“Never Underestimate the Power of a Big Gold Frame”*

Deconstructing the Ideological Powers of the Museum and Understanding the Development of the Curatorial Profession

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“Museums are important venues in which a society can define itself and present itself publicly. Museums solidify culture, endow it with a tangibility, in a way few other things do.”

— Steven C. Dubin, 2001

“New words, after all, especially ones as grammatically bastardized as the verb ‘to curate’ emerge from a linguistic community’s persistent need to identify a point of discussion.”

— Alex Farquharson, 2003

In June of 2009, the British graffiti artist Banksy was invited to take on Bristol Museum by mixing 100 of his own pieces with the museum’s collection. In particular, museum visitors were drawn to a concrete slab graffitied with two stick figures, surrounded by elegant gold framing (Appendix A, Figure 1). The first figure asks, “Does anyone really take this kind of art seriously?” to which the other replies, “Never underestimate the power of a big gold frame.” Here, Banksy makes a playful jest at the viewer, who is reminded that what he or she is looking at is only “art” because it framed. Banksy’s work is a very basic example of what Svetlana Alpers calls the “museum effect,” or the authority of the museum to determine objects of visual interest and cultural worth. This piece in particular asks two important questions: who has the power to construct knowledge (in this case, who has the

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authority to define art), and why are we so eager to accept “truth” in the context of the museum?

Historically museums have been important sites of learning for the public and for preserving “valuable” artifacts; however they must also be examined in terms of representation and display. After all, who gets to decide what artifacts are worthy of being preserved? Who draws the boundary between high art and low art? Who defines how other cultures are presented? In *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, Carol Duncan argues that “To control a museum means precisely to control representation of a community and its highest values and truths.”

Museum professionals therefore have the power to determine what a community believes is aesthetically-pleasing or historically “true.”

According to Duncan, museums are “ritual spaces” that the public visits to become educated and cultured, or simply to engage in respectable leisure. Museums tower over visitors as symbols of power and authority. Their elaborate architectural designs often define them as modern shrines of the present (i.e. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in Manhattan) or allude to ancient temples (i.e. The National Gallery in Washington D.C.). Whatever their architectural styles, museums remain isolated from their surrounding environments as spaces of “contemplation and learning.” Visitors “enact rituals” by walking through museums; in museums individuals affirm their identities and acquire knowledge.

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8 Please see Appendix A, Figures 2 and 3 for examples.
10 Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 12.
Further, the British anthropologist Mary Douglas argues “A ritual provides a frame. The marked off time or place alerts a special kind of expectancy, just as the oft-repeated ‘Once upon a time’ creates a mood receptive to fantastic tales.”¹¹ Thus, daunting architectural designs remind visitors that museums are part of a larger system of art and culture.¹² In other words, much like the way Banksy implies that a gold frame makes a piece of graffiti art, museums frame everyday objects as historically, aesthetically, or culturally valuable artifacts. Thus, if we think of museums as framing systems, we must ask – who controls these systems? Meaning is shaped by a variety of individuals including the museum’s director, sponsors, trustees, and donors; however I would like to draw attention to curators, the individuals who research and organize exhibits.

Although the Random House Dictionary describes the curator simply as “the person in charge of the museum,” Lawrence Alloway argues that this definition is incorrect. Alloway acknowledges that while the curator is not the most powerful individual in the museum, he or she is “usually close below the director who is in charge [of the museum.]”¹³ Curators then, are not the dominating figures of the museum, but they play an extremely important role in controlling how information is transferred from museums to the public: “Curators’ duties include 1) acquiring work for the museum, 2) supervising its preservation in store, and 3) displaying it, putting it on exhibition.”¹⁴ Specifically, curators choose what objects are exhibited, how these objects are cared for, and how they are displayed in the exhibit. While

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¹¹ Quoted in Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 10.
the curatorial profession has its limitations, curators have the power to construct notions of
identity, art, and culture.

The ideological role of the curator is best illustrated by Michel Foucault in *Power-Knowledge*. Foucault proposes that there are individuals in society who possess power and
have the resources to construct knowledge.15 Thus, if we apply Foucault’s theory to curators
we can say that they have the resources —expertise in a discipline and employment by the
museum— to choose what objects are displayed in an exhibit and how they are arranged.
Thus, the information presented by curators eventually becomes what Foucault calls a
“regime of truth.”16 Specifically, Foucault defines this as “the types of discourse which
society accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which enable one
to distinguish true and false statements.”17 Thus, the information presented in museums
becomes “truth” in society.18 Curators thus help control the dominant ideologies understood
by society at large.

Using Foucault’s ideas, we can argue that although it is not always the intention of
the curator, individuals that do not possess power are left out of the discourse of the exhibit,
or they are misrepresented. If we consider James Clifford’s argument that “identity is a kind
of wealth (of objects, knowledge, memory, and experience),”19 we can say that what we see in
museums helps define us and tells us who we are. Therefore because curators choose what

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17 Quoted in Hall, “The Work of Representation,” 49.
objects to place in exhibits and how to display them, curators determine whose identities will be made visible and whose will not. For example, in an interview with the *Smithsonian*, the Native American performance artist, James Luna noted, “I had long looked at representation of our peoples in museums and they all dwelled in the past. They were one-sided. We were simply objects among bones, bones among objects, and then signed and sealed with a date. In that framework you really couldn’t talk about joy, intelligence, humor, or anything that I know makes up our people.” In short, Luna is suggesting that in the context of the museum, Native Americans have often been represented as a culture of the past; he is upset that in many exhibits there are few reminders that Native Americans are still contemporary members of American society. Thus, Luna is highlighting that the curator’s representation of Native Americans forms a stereotypical discourse about the culture.

Consequently, complaints like Luna’s have made the curatorial profession a position of increased attention in the academic world and in the media. Since the series of ideological conflicts of the late 1980s and early 1990s, often referred to as the culture wars the public has demanded a more inclusive representation of all cultures in American history, media, and

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21 This is not to say that museums have not accurately portrayed the Native American identity. The National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC is a good example of a museum that has been praised for its representation of Native Americans. At this museum, curators work with Native Americans to improve the way the culture is exhibited and further, Native Americans are often curators themselves. National Museum of the American Indian, “About,” http://www.nmai.si.edu/subpage.cfm?subpage=about
22 In *The Cultural Front* Michael Denning argues that following the Great Depression, “politics’ captured the arts, when writers went Left, Hollywood turned Red, and painters, musicians, and photographers were ‘social minded.’” Thus, the Depression as well as the rise of leftist politics contributed to a series of artistic critiques of the dominant culture. This project however, will focus on the culture wars of the ’80s and ’90s, as these conflicts drastically influenced museum operations.
public institutions. The art historian JJ Charlesworth explains that as a result society is becoming much more concerned with the process of curating itself. The word curating has come to mean more than just caretaking; the profession is now defined as a job infused with ethical and political issues. Specifically, “the attention being paid to the character of the curatorial endeavor itself, as something not innocent or neutral, but loaded ideologically, epistemologically, and institutionally, and in which a consideration of such implications are explicitly rehearsed by curators themselves.” Today’s curators are not only aware of the power they possess; they are actively making attempts to employ these powers correctly.

Thus, it is a pivotal historical moment for American museums. The American Association of Museums (AAM) has reported that over 850 million Americans visit museums each year, which is more than the number of Americans that go to sporting events and parks combined. However, while a significant number of Americans go to museums, Robert R. Macdonald argues that there has been a “public decline in trust of museums.” In a society that has access to unlimited information on the internet, individuals are less likely to turn to institutions like museums and libraries for information – they can ingest a “personalized entertainment diet” through user-developed interfaces such as Wikipedia, Twitter, Facebook,

23 Dubin, Displays of Power, 2.
26 478 million in 2006.
27 Specifically, since The Brooklyn Museum’s Sensation exhibit in 1999.
and blogs. Although websites such as these do not have the reputability of museums or libraries, they help satisfy the desires of a culture that is becoming increasingly individualized. Ultimately Macdonald proposes that “the role of the expert is quickly eroding...with multiple challenges to the authority of the curator.” It is therefore necessary to examine how the profession is developing in response to the loss of public trust and the rise of social media.

Specifically, this project aims to examine the development of the curatorial profession within the museum an ideological structure. It will expose the power structures that operate in museums and discuss curators as arbiters of these powers. Ultimately, I will attempt to understand the contemporary role of the curator as a result of the political conflicts and artistic critiques of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the rise of social media, and the declining economy.

I. “The Museum as a Myth”: Curating Culture in the Framework of the Modern Museum

Stuart Hall describes museums not as educational institutions, but as discourses: He writes, “Museums are systems of representation. Museums are arbiters of meaning, and the processes of collecting, acquiring objects, and mounting displays require both symbolic and institutional power.” Thus for Hall, museums cannot formally dictate knowledge – they

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provide representations of information. The museum can be referred to as “a discourse, and the exhibition as an utterance within that discourse.” We can think about museums then, as systems of objects, images, and texts that construct meaning and about curators as the individuals that operate these systems.

Specifically, this paper will deconstruct the role of the curator within art and history museums. The public visits these institutions seeking knowledge and truth about what is aesthetically valuable (art museums) or what is culturally and historically significant (history museums). Foucault would argue however, that the information in museums is not objective—the discourse produced in these spaces is socially and culturally constructed. Moreover Eilean Hooper-Greenhill summarizes Foucault’s ideas to conclude, “the origin of what we take to be rational, the bearer of truth, is rooted in domination and subjection, and is constituted by the relationship of forces and powers.” Thus, the representations of art, culture, and history that we see in museums reflect the interests of those that construct the exhibits.

In the context of the museum, Foucault would argue that although these power structures are in place, they are often invisible to the public. In Power/Knowledge Foucault explains, “What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse.” Here, Foucault declares that the

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34 Hooper-Greenhill, Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge, 9.
35 Foucault, Power/Knowledge, 118.
public may not recognize the hierarchies embedded within the museum (for example, in art museums the majority of the works are by white males\textsuperscript{36}), and that this gives museum professionals unquestioned authority. Particularly, Foucault refers to this as an “‘economy’ of power,”\textsuperscript{37} specifically, a “procedure which [allows] the effects of power to circulate in a manner at once continuous, uninterrupted, adapted and ‘individualized’ throughout the entire social body.”\textsuperscript{38} The procedures that Foucault describes ultimately render hegemonic discourses invisible.

Therefore we can apply the idea of a hidden power structure to museums: the process of viewing exhibits and learning from exhibits is naturalized – museums are trusted as educational sources and the public is therefore not eager to challenge what they see in museums. This is not to suggest that visitors experience museums passively – visitors play an important role in the way meaning is received, an idea which will be addressed later on in this section, however it is the curator who controls the way information is set up to be transmitted to the public, and therefore it is the curator who is the primary focus of this study.\textsuperscript{39}

\textit{The Role of the Curator}

Because curators construct exhibits, in museums curators become leaders in Foucault’s economies of power; their decisions maintain social, cultural, and economic

\textsuperscript{36} For example, in the National Gallery of Art, 98% of the works are by males and 99% of the artists are white. For more statistics, please see Appendix A, Figure 4.
\textsuperscript{37} Foucault, \textit{Power/Knowledge}, 119.
\textsuperscript{38} Foucault, \textit{Power/Knowledge}, 119.
\textsuperscript{39} Hooper-Greenhill, “Changing Values in the Art Museum: Rethinking Education and Learning,” 558.
power structures so it is important to understand exactly how curatorial decisions manipulate the interests of the public. In most basic terms, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill says that the role of the curator is “to research the histories, contexts, and meanings of the specific artifacts in the collections and to care for and display the collections.” Further, curators are “experts in the subject matter of their collections ([they usually have] a masters or PhD in the museum’s concentration), handle policies and loan procedures, attribution, authentication, research, and publication.” Curators also “act as administrative figures and oversee works of conservators and registrars.” They are expected to care for objects and furthermore, to serve as educators. Specifically, curators communicate information to visitors by writing didactics, choosing wall colors, lighting, exhibition layout, leading tours through exhibits, and recording audio guides. Curators control how information is displayed in the exhibition space and thus act as mediators between museums and the public.

