

Connect with my Loss: The Museum of Broken Relationships as an
Empathetic Institution

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Introduction

Empathy is a sense of understanding through relationships with others, whether that understanding is emotional or intellectual, societal or personal. As contemporary museums increasingly desire to add empathetic dimensions to their exhibits and receive the benefits of relating with their audiences, there is an assumption that it is the content itself that triggers an empathetic response. While this is true, as a response centered on relationships, empathy also occurs between audiences and museums as much as between audiences and content. This is exemplified by museums who use a participatory model to center themselves around those relationships as part of their core mission, not just for temporary exhibits and programs.

One such example is the *Museum of Broken Relationships*, most known for exhibiting novel, mundane artifacts to symbolize the eponymous broken relationship. But although the museum is conceptualized by artists, all of the contributions to their permanent collection are by members of the public. By collapsing the distinction between collection and exhibition, visitor and artist, they encourage a sense of empowerment and expression rarely possible in traditional museum environments. Empathy is not just invoked by the content of their museum, but in the connections forged through its creation.

Though their exact practices may not be feasible for all museums, the *Museum of Broken Relationships'* method of collecting and exhibiting diverse personal stories symbolized by objects invites us as museum professionals to think about what collections and exhibitions can be. Anything can be transformative through the power of

a museum. But it requires us to recognize that empathy is not something we create within our publics, but something we experience with them.

How do I Know You?: Perspectives on Empathy in Museums

Empathy is increasingly advocated for in museums, both as a way to create meaningful narratives and to foster social change. Narratives, as Jeanne Goswami explains, “...give us the details we need to visualize the scene, empathize with the characters, and care about and connect with the outcome.”¹ Studies show that skill in this form of connection has many social benefits, such as a reduction in stereotyping² and increased caring behavior towards others.³ As museums increasingly orient themselves as centers for social change and community bonding, it is clear why they desire these outcomes. Empathy is now a recognized enough asset that exhibition companies like NGX Interactive promote their abilities in creating it, referring to it as a buzzword in the museum industry. They advertise that “Empathy in service of positive change is at the core of why we work in the cultural space.”⁴ Through this statement they are aligning their values with those in the sector who would hire them.

Declarations such as this are responding to conversations about empathy in museums, such as Mike Murawski’s call to embrace empathy-building practices as a

¹ Goswami, Jeanne. “The Museum as Unreliable Narrator: What We Can Learn from Nick Carraway.” *The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum* 11 (1): 1–11. 2018. 3.

² Galinsky, Adam D., and Gordon B. Moskowitz. “Perspective-Taking: Decreasing Stereotype Expression, Stereotype Accessibility, and In-Group Favoritism” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78 (4): 708-724, 2000. 78.

³ Eisenberg, Nancy, Ariel Knafo-Noam, and Tracy L. Spinrad. “Prosocial Development,” In *Handbook of Child Psychology: Social, Emotional, and Personality Development*, Edited by Richard M. Lerner, 1-47. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2015. 28-29.

⁴ “Moving Beyond Empathy as a Buzzword in the Museum Industry” NGX Interactive, Accessed March 9, 2021.

means of becoming places of social change.⁵ But in these discussions on empathy in museums, what do we envision it to be? What are its benefits and limitations? How should museums deploy it responsibly? Discussing questions such as these will help us understand what makes it as a concept so effective in museums such as *The Museum of Broken Relationships*.

The idea that empathy leads to kindness and understanding risks becoming a truism. That makes it all the more important to analyze the critiques. For one, the outcomes are not as guaranteed as it's proponents often assert, and how empathy is conceptualized varies enough to require drawing distinctions. As Stacey Mann and Danny Cohen state in their article "Crying at the Museum: A Call for Responsible Emotional Design," how museum designers and interpretive staff define emotion affects the kinds of experiences they create for their audiences.⁶ Therefore it is worth defining what empathy is, especially since people often think of it in distinctly different ways.

One critic, Paul Bloom, chooses to use the term empathy in what he states is its most common meaning, in which it is synonymous with sympathy as conceptualized in the 18th century. This is the process of experiencing the world as others do, or at least how we perceive them to.⁷ He further elaborates that the term also encompasses the process of assessing what other people are thinking, their motivations, their intentions and their beliefs. He calls this cognitive empathy as opposed to emotional empathy, and notes that they emerge from distinct brain processes. Working off of this, Namwali Serpell links this cognitive process to what she calls Hannah Arendt's theory of

⁵ Murawski, Mike. "The Urgency of Empathy & Social Impact in Museums." *Art Museum Teaching*, July 11, 2016.

⁶ Mann, Stacey and Danny M. Cohen. "Crying At the Museum: A Call for Responsible Emotional Design" *Exhibition* Spring ed.: 90-99, 2017. 90.

⁷ Bloom, Paul. "Against Empathy." *Boston Review*. August 20, 2014.

representative thinking. Rather than trying to be or feel like someone else, this approach envisions diverse perspectives to bring to mind how oneself, as oneself, would feel and think in the same situations. Or as Serpell deftly puts it: “the point is to inhabit the position, not the person.”⁸ It does not require feeling as another does at all, and in fact is more of an exploration of one’s own feelings as inspired by the experiences of others.

How empathy is defined by museum practitioners can follow similar lines of thought. Paula Dos Santos defines empathy similarly to Bloom’s cognitive empathy in that it is the attempt to understand the perspectives and experiences of others from their frame of reference. Comparatively, sympathy, the identification of a “shared sameness” through sharing an emotional response, leads towards understanding what others have in common with us, from our own perspective.⁹ Essentially, the difference lies in who is centered in the encounter: are you trying to connect to another person or are you trying to connect them to you?

The *Empathy Museum*’s “A Mile in My Shoes” exhibition blurs the two definitions. In it, visitors put on a pair of shoes belonging to someone else and go walking while listening to the owner tell them a story about themselves.¹⁰ The intent is that the wearer can learn about and understand them, with the implication that this connection by-proxy will lead to personal growth and prosocial behavior. The design approach has more in common with cognitive empathy, as the story is told to visitors rather than framed as an exercise in becoming and feeling as another person. Emotional empathy may also occur in reaction to the story, but the wearer of the shoes may not necessarily share the

⁸ Serpell, Namwali. “The Banality of Empathy.” *The New York Review of Books*, March 2, 2019.

⁹ Dos Santos, Paula. “Give or Take: Thoughts on Museum Collections as Working Tools and Their Connection with Human Beings.” In *The Museum as Forum and Actor*, Edited by Fredrik Svanberg, 29-38. Stockholm: Statens Historiska Museum, 2010. 34

¹⁰ “A Mile in My Shoes” *Empathy Museum*, Accessed May 9, 2021.

exact same emotions as the storyteller at all in the course of learning about them. However, the goal of understanding others through this method in the first place is to find commonalities and experience an emotional connection so that encounters between people can be more harmonious. Experiencing the same feelings at every point in the story is not guaranteed, but the assumption is that whatever is felt will be enough to create a difference in opinion and therefore behavior.

