

Participatory Culture: Museum as a Forum for Dialogue and Collaboration

Compiled and edited by Daria Agapova

**US-Russia Peer-to-Peer
Dialogue Program**



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Susan Katz

Program Director
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Guide introduction

Museums in Russia and the United States share a common challenge—how can cultural institutions reconnect with the public to clearly demonstrate their value and relevance in contemporary life? *The Participatory Museum: Sharing Models* was launched by CEC ArtsLink together with the St Petersburg Centre for Museum Development in September 2014 to bring Russian and U.S. museum experts together to discuss innovative approaches in community and audience engagement and to work together to address these challenges. Over the course of the project, a working group of three U.S. museum specialists and six Russian has been exchanging ideas, sharing experiences, and exploring museums in each country. We are very excited to share the results of their discussions with a wider audience through this unique handbook on Russian and U.S. participatory museum practices.

For over fifty years, CEC ArtsLink has promoted international communication and understanding through collaborative, innovative arts projects for mutual benefit. We support and produce programs that encourage the exchange of visual and performing artists and cultural managers in the United States and 37 countries overseas. As an international organization, we believe that the arts are a society's most deliberate and complex means of communication and that the work of artists and arts administrators can help nations overcome long histories of reciprocal distrust, insularity and conflict. The Participatory Museum project offers a successful model of how Russian and U.S. museum professionals can work together to address and resolve common concerns. The project has sparked new professional relationships, friendships, and ideas for future collaboration, which we hope will

continue to develop and help improve understanding and communication between our two countries.

We are inspired by the members of the Participatory Museum working group. They have devoted their valuable time and their dedication to helping all museums become more dynamic and essential with their communities. CEC ArtsLink thanks our team of Russian and U.S. museum specialists (Barbara Schaffer Bacon, Yulia Glazyrina, John Haworth, Sergei Kamensky, Yulia Matskevich, Yulia Potcelueva, Prerana Reddy and Andrei Rymar) for their commitment to this project. In particular, CEC ArtsLink would like to thank Daria Agapova for her on-going dedication to the development of museums in Russia through innovative programming and international exchange. We are also grateful to the U.S. Embassy in Moscow and to the U.S-Russia Peer-to-Peer Program for their support of this project and much needed exchange between our two countries.



Daria Agapova

expert at the Centre for Museum
Development, curator of the Children's
Days in St Petersburg Festival

From the editor

This collection of articles is the result of a large body of work carried out by a group of people on both sides of the ocean. It is the fruit of meetings, journeys, correspondence, exchanges of opinions, and discussions, it brings together projects which are very different from one another, but have in common an important internal 'motor'—an understanding of the need to rethink the institutional boundaries of the museum and the bases for its activities.

In these projects heritage is preserved not through creating barriers, but by eliminating them, i.e. by involving supporters and promoting values. We have all seen cultural monuments perish tragically as a result of deliberate destruction or indifference. The function of preservation in itself requires museums to venture outside their elite audiences of connoisseurs and constantly extend the area over which they 'broadcast'.

But audience participation is important not only as a means of increasing visitor numbers and extending influence; today it is viewed as a strategy for developing the museum itself. By giving communities the chance to take part in decision-making and discovering points of contact with key communities (for example, with academics, ethnic communities, subcultural groups...), the museum aims for a deeper understanding of its collections and its mission. We could take the following words of Naila Rosario of Queens Museum of Art as emblematic of this approach:

“Today the museum sees the community not just as potential audience members but as the real heart of the institution.”

In the case of the Queens Museum (see the article by Prerana Reddy in the present collection) the art institution is becoming a community centre with an ambitious programme for participation in the life of the local community; it serves as a moderator of social dialogue, instantly reacting to new challenges and exerting great influence not just within its district, but in the megalopolis as a whole.

The more traditional, as it might seem at first sight, National Museum of the American Indian, is, while retaining its respectability, becoming what is essentially an “international centre for living cultures”, playing an active role in contemporary life through those instruments which are available to it as a preserver of heritage. In his article John Haworth does not merely describe how the museum’s approach has evolved, but also examines the philosophical bases for fundamental change and the challenges and obstructions which lie on this path.

Barbara Schaffer Bacon shares the knowledge and extremely useful practical materials which have been acquired over the course of 10 years by the extensive professional partner network setup and nourished by the Americans for the Arts project. She sees numerous parallels in the experience of American and Russian museums, and especially in the difficulties which they have to overcome.

Yuliya Glazyrina tells us about a project by the Museum of Permian Antiquities which essentially creates a virtual “exhibition” “distributed” through the consciousness of local residents and throughout the space of the entire region, making the invisible paleontological stratum of the region’s ancient history accessible to residents’ thoughts and understanding.

Samara Literary Museum is trying not just to show evidence of the past, but also to make sense of the changing matter of literature, which every day comes to life (or fails to come to life) afresh in the minds of readers today; this literary ‘habitat’ is different from that in which texts were created 20, 50, or 100 years ago. In his article Andrey Rymar analyzes the relations between the museum and various communities.

The Children’s Museum Centre on Bolotnaya 13 in St Petersburg aims to create and support a field of communication where people of very different kinds can meet one another and enter into dialogue as subjects of continuous historical process and of knowing. In this

way the centre supports people who are locked into role positions (as teachers, guardians, parents, pupils...), helping them at the very least to be aware of the fact of the existence of other roles and positions, and ideally to hear and understand one another. Yuliya Matskevich and Anna Rapoport, the centre's team leaders, talk about the experience of working on the exhibition together with schoolchildren.

Similar objectives are tackled by the authors of the 'Teens for museums, museums for teens' project, an experimental laboratory at the Children's Days in St Petersburg Festival where teenagers and museum staff work together in looking for new forms of communication. In her article Yuliya Potselueva shares discoveries made by both children and adults.

'The Art of Travel' is a project from Ekaterinburg which began, as Sergey Kamensky, its author, explains, with an attempt to make sense of a specific collection. As visitors became involved, it grew and became a kind of roots system of links within the community, producing ever more new shoots.

In working on its new exhibition, the Tolyatti Museum of Local History managed to turn a shortcoming—a mismatch between resources and aspirations—into a strength, developing during the course of realization of the project an extensive network of support among the urban community.

I often hear doubts expressed about the possibility of sharing decision-making with museum visitors. The gist of these doubts is: "Non-professionals can't fly a spaceship." All the examples given in this collection of essays are evidence that the participatory culture does not involve experts handing over control to non-professionals, but requires that experts extend their competence—into the realm of communication and understanding of democratic mechanisms, and likewise acquisition of skills of working in a multicultural context. Getting people 'involved' means showing respect for differences in positions, taking into account people's points of view, informing them responsibly and trustfully, firing them up with enthusiasm, and sharing meanings with them. This means not less, but more work—and more responsibility—for the experts. The authors of participatory museum projects often have to answer the question, "Why have you decided that it's now time to complicate your lives?"

Realizing this kind of project requires open dynamic planning, i.e. a readiness to encounter unforeseen factors, to be flexible and make changes in the course of the project, and to be prepared for possible (and even inevitable) failure.

Participation strategies involve overhauling management models and are difficult to combine with vertically integrated structures where all decisions are taken by a single person at the top. Participation does not require sameness of thinking, but it does call for respectful partnership in order to define and tackle specific objectives. The participation culture offers models for managing processes, not people.

To conclude, I would like to say that translating contemporary texts by museum experts into Russian from English is a serious problem: the vocabulary of concepts for the new approaches has been established relatively recently even in English and has only just started to be developed in Russian. Funnily, many words from this vocabulary have criminal connotations when translated literally into Russian—‘involvement’ (in a crime), ‘co-participation’ (‘complicity’ in an offence), ‘collaboration’ (with a police investigation), and the Russian words for ‘accomplices’, ‘accessories’, and (criminal) ‘communities’—or are associated with Soviet bureaucratic clichés (e.g. ‘the interested public’, ‘working with the general population’, ‘desires of the workers at the local level’)... Concepts such as participatory practices, audience engagement, community engagement, and civic engagement embody clear terminological distinctions, but are translated into Russian in a way which is approximate, vague, and depends on context; instead of being precise terms, they become rhetorical figures. In this collection of articles we have made an attempt to fine-tune this descriptive language. This was not always easy: certain linguistic constructions were found to be unwieldy; others could not be translated without importing words from English into Russian; and still others remained vague. In pointing out this problem to our readers, we invite you to enter into dialogue with us—not about language, but about the different systems by which museums communicate.



Barbara Schaffer Bacon

Co-Director of Animating Democracy,
a program of Americans for the Arts

Participatory Museum Practices: Making the Map

On the corners of, at the intersection of lines in the map.
We are the creases between the lines.

Jake Adam York, poet

I am reading the reports on participatory practice projects at Russian museums and I am struck by the parallels in project trajectory and learning to those in our own [Americans for the Arts Animating Democracy Learning Lab](#)¹ more than a decade ago. As was true for our cohort of cultural leaders, what these practitioners have learned by developing and implementing participatory projects is far greater than what any guide could teach. I see that these pioneering museum professionals with their colleagues, their institutions, and their community partners have begun to create a map that will guide the way for Russian museums developing participatory practices.

In 1999, with an investment from the Ford Foundation, Americans for the Arts launched a four-year initiative to foster arts and humanities activity that encouraged



¹ Americans for the Arts is the nation's leading nonprofit organization for advancing the arts in America. With more than 50 years of service, it is dedicated to representing and serving local communities and creating opportunities for every American to participate in and appreciate all forms of the arts. Barbara Schaffer co-directs Animating Democracy, a program of Americans for the Arts that inspires, informs, promotes, and connects arts and culture as potent contributors to community, civic, and social change.

civic dialogue and community engagement on important contemporary issues. In the U. S., and for our program, **civic dialogue** refers to dialogue about civic issues, policies, or decisions of consequence to people's lives, communities, and society. Meaningful civic dialogue is intentional and purposeful. We defined **community engagement** as the active ways arts and culture organizations align programs and services with community interests and needs. Through community engagement, arts and cultural organizations seek to develop relationships with individuals, constituent groups, and publics that achieve mutual benefit and potentially transform both individuals and the institutions.

This contrasts with civic engagement which is sometimes a parallel aim. **Civic engagement** includes the many ways in which people participate in civic and political life. From becoming better informed to participating in public dialogue on issues, from volunteering to voting, from community organizing to political advocacy, the defining characteristic of active civic engagement is the commitment to participate and contribute to the improvement of one's community, neighborhood, and nation. Community engagement frequently encourages or is a means for civic engagement. Art and cultural presentations and exhibitions can serve as a key focus or catalyst for dialogue on an issue and interactive arts experiences can be a forum for civic engagement.

At the center of the Animating Democracy Initiative, the [Learning Lab](#) provided grants and advisory support to cultural organizations across the country to implement projects that experimented with or deepened existing approaches to arts- and humanities-based community engagement. During the four-year initiative the Lab supported 36 projects in which dialogue and engagement were embedded in or connected to the arts or cultural experience.

Lab Projects were implemented from 2000 to 2004. As part of the Lab design, project leaders came together in Learning Exchanges to share and build knowledge and extend their learning to the broader field. The Initiative linked participants with engagement and dialogue specialists, and with scholars who could provide valuable knowledge and expertise. The Animating Democracy Lab resulted in deep

documentation shared in the form of case studies and compiled in seven books including [Civic Dialogue, Arts & Culture: Findings from Animating Democracy](#) (Americans for the Arts, 2005), and on the [Animating Democracy website](#). Individual projects and the collected findings have informed and advanced field learning about the philosophical, practical, and social dimensions of this work.

Because of my experience with our Lab, I reviewed the reports from the Participatory Museum Project in Russia with great interest. The diversity and ambition of projects was immediately stimulating—from making geological history visible at the Museum of Permian Antiquities, to physically representing contemporary literary methods and trends as “poetic machines” at the Samara Literary Museum. I admired that the projects were grounded in mission and collections and that there were clearly articulated and often multiple goals like the Teens for Museum, Museums for Teens project that sought to build peer to peer communication channels between teens and museum professionals and help museum professionals look at their materials through the eyes of teens and other more reluctant visitors. I was impressed by how many made creative leaps, such as shifting focus from objects and collections accumulated through travel to exploring travel as a cultural phenomenon at the Sverdlovsk Regional Museum of Local History, and the use of films and film genres to help visitors explore recent cultural history at the Tolyatti Regional Museum of Local History.

I appreciated the community partnerships that developed and the degree to which they inspired and informed exhibitions and related programming. In the case of the Children’s Museum Center of History Education, elder and youthful partners helped the museum tell a difficult story from an angle that allowed young visitors to find connections to historical events, contribute ideas and interpretation, and take away stories. Finally, I was struck by the integrity of the projects and the honest analysis of what succeeded and what might have been different or better. In each case, the institutions and the professionals went “outside of their comfort zones.” This led to great achievements and some missteps. Both results offered opportunities for learning and helped create a foundation of practice from which to build.

A deeper review of any of the projects reveals how embarking on a course of participatory practice can widen the sphere of a museum's influence, increase the perception of value, and transform the way collections are exhibited and interpreted. In the case of the Samara Literary Museum, despite acknowledging that there was "a difference between what the exhibition promised to the viewer and what it actually delivered," the process of creating the project led to many positive outcomes:

- The museum opened connections with the local literary community.
- A literary club launched where writers and readers began meeting regularly to discuss issues.
- A lab brought designers, architects, poets and museum staff to work together to analyze text and design exhibits.
- A well-attended seminar brought well known Russian writers and poets to Samara.
- Another seminar for museum professionals advanced thinking about how other literature could be explored through participatory practice.
- A popular series of literary/art/social events helped to establish a new summer tradition at the museum.
- Participatory practices continue to be applied to new exhibitions.

For the Tolyatti Regional Museum of Local History, the goal for the creation of a new exhibition was to build a space that would "inspire different generations of Tolyatti residents to find a meaning in recent history." Organizers tackled a history that included "serious historical traumas," a prideful history of industrial innovation, and a civic tradition of community and responsibility. They reached out to the community—recording interviews with citizens who built city factories and those who chose to relocate there, organizing round table discussions that connected historical events to current issues, and collecting 300 objects at a Day of Giving. They determined that they needed to create an exhibition that employed advanced technological techniques to stimulate interactivity and provide visitors multiple perspectives to historical events. When the expanded scope of the exhibition required additional funds, the enthusiasm that had been generated enabled

museum trustees to raise substantial money from businesses and other partners and the city approved funds from its budget. The project gained this community support because it embodied the city's pride and aspiration.

What is remarkable is the similarity of findings discovered and reported in both the Participatory Practices Project and the Americans for the Arts Lab. Among the points of intersection were these:

- It is critical to start with mission and collections at the core, and then address challenges and opportunities that are important to the institution, partners, and the community.
- Relevance matters. The public needs support to discover the relevance of museum resources to their lives.
- Intention matters. Clear, well-articulated project goals are important to communicate inside the museum and with community partners.
- Partnerships require a philosophy of mutual respect and time to develop trust.
- Expectations and strategies may need to be adjusted as projects develop. There should be room for the project concepts to evolve and change.
- Everyone at the museum may not favor participatory practice or have the skills for community engagement. Experience and professional development will help to build capacity over time.
- Projects have ripple effects that cannot be evaluated in the short term.

Why are these lessons important and why should museums cultivate participatory practices?

Museums, through their core functions—collection, preservation, and education, and exhibition—play a vital role in society. But do the communities and the people museums serve share this view? Do they see institutions as community assets and collections as useful? Do they visit? And when they do, do they feel a sense of vitality there? Do they feel personal affinity or connection? Would they support investments necessary to continue, improve, or expand the important work of museums? While not universal, common perceptions are that museums are:

irrelevant, old and unchanging, staid and not creative, present a narrow point of view, are places for academics and experts; and are NOT places to socialize.

These are the perceptions we must address. Nina Simon, director of the Santa Cruz (CA) Museum of Art and History (MAH), and author of the book [The Participatory Museum](#) and the blog [Museums 2.0](#), believes that, "... by pursuing participatory techniques that align with institutional core values, it is possible to make your institution more relevant and essential to your communities than ever before." Simon, an influential voice and field leader for participatory museum practices in the United States, defines a participatory cultural institution as "a place where visitors can create, share, and connect with each other around content." All MAH programs invite people to actively engage as cultural participants, not passive consumers.

Matthew Teitelbaum, just named as the new director of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts said during a recent interview, "I think the most important thing a museum does is create an audience." "I'm very interested in that, how can I increase the utility of the museum to its community." To be good stewards of the cultural and heritage treasures with which they are entrusted, museums must stay relevant. As the Russian Participatory Museum Project illustrates, community engagement can reinvigorate collections and the museums themselves.

Developing participatory practices is a journey of learning. There is not a formula or a blueprint. Each institution must be guided by its unique mission, collection and community. Each pilot and trial will yield new information, new skills, and most importantly, new relationships and partnerships in the community on which to build. But, it is an important journey for museums that want to be valued in their communities; for the museum professionals who want the riches of the collections they preserve, manage, and interpret to have meaning in contemporary society; and for the audiences that will come to view museums as places where they can discover, contribute, and connect with the past, present, and future.

These pioneering Russian projects, like those in our Lab, served as a laboratory for experimentation and innovation. They are helping to show the way by suggesting

questions to ask, activities to try, approaches to avoid, and what kind of results and impact to expect. Rather than prescribe one route, these case studies offer a map to help other museums explore participatory practice at their own institutions.

This Is A Map, a poem by Jake Adam York (1972—2012), provided a metaphor for the learning and documentation we created in the Americans for the Arts Animating Democracy Lab. It is just as appropriate here.