Furthermore, Benjamin Buchloch discusses the curator’s ideological function within the museum. He argues that “the curator’s primary role [is] to function as an agent who offers exposure and potential prominence in exchange for obtaining a moment of actual practice that is about to be transformed into a myth/superstructure.” In other words, the
decisions curators make when constructing exhibitions create and reinforce ideas about what society understands as culture, art, or history. By choosing what objects to place in an exhibition, curators act as preservers of material goods and communicators of historical, cultural, and aesthetic values. Curators thus maintain a set of ideologies that helps “culture” and educate society. 49

_The “Modern Museum”_: Framing History and Culture

It is not only important that we address the basic role and responsibility of the curatorial profession; we must understand the ideological structure in which curators operate and the degree to which they contribute to the “museum’s central narrative,”51 or the overall mission of the institution. Hooper-Greenhill observes, “Museums uphold specific accounts of the past through the objects they choose to collect and the expository juxtapositions they choose to make. Museums and their collections embody and exhibit social values.”52 — but _whose_ values? What we see in and learn from museums reflects the interests of museum professionals, donors, and corporate sponsors.53

Thus, it is necessary to examine the museum as system that preserves the material possessions, tastes, values, and history of the dominant culture. Carol Duncan and Allan Wallac argue that “because [the museum] belongs to the nation and therefore all citizens, [it]
helps foster the illusion of a classless society.”54 This illusion suggests that all visitors can enjoy the museum equally; however in *Distinction*, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues that visiting museums is a privilege for the dominant class55 that reinforces social order.56

In a later study on museums Bourdieu and the sociologist Alan Darbel conclude: “…museums reveal their real function which is to reinforce among some people the feeling of belonging and among others the feeling of exclusion.”57 For example, everyone may have access to the museum, but the way visitors experience the museum is different: the wealthy have the leisure time to attend museums more frequently,58 while the lower or middle classes may only have the opportunity to visit once a year, and further, may not know how to “conduct” themselves in the museum.59 For Bourdieu then, the museum experience is restricted to an individual’s “cultural capital,” specifically their “educational level and social origin.”60 Museums thus invite the masses to experience high culture, suggesting equality among classes; however they simultaneously support class structure, perpetuating inequality.61

Nevertheless, as I have discussed earlier, the ways in which museums maintain social and cultural hierarchies have remained invisible, and Hooper-Greenhill attributes this to

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57 Quoted in Duncan and Wallac, “The Universal Survey Museum,” 59.
58 Bourdieu says that the upper class can “distribute [their] visits more uniformly throughout the year” and that they can “escape crowds in peak periods.” Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 508.
59 “But it is, above all the manner of conducting the visit – in particular, the time devoted to it – and the manner of conducting oneself while visiting which provide inexhaustible material for the games of distinction.” Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 508.
60 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 1.
what she calls “the myth of the museum,” or the notion of the museum as a repository of objective “truth.” However, Hooper-Greenhill explains that this stems from the Enlightenment idea that “knowledge [is] objective, singular, and value-free.” Since the 19th century knowledge and truth have been understood as impartial. Americans visit museums because they trust their expertise; the public expects museums to provide a rational, unbiased narrative of history. The “myth of the museum” then is what Foucault would argue maintains economies of power. Expanding on Foucault’s ideas, Jennifer González observes that “Hierarchy and oppression have become naturalized”; the power structures that shape knowledge have been rendered undetectable. From this we can conclude that although visitors assume that the information presented in exhibits is unbiased it is influenced by the tastes of museum professionals (i.e. the director, board of trustees, donors, and curators).

The installation artist Fred Wilson highlights these underlying hierarchical structures in the 1992 exhibit, *Mining the Museum.* For example, if we consider an exhibit of 18th century American silver, we are encouraged to view the objects because of their aesthetic qualities; we may not consider other factors such as who made the silver, or how the owner was able to purchase the silver, an idea that Carol Duncan refers to as a “moral-aesthetic

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65 Please see Part IV for a detailed overview of Wilson’s exhibit. To see the image that inspired the example please refer to Appendix A, Figure 6.

Please see Appendix A, Figure 3 to see the installation that inspired this example.
struggle.”\textsuperscript{67} If we acknowledge that it was likely that the owner had the money to buy the silver because he or she had slaves, we suddenly see the silver in a different light: It becomes evident that we are looking at the silver in a way that highlights the values of the wealthy and ignores the ethical issues ingrained in the production and acquisition of the silver (through slavery).\textsuperscript{68} Again, this is a result of who produces knowledge; curators collect these objects because they have been taught to appreciate their aesthetic qualities.\textsuperscript{69} Therefore the power structures that Foucault discusses remain in place.

\textit{Identity and Representation in Museums}

The notion that objective and unbiased ideas exist in museums is particularly problematic, especially because museums are institutions whose aim is to educate and culture the public. What visitors see museums ultimately shapes how they understand themselves and others. In \textit{Image-Music-Text}, Roland Barthes argues, “The ways in which museums ‘manipulate’ material things also set up relationships and associations, and in fact create identities.”\textsuperscript{70} Museums therefore become not only “storehouses of objects,” but also “storehouses of knowledge.”\textsuperscript{71} They are sites of physical preservation (artifacts) as well as sites of ideological preservation (identities, histories, and values). Further, Jennifer González argues that “by being represented by the dominant culture, marginalized groups have been

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\textsuperscript{68} Berlin, “Mining the Museum and the Rethinking of Maryland’s History,” 44.  
\textsuperscript{70} Quoted in Hooper-Greenhill, \textit{Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge}, 6.  
\textsuperscript{71} Hooper-Greenhill, \textit{Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge}, 4.  
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‘rendered absences’ within it.”  

Ultimately, this raises questions about whose identity is visible in the museum and whose is not.

Because the information in museums is constructed by museum professionals, cultures and histories are often explained by individuals who are outsiders to the groups that are being displayed. Hooper-Greenhill notes that “questions of cultural identity are unknown to and unconsidered by many curators.”  

For example, the Maori of New Zealand became upset when curators exhibited cultural objects from their population as art. The tribe felt that the aesthetic properties of the objects overpowered their cultural functions. Thus the exhibit reflects the way the curators viewed the Maori rather than the way the Maori wanted to be represented.

Additionally, museums use exhibitions and the objects within these exhibitions as “political tools.” Eric Gable argues that “objects shape national identity by creating an imagined community of memory.” For museums, collecting creates a tangible identity for the public; in other words, the objects in the museum become symbols that define the cultural and historic values of the United States and further, what it means to be American. Ultimately material objects become “epidermalized”; they serve as “stand-ins” for individual people. Therefore we might ask: who is being represented in museums? Who is representing? To what degree must museum professionals account for these questions?

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72 González, Subject to Display, 11.
73 Hooper-Greenhill, “Changing Values in the Art Museum,” 564
74 Hooper-Greenhill, “Changing Values in the Art Museum,” 563
77 González, Subject to Display, 5.
Surely, there is no ideal means of representing a culture, and museums are limited by factors such as sponsorship, the collection itself, and the knowledge of the curators; however museums are public sites, and if the Americans are financially contributing to these institutions, it is necessary to question how values and histories are shaped in society; thus, we return to the role of the curator.

Curators as Governors, Curators as Caretakers

In their critical essay, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno argue that cultural values are produced through a system that preserves the values of the “ruling class,” specifically the economically dominant class. In particular, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, “Culture as a common denominator already contains in embryo that schematization and process of cataloging and classification which bring culture within the sphere of administration.” Thus, culture is governed; it is selected and manipulated by the judgment and knowledge of individuals in power. The independent curator Paul O’Neil explains that we can transfer this idea to museums; the information in museums influences the interests of the public; “knowledge [becomes] a commodity that museums offer.” Museums function as industries of aesthetic, historic, or cultural values. Curators then, operate in museums as what Horkheimer and Adorno call

81 Hooper-Greenhill, Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge, 2.
“guardians of culture;” curators select what to put in exhibits, and therefore they participate in the museum’s preservation of dominant ideologies.

For example, curators teach the public that the modernist style of Cézanne’s artwork is valuable by choosing to produce an exhibition of his paintings; they remove the original aesthetic connection that Horkheimer and Adorno say Immanuel Kant attributes to the viewer:

Kant’s formalism still expected a contribution from the individual, who was thought to relate the varied experiences of the senses to fundamental concepts; but industry robs the individual of his function. Its prime service to the customer is to do his schematizing for him.

Thus, curators give Cézanne’s work aesthetic and cultural significance by placing his artwork in the museum. While the curators do not directly control the public’s reaction – for instance, not all members of the public may believe Cézanne’s work is beautiful, or that his technique was important to the history of art – the simple fact that the curators have placed it in a gallery makes it valuable. David Carrier even argues,

In one significant way, curators can potentially have more influence than art historians...because art museums are extremely popular public spaces, strong exhibitions have great educational potential. Successful curators are mediators, standing between artists and the public.

Ultimately, the expertise of the curator dominates the public’s power to decide whether an object is culturally important; only a small academic elite takes the time to read art criticism,

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however the masses learn about art through curatorial discourse (i.e. didactics, the works chosen for the show, audio guides, etc).

Thus, curators serve two basic functions: the first, to care for the objects in the museum and the second, to govern cultural values. Kate Fowle, the chair of the MA Program in Curatorial Practice at California College of the Arts observes that while the word curator means to care, it also “has hierarchical connotations – a curator is someone who presides over something – suggesting an inherent relationship between care and control.” Curators care for the items in museums — they work with conservationists to ensure objects last as long as possible and display the objects in ways that best preserve them — but they also act as authority figures who govern what the public views as history, culture, and art. Thus, Fowle concludes that “the operations of a public gallery or museum could historically be understood to be as much about the administration and governing of a culture as about a concern for its preservation and presentation.” We can therefore understand museums as “ritualized sites” that control culture, and curators as the individuals that enforce cultural values and ideas.

Exhibitions as Education Sites

Although curators play an extremely powerful role in organizing the way information is communicated, my analysis of the profession would be incomplete without discussing the curator’s relationship to museum visitors. Aside from preserving and protecting objects,

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88 González, Subject to Display, 2.
museums primarily function as educational sites. Beginning in the Enlightenment, museums adopted the “transmission model” of education. This “linear” means of teaching viewed learners as passive subjects. In regard to museums, Hooper-Greenhill notes, “In this approach to communication…the curator is power broker, and visitors are disempowered.” She therefore argues that transmission model does not account for the knowledge that visitors already possess, and assumes that the curator has full authority to construct meaning. Under the transmission model, “the curatorial voice was the only voice to be heard.” Museums did not consider the diverse backgrounds of their audiences, thus ignoring the multiple ways in which their visitors could receive meaning.

To explain this further, Scott G. Paris provides a succinct explanation of the semiotician Yuri Lotman’s “functional dualism of texts,” which proposes that texts ultimately do two things: they “convey meaning adequately” and “generate new meaning.” Essentially, we can use Lotman’s theory to say that texts and objects are interpreted in two ways in museums: first, the texts act as decoding devices to “correctly” transfer meaning from the curator to the visitor. Second, the knowledge that the visitor already possesses becomes fused with the curator’s intended meaning for the object. Thus, the curator does not have

95 Scott G. Paris, Perspectives of Object-Centered Learning in Museums, (Mahwah: Routledge, 2009), 27.
total control over knowledge reception; in the words of Duncan, curators simply “set the stage” for knowledge transmission.97

Ultimately by the 1970s, the educational models in museums began to change.98 Hooper-Greenhill notes, “Reductions in funding led to a need to generate increased revenue through attracting increased audiences.”99 Thus, museums made a larger effort to understand the educational, social, and cultural backgrounds that defined their visitors.100 Museums used a new approach to education known as the “communication model.”101 In this model, “education focuses on the processes of learning rather than the processes of teaching. The role of the teacher is to provide stimulating environments for learning that take account of existing knowledge of the learner, and that enable both the use of prior knowledge and the development of new knowledge.”102 Thus, the communication model describes a discursive approach to learning in which information is transferred fluidly between the teacher (the curator) and the learner (the visitor).

The following two sections will therefore attempt to address the way the relationship between curators and audiences developed in the late 1980s and 1990s,103 ultimately resulting in a more interactive exchange between curators and audiences.104 Specifically, I attempt to provide an analysis of the social and political attacks on museums and describe

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97 Carol Duncan, Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums, 12.
the ways these events have helped to change the curator’s contemporary relationship to the audience, especially at a historical moment when social media is rising in popularity and importance.