Another formulation of empathy is presented by Sarah Campbell in her article “I Feel Your Pain – Or Do I?.” She writes that when writing her Churchill report, she used the word empathy to summarize what she saw as reduced self interest and the active effort to really understand someone else's point of view or experiences.¹¹ On reflection, she says she finds the phrase “rational compassion”, also conceptualized by Paul Bloom, more appropriate. This is because it removes the presumption that we can truly feel another’s pain as they do, or that doing so is required for collaborative action.

Serwell argues that this can actually have the opposite effect. Feeling another’s pain is distressing, and as she points out, coping with this distress does not always lead to an impulse to relieve the suffering of others. Sometimes putting that suffering “out of sight, out of mind” as it were is just as acceptable a solution to relieve personal discomfort.¹² This is not the result museums want to cultivate when trying to inspire their audiences to become socially active community members.

Yet another way of parsing empathy comes from Adam P. Nilsen and Miriam Bader. They also discuss empathy and related terms in ways which are comparable to the definitions used by Bloom, Serpell, and Campbell. These definitions are more

¹¹ Campbell, Sarah. “I Feel Your Pain – Or Do I?” KIWI LOOSE IN MUSEUMS, June 19, 2017.

¹² Serpell, “The Banality of Empathy.”

distinctive. The first term is perspective-taking, which is similar to Bloom's cognitive empathy in that it involves imagining the thoughts and feelings of others to theorize what is happening in their mind. Empathy itself is defined as shared emotions with others, be they positive, negative, or otherwise. This can be an outcome of perspective-taking but it is not guaranteed. Sympathy, by contrast, is a feeling of pity for others.¹³ Given that the discourse around empathy is often directed at curing social ills, it is often centered around experiencing the suffering of others rather than their joys. This is probably why empathy and sympathy are often conflated. Or perhaps this is because in our efforts to foster perspective-taking and empathy with the victims of misfortune and injustice to inspire action on their behalf, the results are sympathy instead.

This unintended consequence, as well as the synonymy of empathy and sympathy, means that it is important to determine what one means when they use these terms. How exhibition designers define empathy and what their goals are by cultivating it in others will influence how exhibitions are designed and the experiences visitors will have. Feeling others emotional pain, especially in a context where no immediate action can be taken to resolve it, such as in a museum, can have unintended consequences. If an exhibition is not responsibly designed, empathy evoking techniques can lead to stress,¹⁴ emotional burnout,¹⁵ the reduction of suffering into spectacle,¹⁶ and a breach of trust with audiences if they feel they are being emotionally manipulated.¹⁷ In this regard,

¹³ Nilsen, Adam P. and Miriam Bader. "The Psychology of Empathy: Compelling Possibilities for Museums." In *Fostering Empathy through Museums*. Edited by Elif Gokcigdem, 115-130. United States: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. 118.

¹⁴ Popova, Maria. "The Science of Stress and How Our Emotions Affect Our Susceptibility to Burnout and Disease." Brainpickings. 2015. Accessed October 6, 2020

¹⁵ Bloom. "Against Empathy."

¹⁶ Serpell, "The Banality of Empathy."

¹⁷ Mann & Cohen "Crying At the Museum," 92.

developing perspective-taking approaches is less risky and more directly in line with traditional learning outcomes.

Whether it is called “perspective-taking,” “cognitive empathy,” or “representative thinking,” it is a process rooted in information processing and imagination. Museums frequently use information and imaginative exercises in their interpretive materials already. So if contextual information is all that is needed to understand a person on an intellectual level, and if emotional resonance will not necessarily result in social action, is there any reason for museums to purposefully design exhibitions to include the emotional dimension of empathy, as well?

There are significant benefits to including emotional encounters in museums. Emotional resonance with the objects and information in museum displays can create meaningful engagement with visitors and improve their memory of those materials.¹⁸ Being attentive to the reactions of audiences can offer insights into how they experience objects change over time. Such insights are increasingly valuable to researchers such as historians who are turning their attention to theorizing on emotion as a way to understand past peoples and events.¹⁹ Museums can potentially become resources of different kinds of knowledge such as this, but only if decision-makers recognize this potential and choose to act upon it.

Additionally, just as emotional empathy is not necessarily an outcome of perspective-taking, perspective may not be necessary for the kind of understanding possible through emotional empathy. Ronaldo Mendoza conducted a study comparing

¹⁸ Mann & Cohen, “Crying at the Museum,” 92.

¹⁹ Downes, Stephanie, Sally Holloway, and Sarah Randles. “A Feeling for Things, Past and Present.” In *Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions through History*, Edited by Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway, and Sarah Randles, 8-26. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. 18.

“situation-based empathy,” which involves imagining how one would feel in another’s situation, and “emotion based empathy,” in which only the same emotions are experienced regardless if that situation was similar or not. The result was that the couples he studied who felt emotionally similar to each other were more empathetic and understanding of each other than those who only projected themselves into a similar situation.²⁰ This means an exhibit does not necessarily need to reconstruct a situation in the audience's minds to help them understand how the people presented were or currently are impacted.

This finding can be useful for developing interactive exercises for visitors when a museum wants to foster a more personal, granular understanding of the subjects of their exhibitions. For museums addressing contemporary social issues, emotional empathy can be an especially powerful method for communicating the reasons for their advocacy. Additionally, when communicating information about the past, emotional empathy can be used in conjunction with perspective-taking techniques to bolster the outcomes, as demonstrated by *The Lower East Side Tenement Museum*, which Nilsen and Bader analyze.²¹ Their research found that empathy-centered narratives in the museum assisted in combating cognitive biases. These include fundamental attribution error, which occurs when we fail to consider the context around a person’s actions and attribute them to something inherent about their personality, and hindsight bias which leads us to believe events were predictable since we have the privilege of knowing the results.²² Narratives written to elicit empathetic responses require contextual information

²⁰ Mendoza, Ronaldo J. “Emotional Versus Situational Inductions of Empathy: Effects on Interpersonal Understanding and Punitiveness” PhD dissertation. Stanford University, 1997.

²¹ Nilsen & Bader, “The Psychology of Empathy.”

²² Nilsen & Bader, “The Psychology of Empathy,” 119.

to understand how people who are not present felt as they experienced times and places different from our own, thereby blurring the difference between empathy and perspective-taking.