This is a map

This is a map. It shows *where things are*. It shows where things are by showing them *in relation* to one another. On the map, a thing is in relation to other things. By distance or size. Placement. A map is a representation of the relations that locate and define the things that are mapped. Often it seems that the relations become things in themselves and are the primary subjects (or should one say *masters?*) of the maps. As in the case of street maps. Is the purpose to show the streets themselves, to show them in relation to one another so we can know each one better? Or is this matrix of relation intended to serve other purposes? Perhaps to help define those things that are not themselves on the map but exist in relationship to things the map makes thinkable? On the corners of, at the intersection of lines in the map. We are the creases between the lines.²

Americans for the Arts Lab

The Andy Warhol Museum: Without Sanctuary Project

[The Warhol: Museum as Artist: Creative, Dialogic & Civic Practice \[PDF\]](#)

The *Without Sanctuary* project (2001), conceived following two racially motivated killings in Pittsburgh, used historic photographic documentation of lynching throughout the U.S. as a springboard to address issues of race, bias, and bigotry. The exhibition was the core of a several-months project that galvanized energies and focused a collective attention on racial issues in a manner that was rare for Pittsburgh. A subsequent project, Andy Warhol's *Electric Chairs: Reflecting*

² From Copper Nickel Journal, Number 3, 2005 © The Grammata Literary Group of University of Colorado at Denver.

on *Capital Punishment in America*, featured Warhol's series of iconic paintings of electric chairs as a focus for dialogue on the issue of capital punishment. The Warhol experimented with curatorial, educational, and presentation practices by using the museum's social space, as well as its traditional position as arbiter of taste, to focus attention on civic issues. The essay details the many and varied dialogue opportunities, including facilitated daily dialogues, a video response booth, and school dialogues, assuring *Without Sanctuary* visitors a way to respond immediately to the highly charged images—as well as special events, and community-based art projects conducted by artist-educators. The project revealed the tensions and challenges of a largely white institution choosing this project and lessons learned while working with an advisory group to effectively involve the African American community. The Warhol Museum's then assistant director of education, Jessica Gogan posited that museums can creatively operate in the cultural sphere as “civic engager”—in effect, that—the “museum can act as artist.”



Photo © Lyn Johnson

Americans for the Arts Lab

The Jewish Museum

[Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art Case Study: The Jewish Museum, New York City \[PDF\]](#)

In 2002, the Jewish Museum in New York City mounted the exhibition *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art*. The controversial exhibition featured artworks by 13 young artists, each two and three generations removed from the events of WWII, who used images of Nazi perpetrators to provoke viewer exploration of the culture of victimhood and also as a means of identifying the distinguishing characteristics of evil. Through the art works, extensive interpretive materials, and

a program of facilitated dialogues, the Jewish Museum offered a springboard for discussion about complicity and complacency toward evil in today's society.

The museum ventured into “taboo” subjects and used provocative artworks to reframe the subject of the Holocaust for discussion about manifestations of evil. Public reception and intense controversy was prompted by the media before the exhibition even opened creating the opportunity to consider the effects of the media on public discourse. . One example is Piotr Uklanski “The Nazis” (1998), inspired by Andy Warhol’s “13 Most Wanted Men” (1964). Uklanski depicts well known Hollywood actors on eye level, all in Nazi roles. The work offers commentary on popular culture, elements of how historical events are portrayed. As well, it makes visual the idea of “eroticizing of fascism” noted by Susan Sonntag’s in “Fascinating Fascism” (1973). The museum partnered with the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, Facing History and Ourselves, and other organizations to design dialogue opportunities—both in and outside the museum—that connected deeply with the Jewish community as well as with a broad public of all faiths and cultural backgrounds.

Americans for the Arts Lab

The Henry Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle

[The Gene\(sis\) Project: A Laboratory for Arts-Based Civic Dialogue \[PDF\]](#)

In April 2002, on the heels of the Human Genome Project’s historic announcement about the completion of a human genome “rough draft,” Seattle’s Henry Art Gallery opened *Gene(sis): Contemporary Art Explores Human Genomics*. The exhibition brought together more than 50 recent and new artworks representing artists’ imaginings of the social, ethical, and economic ramifications of genetic and genome research. To spur dialogue about the provocative and potentially polarizing issues, the Henry, together with its community collaborators, devised and implemented a cross-disciplinary series of public programs in conjunction with its exhibition. Curator Robin Held described in her introductory essay that *Gene(sis)* was organized into four thematic sections: **sequence**, work that explores the rhetoric and media representations of genomics; **boundary**, artists’ investigations of the now permeable boundaries between species; **specimen**,

work that engages questions of DNA ownership, personal privacy and the management of genetic information; and **subject**, artists' re-imaginings of individual subjectivity, family and human "nature" in the wake of recent genomic developments. The new works generated by the Gene(sis) project formed the focal point of the exhibition. Jill Reynolds's Family Tree II, a tree-like installation wrapped in a web of glass rods connected to each other by small Petri dishes that contain growing yeast. Highlighting the interconnectedness of life, the work illuminates one of the earliest insights garnered from human genome research: The human genome shares surprising similarities with the genomes of other species, such as the mouse, roundworm, fruit fly and yeast. The project sought to harness the power of contemporary visual art to elucidate and provoke dialogue about new developments in the science of human genomics. The Henry employed various dialogue methods and raised questions such as: What new innovations can be brought to conducting dialogue about art and, in this case, "controversial art"? How does art function as dialogue between artist and viewer? Does the viewer's experience in grappling with the ideas evoked by a work of art constitute civic dialogue? And what do existing curatorial and education practices have to offer when designing opportunities for civic dialogue?



Family Tree II. Jill Reynolds
© 2002, courtesy of the artist

Americans for the Arts Lab

MACLA/Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana

Public Faces, Private Lives: Making Visible Silicon Valley's Hybrid Heritage [PDF]

In September 2002 MACLA—a San José-based Latino contemporary arts space—premiered *Ties that Bind: Exploring the Role of Intermarriage between Latinos and Asians in Silicon Valley*. This exhibition was a photography-based installation of new work by artists Lissa Jones and Jennifer Ahn that reflected on the history of Asian-Latino intermarriage and contemporary perceptions of ethnicity in the San José area. Capitalizing on the groundswell of public interest in ethnic and racial hybridization trends borne out by Census 2000, the *Ties that Bind* exhibition and dialogues sought to engage a broad cross section of San José residents in dialogue about how Asian-Latino intermarriages in Silicon Valley are challenging the prevailing myths of ethnic identity. To propel the artistic process and spur dialogue around this timely and provocative civic issue, MACLA devised a “humanities-based” model of community intervention that integrated the ethnographic methodologies of oral history, archival research, and social science scholarship with the artistic development process. As part of



Photo by Bubu Alvarez © 2002

that effort, MACLA collected and documented 45 case studies of Asian-Latino intermarriage and engaged 15 of those families to participate directly as oral history interviewees and subjects of the artist's photographic process.

MACLA used an ethnographic-based curatorial approach as a means of driving the project's artistic development. The project team wrestled with ethical and aesthetic considerations in the process of rendering the participating families' personal stories into art. Challenges and insights gained along the way prompted key changes in the design of the project, namely an increased role for the artists and a shift in the scope of the dialogue component. The project raised key questions about the nature of civic dialogue: Does civic dialogue necessarily need to be "public"? How does the intent to foster civic dialogue affect aesthetic choices? Ties that Bind also shed light on MACLA's own quest as a community-based arts group to embrace a long-term commitment to civic dialogue and to embed those practices in the organization.



Prerana Reddy

Director of Public Programs
and Community Engagement

Being a Good Neighbor: Queens Museum's Experiments in Community Engagement

Opening the Doors, Listening to Needs

The Queens Museum's (QM) community, the Borough of Queens in New York City, is one of the most diverse places in the country, and the world, in terms of the number of languages spoken and countries from which residents hail. However, though various ethnic groups may live in the same neighborhoods, Queens is not quite the proverbial "melting pot." Rather it is divided among the paradigm of old and new Queens. Old Queens is a community of working and middle class—black and white—families and accounts for approximately 30% of the residents in the neighborhoods nearest to the museum. New Queens accounts for 7 out of 10 residents in the Museum's tri-neighborhood community and includes mostly South and East Asian and Latino immigrants from countries such as India and Pakistan, South Korea, Taiwan, and China, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Ecuador and Mexico. There has been a wide range of social and economic integration amongst these groups, often dependent on their educational attainment and profession in their home country, as well as immigration status upon arrival here.

Just as individual families make a gradual transition to life here, institutions reflect a time lag. So it is not unusual to see a Polish monument in a Caribbean community—vestigial manifestation of the community's sense of allegiance to its roots. Just so in civic associations. We have traveled through Queens and visited Community Boards (the most local and grassroots element of New York City

government) and found that the staff and many of the Boards themselves reflect the make-up of the community one or two generations ago. These are not bad people. In fact, Board members are generously volunteering their time for the betterment of the neighborhood. But, there is often a divide between the Boards and the newcomers circulating outside their doors in terms of language, culture, religion, race and so on. New Queens has been creating its own groups—from community-specific associations to issue-oriented groups.

When Tom Finkelppearl became director of QM in 2002, the museum was firmly entrenched as an old Queens institution. It is illustrative that nobody on the administrative staff spoke Spanish fluently. The audience was generally much older and whiter than the surrounding community. So, the question at hand was how to embrace the energy and unique diversity of new Queens without abandoning old Queens. The founders of the museum were still on the Board of Trustees, and they were the same sort of civic- and community-minded people we saw on the Community Boards (though considerably more affluent and influential). The goal was to open the doors to the community without turning our back on the people who had created the museum. This was not simply out of gratitude, but because it seemed like a valuable idea for all involved—the hybrid new-and-old Queens institution that could ideally feel as comfortable to a Jewish family as to a Taiwanese grandmother or a Mexican teen.

The first two new employees hired under the new regime are emblematic of this approach. Debra Wimpfheimer was born and bred in old Queens, but she had been working as a non-profit fundraiser in Boston for eight years. Though of a younger generation herself (she was around 30 at the time), she was an impeccable guide through the complexities of old Queens institutions, most particularly the halls of political power that she knew quite well. She also had enough distance from her roots in Queens that she could see clearly how the communities were changing, and it was her observations on old and new Queens that opened our eyes to a series of social dynamics that are still the basis of our vocabulary. As we were learning about our environment, the first shows put on the books reflected the arts and experiences of

local immigrant communities such as: *Nexus: Taiwan in Queens*, QM's biennial of Queens-based artists entitled *Queens International; Crossing the BLVD (abbreviation for Boulevard)*, Warren Lehrer and Judith Sloan's multimedia project based on oral histories of new immigrants and refugees in Queens. Wendy Ewald created a new work with a group of Arab students. These projects were highly educational for the staff, but they did not differ in essence from the curatorial practice at the museum in previous years. Many shows had investigated cultural diversity.

The second new hire was long-time Queens resident and artist Jaishri Abichandani, herself an immigrant from India, to head a new Public Events department that would work to transform QM into a nexus where old and new Queens would meet. Abichandani, a natural connector of communities, had recently honed her knowledge while working on the 2000 census in Queens. Under her tenure we hosted a wide range of activities—from South Asian events like the annual celebration, “Fatal Love” that remarkably combined Indian and Pakistani independence days into one to the national Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride, where caravans of immigrant rights advocates from nine cities converged on Flushing Meadows Corona Park in 2003. Simultaneously, the Museum began literally to open its doors by providing complimentary use of our space to numerous small non-profit community groups for their meetings, cultural celebrations, and fundraising events. Several nights a week our theater would be filled by Colombian, Ecuadorian, Korean, or Indian celebrations. Once a month we welcomed *Cinemarosa*, a mostly Latino LGBT film organization. In so doing, QM began to develop relationships with their members and leadership, allowing us to have frank conversations about their organizational challenges, which included lack of financial resources and space for their activities and greater visibility outside the communities they serve.

With multi-year funding from the Ford Foundation, QM then launched its first long term initiative designed to bridge gaps between old and new Queens by initiating a *Leadership Through the Arts (LTAP)* program, which I was brought on board to coordinate. LTAP targeted young folks aged 16-23 that met every



Community Input on Corona Plaza Designs. Courtesy of Queens Museum

Saturday for a year. The reason we reached out to this age group was two fold; we knew new immigrant adults were working long hours and didn't always have time to be involved in a year-long intensive program, and we would be able to access adults if we provided a service for their children. We also knew that a lot of immigrant youth are unable to pursue higher education as they need to contribute to family finances, and at the same time, they age out of most enrichment programs once they graduate high school.

Using the arts as a uniquely powerful communication device, the youth were equipped with the skills and tools needed to navigate American civic and educational power structures. The program combined an anti-oppression and political education curriculum developed by local activist groups with art-making workshops led by established artists and art educators to develop critical thinking skills. To these activities were added opportunities to coordinate

concerts, performances, lectures and workshops to be held at the Museum and at sites throughout the community. Each cohort of 25 young adults, who were paid a stipend to participate, addressed the tension points in their communities and interacted with community and political leaders, seniors, local businesses and entrepreneurs, and faith communities through exhibitions, photography, film and art projects. Finally they had funds with which to administer grants to community-based organizations, through a rigorous process guided by the North Star Fund. In the short term, the initiative sought to promote social integration through cross-cultural interaction amongst the participants. In the long term, it sought to create upwardly mobile engaged citizens of tomorrow trained to effect positive social change in Queens neighborhoods.

Focus on Corona

While *Leadership Through the Arts* produced many individual success stories in terms of youth development objectives and the museum's ability to connect to families and neighborhoods and identify local tension points, it was difficult to realize community development goals with just this youth program model. Since the program did not target youth from any one neighborhood, it was difficult to focus on local situations that could be tackled over the long-term. With a population of around 2.3 million people in the largest (in area) of the 5 boroughs of New York City, spread across neighborhoods that weren't necessarily easily accessible via public transportation—the geographic scope was too large to make a visible dent.

We realized that we needed to re-strategize to maximize our impact and focus our efforts on a single neighborhood adjacent to the museum. Equally as important, we needed hire a community organizer to be on the ground. While Jackson Heights and Flushing have emerged as thriving neighborhoods with strong identities, successful Business Improvement Districts, and services for immigrants, Corona, within which the museum resides, has encountered some challenges in its development. It is a "majority-minority neighborhood" with Latino immigrants, who comprise the largest part of the population, mixing with South and East Asian immigrants and the African American and

white European homeowners who represent the heart of Corona's recent past. Highways surround the area, and large thoroughfares like Roosevelt Avenue and Northern Boulevard cut through it creating isolated individuals and groups. Sections of Corona lack access to full public transportation service and, while some businesses are able to sustain themselves long-term, the residential immigrant populations tend to be transient. There tends to be a small-business orientation with a significant informal economy. In addition, many residents are undocumented or in mixed status families and live in fear of deportation, diminishing the likelihood of political and social engagement. Consequently, we felt that our efforts would make the most impact in Corona.

In 2006 we hired Naila Rosario to play the important role of QM's community organizer, an unusual move for a fine arts museum. Rosario's familiarity with elected officials and community groups in the area, long history of immigrant



Elmhurst Hospital Screening, Corona. Courtesy of Queens Museum

rights advocacy, and ability to speak Spanish (70% of Corona residents speak Spanish as their primary language) were all key in deepening the level of communication and trust between community members and the museum. The transformation of our project was quite dramatic, helping us listen more deeply to community voices. Language was not the only barrier that Rosario could cross. She could also translate socio-political and community back-stories. The local rivalries and coalitions became more apparent—almost the same role that Debra Wimpfheimer had played in old Queens a couple of years earlier. This allowed us to begin to develop projects that connect to our core competencies as an arts institution yet still have clear development goals in mind. These included: improving cardiovascular health outcomes and healthcare access; cleaning up, beautifying, and programming Corona's public spaces; marketing the businesses in the area, particularly the numerous ethnic eateries in the neighborhood, and generally bringing disparate segments of the community together to develop and achieve their goals. We put all these elements together under the rubric of the "Heart of Corona," attempting to catalyze the transformation of Corona Plaza from simply a circulatory and commercial center into a site for neighborhood pride, cultural activity, and a space to access health and social services.

Historically, Corona had been an Italian immigrant stronghold with a long-standing and thriving business district in "Corona Heights," complete with a bocce court, and numerous *salumerias* and Italian Ice stores. Beginning in the 1940s, Corona was also a haven for middle and upper-middle class African Americans who were shut out of the housing market in Manhattan. Local residents included Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Ella Fitzgerald, and Malcolm X. In the last twenty years, Corona has become home to the fastest-growing Latino community in the city. At the center of Corona is a public space, a triangle known as "Corona Plaza." Once the proud meeting center of the community, with a grand movie house, the plaza has now fallen into disrepair. While businesses surround the open space, it was seldom used for public events; it needed better maintenance, and lacked a clear sense of purpose or centrality to the community. Businesses come and go in Corona Plaza, while

people stream through on foot, by car, and on the subway. QM felt that the space could mean more and be more productive for the community, so along with Corona Community Action Network, an association of local businesses, we helped gather a broad coalition of Corona stakeholders to provide ongoing attention to the plaza. The initiative includes several projects—beautification and clean-up events, a *Healthy Taste of Corona Cookbook*, and a series of street celebrations and public art projects spearheaded by working groups that are collaborations among community-based organizations, health institutions, elected officials, and local businesses.

For the next two years the initiative's sustained programming aimed to beautify the space and populate it through a series of art projects entitled *Corona Plaza: Center of Everywhere* attracting local residents and cultural tourists alike. With additional federal funding, QM commissioned four emerging artists each year to produce temporary site-specific art in Corona Plaza. They were asked to develop projects that would integrate with the specific conditions of the plaza and Corona, resulting in works that value audience participation, fun, generosity and community engagement. The community organizer played a key role in orienting the artist to the neighborhood, brokering partnerships and project locations, and facilitating public interaction. This process differed substantially from other public art initiatives in which artists are asked to find community partners. We already had a well-established coalition with scores of partners. The artists were not assigned the difficult task of wading into unfamiliar territory but were given free rein to explore with the community organizer as an expert consultant. An accompanying exhibition at the Museum described, documented, and centralized the public artworks on view and performed around the plaza. As part of the experience of the exhibition, visitors had access to a map that encouraged them to explore Corona's diverse dining options, unique retail shops, historic sites, and recreational spaces.

