

CONTROVERSY AND COLLABORATION:
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR USING THE PARTICIPATORY MUSEUM MODEL

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Introduction

Contemporary American society is fraught with racial tension, making representation of all races and cultures an especially poignant issue.¹ Museums are places where comprehensive narrative interpretations can result in facilitated dialogue among visitors of different races and cultures. This can, in turn, lead individuals to a deeper understanding of their identities in the context of today's society and develop an ability for interracial and intercultural communication. This paper will explore why the participatory museum model will help cultural institutions embrace and learn from potentially controversial exhibits by including diverse perspectives of communities outside the museum.

By attempting to understand others' perspectives and share authority, museums are beginning to remove intercultural communication barriers by generating empathy and being more people-oriented than task-oriented.² Furthermore, community involvement shows that the institution is dedicated to including multiple perspectives in its interpretation, especially if many of the staff members are European American as is often the case.³ It is also indicative of a desire to pursue a less traditional educational route and deepen its understanding of current and historic issues of race.⁴ Creating this type of collaborative relationship with community partners can lead to sustained involvement from both parties and create a sense of shared investment in telling comprehensive narratives.

¹ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and David Dietrich, "Race, Racial Attitudes, and Stratification Beliefs: Evolving Directions for Research and Policy: The Sweet Enchantment of Color-Blind Racism in Obamerica," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 634 (2011): 191.

² George Gardner, "George Gardner's Barriers to Cross-Cultural Communication" [Class handout], Department of African and African-American Studies, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, 2016.

³ Brian Boucher, "Mellon Foundation Study Reveals Uncomfortable Lack of Diversity in American Museums," *Artnet News*, August 4, 2015, retrieved from <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/mellon-foundation-museum-diversity-study-322299>.

⁴ Kristin L. Gallas and James DeWolf Perry, "Developing a Comprehensive and Conscientious Interpretation of Slavery at Historic Sites and Museums," in *Interpreting African American History and Culture at Museums and Historic Sites*, ed. Max A. van Balgooy (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014), 20.

As museum theorist Nina Simon argued in *The Participatory Museum*, people are eager to express themselves and connect with individuals and groups with similar interests. Museums are places in which these opportunities can occur, especially through participation. They must become welcoming, open places at which people can interact with one another.⁵

However, as places of learning, museums have a responsibility to serve the public as a whole in an ethical and comprehensive way to educate visitors about societies and cultures. These narratives can help people to more fully understand the human condition by presenting multiple points of view.⁶ Part of this educational responsibility includes exploring the often-neglected narratives of individuals who do not identify as white. One way this can be done is by diversifying the authority of museum staff, though that will not be discussed here. Another way to ensure self-representation is to include the input of people outside the institution.

Defining Controversy and the Value of Communication

A discussion on controversial exhibits would be ineffective without first defining what subjects are considered controversial. Subjects that can cause controversy in museums include, but are not limited to, religion, death, evolution, and politics. For the purpose of this paper it refers to a work of art or an exhibit which deals with race or ethnicity and draws negative reactions from the museum's community, including stakeholders, visitors, and staff, and especially from individuals or groups who are included in the subject matter of the work. In other words, the controversial activities that will be considered in this paper are those that stir emotions and draw publicized responses from communities that feel they have been intentionally

⁵ Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010), 349.

⁶ Stanislao Carbone, "The Dialogic Museum and Ethnocultural Diversity," *Canadian Ethnic Studies Journal* 37, no. 1 (2005): 127.

or unintentionally misrepresented. An article written in 2003 by museum theorist and researcher Dr. Fiona Cameron points out that responses to controversial subjects are often rooted in personal connections to the specific piece or exhibit. These connections are critical to personal identities and how individuals frame their worldview.⁷

It can be difficult to predict what audiences will deem controversial. However, given that racial inequality has been part of America for centuries, it is unsurprising that exhibits which discuss race cause controversy.⁸ In 1998, *The Journal of Museum Education* published an issue which listed a timeline of exhibits that were labelled as provocative over the last half century. An analysis of this timeline shows that national and regional climates influenced the reception of the exhibits.⁹ For example, in 1989, the Royal Ontario Museum's *Into the Heart of Africa* exhibition was dubbed controversial because it perpetuated racial stereotypes and notions of imperialism at a time when postcolonial museums were grappling with issues of ownership and authority.¹⁰

Race as a topic forces people to confront their personal and social identities in relation to past and present racial issues.¹¹ This confrontation can lead to feelings of shock, guilt, shame, apathy, and resistance to the truth.¹² Museums wishing to curate exhibits that discuss race should be aware of these potential reactions and develop their interpretations in a responsible and comprehensive way. This may include providing an opportunity for self-representation in exhibit development or creating spaces for dialogue and responses to the subject.

⁷ Fiona Cameron, 2003, "Transcending Fear—Engaging Emotions and Opinions—A Case for Museums in the 21st Century," in *Open Museum Journal*, vol. 6, p. 7.

⁸ Maureen McConnell, "A Controversy Timeline," *The Journal of Museum Education* 23, no. 3 (1998): 4, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40479134>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Shelley Ruth Butler, *Contested Representations: Revisiting "Into the Heart of Africa"* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2008), 11.

