Digital: Museum as Platform, Curator as Champion, in the Age of Social Media

NANCY PROCTOR

As I set out to write my first column as Digital Editor, a good friend suggested I examine the question of curatorial voice. What is it in these changing times? What roles do or should curators play in the age of social media? It seemed an appropriate topic through which to find my own role and voice in what is—for me— a new "platform": *Curator: The Museum Journal.*

I come to this topic from more than a decade of developing digital solutions for delivering interpretation in museums and online. In my days as a doctoral student in art history, I also curated a few exhibitions and presented my films in galleries and alternative spaces in England. Today—as I work with curators and others as head of New Media Initiatives for the Smithsonian American Art Museum—I find myself increasingly questioning where the boundaries lie between digital and analog, in-gallery and online, curator, interpreter, and agent of social media.

Curator David Allison is chair of Information Technology and Communication, a curatorial department concerned with the history of IT, at the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution. During a strategic planning meeting at the Smithsonian in 2009, Allison produced lists of what's "in" and "out" as the Institution enters the age of social media. I have borrowed a few items from his lists to point to the proximate future of museums and curating:

Out	In
Stability/stodginess	Change
Curators as experts	Curators as collaborators and brokers
Monographs	Stories
Control	Collaboration
Web 1.0	Web 1.0, 2.0, and 3.0

Popular adoption of Web 2.0 and its progeny has coincided in the early twenty-first century with the development of new business models and practices. Fields like publishing and journalism, the auto industry, and health care are being reshaped by social media. Even the "stodgiest" of museums is not immune. Whether or not museums are actively embracing Flickr, Wikipedia, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and the rest, their visitors are. People share their own photos, videos, and links about and to museums around the world through platforms that are not in the museum's control.

Just to clarify our terminology: A platform is a medium through which information or content is published or exchanged. In this sense, a bricks-and-mortar museum is an analog platform. Common digital platforms now distribute museum content not only via museum websites, but also through the social platforms mentioned above (Flickr, YouTube, and so on). Although the museum may have a Flickr account, for example, the museum does not own or control the underlying Flickr

site and its functionality. Moreover, people may publish their photos of the museum in their own online Flickr photo-albums, called "photostreams," without any editorial control by the museum itself.

In other words, the museum's digital presence is no longer confined to its website. In consequence, it controls increasingly less of the digital media published about its collections. In fact, many museums now receive the majority of their visitors online.[1] What, then, is the museum's responsibility to those who may never be able to visit the physical museum in person? How can the "real world" museum-encounter with the artifact be communicated to remote audiences?

As museums expand globally across a range of platforms, they are undergoing a transformation. Steven Zucker, principal of Smarthistory.org and dean of the School of Graduate Studies at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), has described it as a transition from Acropolis—that inaccessible treasury on the fortified hill—to Agora, a marketplace of ideas offering space for conversation, a forum for civic engagement and debate, and opportunity for a variety of encounters among audiences and the museum.

I would argue that this transformation is happening whether or not the museum chooses to be part of the conversation. But some museums have embraced the trend, even sourcing "citizen curators" and user-generated content. In 2007, for instance, Tate Britain used Flickr to crowdsource photographs as an online accompaniment for *How We Are: Photographing Britain*, the gallery's first major photographic exhibition. A conventionally curated show, *How We Are* included images by famed British photographers such as William Henry Fox Talbot, Lewis Carroll, and Julia Margaret

Cameron, as well as postcards, family albums, and propaganda. Tate Britain invited the general public to post their own shots through the photo-sharing capabilities of Flickr.[2]

At the Brooklyn Museum, *Click!: A Crowd-Curated Exhibition* gave the public the job of ranking photographs for an in-gallery display in 2008. The exhibition's website gave the rationale: "Taking [the exhibition's] inspiration from the critically acclaimed book *The Wisdom of Crowds*, in which *New Yorker* business and financial columnist James Surowiecki asserts that a diverse crowd is often wiser at making decisions than expert individuals, *Click!* explores whether Surowiecki's premise can be applied to the visual arts—is a diverse crowd just as "wise" at evaluating art as the trained experts?"[3] The project began with an open call to artists for photographs on the theme of "Changing Faces of Brooklyn." Next came an online forum asking for audience evaluation of the works submitted; each citizen-curator answered "a series of questions about his/her knowledge of art and perceived expertise" and was invited to rank the works, which were then installed in the exhibition according to the results from the juried process.[4]

The Torrance Art Museum in California plans to give citizen curators the key to the galleries: Its July 23, 2009 "Call for Proposals: On Gonzo Curating" invited "artists and curators (or anyone else for that matter) to present project proposals to the Torrance Art Museum." (The project will display the results through—and perhaps beyond—the 2011/2012 exhibiting season.) The aim is to leverage the small museum's ability "to react to moments in art, quickly (for a museum) and efficiently,

within a limited budget," and to use crowdsourcing. The term "crowdsourcing" was coined by *Wired* contributing editor Jeff Howe in 2006 to name the new practice of engaging a specific group, community, or the general public to perform tasks as a group that previously were undertaken by staff or contractors.[5] Writing in a very personal voice, the Torrance Art Museum outsourced its exhibition programming to the crowd:

> To engage others, to become more collaborative and interactive with outside curators and professionals worldwide, to see our programming develop more hand-in-hand with a global enquiry and with curators in different contexts with different aims and agendas, alongside fulfilling our obligation to visually and intellectually engage a myriad of different types of visitor . . . .[6]

TAM's call for participants—which has no deadline, since the museum "sees this as an ongoing process of engagement"—concludes by stating that the museum "should be an artist's museum, a curator's museum and our audience's museum for active engagement—so if this strikes a chord with you then feel free to send proposals to us."

Crowdsourcing is not confined to art museums or any museum's physical building. For instance, Powerhouse Museum in Australia has published much of its collection online, but not all of the records are complete. In April 2009, a "citizen scientist" was looking on the Powerhouse website and found a record concerning an "Object" described as an "H7507 Inclinometer, (also called dipping compass or dip needle), made by Gambey, Paris." The notice said that the object record was "currently incomplete. The

information available may date back as far as 125 years. Other information may exist in a non-digital form."[7]

Sharon Rutledge contacted Nick Lomb, the museum's curator of astronomy, and helped identify the object and its provenance: the Gambey Dip Circle is a magnetic instrument from the historic Parramatta Observatory in Australia. As a result, a week later the record included three high-resolution ("Zoomify") images and 746 words of text explaining its history, significance, and the story of its rediscovery in the Powerhouse collection.[8]

The Powerhouse Museum's use of online tools to crowdsource enhanced information and understanding of the museum's collection. This happy result points to new ways that curators and subject experts can collaborate in using social media.

The Copenhagen Doctoral School of Cultural Studies, in conjunction with the Arken Museum of Modern Art and Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, organized the conference, "Event Culture: The Museum and Its Staging of Contemporary Art," in November 2009, in order to examine the changing role of contemporary art curators. The conference website describes the evolutionary pressures on the contemporary art museum. I will sum up its three points here:

1. A shift from substance and solidity towards activity and performance, and from history to the contemporary.

2. A privileging of the temporary exhibition over the permanent collection.

3. Exhibitions that focus on creating events and sensations rather than generating knowledge.[9]

Looking through the lens of contemporary art museum practice, the conference organizers posit the role of curator as increasingly one of "storytelling" or generating narratives rather than producing classical art historical knowledge. If this trend continues under the impetus of social media and other twenty-first-century influences, the changing functions of the museum and the role of the curator "might indeed change the very role of art in society as well."

American Furniture / Googled, an exhibition of nineteenth-century furniture in the Decorative Arts Gallery at the Milwaukee Art Museum, took up the challenge to rethink curatorial praxis.[10] In a telephone interview, Melissa Buchanan, Mae E. Demmer Assistant Curator of Twentieth-century Design, explained to me how the in-gallery interpretation of nineteenth-century furniture drew on innovative new approaches, developed by the Chipstone Foundation, sponsors of the exhibition, for presenting collections to the public.

In this experimental installation, traditional object labels were replaced by digital screens displaying Google search results for each object. Two terminals in the gallery, with open Internet access and minimal restrictions as to what kinds of websites visitors could not access, were also available so that visitors could follow those links and do further research in the galleries. Buchanan and her colleagues curated information from the Internet by selecting links to sites that they felt could significantly enhance the visitor's experience of the exhibition, both in the gallery and online. In this case, the "wisdom of the crowd" (in interpreting art works) came not from an anonymous array of amateurs but rather from the websites of other museums, auction houses, interior design magazines, and scholarly blogs dedicated to furniture studies.

American Furniture / Googled lays bare the research process and resources used by curators in developing their own expertise. Buchanan acknowledged in my interview with her that the role of the curator as subject expert is changing and becoming more creative and educational. Like educators, curators are having to think of how to expose more of the collection and share their knowledge of it in new ways. Recognizing that it is impossible for any individual to "know it all" in the age of the Internet (if it ever was), the curator today can have an even greater impact by becoming a curator of information in the public domain, and an expert communicator and interpreter, stimulating interest and helping audiences navigate to the information sources that satisfy their curiosity. Like a node at the center of the distributed network[11] that the museum has become, the curator is the moderator and facilitator of the conversation about objects and topics proposed by the museum, even across platforms not directly controlled by the museum.