The common denominator of these definitions is a sense of understanding through a relationship with someone else. Whether we better understand ourselves, those we form relationships with, or both depends on the degree to which we are cognitively and emotionally stimulated. These types of understandings blend together in ways that are difficult to define in discrete terms. Though whichever kind of empathy is the desired outcome, the other is often instrumental towards achieving it. Given that calls for increased empathy are often goal-based towards changing attitudes and behaviors, it is important to consider the different ways we can know others and the potential consequences of that knowing. So for museums, when deciding on which form of empathy to prioritize, it is wise to make clear the particular experiences and outcomes you want to create with your audiences from the outset.

The Museum of Broken Relationships: A Case Study of an Empathetic Museum

The Museum of Broken Relationships (MoBR) is an example of a museum that utilizes emotional empathy both in its exhibition content as well as in their practice. The participatory way they collect and present their artifacts demonstrates the strengths of engaging empathy while also mitigating the drawbacks. They recognize that losing a connection is an experience everyone has their own expertise in, the MoBR legitimizes them and their concomitant emotions by showcasing that expertise in a museum

context. This is similar to museums who develop community advisory committees, which are composed of members whose lived experiences, education, or hobbies give them specialized knowledge on a given exhibit topic. Rose Kinsley argues that “...this way of producing knowledge views the production process and the relationships built through this process as valuable outcomes in and of themselves...”²³ For the MoBR though, anyone can be a specialist. And even though the MoBR’s particular methods of radical inclusion may not be viable for all museums to adopt, I believe analyzing their methods can serve as inspiration for those seeking to add an emotional dimension to their work.

Introduction to *The Museum of Broken Relationships*

The *Museum of Broken Relationships* was founded by two artists, Olinka Vištica and Dražen Grubišić, when they ended their own relationship. According to them in the introduction to their book titled *The Museum of Broken Relationships: Modern Love in 203 Everyday Objects*,²⁴ they were inspired to create the museum to preserve the material remains of what had previously been the most important relationship of their lives. This was counterintuitive to the advice they found, all of which offered erasure as the only way to cope. Their alternative was to store painful triggers of past loves as a museum, first as an art installation and then as a full institution. Now the mission of the museum is to be a place that preserves and shares both the tangible and intangible heritage of broken relationships in whatever forms they take. Those forms are diverse, radically so since the collection is not exclusively made of objects created by artists or

²³ Kinsley, Rose Paquet. “Inclusion in Museums: a Matter of Social Justice.” *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 31 (5): 474-490, 2016. 485.

²⁴ Vištica & Grubišić, *The Museum of Broken Relationships*, 6.

owned by important historical figures. Rather, the museum's permanent collection is entirely participatory: theoretically, anyone can donate anything.

As stated before, the MoBR started as an art installation and was first made public at an art festival in 2006. This installation contained 40 objects belonging to Vištica and Grubišić, as well as ones entrusted to them by friends and strangers. Although they thought the stories and objects initially only had meaning for those involved in them, they quickly discovered the exhibition resonated with their audience. They remade the project into a travelling exhibition, where they displayed and collected objects in locations such as Berlin, San Francisco, and Singapore. What started as a memorial to the lost loves of the founders has become a global success story. Vištica and Grubišić describe their installation-turned-museum thusly:

"Our own break up snowballed into what might easily be the most meaningful thing we ever created: an ever-evolving global collection of keepsakes, trinkets of no objective value, each of them a precious witness to the end of a relationship...Whatever their motivation for donating personal belongings -- be it therapeutic relief, sheer exhibitionism, or desire to immortalize the otherwise impermanent-- people have embraced the act of exhibiting their emotional legacy as a sort of ritual, a solemn ceremony...The donors released their stories to us with the hope that their intimate confessions will resonate in the hearts of museum visitors; but what they may not suspect is the comfort and relief their stories offer to those who read them. A mundane object and its story, displayed in a public space, create a temporary comradeship of complete strangers, and it feels like magic."²⁵

Their ability to transform any mundane thing into a functioning museum object demonstrates the transformative power of museums and serves as an example of a creative and meaningful participatory project.

The MoBR presently has two locations: the main location in Zagreb, Croatia and a branch museum in Los Angeles, USA. Additionally, they continue to create traveling

²⁵ Vištica, Olinka, and Drazen Grubisic. *The Museum of Broken Relationships: Modern Love in 203 Everyday Objects.* New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2017. 7-8.

exhibitions. They also maintain a virtual presence via their website, with both physical and digital objects equally welcomed from anywhere on the planet in any language. Both types of collections are equally valued in their mission statement, which is as follows:

*“The Museum of Broken Relationships is a physical and virtual public space created with the sole purpose of treasuring and sharing your heartbreak stories and symbolic possessions. It is a museum about you, about us, about the ways we love and lose.”*²⁶

In their effort to be a resource that offers people a creative way to recover from their pain and grow, their virtual presence is vital in providing access beyond their walls. They are a community project that aims to be as wide-reaching as possible, provided individuals have an internet connection or presence at their exhibitions, of course.

Participating in the Personal: Exploring the Model of the MoBR

The public-oriented turn museums have been slowly making over the past century or so primed the MoBR model of public participation. This participatory model as explained by Nina Simon is when an institution supports experiences where they not only inform and provide value to their audience, but are informed and are provided value themselves. For museums operating on this model, they serve as platforms that connect different users who create, distribute, consume, critique, and collaborate on content.²⁷ Though the MoBR is primarily designed around only three of these, creating, consuming, and collaborating, this participatory model is the source of its transformative power. The interpretive labels and the objects are sourced from the public, rather than

²⁶ “Explore the Museum.” Brokenships. Museum of Broken Relationships, Accessed May 7, 2021.

²⁷ Simon, Nina. *The Participatory Museum*. Santa Cruz, CA.: Museum 2.0, 2010. 2.

developed by the staff themselves. This facilitates the authentic expression of emotions by donors, which can trigger memories and feelings in viewers who then make meaningful experiences for themselves.

To further elaborate on how the MoBR successfully uses the participatory process, it is worth noting the specificity of the museum's subject and mission. When explaining the design principles of participatory projects, Simon emphasizes the need for scaffolding: participants thrive on constraints more than on open-ended opportunities, especially when those constraints are interpreted flexibly. Additionally, participants also collaborate more confidently through personal rather than social entry points.²⁸ These principles seem paradoxical, but are exemplified well by the MoBR. It is an institution focused on one kind of experience, though what this experience entails is framed in the broadest sense imaginable. Informational materials provided by the museum make the rules of engagement clear, particularly the levels of privacy involved at each stage, and the purpose of contributing. It is this focus, inclusion, and trust-building that makes the MoBR's participatory practice effective.

Furthermore, the textual information of the labels, the intrigue of the symbolic objects, and the museum context itself all come together to facilitate connections in its public space. The MoBR is not the only museum that takes the approach of making intangible cultural heritage known through tangible things. Similar projects like the *World Water Museum* project by Keti Haliori may yet follow in their footsteps. It, too, is an art installation of symbolic objects intending to establish a permanent exhibition in a physical location. Like the MoBR, it uses the frame of a museum to position its subject, the challenge of sustainable potable water, as evidence to be put on display. Marco

²⁸ Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, 19 & 22.