During the project, QM organized several street celebrations and bilingual tours so that community members could interact directly with the artists and in several cases participate in the production of an ongoing work. The street celebrations

became a focal point for a number of the artists. The festivals themselves were organized by QM in conjunction with more than 16 neighborhood partners, with a mix of live entertainment, art-making opportunities, and health and social service provision. Local businesses donated refreshments for volunteers and performers, and performances featured a culturally diverse mix of local performers, along with more established touring artists. Each year through the fairs, over 1,200 people received health screenings, and over 600 attendees who were previously uninsured signed up for free or low-cost health insurance.

In 2012, after years of community pressure, the street was de-mapped and turned into an official public plaza under the NYC Department of Transportation's Plaza Program, receiving \$3million of capital funds to rebuild the plaza. With this milestone achieved, the Museum redoubled its efforts and has developed an ambitious suite of public programs in the Plaza in partnership with local cultural groups and folkloric performers, as well as artists and social practitioners interested in the site's potential as a participatory planning platform. Throughout 2013, the Museum and its partners worked to engage local stakeholders to develop a set of priorities for the redesign of the Plaza, which culminated in 2015 with a final design approved by the city's design commission. This effort has dovetailed with the ongoing initiative, led by the museum's Corona Plaza Programs Coordinator, to train local groups on the technical aspects of producing their own public programs in the Plaza, as well as with the beginnings of an effort to establish a civic committee responsible for taking over leadership of the Plaza's programming. Construction of the new public plaza is set to begin in 2016.

Institution-Wide Impacts

Our community engagement efforts in Corona allowed us to garner the attention of new funders to widen our efforts. For example, the J.M. Kaplan Foundation chose the museum to participate in the NYC Immigrants & Parks collaborative and hire a Parks Outreach Fellow, Gabriel Roldós, who worked on such issues as: addressing language and communication barriers to accessing parks facilities; navigating the special events, sports fields, and vending permitting

process; and ensuring that culturally relevant programming takes place. Regardless of background, neighbors rely on parks for recreation, strengthening social ties, and improving physical and emotional well-being. QM's efforts in Corona's local parks, including the flagship Flushing Meadows Corona Park (FMCP) where the Museum is located, aim to ensure that our city's open spaces are democratic, are representative of neighbors' wants and needs, and serve as relevant resources for all New Yorkers. This work is currently carried on by our community organizer Jose Serrano-McClain who in 2015 developed a partnership with the non-profit Design Trust for Public Space to engage two design professionals to work with local residents in the planning, design, and stewardship of FMCP. Through a series of educational workshops and open neighborhood forums, community members are developing new proposals for how the access, connectivity, and circulation of this regional destination can better serve the public's needs.

Furthermore, it was not just the Public Events department that was inspired to shift its focus towards working with the local community. With additional multi-year funding from both private foundations and federal grants, QM's Education Department embarked on an ambitious set of programs for new Queens to go with their well-established programs in primary school arts education and art therapy. This initiative called *New New Yorkers Education Program* centered on a long-term collaboration with the Queens Library system, an international model for immigrant programming. The program provides free bilingual multi-session workshops such as digital photography in Spanish or Web Design in Mandarin. Unlike traditional English literacy programs, *New New Yorkers* classes emphasize creative expression of complex, personal, aesthetic, and social ideas, rather than focus solely on practical situations. These communication skills help participants feel more confident in sharing their opinions and communicating with those outside their communities. Visual literacy skills learned through the classes also help participants engage more fully with exhibitions and cultural events at the QM and other cultural institutions throughout the city. The program continues to be one of our most popular, with classes filling up almost immediately after they are announced. Alumni from the classes help decide on future classes offered

and are currently developing a formal group to organize their own activities and programs. In addition, the New New Yorkers Program has conducted surveys of museum attendees leading to the development of a Queens Museum Friends Committee comprised of ESOL learners whose voices had rarely been heard at the table because of language barriers. This group has specifically identified a need for enhanced life skills and language acquisition as key to their advancement. They also cited a sense of cultural isolation, saying they would welcome opportunities for social integration through work with other ethnicities on projects and to better understand their cultures. This collaboration was so mutually successful that Queens Museum will soon have a branch of the Queens Public Library in its expanded facilities in 2017, further expanding possibilities for how these two public institutions can develop new models of working together.

On the exhibitions side, our Curatorial Department was eager to build upon our successful track record of interactive, socially engaged art practice in Corona and to serve as a laboratory for the creation and presentation of socially collaborative art. They conceived of *Launch Pad*, an exhibition program exploring the novel use of our on- and off-site spaces. *Launch Pad* is built upon re-thinking the Museum as being more than an institution that collects and exhibits art objects, but also a location for interchange amongst museum staff, artists, and community members around particular socio-political phenomena. The Residency Program offered two artists each year a six-month residency with an artists' workspace, full access to Museum staff and resources along with a stipend.

One example of how *Launch Pad* residencies took advantage of QM's staff expertise in community engagement was the project of artist Damon Rich, co-founder of the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP) and an urban designer based in Newark, NJ. His *Red Lines Housing Crisis Learning Center (2009)* collected the history and material culture behind the subprime mortgage crisis of 2007. A nationwide banking emergency was created by high-interest and high risk mortgage-backed securities that defaulted when housing prices decreased, resulting in a recession from which the United States is still emerging.



Red Lines Housing Crisis Learning Center (2009). Courtesy of Queens Museum

The project created an experimental site for reflection and learning on a very complicated economic subject that affected everyone. A highlight of the exhibition was an intervention into the Museum's famed architectural model of New York, the *Panorama of the City of New York*, where thousands of small plastic markers were placed on every block that experienced three or more foreclosed homes (based on 2008 data). Viewers were able to see instantly that the crisis was not evenly spread throughout the city, but concentrated on the very same neighborhoods that had been denied access to credit in past through discriminatory lending practices. QM leveraged the depth of research and excitement around the *Red Lines* exhibition to reach out to organizations and individuals in the community who were already doing something about the housing crisis. We made special efforts to reach out to neighborhoods in Queens and Brooklyn where limited English proficiency and lack of economic literacy attracted predatory lenders. QM's *Red Lines* programming helped audiences understand the scope of the crisis as well as how to avoid being caught up in it.

QM's community organizer in 2009, Alexandra García, had experience in housing activism that was a critical asset in being able to fully utilize the exhibition as a catalyst for education and organizing around the mortgage crisis. Her efforts were essential in slowly and patiently winning over those who were skeptical of how an art museum might help them do the job of fighting to improve their community. She oversaw arrangements for two bilingual off-site Town Halls, each involving nearly a dozen housing organizations, elected officials, neighborhood groups, and service providers in a public discussion about housing and foreclosure issues in the hard-hit neighborhoods of Queens.

The Museum's efforts also resulted in significant media exposure on how the mortgage crisis was not just a question of individual families losing their homes, but also represented the "theft of wealth" from low- and middle-income people in African American and immigrant neighborhoods. The stunning visual display of the foreclosures on the Panorama, the "map of tragedy" created a unique visual draw that proved appealing to the *New York Times* and other papers. Perhaps the highlight was an in-depth story on public television's *NewsHour* that featured

the exhibit, but then spread out through our community networks into Queens to meet individuals affected by the housing meltdown.

Furthermore, having a community organizer onboard helped us to build upon the collaborations even beyond the timeframe of the artist project itself. For example organizations that participated in our town halls continued working with us, co-sponsoring the block rehabilitation event, *My Block, My Home*, that took place in 2010 on 107th Street in Corona, in which over 100 volunteers rehabbed homes, cleaned the block, distributed free plants, and celebrated a mural project to commemorate the upcoming building of a visitors center at the famous jazz musician Louis Armstrong's house located on the block.

Next Steps

While we have had some modest successes in our efforts, QM has found that we can increase the effectiveness of our programs and remain responsive to shifting priorities by spending time listening to participants' feedback, engaging in personal reflection, and being honest about our challenges. Our program development is an iterative process, one that we hope allows for innovation to come from a variety of voices and which respects the complexity of the neighborhood in which we hope to play a constructive role. For example, after two years worth of *Corona Plaza: Center of Everywhere* projects and several *Launch Pad* residencies, we took time to collect feedback from the community, collaborators, and artists. First, many of the projects deemed most successful both by community members and the artists themselves were those by Spanish-speaking artists. Feedback also indicated that meaningful participation of the community in the projects would necessitate longer residencies. Some artists wanted access to a dedicated physical space within Corona. Based on our reflective dialogue, we went back to the drawing board to develop the next generation of projects in Corona: *Taller Corona* or *Corona Studio*, with support from the Rockefeller Foundation's NYC Cultural Innovations Grant. Neither a traditional residency nor a commission, *Corona Studio* collected a roster of eight proposals in which two to four artists were chosen to undertake a year-long to multi-year project-based residency based in and engaging with community

partners in Corona. Simultaneously in 2013, QM developed a partnership with nearby Queens College to develop a Masters in Fine Art program in Social Practice that would reach beyond the traditional space of the studio and directly into the public arena and everyday life. Corona Studio artists' projects would provide up-close examples of social practice in which students could experience and participate directly.

In 2011 the first of these year-long artist projects began, in collaboration with the veteran public art organization Creative Time. Cuban artist Tania Bruguera, who primarily works in behavior art (*arte de conducta*), performance, video, and installation, used Corona as the launch point for a multi-year, multi-site project *Immigrant Movement International* (IMI). Bruguera lived and worked in the neighborhood with a base of operations in a storefront space on Roosevelt Avenue. She set up an interactive, relational art project that is simultaneously a multi-year performance, a community center and a think tank on the role and image of immigrants in the 21st century. With QM's Community Organizer, she connected with local elected officials, immigrant services and advocacy organizations, immigrant law specialists, and leaders of various immigrant communities.

Four years after the launch of her project, the bustling storefront space is still active, hosting such programs as: English classes with a "Know Your Rights" focus for day laborers; rehearsals of the Corona Youth Music Ensemble—inspired by Venezuela's national free music program "El Sistema" that emphasizes group learning and youth development; Mobile Print Power, a project on neighborhood research utilizing a mobile screenprinting unit; regular immigration legal consultations; and nurturing an ongoing conversation about the "usefulness" of art. IMI had always been imagined as transitioning over time into the control of a steering committee of users and community leaders. Since 2013, this has been the main focus of our work, and currently we have about 15 community leaders ranging from 12 to 70 years of age, who have been directing the project with the support of the QM. They received a multi-session popular education training and attended organizational structure strategy meetings over the course of 4 months. Since our community is comprised mainly of working



Banner of the Immigrant Movement International. Courtesy of Queens Museum

class new immigrants with varying levels of formal education, it is very important for us to make sure that we are supporting our emerging leaders by providing training opportunities and staff support. We know that immigrants from all socio-economic backgrounds have something to offer, not just in physical labor, but also in creativity, imagination and intellectual contributions. We need to further their ongoing political, pedagogical, and organizing education, as well as develop a greater focus on key organizing themes, both local and city-wide. We will be developing three main organizing goals for 2015-16 in a strategic planning retreat, and there is already funding in place for those three thematic areas to be supported by social practice artist projects, as well as outside trainers.

Conclusion

In the previous sections I have tried to provide some examples of the evolution of QM's experiments in arts-based community engagement over the course



Printing Power Mobile Unit in Corona Plaza. Courtesy of Queens Museum

of more than 10 years. In that process, in no way have we put aside the commitment to our role as a fine arts collecting and exhibiting institution. Rather, we have attempted to apply the same sort of imagination, experimentation, and resources to community engagement as we do to the galleries. In fact our work in our neighborhoods and in the galleries continues to merge productively on a regular basis. For example, in 2014 we organized the first retrospective exhibition on the work of the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD), an activist theater group that has been working with the homeless and recovering addicts community in Los Angeles's skid row for the past 30 years. They participated in a several month-long collaboration with Drogadictos Anonimos (DA), a Queens-based recovery community for Latinos. Our Community Organizer facilitated this "residency" to have LAPD train DA members in their methodology, culminating in the presentation of a full-length play in Spanish, and series of discussions on national drug policy.

This article is not meant to provide other arts institutions with a roadmap to community engagement in their own locales. Even after several years of development, many of these initiatives are still very much in-progress and constantly evolving to different political moments and opportunities. The city-wide interest in our approach is evidenced by the fact that in 2014, Bill deBlasio the newly appointed mayor of NYC appointed our Director Tom Finkelppearl to become the commissioner for the City's Department of Cultural Affairs, the largest public arts funding body in the entire country. Ironically, while these programs were not conceived as audience development, another marker of clear success is that the museum is now livelier, more active, and better attended than ever. That being said, the Museum is still straddling old and new Queens, seeing the two blur through a range of business deals, intermarriages, social bonding, and shared struggles. Our own institution is in flux, reinventing itself both socially and physically, trying to stay fluid in one of the quickest changing places in America.



Naila Rosario

Queens Museum
Community Organizer,
2006–2009



Unlike any other initiatives that I've worked on in the past, this one involves everyone from the single immigrant parent to the well-to-do business owner. I have come to realize both the challenges and the rewards of coalition building. The importance of inclusiveness as a value in organizing was the biggest lesson. I was initially apprehensive that the community would be suspicious of why an arts organization would be so involved in local community business, but the consistency and regular activities, as well as seeing some positive results helped change their minds (...), so that they really felt the institution was for them and not just for trendy art crowds. I have also challenged myself to see how artists and artmaking can be a valuable tool in building neighborhood identity and getting disparate groups to work together. Through the public art projects we have been able to engage the community around the very definition of what art is. Previously, I wasn't aware of the impact that art can have on community development. For example, in the past I would walk past a community mural and just see a nice picture. Now I walk past that mural and see the different stakeholders in the community that came together to make it possible.

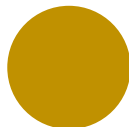


Tom Finkelpearl

Director of the
Queens Museum



The advice that I would convey to others who are interested in this sort of initiative would be: Focus your efforts very narrowly at first, then spread out, and secondly, make sure that the skill-sets of the key people involved in the initiative include actual on-the-street organizing. People in the arts have a great set of communicative tools at their disposal. But translating these tools into a community-based project that has a chance to make a lasting impact takes a different set of skills, which can be found in a person's community organizing background. When we devised the *Leadership Through the Arts* project and talked about the possibilities of working at the intersection of community development, activism and the arts, I did not understand how profound the project would be for the museum. We have found that there is no substitute for interpersonal exchange and that building trust is hard work. Years could pass with slow progress before the true symptoms of change began to show on the surface.





John Haworth

Senior Executive, National Museum
of the American Indian, New
York, Smithsonian Institution

Participatory Culture: the Museum as a Forum for Dialogue and Collaboration

The Participatory Museum Conference in Russia was an opportunity for me to reflect on my professional work with community-based and other cultural organizations since the 1970s, with a special emphasis on the National Museum of the American Indian's work since its founding in 1989. This article expands on my presentation (by Skype) to museum colleagues in Russia at the November 2014 conference, with a focus on some of the philosophical and policy issues and related challenges faced by the museum field throughout the world. This also is a conceptual framework for Dialogue and Community Collaboration. I draw upon experiences working at the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI)¹ the last two decades, as well as the strategies and approaches other museums, cultural and service organization have taken.

Within the context of both policy and operational challenges, it is important to examine and review particular methodologies that museums have used in collaborating with other civic organizations. Museums and other cultural organizations have many opportunities to take proactive and meaningful roles within their communities. In order for such efforts to be successful, however, it is critically important for our field to find ways to be more deeply engaged with the

¹ The National Museum of the American Indian has three locations: museums in Washington, DC, and New York City, and our Cultural Resources Center in Suitland, Maryland, just outside of Washington. The Center is a facility which houses our collection and also serves as a gathering place for Native American communities whose cultures are represented in our collections.



Native Sounds Downtown (August 7, 2008) featuring I Ka Wēkiu
Photo by Stephen Lang © Copyright Smithsonian Institution
Photo courtesy of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian

diverse constituencies we have the obligation and privilege of serving. Becoming more deeply involved with diverse communities is a central feature to being effective participants in the broader discourse in our communities.

For participatory approaches to succeed there must be a focused organizational commitment to specific initiatives. This work requires a commitment to programmatic, operational and financial planning, along with an articulation of what community service means for an organization. Without such institutional and leadership commitments, participatory work cannot move out of a theoretical framework. Imagining and implementing effective visitor service and outreach initiatives, and connecting and collaborating with community partner organizations, requires a significant and well-coordinated effort. Such approaches demand that we understand the communities we intend to serve and how best to collaborate with a larger supportive network. In a practical

sense, this work demands that our staff develop new skills for working effectively with partner organizations, whether educators, cultural promotional agencies, or local civic organizations.

Many museums around the globe are making efforts to go beyond their usual boundaries, geographic and otherwise, and making serious efforts to serve more diverse audiences and to engage ever broader constituencies through what they do. The input of community perspective in cultural institutions is important, yet the methodologies and practices that museums use to become more engaged with specific communities are complex. In this collaborative, community-based, culturally-informed, participatory-focused practice, much has been written about the underlying political theory and aesthetic questions, which certainly informs and grounds the work and with an emphasis on the “what and why” questions. It also is imperative to give attention to the challenges of implementation (the “how” questions) in carrying out this work.

Let us consider some of the ways for cultural organizations to serve their visitors:

- 1 Programmatic and curatorial approaches**, including animating public spaces; re-thinking the “surround” of how exhibitions and programs are organized with greater emphasis on complementary activities which engage visitors (e.g. apps, visitor guides, enhanced tours, more in-depth and meaningful educational programs); deeper site interpretation work. Each incremental activity requires resources, both financial and human, as well as time and space considerations. Museums should carefully consider which of these activities maximize the visitor experience and strengthen the institution’s standing and reputation with defined constituencies.
- 2 Participatory approaches**, including how museums go about involving communities by inviting community stakeholders, including artists, for their input on curatorial work (including advising on which programs and exhibitions are presented, as well as shared curatorial input on key decisions); and facilitated dialogue and conversation both for the general

public and targeted constituencies, whether about particular exhibitions, works of art and artifacts, as well as facilitating discourse about complex topics explicitly or implicitly included.

