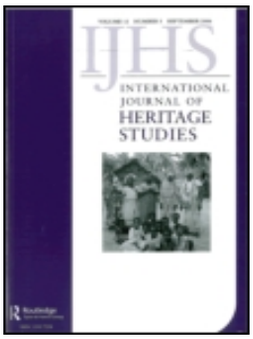

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Changing Values in the Art Museum: rethinking communication and learning

Eilean Hooper-Greenhill

Abstract

In changing times older art-museum values are coming under challenge and new emphasis is being placed on museum–audience relationships. The professional development of new communicative approaches in art museums can be seen as a form of action research. Older modernist models for communication based on the transmission of authoritative subject-based facts to a mass of passive receivers are being superseded by new approaches that acknowledge 'active audiences', constructivist and interpretist learning theories and the complexities of cultural politics. New roles for art museum professionals, the concept of differentiated audiences, the intervention of new voices and the exposition of new narratives offer possibilities for the reconceptualisation of art museums that are rooted in late 19th-century modernist culture.

Key words: Art; Communication; Galleries; Learning; Modernism; Museum; Post-modernism

The Myth of the Museum

Five to ten on a warm but humid Saturday morning in May. Outside the British Museum in London a queue of people has formed. Other people sit on the benches in the forecourt and under the great pillars. The sun shines. There is a slight buzz of anticipation, as though waiting for the lights to go down in the cinema. People are meeting friends, chatting, checking guide-books, eating ice-cream, pointing at the pigeons, and generally warming up for the occasion.

The doors are open, but we are denied entry. The uniformed warders are very firm about that, and we have to sit outside with the stubby-toed pigeons and yesterday's cigarette ends. The minutes pass. The (unused) crowd barriers say: 'Do not climb on the barriers', and 'Do not feed the birds'. Finally, the queue begins to move, rather ponderously, like a huge snake.

The museum holds its breath before another busy day. The galleries have been cleaned and polished, the objects have been chosen, classified and laid out in order, and each box-like space is empty except for its guardian poised and standing at the ready in their sub-military uniforms. Everything is in its place, correctly arranged and positioned, one guardian in each space, surrounded by objects from the past

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that wait to be observed and interpreted. There is a sense of an event waiting to happen, of a show about to be enacted. And within seconds, the crowds catch me up, and the show is on!

The British Museum has become a museum archetype. With its classical columns, triangular pediment, the stairs that need to be climbed before entry, this type of large stone building is the image of 'The Museum' held by many at both a popular and a theoretical level. It is an image that can sustain a range of interpretations: of culture and civilisation; of dust, decay, and neglect; of power and control. In spite of the many and fundamental changes to museums in the last twenty years, it is an enduring image. People in Britain asked to describe 'a museum', describe exactly this kind of building, and this is common across all cultures and ethnic groups in Britain. The typical imagined contents of such a museum include: ' "Kings and Queens", crowns, suits of armour, weapons and "broken pots and rocks" '.[1]

In many ways, this view of museums has achieved the status of myth. It bears very little relationship to the range and variety of museums that now exist, and it is generally uninformed about the actual experience of people who visit or use museums, or of those who work in them. It is an essentialist image, which acknowledges neither the range of pleasures that may be gained from visiting museums, nor the complexities of the challenges facing museums today. 'The Museum' is also powerful as an ideal, an aspiration, to which many museum workers themselves subscribe.

Many art museums see themselves as rather special places, separate from the mundane world of the everyday, places that preserve the best of the past, and places that are appreciated by cultured and sophisticated people. The values that underpin professional practices in museums such as these are those of preservation and conservation, of scholarship, and of displays based on aesthetic approaches to the laying out of knowledge.[2] These museums are expected to be authoritative, informative, and to be their own best judge of what counts as appropriate professional practice.

The mythical museum exists mainly in the imagination. The reality that lies behind these aspirations may not be so grand, so pure, so monolithic. Many museums suffer from lack of funding, lack of sufficient expertise, poor management, unclear philosophies, and from trying to do too much, too quickly, and with insufficient resources. However, for many art-museum professionals, the mythical museum remains a standard to be aspired to, and represents a goal to be achieved, and this has become problematic. This professional direction is one that looks backwards rather than forwards, and inwards rather than outwards. It is based on attitudes, values and perceptions that have developed in isolation from other social

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1. P. Desai & A. Thomas, *Cultural diversity: attitudes of ethnic minority populations towards museums and galleries*, London: Museums and Galleries Commission, 1998, pp. 19–20.

2. See E. Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the shaping of knowledge*, London: Routledge, 1992, pp. 167–190.

and cultural institutions, and from an assumption that the definitions of civilisation, culture and communication that these values enshrine are absolute, and confer an accepted social function for art museums.

However, this is no longer the case. The values described above are no longer sufficient to sustain museums. In many parts of the world they are being questioned on a daily basis, both from within museums and from without. Today, we are witnessing an enormous cultural change, which shifts the ground on which art museums have stood so firmly for so long. Changes in social structures, in cultural allegiances and in personal identities go hand in hand with changes in the nature, control and functions of knowledge. Today, museums are subject to diverse demands to enable them to play valid roles in new worlds. Art museums must demonstrate their viability and argue their value in new contexts where former values are no longer taken for granted.

What specific challenges face art museums? At the end of the 20th century it is clear that large-scale social, political and cultural changes are in process. Some writers characterise these shifts as a move from the modern period into the post-modern period; others insist that modernity is an unfinished project, and therefore the current period must be seen as one of late modernity.[3] However it is analysed, it is clear that we are in a period of paradigmatic change that is affecting all social structures, relationships and values. Museums, expository spaces charged with garnering, caring for and exhibiting those objects that symbolise some of our deepest feelings and hopes, are one of the most vulnerable of institutions at this time of radical change.

Museums are challenged today to justify their existence, and this justification is frequently requested in hard economic terms. Questions are asked about what role museums can play in the national economic life of society. How can museums contribute to national or local income generation? What part do museums play in providing employment, or in education, or in alleviating social problems? The funding of museums needs to be argued for, frequently in competition with other calls on resources. If museums cannot identify and articulate their value in ways that can be appreciated by those disbursing funds, those funds will not be forthcoming.[4] These questions take on a particular urgency as participation surveys demonstrate the audience for art museums is less democratic than for other museums, and that on the best evidence available, less than one quarter of the population of Europe visits art museums.[5]

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3. H. Bertens, *The idea of the postmodern*, London: Routledge, 1995; S. Best & D. Kellner, *Postmodern theory: critical interrogations*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991; J. Fornas, *Cultural theory and late modernity*, London: Sage, 1995.

4. See two reports from the UK which demonstrate the necessity of these arguments over the last ten years: V.C.T. Middleton, *New visions for independent museums*, 1990, and *New visions for museums in the 21st century*, 1998, both published by AIM, the Association of Independent Museums, Chichester.