Borsotti explains that by doing so, Haliori activates water's artistic and social value as a subject to be preserved. The installation situates water as a narrative system that "...through its own existence, it is told as a fundamental life element itself and in perspective, an urgent and strategic global environmental problem."²⁹ This engages a sense of empathy even more abstracted than the MoBR, as it is informed by ideas of material agency rather than anthropocentric ones.

Also like the MoBR, it sources its collection through the voluntary cooperation of anonymous people who donate water samples, whose locations are pinned on a map on their website as well.³⁰ Through collective action the project partners with individuals, acknowledging them as stakeholders who can contribute value to the collection and creates a sense of belonging. The *World Water Museum* and the MoBR establish connections with its donors and create their own global communities in the process of building its collection in a public, participatory way.

Another similar project was the 2007 *Future Memories* by the *Museum of National Antiquities* in Sweden. This project was developed around translating the way those in the professional archaeological community use and theorize history to the public. For example, they wanted to provoke reflection of how the mundane objects of today may become the archaeological treasures of the future. The project designers did this by asking members of the public to donate an item to the future, which was first displayed and then buried in the museum courtyard. Each item was accompanied by a label written by the donor about a memory, a story about the item, and/or themselves.

²⁹ Borsotti, Marco. "From the Invisible from the Everyday, the Unmentionable towards Narrative Strategies to Explain, Understand, Remember. New Perspectives on Cultural Preservation." In *Systems & Design: Beyond Processes and Thinking*, 96-109. Valencia, Spain: Universitat Politècnica de València, 2016. 98.

³⁰ "About." World Water Museum, Accessed May 9, 2021.

Like the MoBR's collection, the donated items were often everyday objects whose main point of interest came from their associated label. Objects were then placed in a case that was exhibited before burial, and other visitors could interact with them and move their positions. Katherine Wahlgren roughly categorized the commentaries created by the assemblages, which included such topics as environment and politics, love and friendship, and changing fashions.³¹ Like the MoBR, the *Museum of National Antiquities'* role was more as facilitator: the content was provided and determined by individuals.

Future Memories differs from the MoBR in a key way: the objects were not accessioned into the permanent collection. According to Wahlgren, due to the rules governing the treatment of accessioned objects, the donations to *Future Memories* were not given actual inventory numbers. A secondary system of identifying them in the database was developed instead.³² This provides an alternative to the MoBR model that may be more appealing to museums who want to create crowdsourced exhibitions of everyday objects but who do not necessarily want to be responsible for the objects in perpetuity as required by their collection policies. This way museums can collect just as radically diverse and inclusive materials without having to devote their often limited resources to their material care.

However, Wahlgren admits that since the objects donated to *Future Memories* do not have the full status of museum objects, they are not as useful for research and public use.³³ The notes are saved, but the objects decay in the ground. Arguably they are more authentic as future archaeological artifacts this way, but I want to draw

³¹ Wahlgren, Katherine Hauptman. "Future Memories in the Rear-view Mirror." In *The Museum as Forum and Actor*, Edited by Fredrik Svanberg, 77-93. Stockholm: Statens Historiska Museum, 2010. 92.

³² Wahlgren, "Future Memories," 89.

³³ Wahlgren, "Future Memories," 90.

attention to the fact that the decision to not make them “real” museum objects diminishes the transformative potential of the participatory process. Participatory projects are at their best when they create new value for all involved.³⁴ Though *Future Memories* created new value for both the museum and their audience, the contributions are reduced to their novelty and placed lower on the hierarchy of objects in the museum space. They are higher than working objects such as chairs and keyboards, but still less valued than those on display and in storage. This is the main point of departure from the MoBR, and the difference between the role it serves and those of temporary participatory exhibitions.

Vištica describes the MoBR’s practice of collecting and exhibiting as a democratization of cultural experience where “[t]here is no demarcation between the creators and the audience of the museum.”³⁵ By opening museum processes to the public, individuals can perform meaningful cathartic actions through transforming symbols of their lost connections into public art. True, museal art. Sara Benceković in her analysis of the MoBR that through performing museal work such as collection and display, the audience collectively “...modif[ies] the ways love is understood, experienced, and generated in people’s everyday lives,” and that “[the] suspension of established social structures and unconstrained expression are crucial for the empowerment of subjects who are free to employ their agency.”³⁶ This is how the MoBR serves its publics. They give individuals a platform to share a part of themselves,

³⁴ Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, 6.

³⁵ Vištica, Olinka. “The Museum of Broken Relationships: The Impact of Emotional Involvement and Audience Participation.” In *The Museum as Forum and Actor*, Edited by Fredrik Svanberg, 161-168. Stockholm: Statens Historiska Museum, 2010. 168.

³⁶ Benceković, Sara. “Loves Me, Loves Me Not: The Museum of Broken Relationships Scene Analysis” *Contingent Horizons: The York University Student Journal of Anthropology* 1 (1): 9–18. 2014. 15

cope creatively with loss, and legitimize such expressions with the status that comes with being a museum object.

Connecting through Collecting: Participation in Collection Building

In the interest of better understanding the MoBR's collection, I would like to take a moment to discuss its museum genre. The MoBR intersects with several museum types. It presents stories of the past with objects, thereby creating "a social space where it becomes obvious that large-scale social and historical changes affect even our most personal relationships."³⁷ However, it is more similar to art museums than history-oriented museums in the sense that the stories aren't intended to be explored further than what is provided at the time of donation. There is no intention to delve into "what really happened," critique the veracity of events, nor attempt to establish timelines. The goal is to document and share the emotional states and memories of donors at the time of donation. The stories that capture this knowledge are informed by cultural, and historical context, but only insofar as they are provided by the donors themselves. The staff can and do explicitly organize exhibitions around historical events such as the *Broken Hearts in a Broken Territory* tour, which collected and exhibited artifacts relating to break-ups in the territory of ex-Yugoslavia.³⁸ However, historical research is not the main goal of the curators nor historical education the goal of the exhibitions.

³⁷ Freeman, Lindsey. "Museums of Experience: The Artist as Curator of Memory and Loss." In *The Art of Social Critique: Painting Mirrors of Social Life*, Edited by Shawn Chandler Bingham, 511-530. Lanham, MD.: Lexington Books, 2012. 512.

³⁸ Vištica "The Museum of Broken Relationships: The Impact of Emotional Involvement and Audience Participation" 165-166.