Carl Gustav Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist, did extensive work in analytical psychology, with references to “deepening the authentic”. Many visitors to museum are looking for deeper experiences in order to better comprehend complex ideas through the arts, history, science and other fields of inquiry. Isn’t this what museums aspire to do? Museums, at their best, have opportunities to tell the truth, add perspective to the human experience, and challenge our preconceptions and biases. Over the last decades, on the global level, there has been a re-interpretation of public spaces, including museums, and an attempt to create immersive, highly interactive spaces. Often, interactive and participatory experiences impede rather than advance depth and illumination. For Jungians, memories, dreams, and reflections anchor their work. As museum professionals who are also educators, it helps to think about these deeper meanings and to create atmospheres that involve and connect people beyond the surface levels. Think of involvement and participation in these four areas: thinking, feeling, sensation, instinct. The imagination itself is a form of intelligence, and through our commitments to participatory work, we can cultivate the imagination as we serve our visitors, both intellectually and emotionally.

Museums as “animated spaces”

In practical terms, thinking about key challenges in this area, there are many questions for our consideration: What are some of the best practices in the museum field? What are the related policy issues museums and other cultural organizations currently face? Vetting complex issues (both within museums as well as with external players) can be especially challenging. Plus, most museums lack the resources and capacity to deal with politically-charged discourse on such complex questions. This work can be far too intense for many cultural organizations. Visitors to museums themselves have different views about issues and come from diverse backgrounds and their own social, political, personal, religious and cultural backgrounds and views come into



Alexander Hamilton U.S. Custom House, home of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, George Gustav Heye Center
Photo courtesy of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian

play. And, while museums can take a close look at history from multiple and informed perspectives, it is important that we are rigorous in our scholarship and thoughtful about what programs we present and think carefully how such programs are presented to our visitors. Aspiring to be an open forum and reaching visitors who come from diverse backgrounds with a variety of perspectives are key to working respectfully and effectively with diverse audiences, and most especially in reaching family audiences in meaningful ways.

On the international level, especially over the last three decades, there have been tremendous changes within the museum field. Through the forum provided by the International Council of Museum (ICOM), as well as the dynamics locally throughout the world, the professional museum practice has broadened.

How do we strike a balance in serving broad audiences and continuing to serve key constituencies, including students, tourists, local residents and other sectors? How do we even define who our key constituencies are and go about engaging them in what we do at our museums? What are our particular challenges in presenting meaningful public programs, exhibitions, performances and educational programs? How do we care for community cultural property in meaningful ways and what are the particular vexing challenges? What does it mean to do culturally-grounded work?

Many museums—most especially ones focused on interpreting a specific place or a specific culture—must deal with a wide and complex range of issues of cultural authority, most especially in how different cultures are represented. How do museums provide meaningful cultural context and engage these diverse constituencies? And, how do museums do this in a way to attract the public attention and resources needed to carry out this work? And, since so many museums throughout the world are supported by government funding or sponsorship, how do museums provide meaningful discourse about complex issues within the context of the support they receive?

All the major shifts in the museum field, have taken place within the context of broader global changes, including technology, the environment, political gridlock, social media, political organizing (think: Arab Spring, Pussy Riot, Occupy Wall Street, the intensity and often violence of political conflicts recently in Gaza and the US-Mexico border, among others). Many museums would not necessarily get directly involved in such discourse in direct ways; however, it is important that museum professionals have a grounded understanding of such complex issues.

Cultural institutions, the academy, media, public intellectuals, artists and others throughout the public sphere have been engaged in what has been called “densely argued cultural politics” (often loud, often contentious, always opinionated, usually passionate) in a highly charged and complicated political environment—have debated many of the issues museums similar to the ones

NMAI deals with on a daily basis, engaged in this broader dialogue. Indeed, cultural institutions focusing on one artistic discipline or a particular collecting aesthetic are not as directly engaged in such issues overtly; however, museums frequently add to a broader and deeper public understanding of complexity through the work they do.

In NMAI's start-up years in the early 1990s, we were guided by the planning document "The Way of the People", a Master Facilities Programming Report, issued in November 1991 (Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates, Philadelphia). Artist Rena Swentzell articulated the philosophical groundwork for NMAI in her words from the preamble of this report: "Common understandings which stem from our traditional world. We are part of an organic world; embrace cycles of this organic world (cycles of the sky, water, earth). Sense of time is natural continuum where past, present and future are interrelated; interconnectedness within this organic world, "reciprocal networks of hospitality connect our families, extended families, tribes and nations; "distinct peoples through centuries of opposition and forced assimilation". We are sovereign, adaptive and thriving communities of people.

This report posed the question: what to do with one of the world's greatest collections of artifacts, books and archival materials related to Native peoples of the western hemisphere? This report summarized the decades of debate and planning regarding the NMAI's mission, programs and buildings and served as a guide for NMAI in how it would interact with Native communities throughout the hemisphere. The report articulated what became the foundation of the museum's policies and methodologies. The examination of cultural and historical context grounded the museum's work far more than a focus on hierarchical aesthetics and connoisseurship.

Exhibition examples

The exhibition *Infinity of Nations: Art and History in the Collections of the National Museum of the American Indian* makes a significant point, with clear historical and material evidence, namely, that contrary to the myth that the Americas were

an empty wilderness for the taking (by Europeans), these lands were populated by indigenous people who had been here for a very long time.

In the first room of this comprehensive hemispheric collections-based exhibition, we include a group of headdresses. “These headdresses, symbols of ability and achievement for specific cultures throughout the Western Hemisphere, represent the right of the Native peoples of the Americas to govern and instruct themselves according to their own customs, beliefs, and laws—the cultural and political sovereignty of—an infinity of nations.”

These are some of the approaches we used in developing *Infinity of Nations*:

- NMAI engaged external scholars and community specialists;
- The interactive (touch screens) were carefully and strategically placed within the exhibition. (It is noted that in previous exhibitions, the interactive screens were placed inside the cases alongside the art and artifacts. Some of our critics thought that having such interactives within museum cases distracted—even confused—museum visitors;
- NMAI incorporated both Museum “Ambassador” (docents) and Native Cultural Interpreters as central to engaging visitors;
- We organized extensive educational outreach with teachers and classrooms;
- The exhibition labels provided historical context of the artifacts, as well as interpretation of the contemporary works of art presented within the same exhibition cases;
- Another exhibition (Circle of Dance) on another floor in the museum complemented the Infinity of Nations exhibition; the museum very intentionally worked to engage indigenous communities and included extensive video documentation of community dances and ceremonies, as well as collecting some of the dance outfits included in the exhibition.

For the retrospective exhibition of the Native American photographer Horace Poolaw in 2014, the museum invited family members and cultural specialists



Infinity of Nations Headdresses Gallery
Photo by David Sundberg/Esto © Copyright Smithsonian Institution
Photo courtesy of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian

to participate in developing the exhibition and a related publication, public programs, and the symposium; their input informed both the content of the exhibition and related programs, and the design and layout of the exhibition and publication.

These are some of the approaches we used to “animate” public spaces in presenting museum programs:

- The museum presents many of its programs out of doors in our local urban neighborhood (rather than inside the museum). This affords us the opportunity to reach new audiences while animating the urban environment.
- The museum has worked with a local arts council, the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, in commissioning artists. The choreographer Tom Pearson developed a site-specific dance piece in response to the art work inside our

building. The work both engaged a family audience and contextualized the historically-significant murals in a large public room.

- The museum presents highly animated performances annually, including a Children's Festival and Day of the Dead programs for family audiences.
- The museum has organized artist-in-residency programs to provide opportunities for the public to speak with artists, participate in workshops, and learn about their artistic practice.

Global context of NMAI

NMAI's development, most especially between 1994 and 2004, was on a parallel track with a huge global emphasis on indigenous collections and museums, a time when many extraordinary museums around the world opened.

The Museum of New Zealand *Te Papa Tongarewa* (meaning "Our Place" which opened in 1998) focuses on the narratives of culture and place and the institutional commitment to bicultural partnership and being a forum emphasizing multidisciplinary collaboration and diversity; National Museum of Australia (opened in 2001) based in part on the idea that visitors to Australia might be more interested in thousands of years of aboriginal history than necessarily the previous 200-year history of European settlers; Canadian Museum of Civilization's First Peoples Hall (opened in 2003) with extensive programming about and by the history and accomplishment of Aboriginal peoples in Canada; the Museum of the American West in Los Angeles (with material from the Autry Museum of Western Heritage and the Southwest Museum of the American Indian) presenting the artifacts of Hollywood movies, the heritage of the American West and objects from a world-class collection associated with Indian tribes, and in Paris, the Musée de la Ville de Paris (opened in 2006), which brought together collections from the now closed National Museum of African and Oceanic Art along with the ethnographic collections of the Museum of Mankind; and my institution, the National Museum of the American Indian, which opened in Washington, DC, in 2004, ten years after opening its permanent museum in New York City.

All of these institutions are significant and focused on cultural relations, the “insider” voice, which also underscores complicated issues related to the interpretation and display of Native art and cultural material, and where Native communities intersect with the ever complex political and global world.

Beyond the day-to-day work that museum professionals do, we need to take into account the political, social, historical, and cultural discourse that informs key issues. The challenges can sometimes be overwhelming. Following 9/11—an event that was especially difficult for my colleagues in NYC, especially given our close proximity to Ground Zero—there were complex political dynamics on a global level. The NY-based writer and public intellectual Susan Sontag was harshly criticized in many quarters about her brief essay published in *The New Yorker* shortly after 9/11. Essentially, she asked us to become more informed, to look more analytically at the particular context of the situation, and go beyond what she called the “self-righteous drivel and out-right deceptions being peddled” by both elected leaders and mainstream media. She advocated for a democracy which entails disagreement and promotes candor. To become engaged in this complex civic discourse, as individuals, we must do our level best to become informed about the issues of our times.

Another public intellectual Lionel Trilling, whose essay “The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent” was the title of a collection of his essays articulates that while it is important to be informed about important matters, the higher level is to bring passion to our intelligence to make it matter. Indeed, as museum professionals, it helps to understand what is going on in our communities from multiple perspectives. Though the challenges are enormous in this area, it is important for cultural organizations to be both focused and intentional in their work illuminating the most complicated issues of our era. As a practical matter, how do we incorporate such thinking into our professional practice?

For most of the exhibitions my museum organizes, the related publication includes commissioned essays by cultural professionals, both scholars and community experts (most typically selected by curators, researchers, and



Day of the Dead performance in the Rotunda with Danza Mexica Cetiliztli Nauhcampa, October 31, 2009
Photo by Stephen Lang © Copyright Smithsonian Institution
Photo courtesy of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian

program specialists on staff). Our Media Initiatives organizes in-depth specialized interviews with Native cultural experts that provide the media content that is incorporated in the exhibitions and the website. NMAI also has developed special interactive multimedia programs, accessible through on-site computers that integrate full-motion video with graphics, sound, and text. Available for school teachers, students and the public, these interactive programs are paired with handling collections to form what we call Discovery Boxes. We house a collection of “handling objects” ranging from cradleboards, Native American toys, a buffalo hide and beadwork. These are all methodologies for engaging different audiences differently.

Indeed, museums must consider these complex issues, but to bring the focus to a more practical day-to-day working level, what are the approaches, techniques and skills we need to engage and represent diverse communities? As we focus

on our visitors, let's also consider several other requirements that collecting institutions have, in terms of how and what we collect and how interpretative decisions are made. For collecting institutions, there are clear connections between our collections and the types of experiences our visitors have at our institutions. Museums must determine how best to collect contemporary items of all sorts, from works of contemporary art to the artifacts, photographs, documents and ephemera. (In my 2012 presentation [subsequently published by MuCEM] in Marseilles, France, I used the phrase "Collecting the Present" as important for museums to illuminate the issues and concerns of today and tomorrow).

NMAI, as a museum with a culturally-grounded perspective, breaks with well-established ethnographic cannons, and gives "voice" to indigenous people, a commitment articulated through all that we do. By collecting the present and interpreting historically-significant objects in new and different ways, the museum assures that their perspectives are brought forth quite deliberately and directly. The realization is that museums are places for engaging audiences in meaningful contemporary discourse informed by the past, yet committed to the present and future.

Indeed, objects—things—help us understand broader cultural matters and they are tools to help reveal deeper things about cultures. Objects are visual aids; objects illuminate ideas; objects give us new information; objects inspire us. Yet thinking beyond the "thing"—oral histories, media, film, moving image, documents, manuscripts, paper archives, ephemera as well as contemporary art and expression all complement a richer and deeper cultural understanding. There are some significant institutional challenges about collecting the present, though most certainly, they are tools.

NMAI evolved into a cultural institution that celebrates the story, honors cultural continuity, gives voice to diverse cultural expression in a variety of media, and whose work is deeply informed and articulated from a Native American perspective. This perspective advances the idea that every object—whether a ledger drawing, weaving, basket, or abstract painting—and every song, poem

and dance reveals something important about a culture, about a people. The NMAI is not a cultural institution that simply hangs works of art on the wall or puts objects in cases for the public to see. Rather, the focus is on the cultural and historical context of the expressive cultures of Native communities. The idea of collecting the present is certainly core to the museum's work and how it is accomplished. Essentially, the museum is an international culture center of living cultures, with extensive use of contemporary material.

Museum collections and objects relate to contemporary concerns

In the Infinity of Nations exhibition, NMAI placed ledger drawings in close proximity to a large buffalo hide. This juxtaposition brings greater attention to the historical circumstances during a period of tremendous social change. In another display case, there is a Victorian wedding dress which had been worn by Susetta LaFlesche, the educated and accomplished wife of Chief Standing Bear. Questions are posed about this significant artifact: Who was this woman who wore this dress? What can we learn about the historical period? What is the deeper story NMAI organized public programs that specifically addressed these questions.

Museums have opportunities to build greater public awareness about culturally sensitive materials, especially in terms of finding ways to engage the public. In NMAI's exhibition Identity by Design: Tradition, Change, and Celebration in Native Women's Dresses, there were outfits on view from a broad cross-section of tribes and geographies. A section of the exhibition included dresses worn for the Ghost Dance, certainly a topic that has deep political and cultural, even sacred meaning. Given the historical significance of the cultural and religious discourse related to this sad chapter in my country's history (along with the cultural meaning in the Ghost Dance and these particular dresses), it was important for the museum to get input (and permission) from Native cultural specialists about particular cultural sensitivities. Seeing these garments within the larger cultural contexts added tremendous power to what our visitors experienced seeing in the exhibition. The Ghost Dance represented a rejection of mainstream ideas of "civilization", including the uses of weapons and technology used as tools to assimilate and convert the Indians, essentially stripping away their culture, their

customs, and their lives. Some dresses were especially sensitive, since there were visible bullet holes in some garments.

The NMAI developed thoughtful text panels and label copy and had signage in the gallery alerting visitors to the nature of this area of the exhibition. This was a way to give cultural respect to the objects (and the people who wore these dresses) and also allowed the museum to show these garments respectfully. Such methods also serve to encourage visitors to be more actively engaged in more serious discourse.

For the opening reception of this exhibition we invited the Kiowa War Mothers, a group of women from Western Oklahoma who sang and danced for over an hour in a large public space. Their black battle dresses are worn only by the female relatives of the male warriors from their community (though women currently also serve in U.S. armed forces) and by wearing the dress and singing and dancing in it, the women honor the sacrifices made. This program illuminated complex cultural issues through the power of a unique community perspective.

Reflecting on this approach at the NMAI, the major political, social and economic threats and issues important to indigenous people informs our work (e.g. clear cutting of traditional indigenous homeland in the Amazon, devastating losses in indigenous Arctic villages as a result of severe climate changes, and the ongoing challenges of cultural survival, protecting languages and cultures during a time of armed conflicts and severe economic dislocation, poverty and disease in many traditional tribal homelands). In the last quarter century, coinciding with all of this, there has been extensive work to establish internationally-recognized museums focusing on the arts and culture, history and stories of indigenous peoples.

Many museums, especially those established since the 1980s, have changed their approaches to collecting, presenting exhibitions and public programs and how audiences are engaged. As a field, museums have developed better methods for presenting both the tangible and intangible cultural material which

represents far broader, more diverse cultures, with far greater attention to the social and historical context of both what is presented to the public and what topics and materials are researched. There is a vast body of scholarly work that frames this particular discourse regarding the issues of representation, multiculturalism, visual display and cultural activism.

Culturally-focused museums that establish and maintain meaningful ties to their communities are well positioned to function as forums for the culturally-specific communities they represent as well as the broader, ever more diverse audiences they serve. Developing effective methodologies for reaching audiences and animating cultural spaces in a civic context are key.

Giving greater emphasis to the historic and cultural context, the “stories the objects help convey”, along with providing a platform for multiple perspectives is core to this approach, and certainly moves museums, beyond what most museums in the past have done. Globally speaking, museums are moving far beyond caring for the “cabinets of curiosities” as the concepts of what is and what should be collected has expanded, along with interpretive and audience strategies. While museums have great potential to provide audiences with a more informed understanding of the past, we have an urgency to illuminate the issues and concerns of today and tomorrow. Finding the balance between the obligation of preserving and interpreting the past while moving forward to collect the present is very much in play.

In order for this work to be done well, it is essential that museums also determine how best to collect the present, that is, contemporary items of all sorts, from works of contemporary art to the artifacts, photographs, documents and ephemera related to each institution’s purpose, topics of particular interest, including current events judged likely to have historical significance in the future. Establishing collection priorities, incorporating appropriate collection management strategies and determining methodologies for interpretation, public access and display and related programs are all labor-intensive tasks that require extraordinary skill and an institutional commitment. This kind of interdisciplinary approach is also

complicated to implement, and identifying both the staffing and financial resources to carry out this work effectively and well is a tall order for most museums.

Tools for reaching audiences through community engagement and interpretative strategies

There has been a trend, especially these last decades, for institutions to be more deeply engaged in a discourse related to political and social issues, from environmental policy to language preservation, and from cultural identity issues to race relations. There are museums that relate to particular international events, genocide, war, slavery, human rights, terrorism, migration, and cultural memory, and there has been significant increases in the number of museums and cultural centers around the world that are culturally-specific. In addressing such matters on meaningful levels, museums and historic sites, the practice has been to involve specialists with strong community identities and culturally-informed perspectives and enlist their help in what to collect and how collections are used for the public benefit, whether research, education or public display.

