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Critical Exhibition Methods in Museums

Jaimie Davis

Introduction:

The purpose of this project has two goals: 1) to investigate the research surrounding a curator's process when selecting what items from a museum's collection make it to exhibition and 2) to examine this research and highlight the interdisciplinary qualities that museum curation must possess to function at its highest capability. Collections in a museum are a selection of items that are not currently on display from patrons to look at. The collections are the bottom of the iceberg and the exhibits are the small part that one sees on the surface. A museum exhibition is a designed display that is meant for public consumption. Utilizing various sources in order to have a global perspective on the matter expands the cultural knowledge around museum methods. The literature review further in this document examines the sources in context with one another.

The research available in literature paints the picture that in order to curate responsibly, cultural background must be taken into account. For example, a piece of art from an indigenous community may not have significance to a population of people outside of their community because of the lack of educational context, so that bridge must be made to attempt to close that knowledge gap by educating museum patrons via informational classes or summaries nearby the object.

When deciding what makes it to exhibition, the cultural and historical significance must be thought of carefully based around the objects in question, as well as the material's relation to other items in the exhibition. In sum, the object being curated must be considered not only from an aesthetic perspective, but from an anthropological perspective as well. More research synthesizing this anthropological understanding when considering exhibition methods is necessary in specifically the art museum world, where aesthetic is often considered before context.

This research was inspired by the following questions when inquiring about a curator's process: How does a curator/exhibitionist in a museum decide what needs to be in an exhibition from the collections? What makes a specific object more likely to be selected for the public to observe than others? How is cultural context being recognized when considering objects? How are interdisciplinary methods superior to monodisciplinary methods of museum studies?

In subsequent sections, conceptualizations of the literature review are further organized into subsections of: the role of interdisciplinary theory, applications, and representation of museums at a global level. The literature review explores where source curators are from and what their knowledge base is from in the first section. The second section highlights applications of art history and anthropology in the museum. The final category, representation of museums at a global level, highlights the importance of cultural representation in the museum arena.

The research materials will pull from both anthropology and art history. The research will also involve speaking on how the monodisciplinary approach is outdated and ineffective. This project involves these two academic disciplines because an exhibition itself is not to be observed in a monodisciplinary manner.

Finally, an overview of ethics in regard to these research methods and the general research topic are examined. Ethical considerations when approaching this research project were made especially in regards to source material, making sure that sources have diverse cultural backgrounds and genders. Potential achievements that can be ascertained from this line of questioning and research is to further illuminate the process that curators undergo in their own process of deciding which objects go on display. The goal of this work is to narratively translate the time and care that goes into selecting curated objects for exhibition.

Literature Review:

The role of interdisciplinary theory

Literature on exhibitions have traditionally focussed through a monodisciplinary lens in research methods about material culture. A monodisciplinary approach in academia is considering a topic from the point of view of a professional or group of professionals who are educated in only one academic discipline. For example, Schneider writes about anthropologists appropriating material culture from the perspective of an anthropologist.¹ Schneider examines in detail the difference between inspirations and appropriation. Similarly, Lentz examines material culture from the perspective of an American art historian and curator of the Harvard Art Museum, another monodisciplinary approach. Lentz addresses the issue of missing art from different cultures and the impact that a lack of representation creates.² Schneider and Lentz both address art and culture in regard to theory. While these studies have provided insight to material culture, there is a gap in the information because they looked at it from a monodisciplinary approach.

Research findings tend to be more encompassing when an interdisciplinary approach is taken; an approach that includes people from different academic disciplines. Helg is an article written from the perspective of a German art historian about the interdisciplinary nature of art history and anthropology; especially related to material culture held in museums.³ They point out that interdisciplinary study is superior to a single background of study for the museum realm. Similarly, Deliss highlights the superiority of a multidisciplinary approach versus a monodisciplinary approach.

Like Helg and Deliss, this project looks at the intersection of art and anthropology in regards to material culture. Helg and Deliss specifically go into the best way to approach the museum world from their interdisciplinary theories. They delve into the theoretical applications

¹ Schneider, Arnd. "The Art Diviners." p. 3

² Lentz, Thomas W. "The Common Path: Possible Futures for Art and Anthropology Museums." p. 21

³ Helg, Ursula. "Ménage à Trois: When Anthropology, Art History and Art Do Joint Research in the Ethnographic Museum."

of the usefulness of an interdisciplinary approach and the different perspectives each discipline tends to have.