5. J.M.D. Schuster, 'The public interest in the art museums' public', in S. Pearce (ed.), *Art in museums: new research in museum studies* 5, London: Athlone, pp. 109–142. See also my own paper in the same volume, 'Audiences: a curatorial dilemma'.

In many museums, reductions in funding have led to a need to generate increased revenue through attracting increased audiences. This leads in the first instance to an emphasis on marketing, but it soon becomes clear that there is a need to go beyond marketing and to think more analytically about the experience that is offered to visitors. We need to consider the museum as a communicator.

In beginning to consider the museum as a communicator, we realise that we are just at the beginning of finding the answers. We still understand very poorly what this role might be and how to conceptualise it. We understand even less what professional strategies might need to be put in place in order to develop a more egalitarian and coherent approach to communication. In some ways, it is peculiarly difficult to begin to develop the museum as a communicator, as the theory and the practice go hand in hand. The theoretical analysis of the roles a museum might play depends on what has already been achieved in practice. Theory and practice are inter-dependent. But, in addition, for those who are struggling to find new ways forward, concepts from communication studies, learning theory, philosophy and museum studies can offer a new vocabulary—a vocabulary of action—ways to describe the new working practices and staff roles that are emerging.

The development of the museum as a communicator is a form of action research,[6] where the museum curator/educator reflects upon her own practice, and in the process of this reflection, asks ever more penetrative questions that themselves force a more thoughtful and insightful practice. The progressive focusing as action research continues acts to make the curator/educator more self-critical, more self-aware, and hungry for more ideas to take the practice forward.[7]

In beginning to approach the analysis of the museum as a communicator, I have found it necessary to draw on a range of fields of study. First, it is important to address communication theory. Here I have found two clearly defined ways of thinking about communication, communication as a process of transmission and communication as a part of culture.[8] Although it is perhaps unwise to reduce the complex processes of communication to two approaches, this has been helpful in considering the strengths and weaknesses of actual museum practice.

Analysing museum communication as either a process of information transmission or as one among many cultural processes, also enables us to relate these approaches to

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6. This is an idea from educational research that has potential for development within other professional spheres. See, for example, C. O'Hanlon, *Professional development through action research: international educational perspectives*, London: Falmer Press, 1996; and O. Zuber-Skerritt (ed.) *New directions in action research*, London: Falmer Press, 1996.

7. See E. Hooper-Greenhill (ed.) *Improving museum learning*, Nottingham: East Midlands Museums Service, 1996. This small publication records the results of a three-year action research project with museum curator/educators in the UK. The project focused on developing methods for evaluating the educational role of the museums, which included learning through displays, learning from objects, and learning from prepared written materials such as Teachers' Packs.

8. J.W. Carey, *Communication as culture: essays on media and society*, Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989, pp. 13–36.

educational theory. Both accounts of communication have clear views on the 'audience' or 'partner' in communication. Both approaches are in fact based upon ways of explaining learning and teaching. The transmission approach to communication is based on a behaviourist view of teaching, while the cultural approach to communication is supported by a constructivist explanation of learning.

In thinking about the museum as a communicator, both learning theory and communication theory have things to teach us. Cultural theory, which examines the social structures of modernism and post-modernism and alerts us to the politics of communication deepens our analysis, and enables the critique of the museum as a communicator to be placed in a wider theoretical arena.

Modernism and the Modernist Museum

Museums are creations of the Enlightenment, institutions that came into being in the period that we now characterise as the Modern period. During the Modern period, reason, rationality, was invoked to supplant the superstitions and subjective knowledges of earlier times.[9] Attempts were made to construct knowledge that could be relied upon at all times and in all places; grand narratives (meta-narratives[10]) were developed that stood as valid outside the context of the site from which they were spoken; institutions such as museums were established to spread out, as though upon a table, those things which could be observed, measured, classified, named, and which presented a universally valid and reliable picture of the world.[11]

The Enlightenment inherited the dream of Descartes—the attempt to escape from the confinements of tradition and the already known and to base all knowledge on what could be deduced from reason alone. It was thought that the use of pure unprejudiced reason would guarantee untainted objective knowledge. Reason thus became the new authority, supplanting that of the written texts of the ancients. However, this belief in an objective reality is itself one of the meta-narratives that the Enlightenment invented: reason itself was and is subject to the limits of contemporary knowledge.[12] Enlightenment thought, long considered the only method of constructing a 'true' world-view is now under siege from, among others, all those whom this 'true' world-view disadvantaged.

The epistemic structures[13] of the Enlightenment were premised on a split between mind and body, with the privileged organ being the mind. This binary split acted to structure the landscape of Western thought and experience. These binary

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9. Best & Kellner, op. cit., note 3; W. Wheeler, *The Enlightenment Effect, a Signs of the Times discussion paper*, April 1997; Signs of the Times, PO Box 10684, London N15 6XA, UK.

10. J.-F. Lyotard, 'Answering the question: what is post-modernism?', in C. Jencks (ed.), *The post-modern reader*, London: Academy Editions, 1992, pp. 138–150.

11. Hooper-Greenhill, op. cit., note 2.

12. Ibid., pp. 9–12.

13. Ibid., pp. 12–18.

pairs, which are still in many ways the 'common sense'[14] of our world, can be observed in everyday concepts such as: mental/manual, male/female, black/white, light/dark. Just as the mind became the privileged point within the mind/body binary, so, within each of the other binary pairs, one half is accorded greater value than the other. These mental structures, the structures which have dominated our thoughts, have of course dominated our daily lives too, in providing 'reasons' for those social facts that are presented as 'natural'. One of the social structures that emerged to mediate these cultural values was the museum. During the late 18th and early 19th centuries in Europe, pre-existing museum models based on the private princely and scholarly 'cabinets of the world'[15] were reinvented as open public museums.

The 19th-century public museum was tasked with the production and dissemination of knowledge. Its epistemological identity was constructed through a range of collection-related disciplines (art, natural history, geology, archaeology, ethnography). It was intended, at least in part, to convert raw humanity to civil society, to create docile bodies.[16]

The modernist museum was intended to be encyclopaedic, to draw together a complete collection, to act as a universal archive. It was structured through deep-rooted binary divisions. Its spaces were divided between those that were private and those that were public. The private spaces were the spaces for knowledge production, irrevocably separated from the public spaces for knowledge consumption. The private spaces were spaces where specialist knowledge was deployed, where scholarly research was carried out, and where products such as exhibitions and catalogues were fashioned. The bodies occupying these spaces were highly specialised and differentiated, each with its own necessary mental freight which justified its presence within these austere spaces. The public spaces, on the other hand, were available, in theory at least, to the mass of the general public; undifferentiated bodies that assembled to partake of the specialist information laid out for them in the galleries. The galleries were spaces of consumption, of viewing and learning. In many ways they were also spaces of controlled behaviour, guarded and surveyed by warders who would eject those who behaved in an unruly fashion.

