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Today's Curation: News of the Art Museum and the Crowd

by Amanda Mobley Guenther

Crowd-sourced or crowd-curated art shows, the relatively new and unusual approaches to museum exhibitions in which members of the public assume the role of the art professionals usually behind big shows, may seem to be the next big thing.

But they are not about to steal the spotlight from the more traditional exhibitions, at least not if the museums have anything to say about it.

When they do happen—and they have been mounted at museums large and small, from Fresno to Brooklyn and many places in between—they seem to represent less of a fundamental change in a museum's vision than simply an opportunity to experiment.

Museums are responding to a cultural and economic shift that asks them to become centers of community engagement and entertain as well as to educate the public. Crowd-based projects represent the latest effort by some museums to define themselves as either a temple for the preservation of art or a forum for public opinion. Crowd-sourcing and crowd-curation appear to be two of the currently favored solutions to threats against museums' sustainability and relevancy. Glenn Lowry, director of the Museum of Modern Art, told the *New York Times* in 2009 that “museums had to shed the idea of being a repository and become social spaces.” The art on the walls must now “invite people to become a part of it,” he said.

When I first started thinking about the democratization of museums through crowd-sourced and crowd-curated shows and talking casually to a few people in the field about it, I expected to find equal numbers of sources to support both sides of the issue.

I have been surprised to find, especially in writings about the subject, little opposition to the museum's role as educator and facilitator of cultural exchange. Duncan Cameron, in his influential paper in 1971, supported it. In 1982, the American Alliance of Museums reported on the future of museums and said that education must be given a high priority, calling it the primary purpose of American museums. The museum of the future faces significant threats to its traditional model, as the futuristic report "Museums and Society 2034: Trends and Potential Futures," produced in 2008 by the Center for the Future of Museums, an arm of AAM, suggests, but it agrees with these earlier sources that the best way to respond to these trends "may call for actions that seem tangential to or even divorced from the missions of many museums."

In interviews with professionals in the field, the tone of language ranged from relief that change is finally coming to resistance of this new movement as a threat.

"Once in a while, efforts like this could be ok," wrote Judith Dobrzynski, former *New York Times* culture reporter, of the Walker Art Center show "50/50" in 2010, "but I would hate to see the public come to expect a voice in curatorial matters." Three years later, alluding to museums' similar exploitation of blogs and other interactive devices, she wrote that "our cultural treasuries are multitasking too much, becoming more alike, and shedding the very characteristics that made them so special."

Skepticism of these experiments as merely devices to increase attendance and regard for the traditional posture of art museums can also be heard from art critic Lance Esplund. Writing in 2012 about the "Click!" project at Brooklyn Museum, he said, "Art is not a popularity contest or a platform in which the viewer gets to be heard. A museum's mission is to offer us cultures' highest artistic achievements, regardless of whether or not the general public takes notice."

Most museums have not actively pursued exhibition input from the crowd. The number of art museums trying crowd-sourcing and crowd-curating represents a small percentage. Those who have experimented have followed their siblings'—history, science, and children's museums—for examples of how to implement these practices. No doubt it has been much more difficult for art museums, which deal with hands-off objects.

Most museum professionals agree that these experiments with crowd selection and contribution will continue to evolve. John Rumm, curator of American western history at the Cody, Wyo., Buffalo Bill Museum with more than 40 years in the business, said the time-tested ways of exhibitions are not going to go away. But, he believes, they may change or need to evolve in some way. In fact, crowd-sourcing models have gone through one cycle of evolution already, according to Scott Stulen, who manages adult engagement at the Indianapolis Museum of Art.

Museums cannot remain temples for curatorial dictatorship nor can they become completely open repositories for every thing, idea, object and opinion. For Rumm, an open-minded member of the “old-guard,” neither end of the spectrum is palatable in the contemporary art museum. He sees museums as having to move toward a “squishy middle place.” It becomes a balancing act. If museums become too democratized they lose some claim to being a trustworthy source of information, he said.

Young curator Erin Dziedzic of the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art enthusiastically echoes Rumm's predictions. “The rubric for exhibitions has been crossed out, edited, rewritten,” she said. “The way we do exhibitions today is really more like a working document, which keeps this fresh, new, open to expanded ideas of engagement and really prolific results.”

John Durel, a private consultant with his finger on the pulse of American museums, expects that institutions will have to find more clarity and, possibly, resolution to the various shifts with which they have attempted to remain relevant to growing numbers of the general public.

Durel predicts that the present battle between the temple and the forum will be resolved in five to ten years. By then museums, he believes, will have figured out their role as expert and custodian, and will be able to work with the younger generations' assumptions that they possess equal experience, knowledge, and expectation. Individuals in American society today expect to have choices and to be able to share opinions. Technology plays a role in encouraging us to have a say; that our opinions deserve to be heard and validated.

Forecasters predict that art museums that don't make the change will become irrelevant.

Traditionally exhibitions have been created by formally trained curators. The message, perspective, selection of objects and method of display was the curator's to control, and the curator worked much like art historians to present new meanings of both historic and contemporary artworks. Often these exhibitions take years of research and planning. This model still exists for most art museums, but some see such scholarly exhibitions as no longer sufficient to attract public interest.

Democratic experiments and reformation of the entire museum space is happening in a handful of places. Crowd-sourced and crowd-curated exhibitions present unique opportunities and challenges for art museums looking to engage broader audiences, but most museum administrators only feel comfortable with limited and contained experiments because these projects expose the tensions within the museum between catering to elite funders and ticket buyers.

A year-long examination of a selection of crowd-based exhibitions across the United States offers a number of conclusions. Ultimately, art museums will change. Exactly how remains difficult to predict.

The following commonalities found in multiple institutions shed light on what this change could look like:

- Some museums still struggle to distinguish their current audience from their desired audience. An assumption that museum crowd-sourcing truly reaches a wide swath of the public is still up for debate.

- Some exhibitions are held in conjunction with or just prior to building renovations, part of an effort to keep on view some of the public's favorite pieces to maintain attendance during construction.

- The exhibitions—or nearly all of them—were installed physically in transition areas or community gallery spaces, rarely finding their way into the traditional collections gallery spaces.

- The experiments, with rare exceptions, have not been repeated at a museum. Those that try crowd-sourcing or crowd-curating tend to try it only once. Only two museums surveyed have adopted crowd-sourced shows as a regular practice.

- Objects in the exhibition tend to play second fiddle to the process of the experiment. Yet when amateur objects enter the museum their meaning changes.

- Some museums have given the role of oversight of these shows to digital communications managers. Traditional curators still bristle at the thought of interference with their scholarly expertise.

Whether or not crowd-sourced or crowd-curated exhibitions become a more common occurrence, the economically-driven motivation to embrace interactive programming and audience engagement is undeniable.

Who is the Audience?

Painting and sculpture as exhibited in twentieth century American museums, says Catherine Evans, chief curator of Philadelphia's Carnegie Museum of Art, has traditionally been designed to serve the 1 percent. She said she wants to create art experiences for the 99 percent—like the crowd-sourced exhibitions that have taken place in museums she has worked with. Evans believes it is possible to frame a presentation and structure art engagement “without dumbing anything down.”

Art museums have traditionally been “less democratic than other museums,” and are generally frequented by white, middle-upper class, educated, older generations, as noted by museum scholar Eilean Hooper-Greenhill. But as American society becomes increasingly diverse, young museum engagement professional Lori Byrd Phillips predicts that museums will increasingly be “expected” to implement community contributions.

Attendance at art museums, across all demographics, dropped 8 percent from 2008 to 2012—to 21 percent overall—according to a report by the National Endowment for the Arts. Visits by women and minority groups remained steady. Museum-going rates declined among millennials and generation X. Attendance at art museums and galleries increased only among adults age 75 and older.

Arts consumption through electronic media, including listening to music and watching videos, by U.S. adults was 71 percent in 2012, but only 8 percent specifically viewed visual arts, according to the latest Survey of Public Participation in the Arts. Nonetheless, museum

marketing and communications departments, and some curators, see the future as providing exposure of the arts through digital platforms and devices.

The NEA data cited above indicates that museums need to increase attendance across all demographics. Attempting to reach new visitors digitally has been one attempt, but the media attention received by crowd-based projects may cause some in the industry to assume it's easier than it really is.

Museums face two challenges when evaluating audiences. First, museum professionals not directly involved with crowd-type projects assume these exhibitions are intended to reach new audiences, but most museums surveyed claim to simply be interested in further engaging their current audience. And in fact, there is little evidence to support the assumption that crowd-type projects actually reach and involve a broad demographic.

When asked, museum curators who have not taken on a crowd-sourced experiment speculate that other museums have chosen to do so to attract new audiences and remain relevant. For instance, though he has not hosted a crowd exhibition yet at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, Scott Stulen, the museum's first director of audience engagement and performances, said he is particularly interested in attracting younger audiences and repeat visitors.

"It is a goal of many institutions to raise the number of audience members, which in turn will hopefully encourage others to become members, and thus fuel financial goals of the institution," said Erin Dziedzic, of the Kemper Museum, who has also not attempted this type of project. "Without people, there is no museum."

