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What a Mess!
Claiming a Space for Student Experimentation in the University Museum

As university museums and galleries around the world reexamine their mission, redefine their audiences and clarify their position on campus and off, many are seizing on new opportunities to assert what sets them apart from other kinds of museums, their pedagogical identity. This essay focuses on one such opportunity, fostering student-produced museologically considered shows. I believe that all undergraduate students — not just art history, anthropology and museum studies students--should gain skills in how to “read” a museum critically, just as they learn how to read literature critically or examine political institutions critically. This is essential if we really want to transform museums from temples to forums. Student-produced shows can convey fresh perspectives on understanding the museum that traditional institutional narratives do not. This empowers student curators, student visitors, and the wider campus community to see how the choices that museums make impact the way we interpret objects and the relationship between past and present.¹

It is now common for university museums to invite faculty members and guest curators to produce temporary exhibitions that support object-based learning. Such projects bring long forgotten objects out of storage, provide resources for seminars, and help institutions to engage ideas and methodologies normally out of their purview.

Inviting students to create special exhibitions, not just annual shows of student art or projects in which student interns assist professional staff, but museologically challenging exhibitions that students conceive and implement themselves with mentoring from faculty and museum staff, can also yield a profound learning experience. Offering students such a forum is a daunting proposition; it entails all-too-short deadlines, exhibition plans that are sometimes not fully conceived at the outset, objectives that might contradict the institution's other scripts, and non-professionals assuming the voice of the institution. Yet, I would argue that the university museum is in a unique position to assume such risk in the interest of critical inquiry.

Most other kinds of museums, in meeting the needs of a wide audience and in attracting diverse funding, aim to minimize risk, to control institutional narrative by defining, from the start of a project, its end result and ensuring that this conclusion follows from a script. Alternative spaces, such as street corners and cyberspace, assume risk as their primary objective and, while they provide impetus for transformation in the museum, their ephemeral and radicalized nature, in many cases, eschews institutions altogether. I see the university museum as a "third space." Protected by intellectual freedom, the third space of the university museum can support student-produced open-ended exhibitions that complicate and sometimes even contradict institutional narratives. And as we increasingly reject the notion of the university museum as a storehouse and reconceptualize it as a space of encounter, a site that fosters learning communities, it follows that visitors should experience a multiplicity of voices in university exhibitions, including those of students.

While such efforts are often difficult, particularly given the pressure from

administration and alumnae to make the university museum a showpiece, museums that support the messiness of students' learning processes demonstrate the centrality of the institution to the academic mission of the university. Messiness? I have to admit that I use this term as hyperbole. I certainly don't mean to advocate poorly written wall texts, bad paint jobs, poor framing, technical glitches, disorganized programming, sloppy handling of objects and the like. It is imperative that students learn "best practice" before and while producing their exhibitions and prioritize appropriate object handling and care above all else. In addition, they must develop clarity of vision, effectively communicating the metaphors of their projects on multiple levels so that the exhibitions engage successfully with visitors. What I mean by "messiness" is the power to mix things up, to challenge museological rituals, express diverse political viewpoints, and experiment with alternative design strategies, even if they run counter to the museum's standard practice. Students must have an intellectual justification for breaking the rules, an issue that they are seeking to address that they could not with a standard vocabulary. Messiness is not an end unto itself. But when students respect best practice and thoughtfully articulate reasons for adopting goals and strategies that may seem counter to an institution's traditions, museum staff and faculty who refrain from what often amounts to censorship in the name of "professional polish" are usually rewarded with provocative exhibitions that speak a language meaningful across campus. Disruptions from conventional practice, such as dialogical wall texts, surprising juxtapositions, cutting-edge technology, raw but original programming, and critical responses to other in-house exhibitions inspire emerging museum professionals and constituents to imagine new possibilities for the museum and to develop skills in change leadership.²

Institutions pioneering such efforts in the United States include the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire and The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York. Though these case studies represent elite private colleges with significant funding for pedagogical initiatives—the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation supports the Hood’s new projects for faculty/student interaction and the Henry R. Luce Foundation sponsors what the Tang formally calls its Program in Object Exhibition and Knowledge—I am convinced that the two institutions present a useful paradigm for university museums and galleries with modest budgets but with staff who are as strongly wedded as the Hood and the Tang to the teaching mission of their institution. Successful experimental exhibitions by students at these museums often rely on long-ignored works from the permanent collection, rather than loans which can involve great expense, and in the case of the Tang, even include reproductions of images not available locally; such choices are perfectly appropriate in this pedagogical context.