¹¹ Nicole A. Moore, "Perceptions of Race and Identity and Their Impact on Slavery's Interpretation," in *Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites*, eds. Kristin L. Gallas and James DeWolf Perry (Ipswich, MA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015), 101.

¹² Julia Rose, *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016), 6.

In their book *African American Communication: Exploring Identity and Culture*, professors Hecht, Jackson, and Ribeau have identified a variety of strategies that are useful to interracial communication when conflicts arise. These include asserting a point of view, be open and friendly, inform/educate, express genuineness, and treat as an individual/equal.¹³ All of these can be traced back to being open, truthful, respectfully expressing one's opinion, and mindfully listening to what has been said. In one word, an empathetic person may be the most effective intercultural communicator.¹⁴ While this may seem obvious, many individuals forget that not all people think or act in the same way. It is important to remember that when one person believes a conversation to be satisfactory, the other might not think the same. Interpersonal communication professor John Stewart has reflected on the importance of checking in with a conversational partner by paraphrasing to ensure that a point was communicated effectively.¹⁵ This emphasizes the importance of creating a dialogue rather than merely having interpreters lecture to visitors.

At museums, these types of conversational norms are not always followed. Interpreters may unintentionally tokenize individuals of another race by expecting them to speak for or represent their entire race. Interpreters should engage with visitors and actually converse to relate the subject to the individuals.¹⁶ By allowing visitors and staff the time and opportunity necessary for dialogue and reflection, those involved are able to negotiate their own identities in relation to the other participants.¹⁷ Having this kind of openness is critical to learning difficult history, especially when interracial or intercultural communication is involved. Understanding

¹³ Michael L. Hecht, Ronald L. Jackson II, and Sidney A. Ribeau, *African American Communication: Exploring Identity and Culture* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2003), 124-127.

¹⁴ George Gardner, "George Gardner's Barriers to Cross-Cultural Communication" [Class handout], Department of African and African-American Studies, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, 2016.

¹⁵ John Stewart, *Personal Communicating and Racial Equity* (Dubuque: Kendall Hunt Publishing Co, 2016), 55.

¹⁶ Nina Simon, *The Art of Relevance* (Santa Cruz, CA: Museum 2.0, 2016), 74-76.

¹⁷ David W. Young, "Expanding Interpretation at Historic Sites: When Change Brings Conflict," in *Interpreting African American History and Culture at Museums and Historic Sites*, ed. Max A. van Balgooy (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014), 43.

fundamental aspects of intercultural communication is critical to the overall success of comprehensive interpretations.

Because visitors and staff at historic sites come from a variety of backgrounds and have many identities, understanding different communication norms is a necessary part of thorough and responsible interpretation. There must be an awareness that not every culture communicates in the same way and that not all cultures have the same communication issues. For example, communication professors Martin, Moore, Hecht, and Larkey have identified seven barriers to communication that are commonly experienced by European Americans and African Americans: acceptance, understanding, expressiveness, stereotyping, powerlessness, authenticity, and goal attainment.¹⁸ African Americans and European Americans may all encounter these hurdles, but not to the same degree and not in the same situations.¹⁹

Examples of Controversy and Collaboration

An example of an attempt at inclusivity and comprehensive representation can be seen in the *First Encounters* exhibit which opened at the Florida Museum of Natural History in 1989. It was criticized for being Eurocentric and a celebration of Columbus rather than a balanced representation of all the cultures involved.²⁰ Critics argued that it was created with very little input from Native peoples and depicted Native American cultures as unchanging or extinct. These critiques were valid, and though they incited backlash and discussion, the criticisms also influenced museums to reconsider traditional collaborative processes. Because of *First*

¹⁸ Judith N. Martin, Sherri Moore, Michael L. Hecht, and Linda K. Larkey, "An African American Perspective on Conversational Improvement Strategies," *Howard Journal of Communications* 12, no. 1 (2001): 3. doi:10.1080/10646170151143352.

¹⁹ Michael L., Hecht, Ronald L. Jackson II, and Sidney A. Ribeau, *African American Communication: Exploring Identity and Culture* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2003), 120.

²⁰ Karen Coody-Cooper, *Spirited Encounters: American Indians Protest Museum Policies and Practices* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2008), 111.

Encounters and similar exhibits of the time, museums became more critical of potentially controversial exhibits and began developing projects collaboratively with communities rather than about them.²¹

An example of a collaboration which had all the necessary pieces to cause controversy, but was ultimately successful, is the interpretation of the historic Cliveden house museum in Philadelphia. It had served solely as an institution that showcased the family that lived there, the Chew family, and the site's role in the Revolutionary War. In 2008, staff decided to include the perspectives of the enslaved people that had lived and worked at the site. According to historian and Cliveden staff director David Young, the museum held several facilitated conversations to include perspectives of individuals external to the institution. He noted that participants in these "Cliveden Conversations" came from four conceptual backgrounds: "those who approach the subject from a sense of anger; those who approach history from a sense of overcoming; those who approach the subject from a sense of loss; and those approaching the project from a sense of skepticism."²²

There was potential for conflict to erupt at any of the facilitated conversations. The museum could have chosen not to listen to any of the non-academic history enthusiasts. However, a neutral mediator—who was also an organizational psychologist—was present to ensure that everyone had a chance to speak. Facilitating these interactions created the opportunity for dialogue and allowed genuine connections to occur. Furthermore, these conversations allowed staff and the invested community to develop a common understanding of

²¹ Patricia Fiorillo, *The Impact of Native American Activism and the Media on Museum Exhibitions of Indigenous Peoples: Two Case Studies* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: ProQuest, 2016), 30.

