

“Possibilities for Evolution: The Role of Artists and Participatory, Socially-Engaged Practice Within the Museum”

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“Art is the only possibility for evolution, the only possibility to change the situation in this world.” —Joseph Beuys

ABSTRACT

In a rapidly transforming world of social media, massive open online learning, and increasing demands for active participation and collaborative engagement, museums have been faced with the challenge of redefining their public practice. The question Stephen Weil posed to museums almost two decades ago seems only more relevant today: “Are you truly able to accomplish anything that makes a difference, or are you simply an old habit?” A growing number of art museums have, in recent years, been working towards a more participatory, socially-engaged practice, partnering directly with artists and the community to develop new forms of engagement that extend the boundaries of what is possible. Projects like the Walker Art Center’s Open Field, Machine Project at UCLA’s Hammer Museum, and the Portland Art Museum’s Shine a Light—along with many other initiatives—have encouraged a rethinking of the traditional museum experience as well as a closer interrogation of the museum itself as an institution and its role in the community. This paper will explore the role of art museums as sites for participatory, socially-engaged practice, examining a series of current projects and bringing to the surface a series of core questions about this type of work as this practice evolves into the future.

In a rapidly transforming world of social media, massive open online learning, and increasing demands for active participation and collaborative engagement, museums have been faced with the challenge of redefining their public practice. As Graham Black states in his recent book *Transforming Museums in the Twenty-First Century* (2012), “people today increasingly refuse to be passive recipients of whatever governments, companies, or cultural institutions such as museums offer” (3). Instead, museums need to engage with users as active participants, contributors, and collaborators, continuing to change and take on new meanings and roles as society continues to transform itself. Nina Simon’s pivotal book *The Participatory Museum* (2010) firmly established the need to develop a more participatory mindset and to reconnect with audiences through diverse forms of participatory experiences—a text that has remained at the core of conversations about this element of museum practice since its publication, in part due to Simon’s widely-read blog *Museum 2.0*. However, the broader arts and culture sector in the United States has also seen this shift occurring.

The 2011 study published by the James Irvine Foundation entitled *Getting In On the Act: How Arts Groups Are Creating Opportunities for Active Participation* draws insights from a much wider field of nonprofit arts groups and experts to explore a new model for understanding and supporting active, participatory practices. Here is how the report's authors frame the "seismic shift" occurring in the United States towards a participatory arts culture:

"People are thinking about the experience of culture differently than in the past, placing value on a more immersive and interactive experience than is possible through mere observation.... Americans are activating their own creativity in new and unusual ways ... [as] part of a larger 'participatory economy' in which social connection eclipses consumption. Americans want to meet the people who make our products, share in the work of the makers, and make things ourselves." (6)

The Irvine Foundation report further suggests that "the value of the arts in this participatory culture is its ability to connect people through shared experiences and to contribute to vibrant, livable communities." The report's human-centered focus brings much-needed attention to the value of the arts—and especially arts institutions such as museums—to connect people, to create shared social experiences, and to contribute to the cultural fabric of the communities in which we live and work.