Applications

While Helg and Deliss focus on theory, there is also a growing body of literature that focuses on the applications art and anthropology have in a museum context. The anthropologist, the art historian, and the artist approach curation in the museum world in different ways. Firstly, Lukavic's article is from the perspective of the curator of the Denver Art Museum and he addresses how anthropological thought is a good fit for art museums. The reason Lukavic argues that the anthropologist is well-suited for art museum jobs is because the history of an object (its ethnography) is of utmost importance when deciding to take on a museum object into collections.⁴ Cultural heritage and history is what needs to be considered first when researching an object and selecting if it is appropriate for exhibition.

Secondly, Dark's article is from the perspective of a visual artist. They address a disconnect for the anthropologist between data and appreciation of studying material culture in a museum.⁵ Dark is referring to the way in which an object taken out of cultural context becomes othered. This naturally occurs in the museum arena because an object in a collection is separated from where it originally came from. Dark further inquiries on how to bridge the gap between art and material culture in order to recognize an object from a museum collection as both a piece of culture *and* a work of art. Because of the separation of the disciplines of art and anthropology, this inquiry and work to recognize objects in the museum as both material culture and art is valuable to this project because it theoretically should be a main consideration of a curator.

Thirdly, Jelinek's article is about a portfolio of art the author created. The artist, Jelinek, made pieces of art to be on display in a museum to assist in explaining other pieces of art as an "interpretive aid for visitors".⁶ Like Lukavic and Dark's articles, Jelinek's article focuses on artistic versus anthropological uses for artifacts, but Jelinek is also basing their inquiry from the point of view of an artist working in the museum, speaking on the subject through physical medium. This is different because the previous two authors are basing their inquiry as curators. There needs to be more cultural recognition in art museums in order to give artwork more context that Western art gains automatically.

Lukavic, Dark, and Jelinek focus on art and culture similarly to Helg and Deliss, however, they focus more on exhibition in a literal context rather than from a theoretical one. Deliss builds on the work of these authors because they bring their real life experience in curating in museums and studying art and anthropology. This real life experience helps to

⁴ Lukavic, John P. "Where We Belong: Anthropology in an Art Museum and New Directions for the Future." p. 38.

⁵ Dark, Philip. "Anthropology and Museums: Only Art?" p. 1132.

⁶ Jelinek, Alana. "Art in Museums: An Artist's Response—Tall Stories: Cannibal Forks At The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge." p. 95.

accurately describe how the mono-disciplinary nature of ethnographic museums is outdated and needs to change.

Other research has explored the barrier to accessibility that patrons experience in museums. This affects the curator's thought process when exhibiting because the exhibitions themselves are for patrons visiting museums. A curator must take into account the accessibility of the exhibit.

Representation of museums at a global level

The three articles by Luntumbue, Diaz, and Smart speak on representation in the museum world. Luntumbue's article specifically examines museums, contemporary art, and colonialism⁷. Luntumbue and Diaz discuss the importance of exploring art while also embracing diversity. In the same vein, Smart addresses how demystifying artifacts can improve accessibility to museum objects.

The Luntumbue article is from the perspective of a curator from Congolese origin working in a Belgian museum and explores issues in representation. Luntumbue is the first Congolese curator to work at the Belgian museum. Colonialism is talked about in depth because of the presence of Congolese artifacts in the Belgian museum. Diaz's article highlights the importance of exhibiting the material culture of marginalized communities via the museum to educate the general public.⁸

Archambault is an article about indigenous representation. Archambault's article succinctly describes the relationship between indigenous communities and some museums by describing how *some* American museums in the late 19th and 20th centuries established positive relationships with indigenous communities.⁹ Inverarity's article goes deeper into artistic origins. The article discusses a history of ignoring art that is seen as less significant because of its origin, specifically indigenous art (coined as primitive art in this article). These two articles are both about indigenous representation in America. Many museums in America have a history of misrepresenting indigenous art. Colonialism is the reason that this is an issue because some historical artifacts from indigenous communities were stolen and should not be in the museum space..