Part II:
“Mama Don’t Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Curators”\textsuperscript{105}

*The Culture Wars: Re-evaluating the Discourse of the Museum - Museums as Sites of Contention*

“...it is difficult, maybe even impossible, to organize a show that will please everyone.”
— Edward T. Sullivan, 1988\textsuperscript{106}

The political atmosphere of the late 1980s and the early 1990s provided an ideal framework for museum practices to come under study and evaluation. The post-Civil Rights atmosphere, tensions between conservative and liberal politics, and the general increase in media coverage were the proper ingredients to ignite the flame of a volatile cultural conflict centered on museums.\textsuperscript{107} This series of political debates, more widely known as the “culture wars” was fuelled by differing views about abortion, religion, homosexuality, education, and race.\textsuperscript{108} While there was an array of debates that took place at the time, I would like to focus...

\textsuperscript{105}“The expression is cute, obviously mimicking Willie Nelson’s advice against aspiring to become a cowboy. But does this mean that curators are lowlifes? Or does it mean that theirs is a perilous profession?”


\textsuperscript{107} Dubin, *Displays of Power*, 2.

\textsuperscript{108} The term “culture wars” is used by James Davison Hunter in the book, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*.
on the “distinct culture war centered on museums,” specifically the conflicts regarding curatorship.  

In “Passionate Irreverence,” the performance artist Coco Fusco raises several questions that both Americans and museums began to ask during this decade of debates. Fusco asks, “Who are we? Whose values? Whose museums and whose aesthetics? Whose icons? Whose image?” Fusco’s questions therefore illustrate the controversies that took place in museums during the culture wars. Although curators try to do their jobs and the voices of corporations as well as the public can be academically restricting, Fusco’s questions further emphasize the power curators possess to construct “truth” in exhibitions.

Dubin argues that the culture wars resulted in greater public interest in museums as a product of “congressional debates over the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, [and] extensive media coverage of outré artworks.” Here, we have a recipe for increased public interest in the museum world: Debates concerning national identity, multiculturalism, and censorship paired with increased media coverage of controversial exhibits sparked the public’s attention as Americans realized that they were paying for the way their history and identity were being illustrated. Thus, by the early 1990s, “Museums [were] no longer dead zones or monuments to the past…Museums [became] noisy, contentious, and extremely vital places.”

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109 Dubin, Displays of Power, 2.
111 Dubin, Displays of Power, 10.
112 Dubin, Displays of Power, 227.
wars illuminated the country’s “limiting views of art and culture”\textsuperscript{113} and everyone wanted their piece of the American pie. Controversial exhibits brought issues such as museum funding and representation to public attention and furthermore, highlighted the role of the curator in controlling these issues. The public was no longer completely accepting of the museum’s authority, and the role of the curator came to the forefront of the conversation.

In \textit{Displays of Power}, Steven C. Dubin argues that “Unflattering, embarrassing, or dissonant viewpoints are often unwanted” in museums.\textsuperscript{114} Specifically, museums aim to “censor exhibits” and “make nice” in order to avoid conflicts with donors, the media, and the public.\textsuperscript{115} If museums present an idea that is unsettling for the majority, they risk a variety of issues including: losing sponsorship, fighting legal battles, and destroying their public image. The public’s increased attention to museums in the early 1990s however forced institutions to stop “making nice;” Americans demanded a more diverse display of culture and history, and museums were forced to reexamine their collections and methods of display. At a time when scholars were debating about a multicultural American national identity,\textsuperscript{116} ideas about who was being represented in museums and who was representing became subjects of increased attention.

\textsuperscript{113} Fusco, “Passionate Irreverence,” 85.
\textsuperscript{114} Dubin, \textit{Displays of Power}, 3.
\textsuperscript{115} Dubin, \textit{Displays of Power}, 3.
To better understand the contention surrounding the exhibits I will explore in this section, it is important to first acknowledge museums as institutions with nonprofit status.\footnote{American Association of Museums, “What is a Museum?” 2010. http://www.aam-us.org/aboutmuseums/whatis.cfm} Nonprofit status, more formerly described as 501(c)(3) status is a permanent title assigned by the IRS that allows museums to be exempt from taxes, therefore granting them particular benefits.\footnote{Hugh H. Genoways and Lynne M. Ireland, \textit{Museum Administration: An Introduction}, (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2003), 33.} They receive government funding as well as “tax deductible contributions” which also benefit their donors and encourage private funding.\footnote{Genoways and Ireland, \textit{Museum Administration}, 34.} Thus, museums are supported financially by private means and more importantly, by the public. A nonprofit institution therefore must have a “public service mission.”\footnote{Genoways and Ireland, \textit{Museum Administration}, 33.} In other words, nonprofits are considered to be charitable corporations; institutions like museums are expected to serve their surrounding communities.\footnote{Genoways and Ireland, \textit{Museum Administration}, 33.}

The controversial exhibits of the 1990s ultimately proved problematic because of the public’s financial investment in museum activities and increased study of means of representation.\footnote{Some of these exhibits include, \textit{The West as America, Enola Gay, Sensation, and Harlem on My Mind}. Although I will not discuss all of these exhibits, Dubin provides an engaging overview of them in \textit{Displays of Power: Controversy in the American Museum from Enola Gay to Sensation} (New York: NYU Press, 1999).} Because curators are the individuals in museums who organized these exhibits the actions of the curators became the centers of public and academic concentration. However, how much attention should be paid to curatorial decision making? While it is true...
that curators have the power to control the way ideas and objects are exhibited to the public, they must perform their daily duties under the watchful eyes of the media and the public, and such intense scrutiny can make everyday work exhausting. In response to the public’s condemnation that he was a young, radical hippie, Bill Truettner, the curator of the 1991 exhibit *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1929*, lamented:

> I am a grandfather. I have gray hair. I mow my lawn every Saturday. And you know, among my academic colleagues I’m very mainstream. I’m not at all on the fringe. For museums, I’m a little more on the fringe but hardly a radical.

Put simply, Truettner is trying to assert himself as an everyday American. More broadly speaking, curators are just trying to do their jobs – yet they are increasingly monitored by the media, corporations, and political parties. Since the culture wars, museums have become “battlegrounds” for political and corporate agendas.

In *Museum Strategy and Marketing*, Neil and Philip Kotler argue that tensions arise when:

> …stakeholders or a community seeks to censor exhibitions on grounds that they are ‘indecent’ or ‘unpatriotic.’ One of the central tenets of any professional community is giving professionals the widest possible intellectual freedom and trusting in their training expertise and authority in their field. Pressure to curb the ability of curators to present exhibitions as they see fit – indeed censorship in any

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124 This exhibit held at the National Museum of American Art (NMAA) attempted to revise the history of the American West, by reinterpreting paintings of the West. Regardless of the subtitle of the exhibit, “Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier,” the public was expecting to see patriotic images, as the NMAA is part of the National Mall. Overall, the exhibit was criticized for being “unpatriotic,” “politically correct,” and “revisionist.” Although Truettner was attempting to reexamine these paintings of the West and post questions about the myths surrounding Westward Expansion, the curator was slandered (even by very liberal scholars) for being too radical.


125 Dubin, *Displays of Power*, 164.

form – runs contrary to professional norms and expectations, as well as intellectual freedom.\textsuperscript{127}

Therefore the increased public attention given to the curatorial profession proves academically limiting to these museum professionals. Curators are individuals who have endured years of education to achieve their positions in the museum world, however it cannot be denied that the curatorial position is infused with an innumerable power and consequently, ethical responsibilities.

Although I do not have the time and space to provide a thorough discussion of all of the controversial exhibits in the 1990s, I have chosen to discuss two exhibits that expose how curators are limited in their efforts to explain a history or culture, but also illustrate how this power must be placed in check: I will examine the 1994 Enola Gay controversy to highlight the ways in which a curator’s attempt to produce an objective history is limited by the media and larger organizations, and the 1987 exhibit, \textit{Art of the Fantastic} to illustrate that at times the authority of a single curatorial voice can be further examined to reveal hegemonic power structures.

\textit{Enola Gay}

In 1994, the National Air and Space Museum (NASM) of the Smithsonian Institution presented Americans with what would be classified as the nation’s most contentious exhibit. For Dubin, it has become “the touchstone in the public’s mind when they think of controversial museum exhibitions, as it has for curators throughout the

country.” The exhibit, initially entitled *The Crossroads: The End of World War II, the Atomic Bomb and the Origins of the Cold War*, centered around the B-29 bomber, Enola Gay. The fully-restored plane was to be exhibited on the 50th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima, Japan. The Enola Gay would be displayed in conjunction with “pictures of the damage it caused, artifacts from ground zero, plus documents and scholarship pertinent to the decision to use the new weapon” (Appendix A, Figure 7), however the curators were caught in the middle of a generational gap.

The head curator of the exhibit, Tom Crouch, described the controversy that would erupt well when he said, “Do you want an exhibition to make veterans feel good, or do you want an exhibition that will lead our visitors to think about the consequences of the atomic bombing of Japan? Frankly, I don’t think we can do both.” In short, Crouch and his assistant curator, Michael Neufeld, had to decide to construct an exhibition narrative that favored veterans or a narrative that provided a more objective history to satisfy the generation of Americans that had not lived through the war. This exhibit highlighted an important point: although curators should be aware for the multitude of histories that must be taken into account when designing an exhibit, they must also be given room to challenge the public and add new discourses to dominant narratives of history.

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130 Dubin, *Displays of Power*, 186.
131 Dubin, *Displays of Power*, 186.
The conflict surrounding the exhibit exponentially rose when The Air Force Association (AFA), which led the critique of the exhibit, suggested that the curators were making a statement against American military efforts.\textsuperscript{134} Before the exhibit opened, the NASM sent a particular passage from the exhibition catalogue to the AFA to review, emphasizing that the passage was not to be displayed to the public at the time.\textsuperscript{135} The AFA however, released the statement to the public which engendered a several conflicts concerning whether the curators were attempting to present an unbiased view of history, or in the eyes of the AFA, if they were siding with the Japanese.\textsuperscript{136}

Taken out of context, the statement reads: “For most Americans this war was fundamentally different from the one waged against Germany and Italy – it was a war of vengeance. For most Japanese, it was a war to defend their unique culture against Western imperialism.”\textsuperscript{137} This statement therefore offended the AFA, who argued that the curators were organizing an exhibit that victimized the Japanese. Out of context, it appears that the exhibit suggests that Americans attacked the Japanese out of revenge, while the Japanese were

\textsuperscript{134} Dubin, \textit{Displays of Power}, 198.
\textsuperscript{135} Dubin, \textit{Displays of Power}, 198.
\textsuperscript{136} Dubin, \textit{Displays of Power}, 198.
\textsuperscript{137} Dubin, \textit{Displays of Power}, 198.

The entire passage reads, “In 1931 the Japanese Army occupied Manchuria; six years later it invaded the rest of China. From 1937 to 1945, the Japanese Empire would be constantly at war. Japanese expansionism was marked by naked aggression and extreme brutality. The slaughter of tens of thousands of Chinese in Nanking in 1937 shocked the world. Atrocities by Japanese troops included brutal mistreatment of civilians, forced laborers and prisoners of war, and biological experiments on human victims. In December 1941, Japan attacked U.S. bases at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and launched other surprise assaults against Allied territories in the Pacific. Thus began a wider conflict marked by extreme bitterness. \textit{For most Americans this war was fundamentally different from the one waged against Germany and Italy—it was a war of vengeance. For most Japanese, it was a war to defend their unique culture against Western imperialism.} As the war approached its end in 1945, it appeared to both sides that it was a fight to the finish.” (Emphasis added.)
only defending themselves. Read in context however, the statement seems to give equal attention to the hardships and faults of both the Japanese and the Americans concluding that “As the war approached its end in 1945, it appeared to both sides that it was a fight to the finish.” Thus, suggesting that both the Japanese and the Americans had legitimate reasons for fighting until one side won the war. Because the AFA sent the sentence out of context to media sources, the public became with the NASM, and the exhibit was canceled on January 30, 1995.

