

Whose Questions, Whose Conversations?

Kathleen McLearn

Why is it that the most interesting and meaningful conversations among museum staff usually take place without the presence of visitors? When dreaming up exhibition and program ideas, framing the questions for research, and articulating future visions for our museums, we explore with colleagues our passionate interests and burning questions. Only rarely, though, does this passion and energy make it into the public arena.

It's not that museum professionals are opposed to interacting with visitors. Museum calendars are filled with receptions to meet the curators, lectures with question-and-answer periods, behind-the-scenes tours, and programs where artists-in-residence talk to the public as they work. And most museums incorporate some form of visitor participation—from comment books to make-and-take activities—into their exhibitions and programs. While these activities may indeed elicit visitor participation, they mostly preserve the usual novice-expert construct: the museum pushes content toward the visitor, and the visitor reacts.

True interaction, by contrast, requires an exchange of some sort, a reciprocity that creates new knowledge and insights. This is where the notion of *conversation*—the most essential of human interactions—can help museums create more meaningful relationships with their visitors. At their best, museums are places of inquiry that nourish the exchange of ideas. From historic house to national treasures house, from art gallery to science center lab and natural history display, museums are places to contemplate, celebrate, and share perspectives on human understanding. It naturally follows that all people have a narrative role to play in the exploration of human experience.

THE PROBLEM WITH EXPERTS

But museums, conceived and perceived as sites of authority, still embody the “information transmission” model of learning that developed in the late 1800s, with museums as the source of expert knowledge and visitors as the recipients of that expertise. Many of the people who work in museums today still see themselves as experts and see their visitors and communities as uninformed

novices in need of guidance. (I recently heard an art museum curator liken his expertise to a medical doctor's and equate visitor-contributed exhibition content to “a gardener operating on one's children.”)

Even within the ranks of museum professionals, a novice-expert tension prevails, as certain professionals are designated the creators of knowledge and others are not. While some museums have embraced new exhibition-development processes that challenge outdated hierarchical models of practice, they are in the minority. I still meet people with the word “curator” in their job title who insist that *only they* have the qualifications to frame the issues and develop the ideas in exhibitions. Other museum staff, such as designers and educators, may have as much content expertise as their curator colleagues, but they are still usually not considered knowledge-creators in the expert sense and are rarely given a voice in content decisions.

Given these ongoing struggles over power and expertise among museum professionals, it's not surprising that attending a museum might feel more like a visit to the home of the authorities than the home of the muses. In the midst of writing my first book, struggling with voice and verb, I turned to a writing coach for help. A gifted writer with a doctorate and several books under her belt, she was articulate and devoted to the creative spirit of writing. And she was intimidated by museums. “I don't know the rules. I know there's a code of behavior, but it eludes me.”

She encouraged me to write a book for potential museum-goers that could help them navigate and feel more at home in a museum environment and better understand their role in the museum-visitor relationship. That suggestion stayed with me over the years. Why would such a creative and well-educated member of the public feel unschooled in the art of museum going? Why did she feel a need for a user's manual? (And she is not alone—I've encountered dozens of intelligent people with similar concerns.)

BEYOND AUTHORITY

Clearly, museum power structures and the people who work within them reinforce and benefit in some ways from perpetuating a novice-expert polarity. But this dualistic notion of learning just doesn't map onto today's Knowledge Age, with its dynamic flow of information and new forms of meaning-making contributed by people from all places and of all persuasions.

This is not to say that we should abandon our respect for expertise. Quite the contrary. We need to embrace the contributions of expert knowledge and at the same time expand our definitions of “expert” and “expertise” to include broader domains of experience. And we need to consider new roles for visitors as they engage more actively in our programs and exhibitions. Rather than perceiving visitors as novices, we would do well to consider them “scholars” in the best sense of the word—people who engage in study and learning for the love of it.

We also need to separate our own notions about expertise and knowledge-generation from the associated concept of “authority” derived from the ancient

Roman *autoritas*—meaning the power conferred by authorship or socially recognized knowledge. The assumption that expertise *inherently confers authority and power* makes it almost impossible to support the open invitation to conversation and exploration that is essential to the life of the museum. Successful conversations require reciprocity and a mutual respect among participants, as well as mutual interest and a balance of contributions. This balance is difficult to establish when the authority of the expert is predominant.