Duncan Cameron in his 1971 paper now considered transformative, wrote, "More than half of the potential audiences will not come to either the forum or museum. [Museums] will have to go to their audience." Museum administrators have known for decades that attracting

audiences is difficult, particularly younger people who may not have grown up going to museums—or if they did they found it boring. These younger audiences also have much more experience navigating digital archives, and they require targeted messages about why an art museum would be interesting for them. The framing of language influences how the crowd is conceived of and approached. In the spirit of this new type of engagement, some museums are referring to their “audiences” as “users” and “participants.”

When organizers of crowd exhibitions were asked who they were looking to attract, few professionals acknowledged they were seeking a new audience demographic. Bucci, of the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, said that by soliciting votes through Facebook, the museum was looking to engage its current audience in a new way. Naturally, Hallie Ford Museum’s Facebook likes increased during the voting period. Anyone could “like” the museum and vote. There were no barriers to new audiences participating, but the stated intention was for the current audience. With “Click!” Shelley Bernstein was also interested in engaging Brooklyn Museum’s “loyal Web followers,” as reported by Carol Vogel of the *New York Times* in 2011.

It seems that museums don’t want to claim too much in the way of reaching new audiences. But they assume that crowd-sourced and crowd-curated shows cannot help but reach new members because their platforms are naturally prone to reach all kinds of people.

With Web 2.0 it is not only possible, but easy, for anyone to participate. Some museums have gathered tens of thousands of votes. Is this the public and how is “public” defined? Are the resulting selections of artworks truly a representation of the tastes of the broadest possible “crowd”? Outside of being able to cite total numbers and responses by geographic area, museums don’t know.

For Shelly Bernstein, who organized the “Click!” exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum, the audience certainly mattered: she was specifically interested in gauging whether the public could judge something as subjective as art. The “Click!” website records detailed data of voters by geographic location and level of art knowledge. Establishing categories made the evaluation much more manageable for Bernstein and her staff. If only self-identifying art experts responded to the call the results would not be a true reflection of the public. She found the spread of art knowledge to be pretty even, with roughly one quarter of evaluators falling into each predetermined category: expert, above average, more than a little and some art knowledge.

“Visitor studies” only became a recognized field in the 1980s. Some museums already had an idea of who visits their exhibitions—the Walker Art Center is an example of an institution with a strong sense of its audience. The Walker specifically designs programs for an audience characterized as having sophisticated taste and knowledge of the contemporary arts, but most art museums surveyed have not been able to articulate so clearly who they are serving. Most museums try to have something for everybody, hoping to reach all demographics: scholars, students, artists, and families of all ages.

Whether museums target digital and participatory programs to attract a certain demographic or intentionally seek to deepen their understanding of their current community, the audience affects what museums become. Where once patrons became involved and invested in museums through membership, John Rumm said, crowd-curation has become a way for the public to become intellectual members of an exciting community of ideas. Ultimately, the public has always self-selected whether to engage or not.

When the Fresno Art Museum mounted its non-curated “Downtown Visions” show, it accepted all submissions, meaning the participating audience could have been anyone. Associate

curator Kristina Hornback said that the call was answered by a few local residents who had never made anything before. “Downtown Visions” could only impact people who chose to participate, either by submitting their own creations or by viewing the work of others. What it means for residents to live in Fresno became a community-wide conversation through the exhibition.

Reaching out to potential stakeholders is a practice of democratization. Brandon Ruud, former curator of the Sheldon Museum of Art in Lincoln, Nebr., said last year that his museum has only “dipped its feet into the waters” of participatory activities by encouraging social media engagement while in the galleries, posting “selfies” with the collection on the museum’s Facebook page. People who attend already have a vested interest in some capacity. For Ruud, it would take moving outside of regular museum audiences to engage people who would never come to the museum to really begin to democratize the museum.

Of course who the audience *is* matters. *Knowing* who the audience is matters even more. As witnessed during artist interventions in the museum like Institutional critique and Fluxus, today’s public is also changing the museum. Participatory engagement affects “who will go to museums and for what,” wrote Judith Dobrzynski in the *New York Times* in 2013.

The Right Opportunity

Some crowd-curated exhibitions seem to be timed to supplement unconventional museum circumstances—a scheduled renovation or a refocusing of a gallery’s purpose. Although much of the activity in such exhibitions takes place online—outside the physical constraints faced by a museum—each of the surveyed crowd-sourced projects resulted in a physical presentation, part of the sponsoring museum’s hope that it would attract audiences not only to engage with the museum more deeply on a virtual level but on a physical one as well.

Exhibitions in side galleries and during building renovations indicate that crowd-curation is not replacing the “bread and butter” of art museums. As organizer Shelly Bernstein told the *Wall Street Journal* about “Go,” Brooklyn Museum’s second attempt at this type of project, “We do 20 exhibitions a year that are completely curator-selected.” Elements of crowd participation have been required to fit around traditional agendas or within larger visitor engagement goals.

One-Time Wonder

Crowd-sourced exhibitions are the current version of experiments by museums to keep their traditional exhibitions relevant to an increasingly digital social public. However few museums have been able to sustain crowd-based exhibition projects.

Current director of the Katonah Museum of Art and former curator at the Walker Art Center, Darsie Alexander, said she believes that Minneapolis’ Walker would “never do a [crowd-sourced exhibit] again.” She explained that despite the Walker having an open culture for participatory and experimental programs, the “50/50” show held in 2010 did ruffle some feathers within the institution. She also said the structure is difficult to repeat.

Others are more open to the prospect of continuing crowd-curated participation. Jonathan Bucci, collections curator at the Hallie Ford Museum of Art said he would be interested to try the project again, with the caveat that the right space become available and the staff have the time to arrange it.

Chief curator of the Carnegie Museum of Art, Catherine Evans, said that “O Snap,” held in 2013, was a one-time experiment, but that they would be open to try it again with some evolution to the format. Evans is not sure how often these types of exhibitions are happening nationally, but she said that they are a “healthy trend” if they continue, regardless of modifications to the model.

Once a museum has established a reputation for engagement, Evans said, “I don’t know how you would go back to the white box. Certainly there are many museums that aren’t doing it, and they’re doing fine.” Evans pointed to the Rothko Chapel as an example of an institution that has built a strong brand around the contemplative and individual experience that visitors have simply with the art on the walls. But for public museums that have a democratic mission and rely on public funding, “the onus is on the city museums to figure this out.”

Only the Columbus Museum of Art has found a working model with the Instagram “Photo Hunt” exhibitions that have been repeated five times since 2012.

The fact that exploration of crowd-sourced exhibitions has been tried only once at most of these institutions may confirm Alexander’s belief that the trend is slowing. There is little disagreement that museums must become and remain more sensitive to their audiences’ needs and expectations. It just may be that crowd participation does not meet enough of those demands for the museum to put in the necessary time and effort to sustain them.

Process Is Outcome

In public-voted singing competitions like “American Idol” and “The Voice,” few Americans ever audition, but millions vote for amateurs who sing cover versions of well known songs. Viewers are invested in the outcome, becoming die-hard fans who watch every week to see who stays in the competition, because they influence the process.

Crowd-curated exhibitions are similar. Expert judges narrow the selections, and members of the public cast votes for what they think are the best. Granted, TV broadcasts attract a much larger voting audience than museum exhibitions. As one *New York Times* headline put it in 2008: “3,344 people may not know art but they know what they like.” The power of the popular vote has infiltrated the cathedrals of culture.

And, according to some art critics, the process has been more interesting than the product.

The Brooklyn Museum of Art did not want its 2008 experiment to be simply a game of favorites. “Click!”—having both a crowd-sourced and crowd-curated component—was designed to be not about the contest, but rather about exploring questions about the value of art. An open call to artists invited submissions on the theme “Changing Faces of Brooklyn.” The artist’s names were kept anonymous as public evaluators selected photos they thought most effectively conveyed the theme.

Ken Johnson, an arts writer for the *New York Times*, found the results inconclusive and the presentation “not very interesting to look at.” He was critical that the images selected looked too much like *Life* magazine covers, even though most of the submissions were not by professional photographers. Johnson thought the choices reflected that the Brooklyn Museum attracts a certain type of middlebrow audience.

Regardless of the types of submissions from the “crowd,” letting the “crowd” judge them raised even more difficult questions: the subjective nature of art makes identifying the best or “most effective” art by popular vote impossible. The public seem to choose what is most familiar or has been approved already as ‘good.’ For Johnson, “it will take a lot more persuasive reasoning to convince anyone with a serious interest in artistic quality that crowd-curating is a good idea.”

Convincing the world that the crowd is right, when averaging their independent judgments, was the idea behind the book *The Wisdom of Crowds*, but it was not the intent of the Brooklyn Museum. The book’s author James Surowiecki admits, as Johnson and other critics have observed, that there is “no objective standard to measure the crowd’s judgments against,”

and therefore we cannot answer if the crowd knows better or just as well as the experts. “At least in some media, the gap between popular and elite taste may be smaller than we think,” according to Surowiecki in a Brooklyn Museum blog post, but that’s not the point.