Ultimately, the media slandered the curators, blamed them for being unpatriotic, and above all, destroyed the objective vision of the exhibit designers. For example, following the cancellation of the exhibit, The Washington Post stated:

“It is important to be clear about what happened at the Smithsonian. It is not, as some have it, that benighted advocates of a special interest or right-wing point of view brought historical power to bear to crush and distort the historical truth. Quite to the contrary. Narrow-minded representatives of a special-interest and revisionist point of view attempted to use their inside track to appropriate and hollow out a historical event that large numbers of Americans alive at that time and engaged in the war had witnessed and understood in a very different — and authentic — way.”

Thus the Enola Gay exhibit serves as a dreary reminder that risk in the curatorial profession can be met with great cost; the curators, Crouch and Neufeld lost their jobs. Thus, in the early 1990s, curating was established as a “nexus for discussion, critique, and debate.” Although the Enola Gay exhibit generated significant controversy, it shook the foundations of museum control, and further, challenged the notion of objective truth that had

138 Dubin, Displays of Power, 198.
139 Dubin, Displays of Power, 198.
141 Dubin, Displays of Power, 225.
characterized museum information since the Enlightenment. This exhibit reminded that public that they could play an active role in the museum world, and that they had the right to question the information with which they were presented. On the other hand however, the exhibit proved to be discouraging to curators whose goal is to construct objective history exhibits.

In response to the Enola Gay exhibit, Neufeld stated, “The museum community as a whole suffered from the controversy because it really discouraged innovative or challenging history exhibits…it sent a message out there that it was dangerous to do these things.”

While the Enola Gay exhibit was unfortunate in that it discouraged risk in the curatorial profession, it did draw the public’s attention to the role of the curator.

*Art of the Fantastic*

While the Enola Gay exhibit is one example of a situation in which the curators attempted to create an objective history, according to Mari Carmen Ramírez, the 1987 show, “Art of the Fantastic: Latin America, 1920-1987,” an exhibit of Latin American paintings at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, proved to be a subjective and demeaning overview of the work of more than 30 artists from Mexico, Puerto Rico, the Caribbean, and South and Central America (Appendix A, Figures 8-10). The art critic Edward J. Sullivan summarizes the exhibit’s faults well in a review noting, “This was a show that was enormously interesting but only partly successful. There were inevitable points of contention regarding the choice of

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143 Quoted in Dubin, *Displays of Power*, 225.
artists and works and countries represented, and even its basic thematic premise.”

Sullivan’s use of the word “choice” indicates that we can direct our eyes to the exhibit’s curators Holliday T. Day and Hollister Sturges.

Thus, “Art of the Fantastic,” reveals that at times the power of the curator must be questioned. Although curators must be given the freedom to explore ideas and make their own judgments, this show highlights that exhibits can be problematic if curators do not fully understand the culture they are representing. Often, not only are curators displaying cultures to which they are outsiders, they are additionally schooled in curatorial practices that favor a US or European view of art or history; for example, Latin American/Latino art is not traditionally covered in art history programs unless it is categorized as “exotic” or “as a manifestation of cultural ethnicity.” Thus, a curator from the United States may describe Latin American/Latino art as “exotic” while a Latin American/Latino curator may view the art as traditional.

“Art of the Fantastic” attempted to illustrate the development of Latin American modernism. Sullivan describes it as “one of the most ambitious of the many exhibitions dealing with Latin art to have been organized in the United States.”

Ramírez highlights however that Day and Sturges organized the show around the notion of an ambiguous concept they defined as the “fantastic,” or a “vehicle for twentieth-century artists of Latin America to [describe] the special cultural identity that developed over a period

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145 Sullivan, “Art of the Fantastic,” 376.
146 Ramírez, “Beyond ‘the Fantastic,’” 230.
147 Ramírez, “Beyond ‘the Fantastic,’” 234.
149 Ramírez, “Beyond ‘the Fantastic,’” 235.
of 400 years.”150 While for art historians the term “fantastic” may connote images of “Surrealism and fantasy,” Sullivan observes that most of the artworks that the curators chose had little to do with these stylistic movements and that “‘fantasy’ is only one of the many facets of Latin American artistic expression.”151 He explains that the curators may have created a broad definition in order to include as many works as possible,152 however Ramírez describes it as generalizing.

Ramírez explains that the artists in the exhibit studied art in Europe and returned home to experiment with avant-garde techniques.153 Because these artists brought modernist principles of art home at a time when “national elites” were aiming to modernize these countries, for Latin American artists, these experiments in art symbolized the birth of a cultural identity. Beginning in the 1920s, these artists began to express ideas about their culture artistically, “revising and tearing apart artistic codes in order to reconstruct them from their own critical perspective.”154 Thus, Latin American artists used the “fantastic” aesthetic an effort to develop a cultural identity through artistic expression.

In contrast however, Day and Sturges conveyed the Latin American identity expressed in the paintings as “primal, ahistorical and instinctual.”155 In other words, the curators described the aesthetic qualities of the works in opposition to European efforts in modernism. The display of the Latin American artworks then was

150 Ramírez, “Beyond ‘the Fantastic,’” 235.
151 Sullivan, “Art of the Fantastic,” 376.
152 Sullivan, “Art of the Fantastic,” 376.
153 Ramírez, “Beyond ‘the Fantastic,’” 234.
154 Ramírez, “Beyond ‘the Fantastic,’” 234.
155 Ramírez, “Beyond ‘the Fantastic,’” 235.
...articulated around the Latin/European irrational/rational dichotomy. In each case the attempts by Latin American artists to solve aesthetic and formal problems [of Cubism and Futurism,] similar to those confronted by their European counterparts...were erased in favour of the instinctual impulse that gave rise to their artistic expression.¹⁵⁶

Thus Ramírez is suggesting that the curators allowed the aesthetic principles of the works to predominate over their cultural significance.¹⁵⁷

She further argues that Day and Sturges “left aside the multiple viewpoints provided by the works themselves in order to zero in on their own concept of the ‘fantastic.’”¹⁵⁸ For example, they separated the aesthetic qualities of the works from their sociopolitical functions. Sullivan observes:

> It is unclear why Sturgis, Day, and Edward Lucie-Smith (who wrote the introductory catalogue essay) decided not to include works by the Mexicans Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros. Certainly, they were among the prime members of that generation which forged an identity; in their case it was known as mexicanidad and was, perhaps, one of the most decisive nationalistic movements in twentieth-century art.¹⁵⁹

Thus, by leaving Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros out of the exhibit the curators failed to fully highlight the political implications of the artists’ aesthetics.

Ramírez argues that the Latin American aesthetic discourse was “charged with connotations of emancipation and liberation”¹⁶⁰ while the curators reduced it to primitivism. To illustrate this, Sullivan cites the didactics from the exhibit commenting on a painting by Armando Reveron:

> Sturges explains that “…toward the end of [Reveron’s] life he would stage the dolls as players in royal balls, mock orgies, ballets…[T]hese theatrical performances reveal

¹⁵⁶ Ramírez, “Beyond ‘the Fantastic,’” 234.
¹⁵⁷ Ramírez, “Beyond ‘the Fantastic,’” 231
¹⁵⁸ Ramírez, “Beyond ‘the Fantastic,’” 235.
¹⁵⁹ Sullivan, “Art of the Fantastic,” 377,
¹⁶⁰ Ramírez, “Beyond ‘the Fantastic,’” 236.
Reveron’s sympathy for the magical and mysterious. They have a cult quality similar to primitive tribal rites.” Nonetheless it should have been made clear both in the show and in the catalogue that these “dolls” were essentially used by the artist only as models. 161

In other words, the curators attempted to frame their concept of “the fantastic” by transferring their assumptions about Latin American art to the dolls Reveron used in his work — the curators’ misinterpretation of the painting therefore reveals their US/Eurocentric conception of Latin American art. 162

Regarding the way the works of these artists were displayed and the “homogenizing,” generalized manner in which their art was categorized, Ramírez asserts that “the most powerful agents in this process were neither the producers, nor the cultural groups represented, nor the audiences, but the North American exhibition curators who set out to construct specific narratives to define Latin American art.” 163 Thus it is the curators who controlled the way Latin American identity was presented in this exhibition. Here, the artists are not constructing their identities; instead outsiders to Latin American culture (the North American curators) are generating a false notion of Latin American artistic discourse by presenting the art in the exhibit as a “primitive” opposition to US/European art.

Above all, the late 1980s and the early 1990s set the stage for an examination and revaluation of the curatorial position. Both the Enola Gay exhibit and “Art of the Fantastic” illustrate the degree to which curatorial decisions can prove to be controversial or misleading. These exhibits made visible the role of the curator in the construction of meaning. While it is

162 Ramírez, “Beyond ‘the Fantastic,’” 231.
163 Ramírez, “Beyond ‘the Fantastic,’” 230.
true that the public has long viewed museums as repositories of knowledge, by the 1990s Americans began to question whether this knowledge could be classified as “truth.” Ultimately the Enola Gay exhibit and “Art of the Fantastic” illuminate the idea that there are a variety of ways to interpret artifacts; the information we see in exhibits is therefore not objective – it is influenced to a significant degree by the social, cultural, and political backgrounds of curators.

Further, in the 1990s museums became sites onto which social, political, and corporate agendas were projected.\(^{164}\) Once the media emphasized the notion that public funding was supporting contentious exhibits, Americans began to demand that a multitude of voices enter the discourse of the museum; representation suddenly became an issue to explore. Thus, the public began to ask: who is represented? Who is doing the representing? Museums and the exhibits within them ultimately became recognized as “vehicles for the representation of individual and collective identities.”\(^{165}\) The public gradually became aware that curators had the power to control these vehicles. They suddenly saw curators as individuals with authority to define cultures and histories. The criticisms directed toward museums in the 1990s consequently transformed them into spaces to evaluate, leading to a reexamination of the curator as an authority figure and further, of the museum as an ideological structure.

**Part IV: Institutional Critique**

\(^{164}\) Dubin, *Displays of Power*, 2.

\(^{165}\) Ramírez, “Beyond ‘the Fantastic,’” 229.
The artists of the early 1990s additionally helped to frame museums as spaces of critique. Museums became the “battlegrounds” for the political and ethical conflicts of the decade, and the increased media coverage of controversial shows like the Enola Gay exhibit drew public attention and further, the attention of artists, to the way meaning was constructed in museums. Although artists challenged museums power structures as early as the 1970s, I would like to discuss two exhibits by artists of the 1990s including: Hans Haacke and Fred Wilson. The goal of this project is not to provide a survey of artists who critiqued museums but to illustrate the ways in which specific artists presented museums as ideological systems and evaluated the curator’s role within these systems. Although performance artists also criticized museums in the ‘90s, I will be focusing on the work of installation artists, as these artists directly take on the role of the curator by selecting the objects to put in exhibits as well as by arranging objects to generate new meaning.

It is important to recognize that these artists were critiquing museums at the same time that the media was drawing attention to shows such as the Enola Gay exhibit. We can thus look at the work of Haacke and Wilson as magnifying lenses within a larger discourse of museum critiques; each artist focuses on a specific problem associated with exhibit construction. While the media covered the problems of particular exhibits in the

168 For a comprehensive overview of the many performance and installation artists who critiqued museums such as Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Peña, Andrea Fraser, Louise Lawler, Michael Asher, The Guerilla Girls, and James Luna, please see “Mining the Museum: Artists Look at Museums, Museums Look at Themselves” by Lisa G. Corrin and *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* by Jennifer A. González.
169 According to González, “The term has been used increasingly since the 1960s to denote temporary, site-specific art works designed to surround or interact with the spectator and/or exatant architecture in a given exhibition space.” González, *Subject to Display*, 7.
1990s and brought these problems to the nation’s attention, it was not able to fully communicate the specific limitations that control the way meaning is formed in the exhibition space. The media provided the public with a general overview of the problems surrounding shows like Enola Gay, but these two artists crafted these conflicts into tangible exhibits; in other words, Haacke and Wilson experimented with the errors they saw in museum operations. These artists illuminated the power of museums as “arbiters of knowledge and taste,”170 and further visually displayed these powers through ironic and moving installations.