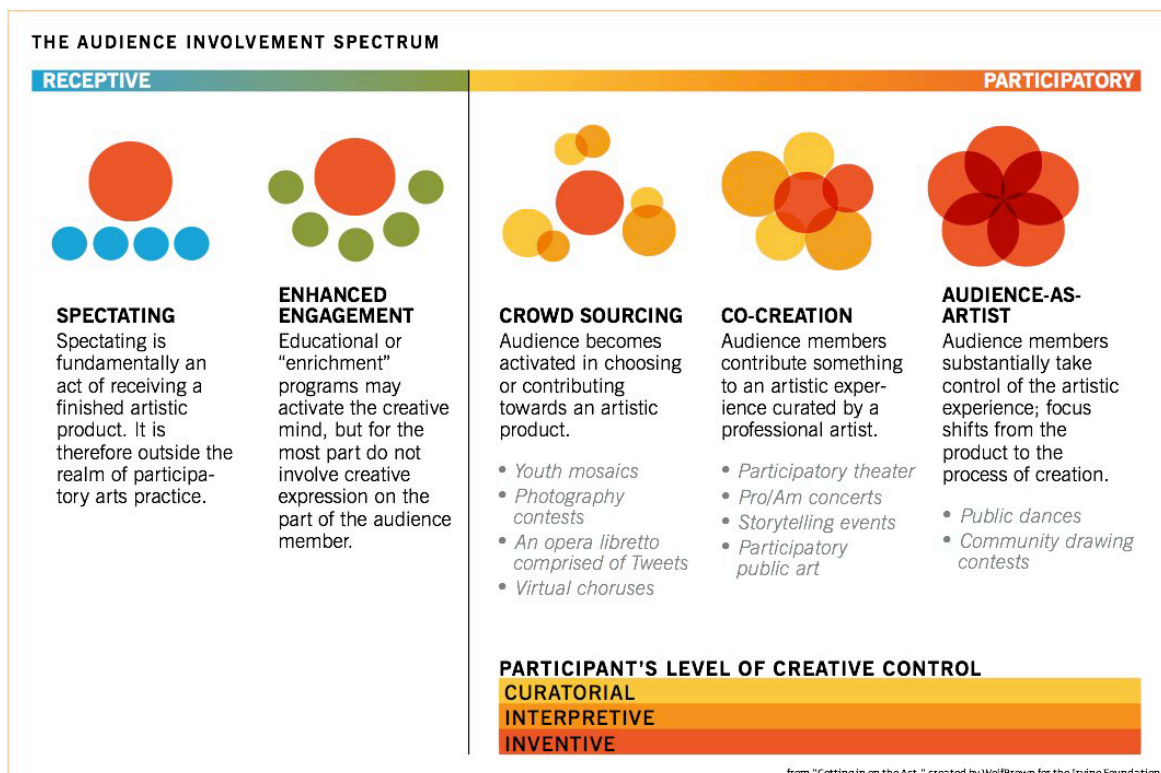


Figure 1. Irvine Foundation's framework for audience involvement and participation.

Over the past few years, the Irvine Foundation's Arts Innovation Fund has supported arts organizations across California—including 7 art museums—to experiment with innovative projects geared toward achieving new relevance for audiences, communities, and artists. One example of such a project, described in more detail below, is the Public Engagement Artist in Residence program at UCLA's Hammer Museum. Outside the boundaries of the museum's traditional curatorial operations, this newly developed initiative brings artists together with museum staff in a collaborative process to investigate public engagement and, according to artist Mark Allen, to open up a more exciting and fundamental challenge: "to rethink the way museums operate and to propose changes that would make the museum as an institution better attuned to contemporary art practices" (Machine Project Hammer Report, 12). The Hammer Museum is now one of several institutions bringing artists and artistic practice into their efforts to become more audience-centered, community-based, and participatory. As artists gain more creative input in museums and activate museum spaces and publics in new, unexpected ways, it is important to take a closer look at these emerging experimentations and consider their place in the evolving practice of museums.

EXPERIMENTING IN ART MUSEUMS

"I don't think ideas are very valuable in themselves. It's only in the doing of the idea that you learn anything, or anything interesting happens." —Mark Allen, Machine Project Hammer Report

Experimental work in museums has been a growing topic of conversation among museum professionals, and an increasing number of institutions have gone down the path of taking risks and developing new kinds of projects that consider the roles of art, artists, and visitors from a fresh perspective. As part of this shift in museums, more and more institutions are working with artists in ways that expand far beyond simply placing their works on the walls, instead inviting artists to bring their artistic practice to bear on creating experiences that actively engage visitors and, in many cases, also interrogate the role of the museum within their community. While they frequently meet resistance from within the museum institution for seeming frivolous or without intellectual content, these projects largely succeed (because of the involvement of artists) in transforming museums into open spaces of curiosity, experience, collaboration, risk-taking, and creativity. In writing about the November 2012 panel discussion entitled "Do We Need Artists in Art Museums?" held at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Annelisa Stephan aptly remarks:

"Inviting artists into the institution ... has ramifications far beyond any individual project. Including artists means taking risks and ceding control; it means changing how museum staff work together; and it even means shifting what a museum is, from a space for art to a space of art." (<http://blogs.getty.edu/iris/what-can-we-learn-from-artists-projects-in-museums/>)

During the 2012 American Association of Museums Annual Meeting, a group of museum experts including Maria Mortati (independent exhibit developer), Sarah Schultz (Walker Art Center), Susan Diachisin (Dallas Museum of Art), and Stephanie Parrish (Portland Art Museum)

came together to address some of the issues and questions surrounding experimental projects in art museums, thinking about public practice as well as working with socially-engaged artists. This important session explored how to support, realize, and engage with a variety of experimental projects, leaving attendees—and the entire museum community—with an “An Elastic Manual for Experimental Museum Projects.” Thinking critically about why art museums would do this type of work, they laid out a series of key statements supporting projects driven by these artistic practices; among them were:

- It will expand your role in the community: the work is more social and each project appeals to different audiences. It relies on networks inside and outside the museum to function and therefore has a greater reach.
- It pushes all departments: it innovates all areas of the museum, by engaging them in the art-making.
- It is the closest thing so far to working in line with how artists create.
- You are furthering a conversation with contemporary work: these projects directly engage with new art forms.

A growing number of art museums have, in recent years, been working towards a more participatory, socially-engaged practice, partnering directly with artists and the community to develop new forms of engagement that extend the boundaries of what is possible. Projects like the Walker Art Center’s *Open Field*, Machine Project’s residency at UCLA’s Hammer Museum, and the Portland Art Museum’s *Shine a Light*—along with several other initiatives—have encouraged a rethinking of the traditional museum experience as well as a closer interrogation of the museum itself as an institution and its role in the community.

In a March 2013 article entitled “Outside the Citadel, Social Practice Art Is Intended to Nurture,” *New York Times* arts writer Randy Kennedy examines the recent rise of social practice art. “Its practitioners,” states Kennedy, “freely blur the lines among object making, performance, political activism, community organizing, environmentalism and investigative journalism, creating a deeply participatory art that often flourishes outside the gallery and museum system.” As he notes, social practice artists more frequently find themselves in dialogue with museums through the education and programs departments rather than through the traditional curatorial route -- this would be true of the institutions and projects described in this paper. Artist and educator Pablo Helguera discussed how institutions, and education departments more specifically, can provide some safety to these types of socially-engaged projects. He suggests that:

“the reason why education departments appear to be very welcoming and very appropriate for this kind of stuff is because they are designed for people. Education is about people and about visitors and they are adjusted to the porosity of social relationships.” (interview with Helen Reed, <http://thepedagogicalimpulse.com>)

In order to more effectively explore the ways in which art museums have become sites for socially-engaged practice and new forms of artist-driven public engagement, this paper will now more closely examine three telling cases that were developed in art museums at a parallel moment these past few years: the Walker Art Center’s *Open Field*, Machine Project’s residency

at UCLA's Hammer Museum, and the Portland Art Museum's *Shine a Light*. Selected from more than a dozen examples of this type of practice, these three projects each have stretched and pushed their institutions in new and productive ways, opening up unanticipated, thought-provoking, exciting, and even uncomfortable ways for visitors to experience an art museum. The teams and communities involved with each of these projects have certainly walked away with their own unique 'lessons learned' as well as several core questions that have already led to pushing this type of practice forward at these and other institutions. Given the co-produced and co-authored nature of this type of experimental practice in museums, the text below similarly draws in many of the voices involved at each site -- quoting artists and museum staff at length to honor their core role in this challenging and meaningful work.