²² David W. Young, "Expanding Interpretation at Historic Sites: When Change Brings Conflict," in *Interpreting African American History and Culture at Museums and Historic Sites*, ed. Max A. van Balgooy (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014), 39-41.

the site. When individuals have an opportunity to have difficult conversations in a safe, open environment, the experience can become much more meaningful for those involved.²³

Learning from Controversy: The Participatory Museum Model

The National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) has created a document called “Museum Best Practices for Managing Controversy” which has been endorsed by a variety of cultural organizations, including the American Alliance of Museums, Americans for the Arts, and the Association of Art Museum Curators. This document has three overarching strategies for managing controversy without censoring or closing an exhibit: make a “freedom of speech commitment,” prepare programming in anticipation of potential controversy, and develop procedures for press releases and addressing the public after the exhibition opens.²⁴ The case study discussed later in this paper, the Contemporary Art Museum of St. Louis (CAM), reaffirmed their dedication to free speech, adapted their programming after the exhibition opened, and released several statements and public addresses. This was all done after public backlash to Kelley Walker’s *Direct Drive* exhibit. However, this paper will argue that by following the participatory museum model of exhibit and interpretive development, museums will be able to learn from controversial situations by including diverse perspectives from inside and outside of cultural institutions.

²³ David W. Young, “Expanding Interpretation at Historic Sites: When Change Brings Conflict,” in *Interpreting African American History and Culture at Museums and Historic Sites*, ed. Max A. van Balgooy (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014), 43-44.

²⁴ “Museum Best Practices for Managing Controversy,” *National Coalition Against Censorship*, accessed December 7, 2016, <http://ncac.org/resource/museum-best-practices-for-managing-controversy>.

The participatory museum model is something which has been developing since the 1990s. This relatively new museum theory marks a transition defined by the authors of *Letting Go* as a switch from “museums as provider of content and designer of experiences to the more complex role of facilitator of experiences around content.”²⁵ For this paper, the book *The Participatory Museum* by museum executive director and author of the blog *Museum 2.0*, Nina Simon, will be central to the argument that participatory exhibition creation is an excellent way to avoid negative backlash from the public.

The participatory museum is defined by Simon as “a place where visitors can create, share, and connect with each other around content.”²⁶ To put it another way, it is a place where people can contribute their own ideas, discuss them with other individuals, and interact with others to process their reactions. In her book, this model is also about how visitors interact with the pre-existing content. For the purpose of this paper, the focus will primarily remain on content development and providing an opportunity for dialogue after viewing the exhibit. In the process of content development, working with individuals and groups from the community that are not part of the museum staff is a good way to ensure self-representation.

Case Study: The Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis

On September 16, 2016, a temporary exhibition opened at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis (CAM): artist Kelley Walker’s *Direct Drive*. It ran concurrently with *Schema*, a collaboration between Walker and a select group of teens in the CAM’s Teen Museum Studies group. The pieces in the exhibit were meant to critique contemporary society. On the CAM’s

²⁵ Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski, *Letting Go?: Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World* (Philadelphia, PA: Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, 2011), 196.

²⁶ Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010), ii-iii.

website, the works are briefly summarized: “Walker has explored the manipulation and repurposing of images in order to destabilize issues of identity, race, class, sexuality, and politics. . . Walker’s work draws attention to popular culture’s perpetual consumption and reuse of images.”²⁷ When visiting the exhibit, it was clear that not all the pieces were commentaries on race. Some were about other contemporary issues such as the consumption of technology and the way news media is presented in the United States. However, the main focus of the case study are the pieces which provoked St. Louis communities.

The museum itself is a small institution. The only pieces on display when I visited were from Walker’s exhibitions. Upon arrival, I was greeted by staff at a visitor services desk. They asked if I had visited before and proceeded to speak about the exhibits currently running. The staff also answered some questions I had from my research before visiting. Some articles about the controversy gave the impression that the curator of the exhibit, Jeffrey Uslip, had resigned as a result of the backlash. However, this was not the case. Uslip had been planning to leave the institution before the exhibit opened. Staff also provided visitors with printed articles about the controversy as well as ways to respond: a post-it response wall and contact information for museum staff.

These tactics utilized by the staff had likely been in place since the exhibit opened in September because the backlash to the exhibit began immediately after the exhibit opened. A gallery talk was held by Walker and the curator Jeffrey Uslip. Specifically, *Black Star Press* (Figure 1) and some pieces from the *Schema* series, especially the one which featured the men’s magazine *KING*, titled *schema; Aquafresh plus Crest with Whitening Expressions* (Figure 2)

²⁷ “Kelley Walker: Direct Drive,” *Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis*, accessed January 3, 2017, <http://camstl.org/exhibitions/main-gallery/kelley-walker/>.

were deemed to be racially provocative.²⁸ The images in these artworks were enlarged and manipulated by Walker as a part of his critique of society. According to the exhibit labels, this mostly involved showing power dynamics, diversity, and representation in the media. These pieces will be discussed before going into more detail about the public's responses to them.