*Helmsboro Country*

The German-born artist, Hans Haacke, has often been referred to as a founder of art that examines the power structures embedded in institutions, particularly museums, a movement more formally known as “Institutional Critique.”171 Haacke currently resides in the United States, and his work has been instrumental in convincing art galleries to show art that “emphasizes social expose and commentary.”172 Specifically, Haacke challenges the exchanges between corporations and art museums.173 Haacke makes visible the problems associated with corporate sponsorship in the art world, an issue that can impose serious limitations on curators. For example, Duncan describes these limitations well in *Civilizing Rituals*, noting that it is not “that museum directors and curators lack the interest or imagination to do anything different (although that may be true), but rather that they are...”

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171 González, *Subject to Display*, 67.
constrained to program their galleries within a cultural construct – one that is never fully of their making, but for which they will be held responsible.” In other words, while curators possess power, to a certain extent they are also controlled by a bigger source of authority, which in the case of Haacke’s critique, is corporate sponsorship.

In a discussion with Bourdieu, the artist observes that because museums need funding, “[they] won’t commit to controversial exhibits.” Curators are often expected to acquire works for museums, and if corporations are funding these purchases or an exhibit in which these works will be placed, the curators’ decisions will therefore be influenced by the corporate sponsor. Museums often aim to “self-censor” and maintain clean slates to attract corporate funding. In the words of Haacke, a “network of dependencies” exists between museums, artists, and corporations. Museums need funding to purchase artwork or artifacts and therefore they must appear neutral to encourage individuals to donate. Haacke bluntly summarizes this idea in his article, “In the Vice,” in which he quotes the president of Cartier who says, “Arts sponsorship is not just a tremendous tool of corporate communications. It is much more than that: it is a tool for the seducation of public opinion.” Sponsoring the arts thus becomes a form of advertising for corporations who want to associate their names with respectable institutions.

Haacke’s 1990 installation at the John Weber Gallery, “Helmsboro Country,” jests at ways in which corporate sponsorship can be limiting to museums (Appendix A, Figure 11).

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174 Duncan, Civilizing Rituals, 107.
176 Bourdieu and Haacke, Free Exchange, 11.
177 Bourdieu and Haacke, Free Exchange, 10.
178 Bourdieu and Haacke, Free Exchange, 11.
The installation, in the words of *New York Times Reporter*, Roberta Smith, is “a giant artistic gibe at Jesse Helms,” the homophobic Republican Senator of North Carolina. Philip Morris, the tobacco company that funded Helms (who wanted to revoke funding for the arts, particularly “homoerotic, proabortion, feminist, and anticapitalist art”) is also ironically an avid supporter of the arts. It highlights two important issues that affect the way curators organize shows including the idea that funding limits what can be shown in an exhibit, and further, that accepting funding from corporations means additionally accepting a corporate agenda.

“Helmsboro Country” is a large scale version of a Marlboro cigarette box, although Haacke replaced the company’s name with the text “Helmsboro,” and substituted the gold medallion with a picture of Senator Helms. A bundle of cigarettes wrapped in paper declaring, “Philip Morris Funds Jesse Helms,” tumbles out of the box to highlight the notion that corporations use funding for the arts as a form of advertising and further, that corporate support of the arts is often only for the purpose of the corporation’s image. For example, it is evident that Philip Morris hopes that supporting the arts will cause customers to think of the

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183 Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era*, 406.
184 Haacke, “In the Vice,” 49.
185 Marlboro is a brand of cigarettes made by Philip Morris.
corporation’s generosity each time they reach into their box of cigarettes, however Haacke additionally draws attention to the fact that Philip Morris also funds a government official who avidly discourages support of the arts, thus negating the corporation’s attempt at charity.

Specifically, this installation is a response to the series of debates concerning funding by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in the late 1980s. These debates began when the Corcoran Museum of Art attempted to host an exhibit containing more than 150 photos by the homosexual photographer Robert Mapplethorpe entitled “Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment.” The museum funded the exhibit with $30,000 from the NEA and both citizens and congressmen expressed anxieties about using public funding to show controversial exhibits. In 1989, Congress reviewed the NEA’s budget, and Senator Helms proposed cutting some of the organization’s funding. While artists argued in favor of “free expression,” congressmen asserted that the debate was “not a First Amendment issue” and that the works were too controversial to be supported by public funding.

This debate highlights the conservative agenda in museum funding – controversy is not welcome when public or corporate funding is involved, which prevents the visibility of specific groups in museums, limiting not only what can be shown, but who can be shown.

187 Haacke quotes the corporation Philip Morris that stated, “It takes art to make a company great.” Haacke, “In the Vice,” 50.
188 Sandler, Art of the Postmodern Era: From the Late 1960s to the Early 1990s, 406
For example, Senator Helms responded to the debates surrounding NEA funding stating

“’That means that artists can get corporate money if they can get respectability - even if it’s undeserved - from the National Endowment for the Arts. And that is what this is all about. It is an issue of soaking the taxpayer to fund the homosexual pornography of Robert Mapplethorpe, who died of AIDS while spending the last years of his life promoting homosexuality.’”191 Thus, it is clear that Helms is partially opposed to the artist’s work because he is homosexual, and therefore hopes to limit Mapplethorpe’s visibility in the art world by cutting arts funding.192

In response to the Corcoran’s cancelation of the show, Hugh Southern, the chairman of the arts endowment noted, “This is a legitimate area of public concern – the matter of free expression is complex and with government funding it becomes more complex.”193 Mapplethorpe’s right to the First Amendment therefore, is placed in jeopardy because of funding. Thus, Haacke cleverly highlights the debate surrounding artistic freedom of expression by inscribing “20 Bills of Rights,” in place of “20 Filter Cigarettes.”194 He draws attention to the irony of Philip Morris’s support of the arts and Senator Helms and further, highlights the way the presence of marginalized groups in the art world is still limited by sponsorship.

192 Dubin adds that “Helms never let [people] forget where he stood; he menacingly predicted, ‘Assuming I may in Senate next year, I say to the arts community and all homosexuals: you ain’t seen nothing yet.’”192
Ultimately, “Helmsboro Country” exposes that corporate sponsors manipulate who or how information is displayed in exhibits. Although the curators of the Corcoran organized an exhibit that contained “homoerotic imagery,” the show fell through because of a conservative political agenda. As Haacke and Bourdieu observed, “art productions represent symbolic power which can be dominating or emancipating,” so we can say that curators have a degree of control, but to some degree corporations limit the decisions curators can make; therefore corporations help control who is visible in museums.

**Mining the Museum**

“What is it? Where is it? Why? What is it saying? How is it used? For whom was it created? For whom does it exist? Who is represented? How are they represented? Who is doing the telling? The hearing? What do you see? What do you hear? What can you touch? What do you feel? What do you think? Where are you?” These are all questions that the artist Fred Wilson poses to visitors in his 1992 exhibit, Mining the Museum. In this exhibit Wilson exposes the power of the curator and of the museum as an ideological structure. Through a series of installations, the artist asks viewers to thoroughly examine the exhibit space as well as the museum’s collection to understand how meaning is constructed. Although there are many factors that determine how a visitor denotes meaning from exhibits such as race, class, gender, and politics, I would like to use Wilson’s work to uncover the

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ways in which curators construct knowledge in museums. Curators help determine the
answers to Wilson’s questions and therefore they are the focus of this study.

Fred Wilson is an African American and Native American artist from the Bronx. He is best known for “mining museums,” that is, studying the collections of history museums and reorganizing the objects in the collections to highlight that meaning is generated in the exhibition space. As Eilean Hooper-Greenhill states, “There is no one way in which objects ‘mean.’ Their meaning is fluid, changeable, relational, and contextual.” Thus, Wilson shows us that because curators control the way objects are arranged, curators largely determine their meanings. There are several elements that influence how curators create narratives in exhibits including: didactics, wall color, frames, lighting, and the order in which the objects are positioned. Wilson experiments with each of these elements in Mining the Museum (1992), and ultimately suggests that “universal truth is at best contested terrain.” The knowledge we gain from museums is not “truth;” it is subjective to the individuals who physically construct the exhibits – specifically curators.

In the opening to an interview with Wilson, Donald Garfield explains that for Wilson, the word “mining” has several connotations: “to mine a collection like a deposit of rock, but also to lay a minefield of potentially explosive controversy. Or perhaps, closer to the artist’s heart, to enable disenfranchised communities to at least call a part of the museum

199 Hooper-Greenhill, Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture, 162.
a ‘mine.’”201 Of his approach to these “minings” Wilson says, “I disrupt the standard way of looking at museums…Museums pride themselves on being objective, and they don’t want you to believe that there’s a view they’re producing. And so to sort of pierce that is what they’re all afraid of.”202 Therefore, as an artist, Wilson deconstructs the power structures that legitimize meanings in exhibits. He does not propose that there is an ideal way in which museums can represent cultures; he simply suggests that there is a multitude of ways that objects can be interpreted and that it is the curator’s responsibility to explore them.

In May of 1991, The Contemporary, a traveling museum based in Maryland203 invited Wilson to create an installation after listening to him discuss museums at the Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C.204 “The Contemporary wanted to “address the ‘crisis of identity’ facing museums in the most direct way possible and to offer a particular, localized model for change.”205 Specifically, the institution wanted to provide an example of a way museums could rethink their collections and display objects differently at a time when increased media coverage and political debates placed museums at the center of the nation’s attention.

The Contemporary allowed the artist to choose any museum in Baltimore to critique and Wilson settled on The Maryland Historical Society. When asked why he chose the

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203 The mission of The Contemporary is to “disrupt expectations and definitions of museums with each project it undertakes.”
institution, Wilson replied, “I looked at a lot [of the museums] and chose the historical society because it seemed the archetypical museum that hadn’t changed.” Wilson wanted to shake the foundations of a museum in dire need of reexamination. Further, the museum’s director was interested in bringing the “traditional historical institution ‘up-to-date.’” In Corrin’s words, “He expressed the need to reflect current concerns and public interests and he was seeking ways to develop an audience that reflected the cultural diversity of the community.” Thus, the director of the Maryland Historical Society was responding the political and social climate of the 1990s—the debates surrounding issues such as identity and representation made him believe that his institution needed a change.

Thus, the Maryland Historical Society welcomed Wilson to study the collections, artifacts and archives of the museum and gave him the third floor of the building for installation purposes. Over the course of a year, Wilson “transformed [the museum’s] collection to highlight the history of slavery in America,” a history that was completely invisible to the public before the artist intervened. Instead of simply working with other curators and experts, Wilson welcomed the opinions of all members for the museum to put together the exhibit. He interviewed everyone from the museum guards to the individuals who worked at the museum’s store and further worked with a group of historians to best interpret the objects in the Maryland Historical Society’s collection. A visitor to the exhibit described its results effectively commenting, “All I can say it is about time that

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209 Corrin, “Mining the Museum,” 387.
210 Corrin, “Mining the Museum,” 391.
museums begin to be inclusive in their storytelling. We are a society that has a rich history that is often ignored for the history of one – white.” Ultimately, Wilson wanted to amalgamate the variety of interpretations of the objects in the collection to create a multidimensional and diverse display of history. The artist attempted to bring into the light those histories that for so long sat in darkness.

In *Mining the Museum*, Wilson experiments with the effect of juxtaposing objects in an exhibit and highlights that what is absent in a museum’s collection is equally as important as what is present. Wilson confronts visitors with this idea by placing a series of six podiums at the exhibit’s entrance (Appendix A, Figure 12). Three of the podiums contain the busts of three white historical figures including: Henry Clay, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Andrew Jackson. The other three podiums are empty; however they are labeled with the names Benjamin Banneker, Harriet Tubman, and Frederick Douglas, emphasizing the absence of black historical figures. This particular juxtaposition makes the viewer ask: Where are the busts of the black historical figures? Why don’t they exist?

Here, Wilson shows us that in a traditional exhibit, the museum’s collection limits the story the curators can tell; curators only display the items a museum has in its collection – they often do not reference items the museum does not own. By exhibiting empty podiums however, Wilson challenges viewers to think about whose history is being presented in museums; he invites visitors to consider who is included in the museum’s overall narrative and who is not.

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In an interview with Leslie King-Hammond, the artist laments, “All this denial. All this history in America, all this history of Europe, and the relationship between people is not being talked about. Museums just pretend that we can overlook it, that we can experience ‘culture’ without having those feelings [of oppression].” Instead of providing a secondhand description of objects that could represent the black historical figures, the artist objectifies absence. Although the viewer does not have a physical encounter with objects related to Banneker, Tubman, and Douglas, he or she is ultimately confronted with their eerie nonexistence, an effect that is much more powerful than a textual description.