This crowdsourced narrative approach lends itself to historic collections. In particular, those that are oriented towards public history, as the discipline has deliberated about issues of authority and the benefits and consequences of decentering expertise for decades.³⁹ Because of this, such institutions have built collections filled with multiple voices often preserved as text, such as oral history archives. These materials are a form of participatory collection and although they may not have blockbusting, one-of-a-kind artifacts associated with them, they can still be important to share nonetheless. Curators of these types of collections can take cues from the symbolic role of the MoBR's exhibition objects for displaying such textual collections in a meaningful way.

In service to this idea, I would like to briefly discuss two other examples. Like the MoBR, these projects are by artists informed by absences in museum collections. They are *Mining the Museum*, installed by Fred Wilson at the Maryland Historical Society⁴⁰ and *The Lost Museum*, by Mark Dion and the Jenks Society.⁴¹ Melissa Rachleff explains that artists provoke accepted interpretation and that one reason that art installations are so effective is through appropriating existing objects and “re-presenting” them in new contexts.⁴² The context in these cases are museums as an idea themselves. Through museal subversion all three projects demonstrate that collecting is, as Graeme Were states, “a selective process which is as much about those objects brought forward as it

³⁹ Adair, Bill, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski. “Introduction” In *Letting Go?: Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*. Edited by Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski. Philadelphia: The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, 2011. 14.

⁴⁰ Rachleff, Melissa. “Peering Behind the Curtain: Artists and Questioning Historical Authority.” In *Letting Go?: Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*. Edited by Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski, 208-229. Philadelphia: The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, 2011. 217-221

⁴¹ Lubar, Steven D. *Inside the Lost Museum: Curating, Past and Present*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017.

⁴² Rachleff, “Peering Behind the Curtain,” 213.

is about those that are rejected.”⁴³ These exhibitions fill the gaps they see in museum collections, and do so in a way that highlights the museum itself as a subjective communicator.

Museums in general are shifting ever more from telling universalising stories of nationhood, mankind, technological advances, and so on towards a greater focus on social histories and those of marginalized groups.⁴⁴ In doing so, they are highlighting postmodern approaches to history that emphasizes how events and their meanings are constructed in the present.⁴⁵ In essence, museums are a media form in themselves that actively produce culture.⁴⁶ This is in line with Goswami’s suggestion that museum narratives embrace the role of the unreliable narrator, and the transparency of decision-making that comes along with it. Nicole Robert surely agrees as she argues that the context such transparency provides is crucial for understanding exhibit content.⁴⁷ By foregrounding subjectivity, museums such as the MoBR present voices not of distance and objectivity, but of emotion and partiality.⁴⁸ In this way the subjects of museological displays can become relatable as and to human beings.

This factors into the shift from museum collections being conceptualized as artifacts that objectively represent facets of reality to that of material culture which emphasizes the social meaning of objects and their role in constructing identities and

⁴³ Were, Graeme. “Extreme Collecting: Dealing with Difficult Objects” In *Extreme Collecting: Challenging Practices for 21st Century Museums*, Edited by Graeme Were and J.C.H. King, 1-18. New York: Berghahn Books, 2014. 1.

⁴⁴ Rengel, Sarah. “Innocent Memories: Reading the Museum in Orhan Pamuk’s *The Museum of Innocence*.” *Limina* 23: 16–30, 2017. 4-6.

⁴⁵ Rengel, “Innocent Memories,” 11.

⁴⁶ Svanberg, Fredrik. “Towards the Museum as Forum and Actor?” In *The Museum as Forum and Actor*, Edited by Fredrik Svanberg, 13-28. Stockholm: Statens Historiska Museum, 2010. 18.

⁴⁷ Robert, Nicole. “Getting Intersectional in Museums.” *Museums & Social Issues* 9 (1): 24–33, 2014. 29-30.

⁴⁸ Goswami, “The Museum as Unreliable Narrator.” 8.

memory. According to Eva Silvén, the public is being reframed from objects of study into collaborators. This change in stance by museum practitioners is leading towards increasingly collecting objects linked to contemporary processes of self-reflection, identity making, and cultural understanding. As a result, collection practices such as field research, collecting, and collections management are becoming more and more of a public interface.⁴⁹ She argues that museums are poised to serve as platforms for involvement in complex events, critiquing problematic aspects of history, and taking responsibility for preserving individual experiences and societal processes, which includes showing empathy and taking a role in societal crisis management and reconciliation.⁵⁰ Museums like the MoBR are on the cutting edge of these postmodern practices. As Ian Hodder states, the different ways we claim to ‘know’ things and make use of them lead to different ways of connecting to other things.⁵¹ They in turn may inspire other museums to think creatively about what their collections are and what they can be.

Next I would like to discuss how the information a museum collects when acquiring objects often demonstrates what it values by what it includes as well as by what it excludes.⁵² Collecting staff make decisions on what data is relevant to document at the time of collection, usually informed by how they intend to use them, or how they anticipate their stakeholders will use them. Consequently, the types of information those object records seek and prioritize are those that assist in answering the questions the museum anticipates the typical user of the collection will have. These questions, and by

⁴⁹ Silvén, Eva. “Difficult Matters: Museums, Materiality, Multivocality.” In *The Museum as Forum and Actor*, Edited by Fredrik Svanberg, 133-146. Stockholm: Statens Historiska Museum, 2010. 141.

⁵⁰ Silvén, “Difficult Matters,” 140.

⁵¹ Hodder, Ian. *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. 12.

⁵² Robert, “Getting Intersectional in Museums,” 30-31.

extension the information an institution collects are derived from the relationships of a museum and its users in a feedback loop. In this way analyzing the types of objects and information a museum collects and conserves can show us what kinds of relationships it values.

Inversely, we can get a sense of which relationships are not valued by what kind of information is excluded, though this is often reflective of the values of the donors as well. It is important to note that the best case for learning through exclusion is by thinking about what sort of information one would expect to be collected but is not. This is because though not all data entry fields in a given database can be filled, they are still acknowledged as worthwhile to collect through said field's existence.

For an example of analysis of relationships by exclusion, we can look at the lack of artist names attached to objects obtained for ethnographic collections. These objects were, and in many cases still, are not considered art in the same sense as those pieces typically in art museums. This is attributable to racist attitudes borne of colonialist practices, which saw the subjects of ethnographic study more as scientific specimens to be studied more than individual artists deserving of the same type of recognition accorded to that position. As such, their works become representative rather than singular, their names incidental, and now at best these pieces are attributable only to an ethnic group rather than to an individual creator. A relationship between museums, researchers/, and/or engaged in this practice are present, but as we can see, a relationship between those museums and the creators of the objects they come to possess is not.

So what kinds of relationships does *The Museum of Broken Relationships* have?