Figure 1, Black Star Press

In *Black Star Press*, Walker used images of a white police officer and a black African American protester in conflict at the 1963 Birmingham Civil Rights protests. The labels at the CAM have interpreted these pieces in the following way: by rotating these images 90 degrees, the police officer is above the protester, making the power dynamic a visual presentation. When the images are rotated 180 degrees, it is implied that the situation is turned upside down, representing chaos. The digital addition of white, milk, and dark chocolate is purposeful. It is

²⁸ Chris King, "CAM STL Exhibit Sparks Demand for Boycott by Artist/Activist Damon Davis," *The St. Louis American*, September 19, 2016, http://www.stlamerican.com/entertainment/living_it/cam-stl-exhibit-sparks-demand-for-boycott-by-artist-activist/article_7b92845a-7ea2-11e6-b4bf-93b1f38d7eaa.html.

meant to hide and showcase specific parts of the images, focusing on the interaction between the police officer and the protester. The label states that the use of different types of chocolate is also meant to be representative: “in its multiple shades of white and brown, chocolate represents racial diversity and allegorizes all of the groups of people who have fought for and against civil rights and social justice.”²⁹



Figure 2, schema; Aquafresh plus Crest with Whitening Expressions

The piece which caused the negative response in the *schema; Aquafresh plus Crest with Whitening Expressions* series was three enlarged, scanned covers of *KING* magazine stacked on top of one another, covered with scanned toothpaste. The top magazine cover features the

²⁹ Wall text, *Black Star Press*, Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis, MO, September 16, 2016-Dec. 31, 2016.

musician Trina blown up to over 20 feet in length, capturing the gaze of the visitor. CAM's interpretation of this piece states that as a cleansing and whitening agent, toothpaste is utilized as a critique of mass media's tendency to gloss over and sanitize issues of historically underrepresented groups of people, especially people of color. In this piece, the interpretation is as follows: "Walker references the minimizing of the presence, power, and autonomy of black women in American mass media, with the toothpaste overlay functioning as a critique of the genre of men's magazines in general and of *KING* in particular."³⁰

Walker's use of these images caused backlash in St. Louis. Artists called for a boycott of the museum, led by activist and artist Damon Davis who has become known for his artworks made in response to the unrest in Ferguson in 2014.³¹ Many artists also withdrew from the Open Studios STL tour, an event by the CAM which showcases local artists.³² Some have argued that the images used by Kelley did not have a purpose or were used as "props" for artistic expression. Indeed, at the gallery talk held by the artist and curator at the exhibit's opening, Walker was unable to articulate why he chose the images he did. This leads to the question of the appropriateness of white individuals utilizing images of African Americans to critique race relations.

Some of the pieces were previously exhibited at other locations, including *Black Star Press* and some pieces of *Schema*. Given that these works were made in 2006 and have been previously exhibited, it is reasonable to question if the artworks are controversial on their own or if they would have been quite so controversial in another city. Artist and activist Damon Davis

³⁰ Wall text, *Schema*, Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis, MO, September 16, 2016-Dec. 31, 2016.

³¹ Claire Voon, "Appropriated Images of Black People Spark Boycott of St. Louis Museum [Updated]." *Hyperallergic*. September 22, 2016, <http://hyperallergic.com/324466/appropriated-images-of-black-people-spark-boycott-of-st-louis-museum/>.

³² Debra D. Bass and Nassim Benchaabane, "Artists Withdraw from Open Studios Tour in Protest," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, October 7, 2016, http://www.stltoday.com/entertainment/arts-and-theatre/artists-withdraw-from-open-studios-tour-in-protest/article_645f974e-4cc1-525a-a95e-8374a489e5c3.html.

voiced this concern in a statement to news source *Hyperallergic*, saying, “Kelley goes all over the world to exhibit, but this city is a different city.”³³ Davis is alluding to the tension which is still present in the area two years after a white police officer shot unarmed African American teenager, Michael Brown, in late 2014.³⁴

Despite the initial public backlash to the controversial pieces, visitor response to the exhibit as a whole was varied. Eddie Silva, the communications specialist for the CAM, noted that the reactions were not out of the ordinary for any of their exhibitions, saying: “Some were still distressed, some were ‘what’s the big deal,’ some were ambivalent, some were very positive.”³⁵ However, he does posit that visitors reacted more favorably after new signs and a dividing wall were placed around the offensive pieces. Museum director Lisa Melandri defended the exhibit as a whole, saying it is meant to make viewers reconsider our history and culture: “Kelley’s work is about reusing, transforming, recycling images that are very salient in our society. . . He makes us. . . rethink various moments in our history and culture and try to decide what we as individuals feel about those moments.”³⁶

A CAM educator and artist, Lyndon Barrois Jr., acknowledged that some staff members were dubious about some of the pieces in the exhibit. Though they were given textual resources about the exhibit, there was no opportunity for them to speak to one another about the pieces or

³³ Claire Voon, “Appropriated Images of Black People Spark Boycott of St. Louis Museum [Updated].” *Hyperallergic*. September 22, 2016, <http://hyperallergic.com/324466/appropriated-images-of-black-people-spark-boycott-of-st-louis-museum/>.