Most museum exhibitions and high-profile programs grow out of curator-driven questions. Curators determine the scope of inquiry and parameters of content, and disciplinary boundaries abide: an art museum curator determines content about art, a history curator about history. Often the scope is quite narrow, particularly when curators think of exhibitions as their opportunity to create three-dimensional monographs. At the same time, educators, as visitor experts and “audience advocates,” develop interpretive questions that attempt to “hook” people into being interested in curator content. Yet both these practices leave little room for the voices of visitors and community members. I find it curious that educators spend so much time trying to develop engaging questions to help visitors make sense of curatorial content, when visitors bring their own questions to their experiences in museums.

COMMUNITIES OF LEARNERS

Museums, at their core, are learning environments, and much of the work of museum professionals—administrators, curators, educators, and designers alike—is to understand and support the learning process in our visitors *and in ourselves*. We at least need to be aware of current learning theory, which takes us beyond “information transmission” to more sophisticated and nuanced notions of learning. Today, it is generally accepted in the world of learning research that knowledge-generation is complex, is socially situated and learner-centered, and requires interaction, conversation, and reflection.

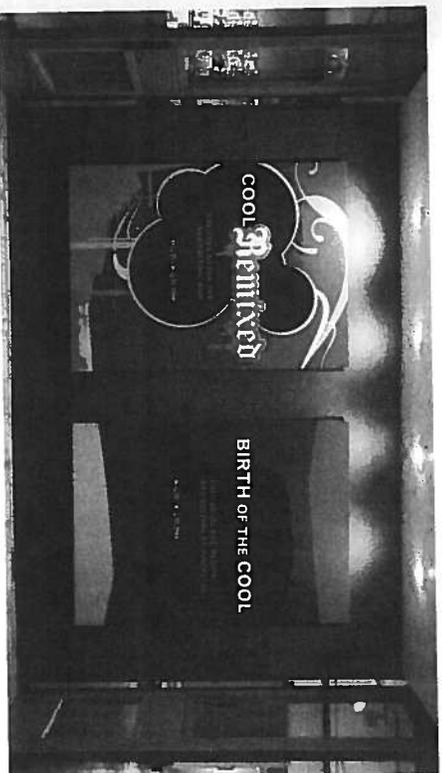
We need to think of visitors as partners in a generative learning process within a dynamic community of learners. In describing a museum-learning research project at the Exploratorium in San Francisco, educational researchers Josh Gutwill and Sue Allen “imagine an ideal world in which communication is so fluid that each person can bring his or her expertise and curiosity to a global ‘ecosystem’ of learning, moving among the roles of teacher, participant, and learner as the situation changes.” Staff and museum organizations as a whole need to participate in learning *along with* their communities and visitors, and *embrace the possibility of change* as a result of that learning.

It’s not as radical as it might sound. Increasingly, museums are employing visitor research and evaluation to better understand how their programs and exhibitions affect their end-users. Often driven initially by funder requirements, these studies are prompting rich exchanges between museums and their constituencies, and some museums are incorporating visitor research into their ongoing organizational work. As research and evaluation give voice

to visitor questions and ideas, these exchanges are having profound effects on museum practice.

BROADENING THE CONVERSATION

The Oakland Museum of California (OMCA), for example, is transforming its presence and practice through a series of initiatives that embrace public conversation and co-creation. With the receipt of a major grant from the James Irvine Foundation’s Arts Innovation Fund, the museum developed a program of visitor research, prototyping, and project experimentation designed to inform the 2010 reinstitution of its Gallery of California Art. One of the resulting projects was *Cool Remixed*, a temporary prototype exhibition co-designed in 2009 by local teenagers and education curators.



Conceived as “a cultural and historical counterpoint” to the Orange County Museum of Art’s traveling exhibition *Birth of the Cool: California Art, Design, and Culture at Midcentury*, *Cool Remixed* explored a contemporary definition of “cool” from Oakland teenagers’ perspectives. The two exhibitions, installed simultaneously in adjacent galleries, set up an interesting dialogue of call-and-response, with visitors going back and forth between them.