The Hood, with a collection originating in 1772 and sited next to Dartmouth’s performing arts center, envisions itself as a theater of knowledge in the mode of Enlightenment thinker G. W. Leibnitz, an adviser to Peter the Great, who imagined disseminating western scientific knowledge in Russia through performance.³ The Tang, founded just recently in 2001 and with a building that spatially bridges diverse areas of the campus, defines itself as an interdisciplinary laboratory for learning with a focus on process over product. Nonetheless, both institutions prioritize their pedagogical functions so strongly that they have permanently reserved spaces for student-curated exhibitions.

The Hood supports student exhibitions primarily through internships and

individual mentoring by museum staff while the Tang relies more commonly on the vehicle of faculty-led seminars. Still, both allow student voices to be heard and museological experimentation to occur, even if they interrupt the institution's other exhibitions and approaches, as long as students have a methodological justification, clearly express their intended messages, and design their exhibitions thoughtfully. Also, both the Hood and the Tang introduce framing strategies that guide visitors to recognize that the galleries with student exhibitions are distinctive spaces to be looked at through a different lens than other parts of the museum and to be thought of as integral to the learning process. The Hood and the Tang report that visitors have been extremely supportive, appreciating that intimate glimpse into students' critical thinking process, messy though it may be, almost like peering into a heated class discussion or reading theoretically-engaged student papers. Staff of the Hood and the Tang agree that marking off and contextualizing student exhibition spaces helps to highlight the pedagogical mission of the museum in a way that vindicates the risk-taking such ventures often entail.

The Hood and the Tang share other similarities as well that foster a climate conducive to student experimentation. Both prioritize education in their administrative hierarchy. The Hood boasts a position of Curator of Academic Programming at the rank of Associate Director, held by Katherine Hart. The Tang has both a Faculty Liaison, Alison Barnes, and a Director, John Weber, who served previously as Director of Education at a major metropolitan museum. Also, the Hood and the Tang have each held numerous staff, guest, and faculty-curated exhibitions that explore new museum theory through their themes and through techniques such as juxtaposing diverse modes of display, posing rhetorical questions in wall texts, and authoring multi-layered labels. The

Hood has focused on intimate, self-reflective shows, as exemplified by *Collectanea: The Museum as Hunter-Gatherer*; *Critical Faculties: Teaching with the Hood's Collections*; and *A Point of View: Africa on Display*. Significantly, the Hood chose to open the *Critical Faculties* show in conjunction with the twentieth-anniversary celebration of the Hood's 1985 Charles Moore building, a gesture emphasizing the teaching mission of the Museum. It juxtaposed four different installations by the four departments most invested in the Museum, anthropology, art history, classics, and studio art, as a means to compare and contrast their approaches to using art. Museologically-challenging exhibitions at the Tang, which are often larger in scope, include *Living with Duchamp*; *Staging the Indian: The Politics of Representation*; and *Fred Wilson: Objects and Installations*. *Living with Duchamp* included images by fifty artists influenced by Duchamp's mockery of the museum world, including some objects that are exact replicas of works by Duchamp and others that fashion by hand the "readymades" he created by with mass-produced consumer goods.

In addition, both institutions have benefited from having Fred Wilson on campus for residencies. Wilson is known for reframing an institution's permanent collections by creating telling juxtapositions and refashioning objects to demystifies western cultural constructions. At Dartmouth (summer and fall 2005) he produced the exhibition *So Much Trouble in the World: Believe it or Not*. In this Ripley-eque sideshow-like installation, Wilson juxtaposed objects from the college's collection that represent a history of racism, provoking the campus community to acknowledge and move beyond this legacy. At Skidmore (spring 2004, 2005, 2006) he introduced faculty members across the curriculum to critical museum theory as a means to help them envision how

object-based learning at the Tang can enhance their teaching. He also collaborated with students and faculty members involved in making exhibitions.

