Considering Competing Values in Art Museum Exhibition Curation

Pat Villeneuve

With a foreword by Prof. Dr. Emilie Sitzia

Professor Pat Villeneuve has been a vocal advocate of visitor-centered exhibitions in art museums for decades. Her work on "edu-curation," a practice advocating for a balanced approach between audiences and objects, as well as the development of supported interpretation—a model for visitor-centered exhibitions—have had a broad impact on the field of art museum curation and cultural education alike. She presents here a work in progress, a new theoretical model for art museum curation based on a competing values framework. This theory attempts to offer concrete, operationalizable tools to practitioners. To explore this theory, she uses a hypothetical conversation based on the scenario planning research method. This method allows her to test ideas, illustrate consequences, and identify the potential risks and need for action.

Her article takes a strong stance in favor of a visitorcentered approach. This stance has been widely supported (and debated) in the museum world. Such discussions were initiated with the advent of the New Museology. 1 The visitorcentered museum has been core to dialogues around the social potential of the museum,2 the educational capacity of the museum,3 and, more recently, within discussions on participatory practices and the emancipatory potential of museums.4 Such theoretical developments have allowed for pockets of visitor-centered practices to expand worldwide. Building on this well-established position, she attempts to bridge the apparent gap between a theoretically inclusive art museum and a still very mixed practice. Villeneuve takes as a starting point what she calls the "stalled paradigm shift of art museums." While the discussion on this paradigm shift has been ongoing,5 the tacit resistance of some institutional

agents to such fundamental changes as visitorcenteredness has prevented practice to evolve more broadly. She hopes that her theoretical model will allow museums to initiate internal discussions, voice concerns, and identify their practice within a theoretical context while understanding how their curatorial choices impact audience attendance and engagement.

Introduction

In 1999, Stephen Weil, then the leading museum theorist in the United States, famously argued that museums must go from being *about* something (the object) to being *for* someone (the visitor).⁶ This came at the end of a decade of publications and policy statements advancing a more educational and visitor-centered approach to museum practice.⁷ It seemed a time of great promise for me, as I was ardently working to advance the position of education in the art museum hierarchy. Fast forward twenty years, however, and many of the advocated changes remain largely unrealized. What happened, and how can we still achieve a museum of mutuality?

I have come to view the slow change to visitor-centered practices as a stalled paradigmatic shift.8 Thomas Kuhn detailed paradigms in a scientific context,9 but museum practice is a far less certain domain. 10 With no great scientific theories to disprove or mathematical problems to settle, we must look for other ways to describe and effect paradigmatic change in the museum, as Gail Anderson has discussed. 11 Elsewhere I have invoked a principle from twentieth-century modernist architecture—form follows function—to foresee how and when paradigmatic change will occur. Seen from this perspective, it is practical to presume that a museum's structure and practices will not change as long as they continue to work adequately. 12 Prevailing practice features a hierarchical organizational structure that supports a curator-centric exhibition-making process.13 This has "effectively eliminated educational and other input in the earlier stages of exhibition development, leaving the curator to function as a lone creative."14

I consider this to be an inherited and largely unexamined practice perpetuated through the informal professional socialization of museum practitioners, ¹⁵ and it has quite effectively slowed the development of the visitor-centered paradigm. Advanced degrees in art history continue to be the predominant training track for art museum curators, directors (who generally begin as curators), and even many educators, ¹⁶ at least in the United States. ¹⁷ Whereas art history preparation provides excellent training for examining objects, it typically lacks other skill sets (i.e., human resources, education, administration) or disciplinary content (i.e., organizational theory) beneficial in the museum setting. Often an internship is the only professional preparation some applicants have before beginning museum work—and

even that is not universally required. Without museum theory or other relevant knowledge bases to work from, new practitioners tend to accept and perpetuate the existing cultures at their museums—or move on if they find them unacceptable. This suggests that we need to educate the museum itself, presenting our case for mutuality in compelling and explicit ways, as done in this edition.