While the similarity of voter preferences by experts and non-experts alike may raise interesting questions about taste and meaning in art, the point of exhibitions like “Click” seems to be to make the process of exhibition-making more transparent, to break down any perceived barriers that keep large segments of the population out of art museums, demystifying the curatorial process.

When looking at crowd-sourced Instagram photos at the Columbus Museum of Art or crowd-curated pieces from the vaults of the Gibbes Museum of Art, are viewers thinking about the selections of the expert compared with their own? Some have. Some visitors at the Chrysler Museum of Art wanted to know if what the public chose would have been the same as what the curator chose. But most people are not thinking about what the exhibition may say about cultural shifts and the value of curation. Where they do think about that is when using the Internet, according to Scott Stulen who specializes in audience engagement at the Indianapolis Museum of Art.

Anybody can put up anything on the Web. People have quickly realized they need a trusted source to help them navigate through all of the information. The popularity of news aggregator sites is a good example of the value the public places on curated content, whether or not they are aware of the presence of curation.

Each of these crowd participatory museum projects have relied heavily on the Internet for much—if not all—of the gathering and selecting processes. Some museums have created their own websites for the project. The Walters and Gibbes museums created elaborate sites dedicated

to process and outcomes, and because of the nature of information online the projects are still accessible. Other museums chose to use already established social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Jennifer Poleon, who organized CMA's "Photo Hunt," credits Instagram specifically as being the key to their model's success.

Museums are well-qualified aggregators of fine art. For some that has become all the more apparent when presented with the alternative—the voice of the public. A less-than-stellar visual presentation by the public secures the museum as king of the art product/presentation.

Crowd-sourced and crowd- curated exhibitions have inherently become about the process. Art critics and museum organizers agree that "Click!" and other exhibitions like it are about the nature of selection, subjectivity of taste, and factors of public influence.

Object Meaning

Since the twentieth century, art museums have rejected copies and prized original and rare objects as sacred; worthy of preservation within the museum as temple. Crowd-sourced art exhibitions invite and display objects that have not passed the rigorous tests of art history or the contemporary judgment of modern curators. Crowd-curation ultimately focuses on objects within museum collections that are interesting; that have a wow factor.

Museum professionals seem unconcerned that these experiments could have a lasting impact on the meaning of museum objects. Judith Barter, curator of American Art at the Art Institute of Chicago, said last year in an interview that it remains to be seen whether museums are changing. These experimentations, she said, rather than trying to change the meaning of art, are simply trial and error efforts to maintain revenue and attendance.

Brooklyn Museum Asian art curator Joan Cummins believes there is "no harm in looking at objects in a new light," though she told the *New York Times* that crowd-sourcing "won't

validate art history.” It becomes about the spectacle in a kind of “art history meets marketing survey.”

But the result may not be as benign as it sounds. A museum that tries to open itself up as a forum is likely to find that object meaning has changed: “robbing the forum of its vitality and autonomy” because once objects, ordinary or exceptional, enter the museum they become “enshrined.” We look at them differently, their value changes, according to Duncan Cameron.

The increase of crowd-curation significantly opens the criterion of objects and images suitable for museum display. Though preservation of art objects was once museums’ highest calling, some institutions now seem less object-focused. Now, with amateur artworks being exhibited in museum galleries and taken into museum archives, art objects appear to be undergoing a process of equalizing. In “O Snap,” photographs submitted by the public were displayed surrounding the photograph from the permanent collection that had served as inspiration. For example, snapshot size photos lined the sides of a 20 x 24” c-print by Dulce Pinzon of Maria Luisa Romero posing as Wonder Woman working in a Laundromat in Brooklyn in 2005. Though the crowd-submitted photos were unframed, they were presented on a playing field that blurs the lines of professional and amateur.

One indication that bringing “ordinary” objects into the temple is having an impact is the hesitancy for the institutions to call these activities what they are: exhibits. Instead, museums call them “projects,” as the Columbus Museum of Art did, or “experiments,” as at the Hallie Ford Museum of Art. Jeff Inscho, web and digital media manager at the Carnegie Museum of Art and speaker at the Museum Computer Network, explained in a Museum 2.0 blog post, “exhibitions have traditionally embodied unidirectional information flow (museum to visitor).” Like the concern that news readers may not recognize aggregated content as curation, museum visitors

have difficulty distinguishing museum “project” from “exhibition,” despite attempts to differentiate the two.

Exhibitions are generally full of professionally vetted objects. That was not the case at the Fresno Art Museum in 2013. The museum accepted every submission in its “non-curated” exhibition and carefully defined objects’ meaning by the atmosphere of the space. The audience had no expectation for professional artworks for this program, according to Kristina Hornback.

Permanent collection galleries maintain a different atmosphere than community spaces in most museums. But increasingly highly participatory institutions are blurring those lines. While not solely an art museum, the Oakland Museum of California has charged the entire museum with the energy of engagement. Scott Moulton, the museum’s design director said that the adjacency and timing of interactive components within an exhibition space are critical to the effective communication and context of the pieces. He believes that gallery design should offer something for everyone within a near visual field, so that for instance the grandmother who would like a more contemplative experience can do so while keeping an eye on the grandchildren at the virtual display monitor. To accommodate personal needs, a wide range of objects are put in different types of exhibition displays next to one another.

Objects will remain a part of the story, but no longer will viewers be satisfied to “sit down in front of the object and let its majesty wash over you. And you will be baptized by the light of this awesome art,” said Nick Gray, founder of Museum Hack a museum tour guide company geared toward millennials as reported by PBS NewsHour in 2014. Art museums now require activating. Visitors need creative support to engage with objects so that they become accessible to them.

Visual arts are an experience. Seeing a painting online rarely can communicate the impact of color, tactility, scale, and presence of the object. “The prevalence of the digital, virtual world raises public awareness of the increasingly rare world of non-digital assets that help tell the story of how humans got where we are,” states the Museum and Society 2034 report. The potential is for museums to “play a more critical role than ever as purveyors of the authentic, addressing a human desire for the real as the wonders of technology march us towards the opposite path.”

Objects, whether collected by a museum or treasured by only one person, can be a bridge to new ways of thinking and understanding. Professional tour guides like Nick Gray are among those interested in removing intellectual barriers, like knowledge of historical context or artist backgrounds, and allow objects to speak to the present culture. Identifying with one object helps to connect visitors to other things in the museum. “You never know how people are going to enter the experience you provide,” said Catherine Evans of Carnegie. But Joan Cummins contends that people like objects better once they have been given information about them, as she witnessed during “SplitSecond,” the 2011 experimental exhibition inspired by Malcolm Gladwell’s book *Blink: the Power of Thinking without Thinking*, at the Brooklyn Museum.

Newcomers to the field like the developer of Open Authority and digital marketing content coordinator at the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis, Lori Byrd Phillips, say that object validation can be shared and reciprocal. We don’t have to choose only one interpretation or valuation of an object. “Museums should embrace the reliance the public has in their expertise to navigate, filter, and validate content,” she said, and simultaneously “enable new voices to be heard.”

Changing Expectations of Expertise

Last year, Brandon Ruud, now curator of the Milwaukee Art Museum, questioned whether there is truly such a thing as a genuine crowd-curated exhibition. Even when transferring some control of selection to the public, there is still significant oversight by professional staff. Perhaps what the public did in the case of “Click!” was to jury a selection, rather than curate, according to a blog post by Kevin Stayton, one of the organizers. Jonathan Bucci alluded to similar skepticism when he admitted that scholarly curators may see this as just a publicity stunt. The director of the Walters Art Museum, Gary Vikan, is looking at exhibitions like “Public Property” as a way to “rectify any unintentional distancing of the public by engaging them through offering unprecedented authority over the art on display,” as reported by Emily Monty, a blogger for the Mid-Atlantic Regional Center for Humanities.

Museum history has been framed around authority and public service. Curatorial expertise and one-directional messages have been the general role of the museum as temple. But the mandates of the forum grow louder. Some curators are yielding to the call.

The term “curate” belonged to the museum through the twentieth century. After 2000, nontraditional usage of the word took off. It is now fashionable to call any activity that involves culling or selecting a form of curation. Curators today may not be intimidated by the broadened usage of the word, but it is clear that a tension exists around the title of the position of curator. “Curation in and of itself is a surfing process,” Alexander said, like surfing the Web. But Ruud sees such casual uses as a cheapening of the word, which he believes should still be a privileged one.

But word usage and scholarly control are two different things. Most curators are not interested in giving up their expertise and authority despite museums asking curators to step aside for crowd-sourced exhibitions. “Curators are starting to realize that they can be challenged

by the audience,” causing significant uncertainty about the direction of the industry, according to Pascale Bastide, founder of the online, Paris-based Museum of Afghan Civilization, as reported by the *New York Times*. Public voting and public submissions have been two common ways for a museum to demystify the exhibition-making process and respond to the idea that anyone can be a “curator” on the Web.