Wilson arranges another important pairing of objects between the podiums entitled “Truth Trophy,” a piece that Ira Berlin calls a “sardonic welcome” to the show (Appendix A, Figure 13-14). The trophy was awarded to the Advertising Men’s League of New York; however Ira Berlin explains that this organization has been questioned for its “commitment to accuracy.” The clear cases next to the trophy illustrate how truth is constructed in the museum; although these cases are used to protect and conserve the objects that would ordinarily be placed inside of them, they additionally act as framing devices of the museum that transform old objects into artifacts making them “worthy” of study and part of history.

Further, the installation “Cabinetmaking 1820-1960” (Appendix A, Figure 15) contains a set of beautifully crafted chairs facing a whipping post. The pairing of the chairs and the whipping post highlights the whipping as a public spectacle for those in power.

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214 Berlin, “Mining the Museum and the Rethinking of Maryland’s History,” 35.
Aesthetically speaking, these chairs are beautiful, but when juxtaposed with the whipping post they become vulgar. This pairing of objects highlights a similar idea that Ramírez observed in her analysis of “Art of the Fantastic”: that curators often allow aesthetics to overpower sociological or ethical interpretations of objects.

Further, many viewers defined Wilson’s decision to place a Ku Klux Klan (KKK) hood in a baby carriage as the most powerful part of the show.216 Here, a KKK hood rests inside a baby carriage, which in the words of one visitor, “was a startling and powerful reminder of just how deeply ingrained racism so often is in this society => All the way back to something as ‘innocent’ as a baby carriage, where it seems to begin.”217 The KKK is still an active organization today, emphasizing the fact that racism may not be discussed, but it still exists. In the artist’s words, “Museums are afraid of what they will bring up to the surface and how people will feel about certain issues that are long buried. They keep it buried as though it doesn’t exist.”218 Thus, Wilson challenges this idea by bringing the KKK hood out of storage and placing it in a space for public viewing.

Although Corrin writes that for the purpose of *Mining the Museum* Wilson was named “the director [of the museum] as well as the artist [for the purpose of the exhibit],”219 Garfield, observes that Wilson articulates a different role for himself. Garfield explains, “Wilson capitalizes on his position as an outsider to the museum structure, which implies than an exhibit like ‘Mining the Museum’ would have a different dynamic if it were done by

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217 Wilson, “The Audience Responds,” 68.
218 Berlin, “Mining the Museum and the Rethinking of Maryland’s History,” 35.
219 Corrin, “Mining the Museum,” 390.
someone on staff who has to stick around after the show comes down.” Therefore, if we look back to the Enola Gay controversy, we can argue that unlike [curators of Enola Gay] Wilson was not in danger of losing a job and he was not limited by fellow curators or sponsors; Wilson had complete control over the way he chose to present his message as a visiting curator.

While the exhibits produced by Haacke and Wilson have raised many questions in the museum world, it is important to acknowledge the artists’ limitations, as they are welcomed by museums to create these exhibits. Even though the artists are attempting to destabilize the structures of the museum, it cannot be ignored that they are ultimately invited by museums; the act of critique is still made in conjunction with the institution. Further, the individuals making the critiques are artists. The art world—especially the contemporary art world—values the unique work of each artist. For example, the artist Craig Damrauer defines modern art as “Modern Art = I could do that + Yeah, but you didn’t.” Damrauer has a quick but important point: in the contemporary art world, the most successful artists are those who attempt projects that have not yet been completed.

What does this mean for museum critique? The answer is as simple as Damrauer’s equation: once an artist has completed a critique it will not be attempted again. For example, even though Fred Wilson’s “minings” could prove to be a vital means of reexamining a museum’s collection, they are in the most basic terms, Wilson’s artwork. Wilson’s minings can take years at a time, but since they are his art; only he can perform them. Furthermore,

Wilson has done enough minings that the concept has already been introduced to the art world. Therefore, it is difficult to ensure that this technique will be replicated as a means of collection examination. Wilson’s work raises extremely important questions, but it is not certain that his technique can be used by others to rework collections because the act of mining is *his* art; it is task that as an artist he must perform. Overall, Wilson’s work has allowed museums to rethink techniques of display and has at least provided us with a new way of looking at the role of the curator.

Both Haacke and Wilson have highlighted that museums no longer need to be thought of temples to art and history. Today we can think of museums as spaces that provoke feelings and ask questions. Ultimately, I would like to answer: how has curating changed since these two artists and the conflicts of the ‘80s and ‘90s? What is happening to the role of the curator? Clearly, there is no ideal way to represent a culture or a history, but these artists remind us that we can continually question the way knowledge is constructed in museums and further, the individuals that convey that knowledge.

**Part IV:**
**Assembler of Many Voices: The “New Curator”**

As the public becomes more critical about the way information is displayed in museums, curatorial responsibilities have come to the forefront of an important discussion.

In November 2009, at the “Event Culture: The Museum and Its Staging of Contemporary Art” conference at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Nancy Proctor, the Director of New Media at the Smithsonian Institution of American Art raised an important question:

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222 The title is taken from New Curator Blog: http://www.newcurator.com

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“What are curators today and who is curating?”223 As we have seen, following the culture wars and the artistic criticisms of artists like Haacke and Wilson, the American public is becoming increasingly aware of and extremely critical of exhibition content. Because curators control the presentation of the information in museums, it is curators whose professions have come under the spotlight.

Currently, the economic crisis and the increased use of social media have placed limits on the authority of the curatorial voice. Museums are experimenting with increased public involvement, and as a result the title of curator has come under siege. For example, in January 2010, as the Fresno Art Museum rapidly fell into debt, the institution replaced some of its professional curators with laymen. To ensure it could still operate, the museum needed to cut its budget in half. To save money, the museum eliminated museum professionals and looked to community volunteers. The board president, Tom Spek noted “‘The museum is relying more on volunteers to do work, including curator duties. It also is contracting out certain tasks rather than hiring curators.”224

So, is the curatorial profession in decline? Are political and artistic criticisms of curators and increased public involvement in museums signaling the “Death of the Curator?”225 I would not like to argue that the curatorial profession is on its way out – I would instead like to highlight that the voice of the curator is no longer a voice of pure

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authority. The curatorial position has become decentralized in response to the rise of museum studies as a discipline, the current recession, and the growth of new media; today the responsibilities of the 21st century curator are currently spread across several departments. Curators are no longer just experts; they have become marketers, educators, designers, and conversation leaders.

“Will Someone ‘Curate’ Me A Cup Of Coffee?”

A contemporary change in diction illustrates the increased attention being paid to curating, and indicates a very new set of tasks for the post-Wilson curator. JJ Charlesworth, an art critic and curator observes that “if the term ‘curator’ has been around as long as there were bodies of objects and bodies of knowledge to preserve and perpetuate, its more active derivative, ‘curating’ is a neologism so recent that dictionaries have not yet caught up.” Charlesworth’s point is that society has become increasingly concerned with the process of curating itself. Curator, a noun that once meant caretaker, is now additionally used as a verb to describe the way an individual constructs an exhibit. The curator has evolved from a simple protector to a discussion director.

Furthermore, the word is now being appropriated by the American public; individuals ranging from bloggers to editors are classifying themselves as curators. For example, Elizabeth Spiridakis, the popular writer of the fashion blog, *White Lightning*,

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“curates” her jewelry collection and “acquires” new “pieces” for her wardrobe. Similarly, the word has been used to describe job titles outside of the museum world. For example, job listings for editors of online journals are currently asking for “content curators.” What happened to old fashioned shopping and editing, and what do these casual uses of the word curator say about the direction in which the profession is headed? According to Elizabeth Schlatter, the term implies a certain degree of expertise. In the museum world, the word curator indicates specialized knowledge in a given subject, and a specific academic authority, and now it is additionally being used by the masses to mean someone who selects objects and information for display.

When asked whether they believe society’s latest buzzword is an example of decreasing respect for their profession, curators seemed to be divided. Troy M. Livingston, the Vice President for innovation and learning at the Museum of Life and Sciences in Durham, North Carolina simply sees it as a response to a change in technology:

I think that the threat to curators is that if we allow anyone to participate, will that lessen the value of what curators contribute? There’s a sense of resistance and fear perhaps in the curatorial profession because of this. I mean, some curators probably hate Wikipedia because they’re no oversight. But we’re living in a Wikipedia world.

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231 Quoted in Schlatter, “A New Spin,” 52.
Others find the term’s recent appropriation by the masses to be disheartening: Alison de Lima Greene, curator of contemporary art and special projects at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas laments,

Of course many of us have a natural inclination to protect the term ‘curator’ – and certain uses of the word can degrade the years of training we have undergone (both in graduate school and in apprentice positions in the museum and academic worlds).233

In a society where many individuals seem to be claiming expertise, one could at least argue that if the curatorial profession is not fading into the background, it is certainly on the cusp of a major change.

*Readymade Exhibits: Corporate Sponsors as Curators*

Traditionally, corporate sponsorship has proven to be restrictive regarding what information curators can present in a show. The curator Alan Wallach, argues:

In a society in which culture is ultimately controlled by corporate elites, controversy is too dangerous – it cuts too close to the nerve…Dependent upon corporations, government agencies, and wealthy donors, and presided over by well-heeled trustees usually more interested in prestige and the fate of their personal art collections than in the public good, [museums] have every reason to avoid anything that would bring down the wrath of their financial bankers.234

Thus corporations sponsor exhibits in order to improve their reputation in the mind of the public. They are reluctant to fund exhibits that would accept the public, as this could pollute their reputations and hinder their financial success. For example, Dubin recalls his experience as a curator, and one of the experiences that inspired him to write *Displays of Power*: Dubin laments that he was fired by Mattel when he wrote “unflattering” information

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about the corporation in an exhibit catalogue. Dubin was a curator for an exhibit entitled *Art, Design, and Barbie: The Making of a Cultural Icon*, and was unaware that Mattel was sponsoring the exhibit.\(^{235}\) It is likely that Mattel fired him because his addition to the catalogue would reflect poorly on their corporation.

Further, the contemporary economic climate is taking its toll on the museum world and furthermore, is proving increasingly limiting to the curatorial profession. Many museums are losing donors and members as a result of the economic downturn and must look elsewhere for funding.\(^{236}\) Although museums have relied on corporate funding since the great era of blockbuster shows in the 1970s,\(^{237}\) I would like to argue that corporate funding is more necessary given the recession, and therefore more limiting to curators than ever before.

While it is a more extreme example of corporate sponsorship, companies are currently donate entire traveling exhibitions to museums, pushing the curators aside and coordinating everything from object placement to the wall text. Corporations are giving prepackaged shows to museums in order to show their “support” for the arts as well as to broadcast their names to the public. Many large corporations have amassed their own collections of art to “culture” their offices, and lending these collections to museums currently appears to be the perfect marketing endeavor.\(^{238}\)

\(^{235}\) Dubin, *Displays of Power*, 15.


While larger museums are reluctant to use these “readymade shows,” in this economic climate, smaller museums cannot help but accept these offers. These collections often give museums the opportunities to host “big name” pieces, thus drawing more visitors and potential donors. Robin Pogrebin reports that exhibiting corporate-curated shows comes with a “potential taint of commercialization and artistic compromise.” Hosting these shows therefore, is considered unethical in the museum world. Because museums are nonprofit organizations, they must ensure that their decisions always further their mission statements; they are expected to focus on their educational goals. Museums therefore are criticized for being too profit-focused if they host these shows, as the show thus becomes infused with a corporate agenda.

Further, Glenn D. Lowry, the director of the Museum of Modern Art discusses how accepting these exhibits affect curators: “What is crucial is curatorial independence, the ability of a curator to make his or her own decisions about what would constitute an exhibition.” Corporation-organized exhibits thus remove the authority of the curator to decide how to best represent the museum and the content being presented. Richard Armstrong, the director of the Guggenheim Museum adds, “The reason the museum exists is to make exhibitions on its own. You have people on staff who consider themselves to be historians with highly nuanced receptors, and it’s not healthy to duplicate that by hiring out

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to somebody else.”

Armstrong is highlighting the fact that curatorial expertise is essential to exhibit production.