Dartmouth boldly announces its commitment to student exhibitions through its continuing series “A Space for Dialogue: Fresh Perspectives on the Permanent Collection from Dartmouth’s Students,” located prominently in the front lobby of the Hood and initiated in the fall of 2001. One cannot, in fact, enter the museum without first acknowledging student viewpoints in these small but powerful exhibitions that typically number four to seven works (perfect for undergraduate students!). The museum contextualizes the series for visitors with this explanatory panel:

New ideas, fresh perspectives, and rarely seen works from the Hood Museum of Art’s vast collection of 65,000 objects are presented year-round through dynamic mini-exhibitions produced by our student interns. These presentations are the result of direct, hands-on experience by the curatorial, education, and public relations senior interns with their mentors on the Hood staff. Each student chooses the objects, conducts curatorial research, writes the labels and accompanying brochure, assists in the design and installation, and presents a public gallery talk. The exhibitions change about every six weeks.

This text sets the stage for the Hood as a theater of knowledge. It tells us that students, as performers in this theater, have original ideas and breathe new life into the collection, that, with mentoring, students can create thoughtful and provocative exhibitions, and that, as a teaching museum, the Hood is committed to having student voices play a key role in defining the institution. In particular, the words “dialogue,” “fresh,” and “dynamic” in the text signal to the viewer that the Hood condones and even encourages intellectual

challenges and controversy in these mini-exhibitions. The placement of the series demonstrates not only that student learning is front and center at the Hood but also that, even with severe space restrictions, as the Hood has, one can and should always find a place for student experimentation.⁴

In the mini-exhibitions, students choose from among objects in storage, organizing them thematically and writing wall texts that link the objects to ideas they've explored in the classroom. Frequently, the themes relate objects and ideas from the past to present concerns. Some of the students offer commentary on issues for museums today. For example, *Sacrilege and Idolatry: Religious Images in Sixteenth-Century Europe* by student Brittany Beth, seen here, establishes links between censorship in the prints and paintings she exhibits and censorship now. *Playing Around with Art* by Dianne Choie blurs the boundaries between the categories of toy and art as a means to advocate playful engagement over intellectual distance in the museum. Lisa Vople's *Timepieces: Perceptions of Natural and Manmade Time* contrasts the illusiveness of measuring time through instruments with the construction of the past through memory and, in so doing, questions our assumptions of art and the museum as eternal. Joseph Ackley's *Emmett and Cadmus: Looking at/for the Homoerotic Power Struggle* applies queer theory to his analysis in a direct and compelling way that makes recent major exhibitions of the works of John Singer Sargent and Thomas Eakins seem evasive.

Student curators champion these projects as a means for their voices to be heard. For examples, Brittany Beth exclaimed, "I still can't believe the museum allows the interns so much freedom with that space. It's really an amazing opportunity."⁵

While students have not exactly radicalized design elements of the mini-

exhibitions, they do experiment with provocative juxtapositions. Gallery talks by the student curator and brochures for each mini exhibitions, including an essay by the student-curator and a selected bibliography, are intended to spark further discussion. As a whole, the student voices of the mini-exhibitions are intended to strike a mood of critical inquiry that the Hood hopes visitors will emulate. Former Hood Director Derrick Cartwright, who initiated the “Space for Dialogue” series, asserted in a Hood Museum Bulletin, “We need always to inspect these works [in the permanent collection] with the originality and courage modeled by these students.”⁶

Many Hood initiatives buttress these efforts to be a teaching museum by providing students a forum for exhibitions. For example, the Hood’s Harrington Gallery, an intimate space somewhat set apart in the museum by architectural devices and by wall texts is designated for teaching exhibitions. The Hood’s study center is well-used in courses across the curriculum and in extracurricular study to examine works from the permanent collection. The museum has a residency program for faculty to conduct research and to increase the curricular use of the collections. Student interns lead workshops and mini (noncredit) courses for students without much exposure to the museum; among the most popular is an annual Halloween workshop called ‘Oddities’ in the study center which teaches participants about the history of collecting and museums. Students also have opportunities to choose together through a non-credit course offered yearly a print or photography acquisition. And, most importantly, the Hood’s staff conveys a general attitude of respect for and collaboration with students. Former Director Cartwright’s acknowledgements in a brochure for a 2004 exhibition curated by two students typify this attitude. He wrote, “ This project represents the strongest

conceivable collaboration between the professional staff of the Hood Museum of Art and two promising young scholars. . . . [They] have proven themselves to be model colleagues as we debated key concepts. Welcoming students as partners with much to offer is ensuring that university museums and galleries continue to flourish.”