As Darsie Alexander said, as new curator and organizer of “50/50”, she wanted to open the process to the public. The “once-sacred professional boundary between curators and the public” was dropped in this crowd-curated show, reported the *Arts Journal* in 2010.

For crowd-curated shows the curator of collections has typically led the charge. At other museums non-curatorial departments are taking the lead to organize crowd-sourced exhibitions. “Click!” was organized by Shelley Bernstein, vice director of digital engagement and technology. CMA’s photo hunt has been led by their digital communications manager, in partnership with the photography curator Catherine Evans who did make selections of the top submissions. The explanation may simply be that because of the digital platform for the project, it makes sense that the digital managers oversee the process, as Inscho acknowledged. Or it could be that curators shy away from complete engagement in this process because they are not ready to relinquish authority.

“The move towards a more participatory culture in museums has been underway for a couple of decades now, and seems finally to be impacting daily practice among museum professionals on a wide scale,” said Nancy Proctor, head of mobile strategy and initiatives for the Smithsonian Institution, who summarized the current state of museums in 2011. “However even as we achieve greater openness, transparency, and collaboration among museums and ‘the people formerly known as the audience,’ I am increasingly wondering if we are truly changing the

fundamental structure of museums within society, or simply putting new faces into power in the old system?”

Curatorial professionals fall across the spectrum on the issue, but understandably are fearful of losing authority. After thorough research and numerous in-person discussions, those in favor of participatory ventures seem more numerous than their opponents. Many professionals choose a compromise position, believing that their expertise is not in jeopardy from crowd-sourced exhibitions but that museum authority may be. Encouraging participation does not mean abdicating curatorial control, the Smithsonian’s new-media director, Michael Edson, told the *New York Times* in 2010. “Authority and trust will be granted to institutions differently—through transparency, speed and a public orientation,” he said.

“There’s a difference between having power and having expertise,” the director of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History and prominent advocate for participatory museums, Nina Simon told the *New York Times*. “Museums will always have expertise, but they may have to be willing to share the power.”

Some curators are much less willing than others. Kathleen McLean, who has decades of experience developing exhibitions founded on social issues and public response, said that it has never been about removing the expert voice, but rather that juxtaposing “expert knowledge and common knowledge in shared dialogue animates the exhibition and creates a sense of immediacy and exchange.”

James Surowiecki sees the type of arguments that crowd participatory projects raise between mass tastes and elite connoisseurship as inevitable. Audiences are well aware that museums have not historically been open about equity of knowledge and opinion. However, the public has become accustomed to sharing opinions. Today people expect to give their opinion,

said John Durel, consultant for Qm2, a for-profit community of experts helping museums and cultural nonprofits. Still people want their opinions validated and truly appreciate the expertise the museum has to offer. That expertise just may need refinement in its presentation, according to the public response to “People’s Choice” at the Gibbes Museum of Art.

As most museums struggle to balance temple and forum, curators will always be keepers of collections, according to Stanford professor emeriti Wanda Corn. She said she doesn’t see that being done any other way, although other digitally savvy people may challenge that statement by citing the impressive amount of object identification completed via crowd-sourcing models, like Wikipedia. Corn admitted that she could imagine curators becoming threatened in the area of exhibitions. Exhibit and catalog-making could be replaced by a more democratic model, as she noted that, in her opinion, art historians tend to write scholarly catalogs for one another rather than to be of interest to the general public.

The industry appears to be recognizing that expertise is valuable and shouldn’t go away, but the framing of the conversation about art can engage people or turn them away.

“Placing the expertise of curators and other domain experts at the center of an open discussion” increases the value of the conversation whether online or in the gallery, according to Lori Byrd Phillips. Though perhaps still taking a central role in the dialogue, curators are collaborating more with conservators, community members, and artists, thus reducing curatorial autonomy.

John Durel, who calls himself an optimist, said he hopes that in a short time museums will have figured out their role. Curators and other exhibition staff need to see themselves as expert facilitators, not just providers of one-way education, he said.

The way that Duncan Cameron described the identity crisis of the museums in 1971 surprisingly hasn't changed much for most art museums. Like teenagers acting out to find their limits, museums presenting crowd-sourced exhibitions may simply be seeking to discover who they are.

Part II: Museum History and Exhibition Evolution

Is a museum, a forum or a temple?

“The forum is where battles are fought, the temple is where victors rest,” wrote Duncan Cameron, the one-time director of the Brooklyn Museum whose 1971 thesis has been consulted regularly by students of museums ever since. “The former is the process, the latter is the product.”

Museums still struggle with reconciling their dual function as a temple and forum.

To understand how American art museums arrived at the democratic and participatory projects of crowd-sourced and crowd-curated exhibitions, it is necessary to examine museum history. Museums evolve in accordance with changes in a culture's understanding of their purpose and function. Since the founding of art museums in the U.S., the same conflict—whether to be inclusive or exclusive—has recurred as museums seek to balance scholarship and popularity. Despite the astonishing social and economic changes over the last two centuries, the art museum has remained “an apparatus with two deeply contradictory functions: that of the elite temple of the arts, and that of a utilitarian instrument for democratic education,” according to Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, professor emeritus of museum studies from the United Kingdom.

Arts organizations founded during the antebellum period—between the War of 1812 and the Civil War—could not effectively separate high from popular art, or natural history from fine

art. In contrast, urban museums founded after 1870, such as the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, hinged on a “synthesis between professionalism and popular education.” This democratic educational model for art museums, which still did not insist on an absolute demarcation between types of visual culture—between originals and copies, for example—but instead focused on principles of design, encouraged museums’ exponential growth. It was not until about 1900 that the definitions and goals of museums made a critical shift and museums began to insist on distinguishing high art from low, with greater emphasis on identifying artistic genius and recognizing the hands of individual masters. “Without art museums,” art historian Alan Wallach wrote, “the category of high art is practically unthinkable.”

Rather than educating and refining the masses using a cadre of reproductions and curiosities, museums became a place for elites to re-establish cultural authority. Sociologist Paul DiMaggio argues that art institutions increasingly played the role of gatekeeper, determining what objects qualified as “sacred,” with “fences and labels” to control the experience of the viewer. For example, in 1903 Boston Museum of Fine Arts assistant director Matthew Prichard said the purpose of the museum was to “establish a high standard of aesthetic taste.” Prichard was not interested in teaching design. He believed that museums ought to be solely comprised of the rare—the true works of art—because museums were institutions that existed to bring inspiration, joy and spiritually enlightening experiences. DiMaggio adds that in order for these organizations to be successful in defining taste, they had to embrace the middle class, attracting them or winning them over to what the elite had determined was sacred and artistic.

The sacralization of museum objects and the positioning of art museums as cultural arbiters remained solidly in place for decades and for some institutions still serves as the basis of

their institutional purpose. For museums with this approach to exhibitions, the visitor was passive. Curators expected viewers to learn and appreciate by viewing objects and reading labels. But by the mid-twentieth century, with the rise of post-modernism, curators and artists began to try to bring museums, or aspects of museums, back to their more populist mission of a century earlier.

French art theorist Andre Malraux for example explored the function of museums. He observed in 1947 that introducing objects into the context of an art museum fundamentally changes the nature of the object. In his “Imaginary Museum” or a “Museum without Walls,” as it is often called, Malraux recreated prized artworks from across time and space in photographs and stacked them in a box. Standardized through photography and removed from their spatial context they were open to new perspectives. Viewers were then permitted to tap into this cross-genre archive; whether trained curators, artists or members of the public, they could easily reorganize, remove, and present the “museum” as they wished. This was a first step toward popular selection or curating.¹

Like Malraux, some scholars argue that objects, once they enter an art museum, lose their independent meaning and become part of how the institution asserts its often hidden claims about history, social class and economic and cultural power. French artist Daniel Buren said, “The museum/gallery is not the neutral place one would like to believe.... In order not to be taken into consideration or to be considered as natural/matter of course, the museum/gallery becomes the mythical framework, distorting everything that goes into it.” This explains the potential of crowd-sourcing, which introduces amateur or low artwork in some cases into the museum, or moves fine art outside the rarefied museum space, as with the 2014 crowd-curated exhibition

¹ With the advent of digital art collections, like Google Art, Pinterest, and Tumblr, it is now easier than ever to create and share one’s own ‘museum without walls.’

“Art Everywhere US,” a nationwide art-on-billboards project to display 58 artworks from five leading museums. Museum blogger Barbara Eldredge likened the result to an image of a Rubens painting having the same impact as a picture of a neighbor’s cat. Introducing ordinary objects into the context of a museum tends to elevate ordinary objects and one’s perception of them. The reverse is also true. Plastering a Rubens masterpiece on a billboard lessens its impact.

Reproducing artworks digitally on Facebook or other social media platforms relegates the object to common snapshot status. Malraux’s early use of photography to replicate the museum has had, in the digital era, an even more widespread impact on visual culture.