Walker Art Center's *Open Field*

"What does it mean to be creative as conscious social activity—to create a commons, rather than individualizing creativity?" —Josh McPhee, artist ("Introduction" in *Conversations on the Commons*, 2012)

Open Field is the Walker Art Center's experiment in participation and public space. Taking place outdoors in the summer months since its launch in 2010, the project invites artists and visitors to imagine and inhabit the museum's campus as a cultural commons—a shared space for idea exchange, creative gatherings, and unexpected interactions. The Walker's backyard has been home to numerous planned and spontaneous activities during its three years of *Open Field*, including music performances, artist-in-residence projects, Internet cat video festivals, juggling lessons, Drawing Club, pickling workshops, yarn-bombing, temporary sculpture installations, a concert of people mowing the field in tandem, and so much more. The initiative began with a simple question: "What would you do in an open field?" Through this experiment in 'letting go' of cultural authority and control, the Walker Art Center has been pioneering in its rethinking of public gathering spaces and the role of the art museum in creating something *with* its public rather than simply *for* its public.

In addition to being an open creative space for public participation, the Walker Art Center also imagined the potential for professional artists to experiment with public practice in the commons. Working with artists and collectives who embraced their vision for public engagement and collaborative investigation, the Walker Art Center commissioned groups such as Futurefarmers, Machine Project, and Red76 to envision and implement projects during the summer—both pushing the creative and artistic thinking about the space, as well as to model possible creative activities to the larger community (who were interested in participating, but nervous about what this might look like in the context of a contemporary art center). In the 2012 publication *Open Field: Conversations on the Commons*, which documented the first two years of the project, *Open Field* co-creator Sarah Schultz describes the vital role that these artists played:

"The socially engaged practices of these artists and the intellectual and creative rigor with which they approached the aesthetic, social, and political implications of commons-based cultural practices were crucial to project's evolution. The resident artists'

openness and warmth toward the public and their willingness to allow their work to unfold alongside whatever else was happening on the hill played an important role in what Open Field would eventually become: a porous environment that blurred the lines and leveled the playing field between professional and nonprofessional artists, weekend hobbyists, and creative enthusiasts.” (<http://blogs.walkerart.org/ecp/2012/08/27/my-common-education-lessons-from-open-field>)

As the Walker Art Center’s education and public practice staff continue to reflect upon *Open Field* and plan for future directions for this project, there is little doubt that they have shifted the conversation about museums, public practice, and community participation.



Figure 2. A crowd gathers on the field for Open Exposure, a music festival organized by the Walker Art Center Teen Arts Council, 2010. Photo © Walker Art Center.

Machine Project at UCLA’s Hammer Museum

“Almost every day now I think about the power that intimacy can have, and that we don’t need to serve a thousand people with each project. We’ve talked often about how you measure success: it’s not just the number of people that come through; quality is part of it.” —Allison Agsten, *Machine Project Hammer Report* (36)

In 2010, the Hammer Museum at the University of California, Los Angeles, invited the artist/performer collaborative Machine Project to produce a year of programming which proposed new, alternative, and experimental ways of presenting work at the museum. This decision came out of a process in which the museum worked with a newly-created Artist Council to address many of the visitor services issues the museum was struggling with. Striving to be a truly artist-driven institution, the museum received funding from the Irvine Foundation to create its Public Engagement Artist in Residence program, with Machine Project being the first. Over their residency, twenty-six projects were implemented, including personal soundtracks for visitors, staff pet portraits, table tennis, printmaking workshops, micro-concerts, and a giant animatronic hand that pointed people to different areas of the museum.



Figure 3. Machine Project’s Live Museum Soundtrack at the Hammer Museum. Guitarist Eric Klerks improvises music for each artworks this visitor views.

The Hammer’s Public Engagement Artist in Residence program specifically sought to bring the creative process of artists into the museum, setting out to utilize artists as problem solvers for visitor services and operational concerns. As Mark Allen, Director of Machine Project, discusses in his introduction in the *Machine Project Hammer Report* (2012), however, this became a point of tension between the museum and Machine Project artists:

“When people at an institution speak of a problem, it is often to indicate something that interferes with their operation. From the artist’s perspective, a problem is a provocation or a site to which the artwork responds by creating something that engages the problem and makes it visible in a different light. The problem is aestheticized, framed, or reconfigured; it is seldom erased or resolved” (14).

