



# theory & practice

VOLUME 3, 2020

MUSEUM FUTURES: Museums as Change Agents

A Publication from the National Emerging Museum  
Professionals Network and The Museum Scholar

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# Visitor-Centered Museums: Surviving the 21st Century

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## **Theory and Practice: The Emerging Museum Professionals Journal**

[www.TheMuseumScholar.org](http://www.TheMuseumScholar.org)

Rogers Publishing Corporation NFP  
5558 S. Kimbark Ave, Suite 2, Chicago, IL 60637  
[www.rogerspublishing.org](http://www.rogerspublishing.org)

Cover photo: Rovelyn Camato.

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# Visitor-Centered Museums: Surviving the 21st Century

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**Keywords** Museum of the 21st Century; Burning Man; Constructivism; Democratization of the Museum; Museum Technology

**Abstract** As museums struggle to stay relevant in the world, technology advances at an exponential rate. The traditional educational role of museums has been contested with a myriad of challenges. Society asks museums not only to educate but also to entertain. Museums can change from a didactic, unilateral knowledge base to a more accessible pedagogical framework by using visitor-centered, technology-based exhibits. Institutions that once flourished, must now compete more than ever for funding; they must evolve or go extinct. They not only fight for dollars with public entities but with edutainment attractions as well. Will digital technologies help museums overcome the challenges they encounter throughout the 21st-century to help support their missions? Are emerging digital technologies capable of changing museum environments into more interactive, engaging experiences, appealing to larger audiences? This paper answers these questions by providing a case study of the Oakland Museum of California and the exhibition *No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man* as an example of one institution that uses many of these techniques and has become more than a museum but also a diverse community center.

**About the Author** Ginger M.F. Daley is a recent graduate of the Master of Arts program in Museum Studies at the University of San Francisco, and had the honor of being the graduate student speaker at her commencement. During her studies she completed two internships, one as a museum educator at the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco and the other as a curatorial assistant at the Museum of Sonoma County. She is passionate about using digital technologies to make museum experiences accessible for more diverse populations. Ginger volunteers with several organizations to promote social justice and equality for people from all walks of life. She received the 2015 “Volunteer of the Year” award for Catholic Charities of Santa Rosa, where she was an art teacher at the homeless shelter. She curated an art show, where her students created and sold their original art. Her diverse family provides constant motivation; she has an adult daughter and step-daughter as well as a toddler son and grandson. Ginger lives in Kailua, Hawaii, with her husband and son.

*This article was published on June 20, 2020 at [www.themuseumscholar.org](http://www.themuseumscholar.org)*

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As the world reels from both the economic and public health impact of the SARS-CoV-2 crisis, it is clearer than ever that as museum professionals, we must explore ways museums can make a difference. Effective uses of technology help us support these goals. This essay, written and researched one year before the pandemic, discusses some of the vital issues museums found themselves facing at the end of the 2010s. As such, it frames the situation we find ourselves in today, as it is increasingly important that museums’ strengths lie in the communities they serve.

## Introduction

There are many inventive ways in which museums engage diverse audiences. This article outlines a case study from the Oakland Museum of California (OMCA); to show how they revamped their core principles to achieve this goal with a current exhibition that utilizes accessible installations from the maker movement.

Since 1998, when George Hein's *Learning in the Museum* was published, museum curricula and programs have largely embraced the constructivist theory of education.<sup>1</sup> The theory argues that learning is self-led and people "construct" knowledge by using their meaningful past experiences. Hein writes that constructivist philosophy should be the educational model used in museum education.<sup>2</sup>

This means that museums provide familiar content for visitors so they can build upon their prior knowledge and construct meaning in ways that are relevant to their lives. We must make visitors feel important. In the recent past, many museums were still overburdening their visitors with too much information. One tool for helping visitors access the information that is most pertinent to them is digital technology. OMCA has recently explored ways to marry the philosophy of constructivism with digital technology such as virtual and augmented reality, crafting museums as metaverses.