In the 1960s, though most museums continued to operate much as they had in the early 1900s, contemporary art movements began to challenge them. “Happenings,” performance art, Institutional critique and Fluxus art movements prepared audiences to be co-creators in the museum experience and in the creation of the art itself. These movements specifically attacked elite control of art institutions. The artist-led movement Institutional critique, for example, investigated the museum’s role and principles. It “confront[ed] the institution of art with the claim that it was not sufficiently committed to, let alone realizing or fulfilling, the pursuit of publicness that had brought it into being in the first place.” Institutional critique was an international, multiple-decade examination into the physical and conceptual systems of the art world. Artists generally engaged in the critique through direct manipulation of museum collections and museum spaces. Conceptual artist Ilya Kabakov pointed to the resulting symbiosis when he said in 1992, “...the war with the ‘museum’ continues as an ordinary strategy of artistic production that has already become traditional for our century ... And nevertheless the only place where all this ultimately winds up is the museum, the same culture it is fighting against and which it repudiates.” Artist Allan Kaprow expressed similar frustration that the

museum context is nearly impossible to avoid. “What disturbs me is the lack of extremity in either of our positions. For instance, I must often make compromises in my Happenings, while, similarly, you and others who might object to museums nevertheless go on showing in them.”

In response, museums adopted Institutional critique as part of their own practice. Institutional critique became a part of the museum vocabulary. The art museum assumed the role of critic of itself and so stymied outside claims of injustice. Thus the majority of these artistic interventions or critiques took place at the request of and with the assistance of the museum. Even unsolicited interventions could be recuperated. In 1976 New York artist Dove Bradshaw added her own label to a glass case for a fire hose mounted to a wall in the Museum of Modern Art. The label read: brass, paint, canvas by Dove Bradshaw. The museum took down her label and Bradshaw put it up again, this time photographing the work. She then had postcards printed with the image on the front and placed them in the museum gift store among the official museum postcards. As a result, her postcards sold. The museum responded by purchasing the original photograph and made “official” postcards of her work, proving it was willing to embrace activity that challenged its authority to determine what is art, in an elaborate and subtle institutionalization of the critique.

Isabelle Graw, editor of *Texte zur Kunst*, a German journal of contemporary criticism and theory, argues that museums should be places for new scholarship and experimentation, not just places for the already successful artist. In 1998, after repeated requests to be exhibited at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Jeffrey Vallance staged an unofficial exhibition of his paintings on the museum’s electric wall socket plates. His children looked out for security guards as he replaced the plain outlet covers with his own painted ones. He sent out an invitation to an opening for his “exhibition” and people came as if to a private viewing. The museum response

was to leave Vallance's socket plates in place for two years before painting over them. By leaving Vallance's work on view, the museum embraced the creative artistic intervention, and it became a part of the identity and culture of the institution. But by painting over them, instead of replacing them, the museum expressly considered them something other than an art object that it was its responsibility to preserve.

An early example of a museum and artist collaborating on an Institutional critique was the exhibition "Mining the Museum" by artist Fred Wilson at the Maryland Historical Society in 1992. The Maryland Historical Society gave Wilson permission to use—however he chose—any objects in the collection. Wilson displayed objects in unconventional ways to address how the museum presented the history of slavery, showing that racial prejudice continued to affect how the state's history was told and displayed. "Museums pride themselves on being objective," Wilson said of the exhibition, "and they don't want to believe that there's a view they are producing." Wilson's exhibition, through his juxtaposition and contextualization of objects, forced people to question the museum's bias, as well as their own. Through this exhibition the museum began to address substantial historical and political themes with selective "outside" curatorial leadership.

Once artists were able, at some level, to successfully infiltrate the museum's power to select exhibitions and artworks, curators themselves began to think differently about the purpose of exhibitions. "Most striking of all, however, is that the development of curating ... would not have occurred without the involvement of artists and their conceptual and practical influences. In order to break free from artistic and curatorial routine and the political power-structures and historically weighted authority of art institutions, curators have clearly learned directly from artists," wrote Jens Hoffman, exhibition maker and current deputy director of The Jewish

Museum, in 2006. Curators could invite the public to participate, contribute and critique with the reassurance of it being an institutionally initiated practice, combining expertise (curatorial supervision) and general edification.

Fluxus was a radical art movement during the 1960s and 70s that, like Institutional critique, questioned traditional understandings of art. Mixed media projects included found poems and collages of ready-made materials, mail art, silent orchestras and scavenger hunts. The founder of the movement, George Maciunas, sought to “undermine the traditional role of art and artist ... He hoped to demonstrate that everyone is an artist and that artists therefore are indispensable,” wrote Elizabeth Armstrong, who has extensively studied the movement. The acceptance by some curators of such “social (not aesthetic)” goals for art exhibitions has continued to justify the socially constructive ends of crowd-sourced art. While Maciunas’ more radical objective of “the gradual elimination of the fine arts” is not widely shared, the success of movements like Fluxus underlies present-day experiments to make everyone’s voice and perspective equally valuable in the exhibition space, democratizing it socially as well as aesthetically.

It is perhaps not entirely surprising that Fluxus, like Institutional critique—a movement intentionally outside of the mainstream art world—ended up in the museum. Curator of Contemporary Art at the Minneapolis Institute of the Arts, Elizabeth Armstrong, says that museums are now similarly questioning “cultural assumptions about artistic quality, value, and meaning.” But this openness to reevaluation did not entirely solve the conflict between the role of museum as expert and its role to make art accessible.

A renewed emphasis on education seemed to be the answer. The 1984 Report of the Commission on Museums for a New Century from the American Alliance of Museums noted

that “educational activities are not related as closely as they should be to the curatorial and research activities of the staff.” At a time when curators felt increasing internal financial pressures, educators joined curators designing exhibitions in hopes of attracting more visitors to the museum. Museum consultant John Durel said that museum educators called themselves “the voice of the audience” who needed to be present at the planning table. “Visitor studies” emerged at this time as museums looked to bolster educational impact. French author George Bataille predicted this direction when he wrote in 1930, “we must realize that the halls and art objects are but the container, whose content is formed by visitors. It is the content that distinguishes a museum from a private collection.”

However, there are losses involved in this seemingly open model. Museums that present scholarly or critical arguments that differ from popular media representations or commercial celebrations of the past run the risk of alienating audiences. In “The West as America, Rinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820–1920,” organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., in 1991, the team of eight curators and art historians presented the story of western expansion through prized paintings. The public controversy over the exhibition’s inclusion of aspects of the conquest of the West other than the heroism of the pioneers has caused subsequent decades of curators to shy away from historical and socio-political themes. To forestall such controversy, some museums have sought ways to include popular responses to the art and the exhibition theme, even though it may risk watering down the exhibition’s impact.

Because of a continued emphasis on education and efforts to attract larger numbers of visitors, museums in the digital age are increasingly committed to interactivity. Interactive tools offer “highly variable opportunities for co-participation and collaboration” for the individual and

group, while still allowing the curators to guide the experience, as pointed out in one of the chapters of the book *Museums in the Digital Age*. Design director Scott Moulton at the Oakland Museum of California said in a recent interview that participatory engagement takes into account a broad scope of activities that still allow/require the curators and designers to guide the experience. Museums have used crowd-sourcing to create collections databases, to help with fundraising, as well as in other aspects of museum work.

Two opposite positions have emerged in reaction to these digital transformations: museums that dive in fully to embrace social group work and museums that seek to restore object primacy. An expert on presenting history to diverse audiences, Mike Wallace sees borrowing media technologies as inevitable but advises that museums “can also become places that interpret the media world itself.” Museums are in a position to sort the wealth of cultural information easily available online, validating multiple perspectives rather than a single “expert” view.

The crowd-curated museum of the twenty-first century grew out of this history: the experimentation and criticism of the 1970s, the shift toward education and corporatization of the 1980s, and the politicization and culture wars of the 1990s. One example of this latest trend involving the public with the selection and presentation of artwork is “Phantom Captain: Art and Crowdsourcing,” curated by Andrea Grover in the fall of 2006 at Apexart in New York. Grover found artists who had expanded their practice to include crowd participation, often through digital media. For instance, artists Harrell Fletcher and Miranda July developed a Web project called LearningtoLoveYouMore.com, which sent out specific assignments to the general public. Assignment No. 30 was to take a picture of strangers holding hands. The actions and “reports” sent back to LTLYM were the artistic creations. Crowd-sourced projects such as this were conceived of and executed by the Social Practice artists and then gathered by Grover in an

exhibition. “With the cooperative intention of projects such as these, crowd-sourcing as a method of artistic production appears to be heir to the throne of 1960s and 70s happenings and participatory art,” Grover wrote in 2006.

However, a significant difference exists between participatory artwork, like “Phantom Captain,” and a participatory curatorial process, said Nora Burnett Abrams, assistant curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver. The curatorial development and planning processes for exhibitions are often lengthy and involved. Grover herself worked in a traditional manner—most directly with artists, not the public. “I don’t know how the public could really participate in that type of development from start to finish in a meaningful way,” said Abrams.