Like any good museum mission statement, theirs establishes the scope of their collection, which states that they collect both stories and symbolic possessions. We can see on their web page in the contribute tab that we can elect to send our items or share our stories. Their FAQ elaborates by telling us that the stories become a part of their virtual collection and the items go to their permanent collection in Zagreb. Inversely to a typical museum, which primarily collects tangible objects enriched by the addition of textual information, the MoBR collects texts enriched by the addition of objects. One can donate text without an object but cannot donate an object without accompanying text.

So in the MoBR's case, physical things play a crucial role but ultimately a supporting one. The donated text is the main route by which donors express their emotions. Now, one could conceivably design an exhibition wherein the audience has only the context of the exhibition itself and the objects in it to interpret, with no text at all. This would be an exhibition that confronts viewers with assemblages of things, requiring creativity and attentive looking to form ideas on how they are connected to heartbreak. However, such an exhibition would lack another key feature of the mission statement, that being how the museum is "about us, about you, about the ways we love and lose."⁵³ So, as engaging and potentially meaningful as letting visitors create the puzzle pieces and put them together could be, the museum is about intensely personal emotional events experienced by real people. It is by these real people and for real people, not hypothetical ones.

To be clear, this is not a criticism of museums who have to use the evidence and talent available to them to construct long-passed persons in the effort to make their

⁵³Brokenships. "Explore the Museum."

exhibitions richer and more relatable to their audiences. The MoBR is privileged in having a clearly defined identity and collection goals from their founding, as well as contemporary people who choose to donate the types of objects the museum solicits. Many museums have not had the privilege to start on such a mission-focused path. There are also cases where missions change over time, which changes the types of object information those museums collect. This highlights that as we see the needs of museums and their audiences change, and the types of knowledge they engage with expand, it is worth considering what's possible to collect now for the needs of the future.

Going back to the MoBR, we can see that how they present themselves on their website shows the ways in which the museum positions itself in relation to its audience. The FAQ does a good job at explaining their collection policies to potential contributors in a way that demonstrates the MoBR's values, such as being open and upfront with what to expect during interactions with the museum. As is standard for most museums, they explain that what goes on display is ultimately at their discretion, and they are limited in how much they can display at any given time by their physical realities. They reiterate that they value all donations whether currently featured in an exhibition or not.

They are also clear that donations are a transfer of ownership and are not returnable, though in some cases the current staff have made exceptions to that last rule.⁵⁴ They did so out of respect for the fact that feelings change as do minds about giving away a personal item forever. Such exceptions demonstrate the empathetic relationship between the museum's staff and donors, especially since legally speaking, these returns are at the discretion of the staff. This is not to say museums overall should be expected to make such exceptions. It is a practice that would court tax fraud in

⁵⁴ Charlotte Fuentes (Collections Manager at the MoBR) email conversation with the author, May 2021.

institutions who hold objects with significant market value. However, I do think it is worth reflecting on how the MoBR considers and respects the needs of its source communities, who have much higher emotional stakes in their objects than the museum does.

The MoBR also demonstrates care for donors by being clear on the rules of engagement regarding privacy. The FAQ tells us that the staff can access any personal information provided, but only the staff. They explain that donors must provide their identities only in order to confer legal ownership of the donation to the museum, but they will otherwise remain anonymous. In fact, they explicitly say that they reserve the right to refuse to publish anything that includes the full names or personal information of anyone, including the donor themselves. Additionally, if one wishes to contribute a story they can choose to time lock it so that it is publicly inaccessible for a time-frame they themselves specify. In this way the MoBR has chosen to relinquish a significant level of control over publication to their stakeholders in order to give them a sense of comfort and security, and therefore the opportunity, to engage in the museum's mission of treasuring and sharing heartbreak.

To this end they also encourage donors to write in their preferred language. Stories pinned on their virtual world map are published in that language. For items that go on exhibit, they assure that their translators will try to convey the spirit and the style of the original submission as well as its content. This demonstrates that the MoBR values giving donors the opportunity to express themselves on their own terms, even if that leads to extra work on the museum's part.

The MoBR also allows donors to represent their emotional experiences in radically accepting ways compared to typical museums. The FAQ states that anything can be donated, all is welcome. This is conceptually true, though not entirely as they do retain the right to refuse anything they deem offensive or discriminatory, as well as oversized items for practical reasons.⁵⁵ But in almost every case they have kept their word with this bold declaration, and I suspect some donors have taken it as a challenge worth testing. At the time that I am writing this, the very first entry shown on their explore tab is a wad of belly button lint. Among the page's eclectic array there are also a 27 year old scab, two different sets of dreadlocks, a gingerbread cookie, sex toys, and a Starbucks cup with an empty bag of fortune cookies attached to it. It does not take much browsing to find objects few if any other museums would dare to accept into their care, whether out of concern for long term care, mission relevance, or taboo nature.

The text contributors provide is also accepted with few limitations. The FAQ states that there is no restriction regarding the style or the length of the text, though it does recommend that audiences prefer brevity for museum labels. It is this inclusiveness that allows different personalities to express themselves, creating a truly polyvocal space in which many different voices and perspectives create narrative shifts. These text contributions also include the titles, which range from those recognizable in standard museum genres such as "Gift 3: Ceramic Heart" and "Sailor's cap" to the wry and disruptive like "Stupid Frisbee" and "The Toaster of Vindication."⁵⁶ The stories are as diverse and unexpected as the objects themselves. But as long as they are not explicitly harmful to others or breach their privacy, they are acceptable as they are to the

⁵⁵ Fuentes, email conversation with the author

⁵⁶ Brokenships. "Explore the Museum."

MoBR. It is a place to publicly memorialize and experience those things which are attached to pain and are otherwise unwanted for the sake of healing.

This radical inclusiveness into the collection is not without its challenges. For most museums, charged with the stewardship of their collections in perpetuity as they are, one has to wonder how the MoBR cares for its eclectic collection containing perishable goods, mass-produced ephemera, and objects in various stages of wholeness. According to their current collection manager Charlotte Fuentes, the two technical challenges that most stand out are size and perishability.⁵⁷ This is possibly because the bulk of the objects that comprise the collection have yet to reach an age or level of decay that would impact their physical integrity, such as experienced by museums now struggling with maintaining early plastics. Limited real estate is a problem most collection managers can relate to on a daily basis, and the lifespans of perishables are short enough to be relatively immediate problems. Time will likely create more challenges as the material aspect of their collection packages change. They are not unaware of this, precisely due to perishable items demanding solutions to preservation problems already.

The collection currently numbers around 3,000 objects, among them a bed and a car, which unsurprisingly put a strain on their available storage space. How to store and preserve foodstuffs is a trickier problem, one Fuentes admits they don't have a ready solution for. However, she states that she and her colleagues continue to reflect on the best way to preserve their physical objects intact and work on a case-by-case basis on how to do so. One example she provided was when they had to make a copy of steamed bread donated from Korea with the understanding that this could affect the

⁵⁷ Fuentes, email conversation with the author

authenticity of the donation. Such authenticity issues raised with having to replace such quickly degradable objects, in addition to pest problems that can accompany them, are typically why most museums do not collect them. In comparison storage space issues are much more straightforwardly solved.