Nicholas Poole is CEO of Collections Trust, an independent U.K.-based charity that campaigns for the public right to access and engage with collections. He spoke to the Social History Curators Group, which advocates for improving the representation of social history in museums, in a July 2009 meeting in Leeds, England. He asked: "Given that everyone's experience and creative output is now spread across an extraordinary range of channels and platforms, how can we hope to curate *digital* Social History?"[12]

He observes that this kind of challenge is not new to the social historian—nor, I

The curator's universe: MVSEVM (2006), mixed media construction by David Beck.
Photo courtesy of Smithsonian American Art Museum; gift of Thelma and Melvin Lenkin.

would add, to any subject expert—who has been impacted by the "accelerated pace of social change ever since the invention of the printing press and the inception of the Industrial Revolution." But looking at the exponential increase in data, publications, and knowledge on all fronts, Poole argues, "the only way we could hope to curate it is by enabling users to become their own curators. Hence a new phrase 'citizen curators' joins the 'citizen digitization' refrain . . . ." Web 2.0 is "rewriting the social contract," according to Poole. Its new precepts form the basis of "a kind of New Deal for museums" as "public service broadcasters and service providers."

In the online discussion of Poole's presentation, Angelina Russo revised a set of precepts Poole had written in order to suggest a version that was both more recipro-

cal and, arguably, more feasible in the museum context. She listed four:

1. They're our collections.

2. Many voices are critical to the interpretation of culture.

3. We [the museum] will attempt to go where participation takes us.

4. We will provide the platform for culture, the training and advocacy to support it, and we would like to work together [with our audiences] to construct the content.[13]

In this formulation, the role of the curator is "assembler of many voices," as Eric Johnson wrote in response to my Tweeted question, "What is curatorial voice in the age of social media?" Johnson is New Media Specialist at the Jefferson Library at

Monticello. He acknowledged that the role of curator "does imply expertise even still, rightly or no."

Neal Stimler, from the Image Library at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, takes issue with the concept of "citizen curator" on just this point of expertise. In an email message to me, he spoke about the role of art curator, but his point holds true for any curatorial discipline:

> While scholars and museum visitors contribute to the enrichment of curatorial practice through a social media dialogue, I do not share the view that using social media makes everyone a curator. Curators are the most trusted art experts, whose aggregated knowledge, critical thinking abilities, and aesthetic observations define the meaning and value of art.

It seems that a conceptual shift is necessary to reconcile these seemingly contradictory intentions: to democratize control of and access to culture through programs involving "citizen curators" and "user-generated content," while preserving and valuing the subject expert and a traditional curatorial role. Perhaps we need to recognize that expertise does not necessarily entail a curatorial elite speaking from a remote Temple of the Muses. "Crowdsourced" enhancements to the Powerhouse Museum's online collection information have shown (as Eric Johnson observed in an email to me) that "'communities of passion'—amateur experts whose knowledge of any given subject areas may be as deep as (or even deeper than) that of curators"—working in partnership with museum curators, can provide critical data as well as the impetus to enhance the quality of information and content publicly available.

As sources and information proliferate online, the acknowledged expert increases in value by filtering, validating, and connecting to these networks of knowledge. Perhaps even more usefully, the curator can help teach audiences how to research and read critically when evaluating sources on a given topic, much as the curatorial team at the Milwaukee Art Museum did with *American Furniture / Googled.* In this role, the curator becomes both an educator, as Buchanan suggests, and a champion for a body of knowledge and its artifacts. By visibly standing on the shoulders of giants and publicly acknowledging the network that generated his or her expertise, the curator gains both credibility and connectivity with—and relevance to—audiences.

Chris Anderson, editor of *Wired* Magazine and author of *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More* (2006) and *Free: The Future of a Radical Price* (2009), noted in a talk at the Smithsonian in 2009 that the things we're most passionate about tend to be "niche" as opposed to "mass market." As an example, he described the effort and hours he put into his hobby, Lego robotics, despite its irrelevance to his professional success or income.[14]

One of the privileges of museum work is that most of us get paid for doing what we love, so our avocation is also our vocation. Since the era of the cabinet of curiosities, museums have been sanctuaries for specialists and their niche interests. In the age of information abundance, the museum's ability to provide depth of knowledge on specific topics is its virtue and strength. Anderson encouraged the Smithsonian—and, by implication, all museums—not to be afraid to cultivate specialist content, ideas and initiatives in

quantity. Though many will fail, some will take root, flourish, and advance our missions.

Clay Shirky, analyzing the future of newspapers and journalism in his blog post, "Newspapers and Thinking the Unthinkable," similarly identifies a potentially crucial role for the passionate subject specialist. Like Anderson, he urges that "Now is the time for experiments, lots and lots of experiments, each of which will seem as minor at launch as craigslist did, as Wikipedia did, as octavo volumes did," but any of which could prove to be the lynchpin for the new cultural economy.