The MCA Denver nevertheless often invites active engagement from the public, Abrams said. Successful participatory projects, initiated in partnership with artists to engage the public directly with art objects, have been a focus of the museum since 2009. In 2012 MCA Denver invited artist Jon Rubin to present “Thinking About Flying.” The museum was given homing pigeons that they cared for and visitors helped train. Visitors could take home a pigeon in a carrying case and release the bird when they arrived home to fly back to the museum’s rooftop loft. Over the course of the year more than 1,000 people took and released the homing pigeons, which traveled as far as 400 miles back to the museum.

“Thinking About Flying” involves actual visitors in an interactive experiment that creates an original experience. In this example the museum became the platform for the audience to engage with the artist’s conception. The unpredictability of audience participation may make similar exhibitions difficult for other museums to replicate. Some curators are concerned about the museum’s reputation if the result of such exhibitions does not meet desired goals. Other

curators remain concerned that this type of engagement is a distraction from the museum's collection.

Nina Simon, director of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, believes museums are places “with the potential to build community,” unlike places that serve already established communities, such as schools, churches, and ballparks. Museums are unique places within our cities, Simon argues, where strangers chance to meet and can participate together if the museum provides the opportunity to do so. Simon's book, *The Participatory Museum*, outlines a justification and method for creating an atmosphere for democratic participatory learning. These interactions have to be intentionally created and designed, she wrote. For Simon, an institutional goal to serve the public good combined with technological tools to create, share, and connect has made participatory programs the new mandate—“translating individual action into collective benefit.” Current experimental museum exhibitions with reliance on crowd participation accordingly are more distant from contemporary professional artists than any previous interventions.

The present stage of museum evolution is “Open Authority,” named in 2011. The “open” in Open Authority comes from “the open source software movement, which believes that the more people you have looking at a problem, the more quickly you'll find a solution,” as reported by the category's creator Lori Byrd Phillips. Open Authority, as it has been defined by Phillips, is “the coming together of museum expertise with community contributions, both online and on-site.” Phillips is careful to frame museums as authoritative without being authoritarian.

Phillips sees the modes for increasing public engagement, also used by Simon and others, as falling along a spectrum from contributory to collaborative to co-creative. Crowd-sourcing falls under contributory participation and typically has involved “voting, tagging, indentifying

objects, and transcribing documents.” The term “community sharing” asks for the same type of participation, but is limited to a narrower group of people and therefore generates deeper responses, which can include “memory sharing, community blogging, idea generation and dialogue, and sharing media,” as noted by Phillips. Crowd-curation is a co-creative engagement model that invites the public to help select the displayed objects or manner of display. Outside of evolving implementation of technology, the current means of community participation seems to be the same as practiced by Grover, except that museum professionals are putting new names on the activity to help the entire field better understand the shifting practices and values.

Technology has made crowd-sourcing possible, and it will play an increasingly vital role in museums’ attempts to remain relevant as they balance the historic conceptions and future prospects of art museums. Unlike those who visited the passive learning environments of the early twentieth century, audiences today have come to expect active learning experiences, and museums engaging in these experiments hope to attract those audiences by validating their taste and expectations.

Part III: Survey of Crowd Contributory Exhibitions Since 2008

Crowd-sourced exhibitions invite the public to contribute original material for an exhibition. The more common crowd-curated exhibitions invite the public to contribute to the decision-making process, actually joining in the selection of objects for exhibition, usually voting from among preselected options. News reviews continue to describe these types of projects as shocking, risky or controversial, despite the popular online-based voting model being easily repeatable and within the cultural mainstream.

A broad look at recent exhibitions suggests ways in which museums are approaching crowd-sourced or crowd-curated art exhibitions. The variety of size, location, holdings, and funding sources of the institutions that have taken on this form of experimentation is evidence that no type of museum is immune to the pressure to engage the community in exhibition through technology, though it does dictate how they choose to experiment.

This survey begins in 2008 with a crowd-sourced and crowd-curated project that hoped to discover if members of the public were good judges of the subjective nature of art. “Click!” at the Brooklyn Museum was the first show of this kind to receive national attention and has since served as the initial marker of this ground-breaking trend. The next notable exhibition took place in 2010 at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, an institution known for its high levels of audience involvement and simultaneous curatorial authority. “Photo Hunt,” the photo-gathering project undertaken by the Columbus Museum of Art in 2012, shows how one museum was able to successfully turn a short-term experiment into an on-going project, one that has garnered it authority within the museum community.

Since then museums have adopted and adapted the crowd contributory process to exhibitions across the country.

“Click! A Crowd-curated Exhibition”

Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, N. Y.

June 27-Aug. 10, 2008

“Click!” was not a photography exhibition but an art installation about the nature of crowd selection, according to the museum’s website. It was both a crowd-sourced and crowd-juried experiment. Organizer Shelley Bernstein made very clear that the exhibition was not a

contest, but rather a study in crowds. The museum's goal was to see whether "crowds could 'wisely' judge something as subjective as art," summarized museum participatory advocate Nina Simon.

The Web played an integral role in the project's conception and execution. An open call was sent out in March 2008 for photographers—professionals or amateurs—to each submit one photo depicting the "changing face of Brooklyn." Over the next two months, 3,344 members of the public then responded to a call to serve as evaluators of the images, rating them from least to most effectively representing the theme. The top 20 percent of the photographs—78 images—were displayed in the gallery that summer according to their ranking.

The online evaluation process was carefully designed to limit bias. Social interactivity was intentionally limited and anonymous—the photographers' names did not accompany their photos. Evaluators were asked to provide their geographic location and a self-disclosed rating of their art knowledge, on a scale from none to expert. Evaluators could not see how others voted or how individual images were ranking, and they could not skip through images to find the one they wanted to vote for.

In the end, all of the public evaluators' picks were very similar to those of the experts. On the "Select and Compare" page of the Click! website, the slight variance among the top 10 across geographic and art knowledge categories is immediately evident when seeing the image thumbnails displayed as a graph on the webpage. This consistency of selection may be explained by the fact that participants most likely have some connection to museums, artists, aesthetic decision making, or at the very least come from the same class as the curators and therefore hold similar standards of taste. The results of the experiments are not conclusive but raise interesting speculation about the perceived gap between novice and expert.

“50/50: Audience and Experts Curate the Paper Collection”**Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minn.****Dec. 16, 2010-July 17, 2011**

The Walker Art Center is widely known for its Open Field Cat Video Festival, which attracted more than 10,000 people to the Minnesota State Fair in 2013. But the Walker’s reputation for cutting-edge arts experimentation predates that event.

When Darsie Alexander joined the team in 2009 as chief curator, she was looking for ways to orient herself to the museum’s expansive collection of contemporary art. One of her first exhibitions, “Benches and Binoculars,” allowed her to explore the depths of the collection, and the ceiling-height salon hanging style encouraged visitors to linger while looking through binoculars to see the highest levels of the wall hangings.

“50/50: Audience and Experts Curate the Paper Collection” was the next exploration of little-seen parts of the collection, and it pushed the participatory element even further. Both shows were described as “injecting more fun and play into the mix without pandering to viewers or compromising its cutting-edge reputation,” by *Star-Tribune* reporter Mary Abbe. Alexander selected 50 pieces, and the public was invited to select another 50 from 183 artworks culled from the collection and put online through the Walker’s own website.

In a recent interview, Alexander said that she had expected members of the public—nearly 250,000 votes were cast—to vote differently than they did: Some major artists in the collection, for example, were not among those selected most often, though she was quick to justify that by giving credit to the sophistication of the Walker audience. A former project director at the Walker, Scott Stulen, who is heavily involved in facilitating audience

participation, surveyed the selection process and concluded that the curatorial hand was quite strong. He said in a recent phone interview, “We kinda knew the outcome before we did it.” The staff generally expected the public to favor figurative and narrative pieces, which they did, except for the top vote earner, “Breaking Point” by Fiona Banner. That piece may not have been the most popular, Alexander said, if people has been voting on the works in person rather than online. The scale, scope, and experience of an artwork is impossible to recreate digitally. In any case—predictable outcome or not—it was a new experience for the Walker’s audience to engage with the creation of an exhibition.

The Walker Art Center has a strong reputation for innovation and artistic engagement married with curatorial authority. It was Alexander’s goal to “break down the barriers” between curator and the public, she said, and she hoped to expose an intentional selection process while retaining the playful curiosity of an online platform with which Web users are so familiar. Though content doesn’t have to come solely from expert staff, she said, some parameters are needed. She believes it is easiest and safest to rely on the already vetted artworks within museum collections. “What is the alternative,” she asked, “asking people to select images off of the internet?” Pre-screening of artworks was the baseline for the experiment at the Walker and all of the other surveyed museums who have chosen to democratize through crowd-curation.

Alexander believes the type of exhibition represented by “50/50” is on a downward trend. Museums’ administrative and curatorial staffs are more open to participatory programs than ever before, she said, but the positions of curating by a small number of people is very much intact.

“50/50” was very well received, but the open-selection process has not been attempted since. Alexander, who now directs the Katonah Museum of Art, believes the Walker is unlikely to try such an exhibition again: It’s difficult to repeat, and it did ruffle some feathers internally.