The 19th-century museum, in actuality, took many forms, but the ideal to which most aspired can be closely related to the model sketched above. Those institutions that were established by proud city fathers or by nations newly celebrating their political identities saw themselves as separate from the mundane world of the

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14. C. Belsey, *Critical practice*, London and New York: Methuen.

15. Hooper-Greenhill, op. cit. pp. 105–132.

16. In 1805, Martin Archer Shee, later to become the President of the Royal Academy, referred to the arts as: 'those softeners of human life, those refiners of the rough, drossy ore of humanity . . .', quoted in J. Minihan, *The nationalisation of culture*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1977; and see E. Hooper-Greenhill, 'The museum in the disciplinary society', in S. Pearce (ed.) *Museum studies in material culture*, Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1989, pp. 61–72.

everyday, as standing for higher, purer values. They offered opportunities of self-improvement, of inspiration and of civic celebration. This ideal was to prove the dominant model of a museum until the last quarter of the 20th century. This is the image of the museum that has been internalised by many today, and these are the working practices that create and sustain this image of 'The Museum' that provide the 'common sense' of many museum professionals still.

The Modernist Museum and the Transmission Model of Communication

The modernist museum adopts a particular stance towards its visitors. The communicative aim of the modernist museum is to enlighten and to educate, to lay out knowledge for the visitor such that it may be absorbed. The information offered is that of the academic discipline from which the collections are viewed. Thus in art galleries, the paintings are grouped in order to materialise 'art history'. The educational aim of the museum is to transfer or transmit information about 'art history'.

Underlying this approach to communication is a particular view of knowledge, and of learning. The 'transmission' model of communication understands communication as a linear process of information-transfer from an authoritative source to an uninformed receiver. Knowledge is seen as objective, singular and value-free. The receiver of the message to be communicated is conceptualised as open to the reception of the message, which is received more or less efficiently, and in the same way by all.

The transmission view of communication is defined by terms such as 'imparting', 'transmitting', and 'sending'. A geographical metaphor is used, that of sending information across space, from one point to another. This is a metaphor of transportation—the sending of signals and messages over a distance for the purposes of control. The model focuses on the technological processes of communication.

The basics of the model are straightforward; a communicator (sender or transmitter), sends a message through a medium to a receiver. The focus is on the technical act of transferring data from a source to a receiver, with the telephone system as an example. One of the first depictions of the model of communication as transmission was that of Lasswell, who famously once said that any act of communication could be understood by answering the question: Who? Says what? In which channel? To whom? With what effect?[17]

This approach to understanding communication is severely limited. It is based upon technical processes, and ignores the social and cultural aspects of these processes. It does not explain well the extremely complex relationships that structure acts of understanding between people. The secular metaphors of transmission, for example, hide the links to religious practices, those of evangelism

17. J. Morgan & P. Welton, *See what I mean: an introduction to visual communication*, London and New York: Arnold, 1986, pp. 4–6.

and conversion. Movements of people in space were frequently impelled by desires to extend 'civilisation' through the implantation of Christianity. This moral component, of purportedly improving patterns of life, of making things 'better' for others by the giving of new information, is deeply embedded in this understanding of communication. It can be found in 19th-century paternalism, in gender relations, in forms of education.

In the transmission-model approach, the processes of communication are reduced to a single, one-way, linear trajectory.[18] The receiver of the message is considered only in so far as a judgement is made in relation to the correct reception of the message. The selection and control of meaning lie with the communicator, who is therefore the power broker in the transaction. In this approach, evaluation or feedback is likely to be limited and, where it exists, is used to judge correct reception.

This approach to communication is based upon a behaviourist explanation of education.[19] Behaviourism proposes that learning takes place through a response following a stimulus. Students are 'empty vessels to be filled', and the role of the teacher, as a knowledgeable individual and authoritative person, is to structure the subject matter to be mastered so that the learners may absorb it.[20] Sometimes called the banking approach to education,[21] this approach to teaching and learning sees the school as separate from the world outside and does not view the 'knowledge' that learners bring with them into the learning situation as relevant. The content to be learnt is structured according to the internal logic of the subject matter, with few concessions to the experience or knowledge of the learners. Knowledge is conceptualised as something that can be transferred from one mind to another. The approach to teaching is didactic and structured through the setting of measurable goals. Examinations are used to judge how effective the information transfer has been.

The transmission approach assumes that the communicator defines the content of the message, and that this is received without modification by the receiver, who, in this process, is rendered cognitively passive. Each individual receiver/learner is understood to receive the same message in the same way. Underlying this approach is, as we have seen, a behaviourist view of learning, with individuals conceived as atomistic. Atomism asserts that people are separate individuals constituted by their own unique states of consciousness, and by their own capacities and needs. It views the self as a monad, an impermeable integral entity radically different from all others, and, at the extreme, cut off from all others. The

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18. The simple model of communication is sometimes also called the 'bulls-eye' or 'hypodermic needle' model.

19. D. McQuail & S. Windahl, *Communication models for the study of mass communication*, London and New York: Longman, 1993, pp. 58–61.

20. G. Hein, *Learning in the museum*, London: Routledge, 1998, pp. 19–21.

21. P. Friere, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, pp. 45–69.

atomistic view of the self ignores the degree to which the self is inflected through experience, has the capacity to change and modify itself through learning, and may objectively consider and develop itself. In other words, people are seen as individuals without curiosity, without capacity to change, and as merely the absorbers of external stimuli.[22]

The transmission model of communication can be used to explain the moral imperative that underlay much of the use of culture during the 19th century. As museums were established, one of their most prominent functions lay in the field of education. Education was understood as a process of imparting information and, through this, values, such as to constitute the subject as an ideal citizen.[23] One of the characteristics of museum education during this period was a moral, sometimes proselytising dimension.[24]

The transmission model also explains rather well the approaches frequently taken by museums to the development of exhibitions. The curator as scholar, expert on the collections and knowledgeable about the relevant discipline, leads the project, chooses the objects[25] for display and decides what to say in the text panels and labels. The audience for the exhibition is rarely defined beyond the catch-all 'general public'. A generalised mass audience is envisioned. There is no research into the levels of information that this 'general public' might bring with it into the museum, and there is no investigation into the experience of this abstracted mass visitor. Lest it be thought that these processes belong only in the museums of the past, let me assure you that some (many) art museums today still use this approach, and are still unaware of who visits them and why they might come.

