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INTERVIEWS OCT. 17, 2016

The Social in Practice: A Conversation with Nina Simon

by Ceci Moss



First Friday: Santa Cruz Collects, Oct. 7, 2016, visitors explored personal items from collectors all over Santa Cruz County and how artists used collections to create assemblage sculptures in the exhibition "Santa Cruz Collects."

Courtesy Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History. Photo Amanda Ross.



Engagement is a hot topic in the museum world. Buzzwords like “collaboration,” “participation,” and “inspiration” are used often across the sector, from grant applications to professional conferences. In today’s connected and fast-paced cultural landscape, there’s no question that the impetus and pedagogical role of museums are undergoing a profound paradigm shift. Institutions are becoming “a stage for the flow of art events,” as Boris Groys writes in his essay “Entering the Flow: Museum between Archive and Gesamtkunstwerk.” In this context, exhibitions aren’t “on view” as much as they are “broadcast live.” This conscious attunement to the present offers not only new strategies for the display of art, but a renewed sensitivity to the political and social stakes of that temporal space.

Nina Simon’s blog *Museum 2.0* has been at the heart of these conversations. Launched in 2006, the blog covers how museums can implement more horizontal twenty-first-century practices in terms of exhibition design, collection management, and audience interfaces. She’s also the author of the self-published books *The Participatory Museum* (2010) and *The Art of Relevance* (2016), which are practical guides for museum professionals wanting to deepen visitor participation and audience connection. Simon’s work as a writer and consultant led to her appointment in 2011 as executive director of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History (MAH), where she has had the opportunity to test and realize many of the approaches discussed in her research. I spoke with Simon about her current projects at MAH and her vision for the future of museums.

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should involve and showcase the diversity of voices within our communities. That doesn't necessarily mean that everybody's art goes on the wall, but it means looking at every person who walks through your doors as a potential contributor to the work that is happening inside. Instead of a traditional top-down model where the museum staff produce exhibitions and the visitors consume them, we should be looking at a co-creative model where the museum staff are building a platform for lots of people to make and share the cultural content that connects us as humans.

For example, "Santa Cruz Collects" is a recurring exhibition exploring why individuals and institutions collect. We involved community members to show objects from their own collections, and we also created the installation *Memory Jars* to acknowledge that we cherish not only physical things, but also memories. We invited people to place assemblages inside mason jars, and make labels telling the stories behind them. Very soon, we had a collection of hundreds of memories from our community.

That's a visible example. But the most powerful participatory work often happens behind the scenes. At MAH, there's a program called C3 [Creative Community Committee] that convenes forty-five individuals from our county. It is a think tank where people from different fields—politicians, film-festival organizers, artists, park rangers, and so on—can spend time together and explore how they can amplify each other's work through creative practice. In that kind of model, the museum is the hub for agents of change throughout our community.

MOSS What is the big-picture vision for this approach?

SIMON If we want our institutions to exist for everybody in our communities, if we believe that art, history, and science are relevant parts of everybody's lives, then we should be doing whatever we can to involve all kinds of people in museums, not just the ones who want to consume the mostly male, mostly white products that have historically been vaunted in such venues. We have to ask how our museums can reflect, comment on, and celebrate the plurality of cultures and artistic practices in our communities.

The audiences for museums, as for other traditional arts venues, are older, whiter, wealthier, and more educated than the population overall. If museums want to be relevant and compelling institutions in the twenty-first century and beyond, then they will have to involve more diverse people. But there also is a business mandate to do so, because those new people are going to be the visitors, members,

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socially engaged ways, and there's a need for institutions to find ways to embrace their work. We've seen some very traditional arts institutions take this on. Artists are already pushing their work into the world, more so than institutions are. We need to ask how we as an institution can open up new doors into artists' work, but in many cases the artists are already paving the way.

We're planning an exhibition with Hung Liu for next spring focused on her prints and tapestries using images of labor. We talked to Hung about the opportunity to incorporate objects and stories from laborers working in Santa Cruz County alongside the artwork. She was comfortable with sharing objects and stories related to labor, but less comfortable with putting other people's artwork on a similar topic in the same gallery as her own. As an art institution we navigate that.

MOSS Can you outline the idea of "relevance" that you wrestle with in your book *The Art of Relevance*?

SIMON Relevance is not about what's trending or what's hot. It's a quality of art that invites you into a deeper understanding, emotional reaction, or conversation. Peter Samis, a curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, likes to say "visual Velcro" in reference to the way that some pieces of visual art immediately stick to you. As soon as you see them, you're immersed. But a lot of art doesn't have that Velcro effect if you don't know the context. It's more like Teflon. You walk past it and it slides off of you.

If we want people to access the deep meaning within an art experience, we have to provide them the key to the door into that artwork so that they don't look at it and say, "What the heck is this?" and move onto the next thing. We want them to say, "Wow, this connects to something I care about!"

MOSS Can you explain your concept of "community-first program design"?

SIMON Museums often create exhibitions and then find audiences for them. We ask who we want to engage as visitors, as participants, as collaborators, and then decide which projects we want to develop with them.

One example is Temple Contemporary in Philadelphia. Every two years they bring together a group of diverse community advisers and ask them each to come with a question relevant to the city and to the world. They vote to determine which questions are most compelling, and those questions then set the direction for Temple Contemporary's artistic work over the coming year.



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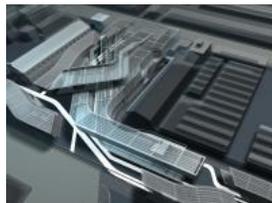
work using the broken instruments. His *Symphony for a Broken Orchestra*, which makes use of six hundred of these instruments, will be performed next year. They've also raised the money to restore all of the instruments and to send them back into the schools with repair kits. That is a project that has amazing social value in Philadelphia.

MOSS I've spoken with arts professionals about the void left open by crumbling government support for social services in the United States. Even if there's tremendous goodwill, sometimes arts institutions are not the best equipped to meet these challenges. What's your position on this?

SIMON When we partner with social service agencies, I always say that art is a side door. The people who are dealing with the immediate crises associated with homelessness or the foster care system are working at the front door. We are not going to replace them and solve those problems, but we can open a side door into opportunities for more dignity or more agency. Art institutions can play particular roles with regard to some of these issues, but you could ask the same question of all of us as individuals.

For example, whose responsibility is it to engage issues around police violence toward African-Americans in our country? Some people would say, not my community, not my business. Others would say, it's our whole country, it's all of our business. Art institutions have to face the same question. I want to be part of a museum that shares this responsibility.

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