

The Art Museum Today, in Discussion

Introduction

With the massive social, demographic, technological, and economic shifts that have been radically transforming global society in recent decades, art museums around the world have been managing in environments of significant change. As Graham Black notes in *Transforming Museums in the Twenty-First Century* (Routledge, London: 2012): “We are living through a period of profound change in Western society, underpinned by a rise in new media and a fundamental shift in Western economies to a globally interconnected information economy.” For art museums, this shifting landscape has also been marked by periods of rapid growth and facilities expansion as well as economic crises and financial uncertainty.

Struggling with issues of audience relevance, leadership and financial sustainability, museum directors around the world are boldly questioning the future of the art museum. For some directors, the model of the art museum has never been more challenged and in need of creative re-imagination. For others, the call to radically reinvent the museum model is less urgent and the future is more a matter of “minor tweaks” and modest adaptation. As Richard Armstrong, director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Foundation, noted at a recent seminar of international art museum directors at the Aspen Institute, a key tension among colleagues today is, “Which side of the dynamism question are you on?”

In conjunction with an ad hoc committee of art museum directors, we convened a four-day seminar in 2013 focused on the future of the art museum. This gathering took place March 7 through 10 in Aspen, Colorado, at the Aspen Meadows campus of the Aspen Institute. There an independent group of seventeen art museum directors from the United States, Europe, Asia, and Australia were joined by seven thought leaders (or provocateurs) from other fields, including the disciplines of architecture, science, marketing and communications, technology, business, and the performing arts. Two of the outside provocateurs were artists. Five countries (including the United States) were represented. Funding included participant contributions, grants from the Getty Foundation, funders Agnes Gund, Lynda and Stewart Resnick, and in-kind support from the Aspen Institute Seminars Department.

The seminar was designed to address a series of questions emerging out of discussions within an Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) task force about the future of the art museum. The Aspen seminar method of text-based dialogue was selected as a way to address the broader question of the role of the arts in a good society as a means of providing a different, reflective, and creative space for discussing the difficult questions facing art museums. Senior Aspen moderator Jay Marshall, managing director of AlixPartners LLP in Dallas, presided over the discussion. Seminar discussions blended the Aspen Institute’s classic text-based dialogue with specially designed exercises to develop specific strategies for helping museum directors address contemporary challenges of audience, funding, purpose, structure, and technology.

The white paper that follows, authored on behalf of the group by Michael Govan, director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, reflects a strong embrace of the diversity of museums, the challenges they face, and propositions for their respective futures. As with most Aspen seminars, the outcomes are manifest in a clearer individual and collective vision of the challenges facing museums and the broad contours of agreement and disagreement. Museum directors are better prepared to work together for the future of the art museum because they have a clearer sense of where—and why—they agree and disagree.

Olga Viso, Executive Director, Walker Art Center
Todd Breyfogle, Director of Seminars, Aspen Institute

Participants in the Aspen Institute Seminar Propositions for the Future of the Art Museum, March 7–10, 2013

Museum Directors

Max Anderson, Dallas Museum of Art, Texas
Richard Armstrong, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City
Tom Campbell, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City
Melissa Chiu, Asia Society, New York, Hong Kong, Mumbai
Thelma Golden, Studio Museum Harlem, New York City
Michael Govan, Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Kim Hong-hee, Seoul Museum of Art, South Korea
Laurent Le Bon, Centre Pompidou Metz, France
Adam Lerner, Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver
Liz Ann MacGregor, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia
Lisa Phillips, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York City
Timothy Potts, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles
Kim Rorschach, Seattle Art Museum and then president of AAMD
Michael Rush, Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University
Olga Viso, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson, Aspen Art Museum
Julián Zugazagoitia, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City

Outside Provocateurs

Mark Allen, artist, executive director, Machine Project, Los Angeles
Amr Attia, architect, AECOM, Cairo, Egypt
Ben Cameron, grantor in performing arts, Doris Duke Charitable Trust
Laura Danly, scientist, Griffith Observatory, Los Angeles
Anna Deavere Smith, artist, actor, playwright, New York City
Alan Eyzaguirre, marketing and communications, Gershoni Agency, San Francisco

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by Michael Govan, director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, May 13, 2013

A white paper following a gathering of art museum directors at the Aspen Institute, March 2013, to discuss the future of the art museum in a changing world.