Many of the values of the modernist museum can be explained by the transmission approach to communication. These include naturalised assumptions of separation from the quotidian, an emphasis on scholarly values which focus on collection research, the ordering of a display according to the structures of an academic discipline, a lack of audience research, and a consequent ignorance of visitors and their worlds. As a communicator, the modernist museum is subject to the same criticisms which have already been identified in relation to the model itself. In the modernist museum, communication is considered from the perspective of a technical process only; which paintings shall we hang, in which arrangement, with which attached texts? The social and cultural aspects of the process are not considered. The communication process is one-way. The focus on exhibition technology excludes the visitor, proceeding with no consultation as to whether the selected approaches will be familiar or unfamiliar, or will be

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22. B. Fay, *Contemporary philosophy of social science: a multicultural approach*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, pp. 30–49.

23. T. Bennett, *The birth of the museum*, London: Routledge, 1995, pp. 99–102.

24. S. Koven, 'The Whitechapel Picture Exhibition and the politics of seeing', in D.J. Sherman & I. Rogoff (eds) *Museum culture: histories, discourses, spectacles*, London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 22–48.

25. I include paintings and other fine art artefacts within my use of this expression.

accessible to those who do not already recognise the display codes and the art historical references.[26] In this approach to communication, as the transmission model reveals, the curator is the power broker, and visitors are disempowered. If no audience research is undertaken, the actual experience of visitors is unknown, as is, indeed, their very identity.

The adequacy of this approach to communication has been seriously called into question by communication theorists. In communication studies, frequently using television as the field for research, the concept of 'the active audience' has developed.[27] The transmission model of communication, based on the stimulus/response model of education, assumed the possibility of a universal effect on the targets (receivers) of the message, who were thought to be open to the persuasions of the mass media. Following a range of research studies of these assumed 'effects', it was gradually realised that people were not merely passive absorbers of the media. The media–audience relationship was found to be complex and multi-faceted, mediated by factors external to the technical process of information transfer. By the 1970s, new explanations were being developed to analyse the media audience, which focused on the range of responses and interpretations in which media audiences actively engaged. In those few museums in Britain which carried out audience research on a consistent basis, it would take until the 1990s to be able to admit that in the development of exhibitions that would communicate effectively 'the initial emphasis was entirely on the subject matter and the efficient transmission of information, and it was only later that we began to understand and respond to the meaning of a museum visit to the visitor'.[28]

The Challenges of the Post-modern World: narrative, voice and interpretation

Society is changing. The modernist structures that we inherited from the 19th century are under attack. Many of the challenges to traditional values challenge the core values of the museum, and the art museum in particular. The post-modern, post-colonial world has meant a thorough review of social organisations, and one of these is the museum.

The challenges to the art museum focus on two areas, both of which are essential to its identity. Both relate to the prevailing contemporary challenge to modernist authority. The first concerns what is said and who says it, issues of narrative and voice. The second relates to who is listening, and is an issue of interpretation, understanding and the construction of meaning.

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26. P. Bourdieu & A. Darbel, with D. Schnapper, *The love of art: European art museums and their public* (trans. C. Beattie & N. Merriman), Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.

27. See, for example, D. Morley, 'Theories of consumption in media studies', in D. Miller (ed.) *Acknowledging consumption: a review of new studies*, London: Routledge, pp. 296–328.

28. R.S. Miles & A.F. Tout, 'Impact of research on the approach to the visiting public at the Natural History Museum, London', in E. Hooper-Greenhill (ed.) *The educational role of the museum*, 1st edn, London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 101–106.

The art museum works from the epistemological perspective of art history. This is taken as a given. The task of the museum is to make art historical narratives visible on the walls of the museum. The narrative itself is constructed from within the parameters drawn up by the classic texts. The role of the curator is to work ever more deeply within these parameters, to research the histories, contexts and meanings of the specific artefacts in the collections, and to care for and display the collections. The parameters of the narrative from which the collections and displays are constructed have, in the past, rarely been challenged from within the museum. The curatorial voice was the only one to be heard.

This voice has been challenged from outside the museum. The demand from feminist art historians to revise the art historical canon has been heard, although not always accommodated.[29] In the post-colonial period, the questioning has intensified and is coming from more than one direction. In white settler societies, for example, where specific definitions of civilisation, informed by European traditions and values, were imposed as part of colonialism, the voices of indigenous peoples demand a hearing. In New Zealand, Maori have successfully demanded that their cultural treasures be re-valued. This has meant that Maori objects have been taken out of the natural history and ethnographic collections in which they were formerly classified, and are now placed within new contexts where they are able to assert their own aesthetic and cultural identity. Similar re-classifications and re-evaluations are also happening in South Africa and Canada. Histories are being rewritten from new perspectives and the past is being re-memoried to privilege different events. Formerly silent voices are being heard, and new cultural identities are being forged from the remains of the past.

These processes of the re-memorialising and rewriting of the past affect museums deeply. Museums uphold specific accounts of the past through the objects they chose to collect, and the expository juxtapositions they choose to make. Museums and their collections embody and exhibit social values. Values necessarily operate to discriminate, to emphasise and downplay, to make visible and to put away. These processes of valorisation are highly visible in relation to those cultural groups who are overtly concerned with asserting their identities. The Lakota Sioux, for example, have recently succeeded in claiming an item from their past from the ethnographic collections of Glasgow Museums in Scotland. After much discussion, it has been agreed that the Ghost Dance Shirt which has been in Kelvingrove Museum will be repatriated.[30] These dramatic and high-profile events can disguise the central issue, which is one of how museums represent the past, and in consequence the present. This is an issue that operates across a broad spectrum of museums, including the art museum. Issues of narrative and voice lead to questions of the construction of knowledge, and the relationship between knowledge construction and power.

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29. See, for example, N. Broude & M.D. Garrard (eds) *Feminism and art history: questioning the litany*, New York: Harper & Row, 1982.

30. See S. Maddra, 'The Wounded Knee Ghost Dance Shirt', *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, Vol. 8, 1996, pp. 41–58; 'Sioux to be given "ghost shirt"', *The Independent*, 20 November 1998, p. 11.

The second challenge is that of interpretation. As institutions become more aware of their audiences,[31] patterns of consumption begin to be mapped, but it quickly becomes clear that closely related to patterns of participation are patterns of interpretation and meaning.

At an exhibition of African sculpture I observed a black visitor scratching fiercely and angrily at one of the labels. Carrying a small child on his back, he knelt down carefully next to the label which was placed at the lower edge of a large glass case. Muttering, 'This is sick: rub it out', he proceeded to scrape at it with his nails. The woman accompanying him, tried to restrain him. This was more than simple vandalism; this was the act of a man who disagreed with the text, an active contestation of the story that was being told, by, as it happens, a white curator, describing the sculpture from his (and it was a man) Euro-centric perspective.