Figure 1 (left): Original photo of the non-interactive installation of a woolly mammoth at the Western Science Center in Hemet, California. Photo credit Ginger Daley. Figure 2 (right): A mock example of how an installation can be enhanced by using augmented reality and creating a metaverse.

The words "meta" and "universe" make the compound word "metaverse" and points to the new space created by a combination of both real and augmented spaces (figures 1 and 2). Creating metaverse exhibits help museums achieve their constructivist educational goals. These technologies are still in the development phase, even though some digital museologists have been working with digital techniques for many years.<sup>3</sup> The museum of the 21<sup>st</sup> century possesses a unique opportunity to utilize creative ways and attract diverse audiences.

Many institutions are making the shift to being more hands-on for visitors. One example of a museum that intertwines interactive elements throughout their permanent collection and programming is OMCA. The exhibition *No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man* (on display October 12, 2019 - February 16, 2020) in particular, provides a key example of the fusion of different types of technology that creates metaverse and audience engagement.

## Transformation of OMCA

Being located in Oakland, California – which is typically described as a “second city” to its more glamorous across-the-bay big sister San Francisco – gives OMCA a unique opportunity to experiment. Oakland commonly receives recognition for its ethnic diversity as well as being a vibrant art and maker community. The ethnic profile looks something like this: 27.3% Caucasian, 24.3% African American, 27% Latino, 15.9% Asian, 0.9 % American Indian, 0.6% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and .7% as classifying as two or more ethnicities.<sup>4</sup> This diverse population creates the perfect environment to experiment with creating a space where the demographics of the museum visitor mirror the demographics of the community.

OMCA realized it needed to recognize the changing demographic of their community, specifically how they are relating to developments in technology.<sup>5</sup> Bringing *No Spectators: Art of Burning Man* to their museum demonstrates their commitment to listening to their audience, as the *Burning Man* festival is an annual pilgrimage for thousands of Bay Area Millennials and was founded by Bay Area Boomers. This exhibition explicitly speaks to local audiences. It also serves as an excellent illustration of creating metaverse experiences.

OMCA, as we know it today, started in 1969; by the end of the 1990s, the galleries and surrounding gardens were in disrepair. Thanks to a museum and library bond passed by the voters in 2002, the museum rebuilt itself from the ground up, with the goal of growing a diverse audience and becoming a cutting-edge museum of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> One initiative transformed the entire museum environment. OMCA honored input from inexperienced visitors by making changes based on their feedback. They surveyed 3,300 people from their community over the course of three years. They compiled the answers and put the information into seven groups of questions defining what the people wanted to know:

1. Why are these works together in this area in this arrangement?
2. Why is this even here in the museum?
3. Whose point of view is this?
4. What is this in front of me?
5. What motivated the artist to make this? How was it made?
6. But why does this matter? Where are the other perspectives?
7. Is there a right way I’m supposed to look at this artwork?

OMCA took the answers to these core questions and used them to reorganize their entire infrastructure. The questions acted as guideposts on the road to becoming a sustainable museum of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Another way OMCA put the visitor at the center of their museum was by “prototyping” their exhibitions before putting them on display. They tested the professionals’ ideas by asking for feedback, in the form of sticky notes and mock exhibits, to non-professional visitors. They set up these mock exhibits before making permanent changes to exhibition space. This approach takes the authoritative voice away from the curator and gives it back to the visitors. The community now has a vested interest in the way the objects are displayed as well as the museum itself. Jaime Cortez, artist and guest writer at OMCA, calls to mind what a museum visit can feel like for many visitors: “Stepping into [an] art exhibition can be like stepping into the middle of a conversation that began without you and is being conducted in a secret

language.”<sup>7</sup> The prototyping technique enables the visitor to participate in the conversation from the beginning.

OMCA is an interdisciplinary institution with halls in science, history, and art. They arrange their collection so these usually separate disciplines are in conversation with each other, to help visitors understand that the different disciplines are more interdependent than society currently recognizes. It is obvious when walking through the galleries that visitors are supposed to engage with the objects and spend time with each installation. There are places to sit. Many of the installations have iPads installed with videos that help the visitors engage more deeply with the subject matter.