³⁴ Ray Sanchez, “Michael Brown Shooting, Protests Highlight Racial Divide,” *CNN.com*, August 15, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/08/14/justice/ferguson-missouri-police-community/index.html>.

³⁵ Eddie Silva, e-mail message to author, January 3, 2017.

³⁶ Chris King, “CAM STL Exhibit Sparks Demand for Boycott by Artist/Activist Damon Davis,” *The St. Louis American*, September 19, 2016, http://www.stlamerican.com/entertainment/living_it/cam-stl-exhibit-sparks-demand-for-boycott-by-artist-activist/article_7b92845a-7ea2-11e6-b4bf-93b1f38d7eaa.html.

their context in St. Louis. It is because these conversations did not occur among the staff that the museum planned to utilize public discussions after the exhibit opened.³⁷

Silva has stated that the museum considered several strategies in response to the controversy, including closing the exhibit or removing some of the more controversial pieces. Ultimately, they decided to leave the content as it was with a few design modifications.³⁸ The strategies used by the CAM were adapted from the NCAC's "Museum Best Practices for Managing Controversy" document discussed on page eight, though all the management tactics were employed after the exhibit had opened rather than in anticipation of the controversy. Most of the strategies were related to issuing press releases and program adaptation, which are the second and third strategies outlined in the document. The CAM erected a wall to separate the more offensive pieces from the rest of the exhibit. The entrances on either side of this wall displayed signs which warned visitors that some viewers found some of the pieces offensive. The museum also printed off articles which reported the controversy and made them accessible at the front desk and outside the walled off section of the exhibit. Lastly, a response wall was incorporated so visitors would be able to voice their opinion of the exhibit (Figure 3). To clarify, the post-it wall was begun by visitors of the museum who placed their messages on the windows of the café. The museum then embraced the response by moving the post-it notes from the café wall to a space by the visitor service desk at the entrance.

³⁷ Claire Voon, "Appropriated Images of Black People Spark Boycott of St. Louis Museum [Updated]." *Hyperallergic*. September 22, 2016, <http://hyperallergic.com/324466/appropriated-images-of-black-people-spark-boycott-of-st-louis-museum/>.

³⁸ Eddie Silva, e-mail message to author, January 3, 2017.

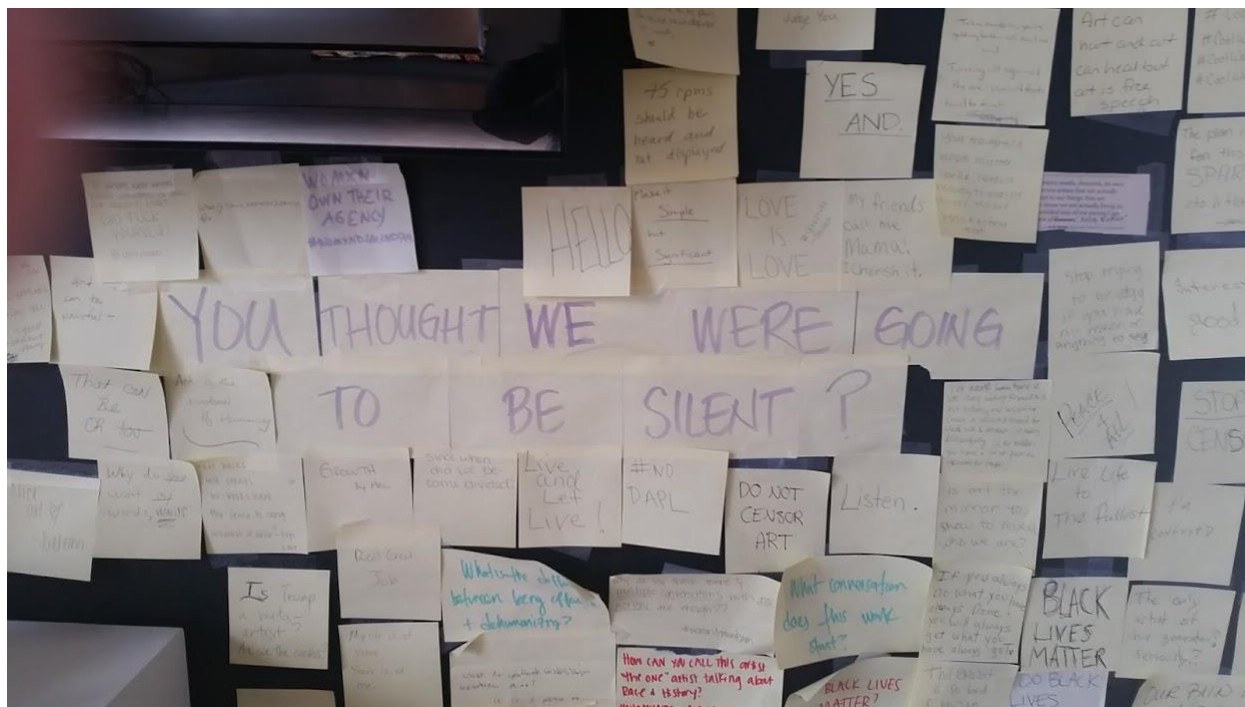


Figure 3, Close up of the response wall

In addition to these, the museum also modified their fall programs, all of which were free, to explore issues of race, art, and protest as a result of the exhibit.³⁹ These were relatively more formal and planned opportunities to engage the community and facilitate dialogue in a safe space. This is a form of a participatory museum experience. Visitors would have to be aware that these events are occurring in order to partake in dialogue, but this was a good way to incorporate the participatory museum model.