Indeed, “exhibitions are not just composed of objects on display; they are essays spread out in space. They need to be analyzed in detail” (meaning everything about exhibitions, including wall texts). “It is only by careful study of texts and objects, only by dissecting the exhibition’s principles of organization and implication, that conclusions (and delusions) can become clear. Such exhibitions combine two different approaches: the visual impact or historical importance of its objects, as well as the use being made of them.”² Indeed, museums have points of view, and many embrace an ideological stand or advance a particular argument about a topic. Museums can be contentious; “they make arguments; they should expect them in return.”

NMAI’s 2007 exhibition *Off the Map: Landscape in the Native Imagination* explored the complex relationship between Native art and the representation of the landscape, and included deeply personal and political works of

² Edward Rothstein’s New York Times [article](#) “Extreme Museums: The Rigors of Contemplation” published October 21, 2011.

contemporary art, with some work addressing cultural marginalization. My museum scheduled films and discussed related to the environmental topics, and took the opportunity to have dialogue about the environment. For the 2010—2011 exhibition HIDE: Skin as Material and Metaphor, the artist Nadia Myre (Anishinaabe) engaged the public in sharing intensely personal stories about complex chapters in their lives both in words and sewn onto cloth pieces which were subsequently installed in the exhibition gallery. Her artistic practice was a way to document and compile stories from our visitors.

Contemporary art can be incredibly sophisticated from a formal perspective, but a lot of the work is a running commentary on issues that matter—whether it is the environment, the issues in tribal communities, the relationships (sometime tensions) between tribal communities and the mainstream, commentary about stereotypes and correcting the wrong assumptions and fixed ideas many people have. Yes, the art work can be hung on a wall or installed, yet creating a lively forum for a deeper discuss prompted by the art work and informed by artists broadens the public impact.

Erika Doss, one of the most informed writers about public memorials and commemorations, whose book *Memorial Mania*, puts in sharp focus the anxiety about both who and what should be remembered, especially regarding particular narratives in my country about our diverse social and political agendas. Developing memorials, culturally-grounded cultural institutions and comprehensive multiple-perspective exhibitions, and for museums, resisting the temptation to develop exhibitions, not “books on a wall”, while understanding that such spaces are repositories of feelings, emotions and particular points of view. How are sociopolitical and cultural concerns negotiated?

Robert Croonquist, a retired New York City public school teacher, helped organize the Hibakusha Stories project about the legacy of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki both to honor the survivors, commemorate the events honestly, and to bring greater public attention to the complexity of nuclear weapons of mass destruction. The visual arts, poetry and storyteller were all

incorporated into this deeper cultural work. When the Brooklyn Botanic Garden presented a related program event “Giving of Thanks and a Setting of Intentions” at their annual spring blossoming of the cherry trees, we are all reminded, as so poignantly and beautifully expressed by the Hibakusha Stories that “it is irresponsible to show children the face of war without giving them reason to hope and reason to care and without giving them the tools they will need to create a bright future.” In order to move to this sphere, however, it is critical that we work very hard to grasp complex issues from multiple perspectives.

Service and membership organizations like ICOM and International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, a network of historic sites, provide museum and related professionals with a global forum for discussing these complex matters, and for providing the techniques and strategies for serving diverse constituencies. Its global network of historic sites all have an “always remember, never forget” message. By interpreting history through historic sites, such places can engage people on a deeper level about human rights issues, and help us remember past struggles for justice and address their contemporary legacies. This organization is committed to encouraging dialogue on social issues and promoting humanitarian and democratic values. They help initiate new conversations about contemporary issues looking through a historical lens, and they encourage a higher degree of citizen participation in meaningful, constructive ways. These museums and sites relate complicated and layered narratives, often the stories of atrocities and genocide. This work is never easy. Addressing xenophobia and exclusion in parts of the world is a huge challenge, as is promoting cultures of peace and pluralism in the wake of ethnic and religious conflict. For Indian Boarding and Residential Schools, there is the challenge of finding effective and meaningful ways to talk about diverse legacies of the past.

Finding ways to teach and talk about genocide, displacement (including ethnic cleansing), human trafficking and slavery, racism, state terrorism, sweatshops, political repression and totalitarianism requires leadership which is both informed and committed. Asking the right questions—what happened here? How it is remembered? What was the world’s response to the matter?—moves the

conversations forward in meaningful ways. These sites include the National Civic Rights Museum located at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated; the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles which relates the history about the forcible removal of 110,000 Japanese Americans leading up to and during World War II; and Constitutional Hill in Johannesburg, South Africa at a prison site associated with the atrocities of apartheid and using heritage, education and even tourism to tell the full story about this place.³

Efforts like these can lead to genuine truth-seeking and truth-telling, and it is critical that the public is made aware of the indisputable facts of any situation, though candidly, this is enormously challenging operationally for many museums. As an example, the Japanese American National Museum convened the governmental representatives and former internees to discuss this complex history. For museums involved in this type of discourse, it is necessary for their leadership to understand both philosophically and operationally effective approaches to civic engagement and public dialogue, coupled with a deeply informed understanding of communication methods and rhetorical styles. They also must comprehend multiple perspectives about the key contemporary issues being addressed. With greater emphasis on advanced technology and new media approaches, there are more opportunities to engage museum constituencies on the issues that matter most. These approaches help museums find more effective ways to serve their audiences in meaningful and constructive ways. Institutions able to articulate their expertise while allowing input from diverse constituencies are better equipped to have genuine and richer dialogue both with specialized and general audiences. Developing collective and strong public understanding is a worthy goal for all of us working in my field. Inviting our visitors to consider the history from informed and diverse points of views also is key.

³ Until recently six Russian museums were members of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, including the Memorial Museum of the History of Political Repressions "Perm-36", whose activities were halted in March 2015 after a long confrontation between the museum's founders and local authorities.
—*Editor's note*



The Scar Project with Nadia Myre (Anishinaabe) in the *Hide: Skin as Material and Metaphor* Gallery, March 6, 2010

Photo by Enid Farber © Copyright Smithsonian Institution

Photo courtesy of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian

Reflecting on the work of the NMAI, we have involved diverse perspectives and communities in order to tell the richness and complexity of stories from communities. This work necessarily requires consideration of a broad range of disciplines—from art history to archeology, from cultural studies to anthropology, and from social history to storytelling (through filmmaking, music and poetry) to contemporary art practice.

2014 was an Anniversary Year for the NMAI (20 years since opening our museum in NY). These years have been a time of shifting gears, shifting sands, shifting perspectives, and certainly a time for the broadening of the discussion. This sweeping transformation is grounded in the dialogue with a changing focus from an indigenous perspective (sticking with that yet broadening it) to a far broader contemporary cultural discourse, and from the idea which informs the

work of governmental, corporate and community-based institutions, including museums, expanding upon “civic engagement”, sometimes advocacy.

With an enormously challenging global context, the museum’s work is necessarily complicated. Advancing policies that value ethnic plurality and multiculturalism, actively encouraging the participation of indigenous peoples in issues of interest, including basic human rights, economic participation, respect for their cultural histories and languages, is a complex challenge, both on international and national levels. Advancing economic, social, political and cultural inclusion is at the heart of this particular discourse. Generally, museums lack the capacity or power to address such issues directly; however, these museums are key forums for illuminating some of these concerns, and deepening the public’s understanding of broader perspectives.

All of us have very particular points of view, and through our work in museums, we do focus on the specific and that which is local to our individual circumstances. We contribute to a global discourse, however, always striving to find the universal.

Outline of implementation narrative for the museum 2.0 projects

This outline was created by Daria Agapova and Sergey Kamensky during the course of preparing publication in order to help the authors structure their descriptions of the projects. Even though it served as an ancillary framework, we decided to keep it in our publication as an instrument which may be useful to readers. The icons are intended to simplify navigation.



Social and cultural context: real-life problems, life issues relevant to the local communities (as well as the specific museum, project team, etc.) which supplied the idea for the project and/or which served as a framework for development of the project. Why is audience engagement important to your museum?



Project goal and idea (which helps the authors attract partners).



Project content and phases.



Products/services and/or other results.



Audience participation:

Why did you address your visitors and the community?
How did you choose who to call and who to address?

What was the motivation of the participants/co-authors?

What kinds of engagement did you use?

Which aspects of collaboration with the community

do you consider most valuable for the participants?
And for you?

What kinds of new visitors (social groups) came to the museum and/
or what communities did you manage to build around the museum?

What did you learn from your visitor-partners?

How did the project concept change as a result of
communicating with your visitors? What difficulties arose
as you were establishing communication with people?

How did you visualize their contribution and what
difficulties did you encounter in the process?



Criteria for evaluation of the project, methods for monitoring results:

How do you determine that your project has been successful?

Did you engage the audience in the process
of evaluating your project?

Did you find that traditional evaluation methods and
criteria of success were not suitable for your 2.0 project?
How did you solve problems with evaluation?



Has your attitude towards audience participation in the museum
project changed? Have you made any personal discoveries
during the process of development of your project? Will you
further develop this or other participatory projects? What
directions for developing your project are of interest to you?



Yulia Glazyrina

Curator of the Museum of Permian Antiquities,
a branch of the Perm Museum of Local History

Discover the Permian Period

Museum of Permian Antiquities



'Discover the Permian Period!' is a project which takes the form of a game designed to engage residents of Perm in discovering a geo-cultural image of the territory. The Permian period (299 to 251 million years ago) is the only geological period in the history of the Earth to have been discovered in Russia and given a Russian name. The Museum of Permian Antiquities, a branch of Perm Regional Museum, opened in Perm in 2011. The museum presents the Permian Period in the context of the geological history of the planet Earth: in addition to in Russia, deposits from the Permian Period are found in North and Central America, South Africa, China, and Europe.



**открой
пермский
период!**

But the Permian Period is not only the fossils and minerals in museum displays; it is also everything that residents of and visitors to the Perm region see every day beneath their feet—the petrified bottom of the Permian Sea; what they eat for breakfast—salt and traditional cakes made with sprouts of horsetail; and what they perceive as historical and cultural features of the region. The project allows the museum to venture beyond its walls, into the city streets

and to areas outside the city in order to engage people —students, teenagers, families, tour guides, scientists—in discussion and interpretation of these features. This project brings together objects of culture, geology and regional history under an umbrella brand, ‘the Permian Period’.

We decided to create a mobile app, ‘Discover Permian Period!’,¹ as a means of communication. The project was supported by the Vladimir Potanin Charitable Foundation as part of the competition ‘Changing Museum in a Changing World’, held in 2013. Today the app is a free download at the AppStore and GooglePlay in Russian and English.



The basic principles of the project are to support grass-roots initiatives and to work within the framework of an ‘open brand book’. The first principle is based on the necessity to engage audiences in the museum’s activities, to respond to their needs and support their initiatives in the context of the scaling back of major cultural initiatives which were previously supported by the state. Tourism agencies and tour guides were interested from the start in creating new routes and educational opportunities and joined the project as partners. The texts for multimedia guides were written by teenage geologists who had previously visited the museum as participants in a children’s geological conference and the lecture series ‘Scientists for Children’. The second principle implies not only audience engagement in the course of the project and the availability of a concrete final product (a free supplement), but an open-ended outcome as well. It means that even after completion of the active stages of the project, the audiences can still influence its outcomes, the most important of which is qualitative development of the ‘Permian Period’ concept in the minds of the local population.

¹ The app is called “Discover Permian Period!” without the article ‘the’.



Goals and objectives

A long-term goal of the project is integration of various geo-cultural symbols in tourism, information, and culture in the Perm region and in Russia in general through encouraging people to embrace their heritage. This goal would be unachievable if we used only traditional museum approaches. It is necessary to involve multidisciplinary contexts and mundane cultural practices (such as cooking and gardening), and to use models from tourism and mass culture. As the project's author, I am convinced that it is very important that people acknowledge their geological heritage as part of their personal histories, in order that the latter should then be understood as part of a multi-million-year-long macro-history. Then our dream will come true—to get people involved as ambassadors of the Permian Period.



Implementation stages

In the summer of 2013 teenage geologists and the project team researched itineraries for a mobile app. Development of

a multimedia guide (programming; design; preparation of photos, texts, panoramas, and games; scientific consultations; meetings with tour agencies) took about a year, beginning in the fall of 2013. It was very important to investigate the current market for mobile apps for museums and tourism in order to create an up-to-date and user-friendly IT-product. January 2014 brought the start of the next stage, which consisted of working with wide audiences and involved special events (a series of multidisciplinary lectures), as well as participation in popular museum events (Night at the Museums, Pancake Week or Mardi Gras in Khokhlovka, etc.). In April we held a test run with one itinerary in Perm. During the summer the app was tested by a focus group of students, friends, IT people, museum visitors, and people who have never used an app before. Our initial idea of testing with wider audiences proved unrealistic because in the spring and summer we had unplanned photo shoots to do for all itineraries. (The young geologists wrote good texts for the app but it proved impossible to crowdsource quality images.) In September 2014 we launched the final version of the app.



In addition to the app, we published a souvenir tourist map with itineraries in Perm and the Perm region. We also developed and partially tested a series of tours entitled 'Walks in the Permian Period'. Currently, we are investigating appropriate mechanisms for collaboration with travel agencies to allow us to include itineraries of the Permian Period in a package of regional offers.



Audience participation in the project

Our goal was to engage audiences as our partners and make participants the conduits of ideas. Travel agencies and visitors are looking for quality geological content in the museum; the teenagers who co-wrote the mobile app come to the museum as young geologists with an interest in science; local environment-conscious residents bring in fossils and minerals from the Permian Period. Requests from the audience and grassroots initiatives served as

catalysts to embolden our museum team to create an open-ended project of the kind which, essentially, all participatory projects are.

Direct and indirect project participants

- Project team: 7 people.
- Management of partner organizations and key experts: 9 people. These became project ambassadors (the communications team at SP-Media, project designer Piotr Stabrovsky, programmers at the Multimedia Solutions Lab, LLC, composer Leonid Imennykh, photographer Mikhail Nagaitsev).
- Co-authors of the mobile app: 14 people (members of two geological youth expeditions at the Children's Palace of Perm).
- Staff from 5 municipal museums in the Perm region, 4 geological museums, and Perm University Botanical Garden.
- Participants in the seminar for tour guides and staff of travel agencies: 30 people.
- Focus group: 50 people.
- Participants in the multidisciplinary lecture series to support the projects: 336 people.
- Participants in the test tours (itineraries in Perm, Kungur, and Ocher): 110 people.
- Participants in the project presentation at the Forum for Museums of Perm Region: 120 people.
- Various museum events within the project framework: 11,500 people.
- Mobile app users: over 600 downloads by the end of 2014.

One of the most important aspects for me was that we learned to use humor in complicated topics such as geology and paleontology. One of the lectures was called 'Cakes with horsetail: can we eat fossils?'; we also measured the saltiness of people's ears and created a humorous Twitter account for the project with posts by Sir Roderick Murchison, the first investigator of the Permian Period.



Participants in the project helped extend its significance and scale. Initially, we planned only four itineraries, but thanks to the enthusiasm of our young geologists we actually ended up creating 11. All of these were included in the app to make sure that kids' initiatives were encouraged. On the other hand, our budget for the app doubled as a result. The museum had to co-finance these costs; it also helped that our partners became really invested in the project.

Another difficulty was that the audiences might not always have well-prepared tour guides. For example, travel agencies do not have guides who can work with a set topic. The museum can teach them but development of quality-control mechanisms is not easy.



© Photo by Mikhail Nagaitsev

A year of collaborative project work showed us that the key motivation for any audience is a broadening of the spaces available to them, whether relating to information, resources, or symbolism. For our regional partner museums, the most important opportunity was that of being plugged into a whole new info-communicational space and having access, through the mobile app, to a wider audience than they can reach through tourism agencies. Some partners, including the communications group SP-Media, which developed the first comprehensive PR campaign for the museum, valued the opportunity to participate in an innovative, socially engaged project which gave them access to different markets, including markets beyond the Perm region. Tourism agencies now realize that this is a new niche in regional tourism. Young geologists appreciate an opportunity to include a 'grown-up' IT project in their portfolio. They have had the

chance to participate in national conferences and competitions and win first prizes presenting itineraries from the guide.

It was very important to visually represent participation of all the audiences for the project and to keep up their interest throughout the year. Photos by young geologists are included in the app. Partners, in accordance with agreed terms, were represented in all publications. Project co-authors and partners received certificates as Ambassadors of the Permian Period at the closing party.

The project undoubtedly helped us discover a fundamentally new approach—one which involves a greater degree of freedom, a broader point of view, and more questions than answers. We experienced firsthand that to engage our audiences we need to be more flexible. Working openly and frankly with audiences leads to many discoveries, but also implies responsibilities: we have to listen and follow up; we have to understand that timelines can shift, that resources might be expanded, and that the moods and needs of our audiences can change. The most valuable thing is to see participants start paying more attention to their environment and to each other.



Criteria for evaluation of effectiveness

In addition to statistics for viewing and downloading the app, the following criteria are important:

Distribution of itineraries involving objects from the Permian

Period. One of the unexpected indicators of the project's relevance turned out to be a regional 'vogue' for identifying Permian-Period objects and including them in activities. For example, in 2014 Perm University initiated two projects at the Preduralye Wildlife Preserve learning center: development of an environmental trail and construction of an observation deck. A partner tourism agency included one of our itineraries in its program for a summer camp.

'Mythmaking' around the topic of the Permian Period, a new wave of interest in regional geo-cultural heritage.

An indirect indication of a positive evaluation using this criterion is the popularity of the multidisciplinary lecture series and of the humorous twitter posts by Sir Murchison. The potential here has yet to be explored to the full.

Feedback from the professional community and visitors.

The project was positively evaluated by professionals for its implementation of innovative IT technologies (the first combined museum and tourism mobile app in Russia), as well as for its engagement of the audience. We think that the idea of a multidisciplinary museum and tourism app as an innovative approach to audience engagement contributed



© Photo by Daria Dyagileva

to the nomination of our museum for participation in the prestigious competition European Museum of the Year 2015.