When describing how organizations go from good to great, Jim Collins used the analogy of a flywheel, describing how difficult it is to begin its rotation. But with multiple pushes, it establishes its momentum and spins relatively effortlessly thereafter. 19 Although we do not know exactly what it will take to change the paradigm, recent publications²⁰ and a growing list of museums championing visitor-centered practices provide a critical mass, suggesting that the field may at last be on the cusp of paradigmatic change.²¹ In this paper, I continue to push the flywheel by offering a new theoretical model for art museum curation based on a competing values framework.²² I envision it as a tool to help art museums consider their curatorial practices and understand that decisions made throughout the curatorial process, whether explicit or implicit, impact the exhibition and largely determine which audiences will attend. The model, which is still in development, can also be used to identify preferred curatorial practices and implement change, as illustrated with an example from a hypothetical museum.

Competing Values Framework and Model for Art Museum Curation

The conceptual framework for this work is a competing values framework originally articulated by Robert E. Quinn and John Rohrbaugh in an attempt to generate a model of organizational effectiveness.²³ Working from an exhaustive review of literature, they noted "recognized dilemmas"²⁴ such as whether an organization should have an internal or external focus—that they represented as competing values within and across organizations. They developed a matrix of intersecting axes, with each axis suggesting an array of practices between two opposing values. The x axis represented organizational focus, ranging from a concern over the well-being and development of the people in the organization, to a priority on the organization itself. The v axis reflected the form of organizational structure and power, from controlled to flexible. The intersection of the axes at their midpoints delineated four quadrants, each of which described a different type of practice (internal process, human relations, rational goal, and open system models), with merits and shortcomings based on context. The authors addressed a third set of competing values, means versus ends, that I use instead as a way of visualizing the quadrants in the model below.

The axes in the adapted model for art museum curation similarly reflect competing values found in the literature and ongoing museum practice. In place of organizational focus, the *x* axis represents the <u>interpretive focus</u> of the curatorial process, from a priority on the <u>object</u> on the left end, to attention to the needs of the <u>audience</u> on the right.²⁵ The *y* axis indicates who holds the <u>curatorial power</u>, ranging from the <u>lone creative</u> curator at the base of the continuum, to a <u>collaborative</u> curatorial team at the top (fig. 1). The resulting quadrants reflect four distinct curatorial practices with differing priorities (values), means, and outcomes:

- In the lower left quadrant, the lone creative curator has the power to engage in a solitary curatorial process producing an exhibition focusing on the art object. This is typical of a <u>traditional</u> curatorial practice, whereby a curator explores his area of expertise, discriminating sophisticated art historical knowledge—such as comparisons of American and Australian tonalism—important to scholars but largely irrelevant to public audiences without further educational support.
- The interpretive focus remains on the object in the upper left quadrant, but curatorial power is shared in a limited and selective fashion. In an <u>exclusive</u> curatorial practice, this is typically with like-minded individuals who can contribute additional art historical or other necessary disciplinary expertise to the object-focused interpretive process. For instance, a curator of twentieth-century art in charge of a Czech scenography exhibition might recognize the limits of her art historical expertise and invite a theater scholar to assist with interpretation. In this case, the resulting exhibition is most likely to appeal to audiences knowledgeable about theater and art.
- In the lower right quadrant, the interpretive focus switches to the audience, but the curatorial power remains with the lone creative curator. In this sympathetic curatorial practice, the solitary curator selects objects and engages in interpretation independently, but with the audience in mind. Although well-intended, such an approach may miss its mark due to differences between the curator's knowledge base and community interests and needs. Imagine, for instance, a singular art historical interpretation of an exhibition about migration presented to a community with a growing refugee population.
- The top right quadrant describes an <u>inclusive</u> curatorial process, distinguished by a collaborative approach to curation with an interpretive focus on the audience. A curatorial committee comprising curatorial, education, community,²⁶ and other appropriate expertise would be well positioned to prepare engaging exhibitions for diverse audiences.

The curatorial process and resulting exhibitions for all four curatorial practices, including who is likely to be drawn to the differing exhibitions, appear in table 1.

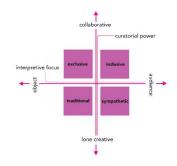


Fig. 1. Two-dimensional Model for Museum Curation. Credit: Amanda Martin-Hamon.