These responses show that controversy in and of itself is not a bad thing. It can be embraced as a learning opportunity. Any time museums exhibit difficult topics like the CAM did (race, technology, class), even if they do not specifically advocate for a certain point of view, they present an opportunity for dialogue.⁴⁰ The CAM was able to adapt its presentation of the exhibit and its programming in order to have more conversations about race and art, which is

³⁹ Eddie Silva, e-mail message to author, January 3, 2017.

⁴⁰ Nina Simon, *The Art of Relevance* (Santa Cruz, CA: Museum 2.0, 2016), 154-155.

something that may not have happened without the controversy. This controversial situation allowed the CAM to look critically at ways to communicate with and involve the community.

The CAM is still engaging in discussion about what a participatory museum might look like for them. Silva has asserted that the staff are discussing many aspects of how to involve the community, including what constitutes community involvement and how communities are defined. More specifically, there are debates about the nature of the museum itself. They are asking questions such as, “Does a contemporary museum endanger its provocative nature by enlisting ‘focus groups’? How do we internally discuss and debate curatorial vision?”⁴¹

There is no single correct way to be a participatory museum. Additionally, there are degrees to which institutions incorporate participatory practices. The CAM already has a program which facilitates co-development collaboration with their Teen Museum Studies group. This program occurs every summer and gives a select group of students the opportunity to learn from museum staff and create an exhibition. This type of cooperation can lead to exhibitions which include more diverse perspectives, voices, and experiences.⁴² By broadening the scope of participation, the CAM and other museums can learn from potential and actual controversy by including and representing diverse perspectives and sharing authority with people outside the museum.

Collaboration: Building Institutional Support for External Engagement

The necessity and benefits of collaborating with communities were illustrated in a study published in 2008 by the Center for the Future of Museums. By utilizing the U.S. Census Bureau’s prediction of an increasingly multi-ethnic population (growing from 1 in 3 Americans

⁴¹ Eddie Silva, e-mail message to author, January 11, 2017.

⁴² Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010), 237.

in 2008 to just under half the population in 2034), the authors argue that museums will have to become places to facilitate intercultural communication and foster understandings of different cultures. In order to do this, relationships must be formed between cultural institutions and their communities.⁴³ Every institution is different and some of these barriers may be more easily overcome than others. That being said, it may be beneficial to conceptualize collaborative goals into two main groups: staff development and community engagement. Staff throughout the institution must be aware that they all—individually and collectively—have a responsibility to actively participate in community engagement programs.⁴⁴

This process begins with shifting the mentality of completing singular departmental projects to one which holistically integrates staff members throughout the institution. A program based in the United Kingdom, the *Our Museum* initiative, resulted in a treasure trove of information for institutions attempting to employ the participatory museum model. This program identified six barriers for museums: directors and managers tacitly supporting rather than actively committing to collaborative relationships, believing that income and audience size conflict with community engagement and participation, passing the responsibility of community cooperation onto one individual or group rather than sharing across departments, only working with known communities and not reaching out to new groups, staff resistance, and fear of/resistance to change.⁴⁵

⁴³ James Chung and Susie Wilkening, "Museums & Society 2034: Trends and Potential Futures," *Center for the Future of Museums, American Association of Museums*, 2008, accessed January 13, 2017, <http://www.aamus.org/docs/center-for-the-future-of-museums/museumsociety2034.pdf?sfvrsn=0>.

⁴⁴ Piotr Bienkowski, *Communities and Museums as Active Partners: Emerging Learning from the Our Museum Initiative* (London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation, 2014), <http://api.ning.com/files/Y7WxhNqXbMZG-oFhNNG9ShdSLDg3tj8y11FGe9fCLooC2odR3mxD08GA8yhTLksLOLswURb9TBWbNq6ehGNK19U5DCLY3hJj/OurMuseumemerginglearning.pdf>, PDF, 9-10.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

The institutions involved in the *Our Museum* initiative responded to these barriers in ways very similar to guidelines developed for interpreting slavery by historian Linnea Grim which will be discussed in more detail below. The museums found that there are five key areas of practice museums would have to adapt in order to adopt a participatory museum model. These are governance, staff professional development, engagement with community partners, evaluation, and incorporating external voices. For example, at National Museum Wales, the director, trustees, and staff are vocal about supporting participation; job descriptions are modified to include community engagement; the volunteer base was diversified and given more decision-making power; the staff presented their reflections as papers at national and international conferences; and staff and community members visit partner institutions from the initiative to share their experiences, information, and reflections.⁴⁶

By looking at how other institutions have encountered similar difficulty when presenting difficult topics, museums attempting to create exhibits which deal with racial issues may be able to adapt some guidelines for gaining staff support. The suggestions presented here have been adapted from Linnea Grim's guidelines for interpreting slavery at museums and historic sites.