As a newly-founded institution, the Tang has a small permanent collection, unlike the Hood, and its leaders understand that its most important resource is ideas. The fact that the Tang calls itself a “Teaching Museum and Art Gallery” lets visitors know that sparking discourse among disciplines is central to its mission. And, as a laboratory, which, by definition, tests hypotheses, the Tang is committed to taking risks in the name of museological experimentation. The Tang has held numerous student theater and dance performances in the galleries, such as *Balls*, in conjunction with exhibitions to establish the space as dynamic. It has brought students’ critical thinking processes into faculty shows, for example, exhibiting student papers beside historical objects in a faculty-produced exhibition.

Among the most radical or “messy” of Tang projects are exhibitions that students create through the vehicle of the seminar. The professor provides an intellectual framework for the exhibition by assigning readings and facilitating exploration of relevant theoretical concerns. Along with Tang staff, s/he also provides mentoring in producing the exhibition. Though the Tang does not typically situate its student-produced exhibitions right in the main lobby, as does the Hood, but instead locates them in a wing gallery, the students are given a great deal of intellectual freedom. Many shows embrace ideas or contain elements not usually thought appropriate for a university

museum. Placing these shows in intimate spaces becomes a framing device that alerts viewers to rethink their expectations in student-produced exhibitions.

Much of this thinking out of the box must be credited to the long-term residency of Fred Wilson. Instead of creating an exhibition during his time at Skidmore, he introduced ideas in critical museum theory through faculty seminars based on readings and field trips. He also facilitated the process of translating theory into practice. Wilson very much championed the idea of the Tang as a laboratory which, through diverse and sometimes contradictory methodologies, challenges (or tests) the assumptions (or hypotheses) that shape institutional constructions of race, ethnicity, gender and class. This is clear in the title he gave to the conference held at the Tang to mark the end of his residency, *The College Museum: A Collision of Disciplines, A Laboratory of Perception*.

Inspired by Wilson, Professor of Anthropology Susan Bender mentored students in her Spring 2005 senior seminar to produce the exhibition *Many Different Heavens* in the Tang's mezzanine gallery. Because Bender was Dean of the Faculty when the Luce grant that funded Wilson's residency was written, she had many opportunities to consider Wilson's approach. And, in fact, *Many Different Heavens* disrupts the Tang's institutional narrative, just as Wilson's exhibitions disrupt the written and unwritten scripts of the museums where he creates his interventions. *Many Different Heavens* critiques the concurrent ambitious, large-scale exhibition *A Very Liquid Heaven* which was then on display in the Tang's more prominent galleries.

The title *A Very Liquid Heaven*, as a sphere suspended over a centuries-old astronomical text in this installation suggests, derives from René Descartes' theory that the earth is surrounded by liquid, which he described in his 1644 *Principles of*

Philosophy. Though Descartes was later discredited, this exhibition revisits his theory as a means to explore the relationship between fixity and change. The exhibition examines how we define stars—traditionally considered to be unchanging but now known to be in flux-- by juxtaposing astronomical historical artifacts and works by contemporary artists. *A Very Liquid Heaven* was a beautiful and provocative show. It included an installation by Kiki Smith and a video projected on the ceiling by Charles and Ray Eames. Nonetheless, the students in Susan Bender's anthropology seminar found it Eurocentric and, in response, created *Many Different Heavens* to introduce non-western perspectives on astronomical concepts.

This was a bold move that many university museums, fearing that student projects could undermine the institution's authority, would never take. But Tang museum staff had the confidence to know that a student critique of a major exhibition only serves to encourage intellectual inquiry, the primary mission of the institution. The wall text that contextualizes the exhibition frames the project as initiating a conversation. "In dialogue with *A Very Liquid Heaven*," it reads, "we offer a glimpse of scientific and sacred readings of the sky from cultures scattered across the globe in our portrayal of *Many Different Heavens*." It also reminds viewers that science is not exclusively the domain of western culture. The exhibition conveyed perspectives on astronomy by Muslim, Eastern and Western African and Mayan cultures, among others. And it's not just the theme of the show that's innovative; it's also the display.