The Hammer Museum and the artists working with Machine Project have been transparent about these tensions in a unique way that spotlights how productive it can be for visitors to think critically about the museums they visit. While bringing in artists to “fix glitches” may not be a successful goal for experimental practice like Public Engagement, having artists collaborate with museums does work toward more process-oriented goals of having critical conversations about creative negotiation, of building capacities for collaboration, of encouraging museums to cede more control to their communities, and of reconsidering how these institutions engage their publics. Reflecting upon the project in 2012, a year after its conclusion, the team at Machine Project observed:

“A year later, what seems most interesting about this project is not just what the public experienced, but everything that took place behind the scenes – the conversations with artists, the challenges inside and outside of the museum, the logistic and philosophical issues involved in attempting to suggest other uses for a major cultural institution.”
(<http://machineproject.com>)

This single example of the Hammer Museum’s Public Engagement Artist in Residence program clearly indicates the value of artist-driven visitor engagement, and their work has served as a guide for other institutions to have “a better sense of the terrain” in pursuing similar endeavors (Mark Allen, Machine Project Hammer Report, 15).

Portland Art Museum’s *Shine a Light*

“Art and everyday life share a common and continuous border. They coexist in the same reality, divided and defined by a border that twists, turns, open and closes. The edges of the museum are part of that border, and like the imaginary line between any contested territories, this boundary does not completely reflect the reality on the ground.” —Paul Ramirez Jonas (“An Imaginary Line,” *Shine a Light* 2013 program, 1)

At the same time that the team at the Walker Art Center was preparing to launch *Open Field* and Machine Project had recently experimented at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (which preceded their work at the Hammer Museum), the Education team at the Portland Art Museum began conversations with the faculty in Art & Social Practice at neighboring Portland State University around similar types of experimentations. The immediate outcome of this collaboration was *Shine a Light*, a new annual one-night event at the Portland Art Museum dedicated to experimentation, play, and participation. Emerging out of a collaboration between the museum and Portland State University’s MFA program in Art & Social Practice, *Shine a Light* invited the MFA program’s faculty and students to propose a series of projects that would

experiment in and with the Museum space -- conceiving the museum as a laboratory for ideas and interventions. As Christina Olsen, then Director of Education and Public Programs at the museum, recounts:

“Over lunch one day, I began to talk with Harrell Fletcher and Jen Delos Reyes—co-directors of PSU’s Art & Social Practice program—about the the ‘habits of mind’ that govern both museum visitors and museum staff, and ways we might collaborate to expand such mindsets” (*Shine a Light* 2010, 5).

Inspired by the Machine Project’s *Field Guide to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art* one-day event in November 2008 as well as the broader approach and process of social practice art, the team at the Portland Art Museum and PSU launched the first *Shine a Light* event in September 2009. For six hours, the museum was a space in which sixteen artists enacted projects that offered visitors new, unanticipated, playful and provocative ways to experience the museum. The goals established during this first event—which have remained the core goals for this project up through the most recent *Shine a Light* event in 2013—included:

- Situate art (producing, interpreting, enjoying, puzzling over) as a living activity that everyone can participate in.
- Encourage an atmosphere of participation between the museum, its visitors, and artists.
- Make the museum a “site” of artistic production and practice.
- Inspire inquiry into the connection between art and everyday life.
- Have fun!



Figure 4. Museum visitor engages with Duane Hanson sculpture as part of Shine a Light 2011, Portland Art Museum. Photo by Jacob Iller.

Artist-led projects that have been part of *Shine a Light* since 2009 have ranged from live Greco-Roman nude wrestling, a museum cookbook, dead artist seances, and haircuts inspired by artworks in the collection to inviting visitors to have a work of art tattooed onto their body, to sing songs about a work of art, or to display their personal cell phone photos within the museum's photography collection.

