

Key Issues Facing Art Museums in the Context of Their Social Role

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Abstract

This paper aims to highlight the major issues that art museums are facing nowadays in the context of their effort to become more accessible and to stabilize their social role. In the prologue the nature of art museums and their changing character is addressed, to continue to the nature of contemporary collecting, which is extremely important, as it defines their nature. Continuing, the accessibility of art museum's collections is being discussed by using examples from the British art museum's reality. The social role of the museums and their impact on people's lives is extremely stressed, along with their need to create a great visitor experience, as museums have become public spaces and platforms for stimulating critical thinking. Art museums constitute a sensitive category of museums, it is not long ago that they were considered as extremely elitist, so therefore their relation to the public should be considered.

Keywords: art, museum, collecting, accessibility, display, society, visitor, experience

Prologue

Art Museums are now richer, more numerous and more glamorous, as sites of cultural activity, compared to what they were, when they first appeared in the late eighteenth century. So, they should not be considered as neutral sheltering spaces or as products of architectural design (Duncan, 1995), as it usually happens, but as complex entities, in which both art and architecture form parts of a larger whole. It is true that art museums belong to the bourgeois culture. One can clearly see that just by looking at the buildings that primarily housed art collections themselves, such as the Louvre, but it is also true that this model of the princely gallery is changing into the public art museum. This transformation is necessary for these museums, in order to become more popular to the wider public that quite often feels inferior as well as excluded from them. Art museums are given an aesthetic value that separates them from the traditional education orientated museums and as a result they are considered as elitist (Bourdieu, 1979).

People often feel intimidated by the imposing facades of most of the art museums and galleries and that prevents them from entering these buildings, and, consequently, the museums need to demonstrate that they function for the benefit of the broad public rather than the privileged and fearless few that manage to enter them. These temples of art need to make their collections more accessible to make art a part of a wider culture (Barker, 1997). Accessibility of art museums is one of the major issues nowadays, so ways that can make them more approachable and likeable are going to be discussed, especially with the use of the new technologies and the internet. But previously, contemporary collecting will be reflected upon, in terms of what is considered as art and therefore should be exhibited in a museum. Another key issue for art museums in particular constitutes the display of the collections- how they are organized and how people interpret them. Lastly, the impact that museums have in peoples' lives is going to be stressed, in terms of their role in the broader cultural education (Bennett, 1995).

1. Contemporary Collecting

One of the reasons why people don't usually find art museums interesting is the fact that they are not relevant to their lives. But that can change if museums begin to collect everyday, contemporary objects, to which people can relate. There is a struggle to establish contemporary collecting as part of the museums' fundamental responsibilities and a lot of steps have been made towards that direction.

Although the following example does come from an art museum, it proves however that people can become involved if they feel connected to the collections. The project that the Discovery Museum in Newcastle accomplished from November 1999 to April 2001, where people were asked to donate five items that represented their lifetime and was therefore called 'Making History', turned out to be very successful (Barnard, 2002a). It is possible that, if something similar took place in an art museum, it would have the same result and therefore would help the people to familiarize with art by acknowledging it as part of everyday life.

Contemporary collecting will also solve the major problem of funding that most museums are dealing with and that consequently prevents them from making new acquisitions. Especially in the arena of modern art, funding purchases is a big problem, as museums have to compete with private galleries and buyers. Unfortunately, there is not much that can be done for that, as it is really difficult to increase funds, however there is an argument for increasing the Victoria & Albert Museum's Purchase Fund and the Science Museum's Prism Fund, which are useful, but not large enough for serious art buying. Due to that lack of funds, some institutions are in danger to become static collections, unable to reflect modern and contemporary issues.

It is vital, then, for art museums to collect everyday, contemporary objects as rigorously as they collect paintings, by an Old Master for instance, not only as the costs of such acquisitions are significant, and therefore difficult to be covered by funds, but also because people need to become familiar with art and to understand that art can be everything that gives pleasure or causes spiritual challenge. Some museums are already following the route of contemporary collecting-it takes time for all the important changes to take place- but eventually it will become established, because, as mentioned above, people seem to welcome it.