Type of Curatorial Practice (Interpretive Focus + Curatorial Power =) Interpretive Focus on Object + Lone Creative Power = TRADITIONAL PRACTICE	Means → (Curatorial Process) Singular curatorial expertise of art objects	Ends (Exhibition Outcome) Exhibition meeting art world expectations in appearance and content, appealing to a limited, educated audience
Interpretive Focus on Object + Selective Collaborative Curatorial Power = EXCLUSIVE PRACTICE	Limited sharing of curatorial expertise among selected individuals with recognized expertise in art or complementary disciplines relevant to the exhibition	Exhibition similar to art world expectations in appearance and content—potentially enriched with additional disciplinary context—but still drawing a relatively narrow audience
Interpretive Focus on Audience + Lone Creative Power = SYMPATHETIC PRACTICE	Singular curatorial expertise executed on behalf of audience	Exhibition that may or may not meet art world expectations in appearance and content, and may or may not resonate with the intended audience, due to curatorial presumptions of audience needs or interests
Interpretive Focus on Audience + Broad Collaborative Curatorial Power = INCLUSIVE PRACTICE	Collaborative curatorial process including curatorial, educational, and other expertise, including relevant knowledge bearers from the audience	Exhibition that may vary from art world expectations in appearance (due to enhanced educational features) and that embraces multiple perspectives to engage broad audiences with works of art in meaningful ways

Table 1. Curatorial Practice Means and Ends.

The appropriateness of any selected practice depends on context and objective.

Envisioning the Model for Museum Curation in Practice

The model for museum curation is a tool to help art museums recognize multiple approaches to curation, identify current curatorial practices, reflect on preferred approaches, and determine how to make changes, if desired. Imagine, for instance, a smaller art museum that serves a limited audience from its community as well as the local university. Its collection is good for its size, and the museum offers four changing exhibitions a year, complementing collections areas. Still, attendance is not growing, and there is a general sense of stagnation. The museum has tried offering programs for families and added brightly colored banners out front to enliven the atmosphere, but a feeling of dullness—perhaps even inertia—remains.

How can the model help? Picture a special meeting with curators and other museum staff. The curators read the descriptions of the curatorial practices and quickly and proudly identify theirs as traditional. Another staff member in the room interrupts: "But remember the recent traveling exhibition of Costa Rican gold? We had outside help on that. That's collaborative." This is a sensitive point for the head educator, who is also present for the discussions. "Not so collaborative, as I recall," she responds. "It was a beautiful show, but the curators didn't want to take it because they thought they didn't have the expertise. Nobody listened when I said I'd been to Costa Rica many times. Then I mentioned a museum professional from Costa Rica who is getting a graduate degree in cultural heritage at the university, and they still said no. The curators had no interest in collaborating until they found an anthropologist at the university who specializes in that area." "Nothing wrong with that," a curator counters. "We know how she's trained, and we can depend on her. No one will guestion her authority."

The director suggests they look at the model again, and they conclude this was an example of an exclusive curatorial practice, characterized by selective sharing of curatorial duties based on expertise. However, they also agree that it was an exception to their generally traditional practice. An individual from the education staff points out that the Costa Rican exhibition had the highest attendance in the previous three years: "Perhaps we should do more of that." A look at the guest book for the exhibition reveals that anthropology students were largely responsible for the increase in attendance, however. The director asks, "Then what do we need to do to bring in more people from the community, like the Smallville Museum does? We need to demonstrate we are serving the community to retain some of our critical funding."

The director studies the means-and-ends table (table 1), and declares that she wants an inclusive curatorial practice to attract new audiences. Reluctant to take on a significant change, the curators prefer an exclusive practice, arguing that it already worked well for the Costa Rican exhibition. But the education department points out that community attendance did not increase during that show. The newest curator then offers to curate an exhibition for the community as a demonstration project. "That's a sympathetic curatorial practice," the head of member services replies. "You're new here. How well do you know our audiences? How do you know what will interest them? Eighty percent of them have never even been to the museum." Before that curator can reply, the director steps in: "We need to move to an inclusive exhibition practice. Let's figure out how to make that happen."

The model's lower left quadrant reflects the museum's traditional curatorial practice, whereby a singular expert curates exhibitions with an interpretive focus on the objects. Approaching an inclusive practice, represented by the upper

right quadrant, will require moving along both axes: from a lone-creative to collaborative approach to exhibition making, and from an interpretive focus on the objects to one that is responsive to audience needs and interests. The museum might initially focus on the *y* axis by adopting a collaborative approach to curation, asking a friendly curator to work with a small curatorial team for a low-risk exhibition on nineteenth-century quilts and coverlets. Adding a museum educator and a local fiber artist to the team will inform and enrich the interpretation through multiple viewpoints, enhance education opportunities within the exhibition, and provide important links to the local fiber community. At the same time, incorporating educational and community voices in the curatorial process will facilitate movement along the *x* axis toward a visitor-centered approach to interpretation.