The Tang did not have many objects in its permanent collection relevant to the show and the class had a modest budget that precluded loans. Yet, because teaching trumps museological convention in student projects at the Tang, participants were not

hindered by a need to display only original artwork and historical artifacts. They relied on inexpensive reproductions and sites from the internet to represent their ideas. While some professionals might think this is too messy, too raw, for a university museum, as a teaching tool, the exhibition met Dr. Bender's objectives. And despite the lack of "authenticity" of objects, polished, well-written wall texts signaled to viewers that this was an exhibition to be taken seriously.

Student papers, which Dr. Bender generously shared with me, demonstrate how such projects have the potential to create systemic pedagogical change. Students learned, firsthand, the benefits of revealing conflict and contradiction. For example, one remarked, "By contrasting so many different sky traditions originating from areas all over the world, our exhibit successfully achieved disorder and dialogue." Students also came to see the difficulties of letting go of "othering" and the necessity of rethinking "best practice." Typical is this participant who wrote insightfully, "Challenges to representing nonwestern cultures are pervasive and perhaps impossible to overcome without directly and explicitly challenging traditional ways of representation."

Both the Hood and the Tang continue to encourage students to experiment museologically through exhibitions. At the Hood, the "Space for Dialogue" series has been so successful that the museum is planning to expand the program to other venues around campus, including its business and medical schools. This will not only give students more opportunities to curate exhibitions but will generate new conversations with Dartmouth students who might not ordinarily consider exhibitions as relevant to their education. At the Tang, students are exploring podcasting to present diverse and

multilayered responses to exhibitions and to foster a learning community in which students record their thoughts.

The Hood and the Tang have distinct but equally compelling approaches to making student learning central to their mission. And, yes, student-produced exhibitions can get messy by pushing the traditional boundaries of the university museum. But, as Sharon Corwin, Carolyn Muzzy Director and Chief Curator of the Colby College Museum of Art, asserts, student curators are in a unique position to attract other students to the museum. “The benefit of working with students is that students are really ambassadors. They bring in other students. They have a particular voice that can speak to . . . their peers that I don’t think anyone else on the campus really has.”⁷ Is it worth the risk? At this time, when many university museums and galleries are being asked to justify their existence and redefine their mission, creating active learning experiences for our most important constituents—our students—will help us to flourish and to create a generation of critical museum visitors.

¹ Many thanks to the staff at the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College and the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, Skidmore College, for so generously sharing their time and resources, in particular, at the Hood, Kathy Hart, Curator of Academic Programming and Associate Director, and Brian Kennedy, Director and, at the Tang, Allison Barnes, Faculty Liaison to the Tang, and Susan Bender, Professor of Anthropology.

² Thanks to Margaret A. Lindauer, Associate Professor, Department of Art History, Virginia Commonwealth University, for sharing her thoughts with me on this issue.

³ Brian Kennedy, Director of the Hood Museum of Art, in conversation of August 16, 2006. Cornelia Weber, “The University Museum as a ‘Theatre of Knowledge,’” *ICOM University Museums and Collections Study Series 11* (2003), 19-21.

⁴ The Hood Museum of Art Quarterly frequently profiles exhibitions and student curators in the “A Space for Dialogue” series. This provides additional preparation for visitors who read the “Quarterly” before or after visiting the museum. See, for example, “Fresh Perspectives: A Space for Dialogue’ Roundtable,” Hood Museum of Art Quarterly, Dartmouth College (Summer 2003): 4-5.

⁵ Brittany Beth in note of September 21, 2006 to the Hood Museum staff.

⁶ Derrick Cartwright, "Letter from the Director," Hood Museum of Art Quarterly, Dartmouth College (Summer 2003), 2.

⁷ Sharon Corwin in "The Role of the University Art Museum and Gallery," from round-table discussion convened by Art Journal Editorial Board at the College Art Association's 2006 annual conference, Art Journal 65: 3 (Fall 2006), 28.