



Visitor Participation: Opportunities and Challenges

by Nina Simon

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Recently, I was giving a presentation about participatory techniques at a large art museum, when a staff member raised her hand and asked, "Did you have to look really hard to find examples from art museums? Aren't art museums less open to participation than other kinds of museums?"

I was surprised by her question. In my travels and research, I've seen all kinds of museums be incredibly successful—and incredibly uncomfortable—with visitor participation. While it's true that art museums have some particular challenges, so do all kinds of institutions in their own ways. Here's what I see as the opportunities and challenges for different kinds of museums in pursuing participatory visitor engagement.

History Museums

Opportunities: History museums are in many ways the best suited for visitor participation. They are frequently about real people's stories. As cultural anthropology has swung away from a vision of authoritative history and toward the embrace of multiple perspectives, there is potential for those stories to come from all over the place, including visitors themselves. For this reason, I see history museums as best suited for participatory projects that involve story sharing and crowdsourced collecting (e.g. *MN150* at the Minnesota History Center). Because of the incredible popularity of genealogy as an activity, history museums are also excellent places for visitor-generated or visitor-supported research projects (e.g. Children of the Lodz Ghetto at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum). Finally, because of their social content, they are good places for community

dialogue programming and comment boards (for example, consider the Levine Museum of the New South's extensive use of sticky notes and talking circles). Everyone can have her own personal experience of history.

Challenges: Despite their support for multiple perspectives, history museums feel strongly about accuracy and authenticity. They also want to avoid stories or perspectives that reflect hateful or offensive views toward other people. Validating and moderating visitors' stories or contributions are often top concerns in history museums. So is maintaining a narrative thread that is intelligible and enjoyable to visitors. Balancing multi-vocal content with a comprehensive narrative can be tricky. Finally, some history museum staff members feel that they should not be dealing with contemporary social issues or that they are unable to facilitate dialogue on contentious topics.

Art Museums

Opportunities: Art museums are well suited for creative visitor participation. They show the creative process, and many visitors may be inspired to create their own art in response to that on display (e.g. *In Your Face* at the Art Gallery of Ontario). While art historians and curators may have their own sense of what interpretations of art are most accurate or valuable, it's generally accepted that everyone has his own experience of art, and that individuals' different interpretations or preferences are acceptable (which encourages some museums, like the Auckland Art Gallery, to invite visitors to write their own labels). Finally, many art museums do fabulous, highly participatory

DIFFERENT INSTITUTIONS, DIFFERENT ISSUES

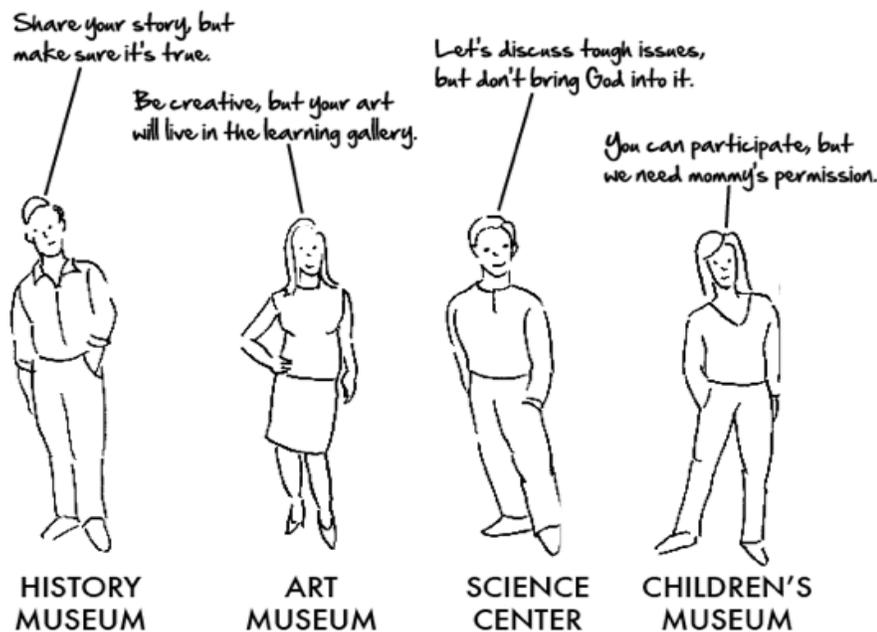


Image designed by Nina Simon with drawings by Jennifer Rae Atkins.

projects that are led by participatory artists who work specifically in the realm of dialogue or active social engagement (e.g. Tino Seghal's conversational show at the Guggenheim, or Tom Marioni's *Free Beer* at SFMOMA).