Other sources have examined accessibility, diversity, art, and museums. Both Diaz and Dobkins bridge the gap between accessibility and museum exhibition and curation. Moreover, Diaz builds on the work of Dobkins by expanding the idea that bridging the gap between disciplines is a great opportunity - expressing that exhibiting materials from marginalized communities can provide the service of educating the general public of the culture. Providing

⁷ Luntumbue, Toma Muteba. "Finding Means to Cannibalise the Anthropological Museum." p. 175

⁸ Díaz, Gina. "Ethics and Folk Art Production: A New Museum Initiative." p. 120

⁹ Archambault, JoAllyn. "Native Communities, Museums and Collaboration." p. 20.

access to people to educate themselves on marginalized communities provides the patrons of art museums information that will give them context about the art that they are viewing.

Catlin-Legutko's book further explores diversity in the museum arena by giving specific testimonies from curators about diversity and accessibility issues. Diaz is the executive director of the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The Smart source is about museum accessibility by being more transparent in regards to how artworks are displayed (i.e. information around the artwork being more accessible).¹⁰ This representation is considered because of the barriers that are posed on people who are unable to access museums the way that able-bodied people are. Benthall is a source that is distinct from Catlin-Legutko and Diaz because Benthall discusses the monetary economics behind cultural artifacts. This source does connect to the previous ones because it is a necessary consideration about the role that economics plays in deciding what goes on display in museums and what does not.

This series of literature used in this research is designed to provide an array of information in order to understand the theoretical and practical applications of what a curator considers when deciding what pieces of art, what objects, get to be put on exhibition.

Ethical considerations:

In this capstone research, the main thesis is how art fits into museum studies while recognizing the museum as an anthropological design and using methods from the latter discipline. Specifically, how and why does a curator decide on what to put on exhibition from the collections. In considering ethical issues relating to this research project and potential solutions or strategies for navigating them, it seemed that this line of inquiry followed suite of the research's line of questioning in the initial stages of the project. Writers must anticipate and address ethical dilemmas that may come up in their own research.¹¹ The reason that ethical considerations tie so well into the research is because the initial research questions are asking about the ethics in a museum - how are the leaders in museum spaces deciding what is worth putting out in exhibition versus what stays in collections?

Inherently an ethical conflict exists in regards to museums because as an institution, museums began as a colonizing capitalist construct that awarded the wealthy in Western Europe. In seeking to recognize the museum's history, this line of research seeks to have diverse source material. The current source material does have several curators from across the United States that work with many types of cultural material and that come from different cultural and socio-political backgrounds. Museums have been traced back to as far as 500 B.C. in ancient Greece and Babylonia, "when the wealthiest people of society collected and displayed artifacts from even further back in history."¹² Two thousand years later a similar practice was being carried by

¹⁰ Smart, Pamela. "Crafting Aura: Art Museums, Audiences and Engagement." p. 2

¹¹ Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 88.

¹² Catlin-Legutko, C., and Taylor, C. 2021. *The Inclusive Museum Leader*. Rowman & Littlefield.

the wealthy with “cabinets of curiosity.” With this inception of the idea of museums in mind, it makes sense that those who face economic hardship would find museum access hard to achieve.¹³ This effort to have source material that comes from a myriad of backgrounds helps in getting the most grounded and accurate information around the topic.

In continuing to make the research more equitable and representative of scholars across genders, ethnicities, disciplines, locations and methods will continue to read about the authors of source material. An issue surrounding this is finding museum workers who have a diverse background. For example, only 4.2% of museum directors are people of color.¹⁴ A diversity of opinions on art on display and in collections of museums need diverse opinions on them because an assortment of art is stolen or has been acquired from marginalized groups.

Having people from diverse cultural backgrounds weigh in on collections and exhibits in the museum world is valuable because people from different cultures have a right to weigh in on objects that may come from their cultural background. The fact that there is an alarmingly small number of museum directors that are people of color makes that push towards diversity difficult. The best solution for solving these ethical issues when studying museums as an institution is to do more in finding sources that comes from a variety of people not just from different cultures, but also from different socio-economic backgrounds and differently-abled people to synthesize a cohesive look into how the museum world looks from as many angles as possible.