These guidelines are as follows:

“(1) acknowledge the difficulty and importance of the subject; (2) address its emotional impact; (3) find interpretation on both site-specific and contextual scholarship; (4) determine how interpreting slavery meets their missions; (5) craft thoughtful strategic and interpretive plans; (6) build networks of allies; (7) incorporate external advisory boards; and (8) use external publicity to their best long-term advantage.”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Piotr Bienkowski, *Communities and Museums as Active Partners: Emerging Learning from the Our Museum Initiative* (London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation, 2014), <http://api.ning.com/files/Y7WxhNqXbMZG-oFhNNG9ShdSLDg3tj8y11FGe9fCLooC2odR3mxD08GA8yhTLksLOLswURb9TBWbNq6ehGNKI9U5DCLY3hIj/OurMuseumemerginglearning.pdf>, PDF, 7-15.

⁴⁷ Linnea Grim, “So Deeply Dyed in Our Fabric That It Cannot Be Washed Out,” in *Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites*, ed. Kristin L. Gallas and James DeWolf Perry (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015), 32.

Most, though not all, of these guidelines will be outlined here. For example, step 6, building a network, is incorporated into step 7, incorporating an advisory board. Additionally, step 8, using external publicity for their advantage is excluded because sustaining long-term relationships with external parties is a subject which deserves more discussion than available here. Nina Simon's book published in 2016, *The Art of Relevance*, has much more information on this subject. In regard to the Grim's guidelines discussed here, it should be noted that these steps are *only suggestions* for cultural institutions wishing to collaborate with communities and explore difficult subjects like race. Every institution is different, and what works in one community may not work in another. The strategies presented here are what I have found through my research to be most likely to aid museums in gaining institutional support for collaboration with communities.

Grim argues that it is advisable that museums first acknowledge the difficulty of the subject and its emotional impact on the community. In locations which have recently been sites of racial tension and/or violence, like the CAM, this is especially critical. Silva said that museum staff were aware of the implications that some of the race-related pieces might have on the community before the exhibit opened.⁴⁸ This awareness shows that the exhibitions were considered in relation to the museum's mission as well as situated in site-specific and broader themed contexts, i. e. race relations.⁴⁹ Unfortunately, there was no acknowledgement or public statement released to the community before the exhibit opened. While the museum was aware that there may be backlash, there were no preemptive actions taken to discuss the potential reactions to the exhibit. As suggested in the NACA's document, at the very least the CAM could

⁴⁸ Eddie Silva, e-mail message to author, January 3, 2017.

⁴⁹ Linnea Grim, "So Deeply Dyed in Our Fabric That It Cannot Be Washed Out," in *Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites*, ed. Kristin L. Gallas and James DeWolf Perry (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015), 32.

have issued press releases before the exhibit. Grim's sixth recommendation of building a network of allies could also have been beneficial to the museum taking a proactive stance and recognizing the difficulty of the exhibit's subject matter.

For her second recommendation, Grim states that museums should address the emotional impact of the subject. Discussions about race can result in strong emotional responses because individuals must confront their feelings and perceptions of race and how these are related to their own identity. Acknowledging association with a community that may have participated in systems of oppression or a community that has been oppressed can be a difficult thing to reconcile with how individuals see themselves.⁵⁰ Because of the country's history, people of all races and ethnicities experience different emotions when encountering issues of race, including anxiety, guilt, embarrassment, and bitterness. There may be a temptation to avoid discussing race because it means acknowledging these unpleasant feelings and reconciling perceptions of our historical narratives with our present perceptions of ourselves.⁵¹ These will be difficult conversations to have, but museum staff wishing to interpret race in a responsible way should be willing to have this open dialogue. It will help staff assist visitors in processing their own emotional responses as well.

Unfortunately, the staff at CAM did not have these conversations about the subject before the exhibit opened. They did not have the opportunity to address their own feelings about race, and so were forced to make sense of their and visitors' reactions concurrently.⁵² This can make answering visitors' questions more difficult if the staff does not have the opportunity to work

⁵⁰ Linnea Grim, "So Deeply Dyed in Our Fabric That It Cannot Be Washed Out," in *Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites*, ed. Kristin L. Gallas and James DeWolf Perry (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015), 34.

⁵¹ Kristin L. Gallas and James DeWolf Perry, "Developing a Comprehensive and Conscientious Interpretation of Slavery at Historic Sites and Museums," in *Interpreting African American History and Culture at Museums and Historic Sites*, ed. Max A. van Balgooy (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014) 16-17.

⁵² Eddie Silva, e-mail message to author, January 3, 2017.

through responses on their own but are instead repeating information received about the museum's official stance on a subject. Having dialogue among staff may be uncomfortable, but acknowledging the discomfort and working through it can be helpful for understanding the emotional responses that a subject like race can cause.⁵³

Grim states in her third step that knowing the context of race relations in the region and the nation will give the staff the necessary background for working with this topic and to assist them in answering visitors' questions.⁵⁴ By understanding broad themes and being able to apply them to the region or even city in which the museum is located, staff will be able to show personal or local connections to the big picture. In a place like St. Louis, the CAM had the opportunity to relate what happened in Ferguson to broad racial themes. Indeed, *Direct Drive* was in the planning process for three years, meaning the violence and unrest in Ferguson occurred approximately a year after the planning began. As stated on page fourteen, CAM staff member Barrois said that multiple staff members questioned the presence of some of the works in the exhibit but were unable to discuss them openly as a group before the opening.⁵⁵ This shows that there was an awareness of the context and implications, but no opportunity for dialogue and how to address the concerns with invested stakeholders or visitors.