Challenges: Art museums have more significant separations between education departments and curatorial departments than other types of museums. This means that an activity construed as educational (i.e. write your own label) often cannot be placed in the gallery if it is perceived by curators to distract from the aesthetic experience of connecting with the artworks. Ironically, art museums often present the most radical participatory experiences for visitors—but only when led by an artist, not by internal staff members. There is also a strong bias in some art museums against amateur content, which prevents some institutions from encouraging creative participation by visitors.

Science Museums and Science Centers

Opportunities: Science museums and science centers have a long history of interactive display techniques, which makes them naturally suited to encourage

other kinds of active visitor participation. They also have a general visitor-centered "you be the scientist" approach, which elevates visitors' own opinions, actions, and contributions in the context of the museum experience. Finally, they are commonly used by school and family groups as learning places. These attributes make science museums and science centers ideal for participatory projects that are collaborative and action-oriented. Many science centers support participatory design challenges, citizen science projects, and nature exchanges that encourage visitors to engage personally and socially in doing science. Some science museums also present dialogue-based programs and exhibits around contemporary science issues, like race, wealth disparity, and climate change (e.g. *A World in Play* at the Experimentarium in Denmark). Several also offer adults-only events or venues (like the London Science Museum's Dana Centre) to encourage older visitors to engage with tough topics in modern science.

Challenges: Unlike history museums or art museums, science institutions do not value multiple perspectives on basic interpretations of science. Theories like

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evolution and the laws of thermodynamics are not open to visitor reinterpretation. Additionally, the family-oriented focus on fun and shared learning at science centers leads some to shy away from controversial topics or visitor experiences that might be perceived as too complicated to integrate into a family visit. There is also the concern that visitors' contributions are more likely to be off-topic or that comment boards will be used in entirely inappropriate ways, especially by school groups. Visitors are rarely engaged in exhibition development or content production as they might be in art or history museums; participation in science centers is often focused narrowly on teens and young adults who are engaged in formal internships or staff positions.

Children's Museums

Opportunities: Like science centers, children's museums are highly interactive and visitor-centered. There are many opportunities for visitors to make things both to share and take home in the context of a visit. Children's museums often encourage visitors to explore new ideas and develop narratives around their experiences (e.g. *Skyscraper Challenge* at Chicago Children's Museum), and institutions frequently showcase visitors' stories and creations. In some cases, professionals develop exhibitions or shows with children's participation, as in Capital E Theater's opera, *Kia Ora Khalid*, which was developed with young immigrants based on their experiences. Some institutions encourage visitors to make personal pledges relative to tough topics, like prejudice, personal health, or environmentalism (e.g. *The Power of Children* at Indianapolis Children's Museum).

Challenges: The biggest challenge to visitor participation in children's museums is concern about privacy. Most children's museum staff are not comfortable encouraging visitors to document each other (i.e. take photos of each other's kids), asking for personal data about children, or encouraging children to approach strangers (unsurprisingly). Additionally, many museum staff members assume that family and young visitors are not able to make substantive contributions as participants due to their level of ability and availability.

A Note on Small Museums vs. Large Museums

While the delineations above are by museum subject matter, there are also significant differences between participatory opportunities in large and small museums. Small museums are more likely to be community-oriented and to be comfortable incorporating visitor-generated content without feeling that it disrupts the overall design of the institution. However, small museums are also less likely to have staff support to maintain and sustain participatory projects over time. While large museums are often beleaguered by endless committee meetings that can hinder the potential for creative new projects, when all the dotted lines are signed, the projects tend to affect more visitors than those of small museums, and may be better funded over time. Frankly, I think small museums win out on this one—ultimately, they are less focused on authoritative image than large museums and more likely to enthusiastically embrace community involvement.

What kinds of challenges and opportunities exist in your own institution? What types of institutions do you see as most open and closed to participation? ✨