### ***Burning Man* in the Museum**

*Burning Man* is an annual ten-day festival held in Black Rock City, Nevada, drawing 70,000 participants and encouraging experimentation with art and social norms, including experimenting with drugs, clothing, and even sexuality. The first impromptu *Burning Man* was a bonfire, held at Baker Beach, San Francisco, across the Bay from OMCA.<sup>8</sup> The festival not only has its roots in the Bay Area but has become ingrained in its culture over the last thirty-five or so years. During this ten-day period, in this desolate desert, a temporary city including all kinds of essential infrastructure develops. In her article, “Utopian Visions,” Jillian Steinhauer writes that it is questionable why all these other civic structures have evolved there—postal system, census project, rangers, the newspapers, and the radio station—yet there is no museum. “Likely such an institution would seem superfluous because the whole festival functions as one itself.”<sup>9</sup> She also questions how the participants come together to create such outlandish art in the most inhospitable weather conditions of in the middle of the Nevada desert. What does the festival say for those who can’t be there? Is the art relevant outside of the environment and community it was created for? The *No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man* attempts to answer these questions.

Nora Atkinson, curator of *No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man*, attended *Burning Man* for the first time in 2017. Atkinson commissioned a long-time *Burning Man* artist, David Best, to make a temple for the interior of the Renwick Gallery at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington D.C. The healing aspect of his temples birthed the idea to recreate an exhibition that would capture the essence of this festival, for those that do not attend each year. Atkinson likens the pertinence of recognizing the art of *Burning Man* in the contemporary modern craft gallery as an expression of technology coming up alongside the process of making collaborative art projects, just as the industrial revolution gave rise to the Arts and Crafts movement between the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Even though this art was created for a specific place and time and many works were intended to be destroyed within a week—leaving no trace—Atkinson was confident that there was a way to pull it off.<sup>10</sup>

Though museums are public spaces, they do not feel casual. Many people are uneasy; they are confused as to how they are supposed to behave. At *Burning Man*, everyone’s expression of art appreciation is accepted, even burning it to the ground.<sup>11</sup> Atkinson says that this exhibition helps us question the commercial value of art and why we continue to create art in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. “These artists represent the creative spirit of the contemporary maker movement and the ongoing importance of craft in the digital age.”<sup>12</sup> Society constantly questions how to define art as well as the museum’s ability to represent art created from a

diverse community. Can the art of *Burning Man* and the utopian society that it creates translate into a museum environment? Does the variety of technology help this art speak to museum audiences more effectively?

The virtual reality “Android Jones Deep Playa Experience” was designed with immersive media company Vision Agency, for the Smithsonian Institution’s Renwick Gallery exhibition *No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man*. It helps create a metaverse experience when mixed with the other installations in this exhibition. The exhibit gives everyone access and no need to visit the Black Rock Desert to see the hype around the *Burning Man* festival. Visitors can get an idea of the art created without withstanding the weather extremes and less desirable conditions, like the party environment or expensive price tag.

The artist of “Deep Playa,” Android Jones, says he creates these virtual reality experiences for everyone to have access, every demographic can be shifted into a new world. Instead of defining the narrative for his art, he invites the players to make their own meaning from their personal experience. Jones’ participatory experiences match perfectly with museums’ constructivist goals because the theory’s main premise purports that we create our world of knowledge through our senses. Virtual reality uses all of our senses in conjunction with our imaginations. So much so that Jones defines the space with the honeycomb structure so that the user can move freely and not feel too vulnerable. Users usually become disoriented in the beginning.<sup>13</sup>

### **No Spectators at OMCA**

Walking into the gallery where *No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man* was exhibited, faint bells are heard, chiming ceremonially.<sup>14</sup> Surprisingly, the music was not a recording but an installation playing, the kinetic, sonic sculpture named “Gamelatron Bidadari,” (figure 3) created in 2018 by Aaron Taylor Kuffner with hand-forged gongs from Indonesia.<sup>15</sup> The gongs are informed by a 1,000-year-old Indonesian musical tradition. The installation was created from teak wood, robotic mallets, and a physical computing system. Kuffner studied for four years at Institut Seni Indonesia Yogyakarta Bali and Java, to gain the knowledge to create this sound system.