2. Accessibility of Collections

The Internet and the use of new technologies nowadays can contribute to a great extent to make art collections accessible to a wider public all over the world. Many museums take advantage, when funding allows it, of the new digital technology in order to create virtual exhibitions that even more people can visit, given the fact that the use of the World Wide Web is constantly extended. Museums' web pages provide also a wide range of extra information that complements their exhibitions and permanent displays (Morris, 2001) and some of them receive funding to create Internet resources. For instance, the Science Museum has received 1.4 million pounds from the government's Invest to Save budget towards the creation of MMW Online, that is an internet resource based on its Making of the Modern World exhibition. It would definitely take a little longer for art galleries and museums to receive funding of this kind, but the evolution is rapid (Dussek, 2002). The Tate Modern gallery in London, which is considered as one of the most important centers for contemporary art, has found other ways to make art more accessible to the public. First of all, it has partnered the City Lit to create an online art course that will eventually lead to a qualification, where people will gain their knowledge through the collections and so, they will eventually come to terms with art. In that way, not only the museum will open its doors to the public, but it will also fulfill its educational role to great extend.

Secondly, the Tate has launched a range of paints- an idea that was originally generated by the Bigidea Brand Management Ltd, a brand management consultancy that worked for B&Q. That partnership has been of mutual benefit. While senior curators and managers invested time into getting the concept right, the Tate did not have to invest any capital into the project, as the B&Q was confident that the Tate brand would sell and therefore it provided full financial commitment for product development, marketing, in-store merchandising, public relations and advertising. The colors chosen for the paint range were inspired by the four Tate galleries, the architecture, the collections and the environment, so there are four collections relating to each gallery: Modern, Britain, Liverpool and St. Ives (Lucas, 2002). Apart from the publicity that gives access to new audiences, the Tate receives 3% of the sales that helps to fund their programs and that proves that diversifying into the DIY market has paid off for the gallery, which is now considering working with other retailers.

Thirdly, the Tate is trying to attract more visitors by offering leisure activities, such as shopping and eating, so that people of all ages can have an interesting as well as educating day out. Many museums are following this example trying to minimize the competition with conventional attractions like the big shopping centers that offer activities for every age group (Black & Phelps, 2002). Other contemporary art centers like the Institute of Contemporary Art or the Barbican have cinema and theatre facilities and that is an important motive for people to cross their doorsteps, even though many people claim that the kind of entertainment that they offer is addressed to an elite minority.

The result after all is positive, as more people are intrigued to visit these places, even if it is out of curiosity and not of genuine interest in art (Barnard, 2002b). The use of the Internet in order to create digital collections and to advertise the contents of a museum in the form of a web page, the museums' collaboration with commercial brands and the expansion of facilities like restaurants and shops within the traditional museum in order to attract and cater to a mass public, contribute to the accessibility of the collections and help visitor numbers to rise (Keene, 1997).

3. Display and the role of space

The fundamental aim of an art museum is to display works of art for the sake of their aesthetic interest (Barker, 1997), stopping them in that way from being used for any purpose other than that from being looked at. Therefore display itself becomes as much an issue as art, as the word is a verb as well as a noun, in other words active as much as passive, as the display is always produced by curators or designers and consequently expresses their aims and thoughts. In short, it is a form of representation as well as a mode of presentation.

Display plays therefore a very important role in art museums and that explains the fact why the white color has become the preferred background for the presentation of contemporary art, as it brings the focus to the works of art themselves. Most peoples' memory of a contemporary art space is of a simple, undecorated space with white walls and a polished wood floor or a soft grey carpet. The white environment has been subjected to forceful critique, as it suggests that the museum is nothing more than a neutral context for the works of art, a lifeless structure destined to remain always the same (Serota, 2000).