Publicity. In general, regional media showed great interest in the project not only because the topic itself is interesting, but also as a result of the systematic efforts made by our partners to promote the project.

Willingness of our partners to engage in non-commercial collaboration is an indicator of their appreciation of the social value of the project and its prospects.



Further development of the project

The project team is currently working on engaging niche audiences, creating a community of Permian-Period Ambassadors, attracting new partners beyond the Perm region, and finding ways to physically mark Permian-Period objects on the itineraries.

Authors, partners, and the local administration understand the opportunity that exists to develop the project (and the necessity of doing so) as a participatory initiative so as to create a ripple effect. It is sometimes impossible to evaluate such projects within the existing administrative and budgetary framework, but long-term value is extremely important. As for the near future, we are working on an exhibition about the diversity of nature in the Perm region. We made an important decision to engage residents of Perm in the planning process from the outset.



Milana Fiodorova

guide at Kraieved
travel agency



For us the project broadened the content for tours of well-known places. As a rule, it is historical and regional information that prevails in excursions. But now everybody is paying attention to objects they can find themselves, touch and even take home. Stone 'woodchip', a piece of the trunk of the ancient valkhiya plant in Ocher, a small stone with a lattice surface, a fragment of a colony of pearlweed around Kungur, a piece of limestone with a mollusk imprint in the Gubakha area... It's one thing to see all of them in a museum and an entirely different thing to find them yourself!

At first, this business seemed entirely new and I didn't know how to approach it. However, I decided to try to write an article for the mobile guide. In the process I realized that my small contribution to the project would be useful to other people, and it was good to feel part of something meaningful. I was really glad to see the results that were achieved thanks to the collaboration of a few dozen people and I very much hope that the mobile app will be of interest to many people and tell them a lot of interesting things about the geology of the Perm region.



Daria Dyagileva

member of Monolith,
a geological group
for young people
at the Palace of
Children's Creativity



Andrei Durakov

head of Multimedia
Solutions Lab

This seemed a very exciting task to us. First of all, the idea for the project is original—to show travelers places with which they are familiar, but in the context of the Permian Period. Who would have thought that so many places in the Perm region are connected to an era that ended millions of years ago! And secondly, we were excited about the idea of developing the Perm brand. Many Perm residents don't even realize what kind of place they live in. Practically every student on the planet studying the history of Earth learns about Perm. But how many Perm residents can name at least three inhabitants of the Permian Period? Anyone who's tried our mobile app will be able to do so, for sure.

In this project we saw a possible 'core', a principal idea around which to build a new touristic brand for the Perm region. This can be equally desirable for both locals and outsiders, and it's very relevant for our region now. What's more, the project combines in a very organic way history, geography, geology, and culture and at the same time brings all of them to the cutting edge of communications technology—as a mobile app.



Petr Kravchenko

R&D director
at SP Media





Sergey Kamensky

Director of the Center of Culture
'Ordzhonikidzovsky',
Professor at the Ural Federal University

'The art of travel', museum research project

Sverdlovsk Regional Museum of Local History in Ekaterinburg



The starting point for this project was an observation about 'The Charm of the East', an exhibition which was held at the Museum of Local History in 2012–2013. The exhibition showcased objects brought from the East by travelers from Ekaterinburg in the period from the 18th to the early 20th centuries. The core of the exhibition was the collection of Urals priest Georgy Levitsky, who undertook a major trip from Kronshtadt (a town near St Petersburg) to Japan in the 1890s. The exhibition consisted of six sections: porcelain, ritual sculpture, Japan, China, objects from various countries (with the theme 'How collections begin') and an interior-design corner showing pieces of furniture. Visitors were attracted by the diversity and exoticism of the exhibition; many attended due to their interest in Japanese culture. This allowed the museum to create a separate exhibition project on this topic.



In my opinion, however, the exhibition contained a far more interesting story which could be revealed in a show of a different nature—a show about travelling as a cultural phenomenon, a state of mind, and a way of discovering the world. In this case the museum could attract



Искусство Путешествий

a much wider audience since Ekaterinburg has far more active travelers in the city than it does aficionados of Eastern culture or of 19th-century history. But more importantly, such an exhibition could give visitors an experience of a different kind. In addition to being a place to learn about the past, the museum would become a place to re-evaluate the present, gain self-knowledge, broaden horizons, and communicate with like-minded people.

As a result, our project set itself an ambitious goal: to make the museum a truly relevant and important place for contemporary travelers using the museum's existing collection as a starting point. Attaining this goal in practice meant changing the algorithm by which exhibitions are created. To define the concept and scenario for our exhibition, we started with the audience rather than with the collection and initiated a dialogue with local communities.

We invited travelers from Ekaterinburg to become co-curators of the project and to join us in creating an interesting, relevant, and inspiring narrative about travel. And even though only a relatively small part of the audience actually became co-authors, the opportunity to participate was for many a catalyst for re-evaluating their relationship with the museum.



Stages of the project

- 1 Develop the concept of 'the art of travel': historical research, brainstorming sessions with travelers, focus groups, identification of suitable objects in the museum's collection.
- 2 Collect stories and artifacts from local communities, interview travelers from Ekaterinburg.
- 3 Write texts for the first exhibition hall, continue collecting stories.

- 4 Work on the exhibition, add more visitors' stories and opinions.
- 5 Develop a virtual Museum of Travel—an online project to support the exhibition.
- 6 Develop a traveling exhibition, travel to other museums, and develop the topic for the exhibition.
- 7 Prepare project research, re-evaluate collected stories, and present them in the context of my meta-theory of travel.



Project results

The Sverdlovsk Regional Museum of Local History staged an exhibition called 'The art of travel' showcasing objects from the 18th–19th centuries from the museum's collection and artifacts from the 20th–21st centuries contributed by local communities. This exhibition was subsequently transformed into a traveling exhibition.



We created a new website called 'Museum of Travel' (<http://museum-of-travel.ru>)—a new format for the museum's catalog which allowed visitors to get to know the collection and travelers' stories, initiated new travels, helped find like-minded individuals, and gave people an opportunity to contribute to the project. The website supports the traveling Art of Travel exhibition, allowing visitors to learn more about the objects they have seen and acquainting them with parts of the collection which are not included in the traveling version. The virtual museum is filling up with stories and photographs of objects from around 40 museums in the Sverdlovsk region.

We published an online book, The art of travel: lessons learnt from a 2.0 museum project (co-museum.ru). The fourth chapter consists of anthropological research into travels based on stories by inhabitants of Ekaterinburg from the 18th–21st centuries.

We created a community of people interested in developing similar projects. In the fall of 2014 the community actively supported a new long-term project and its most active members became co-curators of the project.



Audience participation

We asked our visitors for help because we needed to understand what questions and issues relating to travel are really relevant to the community. We wanted to represent travel from an anthropological point of view and we were interested in both historical and contemporary experiences.

For the museum and for me, this was our first experience of working in a 2.0 format. We had no established circle to rely on, so this was a blind search for mechanisms with which to engage the audience. Initially, we worked primarily with students and personal friends. Gradually, our circle began to expand, including friends of friends and



people interested in the topic. We were lucky to find quite a large number of people with a very wide circle of contacts among travelers; these people became our mediators and attracted many other interesting people to the project.

The project involved several forms of collaboration:

- brainstorming sessions and focus groups to develop the concept;
- meetings to discuss particular exhibition objects;
- surveys;
- interviews;
- collection of stories and artifacts from members of local communities;
- collaborative development of exhibition zones;
- testing of parts of the exhibition;

- a participatory zone within the exhibition where visitors had opportunities to contribute and to become co-authors.

The concept for the project was created and developed during the course of communication with participants. Initially, we thought that we would involve travelers from Ekaterinburg in developing the exhibition concept and giving interesting interpretations of objects from the museum. This was realized at a general level: brainstorming sessions involving many people with non-standard thinking allowed us to widen the framework for the project and ideas about the exhibition. However, another format of audience engagement turned out to be very important; this was unstructured interviews with Ekaterinburg travelers. What interested us during these meetings was not travelers' opinions about what this exhibition should be. We were interested in the people themselves, their life experiences, and their attitudes



to travel. As a result, the interviews helped us understand what the exhibition should be about, how to interpret and represent museum collections, and what meanings and emotions we needed to transmit. These interviews formed the basis for the exhibition's second layer, which consisted of artifacts and the voices of contemporary travelers. The museum became a place where past and present travelers were given equal opportunity to share their stories about their discoveries and adventures, dreams, and passion for discovering the world. This helped us achieve the main result of the exhibition: the museum became a place where travels begin. These meetings to some extent influenced my view of the world and inspired new projects.

Today it is this approach to developing an exhibition that I find most productive. It begins with an interest in the experience of our contemporaries in a given field. The stories, opinions, and artifacts collected by the authors of a project become the foundation for the museum's narrative and for its interpretation of the historical objects. The next phase, when the exhibition concept must be developed and solutions found for problematic issues, requires brainstorming sessions, focus groups, and surveys of wider audiences interested in such collaborative museum initiatives.

Project challenges

The biggest difficulty turned out to be the large amount of time spent on communications (meetings, creating transcripts of what had been said in interviews, writing and approving texts, processing photographic and video materials). Conversations and meetings took up at least 30% of time spent on developing the exhibition.

I had no problems establishing communication. I was impressed by people's openness, their willingness to participate, give us their time, share important things, selflessly and happily brainstorm difficult issues with us, and invent. A sincere interest in people will open any door.



In the meantime, the majority of our museum staff, in spite of their general support for the idea of engaging the audience, turned out to be unprepared for the fieldwork and for conversations with visitors as equals. Some of them could not overcome their idea of the museum as a source of authority. Others had problems with specific practicalities to do with organizing development of an open exhibition which required continuous search and prolonged work with participants. For them the traditional approach to exhibition development is simpler and more comfortable.

Participants' motivations

Surveys showed that different things were important for different people, including:

- the need for self-expression, self-realization, and personal development;

- the feeling of belonging to a large, important cause;
- being part of a team, an opportunity to feel part of a community of people united by a passion;
- the need to share experience and knowledge, an opportunity to be heard and needed;
- meeting interesting people;
- a chance to spend quality time;
- a desire to make life more interesting.

The reality often exceeded our expectations when it came to opportunities for people to contribute significantly to the project. At the same time, we realized that engagement is not simply openness and an invitation to participate; it is an understanding of the kinds of participation that work and of what motivates people. It turned out that the design and content of billboards,



instructions, video clips, the navigation and interface of the participatory zones at the exhibition all play an important role. It became clear that there are many specifics to consider during development of participatory zones and events:

- different people should be offered different but equally effective participatory formats to suit their capabilities and level of involvement;
- an opportunity to contribute should be given to people who often have minimal free time and are ready for various forms of communication (on- and offline, at the museum, at home and at work, in conversation or in writing);
- it is necessary to eliminate obstacles and to minimize expenses involved in participation: any additional effort that needs to be made drastically reduces the number of participants;
- we need to balance the expenditures (primarily, of time) made by participants and co-authors with the results they achieve.

Visual representation of the audience's contribution

Bearing in mind that visual representation is very important, we created a separate exhibition hall entitled 'About the project' where we showed photographs of discussions and meetings and of the mounting of the exhibition, together with our acknowledgements of gratitude to project participants. The stories we collected from travelers were represented in the exhibition, on the website, and in a separate chapter in the book. We recorded video interviews with participants and documented all our meetings in social media.



Evaluation criteria and ways to monitor results

The main project evaluation criterion was how the products and the process of the collaborative development of the exhibition were perceived by our visitors and co-authors. This called for a new approach to evaluation.

Professionally organized sociological monitoring was conducted partially during development of the exhibition (a survey of participants in the brainstorming sessions and focus groups); full monitoring was carried out when the show was running (visitor questionnaires, qualitative analysis of responses, focus groups). The monitoring was conducted by Dr. E.A. Shuklina, a professor at the Urals Federal University with a Ph.D. in sociology. She measured indicators of the quality of the experience of visiting the museum such as emotional background, personal discoveries, changes in visitors' motivation and self-awareness, and readiness to participate and communicate with others. Her findings formed the foundation for our conclusions.

We analyzed traditional quantitative indicators as well. Attendance and revenue were marginally higher than average for this time and season. At the same time, the analysis showed that the audience make up was markedly different. The majority of visitors were individual adults, whereas usual attendance consists predominantly of school groups. The percentage of young people—many of whom were visiting the museum for the first time—was also substantially higher. Importantly, there was a snowball effect: despite minimal advertising, attendance increased dramatically by the end of the exhibition due to word of mouth. The questionnaires showed that most visitors came because friends had recommended the show.



Participatory projects will be pivotal to our work for years to come. We plan to pursue the following courses of development:

- a search for the most effective forms and scenarios of audience engagement and of visual representation of participants' contributions, using crowdsourcing;
- investigation of ways to effectively combine off- and on-line methods of engaging audiences;
- building up of stable communities around our projects.



Andrey Vorokh

project participant,
Ph.D. student
in chemistry

Why did I and others participate in the project? First of all, it's the realization that our opinion as people related to this field is very important to the exhibition organizers. Secondly, the very opportunity to participate in the development of a museum exhibition is a priori not something that ordinary people have. That in itself is attractive. Of course, the difficulty is that most participants' opinions and desires don't get acted upon, but the fact that they're considered is of great value. Personally, for me brainstorms like this are the kind of leisure activity that's not easy to find in Ekaterinburg.

I remember that in this project we had the kind of feedback which is often lacking. Remember how we asked the students what the museum means to them? The response was considerable—very useful, unexpected, and somewhat bitter. At the same time, I felt kind of high—I remember that. In this sense I think that this kind of shake up is very useful for the museum staff, this direct feedback, the understanding of how our visitors perceive the museum in general. Not through a guestbook, but through direct interaction.



Svetlana Shvetsova

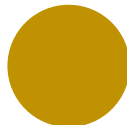
head of the
Museum Scientific
Methodology Center



Aleksandra Boltenkova

exhibition visitor

The exhibition makes you think and re-consider many things. Travelling is a unique opportunity to learn something new, to experience new and lively feelings, to meet interesting people and to acquire pleasant memories. Exchange of impressions is the main goal of the exhibition. Today, I heard someone say something very interesting, "The only borders are only inside you, in your head." And it's true: the only thing separating us from our dreams is ourselves. The stories in the exhibition illustrate how easy it is to travel, and how valuable it is.





Yulia Matskevich

Head of the Children Museum's
Center for Historical Education,
coordinator and expert of Festival
'Children's Days in St Petersburg'



Anna Rapoport

Manager of the Museum Science Department,
Festival 'Children's Days
in St. Petersburg' expert

'A ray of light in the darkness of the siege'

Children's Museum Center on Bolotnaya, 13 in St Petersburg



The Children's Museum Center of History Education (a branch of the Museum of Political History of Russia) is one of a small number of cultural centers in a large dormitory district in the northern part of St Petersburg. It is situated in a small wooden building that used to be a country house before the Revolution.

In 2011 we developed a participatory project for the first time. We invited elderly friends of the museum to participate as experts in the process of creating an interactive museum exhibition about Soviet childhood in the 1930s. We called our project 'The country of Gaidarik' (after Arkady Gaidar, a Soviet children's writer). Fifteen octogenarians from St Petersburg performed three roles as:

- conveyors of private histories: an important part of the exhibition featured an audio 'archive of childhood' composed of their memories of their pre-war childhoods;
- story-tellers and donors of daily objects from that period;
- experts who participated in the final selection of exhibits for the exhibition.

Our octogenarians readily responded to our request because the museum had already established friendly relationships with them. They were regulars at museum events tailored to the local communities (as a rule, in connection with festive celebrations) and helped us collect interactive objects necessary for our work with children.

In 2013 the museum needed to find participants for development of its new idea—an exhibition for children about the tragic siege of Leningrad during World War II.

Observing the preparations for the jubilee events in connection with the 70th anniversary of the full raising of the siege, we identified some problems in how historical memory is transmitted to children:

- Our society has not arrived at a consensus in how to evaluate the tragic history of the siege. There are discrepancies in memories about it. There is official school-taught history, and then there are private family histories which often do not align with the official version. How can we help children construct a coherent picture of this event?
- Even though students are well informed about the siege, only a few have an empathy instilled by their families. For most children the information remains abstract, leaving them either indifferent or scared and traumatized.
- There is no deficit of information available today, but we lack methods which would allow us adults (teachers,

'A ray of light in the darkness of the siege'

museum staff) to reveal the history of these events to children without traumatizing or lying to them.



In order to overcome these problems and to create an exhibition that speaks to each child, we decided to show the siege from an unusual angle which would enable each young visitor to learn something from this tragic event for their personal experience. We devised an exhibition called 'A ray of light in the darkness of the siege'. Its objective was to answer the question: 'What was it that supported the siege victims in their daily struggle to survive; what gave them emotional relief?' The goal of the project was to create conditions for personal growth through understanding the richness and diversity of the moral and spiritual resources which help people survive in the most difficult, even catastrophic, circumstances.



© Photo by Natalia Bulkina



© Photo by Natalia Bulkina



Who could assist us in achieving this goal? People who survived the siege? Historians who study it? Museum staff who possess information about objects and artifacts highlighting the history of the siege? We opted for a peer-to-peer model which would allow students and their teachers to become co-authors of the exhibition.

Our intention was that, together with the participating children, we could develop and subsequently offer visitors to the exhibition different models of historical research that could be used by them independently or with minimal help from adults. This would also help establish communication between the museum and schools, school museums and communities of siege survivors, different generations within families, and today's children and witnesses of the siege.

From the initial invitation letter sent out to schools until the opening, development of the exhibition took five months (September 2013–January 2014). During the first stage (September–November 2013) we met pupils and teachers from 15 St Petersburg schools to discuss the exhibition topics and the algorithm of its development. Then, children from the six schools which decided to participate conducted independent research and formulated their results. During the second stage (December 2014–January 2015) participating schools gave materials which they had collected to the museum. Unfortunately, selection and arrangement of the objects, preparation of labels and installation of the exhibition had to be undertaken entirely by the museum staff because the intense second stage coincided with a period when schools were busy with tests and winter vacations; we did not have time to organize collaboration with students if the exhibition was to open on time. The children participated very actively in the opening of the exhibition on January 17th, 2014. More than 3000 children visited the museum during the show's seven-month run; most came as school groups. Interactive sessions were devised and conducted by the museum staff; regrettably, the students were not invited to participate in organizing these activities. The problem was that the participants saw only their particular part of the project, not the project in its entirety. We would have needed much more time—at least a month of regular meetings—to build a team consisting of kids who were unfamiliar with each other and to develop meaningful activities with the materials they had gathered.