The design of *Cool Remixed* experimented with new installation techniques suggested by the teenagers based on the outcomes of a focus group about the attracting power and accessibility (or the lack thereof) of the former Gallery of California Art. The exhibition, with its brightly colored walls, plenty of lounge spaces, plywood and hand-painted furniture, and “Loud Hours” programmed with music, provided an interesting contrast to the ‘50s cool sensibilities of *Birth of the Cool*. Before the two exhibitions opened, some museum stakeholders considered *Birth of the Cool* the main attraction, and *Cool Remixed* a “community exhibition” not worth serious marketing attention or funding. But visitor response suggested something quite different. The freshness of the

Entry signage created a dialogue between the two exhibitions *Cool Remixed*; Boy

Area Urban Art and Culture Now and Birth of the Cool: California Art, Design, and Culture at Midcentury at the Oakland Museum of California. Photo by Michael Tempico. Courtesy of Oakland Museum of California.

ges designed
local teenag-
s embodied a
:ontemporary
on the notion
“cool” for the
ool Remixed
ion. Photo by
ael Temperio.
Courtesy of
land Museum
of California.



content and the activated spaces in *Cool Remixed* attracted a broad range of visitors who stayed and engaged in the ongoing programs. Many of the design experiments in *Cool Remixed* ended up being incorporated into the reinstallation of the new Gallery of California Art.

Reflecting back on the overall process, I think the vitality of the exhibition grew out of its conversational nature: its origins in talks with teenagers about engaging with works in the art gallery, its position in dialogue with the *Birth of the Cool* exhibition, and its design that encouraged discussions among visitors in the exhibition. Working with education curators, teens joined the curatorial process and developed the questions: What does “cool” mean today? How does it look? What does it sound like and feel like? How can we create an exhibition that brings today’s cool to life for everyone?

COMMUNITIES AS EXPERTS

Conversation also shaped the Native Californian section of the new OMCA Gallery of California History. But in this case it was an ongoing dialogue among curators, project staff, and the museum’s Native Advisory Council. During review of an early curatorial plan for a “First Peoples” display, one of our Native advisors remarked, “We are *not* the First People. The First People were the rocks and the animals and the trees.” Native People were, he told me, the second and third people. I asked the advisors what they called that pre-contact time period, and they replied, “Before the other people came,” which is now the name of that section of the gallery.

Rather than structuring the exhibition around the anthropology curator’s perspective and subject interest, we reorganized exhibition concepts around what our Native partners thought most important. They determined the focus of content; selected the Native participants; interviewed, videotaped, and edited all the commentary; and participated in selecting and placing the



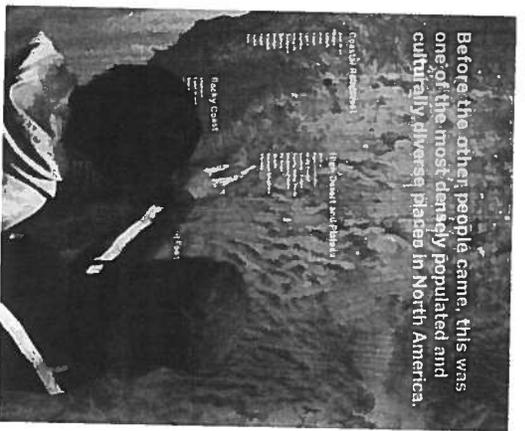
Native Californians
and museum staff
worked together
to select and
install California
baskets from the
Oakland Museum
of California collec-
tions. Photo by Terry
Carroll. Courtesy of
Oakland Museum
of California.

objects. Curators responded to and supplemented the Native content and designers and Native artists shaped the installation. While much of the exhibition content remained similar to the original curator’s plan, the emphasis, voice, and aesthetic shifted considerably.

Admittedly, this is not a new idea—the National Museum of the American Indian and other cultural history museums use similar approaches in developing most exhibits and programs about Native People today. But they often end up feeling like fixed presentations, delivering messages very similar from one to the next. The challenge for OMCA going forward will be to find ways to encourage ongoing dialogue among visitors and the Native participants that might, in turn, alter the look and feel and content of the exhibition.