Recently, much has been written about the future sustainability and relevance—or potential irrelevance—of art museums in a changing world. Competition with other leisure-time activities, the diversity and accessibility of images through ubiquitous media channels, dwindling corporate and government support, and rapidly changing demographics (particularly in the United States) all threaten to undermine the comfortable and central role art museums have played in cities and communities, as well as their continuous growth over a century.

The traditional functions of art museums—to collect, preserve, interpret, and present works of art, and to inspire and educate the public—are constantly in flux. Even the definitions of key words such as “art” and “public” are subject to debate, as is “art museum,” which is used variously to describe collecting and non-collecting institutions. In addition, the proliferation of contemporary art museums has destabilized routine expectations through their broad definitions of art and their engagement with living artists who often question common frames of reference.

In their missions, contemporary art museums usually place a high priority on supporting artists, not just art. Artists are no longer simply the producers of art; like their counterparts of the late nineteenth century who helped found many US museums, artists have been invited inside the museum to help shape programs, to interpret their own work as well as that of others, and to serve as provocateurs relative to the status quo.

Several key topics are recurrent in the ongoing discussions about the future of art museums:

- The fundamental role and value of art museums within a contemporary society
- The changing relationship between the art museum and its audience
- The financial sustainability of nonprofit art museums

Art museums were born in an age before the inventions of easily reproducible media (namely photography), telecommunications, and the airplane—all of which changed the everyday accessibility of places, images, and information. The idea that the art museum could bring together art from diverse geographies and eras, while not wholly obsolete, must be reconsidered in a way that creates a dynamic relationship between local and global. The relative affordability of travel now allows for art to be seen in its native regional (or architectural) context. And an unending diversity of images is available

through mechanical and digital means, as are educational opportunities outside museums.

Museums have been under scrutiny in the popular press and academic circles because of collecting practices related to antiquities and cultural properties. Well-intentioned policies have had to be revised, not only when it has been discovered that object histories or sales may have been misrepresented, but also due to a heightened sensitivity to ethical claims that objects should reside in the regions where they were made or found. That debate calls into question some of the founding premises of encyclopedic art museums, as well as the concept of ownership of objects connected to specific cultural heritages.

One constant, however, is the notion that an art museum can provide a direct and immediate encounter with art—the idea of the authenticity of both the artwork and the encounter with it. This authenticity of experience—enhanced by museums’ artful and sometimes even immersive and/or interactive presentation, and augmented by educational resources, ancillary related programs, and attractive environments that often include restaurants and shops—has kept them popular. Last year more than sixteen million people visited art museums in New York City alone.

However, the continued popularity of art museums, as well as the massive growth in their size and number, particularly over the last three decades, has not been accompanied by commensurate growth in sources of funding. Over the last decade, the corporate sponsorship that fueled much of the growth of art museums and exhibitions has diminished significantly; government support has been mostly static or less; and individual philanthropy, which has risen to fill the gap, has often come with specific requirements from individuals who aren’t always supportive of a holistic public and primary institutional mission. Those revenue challenges, compounded by rapidly rising costs of art, related obligations including insurance, and expected continual professionalization of staff and business practice, have put the future financial sustainability of many art museums at risk.

Few solutions have been offered to these financial challenges. Radical proposals, including the sale of individual institutions’ art assets for operational and capital needs, are fraught with many unintended side effects, including undermining the professional and ethical standards that unite museums. Beyond the legal challenges, they erode the basic trust of donors and support communities and risk the sustainability of the field as a whole. Proposals of mergers and acquisitions, in which less stable museums are joined with those that are more secure, are rare, as most art museums are governed by fiercely loyal and independent citizen boards. Art museums more often are encouraged to band together, for example, to fund national media campaigns that promote their value; encourage new audiences; and more specifically, encourage governments, corporations, and individuals to support their local art museums. The formidable cost and logistics of such collective efforts, as well as debate about their usefulness, have left the museums mostly to fend for themselves.