There are many assumptions built into my interpretation of this observation. I assumed the man was angry from his actions and body language; I read him as claiming an African heritage because of his dress codes and dreadlocks; I read his action in the context of post-colonial and post-modernist writings, and especially those of Stuart Hall, who describes how meaning continues to unfold beyond the arbitrary closure which makes it, at any moment, possible.[32] Hall has also pointed out how Africa was the unspoken presence in the Caribbean of his childhood, but how in the past twenty years, an Afro-Caribbean identity has become historically available to people who simultaneously discover themselves to be both 'black' and the 'children of "slavery" '.[33]

These subjectivities, these questions of cultural identity, are unknown to and unconsidered by many curators. However, the decision to visit a museum or to stay away is informed by the meaning constructed from an experience, or the anticipation of such meaning. For many who have not been successful learners, the overt educational remit of museums is not attractive, and for those who do not feel comfortable with formal social structures, the authoritative style of museum buildings and spaces do not offer the comfortable leisure pastime they seek.[34] And for those whose histories are told from a perspective they find alien, the museum represents a space to avoid or to challenge.

The second approach to understanding communication, the cultural approach, focuses more closely on how meaning is made. It approaches the processes of communication more broadly than the transmission model allows, and sees communication as an integral part of culture as a whole. It is to this second approach that I will now turn.

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31. L. Hutcheon, *The politics of post-modernism*, London: Routledge, 1989, p. 9.

32. S. Hall, 'Cultural identity and diaspora', in P. Williams & L. Chrisman (eds), *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory: a reader*, New York: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1993, p. 397.

33. Ibid., p. 398.

34. Hood, 'Staying away—why people choose not to visit museums', *Museum News*, Vol. 61, No. 4, 1983, pp. 50–57.

Communication as Culture

The second approach works from an integrated perspective that acknowledges from the start the relevance of voice and the importance of interpretation. The second approach sees communication as integral to the whole of culture, and insists on the constructed character of both culture and communication. However, this second approach is itself inflected in a number of different directions depending on what basic assumptions are made about how culture is defined and how social relations are conceptualised.

Culture can be understood in a number of ways. Modernism makes a distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture, with culture *per se* being synonymous with canonical and elevated values, and set apart from the processes of the everyday. 'Low' or 'mass' culture, from this perspective, is the antithesis of 'true' culture, being debased, watered down, populist, and trivial. A second view of culture takes a rather more anthropological approach, seeing culture as the patterning of all aspects of daily life. This expanded view of culture as a whole way of life has positive elements, but fails adequately to identify those practices and institutions that are principally concerned with meaning and signification. Raymond Williams's definition of culture as a 'realised signifying system' seeks to focus specifically on those aspects of social life that work to construct meaning.[35] If we understand culture in this way, as a materialised system for constructing meaning, then communication is an integral element. Culture is understood as constructed through processes of communication, and both social life and individual identity would be impossible without communication.[36]

Carey describes communication as a series of processes and symbols whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed.[37] 'Reality' has no finite identity, but is brought into existence, is produced, through communication. As beliefs and values are represented through cultural symbols (words, maps, models), so 'reality' is constructed. Symbolic systems (art, journalism, common sense, mythology, science, museums) shape, express and convey our attitudes and interpretations of our experience.

Carey[38] also describes communication as a form of secular ritual, as a process of sharing, participation, fellowship and association. He locates the roots of the word communication in 'commonality', 'commonness', 'communion', and 'community' and links this to sacred ceremonies as ritual, and to religion, but in the form of the prayer, the mutual communicative ritual, rather than missionary work or the

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35. See J. McGuigan, *Culture and the public sphere*, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 6.

36. This approach to communication stands in direct opposition to the transmission view which, with its basis in behaviourist psychology and functional explanations of social processes, has been the predominant paradigm in American social science. The cultural approach to communication can be closely linked to British cultural studies, which developed in part as an alternative way of analysing and explaining society and culture.

37. J. Carey, *Communication as culture: essays on media and society*, Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989, p. 23.

38. Ibid., pp. 13–36.

sermon. This emphasis on harmony betrays a non-conflictual view of social life, and Carey's analysis lacks any acknowledgement of the relationship of power to communication. He ignores, therefore, the politics of communication. Giroux criticises this definition of culture as a field of shared experiences as one developed within Western ethnocentric terms. He insists on a broader stance that goes beyond this imagined social harmony to acknowledge difference. The concept of difference has been developed within post-colonial studies to make visible the relative inscriptions of power in and between zones of culture. A focus on cultural borderlands, those liminal contact zones between different cultures, raises questions about relations of equality and inequality, struggle and history, narrative, voice and interpretation. From Giroux's perspective, culture is a site of multiple and heterogeneous borders, where different histories, languages, experiences and voices intermingle amidst diverse relations of power and privilege.[39]

This more developed cultural model understands communication as a set of negotiated processes of making meaning as part of the complex and unequal culture of everyday life. It accepts that there are many, sometimes conflicting, perspectives from which to explain the world. In the consumption of culture, the active interpretive strategies for the perception and processing of knowledge and the differentiated agenda that participants bring to cultural experiences are acknowledged.

Processes of Interpretation

The cultural approach to communication emphasises the importance of interpretive strategies in the construction of meaning. Some elements of the philosophical approach known as hermeneutics[40] offer a preliminary analysis of some of the processes of interpretation.

Much of the focus of hermeneutics, or interpretive philosophy, concerns how understanding can be achieved. Interpretation is seen as a process of making confused meanings clearer; it is concerned with coming to a fuller understanding of how things mean. The range of meanings includes desires, emotions, which are bound up with the level and type of culture and with language.[41] Gadamer is particularly interesting for museums in his thoughts on how meaning is made from objects. He uses the 'hermeneutic circle' to discuss and describe the way in which meaning is made. The process of making meaning moves both between the whole and the part of the object and between the present and the past, simultaneously. A dialogue is established between the whole and the part, the past and the present, which enables continual checking and rechecking, revising ideas, trying new ones

39. H. Giroux, *Border crossings: cultural workers and the politics of education*, New York and London: Routledge, 1992, pp. 16–19.

40. W. Dilthey, 'The rise of hermeneutics', in P. Connerton (ed.) *Critical sociology*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976, pp. 104–116. See also S. Gallagher, *Hermeneutics and education*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992.

41. C. Taylor, 'Hermeneutics and politics', in Connerton, op. cit., note 40, pp. 164–165.

and rejecting of those that do not work. Gadamer emphasises the significance of prior knowledge in the encounter.[42]

The process of constructing meaning from a painting, for example, is circular and dialogic. We are in a question-and-answer mode, a continuous process as the answers build on those questions that have already been asked and answered. This circular movement involves both the whole and the part, but also the present and the past. Meaning is constructed through this circular action, with modifications to the sense we construct being made constantly. The trajectory, or route, of the conversation, is in large part determined by what is already known, by prior knowledge. Thus in constructing meaning from a Van Gogh painting of a sunflower, different levels of information will result in different complexities of interpretation. Someone with little prior knowledge of the artist or art history will see the painting as a flower painting. Someone with a detailed knowledge of the artist's work would be able to place the picture in relation to the rest of his work, to compare subject matter and technique with other artists of the period, and so on.[43]

The process of constructing meaning is like holding a conversation. No interpretation is ever fully completed. There is always more to say, and what is said may always be changed. The hermeneutic circle remains open to these possibilities and, in this sense, meaning is never static.