Authenticity is a fraught topic in museums. Visitors often come to museums to experience 'the real thing' which is often considered 'original' and/or 'unmodified' and there is much disagreement on how those are defined. The argument of how much of an object can be replaced before it becomes an entirely new object is one of the oldest in Western philosophy with the ship of Theseus thought experiment, which goes back to at least 400 BC. However for the bread example above, I do not think there is as strong a case for it being inauthentic as perhaps for other art objects. Donations to the MoBR should be considered akin to collection packages, wherein objects play a supporting role for the text. This is arguably true of other museums, such as natural history museums whose collection and genetic data are becoming just as important as the specimens themselves as research questions shift from morphological aspects to genetic and ecological ones. For the MoBR, an authentic connection between donor and visitor experienced via their collection is the most important factor.

The physical objects in the MoBR's are as ephemeral as the emotions they symbolize. Entropy is a force in every Museum collection: the idea of perpetuity is aspirational more than a fact as Fernando Rubio demonstrates in his analysis of the effort and resources devoted to preserving the *Mona Lisa* as a functioning museum object. Their identities have to be sustained over time, the work is never finished, and

because of this their status is fragile and temporally contingent.⁵⁸ So it is not necessarily entirely inauthentic to replace spoiled bread. It is unspoiled bread that symbolizes the donors relationship, triggers their memories, and elicits feelings within them after all. Those emotions are what the museum aims to give a platform to so that others may recreate them for themselves. So it stands to reason that in terms of mass-produced consumables, if it is the pristine product that is meaningful to the donor, then that is what needs to be preserved as best as possible. If not the product itself, such as if the producer ceases to make them, then a visually exact replica should suffice as long as it's memory-trigger qualities remain intact. For this kind of project, that is the mechanism of authenticity.

In essence, the staff of the MoBR are attempting the impossible: collecting emotional states. It seems a paradox then that even if the actual lived experience itself is impossible to collect and can at best be only symbolized, the experiences visitors have often feel powerfully genuine. This is because the collection as displayed invites connection through empathetic responses by giving freedom to donors to express themselves and their own truths in their own ways. The MoBR's exhibitions do not present knowledge in a unidirectional transmission model⁵⁹ with didactic labels and objective facts, but are in fact giving viewers the opportunity to create emotions within themselves.

This approach is what Dos Santos defines as giving rather than taking by the museum. By this she means that museums who "give [their] objects to people" do so by

⁵⁸ Rubio, Fernando Domínguez. "On the Discrepancy between Objects and Things: An Ecological Approach." *Journal of Material Culture* 21 (1): 59–86, 2016. 80-81.

⁵⁹ Hooper-Greenhill, Eileen. "Changing Values in the Art Museum: Rethinking Communication and Learning." *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 6 (1): 9–31, 2000. 15.

facilitating producers of culture to decide what layers of information are important to add to displays.⁶⁰ This is opposed to taking, whereby it is the museum staff who privilege information, such as aesthetic properties, which often appeal more to those who consume those objects. This typical approach of taking objects to transform them into museological ones more often than not disconnects them from their previous social lives. Dos Santos argues that this act of taking objects ultimately does a disservice to exhibitions that stress universal human qualities as it empties the objects of their human connections. By using virtually unedited text by donors and displaying the symbols they choose themselves to represent their emotions, the MoBR's frames itself around the producers of cultural heritage rather than around the typical priorities of art consumers. This practice of giving is what facilitates empathetic responses.

Another important element of the MoBR's display method lies in the result of Mendoza's study on situational and emotional empathy. After all, some of the museum labels are as brief as two words long, such as "A Can of Love Incense," which simply reads "DOESN'T WORK."⁶¹ There is little in the way of information to provide viewers with the specific situational context of the donor, though their feelings on the matter are strongly implied. The collection also spans many cultures and time periods, and some objects will inevitably include details that are not universally relatable. However, the subject of the museum, broken relationships, is. We have all experienced loss and the complex milieu of feelings that go along with it. They are feelings that most of us can recall with ease. These emotions are what allows us to relate to and understand the

⁶⁰ Dos Santos, "Give or Take," 36.

⁶¹ Vištica & Grubišić, *The Museum of Broken Relationships*, 13.

invisible storytellers we experience through the objects and text, though perhaps more accurately they help us understand ourselves.

This is because the accuracy of our interpretations will never be tested, though unlike other types of museums the learning outcomes of the MoBR are not based on factual information per se. Rather, what we learn from their exhibitions are different ways of being heartbroken, different ways of defining what a relationship can be, and different ways of coping when they inevitably happen to us again. This is where the second strength of the museum lies: diverse representation. As Serpell wrote “one can only bring the experiences of others to mind if they're imaginatively available to us.”⁶² The MoBR serves as an example that this is not just a result of intellectual effort, but of emotional connection as well. By purposefully collecting and displaying almost any kind of object sent to them, no matter how strange, taboo, common, or perishable, and presenting their accompanying text virtually unedited, they make visible the diversity of what a broken relationship can be. They are made imaginatively available to us as we consider our own experiences, past, present, and future.

The diverse experiences on display also help mitigate the unwelcome consequences of empathetic response, most acutely emotional burnout. Given the subject matter we can expect many of the stories to reflect painful experiences and emotions. This is true, but not always. Some of the labels are witty quips, some express relief, or gratitude, empowerment, sarcastic irreverence, hope, and whatever other feelings donors choose to put on display. Therefore the diversity they present extends not only to the objects, but to the emotional resonances their audience can experience. This can help mitigate desensitization bias, wherein people who are repeatedly exposed

⁶² Serpell, “The Banality of Empathy.”

to some sort of stimulus become numb to it and furthermore have difficulty empathizing with someone who the sensation is new to.⁶³ The flexible and diverse representation that their collection offers is not only interesting, but a way to add levity to an often difficult subject.

Memorializing Lost Connections: Examining Emotions as a Public Service Role in the MoBR

Broken relationships are an inherently emotional topic so it follows that the MoBR's exhibitions would engage visitors empathetically. But unlike the value of learning about traditional disciplines of knowledge present in museums such as history and science, the purpose of putting such objects and stories on display for their emotional resonance alone is not as easy to articulate. Even art has aesthetic, skill, and the social cachet of the artists factoring into their worthiness as objects fit for museum display. So what is the value of a collection such as this? Charlotte Fuentes, the collection manager at the MoBR describes it this way:

“The Museum of Broken Relationships is an invitation on an empathetic journey to the depths of a human heart. It is a testimony to our ultimate need for love and connection despite the difficulties that go with it. It is a desire to connect visitors in meaningful ways across growing divides of class, community, and culture that seem to define our world.”⁶⁴

The founders Olinka Vištica and Dražen Grubišić also speak of the merit of their museum in terms of valuing the connections we make with others regardless of how brief or distant in the past. Though they eschew the word “therapeutic” because of its connotation of illness in need of curing, they acknowledge that visitors and donors alike

⁶³ Nilsen and Bader, “The Psychology of Empathy,” 126.