The role and value of art museums to a contemporary society, as well as their worthiness for sustained support, are the subjects of ongoing discussion. Interestingly, the public popularity of large art museums in big cities has changed expectations for sources of support. The potential for big audiences and significant earned revenues from popular exhibitions has created the expectation that, properly managed, art museums can be sustained by paid admissions and memberships—a business model more akin to entertainment than public education and one that privileges non-challenging and popular subject matter and short-term investment in exhibitions rather than the long-term priorities of collecting, preservation, and research. The big question is whether the value of art museums can be measured by their attendance statistics. In a pragmatic and capitalist system such as in the United States, attendance (sometimes including a fast-growing online audience) is the easiest metric.

Indeed, the idea of an art museum as a public gathering place—a town square or a replacement for the cathedral and its plaza—is an attractive proposition, both in terms of communicating the public value of an institution and in enticing audiences as well as public and philanthropic support. Internationally, large art museums have been created and sustained specifically in relation to their status as architectural icons, public amenities, and tourist magnets that create economic impact, especially jobs. Recent examples such as the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, have realized the extraordinary potential of an art museum to create huge economic impact as well as civic pride and prestige. Other cities, especially in the Middle East and Asia, have followed with similar investments. Notably, those museums have often privileged architecture and programming over collections and research, further skewing the metrics for success toward attendance and economic benefit and away from groundbreaking research and preservation accomplishments.

Most art museums hold onto the idea that their value is a function of their very long-term accomplishments, including the preservation of artifacts for future generations and the development of ideas that can measurably influence the present and the future. Despite pressures to direct more resources to urgent goals measured in annual attendance, most large art museums still spend disproportionate amounts on conservation, research, and educational outreach that does not always immediately result in increased visitorship. Museum leaders today will often speak about balancing the long-term priorities of conservation, research, and the generation of ideas, with the goal of reaching as many people as possible with programs and collections. Few see the future any differently.

One of the medium-to-long-term challenges for art museums, particularly in the United States, is the projected and inevitable swing in demographics. In a field not known for its ethnic or racial diversity in staff, audience, or programming, art museums must quickly adapt to serve new audiences or face the prospect of their diminishment. The US Census Bureau projects that Whites will be a minority by the year 2043. The tiny number of Hispanic, African American, and Asian curators working in US art museums is just one important statistic of their unpreparedness for the future; biased collecting practices over many years is another. Future sustainability in audience and cultural

relevance for art museums will depend on their ability to invest and adapt to the demographic and cultural realities of the near future.

Perhaps the most interesting and vigorous debate today within the leadership of art museums surrounds the dynamic relationship between the museum and its audience. The Museum once had a one-way relationship with its audience in which it spoke with a consistent voice of educational authority; however, the forces of social media and the slow diversification of museum audiences have since created a two-way communications path between museum and visitor. Comments, questions, and answers flow back to museums not only through on-site comment cards, but through the easy and global publishing medium that the Internet provides. Audiences share interpretive roles with curators; the word “curator” is now commonly used to describe anyone who selects and publicly presents anything.

Within the seeming chaos of multiple voices and vastly different perspectives are both problems and opportunities. It is often refreshing to receive commentary and opinions from viewers, but it is equally disturbing to witness how quickly factual errors can proliferate. While many embrace the access to multiple perspectives on art from both inside and outside the museum, others lament the potential loss of the museums’ comforting authority. The external force of the Internet and social media—combined with museums’ own efforts to create more interactive educational and exhibition programs—leave no doubt that the two-way relationship between the museum and its audience has the potential to reshape the future of art museums in ways not yet envisioned.

Finally, changing conditions around art museums continue to fracture the sense of common definitions to more regional and local frames of reference. The rise in the diversity of museums—contemporary and historical art, non-collecting and collecting, private and public, those with largely tourist audiences and those more regionally based, and those with specialized or encyclopedic collections—have prompted increasingly varied priorities and programs. The expanding and diversifying membership of the Association of Art Museums Directors is one measure of that trend. Inclusiveness is now a central tenet of museum management. And with the broadening of practice and definition, art museums as a group will have greater reach in terms of artistic content and potential audience but will struggle more to agree on common practice and shared goals beyond their core belief in the value of art, artists, and a society that benefits from engagement with creativity and communication.