The Activist Exhibition
When we consider art through different lenses, we can engage wider audiences.

By James Christen Steward

In the fall of 2018, a group of Princeton students and I spent the semester exploring the tensions between the historically facing lineage and responsibilities of many museums—our commitment to care for, present, and interpret the past—and the possibilities of a more engaged, “activist” museum. The question I ultimately put to my students was whether a museum might, through its collections and exhibitions, be both past-facing and future-facing, inviting its public to consider issues in a new light or to think differently.

After delving into a number of the key issues, such as the origin story of the modern museum, ethics, provenance and ownership of the past, and the rise of the blockbuster exhibition in the 1960s, we considered a series of exhibitions that arguably sought to put forward engaged forms of art history. We looked at why these exhibitions succeeded or failed, and the criteria for success or failure.

Our case studies were mostly historical exhumations for my students: Thomas Hoving’s “Harlem on my Mind” (1969) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the tour of Robert Mapplethorpe’s “The Perfect Moment” (1990–1991), Telma Golden’s “Black Male” (1994) at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and “The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820–1920” (1991) at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Our final case study was the provocation for the course: “Nature’s Nation: American Art and Environment,” organized at Princeton that fall as the first exhibition to attempt a broad reconsideration of American art from 1710 to the present through the lenses of nature and the environment.

Placed alongside other recent exhibitions that seek to connect the dots between past and present in powerful ways, such as the Brooklyn Museum’s “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power” (2018), the Morgan Library & Museum’s Peter Hujar exhibition (2018), the Museum of Modern Art’s response to the proposed travel ban of early 2017, or other exhibitions considering art

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CONSTRUCTIVE CONVERSATIONS

Interested in engaged scholarship or exhibition practices? Consider the following in your planning.

• Know your audiences. Consider what might strike the appropriate balance between dynamic engagement and offense in your community.

• Engage the public in the planning work. Test your key interpretive concepts, vocabulary, and gallery didactics on focus groups.

• Educate your entire staff. If a project’s narrative is especially complex, your staff become essential ambassadors.

• Consider sharing your institutional voice with other, perhaps less traditionally prepared, experts.

• Engage local influencers, including elected officials; they probably rather know about anything potentially controversial ahead of time.

• Let the objects on display shape the narrative. When the objects make the visitors’ interpretation inevitable, accusations of “bias” are less likely.

and social justice, the exhibitions we investigated made powerful connections among the political, the social, and the aesthetic.

Ultimately, these exhibitions ask basic and important questions about art: What is its purpose? Who is it for—the few or the many? Can art and exhibitions deliver a message? What are the implications of taking a risk—for the artist or the institution? And they ask similar questions of the museum itself. Should museums be places of dialogue, including around social change?

For many of the exhibitions we examined, such questions were in the air when much of the art they consider was being made. So perhaps the most daring of these “engaged” projects are those that seek to retell histories with which we are broadly familiar—and, in doing so, seek to re-radicalize the art of the past as anything but safe or simple at the time of its making.

Learning from Controversy

While it’s tempting to identify overarching themes that link the pleasure or failures of the exhibitions we studied, my students and I found more nuanced meanings in the exhibition histories. In some cases, the organizers seem to have been caught unawares by controversy, perhaps insulated by their own familiarity with the material.

The readiness of a specific community to be taken in new directions is also key: audiences in Cincinnati and Berkeley had vividly different reactions to “The Perfect Moment.” In other instances, exhibitions became lightning rods for wider issues swirling in the public discourse: “The West as America,” for example, became an exemplar of Western revisionism that was probably destined for controversy in the context of its exhibition at a national institution in the nation’s capital.

But the terms of success and failure are critical to any risk-benefit analysis. When it premiered, “The West as America” struck its audiences viscerally. Critics accused it of being “inaccurate” or “leftist,” many felt it had no place at the Smithsonian. Reading much of the literature of its reception—and viewing its catalogue—my students felt the exhibition underestimated the degree to which many audiences would find it an assault on core ideas of America that they continued to value—and thus an assault on them. Even as the intended national tour was canceled, the extraordinary debate that ensued in the exhibition’s visitor comment books was itself so lively, engaged, and thought-provoking (one visitor noted that “Re-reading visitors’ comments is almost as provocative as the show”) that the exhibition must ultimately be deemed a success.

In organizing “Nature’s Nation,” we were cognizant of some of the lessons learned from past projects attempting new histories and mining new meanings—especially those whose messages were as topical as climate change and the debate still swirling around it. I regularly reminded the exhibition’s curators that the narrative needed to arise from the objects themselves, rather than from a seemingly predetermined point of view.

The aesthetics—placed in their original contexts—of the works of art on loan from 70 lenders was essential, especially given the presence of canonical artists such as Charles Willson Peale, Winslow Homer, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Jackson Pollock. The exhibition’s blending of opportunities for pleasure with the revelation of deeper, more complex meanings was critical to the project’s success. Surprise was equally a factor and a strategy: The exhibition presents unexpected or perplexing juxtapositions (a painting by Morris Louis with an 18th-century Chippendale chest, for example) to compel visitors to delve more deeply into the exhibition’s purposes.

For the students in my seminar, engaged scholarship presented in the public setting of a museum felt not only possible but essential—an argument for the impact art museums might still have in the 21st century, and even for a career in the field. One student asked, “After an exhibition like this, how do you go back?”—back, that is, to art for its sake.

Many may see the risk of political correctness in such projects or, at the least, of aesthetics subordinated to a politically motivated argument. But my students have helped me see engagement as a point of entry, a way of allowing aesthetics to meet with wider meanings and to speak to wider audiences.

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