Yet another conversational model shaped the section of the OMCA history gallery that focuses on the period from 1960 to 1975—a truly iconic and intense time in California. Here again, community members played expert roles. Design of the section, called “Forces of Change,” also began with curatorial ideas, but the museum’s Latino, African American, Asian Pacific, and Teacher Advisory Councils quickly dissuaded us from those intentions: the advisors felt that the conceptual plan did not accurately depict the chaotic and diverse spirit of the times. With their help, we identified twenty-four people from across California who lived through the 1960s and early ‘70s, and invited them to design and create individual displays that embodied their personal experiences and memories of that time. Participants attended several workshops with the exhibition team to explore potential design ideas and installation constraints, and then worked with staff to create their own displays.

The resulting installation, which includes a light show, music, a staff-compiled “Top 100” list of major events of the period, and a place for visitors to leave their comments and stories, creates a gestalt that more adequately represents the collective memory and history of this period. In exit interviews



Before the other people came, this was one of the most densely populated and culturally diverse places in North America.

soon after opening, some visitors cited the “1960s memory boxes” as their peak gallery experience. Perhaps even more telling were the hundreds of comment cards contributed by visitors during the opening weekend. Visitor stories, questions, and even messages to the creators of the displays covered literally all the empty wall space, extending the “voice of the people” sensibility of those times into the gallery.

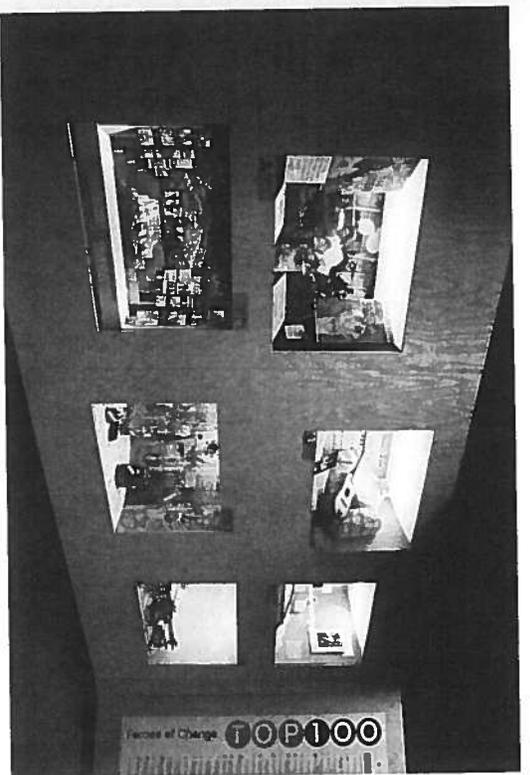
FRAMING THE QUESTIONS

While much of the work described above can be characterized as encouraging “visitor-generated content,” the fundamental intention goes deeper than that, to the generation of *questions*. All meaningful museum experiences grow out of compelling questions asked: “I wonder who...?” “What happens if...?” “Why is it that...?” Museums need to stretch beyond existing channels of communication and find ways to include visitors more interactively, even in the articulation of core questions. Besides conducting focus groups to ask visitors what they think about our ideas, we should be figuring out how we can bring them to the table as questions are posed and ideas developed.

Conversation isn't any easier for visitors than it is for museum experts—many visitors have difficulty articulating questions at the drop of a hat. Josh Gutwill and Sue Allen spent over five years at the Exploratorium learning how to encourage family groups to participate in active inquiry around science museum exhibits. Although their research focused on interactive exhibits of natural phenomena, their experiments helping visitors to work together to articulate “juicy questions” can help us model what we should be asking ourselves: How can museum programs and exhibits better support visitor-generated inquiry? What skills do visitors need to engage more deeply? How can visitor questions inform museum practice?

In discussing her use of artworks in history displays, Louise Pubols, OMCA chief curator of history, also focuses on questions: “The content of an exhibition depends on who is asking the questions, whether it is a curator, an educator, or a visitor. I brought history questions to the art: Who paid for the art? Where did they hang it? What did they want people to look at and why? Historians may choose an artwork for its impact on society, and to understand what people were thinking about at the time. These are valid questions, and potentially interesting for visitors as well.”