Moreover, while some museums do accept these types of exhibitions and others allow community-curated shows, museums will always need curators to create quality exhibits that enhance their mission goals. Although The New York Times notes that curators of corporate and museum collections often have the same qualifications, they ultimately have different goals and responsibilities: John Ravenal, president of the Association of Art Museum Curators argues, “The point of a corporate collection is to burnish the reputation of a corporation. Corporate curators are therefore involved in that agenda.”

If a museum accepts a corporation’s collection, it is also accepting the corporation’s financial goals.

While they are problematic in the museum world, corporate-sponsored and corporate-curated shows add a new voice to the discourse of the museum; even though the voice may be tainted with a corporate agenda, museum curators must consider the opinions of their corporate sponsors when designing exhibits. Whether the corporation is working with curators or simply doing the curating itself, ultimately a new voice has been added to the content in the exhibit; corporate sponsors are thus important illustration of the shift away from the single curatorial voice.

244 The American Association of Museums states in the “Code of Ethics for Museums” that museums are not allowed to operate for “individual financial gain” – thus, a museum’s decision to show a corporate-sponsored show is questionable. Accepting a corporate-sponsored show means facilitating individual financial gains for the corporation.

A Look in the Mirror: Reflecting on Curatorial Responsibility

The rise in graduate programs in curatorial studies, visitor studies, and education over the past 20 years illustrates the shift of the curator’s focus from individual interests to the interests of visitors. Curatorial studies curriculums require that students take courses in public relations, exhibition design, educational programming, representation, and critical theory and history of museums. New curators therefore are learning to be more aware of the way in which they represent history, art, and culture, and furthermore, are focusing more on the way they present information in the exhibition space. Curatorial studies programs ensure that prospective curators become aware of how information can be represented and how it is communicated to the public. Courses even address the work of Wilson, Haacke, and other artists who have challenged the profession, framing the artists not as oppositional figures to curators but as reminders of the power of curatorial decision-making.

The independent curator, Paul O’ Neil, puts a humorous spin on this heightened curatorial self-consciousness and laments, “We are becoming so self-reflexive that exhibitions often end up as nothing more or less than art exhibitions curated by curators curating curators, curating artists, curating artworks, curating exhibits.” In other words, O’ Neil argues that exhibits are becoming as much about the process of curating as they are about the subject matter being presented. Curators are as focused on how the content is being displayed as they are about what is being displayed. Whether or not O’Neil is right, his frustration

247 Charlesworth, “Curating Doubt,” 93.
highlights how specifically curators must analyze the way they present information. Issues such as representation, ethics, how the exhibit corresponds to the museum’s mission, how the exhibit may affect corporate sponsorship, and visitor interpretation are just a few of the concerns curators must address when assembling exhibits.

For example, as Nancy Villa Bryk recalled her experience of curating at the Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village noted, “In the 1970s, object collection often revolved around personal, deep interests or specific expertise. Historical perspective did not always embrace broader social history interpretations…Exhibition development occurred without considering how the content appealed to or was understood by most of our visitors.”

Thus, curators focused on their own interests; they were not concerned with wider interpretations of the objects in their collections. To add to this, Villa Bryk discusses the pedantic way in which she and fellow curators wrote labels in the 1970s. Her experience illustrates that at most, exhibit labels only appealed to a niche audience:

Curators communicated with visitors and each other as if we were connoisseurs who had to prove we had a handle on the collection…The curators often put everything they knew about an object into a single label, thus creating labels a couple of hundred words long. Labels referenced collectors’ books on the subjects and confounded visitors with minute details of the subject or object.

In contrast, curating today is more focused on audience reception than ever before. For instance, curators are constructing interactive exhibits to engage their audiences and prolong

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visitors’ involvement with the content on display. They are conscious about the fact that they are presenting information to a range of academic, cultural and generational backgrounds.

A Selective Mass Culture: Catering to “Generation C”

*Curator Journal* has referred to this contemporary era of museology as the “New Tech Era.” Today, museums receive 45% of their visitors online, thus framing the museum’s digital presence in a very important light. The Center for the Future of Museums predicts that this number will rise between now and the year 2034. The greatest reason for the increased traffic flow to museum websites can be attributed to the development of social media, or Web 2.0 technologies. Web 2.0 has allowed for greater interaction between content-creators and content-users. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Wikipedia, Flickr, Twitter, and blogs have transformed the internet from a vat of information waiting to be digested into a discursive, interactive site. The age of social media is therefore facilitating interaction between users and enabling them to engage in discussions. Museums thus have no choice to respond to a generation that now expects its voice to be heard and furthermore, to be “taken seriously.”

Social media is aiding in the formation of a culture that is becoming increasingly individualized. Culture and entertainment are rapidly becoming more selective and tailored

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252 John Fraser, “We’re All a Twitter,” *Curator Journal*, January 2010, 6.
to individual tastes; niche markets predominate over mass markets. Users are becoming less exposed to ideas that differ from their own – but why? Don Tapscott argues that there has been a disappearance of a central information hub. Individuals want to control the content they consume, or in the words of Tapscott, “activate the slogan that the Baby Boomers used to chant – Power to the people.”257 For example, a study conducted in 2007 by John Ceraci and Lisa Chen reveals that approximately 77% of all American “Net Geners”258 favor the internet to television, which Tapscott argues indicates a preference for individualized content.259 When asked whether he would want to keep his internet connection or television a respondent to Ceraci and Chen’s survey replied, “Why watch cable when I can download my favorite shows in HD – and without commercials – whenever I want?”260 Web users are therefore seeking out their own content from a variety of sources, rather than passively absorbing it from a single distribution point as they would for example, by getting their news from one TV station every day.

Although Tapscott is discussing the decline of the age of television, this public desire for individualized, interactive content can easily be transferred to the museum world.261 In fact, in 2009, The National Endowment for the Arts released a 2008 study revealing that over the past 20 years, there has been a significant decrease in American museum attendance.

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258 According to Tapscott, it is the generation after the Baby Boomers.
259 Tapscott, “Generation Bathed in Bits,” 43.
261 For example, museums are catering to individualized interests through the supplementary audio material that accompanies exhibits. The cassette tapes visitors listened to for audio tours have been replaced with telephone like devices, in which users can dial a number that will tell them information about a chosen piece. What is partially a result of a change in technology also illustrates the new emphasis being placed on the visitor’s ability to choose what he or she wants to learn.
Furthermore, the population of individuals that still visits museums is much older than previous generations. Therefore, museums are asking, how can we regain control of our audiences? How can we reconnect?

It seems only natural to give Tapscott’s “Net Geners” what they want: control over the information they are receiving. This generation of “Net Geners” will not be satisfied with a passive museum experience; they no longer want to simply read labels. Jim Richardson refers to these “Net Gener” museum goers as “Generation C,” or “Generation Curate.”

Because of the evolution of social media platforms, Generation C is accustomed to creating its own content. These museum visitors want to experience exhibits that encompass their personal interests. In the words of Nina Simon, author of *The Participatory Museum,* Generation C “wants to control the narrative.”

Because curators put together exhibits, it is curators who must attempt to make them more interactive; they must take on the task of provoking discussion and promoting public involvement with the objects and information in exhibits. The role of the curator is thus shifting from the projector of one voice to the assembler of many voices. Curators are looking to display a variety of viewpoints, histories, and ideas instead of simply stating their own opinions.

One way museums are attempting to involve the public is through “crowdsourcing.” Crowdsourcing illustrates that the role of the curator is expanding to include another responsibility: the need to incorporate many histories and representations.

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262 Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum,* (Santa Cruz: Nina Simon, 2010), i.
263 Simon, *The Participatory Museum,* i.
264 Simon, *The Participatory Museum,* 73.
into the discourse of the exhibit. In the June 2006 issue of *Wired Magazine*, Jeff Howe coined the term²⁶⁶ to describe “the act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent (usually an employee) and outsourcing it to an undefined generally large group of people in the form of an open call.”²⁶⁷ Put simply, Howe is discussing what Antonio Gramsci would describe as the division between “organic” and “traditional intellectuals” or in this case, the use of amateurs (the general public) to perform the role of the experts (curators).²⁶⁸ Crowdsourcing has the potential to ask curators to consider the views of the public: Who is being represented? Who is not? How can the exhibit generate a more inclusive understanding of the subject matter?

Howe’s tactic has its advantages. After all, if we think back to Wilson, it is evident that many marginalized groups are misrepresented or invisible in museums. Social media experiments like crowdsourcing can give individuals the chance to make their voices heard, especially when representation in the museum world still proves to be a disappointing statistic. In an atmosphere in which American society is becoming increasingly diverse,²⁶⁹ minority groups are still underrepresented within the larger framework of nonprofit museums. For example, a study published on March 30, 2010 by The Urban Institute reveals that in the Baltimore-Washington area 49% of individuals in the region are people of color, while only 22% of museums have executive directors of color. Crowdsourcing

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²⁶⁹ 1 in 3 Americans is a minority, and this number will continue to rise over the next 20 years. Center for the Future of Museums, “Museums and Society 2034: Trends and Potential Futures,” December 2008, 5.
therefore has the potential to change this situation; representation can improve from giving the public a louder voice through social media. I would like to suggest then, that although in museums the use of crowdsourcing is currently experimental and the degree to which crowdsourcing can actually be employed to initiate change is debatable, it is actively shifting the role of the curator as creator of content to framer of meaning.

The following exhibits, Democracy (2009), and Click! (2008) highlight that while museums can experiment with the public’s role in exhibit production, these social media tests often result in lackluster shows produced with cheap, temporary media (for example digital screens and photographs). James Deetz explains that artifacts have an “immediacy” which contemporary objects (books and photos) do not; artifacts provide a direct link between the past and the present. Thus, while these exhibits give “organic intellectuals” a chance to perform the duties of experts, they are ultimately not as powerful as traditional shows because in Deetz’s terms the objects used are not “authentic.” I would thus like to suggest that the power of authenticity in these exhibits is lost through digital displays, and therefore so is the power of the audience’s voice. Further, although these shows claim to be produced without the hand of a curator, someone who could technically be defined as a curator ultimately had to arrange the material for display. In these exhibits curators therefore function as collectors of voices; they are guiding these conversations rather than dictating them.

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Design Event, an annual design festival in the United Kingdom, hosted an exhibit entitled *Democracy*, from October 14th to October 30th, 2009. The tag line? “The Curator is Dead. Long Live Democracy” (Appendix A, Figures 17-20). Jim Richardson, the managing director of the design consultancy, Sumo, and the creator of the exhibit noted that the goal of *Democracy* was to “create the most democratic exhibition in the world,” democratic meaning for Richardson, without the authority of the curator; the public would determine the exhibit’s final content. Presented by The Square Yard Gallery in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne England, the leaders of Design Even encouraged designers and illustrators to submit art that defined the concept of democracy. Individuals were invited to vote for the best designs on the exhibit’s website, by text message, or using a form provided by the gallery. The 51 works that received the most votes were digitally projected onto the walls so that the exhibit could constantly change as visitors viewed it. Furthermore, the greater number of votes a piece received, the larger it was displayed in the gallery.

*Democracy* then, did not allow any individual voice to dominate; the voice of this particular exhibit was collective. Because the display shifted regularly based on audience participation, visitors and online voters controlled both the selection and display of the

273 The exhibit received over 500 submissions from 33 countries.
artwork. Thus, the exhibit explored the concept both thematically and symbolically. As noted by one blogger who reviewed the exhibit, artists could explore the meaning of democracy while experiencing it first hand by contributing to an exhibit that was “by the people, for the people.” By voting, viewers ultimately chose which individual works were exhibited as well as their order.

A similar exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, *Click!: A Community Curated Exhibit* (Appendix A, Figure 21-22) gave visitors the opportunity to vote online for photos submitted by Brooklyn community members. The goal of the exhibit was to “investigate the question of whether crowds could ‘wisely’ judge something as subjective as art.” Viewers could rate the photos using a “sliding scale” to note whether photos were “most effective” or “least effective” in relation to the aesthetic quality of the photo and how well it conveyed the theme “Changing Faces of Brooklyn.” Essentially *Click!* allowed the crowd to become curators. The exhibit’s website served as a platform that gave the public the power to choose the content of the show.