We would like to argue that the white background is far from being neutral, because its aim is to leave to the people the freedom to view and experience art in their personal way. Art museums do not intend to manipulate people, as the only story they want to tell is that of art and beauty, so it is clear that they do not have any other interests, as social history museums would possibly have. It can be claimed that art is better appreciated when it is free of any other supplementary ornaments that can distract peoples' attention from the works of art themselves.

4. Social Role – The impact of museums on peoples' lives

The nature and social role of museums is a very important issue, as it reveals whether museums have an impact on peoples' lives or not, and, moreover, it rises the question whether it is worthwhile for them to exist. That question becomes trickier when it comes to art museums, as they neither focus on the community nor on the national or civic identity of its members.

That question can be answered by supporting that art museums have a lot more to offer than an interesting and enjoyable day out- that is only and purely entertainment. Apart from playing an economic role for the society, they also have educational values. Art museums constitute major tourist attractions and therefore contribute significantly to the economic progress or even regeneration of some areas- for example the Tate Modern at the Bankside that helped the development of that neglected area, which is now even linked to the other side of the Thames by a purpose built bridge.

When it comes to the educational role of art museums, they form a source of life long learning for everyone, including the artists, where they can study the famous masterpieces and also get inspired by the contemporary and revolutionary works of art. Art can have a multiple impact on people and their lives, as it can be interpreted in different ways, depending on one's psychological state. That is the reason why people visit art museums and galleries more than once, proving how important they are for the public. So, art museums do make an impact on people's lives as people have already become familiar with them. They no longer feel intimidated by them, because it is constantly made clear that art is for everyone, it is part of their popular culture.

5. Creating a great visitor experience

It is a fact that the museum has cultivated a dynamic relationship with the local society, as an agent of social change (Sandell, 2007). Since the museum's goal is to serve and interact with the community as well as to educate the public, a good visitor experience from their side is of crucial meaning. Consequently, it is important that the entrance is extremely welcome (Weaver, 2007) for the museum to be characterized as visitor-friendly (Mastai, 2007). Museums in the 21st century are more responsive to the social challenges of the public in order to attract life-long visitors. They try to motivate them by designing exhibitions that engage museum visitors cognitively and psychologically with the objects and the museum experience as a whole (Paris, 2006).

Exhibitions should be designed in a way to enhance the social interaction between the visitors in comfortable and welcoming surroundings, to promote their active participation as well as the opportunity to learn and furthermore to create a challenging new experience for everyone (Weaver, 2007). The way in which the audience receives, responds, interacts and in general makes use of the exhibition should be considered under the aspects of innovation, creativity and inclusiveness (Blackwell & Scaife, 2006). Issues such as the visitor's attention and orientation, the goals of the institution for the enhancement of the visitor's experience under the influence of both the social as well as the physical context, given the fact that the museum visitor is influenced by constructed personal, social and physical factors (Falk & Dierking, 1998) are also of crucial importance.

Furthermore, it is a fact that museums become public places and platforms for stimulating critical thinking. So, therefore, exhibitions should be analyzed in the broader context of the museum's interest to broaden its audience by becoming more accessible. It is regarded as a result of the museum's effort not only to identify the barriers which exclude the visitors but to try to overcome them (Dodd & Sandell, 1998), which literary means giving priority to the public (Reeve, 2006). Finally, as Black (2005) stated a museum visit is in reality a holistic experience.

Conclusion

Some of the fundamental issues that art museums are facing nowadays were discussed previously, not only due to their importance, but also as museums have made progress in dealing with them- collecting, accessibility or display. Examples taken from the field of art museums in the British reality were used in order to support and justify our arguments. Art museums are considered to be important, and they are gradually overcoming their problems and at the same time they are getting out of the isolation that they were condemned into for decades. Lastly, the situation for these museums will improve by the time, as there are many people interested in art museums, which make a great effort for their development.

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