Since the project's launch in 2009, the annual *Shine a Light* event has brought together more than 9,000 participants to actively engage in a total of 88 artist-driven projects spread across the entire museum campus, successfully cultivating a younger "millennial" audience as well as encouraging existing audiences to rethink what is possible in an art museum. In its four iterations, *Shine a Light* has built a unique framework to work closely with emerging and professional artists and to provide an ongoing platform for the Museum, artists, and audiences to actively learn and experiment with one another. In her introduction to the 2013 *Shine a Light* event program, Associate Director of Education & Public Programs Stephanie Parrish encapsulates much of the museum's current thinking about this experimental project:

"In its ideal form, a program like *Shine a Light* is a platform that nudges us to wonder; to consider art museum spaces as flexible sites where one's identity as an artist, an institution, or a member of the public is increasingly fluid.... We find ourselves in a hybrid zone, somewhere on a continuum where museums not only display but also produce art, where artists shape and are shaped by institutions and are not just pitted against them, and where multiple publics see themselves as participants in and reflected through the art. *Shine a Light* is a space where we co-produce museum experiences and adjust our perspective of where art, artists, and institutions intersect in our everyday lives." (*Shine a Light* 2013 program, 1).

Raising Core Questions

During the 2013 Open Engagement conference -- an international gathering of artists, educators, curators, and scholars in the field of social practice and socially-engaged art—one of the panel sessions entitled "Art Museums and Social Practice: Where Are We Now?" brought together nearly a dozen museum professionals and artists engaged in this type of practice within their own institutions. Facilitated by the *Shine a Light* team at the Portland Art Museum, the thinking around this panel session began months in advance by having museum professionals and artists define the 'burning questions' that were core to their own involvement with this practice in museums. After gathering ten pages filled with questions, the group was invited to "crowd-source" the most urgent questions by marking the questions most relevant to their own practice.

At the Open Engagement panel discussion, the top questions were revealed and discussed, and I think perhaps it is an appropriate way to end this paper by simply presenting these and other questions that are now sparking some open thinking in the field across institutions.

- Are we doing this work to broaden our audiences or to serve existing audiences?

- What's the difference between an artist doing this work versus a public engagement or education department doing it?
- What does success look like? How do we measure success?
- What happens when institutions collaborate with artists? How can the questions artists ask reshape us as practitioners and reshape the museum itself?

Many of the answers to these and other questions are localized to each project and institution (some have even been addressed above by existing projects), yet certainly some common responses will emerge as institutions push ahead with experimental, participatory practices that open the spaces of museums to the work of social practice and socially-engaged artists, as well as museum staff that have been gaining a tremendous level of creative capacity through this type of work. Overall, many of these core questions bring the conversation back to the ability of these socially-engaged, participatory projects to effect change -- whether that is shifting the 'mindset' for museum visitors as well as the communities that engage with museums, or a more broad social change felt in the community.

As part of his framing of the 2013 Open Engagement conference, Tom Finkelpearl (Director, Queens Museum) clearly stated that museums and artists need to be self-critical about this type of work and the impact it may have. "My worry," Finkelpearl writes, "is that we are not able to bring our social projects to scale -- to actually address social issues. Even the most ambitious projects seem to deeply impact only a handful of people" (Open Engagement 2013 conference program). In her framing remarks, Claire Doherty (Director, Situations) echoed some of these same sentiments, challenging the notion of participation in an even more basic way: "how do artists create a reason for people to become involved?" (Open Engagement 2013 conference program). Additional questions facing institutions involved in this work include: Are these experiments and practices short-lived? How might they be more sustainable in the long term (in terms of both financial and staffing resources)? Do they offer any long-term benefits to the museum's communities, rather than just reaching out to and involving communities at the benefit of museum institutions? What are some of the most effective ways for embedding these artist-driven initiatives within the larger institutional culture, and growing a critical mass of support beyond the museum's walls?

As museums face the current challenges to drive relevance through becoming more active, participatory, responsive, and community-based, experimental projects such as the ones explored in this paper indicate a potentially transformative role for artists to play. Whether rethinking a museum's visitor experience, reinventing the public spaces of and around museums, drawing on creative practice to break museums' 'old habits,' or interrogating the internal culture and working of the museum, artists are effectively exploring museum institutions as sites with a distinct "possibility for evolution," to reconnect with the powerful words from Joseph Beuys that opened this paper.

"Art is a space, which we have created, where we can cease to subscribe to the demands and the rules of society; it is a space where we can pretend. We can play, we

can rethink things, we can think about them backwards.” —Pablo Helguera (Reed, “Bad Education”)

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