Arguably the most dynamic conversations and exhibitions take place around the edges, in the margins, in the overlap of disciplines, and in the



From stories about the Black Panther Party Food Program to depictions of hootenannies and hippies, personal voices came alive in the “Forces of Change” community displays. Photo by Dirk Dieter, Dieter Design.

framing of questions in surprising new ways. Extending that idea even further, Pubols suggests that intriguing questions can come from anywhere. “Take for example, an exhibition about salmon. A scientist might ask, ‘What is the role of salmon in the health of a riparian community?’ A philosopher might ask, ‘What is the proper relationship between humans and salmon?’ A historian might ask, ‘What was the role of salmon in establishing the cannery industry?’ An artist might ask, ‘How does the salmon symbolize California wilderness?’ And a visitor might ask, ‘How can we protect salmon for future generations?’”⁵ All of these questions suggest different conceptual frameworks that could form the basis of different exhibitions and require different methods of inquiry.

LEARNING TO LISTEN

I am not suggesting that museums *replace* curator expertise with public chat. Twitter, Facebook, and other social media take care of those exchanges quite nicely. At the same time that visitors expect to engage more actively in their museum experiences, they also expect and want to hear from museum experts. Visitors want to know what the experts think, why experts value some ideas or objects over others, and how that expertise can help them make meaning and find significance in the world around them (or at least at the museum). But visitors are just not interested in *monologues*. This means that museum experts need to learn how to *listen* and *respond*, share the inquiry process, and change perspectives as new ideas emerge.

Engaging in conversation is an acquired skill, an art form that requires practice and experimentation and a willingness to fail, or at least to stumble around a bit. When the new OMCA galleries opened, I wasn't prepared for the responses of some of my colleagues, who thought the Native Californian display was

Previously untold stories of Native Californians inspire visitors in the OMCA History Gallery. Photo by Daniel Kin. Courtesy of Oakland Museum of California.

3" x 5" cards attached to the displays with masking tape, hundreds of visitors comment on the "Forces of Change" community displays. Photo by Terry Carroll. Courtesy of Oakland Museum of California.



uncomfortably dissimilar from the rest of the gallery. And not all visitors appreciated the community approach employed in the "Forces of Change" display:

"Wow! I am extremely disappointed! Instead of an honoring of... political and cultural upheavals, I found a cheeky little collection of panoramas of 'my summer vacation' in the 60's by mostly non-political, non-Bay Area folks. Yes there was something interesting about the zeitgeist captured there... but it felt completely void of our amazing collective historic struggle!"¹

Because these installations are designed as prototypes, we actually have the opportunity to adjust and change them in response to visitor comment. For example, we went back to the "Forces of Change" participants and asked them to write a short description of the social and political context of the times from their perspective. Their writings, now included in the gallery, have added a depth of content and a palpable sense of personal witness that was missing from the original installation.

TOWARD RECIPROcity

Let's face it. We live in a world interconnected in ways unimaginable just a few short years ago. On the radio in the morning I can listen to a song that's creating a sensation in Nairobi nightclubs, contact the Congolese musicians and their fans by noon, and engage them in a lively discussion with museum visitors in San Francisco that evening. As people around the world "log on" and weave together increasingly interconnected patterns of knowledge, they expect museums to be players.

And people expect to be able to take more active roles in shaping their own learning activities, from co-designing the programs they attend to asking their

own questions and contributing their own expertise and opinions. The issue isn't *whether* we should provide opportunities for people to choreograph their experiences in museums; it's how we embrace these opportunities *ourselves*. If we don't take people's expectations seriously, they will simply "vote with their feet" and go elsewhere.

We need to find ways to bring the museum's expert knowledge *into conversation* with the people who attend our museums—people who bring with them their own expert knowledge. And this means letting go of the notion that we, museum professionals, are a class apart from our visitors. And we need to find new ways to create narratives in common, narratives that will change over time as the world around us changes. As the news each day reminds us, these are not always easy or comfortable conversations. But they will breathe new life into our museums.

- 1 Joshua P. Gutwill and Sue Allen, *Group Inquiry at Science Museum Exhibits: Getting Visitors to Ask Juicy Questions* (San Francisco: Exploratorium; Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2010), 3.
- 2 Evelyn Orantes, "Listening to 'Teens,'" in *How We Visitors Changed Our Museums: Transforming the Gallery of California Art*, ed. Kathleen McLean and Barbara Henry (Oakland: Oakland Museum of California, in press).
- 3 Gutwill and Allen, *Group Inquiry at Science Museum Exhibits*.
- 4 Conversation with author, December 2009.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Letter to the history curators at the Oakland Museum of California, May 28, 2010.