Grim's fourth suggestion is to determine how the interpretation of the issue meets the mission.⁵⁶ Cultural institutions today often have a mission statement which involves a

⁵³ Linnea Grim, "So Deeply Dyed in Our Fabric That It Cannot Be Washed Out," in *Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites*, ed. Kristin L. Gallas and James DeWolf Perry (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015), 34.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵⁵ Claire Voon, "Appropriated Images of Black People Spark Boycott of St. Louis Museum [Updated]." *Hyperallergic*. September 22, 2016, <http://hyperallergic.com/324466/appropriated-images-of-black-people-spark-boycott-of-st-louis-museum/>.

⁵⁶ Linnea Grim, "So Deeply Dyed in Our Fabric That It Cannot Be Washed Out," in *Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites*, ed. Kristin L. Gallas and James DeWolf Perry (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015), 37.

commitment to serving the public.⁵⁷ Given this duty of public service and the role race plays in intracultural and intercultural communications and relationships, developing exhibits which explore race can lead individuals to a deeper understanding of their identities in the context of today's society.

After determining if the mission does indeed allow for interpreting broad cultural themes like race, Grim states that a specific interpretive plan is necessary to keep the staff on task and prevent distractions. This involves determining which narratives to tell, which artifacts or artworks to use, and what the intended learning outcomes of the interpretation will be. A plan will also help staff map out the steps that need to be taken in order to complete the exhibit, which can include collaboration and partnerships with people outside of the museum.⁵⁸

The last suggestion of Grim's that will be used for this set of recommendations is that once the museum's staff is aware of and comfortable with their roles and the interpretive plan, the institution can begin the community engagement process for interpretation. It may be argued that this should happen earlier in the process, such as choosing the topic before developing an interpretive plan. However, community engagement is placed at the end of these suggestions because these are about gaining institutional support before branching out into communities. If connections with communities external to the museum already exist, they may be integrated into the collaboration process far earlier. Again, these are simply suggestions that do not have to be followed in the same prescriptive order at every institution.

⁵⁷ Hugh H. Genoways and Lynne M. Ireland, *Museum Administration: An Introduction* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003), 22.

⁵⁸ Linnea Grim, "So Deeply Dyed in Our Fabric That It Cannot Be Washed Out," in *Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites*, ed. Kristin L. Gallas and James DeWolf Perry (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015), 39.

Community connections may take on different forms of engagement at different institutions. For example, it could be an advisory board comprised of artists, community leaders, historians, journalists, etc.⁵⁹ Including external input can result in an incorporation of diverse voices and reduce controversy by ensuring that more groups have the opportunity to make their feelings known and work through problems before opening an exhibit to the public.

Conclusion

In becoming participatory, museums can embrace controversial topics. This is based on the premise that collaboration and communication with diverse groups of people will allow those involved to discuss ideas openly and work through points of contention as they arise. When museums attempt to respond to controversy by participating in interracial and intercultural discussions, those involved must be aware that the conversations could result in conflict. The majority of interracial interactions have either overt or subconscious expressions of racism, which means that the communicators must be open to working through these barriers.⁶⁰

As stated on pages four and five, it is important to recognize that there are a variety of strategies which can be used to manage conflicts in interracial communication. Perhaps most importantly, it is critical to be open, genuine, and empathetic. This will allow collaborators to truly become invested in a museum which desires to be inclusive.

Noted museum educators John Falk and Lynn Dierking have argued that people need these open, empathetic conversational spaces to succeed: “Humans are highly motivated to learn when they are in supporting environments . . . when they are freed from anxiety, fear, and other

⁵⁹ Ibid, 40.

⁶⁰ Marsha Houston, “When Black Women Talk with White Women: Why the Dialogues are Difficult,” in *Our Voices: Essays in Culture, Ethnicity, and Communication* 3rd ed., eds A. Gonzalez, M. Houston, & V. Chen (Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Co., 2000), 98-99.

negative mental states.”⁶¹ Providing these kinds of environments for staff and community participants is critical to the success of collaboration. Museums should be places where dialogue is encouraged and individuals are challenged in respectful, nonjudgmental ways. Interracial and intercultural communication, especially when the conversations are on difficult subjects like race, can result in the prevention of racially controversial exhibits as well as a closer relationship with the community.

⁶¹ John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2000), 32.

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Figure 1: Kelley Walker, *Black Star Press*. Triptych, silkscreened white & chocolate on digital print on canvas. 213.4 x 264.2 cm. 2006. Photo taken by the author with permission at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, December 28, 2016.

Figure 2: Kelley Walker, *Schema*. CD Rom, scanned image and toothpaste, digital poster on archival paper. 305 x 244 cm (dimensions vary). 2006. Photo taken by the author with permission at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, December 28, 2016.

Figure 3: Response wall. Post-it notes, pen, pencil. 2016. Photo taken by the author with permission at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, December 28, 2016.

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