Meaning is never static in another sense too. All interpretation is necessarily historically situated. Our own position in history, our own culture, affects meaning. Meaning is constructed through and in culture. Perception (what we see), memory (what we choose to remember) and logical thinking (the sense we choose to attribute to things) differ culturally because they are cultural constructs.[44] Prior cultural and historical knowledge and experience contribute to differentiated meanings.

In the museum context, the concept of 'interpretation' is generally deployed to discuss matters of design and display, with the emphasis being on the work of museum personnel, who decide on the interpretive approach. In fact, interpretation, as understood within museums, is less common in art museums than in museums of other types, where interpretive display technologies might include photographs and graphics, interactive exhibits, sound and handling material. However, whenever it is used in the museum context, interpretation is something which is done for others—to point out the significance of certain works, for example, or to construct a display-based narrative. The cultural approach to communication acknowledges the significance of the symbolic systems constructed through technologies and events such as exhibitions. However, it also works from the premise that participants in any act of communication are active in the

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42. H.-G. Gadamer, 'The historicity of understanding', in Connerton, op. cit., note 40, pp. 117–133.

43. McGuigan, op. cit., note 35, p. 33.

44. J.U. Ogbu, 'The influence of culture on learning and behaviour', in J. Falk & L.D. Dierking (eds) *Public institutions for personal learning: establishing a research agenda*, Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1995, pp. 79–96.

construction of their own interpretations of experience. Here, the concept of 'interpretation' is used to refer to the strategies and the results of explications that are carried out by individuals themselves. Vitally, art museums need to acknowledge that a major sense of 'interpretation' is that of an active process of making meaning, where preferred individual interpretive strategies are used, and where prior knowledge and historical and cultural background play a part in assigning significance. Research remains to be done to investigate how far the interpretive strategies of art curators in selecting specific works, constructing specific narratives and using specific display technologies influence the interpretive processes and strategies of individual visitors.

Constructivist Learning Theories and Active and Differentiated Meaning-making

Hermeneutic philosophy is close to constructivist learning theories. Both hermeneutics and constructivism propose that knowledge is constructed through active interpretations of experience. Knowledge is not a single, self-contained body of facts that can be transmitted, unchanged, from one individual to another. Knowledge is plural, and fluid, brought into being by the processes of knowing.

Both hermeneutics and constructivism assert that knowers, or learners, are active in the process of making sense of experience (including the formal or informal experience of learning). Both mental and bodily action are important in learning processes, and learners will use differentiated learning strategies both to perceive and to process information and experience. Individual learners will combine concrete and abstract modes of perception, and active and reflective processes of accommodating and assimilating knowledge, according to their preferred approach to learning.[45]

Within constructivist theory any discussion of education focuses on the processes of learning rather than the processes of teaching. The role of the teacher is to provide stimulating environments for learning that take account of the existing knowledge of the learner, and that enable both the use of prior knowledge and the development of new knowledge. Effective learning environments enable and encourage the range of learning styles that learners may prefer, encompass a range of both concrete and abstract modes of perception, and offer opportunities for a wide range of intelligences and abilities to be both deployed and developed.[46] Constructivism recognises that where appropriate environments are not provided, some learners will be disadvantaged, and this accounts for the emphasis on learning rather than teaching.

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45. B. McCarthy & S. Leflar, *4mat in action: creative lesson plans for teaching to learning styles with right/left mode techniques*, Excel; C.F. Gunther, 'Museum-goers: life-styles and learning characteristics', in E. Hooper-Greenhill (ed.) *The educational role of the museum*, London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 286–297.

46. H. Gardner, *Frames of mind; the theory of multiple intelligences*, London: Paladin Books, 1983; H. Gardner, *The unschooled mind: how children learn and how schools should teach*, London: Fontana, 1993.

Within constructivist learning theory, the teacher is also seen as a learner. The teacher needs to work in a collaborative and consultative way, jointly with other learners, to develop new approaches to learning processes. Working as a group to solve problems and explore ideas, concepts and processes, teachers balance the responsibility to take a lead with the delight of shared discovery.[47]

Both hermeneutics and constructivism suggest that knowing is culturally inflected, and that in this sense knowledge is relative. Different perspectives on the same events, different emphases on what is significant, different depths of analysis, and the use of different contextual factors all combine to complicate simple 'facts'. The importance of multi- and inter-cultural issues are fully recognised.[48]

In the analysis of communication as culture, one further strand needs to be drawn out, and that is the importance of interpretive communities. Although each of us is active in interpreting our own experience, using our individual strategies, capabilities, and preferred learning styles, the interpretation that we make is not ours alone. It is mediated, tested and developed within the context of communities of interpretation. Constructivist learning theory tells us that learning is both personal and social.[49] The concept of 'interpretive communities' enables a focus on how this social aspect to learning might be understood.

Interpretive Communities

The meanings constructed from information and experience emerge from a complex network of mediation. Personal interpretations are forged through social and cultural environments, through local communities and through location in social structures. Although none of these elements is immutable, meanings and interpretations do have social dimensions. Individual meaning-making is tested in the context of interpretive communities. What we 'know' is produced through interpretations of individual experience, but also through the testing and refining of our interpretation within significant communities.

Stanley Fish[50] defines an 'interpretive community' as those who share the same strategies for reading texts and assigning meaning:

> Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions.[51]

These strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read. The interpreting reader, acting with purposes and concerns, which

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47. E. Sotto, *When learning becomes teaching: a theory and practice of teaching*, London: Cassell.

48. R. Young, *Intercultural communication: pragmatics, genealogy, deconstruction*, Philadelphia: Avon.

49. J. Falk & L. Dierking, *The museum experience*, Whalesback, 1992.

50. S. Fish, *Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretive communities*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1980.

51. Ibid., p. 171.

have emerged through pre-existing experience and learning, determines what counts as the facts to be observed.[52]

> Systems of intelligibility constrain and fashion us and furnish us with categories of understanding with which we fashion the entities to which we then point.[53]

An interpretive community can be identified where the same systems of intelligibility are being used, where the same categories of understanding are employed and the same entities are recognised. The visitor to the exhibition on African art that I described earlier can perhaps be understood as coming from a different interpretive community from that of the exhibition curator. He disagreed with the systems of intelligibility that the curator employed to interpret at least one of the displayed objects and, therefore, wished to erase the accompanying text.