Curatorial Practice and Organizational Culture

A museum's curatorial process is a reflection of its greater organizational culture, meaning the implicit or explicit values that permit a specific curatorial practice to flourish can be entrenched throughout the organization. Table 2 reveals how the four orientations manifest within other aspects of the museum.²⁷ Like the model for museum curation (fig. 1) and the means-and-ends table above (table 1), this table can be used to better understand a museum's practices.

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Organizational	Traditional Expertise- and object-driven	Exclusive Limited, privileged	Sympathetic Service orientation	Inclusive Welcoming, family
Feel		input		atmosphere
Leadership Approach	Solitary authority	Selective sharing	Expertise- driven	Open, facilitative
Curatorial Process	Privileged Ione creative	Participation restricted to like-minded experts	Presumed knowledge of what is good for community	Collaborative, with broad, egalitarian participation
Organizational Glue	Tradition and quality	Exclusive club	Community service	Sense of family
Strategic Focus	Quality and status	Cultivation of limited qualified collaborators	Recognition for community service	Audience- driven
What Constitutes Success	Art world- approved exhibitions	Exhibitions curated through limited, shared expertise	Symbolic focus on audience	Relevant visitor-centered exhibitions

Table 2. Curatorial Approaches Reflected throughout the Museum.

The Evolving Model

Colleague and collaborator Ann Rowson Love suggested the addition of a z axis, to reflect curatorial intent, ranging from democratization of culture to cultural democracy. Democratization of culture represents a more traditional approach to curation that showcases major works of art to enlighten museum audiences. Cultural democracy, at the other end of the continuum, is a more democratic and inclusive curatorial impetus that can lead to social change.²⁸ The curatorial intent axis perpendicularly bisects the two-dimensional model at the intersection of the x and y axes, creating eight cubes (fig. 2).

Each cube represents a different curatorial practice that we describe as "exhibitions that _____."²⁹ For instance, the intersection of traditional practice (fig. 1) with the democratization of culture end of the z axis yields exhibitions that disseminate, whereas inclusive practice informed by cultural democracy generates exhibitions that call to action. See all eight articulations in the tree diagram in figure 3.

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Fig. 2. Three-Dimensional Model

for Art Museum Curation.

Credit: Alexia Lobania.

Fig. 3. Eight Types of Exhibitions. Credit: Alexia Lobania.

Implementing Inclusive Curation in the Museum: The Bigger Picture

Returning to the form-follows-function principle mentioned earlier, museums will change their curatorial practices when compelled to do so-whether to keep up with other museums or address financial or attendance issues, for instance. However, effecting lasting change in the curatorial process will inevitably require other changes throughout the museum organization, which can be thought of as an ecosystem.30 Such changes in values and practice take time and are not always neatly resolved. Organizational restructuring is likely necessary to enable the communication and level playing field necessary for collaborative team curation.³¹ Although steps can be taken in a bottom-up approach—such as an education department presenting a visitor-centered demonstration exhibition in an education space—strong administrative leadership is key in expediting the change and institutionalizing an overall shift in museum values.³² The model for museum curation can be used as a tool to facilitate this process.

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- 9. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
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- 14. Love and Villeneuve, Ibid., 11.
- 15. Villeneuve and Song, "Edu-Curation and the Edu-Curator."
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- 21. Villeneuve and Song, "Edu-Curation and the Edu-Curator."
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- 23. Robert E. Quinn and John Rohrbaugh, "A Competing Values Approach to Organizational Effectiveness," *Public Product Review* 5 (1981): 122–140.
- 24. Quinn and Rohrbaugh, "A Competing Values Approach to Organizational Effectiveness," 132.
- 25. All curatorial approaches rely on the quality of the object and the knowledge surrounding it. An interpretive approach

- sensitive to the audience limits jargon and nuanced ideas of art history in favor of diverse, relevant entry points that make objects come alive to a broad array of visitors.
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