> For the next few decades, journalism will be made up of overlapping special cases. Many of these models will rely on amateurs as researchers and writers. Many of these models will rely on sponsorship or grants or endowments instead of revenues. Many of these models will rely on excitable 14-year-olds distributing the results. Many of these models will fail. No one experiment is going to replace what we are now losing with the demise of news on paper, but over time, the collection of new experiments that do work might give us the journalism we need.[15]

Bran Ferran—artist, innovator, principal of Applied Minds, Inc. and former president of Disney Imagineering—suggested at the Smithsonian 2.0 conference that perhaps museums are a fad.[16] Like CB radio or newspapers, they will have proven to be irrelevant or unsustainable as a business model in 10 years. Perhaps the curator will go the same way, or turn into a hobbyist or blogger, paying for his or her research through unrelated professional activities. I may just be showing that I'm a digital immigrant, too old to be a digital native, when I say that I hope not. I still enjoy the printed exhibition catalogue even though I read more and more on the mobile, digital screen. I would hate to lose the pleasures of browsing museum collections and their archives, however old-fashioned and dusty in their presentation. But rather than fetishizing the medium, we should focus, as does Clay Shirky, on the value of the underlying service: "Society doesn't need newspapers," he writes. "What we need is journalism."

We also need passionate, creative, generous champions to curate the expanding fields of knowledge now on offer, thanks largely to the social media and other digital tools that make knowledge generation and publication faster and easier for everyone, experts and enthusiastic amateurs alike. As has ever been the case, curators can best serve and preserve the artifacts they love by ensuring that audiences understand objects' pertinence and value to our lives. In the new cultural economy, the curator's expertise will be judged not just by the depth of his or her subject-knowledge, but also by the extent, diversity, and richness of the network that is engaged in active conversation with the curator, thereby ensuring the ongoing quality, relevance, and future of the discourse.

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Acknowledgment

Notes

1. A study by José-Marie Griffiths, dean and professor, and Donald W. King, distinguished research professor, School of Information and Library Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, revealed that 45 percent of museum visits are by online visitors. The study, *Interconnections: The IMLS National Study on the Use of Libraries, Museums and the Internet*, was published as a series of reports (over several years, beginning in 2006) on the Web. See http://www.interconnectionsreport.org.

2. See http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/howweare/, accessed Aug. 30, 2009.

3. See http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/click/, accessed Aug. 30, 2009.

4. The Luce Foundation Center of the Smithsonian American Art Museum also uses Flickr to solicit "citizen curators" who help select artworks for display in its open storage area.

5. Jeff Howe, "The Rise of Crowdsourcing," *Wired*, Issue 14.06 - June 2006, accessed Sept. 13, 2009 at http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.06/crowds.html.

6. See http://www.torranceartmuseum.com/gonzocurating.php, accessed Aug. 30, 2009.

7. You can download this image from http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/dmsblog/wp-content/gambey-h7507.png.

8. The newly revised object record can be found at http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/collection/database/?irn=248651. For more of the story, see http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/dmsblog/index.php/2009/04/27/another-opac-discovery-the-gambey-dip-circle-and-the-value-of-minimal-tombstone-data/.

9. The University of Copenhagen, "Event Culture: The Museum and Its Staging of Contemporary Art," November 6-7, 2009, accessed Aug. 30, 2009 at http://eventculture.ikk.ku.dk/.

10. Milwaukee Art Museum, "American Furniture / Googled," July 9-Oct. 11, 2009, accessed Aug. 30, 2009 at http://www.mam.org/exhibitions/details/americanFurniture.php.

11. A computer network is said to be distributed "when the computer programming and the data to be worked on are spread out over more than one computer." See Wikipedia, "Distributed Networking," accessed August 30, 2009 at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Distributed_Networking. In this sense, the museum, which distributes its content and encounters its public on a wide range of analog and digital platforms, is a networked presence.

12. Nicholas Poole, "Social Media and Social History," posted on his blog on Monday, July 13, 2009. Accessed Aug. 29, 2009 at http://openculture.collectionstrustblogs.org.uk/2009/07/13/social-media-social-history/. For the Social History Group, see http://www.shcg.org.uk/.

13. The comment is on Poole's blogpost.

14. Chris Anderson, "The Smithsonian's Long Tail," accessed Sept. 9, 2009 at http://smithsonian20.si.edu/schedule_webcast2.html.

15. Clay Shirky, "Newspapers and Thinking the Unthinkable," posted March 13, 2009. Accessed Sept. 9, 2009 at http://www.shirky.com/weblog/

2009/03/newspapers-and-thinking-
the-unthinkable/.

16. The Smithsonian 2.0 conference is
identified on its website as "A Gather-
ing to Re-Imagine the Smithsonian in
the Digital Age." See http://smith
sonian20.si.edu/about.html. Ferren
spoke in a Webcast of Keynote Presen-
tations; see http://smithsonian20.
si.edu/schedule_webcast1.html.