Like much of this exhibition, this installation marries the complex high-tech with the familiar low-tech. Kuffner has made over 50 Gamelatrons and they are regularly installed in temples at the *Burning Man* festival as well as other locations around the world. The wall is painted a Pepto Bismol pink and the bronze sculpture shines against this backdrop. The installation area is outfitted with sofas and bean bags to encourage visitors to stay and experience the music without feeling rushed. There is no doubt about what to do, how to appreciate, or how to interact with this art. There is no explanation necessary. The musical performance is a continual experience, as the robotic element does not need to take a break. There does not seem to be a beginning or an end, just a gentle path of musical resonance. The gallery becomes a space to soak it all in and stay as long as one likes.



Figure 3: “Gamelatron Bidadari,” Aaron Taylor Kuffner in *No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man* at the Oakland Museum of California, November 19, 2019. Photo credit Ginger Daley.

There were often lines at seven in the evening to buy tickets for *No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man* at OMCA. The visitors were immersed in the different exhibit installations throughout the gallery. At each of the interactive elements, there were multiple people waiting patiently for their turn. The audience seemed diverse in age; people with grey hair and young adults that looked like they were on dates. There were also many families with small children; the children were running free, not sequestered in their strollers, like most museums. There is always one way to see young audiences engaging: look at the Instagram feed.<sup>16</sup>

*No Spectators: Art of Burning Man* is aptly titled as a nod to the “radically participatory ethic”<sup>17</sup> of the *Burning Man* festival. There are street signs in the opening of the exhibition to lead the way to the tenets: Radical Inclusion, Gifting, Decommodification, Radical Self-Reliance, Radical Self-Expression, Communal Effort, Civic Responsibility, Leaving No Trace, Participation, and Immediacy. These signposts serve as a mission statement and code of conduct for the festival that hopes to build a utopian community. The art at the *Burning Man* festival is perceived in the opposite way that people typically interact with art in the museum environment. Six-time *Burning Man* attendee (a so-called Burner) and dancer, Larissa Archer describes it this way, “You climb on things and share a drink with your buddies under them. You park a few art cars around them and have a rave. There’s a wonderful casualness to the treatment of art—it’s sacred but not in a fussy, uptight manner.”<sup>18</sup> The exhibition successfully transports these concepts into the museum space, effectively upending the conventional museum atmosphere.

## Conclusion

Traditional museum experiences—where a line of people stand in front of individual paintings, waiting to read the wall label, before moving down to see the next—are being replaced. Visitors



do not have to wait until they have a day off work to attend during the weekdays. Museums are getting more creative at giving people access to their galleries at alternative hours. One prime example from OMCA, they have increased their visibility for more diverse audiences by hosting a vibrant block party every Friday evening. “Friday Nights at OMCA”<sup>19</sup> has all the elements to attract younger visitors. One significant reason is that people with less discretionary money can get much of the experience without paying for admission. One of the streets is blocked off to traffic and there are multi-ethnic food trucks<sup>20</sup> to help make this a viable destination for the whole family. The galleries are open late, until 9 pm. Once again, they have placed the visitor experience at the center of the museum’s goals.

OMCA also creates a spectrum of activity that engages a multitude of visitor demographics. During the “Friday Nights at OMCA” the gardens and all common spaces are open to the public. There are elements of the exhibition *No Spectators: Art of Burning Man* in the gardens and visitors take pictures with their smartphones to presumably post them on social media. The space becomes a metaverse experience, fusing elements of reality with elements of technology. Most of the action on these late nights happens outside of the galleries: live music, dance lessons, DJs, no-host bar, storytime led by the Oakland Library, craft workshops and even a local marketplace. The community participates and builds knowledge; they become familiar with the museum environment.

In the *No Spectators: Art of Burning Man*, we see how diverse audiences line up to participate. This type of exhibit demonstrates how a museum visit can teeter on being entertainment. Pair this with the festive environment that OMCA provides on Friday nights, and suddenly the museum becomes an accessible place for the community. Younger audiences who become frequent visitors at early ages associate the museum with being a fun environment.