We consider this project to have been reasonably successful; for this reason, it is more interesting to analyze our mistakes. One mistake was that the museum tried to inform all the schools in the city about the project but relied only on a convenient and established channel of communication—an official electronic information letter sent to teachers. The letter addressed the teachers and tried to motivate them, rather than their pupils, to participate in the project.



© Photo by Solmaz Guseinova

The motivating factor was that the idea of the show was close to the school curriculum, and the project had great potential for development within the schools. In addition, participation would give children the chance to develop their research skills. To put this in the language of the teachers themselves, this meant that the concept for the project made a fit with the up-to-date competency approach emphasized by the Russian educational system. Theoretically, the project was open to everyone. But only students of teachers who became interested in the exhibition and considered it useful for their pupils actually became participants. The teachers were intermediaries between the museum and the schools in the process of developing the exhibition. This relieved the museum of a great deal of organizational work but also had the consequence that the teachers influenced their students and restricted their independence.

Functions of project partners

Museum

Initiator and organizer of the project. Ensured high scientific and methodological standards, provided objects from its depositories, prepared materials submitted by students for the exhibition, organized and structured the exhibition space, facilitated the project, developed and conducted museum activities at the exhibition.

Schools (teachers and students)

Set up research groups, chose topics, organized collection and research, submitted collected materials to the exhibition, actively participated in presenting the project and in publicity.

Private associations of siege survivors, families

Shared memories of the siege with students, submitted documents, photos and objects for research. Some of the materials were temporarily exhibited at the museum.

As the exhibition was being developed, new partners joined in—a children's library and two publishers of literature for young readers. They taught the children how they can use books to independently study the siege.



This collaboration resulted in the exhibition having a simple and clear structure whereby parts of the show gave the following succinct answers to the question, 'What was a ray of light in the darkness of the siege?':

- Work and studies.
- Personal relationships, friendship, mutual help, memories of pre-war life and the hope that the war would end.



The exhibition was full of real objects from school museums and family archives; student research papers interpreted these

objects as documentary proof of the answers. In rare cases where parts of the exhibition required additional content, we added artifacts from the collection of the Museum of Political History of Russia (no more than 10% of the total number—since presentation of the museum's collection was not our goal). Participants' contributions were acknowledged in a press release and on the exhibition labels. In addition, we engaged students as media representatives: they gave interviews about the exhibition and their participation on radio and TV.

Of course, the collaboration produced a number of problems. During the first stage of development of the exhibition, pressure from teachers who imposed standard and traditional solutions on their students became a serious problem. It was difficult to establish direct interaction between museum staff and students since teachers were constantly present as intermediaries.

We could have avoided these problems if:

The museum team had thought through the project more thoroughly from the point of view of motivating the children rather than their adult superiors and had created channels of direct communication with the children.

In the event of having to use teachers' organizational resources, it would have been better had the museum staff set aside extra time to work with teachers who already use the principles of participatory culture with kids and to recruit teachers who are open to new approaches.

The museum had agreed with the teachers in advance that the museum staff would perform the curatorial functions. The museum should have prepared staff for these functions and included working with students in the schedule for the project.



© Photo by Natalia Bulkina

The second stage of developing the exhibition brought its own problems. It was difficult to describe scientifically the objects collected by the children (to check attributions, to decode manuscripts). There were organizational obstacles in engaging the students to write labels or to install the exhibition.

The museum should have allowed a year rather than six months for development of the exhibition and should have started working with the children right after the participants had been finalized, without delegating curatorial functions to the teachers. A significant flaw in the project was that no plan was made for involving the children in developing interactive activities.



If we analyze the project with the help of the instrument developed by Roger Hart (the so-called ‘Hart’s Ladder’)¹, we would place it on the fourth or fifth rung of the participation ladder: the children understand the whole and have a voice; they are included in project work but rarely make decisions together with adults because the adults have a more substantial role in the project.



Marina Krenitskaya

11th grade student,
Gymnasium No. 11

...My family has kept some documents from the war period, and it was only after studying our archive that I realized the difficulties of that time. I understood that my relatives survived and were victorious thanks to their willpower and the way they helped each other. I wanted to share the results of my research with others. That is why I participated in preparing the exhibition, gathered artifacts, wrote an essay, and made a presentation. I was invited to speak on a radio show after the opening, and later my work was published in the book ‘Madonnas of the St Petersburg Siege’.

¹ Roger Hart. Children’s Participation: from Tokenism to Citizenship // Innocenti Essays, No. 4, UNICEF, 1992, http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/childrens_participation.pdf

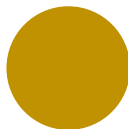


Anna Rapoport

Manager of the
Museum Science
Department



Communicating with teachers was the most difficult part of the job. I visited dozens of schools; many of them have very interesting materials about the siege. And the teachers said to me right away, "Take the exhibitions we have prepared and our presentations for the annual events." It was difficult to shake them up, to convince them to let go of their stereotypes. At one school the teacher wrote all the texts for the excursions conducted by students in the school museum. She couldn't even imagine that the students could work independently. Lack of confidence in students: that's the main problem.





Andrey Rymar

Deputy Director, M. Gorky Samara
Literary Memorial Museum

'World–Text–Museum': poetic communities as agents of transformation

Samara Literary Museum



Backed by The Vladimir Potanin Charitable Foundation, the World–Text–Museum project studied and developed new ways of representing contemporary literature in a museum. When we consider literature in the context of the museum, there are a number of problems which become apparent. First, we are talking about texts which visitors might not have read and whose authors might be unknown to them. Secondly, the innovative language of these texts might be incomprehensible to the reader. And thirdly, a museum might prefer to work with texts that deal with important contemporary issues, and yet their relevance might not be obvious to visitors.



Therefore, we considered developing methods of researching and exhibiting texts and literary movements which would allow museum visitors to:

- understand how these texts are constructed, including what the authors are working with and why and how they work
- understand how the authors' methods can be applied in real life

In general, we viewed the museum as a place where visitors may comprehend literature as a means of understanding themselves



and the world and where they may experience the application of these means. The final exhibition in the project was intended as a kind of guide to the various ways of existing offered by contemporary authors offer in today's world. So the exhibition did not set out to be about objects, but about authors' creative methods and their ways of responding to the challenges of the world.



It was important to us that local communities participated in the museum's research and benefited from it throughout the process, not only at the end of the project. So the local literary community became our main foothold. Reflecting on communal needs which are typical for a provincial Russian city, we remembered how one writer had observed that there are no writers or poets from Samara or Saratov. Either one is a writer or one is not. The paradox, however, is that even if local authors feel that they belong to the national Russian and international contexts, they are isolated by provincial life. The atmosphere of lively discourse intrinsic to big cities is lacking here. It is as if the locals do not believe that they can read and discuss something really relevant. The provinces live with the feeling that "the future is being created somewhere else", and this feeling is projected onto literature. Thus, we came up with a formula for the local literary process: "If we want to preserve this phenomenon in our archives, we must help create it".



During the first stage our objectives were to develop a classification of creative methods and trends in contemporary literature, to highlight contemporary problems that are reflected in literature, and to find people in the city who would be interested in discussing these issues. Members of the literary community helped us meet these challenges. Writer Leonid Nemtsev undertook to organize regular meetings of a literary club for people who want to understand better how literary



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texts are constructed and how to read and, perhaps, to write them. Poet and philosopher Vitaly Lekhtsier was finally able to realize his dream of holding a seminar on ‘Anthropology of the poetic experience’; at it writers from Moscow and their local colleagues acted not as authors of the texts but as researchers into the social and cultural contexts to the output of contemporary writers and poets. The seminar brought the well-known Russian poets and writers Linor Goralik, Stanislav Lvovsky, Dmitry Kuzmin, Ilya Kukulkin, and Aleksandr Skidan to Samara and, as far as we know, was the best attended literary event in Samara in 2012–13.

Next, we tackled the issue of visualizing the creative methods that we had identified in a way that would allow visitors to understand

the connection between a poet's work and their own lives. At this stage, we were very lucky to meet architects Evgenia Repina and Sergey Malakhov, who have experience in 'translating' from one cultural language to another (for example, explaining how an Avant-garde text works through the language of installation or translating the principles of Suprematism into the paradigm of a culinary recipe, etc.). These architects perceive the city as an integral field of meanings that cannot be divided into autonomous spheres, be they social, economic, cultural, or architectural. It was particularly valuable that our partners have been applying the principles of participatory culture in their architectural practice, based on their belief that not only professionals but city residents too should participate in planning and changing the urban environment. Later, Evgenia Repina and her students became the main force behind a museum lab called 'Poetry and visualization'; they also designed the project exhibition. At the lab designers, architects, poets, and museum staff analyzed texts and designed exhibition models to explain how these texts work.

We wanted visitors engaging with parts of the exhibition devoted to particular poetic movements to be able to find answers to the following questions:

- 1 What is this movement? (For example, what is Conceptualism and how different it is from New Sincerity?)
- 2 How does it work? (What do the poets use as their material and what do they do with it? For example, we showcased the conceptual practice which involves working with a 'borrowed word'—by collaging different styles, exaggerating clichés, etc.)
- 3 How does this relate to me? (For example, through Conceptualism we wanted to show that the linguistic clichés used by conceptualists can be found outside literature. We often describe ourselves and our relationships using scenarios which are as clichéd as those of graphomaniac poetry.)



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Evgenia Repina proposed radicalizing the interactive element in the project, allowing visitors not only to interact with texts but also to create them using creative methods employed by well-known authors. Thus the exhibition concept changed radically during the course of interaction with the participants.



As a result, the exhibition included five Poetry Machines representing five poetic movements that we identified as:

- 1 Concretism
- 2 Conceptualism
- 3 New Epic
- 4 New Sincerity
- 5 Meta-Realism

This large exhibition was installed in the museum courtyard. Each 'machine' was a two-story structure with dimensions of 5 x 2 meters. It showed the atmosphere of the poetic movement and the materials used by its practitioners. For example, the Concretism Machine was based on a play and presented images of a Soviet communal apartment. The Meta-Realism Machine reproduced a mythological scheme called 'the initiation path'—involving a dangerous route through a 'forest', an encounter with a sacred tree, etc. In each module visitors had the opportunity to perform tasks in creating a text. In the Conceptualism Machine they could assemble collages from statements representing various kinds of poetic discourse (Symbolist poetry of the early 20th century, Soviet ideological poetry, contemporary prison lyrics...). In the New Epic machine they could study a card index of typical situations used by the movement's poet-practitioners and create their own storyline.

We called this exhibition 'World. Text: five ways to freedom'. The title underlined the fact that creating texts during the exhibition was not a goal in itself but a way of seeing the world through the eyes of poets and of adopting their ways of responding to challenges. Freedom is not independence; it is an opportunity to build harmonious relationships with the world and to find sources of happiness and creativity in the mundane.

After the exhibition opened, we decided to use our established connections with the literary and art communities to attract visitors. With this goal in mind, we organized a five-week-long summer festival of free arts called 'Five Elements', with one week being devoted to each poetic machine. Each week, we had events with poets, musicians and artists whose work represents the principles of that week's poetic movement. This meant that the exhibition was accompanied by a popular program of events; simultaneously, we highlighted the universal nature of the poetic principles in question, including possibilities for using them in the visual arts, music, etc.

The last stage of the project was a seminar for the museum community called 'Literature in the museum: representing meaning in a museum setting'. Together with representatives of other Russian museums, we tried to determine whether the methodology adopted by our project could work not only with contemporary authors but with the classics as well. Is it possible to represent the creative methods of Anton Chekhov or Mikhail Lermontov in a museum? The seminar resulted in three exhibition projects on the plays of Anton Chekhov, the lyric poetry of Mikhail Lermontov, and the prose of Viktor Pelevin.



The project continues even after its official closing. We are currently using the methods of working with texts and with local communities developed during the project. In particular, we decided to keep the tradition of a summer festival at the museum; the topics for this event



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will, however, be closely linked to the museum's main exhibition on the writer Aleksey Tolstoy. In the summer of 2014 we organized an exhibition about Tolstoy's science fiction in the context of dystopias by his contemporaries Aldous Huxley and Evgeny Zamyatin; there was an accompanying festival on futurology in art and science. The exhibition took the form of a game during which visitors had a chance to learn the principles of dystopian states from books by these authors and to build their own utopian world using typical storylines which we had identified. Writing in the 1930s, Huxley and Zamyatin observed how the state uses utopian slogans and drags its citizens into mega-projects which eventually lead to destruction; this has many parallels in today's reality. However, holding the exhibition and the festival together allowed us not to point out these parallels and not to impose any ideas on our visitors. Our ultimate goal was to offer material that speaks for itself and to create around it a field for reflection which would be supported by members of the community, not the museum staff.

Of course, the description above offers an ideal model, without any of the inevitable drawbacks which plagued actual realization. The main problem which became obvious during realization of the



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project was the difference between what the exhibition promised viewers and what it actually delivered. The intention of the project was to foster understanding of poetry (and art in general) as an instrument for making sense of and transforming reality. Essentially, the project involved representing not documents or even ‘creative methods’ in the museum, but ways of life. But a day spent getting to know poetry in a museum or at a festival cannot ‘bring freedom’ to anyone. Because freedom is not just a single insight, but a way of living. Here again we come back to the topic of communities. It is communities that are the only embodiments of alternative ways of life, and visitors can join in if they so desire. But a community lives only while it has work to do. As such, we face the prospect, on one hand, of an ‘eternal’ continuation of the project, and on the other—of the necessity for the museum to transcend its

boundaries and to act on a city-wide scale. A single organization cannot act on its own. In fact, what we are talking about here is grass-roots cultural policy.



Evgenia Repina

associate professor
at the Department
of Innovative Projects
at Samara State
University
of Architecture
and Construction,
co-curator
of the exhibition
'World–Text. Five
Ways to Freedom'

There are few people in Samara who understand that art can be part of life and an instrument for perceiving the world. That's why we addressed the exhibition to, so to speak, 'residents of the town of Nameless', as we thought of them. Essentially, most of the 20 students who were involved as co-authors were post-Soviet everymen, residents of residential micro-districts. Through simple analytical and visualization procedures we gradually approached the metaphorical idea of Machines to produce poetry—as a way of showing the latter's reflective and transformative role. Six months of deep involvement in the project were enough to create in the consciousness of the student designers a mental map of contemporary poetry and to develop a methodology for spatial interpretation of a poetic text.

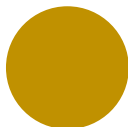


Vitaly Lekhtsier

Ph.D. in philosophy,
poet, co-editor of the
portal Magazine of
Contemporary Art
Circus 'Olympus' + TV,
curator of the seminar
'Anthropology of the
Poetic Experience'



The Internet magazine *Circus 'Olympus' + TV* is one of the museum's partners. Together, we conducted a series of exclusive literary seminars, round tables and readings with famous authors from the capital. There was a huge resonance in the city's literary and liberal arts circles. This amazing project brought together efforts by a number of creative and age groups in our city—students and scientific and literary communities. I was glad to see how many families came to see the Poetic Machines.



'The 20th century on the screen and beyond': An urban community reflects on its history.

Tolyatti Regional Museum of Local History

Text by Andrey Rymar



A project by the Tolyatti Regional Museum of Local History, 'The 20th Century on the screen and beyond' was launched in the summer of 2013 with support from the Vladimir Potanin Charitable Foundation. The goal of the project was to develop an interactive exhibition about the history of Tolyatti in the 20th century. The project's authors aimed to create not just an exhibition, but a space which would inspire different generations of Tolyatti residents to find a meaning in and to live through the city's recent history.



A previous attempt to systematically reflect on the 20th century in an exhibition was made at the museum almost 30 years ago, in 1984. The latter exhibition was primarily about the history of Tolyatti's industrial factories, and it did not last long. After an interval of several decades, a project team organized by the museum's director, Natalia Lankova, set itself the goal of showing the most important events in the city's history, many of which relate to serious historical traumas, in a relatively small space of about 600 square meters. The civil war; the collectivization and dispossession of the kulaks (well-to-do peasants); World War II; the flooding, relocation, and renaming of the city in connection with the building of the electric power plant on the River Volga; and the construction of major industrial factories (particularly, the Volzhsky Automobile Factory) made Tolyatti one of the most important industrial centers in the country and created fertile ground for the large-scale 'criminal wars' which raged during the crisis of the 1990s.



The project team and, in particular, Tatyana Minsafina and Mikhail Osipov, who developed the visual concept and design for the



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exhibition, came up with an original solution which allows visitors to see historical events from the point of view of both participant and outside observer. The journey through Tolyatti's history is presented as a passage from one movie theater to another. 'Films' of various genres reflect different historical periods. 'Film' in this context is a relative notion. Each hall proposes that we view the exhibits through a special selection of narratives which are typical of a particular historical period. In 'Thunderbird', the first movie theater in Tolyatti, we watch a melodrama about the Civil War and the first decades of Soviet rule; in 'Avant-garde', a heroic film about the World War II; in 'Beacon', a drama about the flooding of Stavropol (as Tolyatti was called until 1964)¹ after the power plant was built and about the birth of Tolyatti.

¹ Not to be confused with the other Stavropol in southern Russia, in the Northern Caucasus federal district (which was until 1964 known as Stavropol-Kavkazsky).

The authors are planning a sequel to the project involving 'an industrial novel' about the construction of major factories in the city, as well as 'a family film' and 'a crime-story film' about the various ways there were to survive in the 1990s.

Entitled 'The 20th century: Stavropol–Tolyatti', the exhibition opens with an introductory section consisting of a 'cashier's desk' over which, instead of a quote from Lenin of the kind that was customary in the Soviet movie theater, we read the following words of Jean-Luc Godard:

“...Life ... passes and the memories it leaves behind
take on the appearance of its depiction.”