On the other side of considerations when researching, leaning into one’s own experiences can inform the research. McDonald’s article encourages the reflexivity in what the researcher decides to keep hidden in regards to social identity.¹⁵ People with sexual orientations or gender identities outside of the norm move through life differently than others, which changes their perceptions and can bring more diverse opinions in research and in the museum world as well. Having people from different walks of life weigh in on what the public should be educated on allows for more fair opportunities for issues of importance from various groups of people.

In the article, the author outlines social contract theory, utilitarianism, and Kantian ethics. The author argues that despite these theories being valid, there is an oversight in teaching ethics as a cookie-cutter way of approaching ethical thought. The lack of diversity is a main reason why this is the case. The philosophers who came up with those theories were all white men.¹⁶ This article relates to the study because in order to have a more accurate picture of what art is and who decides that, many different people from different backgrounds need to be able to give their opinions. Aspects to art and museums that will not be considered automatically because of the privilege had by researchers which is why one must look closely at what people who are BIPOC and people with health conditions and/or impairments are writing and publishing about the topic so the research can be well-rounded and speak ethically. There must be care in how the analysis

¹³ Catlin-Legutko et al. *The Inclusive Museum Leader*, 34.

¹⁴ Catlin-Legutko et al. 4.

¹⁵ McDonald, “Expanding Queer Reflexivity.” 391-406.

¹⁶ Lindeman, Hilde. 2006. “Standard Moral Theories from a Feminist Perspective.” In *An Invitation to Feminist Ethics*, 59-84. New York: McGraw-Hill.

considers the publications being read and recognize that there may be cultural context that is not familiar and be missed.

Recognizing issues within the museum world that are ethically challenging is also an aspect to consider when researching. NAGPRA is a 1990 law in effect in the US that requires stolen material culture and remains to be returned to indigenous tribes of origin. However, the movement within this law is slow-going because of many aspects, such as lack of knowledge around the acquired collections.¹⁷ Knowing these ethical issues that plague museums as institutions will help me with synthesizing a cohesive and ethical research paper.

Conclusion:

What a curator's methodology is in regards to exhibition is explored in this research. The literature review, methodology, and ethics are details in this research for repeatability and concise research to be built upon in the future.

The future of museum research is interdisciplinary. The expertise that art historians and anthropologists possess are each necessary to have an exhibition that regains its cultural context. An art piece loses its cultural context when put in a sterile environment away from the background it originates. When an art piece is placed into a museum, it loses its background. Knowing where a piece comes from paints a picture of the artist and their worldview. Recontextualizing cultural information about an object allows the viewer to have a deeper understanding of another's culture and of the art itself.

In these considerations of research into the exhibition from the view of a curator, what art is comes into question. Bauer quotes writer Russian writer Leo Tolstoy, stating the definition of art succinctly: "Art is a human activity, consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them."¹⁸ Exhibition has value because of this concept Tolstoy describes. By handing others feelings one has lived through, understanding between people is transferred. Exhibition is the main means of elevating these feelings because it is a large contributor to exposing many people to art. There is an honor amongst curators in their task of deciding what voices should be louder than others. Observation from patrons adds power to pieces of art, attributed by the transference of feelings that occurs from experiencing an art exhibit. This research seeks to define a curator's methodology, and in that, what is also learned is the significance of this methodology to a larger degree.

¹⁷ Colwell, Chip. "Museums Have A Dark Past, But We Can Fix That." Youtube. August 22, 2017. Educational Video, 13:21. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DJYS9C06_qY.

¹⁸ Bauer, Marion. "The Primitive Art Instinct." *The Musical Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (April 1923): 159.

The first direction of this research was finding more about the thought process of art curators in exhibition methods. Materials from the Mike and Maureen Mansfield library originally were going to be the only method used to complete this line of inquiry. Upon further examination, a secondary direction was adopted to further support the claims the research made. The literature needed a tangible research method to further solidify the project as a whole.

The potential future research directions this project could take is in interviewing local art historians and museum exhibitors for their expert opinion on these display processes. Combined with the analysis found in this study of museum exhibition, follow the direction leading to a standardized understanding of exhibition methods of art curators in museums.

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