The traditional educational role of museums may be changing to a more entertainment-based model because this is what the audience demands. Visitors are familiar with the technology of handheld devices and this is the perfect medium to help museums be more relatable. Even though museums struggle and encounter challenges to attract younger, more ethnically diverse audiences, interactive exhibits help them stay relevant. Museums have the ability to utilize digital technology as well as a spectrum of activities to help visitors construct a meaning-making experience. As museums continue to evolve and adjust to today’s realities, we can be thankful for experiments like OMCA’s presentation of *No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man*, which showed that museums have the potential to create new kinds of metaverse experiences.

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Figure 1: Original photo of the non-interactive installation of a woolly mammoth at the Western Science Center in Hemet, California. Photo credit Ginger Daley.

Figure 2: A mock example of how an installation can be enhanced by using augmented reality and creating a metaverse.

Figure 3: “Gamelatron Bidadari,” Aaron Taylor Kuffner in *No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man* at the Oakland Museum of California, November 19, 2019. Photo credit Ginger Daley.

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Leslie Bedford, *The Art of Museum Exhibitions* (London and New York: Left Coast Press, 2014), 28.
- <sup>2</sup> George Hein, *Learning in the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1998), 26
- <sup>3</sup> Hee-soo Choi, "A Content Service Deployment Plan for Metaverse Museum exhibitions—Centering on the Combination of Beacons and HMDs," *International Journal of Information Management* 37, 1 (2017): 1519-1527.
- <sup>4</sup> "Quick Facts, Oakland City, California," United State Census Bureau, last modified July 1, 2018. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/oaklandcitycalifornia>. This demographic breakdown is the format provided by the US Census and is flawed in terminology and lacking updated descriptions of ethnicities.
- <sup>5</sup> Barbara Henry, *How We Visitors Changed Our Museum: Transforming the Gallery of California Art at the Oakland Museum of California* (Oakland Museum of California, 2010). <https://museumca.org/files/HowVisitorsChangedOurMuseumBook.pdf>.
- <sup>6</sup> Henry, *How We Visitors*, 11.
- <sup>7</sup> Henry, *How We Visitors*.
- <sup>8</sup> Jessica Bruder, *Burning Book: A Visual History of Burning Man* (New York: Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2007).
- <sup>9</sup> Jillian Steinhauer, "Utopian Visions," *New Republic* 249, no. 9 (2018): 50.
- <sup>10</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, "Art Works Podcast: Nora Atkinson, curator of *No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man*," May 18, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4S2Moax30AY>.
- <sup>11</sup> Steinhauer, "Utopian Visions," 53.
- <sup>12</sup> "*No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man* Opens March 30 at Smithsonian American Art Museum's Renwick Gallery," Smithsonian American Art Museum press release, December 6, 2017, <https://americanart.si.edu/press/2017/06/no-spectators-art-burning-man-opens-march-30-smithsonian-american-art-museums-renwick>.
- <sup>13</sup> "Meet The Artist: Android Jones for *No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man*," Online Gallery for *No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man*, Smithsonian American Art Museum, accessed December 5, 2019, <https://youtu.be/O9UnHO4VRNk>.
- <sup>14</sup> Observations based on the author's visit of the exhibition *No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man*, November 19, 2019.
- <sup>15</sup> Museum label for artist Aaron Taylor Kuffner, "Gamelatron Bidadari," Oakland Museum of California, *No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man*.
- <sup>16</sup> On Instagram search hashtags #oaklandmuseumofcalifornia #nospectators to see how visitors are engaging with the exhibition *No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man*.
- <sup>17</sup> Steinhauer, "Utopian Visions," 50.
- <sup>18</sup> Steinhauer, "Utopian Visions," 53.
- <sup>19</sup> For more information about "After Hours Friday Night" please visit this website: <https://museumca.org/friday-nights-omca>.
- <sup>20</sup> For more information about Off the Grid Food Trucks, see their website: <https://offthegrid.com>.