Fish wishes to show how meaning is not inherent in the text (or, in the case of this paper, the object or exhibition), but is brought into being through the interpretive strategies used by the reader (viewer, visitor). These meanings, however, are not relative or subjective, but are to some extent controlled by the validation accorded them by the relevant interpretive community. The challenge for interpreters, or communicators, is to test their interpretations against those of respected interpretive communities. If the interpretation is accepted by such a community, it will stand, at least for the moment.

Fish points out that the concept of interpretive communities stands between the ideal of the perfect agreement that would, if it were possible, depend on objective external texts, and the interpretive anarchy and extreme relativism that would be realised if interpretation were completely random.

Fish suggests that interpretive communities increase and decrease and that individuals may move from one to another. While alignments are not permanent, they are always there, providing just enough stability for interpretive battles to go on, and just enough shift and slippage to ensure that they are never settled.[54] Interpretive communities are no more stable than texts because interpretive strategies are not natural nor universal but learned. The ability to interpret is constitutive of being human; there is no moment before we learn to interpret—we are born into an interpretive context.

The cultural model shows communication to be a much more unreliable business than we are used to thinking. In the transmission model, communicators handed over ready-made or prefabricated meanings. However, if there are no fixed meanings, and if interpretive strategies are learned and not natural, what do communicators (writers, speakers) do?

Fish's answer to this question is that communicators give hearers and readers the opportunity to make meanings by inviting them to put into execution a set of

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52. Ibid., p. 8.

53. Ibid., p. 332.

54. Ibid., p. 172.

strategies. It is presumed that the invitation will be recognised, and this presumption rests on a projection by the communicator of the moves she would make if she were confronted by the sounds she hears or marks she sets down.[55]

However, these interpretive strategies will be employed only if they are already in place. The opportunity to make meaning will be recognised only if the strategies exist to respond to it. And only those within the same interpretive community will have the relevant interpretive strategies. A writer, communicator, hazards her projection, not because of the something 'in' the marks, but because of something she assumes to be in the reader—something similar to what she perceives within herself. The very existence of the 'marks' is a function of an interpretive community, for they will be recognised, made, only by its members. Those outside the interpretive community will employ a different set of strategies, and may, therefore, find themselves unable to recognise the appropriate strategies for the specific communicative event.

Fish is working in the context of reading written texts. Although there is a good deal to say about the difference between written texts and the collections and spaces of art museums, the idea of interpretive communities is a fruitful one for the understanding of the experience of visitors to art museums. A first question to ask is: do art museums attract their own interpretive communities, who use the same interpretive strategies as the community of professional museum people? If so, at what level and to what degree are these strategies used? If an art curator has a doctorate in art history and several years of experience as a curator, and uses the interpretive strategies that feel comfortable, does that mean that all visitors, in order to benefit fully from a visit to an art gallery, need the same level of expertise? Do art museums represent a self-perpetuating community? What would be necessary to open the art museum to new audiences who might belong to different interpretive communities? What might their systems of intelligibility be, and how would they assign meaning?

Many of these questions relate to the contemporary situation of art museums. They focus on issues of access, of learning and teaching, of visitor research. However, they also have broader implications. If we accept the developed and complex approach to communication as culture, and think about art museums as cultural borderlands where power and knowledge are unequally deployed, the questions above resonate within the context of the politics of museum communication. My experience in a crowded exhibition in London in the middle of the 1990s demonstrates how opposing world-views exist, and it shows how museums and galleries are active in creating them. It demonstrates the power of the museum to legitimate particular narratives. Museum professionals are not always conscious of the power that they wield, but this power is very real in constructing 'reality', in shaping consciousness. It is time for museum professionals to acknowledge and address the power of museums, to accept that museums are necessarily implicated in cultural politics, and that, therefore, professional practices and decisions have political dimensions.

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55. Ibid., pp. 172–173.

Towards New Professional Values and Strategies

The developed cultural model approach to communication, combined with constructivist theories of learning, suggest ways forward for art museums but also offer significant difficulties. For many curators, these intellectual approaches challenge the values on which their professional careers have been built, and this perceived attack on professional identity is felt deeply and personally. However, many curators in many museums, including some art museums, have embraced the possibilities that the new approaches provide, and have found innovative, creative and imaginative new ways of working. At present, while the old orthodoxies are being firmly overturned, new ones are not yet fully in place. This offers the chance to invent new definitions of curatorial professionalism, new museum–audience relationships and new identities for museums. The positive outcomes of embracing and taking control of change far outweigh a more fearful and defensive approach.

There are some guidelines for the paths that change will follow. The emphasis is on the review and reconceptualisation of the museum–audience relationship, and the direction of change is to bring these two poles much closer together. The degree of proximity and the strategies used to link the two will vary with each museum, as each institution searches out the most appropriate approaches for its own needs. Some strategies are already becoming established, although much of the thrust of change is coming from outside the art-museum field. In many ways, science and history museums are further ahead that art museums but, on the other hand, some of the most interesting and radical new developments are taking place in art museums. Change is taking place on four fronts, which can be summarised as, firstly, the introduction of new professional roles; secondly, the concept of differentiated audiences; thirdly, the emergence of new voices; and fourthly, the development of new narratives.

In many museums of all types, new professional roles have been introduced in the last twenty years. In the past, curatorial authority, scholarship and professional judgement have been the drivers of the museum; today the driving position is shared with new professional roles—those of the educator, the marketing officer, the interpretive planner and the outreach officer.[56]

Today's museum professionals share many different kinds of specialist knowledge, which includes knowledge of the collections, but also knowledge of both traditional and new audiences. They come from diverse backgrounds, and have a range of methods and approaches. They are united in their aim to serve their audiences through making the art museum experience relevant, educational and inspirational.

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56. Outreach is still a confused concept in many museums. It generally refers to work with audiences that is done off-site—outside the museum, including workshops in prisons, schools, hospitals, and other community venues. Partnerships are formed with social services and education. Sometimes outreach collections are established, consisting of material that can be safely used outside the museum premises, although this is more difficult with art museums. Excellent outreach programmes have been established at the Tate Galleries in London and Liverpool.

A second point of change is the recognition of differentiated audiences. Museum visitors are no longer thought of as an abstract mythical body 'the general public', but are seen to be made up of many individuals, who have characteristics, agendas and desires that can be researched. Many museums and galleries have carried out visitor research for some years and have an accurate picture of the nature of their audience.[57] This picture generally breaks down into a range of groups, classified by age, where they have come from, and their purpose for coming. From this we can extrapolate these main groups; children, often but not always in school parties, students, family groups, older people, people with disabilities, local people, tourists, people with a range of cultural or religious backgrounds.