⁶⁴ Fuentes, email conversation with the author

experience a sense of consolation and emotional unburdening. They describe the act of donating as a “ritual of emotional catharsis,” with bereavement support as part of the potential social role of contemporary museum displays. Other types of museums can provide psychological relief as well as other benefits to health and wellbeing such as a sense of connection and positive feelings, though there is a key difference to what the MoBR provides. It is a museum that functions as a memorial, but importantly it is a memorial that provides an opportunity to transform shame.

A common theme when Vištica and Grubišić describe their museum is that the idea was a reaction against the impulse to erase past relationships once they end. That is why the mission statement of the MoBR emphasizes that heartbreak should be treasured and publicly shared: the value of doing so requires persuasion. It seems like a counterintuitive prospect, and I believe this, as well as the success of the MoBR, can be at least partly explained by Brené Brown’s research on shame and vulnerability. She states that humans live for connection to others, and that shame is ultimately a fear of disconnection. Shame stems from the fear we have about not being enough of something to be worthy of connection. During her research, this belief of worthiness was the only factor separating people who felt loved and connected and those who felt they were not. This sense of worthiness in turn was tied to “the courage to be imperfect,” a sense of compassion with oneself first then to others. This allowed them to present themselves authentically, even if vulnerably. This in turn led to more connections.

Broken relationships are synonymous with lost connections, so it follows that they are often treated as sources of shame. Brown says of shame: “No one wants to talk about it, and the less you talk about it, the more you have it.” Therein lies the

“magic” the staff of the MoBR describe. Their museum provides a safe space for people to share experiences connected to feelings of shame, whether now or in the past. Donations are anonymous, the way one can symbolize their feelings is almost entirely without limit, and those who come to the museum’s exhibitions virtually or physically can connect their personal heartbreaks to those they witness even if only in their minds. Few public venues exist that allow us to confront painful emotions in this way.

While the approach of encouraging donors to represent themselves can help inform displays of emotionally-charged subject matter, the MoBR, too, can be informed by discussions about how museums present other difficult histories. On the one hand, the abstraction museum objects create can minimize extreme emotional responses and create contemplative spaces for visitors to engage with critical questions.⁶⁵ On the other, as memory triggers museum objects can unintentionally re-traumatize individuals through remembrance. Solutions to help mitigate this include being clear about the reasons for implementing the activity, understanding as much as possible about the target audience’s needs, building in planning and training to support all stakeholders involved, and setting clear expectations at the start.⁶⁶ This honesty and support builds trust and allows for everyone, both museum staff and visitors, to make informed decisions on how to approach and manage experiences in the museum.

The MoBR is upfront on what it is about, and as the audience is typically adults, the museum staff expects that they know that they will experience sensitive subject matter. There are staff members at the entrance to explain this as well, especially when

⁶⁵ Mann & Cohen, “Crying at the Museum,” 96.

⁶⁶ Chatterjee, Helen and Guy Noble. *Museums, Health and Well-Being*. Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2013. 51.

they see young visitors.⁶⁷ However, individual artifacts themselves have no way of suggesting what their labels contain. While many of their visitors accurately assume that the museum will be about the end of romantic relationships, they may not be prepared for the ends of other relationships nor references to abuse, accidental death, terminal illness, identity rejection, or other tragic realities they could potentially be confronted with unexpectedly.

Stacey Mann and Danny Cohen offer some potential solutions. Having interpretive staff trained in supporting visitor experiences can help prepare visitors and assist those who appear overwhelmed. Additionally, advisory signage and exhibition layouts can allow visitors to decide which experiences they are prepared for. This is especially important if staff members are not available. Directional signs to early exits can also help visitors manage their experience and show them that they have control of what they experience and for how long, not the museum space.⁶⁸ Implementation of some if not all of these practices would fit well with the current stakeholder-centered culture currently at the MoBR and would likely improve the experience.

Another potential avenue the MoBR staff can consider to enrich the empathetic opportunity they offer is by including sensory elements in their exhibitions other than the visual ones alone. Like typical art museums, visitors are not allowed to handle the objects on display, even if the donor's label invites it, such as with "Stupid Frisbee." This is because the MoBR shares the same concern with preserving the objects as-is as much as possible, as well as for security reasons and theft-prevention.⁶⁹ Although necessary, the lack of touch diminishes the ability of the objects as memory triggers.

⁶⁷ Fuentes, email conversation with the author

⁶⁸ Mann & Cohen, "Crying at the Museum," 93-94.

⁶⁹ Fuentes, email conversation with the author

Sarah Dudley argues that something vital is lost when touch is impossible, such as the ability to more deeply understand and empathize with those who previously held, cherished, and possessed them.⁷⁰ Being able to touch something physical, to feel its weight provides a different kind of knowledge than looking alone. How might visitors' feelings on something like "Divorce Day Mad Dwarf," which was thrown at a car, change if they could know whether it is light or heavy? If not feasible to hold the objects themselves, providing ones that resemble their characteristics for visitors to interact with is an option. The sense of smell, too, could be engaged with recreations provided nearby, which can further provide visitors the opportunity to interact with the objects on display as the donor once did, even if only by-proxy. It is up to the staff's discretion whether such additions would be in line with their mission, and how to implement them if they choose to. As other museums experiment with embodied interactions in their exhibitions, the MoBR may find those results can enrich their own as well.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the MoBR as an institution does not represent others as much as it serves as a platform for others to represent aspects of themselves. The novel objects and presentation style within a museum context elevate them into things worth engaging with and preserving, as well as simply being an interesting juxtaposition that attracts attention. The personal stories that the MoBR displays emotionally connect to the persons who come to the museum as well as those who work there, wherein they experience the emotions of others as well as themselves. It is a place where lost

⁷⁰ Dudley, Sandra H. "Museum Materialities: Objects, Sense, and Feeling" In *Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations*, Edited by Sandra Dudley, 1-18. New York: Routledge, 2010. 10.

connections are made worthy of being cherished. This is made possible through a participatory process that treats members of the public as partners whose contributions are as culturally significant as more traditionally conceived museum objects. For museums who are considering how they can better serve their communities, the MoBR serves as an example of how to address emotional needs, as well as the potential for any object or story to be engaging when supported by the right mission.

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