Simon reminds us that the questions being asked by exhibits like *Click!* however, are not asking new questions. As early as the 1960s, scholars like Paulo Friere and Ivan Illich attempted to redefine educational methodologies using a discursive approach: Friere and Illich proposed a “peer matching network,” noting that it would be “the only way to guarantee the right of free assembly and to train people in the exercise of the most

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fundamental civic activity.”281 Essentially, Friere and Illich’s model suggests that “citizen education would be much more powerful and valuable to formal schools.”282 Click! highlights a similar idea: that a highly “participatory” approach283 to an exhibit may prove more engaging for the public than a formal exhibit. This concept essentially repositions the curator as a facilitator of ideas as opposed to a dictator of ideas.

While Friere and Illich’s ideas could prove to be effective, it is difficult to say whether museums will ever fully adopt the “peer matching network model.” Specifically, in regard to Click!, those who participated in the exhibit construction responded well; however critics did not. Simon reports that “The community of people who had been involved in making it – photographers and judges alike – came to share the experience with each other and with their own networks.”284 Because the Brooklyn community played a role in organizing the exhibit, they were more excited to see the results than a critic for instance, who came to the show to judge it for its aesthetic appeal. Ken Johnson of The New York Times described the exhibit as “not very interesting to look at,”285 although he found that concept made for a “good conversation starter.”286

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282 Simon, The Participatory Museum, 120.
283 Simon, The Participatory Museum, 120.
284 Simon, The Participatory Museum, 117.
He elaborates to say, “it will take a lot more persuasive reasoning to convince anyone with a serious interest in artistic quality that ‘crowd-curating’ is a good idea.” Johnson’s commentary proves that while museums are experimenting with “crowdsourcing” and other forms of social media, the power structure of expertise in the museum world is still in place. Museums may be giving the crowds contemporary control of exhibit content, but the curator’s expertise will always be valued.

Before You “Exit Through the Gift Shop” …

Thinking back to Banksy’s big gold frame we can acknowledge that museums have been given the “Midas touch” of knowledge. Museums have the power to define our identities, shape our understanding of the world around us, and determine cultural and aesthetic values; however, this power has not gone unchecked. As we have seen, museums have become important sites of critique, and they have adapted their internal structures to compensate for these critiques. The media has brought the public’s attention to the process of curating; exhibits such as Enola Gay and Beyond the Fantastic have illustrated the way curators are limited by outside forces but have also shown how curators limit the way ideas are presented. Further, artists like Hans Haacke and Fred Wilson and have brought to light the power of the museum to represent other cultures and produce meaning. Artifacts can be interpreted in a variety of ways, and these artists prove that the context in which objects are

288 Taken from the title of the graffiti artist Banksy’s 2010 film and a piece from his 2009 exhibit at Bristol Museum. Please see Appendix A, Figure 23.
placed and the way they are arranged generates meaning — meaning that is often framed by
the social, cultural, and economic background of the curator.

As a result of these political and artistic critiques, today’s museums are not static
institutions – they are changing in response to external forces.289 The narrative of the
museum is no longer authoritative and singular; many new voices have been woven into the
discourse of the museum: Museums have become spaces onto which political and corporate
agendas are projected and further, the growth of social media has led to greater public
involvement in terms of what is presented in exhibits. We can acknowledge that today,
museums are undergoing a transformation from “Acropolis—that inaccessible treasury on
the fortified hill—to Agora, a marketplace of ideas offering space for conversation.”290 Thus,
the museum has become a site for active community discussion. A curator from the mid
1990s remarked, “Ten years ago, art museum staff might easily have asked, ‘Is an audience
necessary?’”291 Clearly, curators today are making an effort to consider the ideas of their
surrounding communities. Curators now function as the discussion leaders; they control how
the museum communicates with the public. Curators lead tours through exhibits,292 develop
community outreach programs,293 and choose how to display user-generated content in

of Museums, 2001), v.
290 Nancy Proctor, “Digital: Museum as a Platform, Curator as a Champion, In the Age of Social Media,”
Curator Journal, January 2010, 36.
291 Neil Kotler and Philip Kotler, Museum Strategy and Marketing: Designing Missions, Building Audiences,
293 North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences, “Outreach,” http://naturalsciences.org/programs-
events/outreach
exhibitions. Museums are moving away from linear educational approaches – information transmission is becoming discursive.

While corporations and “citizen curators” have at times been given the chance to take on curatorial responsibilities, these opportunities are ultimately nonthreatening to the profession. In reality, museums are looked down upon by the museum community for accepting corporate-curated exhibits. Because museums are nonprofit institutions, they must fully adhere to their mission statements; accepting a corporate-curated exhibit simply means accepting a corporate agenda. Museums must rely on the expertise of their own curators to carry out their missions. Further, contributing to exhibits via the internet certainly does not make laymen curators. Although exhibits like Democracy and Click! present an interesting idea – the idea of a community-curated exhibit – ultimately the knowledge of the public is not valued the same way as the expertise of curators. According to Troy M. Livingston, we may be living in a more democratic “Wikipedia world” in which anyone who has access to the web can publish content for public access; however for most academics Wikipedia is not a reputable source of information, much like for critics a community-curated exhibit is not a reputable exhibit.

Nevertheless, the notion of community involvement is noteworthy and is not dismissible. In “Newspapers and Thinking the Unthinkable” the media analyst Clay Shriky

294 Essentially “citizen curators” are members of the public who are invited by museums to participate in the construction of an exhibition through social media. Term borrowed from Proctor, “Digital: Museum as a Platform, Curator as a Champion, In the Age of Social Media,” 36.

295 Bourdieu and Haacke, Free Exchange, 10.

296 Proctor, “Digital: Museum as a Platform, Curator as a Champion, In the Age of Social Media,” 36.

297 Schlatter, “Are DJs, Rappers, and Bloggers, Curators?” http://www.aam-us.org/pubs/mn/newspin.cfm
discusses the recent decline in the newspaper industry, a concept that Proctor argues can be applied to the increased public involvement in the museum world. Shirky observes:

For the next few decades, journalism will be made up of overlapping special cases. Many of these models will rely on amateurs as researchers and writers. Many of these models will rely on sponsorship or grants or endowments instead of revenues. Many of these models will rely on excitable 14-year-olds distributing the results. Many of these models will fail. No one experiment is going to replace what we are now losing with the demise of news on paper, but over time, the collection of new experiments that do work might give us the journalism we need.298

In other words, although corporate and citizen curated exhibits have placed the profession under siege, generally speaking these exhibits are experiments. We can argue that indeed, at times these experiments remove curatorial authority, however they also illustrate that museums are attempting to educate and interactive with the public in new ways. Although these experiments can be problematic, they are also signaling new ways to bring information into a community. Corporate-curated exhibits allow museums to introduce famous works to the public that would be too expensive to exhibit otherwise, while crowdsourced exhibits give the public a more active voice within the walls of the museum.

Ultimately, it has become essential to reexamine the responsibilities of the curator in order to respond to the public’s demands to be included in the overall museum conversation. As Proctor argues, “many voices are critical to the interpretation of a culture,”299 or to the interpretation of artifacts. We must acknowledge that objects do not possess inbuilt meaning;300 artifacts, aesthetics, and histories are subject to the backgrounds of their interpreters, and thus a variety of viewpoints are essential to fully understanding the objects

300 Cited in Hooper-Greenhill, Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge, 6.
within art and history museums. The public then, can improve the quality of the information available in exhibits. For example, in 2009 the Powerhouse Museum in Australia made its entire collection available to the public online. A “citizen curator,” Sharon Rutledge, was able to explain to the museum the use of a particular artifact and furthermore, informed the museum of the object’s provenance, ultimately improving the amount of information available about the object.\footnote{Proctor, “Digital: Museums as a Platform, Curator as a Champion,” 37.} Without the insight of its “citizen curator,” the Powerhouse Museum might still be researching the function and history of the particular artifact.

In short, we need curatorial expertise – the training curators undergo to become museum professionals and the knowledge they possess are invaluable to museums; however, it is also important to recognize the multitude of voices that are waiting to enter the museum conversation. Today, curators function as conversation leaders rather than dictators. Curators provoke discussions and ask us to think critically instead of completely controlling the information in exhibits. Furthermore, as discussion leaders they can assemble the ideas of many into one narrative, potentially producing knowledge that is more inclusive of all members of our diverse society.\footnote{Proctor, “Digital: Museums as a Platform, Curator as a Champion,” 40.} One could argue that now, curators are more necessary than ever before – they are developing an educational method that is becoming increasingly discursive. Curators are not in danger; their responsibilities are expanding and evolving to provide a more comprehensive overview of history, art, and culture.
Banksy, “Exit Through the Gift Shop,” June 2009
Banksy vs. Bristol Museum
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Appendix A: Images

Figure 1: Banksy, “Never Underestimate the Power of a Big Gold Frame”
*Banky vs. Bristol Museum, June 2009*

**Note: The title of this project was taken from this piece.**

Figure 2: The National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

83
MORE DIRT ON MUSEUMS:

OUR NATIONAL MUSEUMS
HAVE PALTRY COLLECTIONS
OF ART BY WOMEN, AND
ALMOST ALL OF IT IS KEPT IN
STORAGE, NOT DISPLAY.

WHICH MUSEUM HAS THE LEAST ART BY
WOMEN AND ARTISTS OF COLOR ON VIEW?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Museum</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Gallery of Art</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>99.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Portrait Gallery</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hirshhorn Museum: Modern &amp; Cont.</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Art Museum &amp; Renwick</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

EVER WONDER WHY BILLIE HOLLADAY STARTED
THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF WOMEN IN THE ARTS?
NOW YOU KNOW!

IF YOU'RE SHOCKED BY THESE STATS, JOIN US!
DEMAND THAT MUSEUMS USE OUR TAX DOLLARS TO
TELL THE WHOLE STORY OF OUR CULTURE.

Figure 4: Guerilla Girls, “Horrors on the National Mall!”
“Statistics are based from information supplied by museums or found on their websites.”
http://www.guerrillagirls.com/posters/washposthorror.shtml
Figure 5: An organizational chart of traditional museum administration
Figure 6: Fred Wilson, Metalwork 1793-1880

Figure 7: Image from the Enola Gay Exhibit
http://www.nasm.si.edu/imagedetail.cfm?imageID=2041
Figure 8: Rufino Tamayo, Leon y Caballo (Lion and Horse), 1942
From *Art of the Fantastic*

Figure 9: Tarsila do Amaral, *Abaporu*, 1928
in *Art of the Fantastic*
Figure 10: Luis Cruz Azaceta, *The Journey*, 1986 in *Art of the Fantastic*

Figure 12: Busts of Tubman, Douglas, and Banneker / Clay, Bonaparte, and Jackson
Mining the Museum, 1992

Figure 13: Fred Wilson, “Truth Trophy,” Mining the Museum, 1992
Figure 14: Truth Trophy and Busts, Mining the Museum, 1992

Figure 15: "Cabinetmaking 1820-1960"
Figure 16: Baby Carriage, Mining the Museum, 1992

Figure 17: Democracy Exhibit Poster, 2009
Visitors were invited to leave comments on post-its at the end of the exhibit. The post-its included discussion starters such as: “I Love/Hate Democracy Because,” “My Favorite Submission Is,” and “Democracy Means.”
Figure 20: A Voting Booth, Democracy 2009
Brooklyn Museum

Exhibitions: Click! A Crowd-Curated Exhibition

Current
Upcoming
Past
2008
2007
2006
2005
2004
2003
Touring
Online

Click!
A Crowd-Curated Exhibition

June 27–August 10, 2008
2nd Floor

Click! is a photography exhibition that invites Brooklyn Museum’s visitors, the online community, and the general public to participate in the exhibition process. Taking its inspiration from the critically acclaimed book *The Wisdom of Crowds*, in which *New Yorker* business and financial columnist James Surowiecki asserts that a diverse crowd is often wiser at making decisions than expert individuals, Click! explores whether Surowiecki’s premise can be applied to the visual arts—is a diverse crowd just as “wise” at evaluating art as the trained experts?

Figure 21: A screen capture of Click!’s website

Figure 22: Click! on display at the Brooklyn Museum, 2008
Figure 23: Banksy, “Exit Through the Gift Shop,” Banksy vs. Bristol Museum, June 2009