“Photo Hunt”

Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio

Fall 2012

“With the advent of the camera phone, you essentially have a darkroom in your pocket,” said Jennifer Poleon, the museum’s digital communications manager. Poleon conceived of the Photo Hunt project as a “digital and social campaign” to encourage deeper interaction with the museum, the collection and the arts in general. She worked closely with the photography curator and education director to design and execute the experiment.

The first invitation for CMA’s crowd-sourced Instagram project was posted to the museum’s website on May 18, 2012. Seven photo hunt assignments were given to the public every two weeks through the museum’s blog and other social media tools. The project was inspired by and held in conjunction with “The Radical Camera” exhibition about the Photo League of mid-twentieth century in New York. Since that first experiment, five more Photo Hunt exhibitions have been held as a way of encouraging the public to engage with the museum in its current exhibitions as well as to help create new ones.

In the latest Photo Hunt, “The Modern Dialect,” which opened in September 2014 in the Community Gallery, one assignment was inspired by a Marsden Hartley still-life painting, *Seashell*. Contributors were given two weeks to submit a photo to Instagram that reflects and responds to the theme of a “still life” and, specifically, to Hartley’s painting. The favorite submissions from each hunt are selected by the photography curator and held for later physical exhibition with other amateur photos in their own gallery space.

Poleon said that with each hunt the numbers increase: more submissions, more photographers, both professional and amateur, and greater global reach. For the first photo hunt with “The Radical Camera” roughly 900 images were submitted; for the latest hunt the museum received more than 2,000. “It’s also been interesting to see how work has evolved,” Poleon said. “You can see how new mobile photographers are inspired by both our collection and other established artists.”

The Photo Hunt project was “not going to take anything away from the canon” of art history, former CMA photography curator Catherine Evans said, and the museum was not looking to discover the next great underground photographer. Like other projects of this kind, the goal is to engage audiences in an exciting experience at the museum. “It’s much more than a digital connector,” Poleon said. “It’s about building a creative community and a deeper connection to art.” She said that she has been experimenting with other crowd-sourced, participatory digital projects with mixed results. “With the Photo Hunt project I hit upon the right mix of medium (Instagram), and simplicity.”

For Evans, the opening reception for the first Photo Hunt show was eye-opening. The opening receptions of the physical display of selected photos proved to be very popular, with three generations of families sometimes coming to see a loved-one’s photo. Visitors made personal connections in the gallery where previously only digital conversations had taken place through the museum’s website, Evans said.

“Prior to 2007, [Columbus Museum of Art] was not an institution focused on outcomes,” wrote Cindy Meyers Foley for a museum education roundtable. CMA changed the entire culture of their mission to one of creativity at the forefront and thus “nothing was sacred,” reported Foley. The success of this project has made the Columbus Museum of Art a leader among

museums in adapting technologies to enhance visitor participation. Poleon has been invited to speak at multiple conferences about how the museum has used technology to increase interactivity with exhibitions.

“Public Property”

Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Md.

June 17-Aug. 19, 2012

The Walters Art Museum in Baltimore went beyond their colleagues to allow the public to have a voice at each stage of the curation process—even in the selection of which movie should be screened at the closing party. The public voted on the title, theme, and objects of the exhibition during four different voting sessions. Popular choice resulted in “Public Property,” a crowd-curated exhibition about “creatures” from within the museum’s holdings.

The exhibition was organized by Emily Blumenthal, the Walters' manager of family programs, and Dylan Kinnett, the social media manager, who were forthcoming about the questions that this experiment may raise. The exhibition’s catalog announced that the museum was eager to engage in a dialogue about the public’s opinions about art; what they mean and why they matter. After all, they point out, Henry Walters’ major bequest, which forms the nucleus of the collection, was given with the intent that it be shown for the benefit of the public. The experiment asks the question, what better way to benefit the public than to give them exactly what they want to see by letting them choose?

As they sought public responses for the content of this exhibition, the museum staff also learned about the broader needs and interests of their visitors. People were open about how and why they were willing to participate, providing critical information for the staff to design future

participatory programs. The public wanted engagement to be “fun, easy, and accessible,” and it must have been because roughly 53,000 votes were cast, online or at the museum by 7,166 participants.

When it came to selecting the actual creature-themed objects for display, the curator of ancient art oversaw the process to ensure that each object, already vetted by being in the collection, was suitable and safe for display. Once objects passed that test they went into a head-to-head battle through an internet application “photocracy”—photo + democracy—in which voters chose their favorite between two images at a time. There was no limit to the amount of voting, per person or object.

Photocracy was one of five interactive elements of the exhibition. During the course of the exhibition 101 visitors were observed and their activities recorded providing insightful measures of visitor response. Eight-five percent of those observed participated in at least one interactive; Photocracy and Stacking the Vote (an in-gallery social decision making activity) being the most popular.

Washington Post writer Matthew O’Sullivan called the result “a provocative meditation on taste, the mechanics of decision-making and the growing trend of crowd-sourced culture.” He said the paintings were pretty, but the real drama took place in the process and the resulting questions raised about the shifting meaning of art and choice in contemporary society.

The response wasn’t solely skeptical. The show’s popular momentum landed “Public Property” the “Best Use of Crowdsourcing” award for 2012 from the City Paper. The Baltimore City Paper’s review said that “popularity does not always equal quality,” but the Walters appears to have found the right balance.

Museum staff gathered and compiled extensive data from visitors and internal staff members alike about the response to this experiment in the museum's internal "Exhibition Wrap-up Report." When visitors were asked to respond to the statement, "After seeing this exhibition, I believe that public participation is important to museums," nearly 80 percent of responded "very much." Responses to the internal survey by employees revealed a more equal mixture of warm enthusiasm and cold resistance.

"O Snap! Your Take on Our Photographs"

Carnegie Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pa.

Feb. 15- May 12, 2013

The Carnegie Museum of Art in Philadelphia has long been a very traditional place for fine arts—or stodgy and slow-moving, as some might describe it. But "O Snap!" was an experiment across departmental bounds and an attempt to reach new audiences. "It has impacted the way we think about ourselves internally" and the message we send out, said Jeffrey Inscho, web and digital media manager at the museum.

The museum invited the public to submit photographs inspired by one of 13 recent acquisitions to the museum's photography collection, chosen by the photography curator, according to Inscho, for their ability to inspire "creative responses." During the two and half months of the project new public photos—eventually, 1,263 of them—were pasted on the wall of the Forum Gallery daily next to the framed and labeled inspiration photograph. Contributors were notified by email once their photos were installed and given a free admission pass to see the show. The Forum Gallery is just off the main entrance so technically no admission fee was required to see the continually changing results. General admission price for adults is a steep

\$17.95. The free admission pass allowed participants to see all of the museum's galleries. This exhibition saw a free pass return rate of 10 percent, when typical free pass giveaways only bring 3 percent of visitors to the museum.

This project to reach new audiences came out of a six-museum partnership with Innovatrium of Ann Arbor, Mich., an Institute of Innovation affiliated with the University of Michigan serving public and private sectors. Most of the photos were submitted from residents in the western Pennsylvania region, though submissions also came from much further abroad. Inscho said in the comments feed on the Museum 2.0 blog that the Carnegie wasn't specifically targeting "non-traditional" visitors but rather wanted the participatory experience to be available to anyone, whether or not they had a previous relationship to the museum. Forty-one percent of participants were in the target audience of 20-40 year olds.

Inscho said the museum was excited by the response—contributions increased as the show progressed—especially since it was just beginning to experiment with "Open Authority," a mindset that looks to integrate open community input with more traditional authoritative knowledge. He said that this kind of experimentation is risky in a physical space because the museum has to rely on public response to make it work. Inscho pointed to the cross departmental collaboration from the beginning of the planning as one of the keys to the project's success. Because of the unknown variables, members from the marketing, communications, education, and curatorial departments had to work together, with input from on-staff millennials, to pull off this type of project, he said in a phone interview. "O Snap!" has changed the way the museum plans all of its exhibitions—now with more cross-departmental collaboration.

Inscho also knows well the details that went into preparing the digital platform to receive the submissions. For him the subtle design style and features of the online experience made it

easy and inviting to participate. Social media sharing was designed to work for users by providing each image with its own URL. By designing the project to operate through a dedicated website rather than through photo-sharing technologies that already exist, the museum was able to more closely control the process and product.

The needs of these types of projects are critically different from traditionally curated shows, which are planned years in advance and expect that the body of work to be exhibited is complete when the show opens to the public. The crowd model, Inscho explained, has to be much more responsive. The design continues even after the project has officially opened for the public to experience.

“People’s Choice”

Gibbes Museum of Art, Charleston, S. C.

May 3-Sept.15, 2013

As the Gibbes Museum of Art in Charleston prepared to close for more than a year for renovations, the collections and curatorial team decided the last show offered the ideal opportunity to allow the public to choose which artworks it would like to see. The goal was two-fold, Sara Arnold, curator of collections, said recently by phone: to develop personal connections between the museum’s community and the permanent collection and to attract new audiences to the museum.

Arnold and her team selected 140 artworks, the typical number of pieces that would be on view throughout the permanent collections galleries, and displayed them on a special website made just for the project. The selections included a broad sampling of the collection’s more than 7,000 works.

