

***Exhibitions for Social Justice* by Elena Gonzales
Published by Routledge, Museum Meanings 2019**

Chapter Overview

The first three chapters of this book address the ways in which the work of the curatorial team affects the experience of the visitor. First, I examine how the experience in an exhibition can support visitors' development of empathy and, from empathy, solidarity. Then I explore the ways in which visitors can build strong, lasting memories of their experiences in museums, and how curators can support making memories through their work in the gallery. In Chapter 3, I survey diverse examples of exhibitions inspiring visitors to take action and analyze the curatorial practices involved. From the discussion of visitors taking action in Chapter 3, I move in Chapter 4 to a discussion of how museum staff and leaders can take action to make their institutions work better for social justice in and out of the gallery. The book ends with worksheets to help museum professionals evaluate the practices in this book in relationship to their own institutions and put them to use.

Chapter 1: From empathy to solidarity

I begin where many museums do: stories of individual people. We readily empathize with one person, but usually not with millions, as Holocaust museums well know. If curators hope to inspire people to act – whether inside or out of the museum – then visitors must empathize. If visitors are to be part of any collective action, they must feel solidarity.

In exploring the role of a curatorial strategy that is founded on empathy and solidarity, I ask why empathy is important. I look at two divergent stances for personal and group relationships that we see in museums: hospitality and tolerance. Then, I explore practices that curators can use to help visitors build empathy and solidarity.

Chapter 2: Physical experiences: building memories and empathy

Memories combine with the empathy and solidarity discussed in Chapter 1 to make a powerful platform from which visitors can act. In this chapter, I look at physical experiences in the museum, paying special attention to the promises and challenges of immersive environments. I explore what makes some immersive environments successful and others not. What are the roles of keystone objects? What happens when objects or artworks become environments? When and how is it advantageous to slow down or stop an emotional experience?

This chapter also discusses the connection between content in the museum and visitors' own experiences. Often this includes a connection to contemporary events. The possibilities for making content that resonates with visitors are as varied as the visitors themselves. But it's worth examining how a museum's approach to storytelling may include or exclude people from that resonance.

Chapter 3: Inspiring action

The neurologist Oliver Sacks was 69 when he wrote about his formative experiences in the museums of London: “The museums, especially, allowed me to wander in my own way, at leisure, going from one cabinet to another ... There was something passive, and forced upon one, about sitting in school, whereas in museums one could be active, explore, as in the world.”³⁸ Perhaps our sense of what constitutes action has changed. But for Sacks, looking back on his childhood, the simple action of exploring in the museum was significant. In this chapter, I take an ample view of action in an effort to examine the many ways in which a visit to an exhibition in a museum might affect a visitor’s behavior.

Many museums working for social justice hope to inspire the visitor to take action. At what point in exhibitions do museums call their visitors to action, and what are the implications of these choices? This chapter explores the range of ways in which museums can inspire visitors to take action inside and outside of the museum, and the stakes involved in how museums envision visitors as social actors.

In addition to the issue of social control, addressed above, two related concerns emerge around the notion of inspiring visitors to act. One is that museums working for social justice are simply “preaching to the choir”; that those who visit are self-selecting and were already likely to take action on contemporary issues. While most visitors are self-selecting (school groups being a notable exception), it’s unfair to envision the majority of visitors as “the choir.” First of all, many of the institutions in this study are mainstream institutions at which a visitor might be surprised to find content around social justice at all. However, even at a museum such as Hull-House, where the visitors are likely to be acquainted with the museum’s work in this area, the visitors might be divided into three categories: super-users who are already taking action on all fronts represented within the museum, those who are totally apathetic or uninterested in the topic, and the middle majority of visitors. This middle majority is likely to be at least somewhat interested in the subject matter, informed about some parts of it and not others, and open to making a new connection, thinking about something in a new way, or perhaps even taking action. The second, related concern that critics may have is that an exhibition in a museum is not going to truly transform someone’s frame of mind. While it would be wonderful to be able to take White supremacists, expose them to an exhibition, and transform them into open-minded anti-racists, this is neither the topic nor the goal of this book. Rather, my discussion of inspiring action is focused on the middle majority of visitors who are curious but perhaps still passive. This will be different at each institution, and staff members will know their own audiences the best.

I offer a sample of ways in which museums have engaged visitors in action along with a series of vignettes that offer a rare long-term glimpse into how museums can affect the informational environment of visitors. I do not suggest outcomes-based evaluation as a solution for the highly complex question of how exhibitions affect visitors over the long term. But I do hope that future studies will provide more data about whether the curatorial practices discussed here affect visitors’ memories, empathetic feelings, and actions in the anticipated ways.

Chapter 4: Welcome, inclusion, and sharing authority

Empathy arises between individuals. Solidarity arises between groups. Over time, that solidarity can develop into a bond of community. And museums can help us to sufficiently expand the group of people whose fate matters to us so that we're willing to act on their behalf. Museums can break down barriers that separate "us" from "them." My book ends with support for museum professionals as they rupture categories that keep us from helping one another and retain those that band us together.

Sharing authority has taken on great importance in museums in the new century. In this chapter, I discuss three ways to share authority: with visitors, with members of specific communities, and with both. This last can be an important way to bring people together to work for a cause.

The final task of this chapter will be to tether the popular topic of sharing authority to the question of how to use exhibitions to work for social justice. I will discuss museums that have used labels and other forms of address to consolidate visitors into publics with particular shared goals.

Summary

Two lines connect the collection of curatorial practices in this book. One is the goal of fostering curatorial work that seeks to redress wrongs and equitably distribute risks and rewards in society. The second is the way in which these curatorial practices make use of human bodies' natural systems, the ways in which human brains form memories and the ways in which people build empathy. These tools help curators to intentionally blend content with intellectual resonance and content that produces embodied emotional responses. I have selected curatorial practices that can do this because blending resonance and embodied emotion can help build memories and improve empathy.

In this book, I offer museum professionals ideas and strategies for confronting profound and urgent contemporary problems. One way to do this is developing the broad acceptance of the notion that we ought not to simply tolerate those who are different from ourselves. Museums must model hospitality. Our continued human existence demands that we share resources equitably and learn to care for others. Our existence is interdependent. Let's work together and use the vast resource of the world's museums to mitigate prejudice, inspire collaboration, and redistribute resources.