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This epigraph determines the topics, development methodology, and conceptual framework for the exhibition: we have before us not a history that pretends to be objective but a version of it, a 'film' in which visitors can be both protagonists and co-authors.

The interactive component is realized through multimedia technologies, which are here used on a qualitatively new level for a regional museum. Entering the Editing Room, we can browse an archive of portrait and group photographs from the museum's collection, take our own photo, process it with filters appropriate to the era of our choice and 'paste' it into an old photograph. In the Dressing Room we can choose photos of period costumes from the museum's collection and try them on using a special electronic mirror. Visitors can manipulate panoramas of old Tolyatti and Stavropol, browse parts of the digital museum collection

that have not been included in the exhibition, and listen to interviews with eyewitnesses to events. The authors of the project provide various scenarios of the exhibition experience including 'investigations' which visitors can conduct using archival objects.



The final budget for the exhibition was three times larger than the original grant the museum received from the Potanin Foundation. Additional financing came when the museum managed to involve various Tolyatti communities in meaningful work on the project as well as in fundraising efforts. It is worth noting that a significant number of Tolyatti residents live in the city not because they were born in Tolyatti but because they chose to come here. Over the course of several decades, the city attracted some of the best Soviet experts, who moved here to participate in building and launching factories which were the most advanced of their time. Simultaneously, they were building a city designed in accordance with Le Corbusier's theory of the garden city. This gave those who came here from all over the country a feeling of community and of responsibility for the city that was being created before their eyes and with their own hands—feelings which, unfortunately, are not typical for Russian cities. This explains why participation in the exhibition was for many a matter of honor, particularly since Tolyatti residents appreciate the project's innovative approach to technology and content; in other cities this approach might well have been resented by conservatives demanding 'a return to origins' and 'loyalty to tradition'.

Museum staff recorded dozens of interviews with city residents who built the factories, relocated the city to a new site, and participated in other events. These interviews are included in the exhibition. In addition, the museum organized a Day of Giving, when residents gave the museum over 300 objects related to the life of the city in the 20th century and told their stories. Currently, the museum has a number of zones specifically dedicated to residents' collections and

to temporary installations which showcase particular episodes of the city's history in greater detail.

The museum organized a number of round-table discussions on issues which city residents consider to be both of historical significance and of continued relevance to current problems. One such issue is whether the city should revert to its historical name. Stavropol was renamed 'Tolyatti' in 1964 in honor of Palmiro Togliatti, the recently deceased General Secretary of the Italian Communist Party. The discussion involved members of the city council, the Association of Residents of Stavropol (people who lived in Stavropol before its relocation in 1953-55), and, most importantly, people who remembered how the city was renamed and even participated in the process. The museum also hosted a meeting of the Social Committee of the Municipal Duma [Council]; this helped to advance recognition of the project's importance for the city. As a result, the city approved an allocation of two million rubles for the exhibition from its budget. The museum also involved staff of the city's oldest movie theater (one of the exhibition halls is named after it), and organized a number of events there.

The museum's Board of Trustees set up a fundraising team which managed to raise substantial funds from businesses and various organizations in the city. In addition, many services (renovation and construction, printing, equipment installation) were either donated or provided at a heavy discount. One of Tolyatti's banks installed donation boxes in its offices to raise money for the exhibition.

The museum published stories about Tolyatti on its website and in social media and organized a number of competitions for residents—namely, 'People's history of Tolyatti', 'Best collection by a 20th-century resident' and a competition for posters to mark the 60th anniversary of the city's first cinema.



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In the end, the opening of the exhibition in the fall of 2014 unleashed an emotional outpouring in social media: residents saw their expectations exceeded and that even serious experts agreed that the city now had 'an exhibition to a European standard'.

Of course, the true importance of this project will only be revealed in time. Will the exhibition continue to serve as a place to reflect on and reconsider local history, or will all the discussions remain in the past? Will the exhibition come to be perceived as 'a movie with special effects' which is interesting to watch—but only once? Will the museum decide to take a deeper look at low-profile and dramatic aspects of the city's history? Perhaps the most difficult question, though, is: how will the section of the exhibition dealing with the 1990s be constructed and how are we to build a bridge to today? Currently, the museum is



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approaching a very important problem: the story about the challenges that residents have faced in the past may or may not become a story of the challenges they are facing today.



The museum continues working with city communities (the latter collaborate on collecting materials for the exhibition; these objects will rotate continuously) and organizes museum events for people of different ages and belonging to different professional and social groups. Natalia Lankova draws the following main lesson from the project: “Thanks to the faith shown by the city’s residents in the project initiated by the museum, even the most ambitious ideas didn’t have to be simplified due to lack of funds.”



Elena Kosova

head of information
management,
KujbyshevAzot

We supported the project because we realized its importance for filling 'blank spaces' in the annals of our region. It may seem strange at first, but it's in the coverage of our recent history that there is a deficit of information. Implementation of the project has made it possible for us to create a comprehensive and detailed picture of the city's history—and in a form which is interesting and captivating for the younger generation. The project partners saw the exhibition as an event on a scale substantially larger than the merely regional. It's quite obvious that this project deserves to be continued!

I think the exhibition is indeed a major accomplishment for the city. As a school principal and a member of council, I often see that there are many residents who don't know the history of our city, nor even things that happened in neighboring districts. By giving its history back to the city, the exhibition unites our residents. Our school is already using it in the educational process. Currently, we are promoting the idea of educational tourism in our council, and this project is very timely. Furthermore, in the future it can generate—and is already generating—a whole cluster of exhibitions about particular aspects of the city's history or about particular principal actors.



Aleksandr Rodionov

trustee of the museum,
principal at School
No. 93, chairman
of the Social Policy
Committee at Tolyatti
City Council



Yulia Potseluyeva

Development Director, Festival
'Children's Days in St Petersburg'

'Teens for museums, museums for teens', creative research program

Special project for the 10th 'Children's Days in St Petersburg' Festival



'Children's Days in St Petersburg' is an annual festival involving over 40 museums which aims to develop new approaches to engaging children. Its trademark self-guided game for visitors attracts over 20,000 kids each year. However, it is still the case that teenagers are reluctant to visit museums. In 2014 the festival team developed a pilot program called 'Teens for museums, museums for teens' with the following premises:

- Museum staff have a hard time communicating with teenagers who have outgrown kids' games and are unwilling to accept typically adult forms of communication whereby the museum is the transmitter of truth and visitors are passive recipients.
- Based on their experience of compulsory school excursions, teens often perceive museums as places far removed from contemporary life and their own interests.
- The reference group for teens is their own peers. They readily trust information which comes from other teens.



The goal of the project was to find new ways for museums to communicate with teens. The objective of our collaborative creative



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research was to identify new roles and organizational models which would allow us to:

- build peer-to-peer communication channels between teens and museum experts;
- give teens an opportunity to feel like active learners rather than objects of pedagogical efforts;
- convey to teens that there is no one correct and final interpretation of museum objects and that their own interpretations are valid;
- give museum professionals an opportunity to look at their materials through the eyes of museum visitors in order to find new ways of working and new ways of attracting reluctant museum goers;
- help museums utilize free on-line resources of the kind which teens often understand better than adults.



We engaged smaller museums where the distance between management and staff is minimal and decision-making is rapid. We invited five museums, and they all agreed to participate in the project; these are: the Memorial Workshop-Museum of Sculptor Mikhail Anikushin, the Anna Akhmatova Museum at Fountain House, the Samoylov Family Apartment Museum, the Memorial Museum 'Raznochinny Petersburg', and the Museum of the History of Photography.

We also invited to work with us IZI.travel, a company which provides a free platform with which to create audio guides, and the internet portal Five Corners, which employs not only professional journalists but teenagers as well.

We organized a group of teenagers and suggested that they select an interesting museum exhibit or a topic for creative research (individually or in teams). In their research the teens would be helped by adult moderators, but not directed by them. We suggested that the teens independently identify the topics and issues to research, and we would help them find the experts to tackle these issues, either in or out of the museum. Furthermore, the teens had to choose a form of final presentation which would allow them to convey their findings to their peers—video, blog, audio podcast, or audio guide for smart phone (master classes and individual consultations were offered).

Lab timeline: 2 months.

13 teenagers participated; 9 of them created 6 projects:

- an article on the internet portal Five Corners
- a video clip
- two presentations using thinglink.com
- a series of museum cards
- a photo blog

Hours spent on the project:

- 15 hours on visiting museums
- 9 hours on collective discussions
- 6 hours on master classes on Inspiring Technologies, Museum Audio Guides, Foundations of Journalism
- 40 hours on individual project work with curators via Skype, phone, correspondence, meetings



Implementation stages

Initiative



To participate in the pilot project we invited teens who had played the role of experts at previous festivals. Three students from the College of Tourism and two of the editorial staff of Five Corners joined in as well. However, in the process it became clear that the latter participants did not volunteer but were incentivized to participate by curators from these organizations. This resulted in a much weaker motivation on their part. (Next year we are planning an open call and will ask for a motivational essay.)

Choice of museum

Teens chose three out of five museums. The spread of participants was uneven. We concluded that the choice depended not on the topic or attractiveness of the exhibition but rather on the openness and enthusiasm of the staff member who represented the museum.

Choice of research topic

An opportunity to find a topic relevant to contemporary life proved very important for the teens. For example, at the Samoylov Family Apartment Museum, which is dedicated to a dynasty of actors from the 19th-20th centuries, one of the projects dealt with how to prepare for an acting role. We invited actress Olga Belinskaya to consult us. For another project,



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this time on ballet costumes, we invited ballet dancer Evgenia Berdichevskaya from the Mariinsky Theater to talk to us.

Final presentations, master classes

To provide freedom of choice for the final presentations, we conducted a number of master classes on ‘inspiring technologies’, including videos, blogs, audio podcasts, audio guides, web documentaries (one-page website presentations), and sources for presentations with infographics (easel.ly and thinkglink.com).

Motivation

All participants noted that it was very important for them to get to know museums informally and to have an opportunity to talk to experts. However, a difference in motivation manifested itself

in the choice of means for the final presentations. The teens who had joined the project of their own accord were interested in experimenting with something new. Later on, we learned that they are continuing to use the new tools for their work in school and at home. Participants from the Tourism College and from the Five Corners used the tools with which they were already familiar: Power Point presentations and articles in the press.

Independent project work moderated by curators

Meetings with experts, elaboration of the topic, search for materials, weekly discussions of the process. This stage shed light on the differing degrees of the teens' readiness for the project: some just needed a modicum of orientation and help, while others expected to be given detailed tasks and were not ready for independent decision-making.

Final presentations

Participants presented their final projects to an audience consisting of teens and the museum experts with whom they collaborated. The 'process/result' correlation became clear at this stage. For us the most important part was process. But it turned out that for the teens it was very important how the result is presented and utilized. For example, for participants who presented an article the main motivating factor was the possibility of seeing it published.



Observation and analysis

We used the method of insider observation, i.e. observation from within the process. We noted instances where communication lapsed, following the pattern of a museum excursion, and the teens disengaged; this led to conclusions about the optimal way to organize communication.



It was very important for us to find ways in which the museums and teens could cooperate in the framework of the festival. But before changing the

format for wider audiences, we wanted to experiment in a ‘lab’ mode. Instances when participants showed initiative or remained passive were of particular importance. The following scenarios are good examples:

- 1 No initiative** Participants from Five Corners whose motivation was ‘Our management made us do it’ demonstrated the least self-reliance. Both girls plan to become journalists but they have already formed a pattern of working with information whereby a superficial knowledge of facts is sufficient to write an article/essay.
- 2 Firm initiative** Participants’ personalities were a decisive factor: in some projects the work was entirely independent, from choice of topic choice to the search for the appropriate form and to agreements with experts. The following factors were important:



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- strong initial motivation and loyalty to the projects (the kids had previously participated in the festival);
- desire to experiment with form and tools;
- understanding of the value of new knowledge;
- the museum staff's readiness to enter into dialogue.

3 'Fluctuating' initiative In these cases the initial motivation was weak: participants were college students whose teacher had promised them extra points for participating in the project. This scenario is most interesting for analyses of the following:

- **topic:** there were difficulties with choosing a topic, but initiative materialized when a curator helped formulate the topic with reference to the participant's personal experiences;
- **form:** the opportunity to publish in a newspaper was a motivating factor;
- **competition:** comparison of results with those of their peers;
- **an opportunity to work with non-museum experts:** when offered by curators, this stimulated the interest for further independent work;
- **readiness of museum staff for dialogue;**
- **personal interaction:** the teens showed initiative when they realized that the curators cared and the project was not just pro-forma.

We made an important discovery about the perceived distance between participants and curators. We thought that this distance needed to be overcome. But in the course of the project we realized that the distance existed in our minds but was not perceived by the teens. Together, we learned about equality, partnership, and mutual respect in the creative process.

Initially, we thought that after having become acquainted with the museums, the teens would themselves come up with topics and issues to research and that our help would be needed only in

searching for sources of information. However, we soon found out that many of them needed our assistance in identifying a topic of particular interest to them. This might have been a result of the kind of inertia induced by our schools, where students are not expected to ask questions, but to answer them, regardless of whether they or not they are interested.

At first, we suggested that the students work on the projects independently—that they choose a topic and the form of their project, communicate with experts, and search for information. However, for some participants this proved stressful and we realized that we needed to break down the tasks. Some teenagers just needed orientation and advice on how to structure their independent work; for others our participation was necessary at each stage, including for the intermediate tasks.

The main difficulty was that many teenagers expected to be given an assignment and be assessed on its result in the way that this happens at school. The experience of working on a project was new to them and they did not always grasp the necessity of planning, meeting deadlines, and keeping agreements.

The teens' reluctance to use social networks was an unexpected obstacle. All of them have Vkontakte (the Russian equivalent of Facebook) accounts and use them for personal communication, but it was difficult to motivate them to share information with other participants. We came to the conclusion that we needed to structure the teamwork differently in order to stimulate the teens' interest in the work of their peers.

With regard to personal discoveries made during the course of the project, I expected from the participants a greater degree of non-conformity and readiness to stand up for their opinions. I did not



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expect that they would agree with the stereotypes bestowed on them by schools or museums, or that they would be confused by the freedom of choice rather than enjoy it.



Criteria for evaluation of effectiveness; means and ways of monitoring results

For this project, two groups of criteria can be highlighted:

- 1 Quality of the teens' projects:
 - originality and quality of information processing (accuracy, originality, understanding, and analysis);
 - depth of research, quality of sources;
 - correlation between an idea and its presentation;
 - involvement of non-museum experts.

2 Degree of participants' self-reliance:

- independence in choosing a topic, working with experts, searching for information;
- independence in processing information, the degree to which a project acquired added value and additional meaning;
- boldness in topic selection, angle of presentation, and personal affinity with the topic.

The second group of criteria is more challenging to monitor but is, in our opinion, more important.



Next year we plan to continue the project with an open call to engage more teenagers.

Initiator of project

Daria Agapova

Authors and curators

Evgenia Kartashova, Yuliya Potselueva, Darya Matskevich

Participating teenagers

Mariya Ponomareva, Elena Nikanova, Yuliya Amoskova, Ekaterina Baykova, Elizaveta Petrova, Aleksandr Seyts, Artem Voljenin, Anna Korneva, Vladimir Kornev

Museum experts

Elena Kryuchek, Svetlana Timofeeva, Vladimir Platonov, Anna Belova, Solmaz Guseynova, Anna Sokolova, Irina Osipova



Evgeniya Kartashova

co-curator
of the project

At first, it seemed that working on an individual project in which you ask questions and look for answers would be unusual for the kids. At school and at home, it seems that something different is required of them. But each of them looked for and eventually found an interesting topic at the museum and their own way of presenting it. The museums were open to experimentation, even though venturing beyond regular forms of communication wasn't easy for them. As a result, everyone learned something, even if they made only a small step towards the unfamiliar and left their comfort zone only briefly.

For me the project was the realization of my abilities. I understood that to create is cool. I've never thought that interviewing or meeting interesting people, editing video recordings that I made myself, and speaking in front of an audience can be so captivating. It defines your time in a way. You have a reference point. You are appreciated for your skills. You are interesting to those around you. At school you're just an ordinary person. It's not the same at school: you do your homework—and then forget it. I am very grateful to the organizers and I'm looking forward to there being a follow-up project.



Sasha Seits

student,
project participant

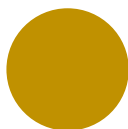


Artyom Volzhenin

student,
project participant



I like going to museums and when I received the invitation, I agreed without so much as a second thought. To gain access to the museum ‘through the back door’, to find out about things that aren’t seen by usual visitors—that’s simply cool! I met interesting people, learned lots of new things about how the museum works and about journalism. It was difficult to make the presentation: the voice, the format...But to come up with a title, to define the topic, was the most difficult thing. I learned how to present information in a way that engages the audience and I discovered how to select the most important questions when there are many.





CEC ArtsLink is an arts organization with offices in New York and St Petersburg that for more than 50 years has been producing programs to encourage and support exchanges between arts professionals in the US and other countries. We believe that the arts are a society's most deliberate and complex means of communication, and that the work of artists and arts administrators can help nations overcome long histories of reciprocal distrust, insularity and conflict.

ЦЕНТР РАЗВИТИЯ МУЗЕЙНОГО ДЕЛА



The St Petersburg Centre for Museum Development (established in 1998) is a non-profit non-governmental organization that strives to develop and support successful and sustainable museums which are valued by their communities and attract ever-wider audiences.



The Festival 'Children's Days in St Petersburg' is an annual collaborative event that brings together over 30 city museums. It was established to encourage further development of the professional museum community and is centered around the idea that an annual city-wide program targeted at broad family audiences results from a host of activities for museum professionals.

The All-Russia Professional Forum for Museum Educators focusing on museums' educational and socio-cultural activity for children, young people and family visitors is held in the framework of the Festival once in several years. It is a platform for professional dialogue, discussions, exchange and development, focusing, among other things, on such topical issues as current professional standards and major development trends.