To spread the word about the project, the Gibbes invited 28 well-known community members—including such notables as Mayor Joseph P. Riley Jr. and local fashion designer Leigh Maga—from across the Charleston area to share their five choices and to answer five questions about art:

- Why is art important in your life?
- What is your first memory of art?
- What is your most memorable art experience?
- Who is your favorite artist?
- Why are museums important to you?

Voting took place through the month of March, and each week new featured voter profiles and choices were added to the website and shared through the museum's social media platforms. The celebrity voters' choices carried the same weight as those from ordinary voters. Voting was limited to one vote for a particular artwork in each 24-hour period. Some technical problems arose, and some people were confused about the number of times they could vote. During the voting period, traffic on the museum's website and in its social media increased significantly, with nearly 35,000 different viewers logging into the site.

The forty artworks that received the most votes were installed in the museum's main gallery.

“On Demand: a Crowd-sourced Curatorial Experiment”

Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Salem, Ore.

May 21 - Aug. 4, 2013

Collections curator Jonathan Bucci pondered the idea of a crowd-curated art exhibition for a couple years after hearing Nik Honeysett, then at the Getty Museum and now serving as chief executive officer of the Balboa Park Online Collaborative, speak at the 2012 Western Museums Conference in Palm Springs.

“We need a culture of innovation in our museums across all programs and disciplines,” Honeysett said during the keynote address. “We cannot solve digital problems with analog thinking.” Most museums have innovated slowly, finding participatory programs difficult to sustain, but the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, on the campus of Willamette University in Salem, Oregon, decided to give it a try.

Bucci, in a recent phone interview, said he and his team thought carefully about how to design their project, choosing to restrict the exhibition to one regional segment of the museum’s collection. Works that fit within the Northwest regional criteria were specifically chosen because they either had not been seen for 10 years or more or had never been on public display. They did not want the exhibition to be about the museum audience choosing famous artworks by well-known artists.

They also chose to use an existing technological platform, Facebook, from which to reach the museum’s audience. Images of 30 artworks were uploaded to the site, and museum fans were encouraged to “like” as many of the pieces as they pleased. At the end of one week, the eight pieces with the most likes were put on display. For Bucci it was important to have a short turn-around time. With a short voting period and two weeks for preparation and installation, the museum audience was able to see the results in person quickly for near-instant gratification.

Operating the project through Facebook, Bucci said, resulted in people not explaining their selections as much as he had hoped. People are very accustomed to Facebook's "like" function and may have been less motivated to take the time to comment.

Bucci said the museum was not targeting a new audience, even though public sharing through personal networks was very easy on Facebook and the barriers for participation were low. The museum was more interested in engaging its current audience in a new way, by giving these members of the public a say in what happens at the museum.

When Bucci first proposed the idea, Hallie Ford Museum director John Olbrantz's response was immediate. "He physically shivered at the idea," Bucci said. Once Bucci justified his ideas and explained the parameters that would be placed on the project, however, Olbrantz warmed to the experiment.

For Bucci, the small exhibition, displayed in the museum's lobby, was a successful one, and he'd be in favor of doing it again should the right opportunity present itself.

"Downtown Visions"

Fresno Art Museum, Fresno, Calif.

Sept. 27, 2013 – Jan. 5, 2014

With all of the hype of crowd-curated exhibitions, an exhibition advertised as "non-curated" was sure to catch some attention. That was the case for the Fresno Art Museum and its Downtown Visions exhibition. The project was Fresno Art Museum's first experience with crowd-sourcing made possible by support from the James Irvine Foundation, which is interested in engagement and innovation in the arts.

The museum put out an open call for submissions to seasoned and aspiring artists for a real or imagined vision of downtown Fresno. Associate curator Kristina Hornback said that nearly all of the received submissions fit the parameters. Numerous submissions featured the Fulton Mall, which has been a “hot topic” in town, Hornback said, because city leaders have been considering reopening this section of the streets to motor vehicle traffic.

The project was designed to accept physical and digital submissions within a set of guidelines. The museum displayed all of the submissions that fit the criteria, about 50 physical objects made by people of all ages and skill levels. Digital submissions continued online even after the project formally ended. The community members’ visions were displayed in conjunction with local artist A. F. “Corky” Normart’s documentation of the changing face of the downtown area.

Hornback said that quality was not a concern. Audience engagement was the goal. The open call and other marketing communicated that all skill levels and types of renditions were welcome. An understanding was clear throughout the project that the result would not be a professional-level product. Hornback said she thought the project was very successful because there were submissions by community members who had never made anything before. It also brought families together to work on a project and attend an event together. She said that she and her staff could see a strong level of attachment to the museum as participants made return visits to the show.

“Boston Loves Impressionism”

Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Boston, Mass.

Feb. 14-May 26, 2014

Malcolm Rogers, the Museum of Fine Arts director, broke with expectations of prominent museum leaders by conceiving of and implementing the museum's first crowd-curated show. However, this appears to be another step in Rogers' agenda to transform the MFA into a much more popular place.

The reinstallation of the Art of the Americas wing was criticized by *New York Times* writer Holland Cotter in 2010 for how familiar both the galleries and the visitors looked. Art historian and Boston resident Wanda Corn has witnessed a dramatic shift in the MFA's outreach efforts since Rogers has been at the helm. She said she gets some kind of marketed email communication from the MFA daily with language targeted to young audiences.

Not unlike other museums facing a renovation, Rogers was looking for a way to keep on view many of the museum's famous impressionist works. The museum invited the public to vote for their favorites out of 50 impressionist and post-impressionist masterpieces. The top 30 were on view in another gallery while the Sidney and Esther Rabb Gallery of European Impressionism got a facelift.

To facilitate public response, the museum divided the selection among themes: seascapes, landscapes and still-lives, and portraits. Each week a new grouping was available for public vote. The final press release read like coverage of a horse race: In the final hours of voting, Edgar Degas' "Little Dancer" came from behind "propelled by social media appeals from its fans" to earn a spot in the coveted top three. This was at the close of a three day run-off to position the top ten.

The top two spots were secured from the beginning of the voting with sizable leads by Vincent van Gogh's "House at Auvers"—4,464 votes—and Claude Monet's "Water Lilies"—

3,543 votes. The director said the public's love for Monet was not surprising, but he thought voting the top spot to Van Gogh may signal a shift in Boston art-lover's tastes.

In the two weeks between voting and the reveal, the curatorial team framed the whole project to reveal Boston's "long-standing love for Impressionism."

Also not unlike other museums taking on this type of project, Emily Beeny, the MFA's assistant curator of paintings said that they were not specifically aiming to attract new audiences but to engage their existing community in a new way.

"By Popular Demand: Your Selections, Your Gallery"

Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Va.

May 10-Aug. 31, 2014

Cheryl White, organizer of the "By Popular Demand" exhibition at the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, said museum visitors can spot a disingenuous effort to engage the community. "I see a lack of sincerity in other museums," she said in a recent phone interview. White wanted the Chrysler's experience to have a meaningful impact on their visitors.

A 10-member community board had worked to make the museum a more engaging institution overall. The Community Gallery, previously used to display the work of high school students and local artists, needed a re-focused purpose. The gallery is located directly adjacent to the museum's temporary exhibitions gallery, and one goal became to connect the two spaces to improve the flow and to make both spaces more interactive.

As the first test of the community gallery's new use, the committee planned a crowd-curated exhibition of 15 of the public's choices. Each one of the committee members had seen

this type of exhibition at other museums. The group also referenced Brooklyn Museum's "Go," a follow-up to "Click," as they began planning the details.

Like other museums looking to show highlights from the permanent collection, the committee prescreened the artworks it offered. Board members considered the national and regional notoriety of the artist, space limitations for both two and three-dimensional pieces and the type of media. They also ensured that the works were not already planned for exhibition elsewhere in the museum. Lastly, the committee sought the selections of each of the department curators, White said.

Forty artworks were chosen to be eligible for public vote. White said some community members were confused or disappointed when they knew of and wanted to vote for pieces in the collection that were not among the 40, signaling a positive level of awareness of the museum's collection by at least some constituents.

The committee also developed a means to collect public comments about their voting rationale and shared the comments with the rest of the public on the gallery labels. "The comments were a telling part of the voting," White said. Interestingly, the fourth most popular artwork, Susan Watkins' (1900) portrait of an 1830s girl taking home a third-class gold medal from the 1901 Paris Salon, received the most comments.

White considers the exhibition a success for the museum. And with the repurposing of the Community Gallery, she said that the community board now sees this type of crowd-curating as an ongoing project.²

Still, attitudes about such projects are certainly shifting within museum circles. White said this type of community curating would have been considered blasphemy not too long ago, but that perspectives have changed dramatically in the last five to 10 years. Her own perspective

² The museum has not yet recreated this model since "By Popular Demand."

has changed, she said. She found it important to maintain her personal aesthetic. “I loved the idea of being an expert,” she said. Ultimately, she said, it is more engaging to access multiple points of view.

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