Using this demographic information, exhibition developers are now beginning to plan their exhibitions to suit different interests and experience. Specific museum spaces might be planned for different audiences so that across the museum as a whole many different groups will find something of interest and relevance. This differentiated provision is also assessed over time, so that a run of temporary exhibitions might appeal to a range of different cultural groups in the local community. In Leicester in recent years, for example, we have seen art exhibitions focusing on the interests and material culture of the Chinese, Gujarati, Ukrainian, and Jain communities. In the development of these exhibitions, partnerships are formed with the various communities, which has resulted in donations, loans, educational programmes, translations of texts, and the avoidance of mistakes due to ignorance.[58]

A third point of change is the introduction of new voices, and this, of course, is a consequence of the acknowledgement of the diversity of museum visitors, and of the potential audience. In the past, it has been the perspectives and desires of the curator that have been paramount; today, the perspectives and desires of audiences must be researched and acknowledged. Art museums that accept and adopt the cultural model of communication have built multi-skilled professional teams, and have engaged in visitor research and incorporated the findings into their professional practice. Assumptions about the knowledge visitors bring to exhibitions are tested, and the success of exhibitions is evaluated against complex criteria that focus on the experience of visitors rather than just on visitor numbers. Different learning styles are planned for, and the specific needs of target groups are researched. These museums have responded creatively to the new demands and expectations and are valued and cherished by their communities.

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57. S. Bicknell & G. Farmelo, *Museum visitor studies in the 90s*, London: Science Museum, gives a good overview. S. Davies, *By popular demand: a strategic analysis of the market potential for museums and galleries in the UK*, London: Museums and Galleries Commission, shows how collective market research can be used. See J. Falk, 'Visitors: who does, who doesn't and why', *Museum News*, March/April 1998, pp. 38–43, for a general picture of museum visiting in America, and T. Bennett, 'That those who run may read', in E. Hooper-Greenhill (ed.) *The educational role of the museum*, 2nd edn, London: Routledge, 1999, pp. 241–254.

58. See E. Hooper-Greenhill (ed.), *Cultural diversity: developing museum audiences in Britain*, Leicester and London: Leicester University Press, 1997, for further discussion of the issues involved and a range of case studies.

This approach means considerable changes in the processes of exhibition development. One idea that facilitates the increased awareness of the audience is to introduce an 'audience advocate' onto the exhibition development team.[59] They should have an equal voice with the content and design advocate. Evaluation[60] will become necessary throughout the development process. A range of strategies throughout the development process will enable exhibition plans to be tried, tested and researched.

One example will suffice to show how this kind of approach results in a very different exhibition, and one that has been proved, through external evaluators, to be extremely successful.[61] *Start*, at Walsall Museum and Art Gallery, was an art exhibition for a specific audience—children aged from three to five years. The approach to such young visitors was carefully researched and piloted, with the help of educational experts. The collections for the exhibition were chosen to reflect the known world of pre-school children (flowers, activities, animals, children). The exhibition was laid out to become a space that would be recognised by parents and carers. Low circular barriers acted both as seats for weary adults, and to form booths for specific activities for the children. These activities included story telling (about Epstein's dog, Frisky), creating a picture out of fuzzy felt (based on Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*), experimenting with different lighting on a bronze bust, and manipulating a specially commissioned sculpture. The learning styles used by pre-schoolers (enactive and concrete) were facilitated by the exhibition design, and existing experience was acknowledged, and used as a base for development.

The final point of change is that of the development of new narratives within the museum, which accept the fact that the grand authoritative meta-narratives of modernism are daily questioned and challenged. Constructivist theory suggests that today's learners want a range of ways of learning, to include facts and the voice of experts, but not exclusively limited to this.

Visitors demand a chance to pick and choose from a range of possibilities, a chance to explore and make up their own minds, to test their own interpretations against the experts, and an insight into the disagreements and conflicts between experts. If visitors are offered the evidence from which to draw conclusions, given access to data, including previous and conflictual interpretations of the data, they are able to adopt a problem-solving approach to learning. Demonstrating ways of analysing artefacts, of decoding silver-marks, or assessing stylistic detail, or of comparing one painting with another, opens up opportunities of increasing deductive thinking, of developing distinctions, of stimulating an interest. New narratives are likely to be less complete, more fragmentary, and to consist of the

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59. E. Hooper-Greenhill, *Museum and gallery education*, Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1991, pp. 187–193.

60. E. Hooper-Greenhill, *Museum, media, message*, London: Routledge, 1995, pp. 189–293 offers a range of case studies in evaluation.

61. Walsall Museum and Art Gallery, *Just like drawing in your dinner—START: the first interactive art gallery experience designed for three to five year-olds*, Walsall Museum and Art Gallery, Walsall.

elements of many narratives which can be combined in a range of ways, rather than to be the complete finished story. Opportunities for testing the validity of constructed narratives will also be needed, perhaps by showing the narratives accepted by one or more interpretive communities.

The Peopling of London at the Museum of London included an exhibition, but used this as the centrepiece of a much broader project.[62] The aim of this exhibition was to show how varied had been the cultural and ethnic diversity of London's population over a very long period of time, and to present a view of London's history that incorporated this variety. A range of focus groups was set up to identify the differentiated interests and to define the historical parameters and approaches; an historical researcher from one of the Asian communities who was familiar with the local archive materials was appointed. In selecting the objects for display, curators were asked to view the collections tangentially, to see which objects might link to the different cultural groups to be represented. A cutlass made at Hounslow, a district of London, by a German blade-smith was used to demonstrate the significant impact of German settlers on London's early development.[63] Some objects told the story directly of some of the communities, for example books written in the 18th century by former slaves, and some images showed visitors heroes from different communities. A large number of 'focus weeks' were organised by the communities concerned, which were held in the museum but entirely managed by the communities. These were occasions to talk, dance, hold exhibitions, and generally celebrate community identity.

The development of new narratives in art museums demands new ways of thinking about collections and audiences, and new ways of integrating the two. The challenges of narrative, voice and difference go to the heart of the power relationships that currently operate in art museums. Finding ways to integrate audiences and their worlds means finding new ways of balancing power and knowledge. The function of the museum as a communicator cannot be separated from cultural issues of knowledge, power, identity, and language.

Power is necessarily effective, but it is not monolithic, and it is not always stable. There are always other ways of doing and saying, and at moments of challenge and change, other powers may come into play. Museums are at a point of change. The possibility of cultural re-opening, of reinterpretation, of re-negotiation, is deeply exciting. Museums today have the opportunity to push at existing borders, to change current relationships, to manipulate and break down old orthodoxies, to enable a broader, more inclusive approach to a more inclusive society. Through developing their communicative functions in creative and innovative partnerships with their audiences, art museums can become vital new institutions for the 21st century.

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62. See N. Merriman, 'The *The Peopling of London* project', in E. Hooper-Greenhill (ed.), *Cultural diversity: developing museum audiences in Britain*, Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1997, pp. 119–148.

63. P. Panayi, 'Germans in London', in N. Merriman (ed.) *The peopling of London: fifteen thousand years of settlement from overseas*, London: Museum of London, 1993, p. 111.