



THEORY & PRACTICE



MUSEUM FUTURES: Diversity, Inclusivity, and Social Justice

Volume 2, 2019

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

A Museum Without Walls: Community Collaboration in Exhibition Development

MARIA FERGUSON, MA
Memphis Brooks Museum of Art

KATE RENNER
Memphis Brooks Museum of Art

Theory and Practice: The Emerging Museum Professionals Journal

www.TheMuseumScholar.org

Rogers Publishing Corporation NFP
5558 S. Kimbark Ave, Suite 2, Chicago, IL 60637
www.rogerspublishing.org

Cover photo: Antonio Molinari

©2019 The Museum Scholar
The National Emerging Museum Professionals Network

Theory and Practice is a peer reviewed Open Access Gold journal, permitting free online access to all articles, multi-media material, and scholarly research. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.



A Museum Without Walls: Community Collaboration in Exhibition Development

MARIA FERGUSON, MA
Memphis Brooks Museum of Art

KATE RENNER
Memphis Brooks Museum of Art

Keywords Inclusion; Community Engagement; Collaboration; Exhibition; Museum

Abstract In his 2010 article, “Embedding Civil Engagement in Museums,” Graham Black discussed the role that museums can play in promoting communication and understanding between local communities. He asserts that because museums are uniquely positioned to attract a diverse audience, they should encourage conversations between communities and incorporate local voices into museum exhibitions, thereby becoming a museum without walls. In practice, this relationship is often evident in community and educational programming. However, museums can also provide a setting for social interaction between diverse cultural and community groups within the framework of exhibition development. An example of community involvement in exhibition development and execution is *Outings Project* hosted by the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art in 2018. Created by artist and filmmaker Julien de Casabianca (French, b. 1970), *Outings Project* takes images from artworks in a museum’s collection, reprints them, and places them on city streets. In preparation for the exhibition, the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art facilitated a meeting between de Casabianca and fifteen community representatives who would choose the “characters” from the Brooks’ collection which would eventually be placed in their communities. This article describes the process of shaping a collaborative exhibition with the Memphis community, and how the museum adapted the project in order to represent the perspectives of diverse communities. Ultimately, by sharing curatorial authority with the communities it serves, the museum was able to ensure meaningful participation and a successful outcome for the artist as well as for the participating communities.

About the Authors Maria Ferguson is the Assistant Registrar at the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art and has developed exhibitions for Davies Manor Plantation in Bartlett, TN and C.H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa in Memphis, TN. Maria earned her MA in Art History and Graduate Certificate in Museum Studies from the University of Memphis, and her BA in Art with an emphasis in photography from Penn State University. Her research interests include innovations in museum exhibitions, social practice art, and photographic history and conservation. She can be reached at maria.ferguson@brooksmuseum.org.

Kate Renner received a BA in Art History with a focus on museum studies from the University of Memphis in 2014. She loves her role as the Associate Director of Education, Family & School programs at the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art and is passionate about turning every visitor into life-long museumgoers. She can be reached at kate.renner@brooksmuseum.org.

This article was published on July 8, 2019 at www.themuseumscholar.org

In museums across the country, programming is shifting from the traditional model of one-way knowledge sharing – from the institution to the individual – to a more collaborative

approach in which museums make space for gaining knowledge from the communities which they serve. Many museums understand the necessity of creating programs and exhibitions that allow for greater community participation, but in practice, this collaboration is often incorporated into educational programs and activities. Few museums incorporate community collaboration into exhibition development in a way that provides meaningful participation for those involved. In order to truly be of and for the community, museums must consider how collaboration can build relationships with the communities they serve, and how it can be embedded into the fabric of museum practice. In his article, "Embedding Civil Engagement in Museums," Graham Black discussed the role that museums can play in promoting communication and understanding between local communities.¹ He asserts that because museums are uniquely positioned to attract a diverse audience, they should encourage conversations between communities and incorporate local voices into museum exhibitions, thereby becoming a museum without walls.² One example of community collaboration in exhibition development and execution is *Outings Project* hosted by the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art in 2018. This article discusses how the Brooks Museum created space for community collaboration during the planning and execution stages of the exhibition, and how this model strengthened the relationship between the museum and communities it serves.

***Outings Project* in Memphis**

Because museums attract visitors from a broad range of communities, they can provide a setting for conversations between and collaboration with diverse cultural groups. With this in mind, curators can allow for a collaborative exhibition model wherein community involvement shapes the exhibition itself, resulting in exhibitions that also build stronger relationships with communities. This exhibition model was put into practice with *Outings Project* in Memphis. Created by artist and filmmaker Julien de Casabianca (French, b. 1970), *Outings Project* takes images from pieces in a museum's collection, reprints them, and places them on city streets. *Outings Project* was brought to Memphis as one of the museum's *Brooks Outside* installations, an ongoing series of outdoor installations, often occurring in different areas throughout the city. Including Kurt Perschke's *RedBall Project*, Amanda Parer's *Intrude*, and Michael Townsend's *Tape Art*, *Brooks Outside* installations are consistently well-received by the Memphis community. In some cases, *Brooks Outside* has included space for community participation, but in each case, the projects themselves were directed by the artist and the museum rather than by the community. What distinguished de Casabianca's *Outings Project* from other *Brooks Outside* installations was the opportunity to include community voices in the development and execution of the exhibition.

Community collaboration was the foundation of *Outings Project* in Memphis. Each stage of curating the exhibition required collaboration between the artist, the museum, and the community involved with the installation of the artwork. Prior to the implementation of *Outings Project* in Memphis, de Casabianca had expressed that the purpose of his artwork was to unleash museum-quality art from its formal setting and release it to the outside world.³ In some previous iterations of *Outings Project*, de Casabianca had chosen artwork and locations before reaching into the community for volunteers to help cut and paste the characters onto buildings. Initial conversations surrounding the Memphis exhibition led to questions such as: What should go where? Why? Who decides? Should it suit the environment or stand out? Throughout these discussions, it was clear that realizing the project at its highest potential would require that the museum not make assumptions about what the community might want,

and that input from the community at the outset would be a necessary element of a successful exhibition. For Brooks, the primary concern was ensuring that the people in the neighborhoods – those who would be living side by side with the characters – would have the opportunity to both shape the outcome and participate with the installation.

Location, Location, Location

The first step towards ensuring an inclusive exhibition involved the search for appropriate locations on which to paste characters. The objective of the project was to make the artwork accessible to every potential viewer, not just a certain list of neighborhoods. Additionally, de Casabianca had specified that the locations be weather-worn structures in an urban setting. Therefore, the location search began with two stipulations: locations would vary and be spread widely across the area, and structures for consideration would align with the artist's desired aesthetic. The search for structures that would be considered was the combined effort of both Brooks and de Casabianca. Museum staff surveyed buildings across Memphis and the surrounding area for several months, compiling images and addresses of structures that met the requirements. All told, about 50 prospective sites were found. The images were shared with de Casabianca for his approval, and the process of contacting site owners began.



Figures 1 and 2 (left to right): A character from Arkansas artist Carroll Cloar's painting, *Where the Southern Cross the Yellow Dog*, 1965, pasted into the Orange Mound neighborhood of Memphis. (right) One of three "monumental" characters in *Outings Project* in Memphis. Four girls from Carroll Cloar's painting, *Wedding Party*, 1971 were pasted into the South Main neighborhood of Memphis. Photos courtesy Kathy Dumlao.

Kathy Dumlao, Director of Education and Interpretation for the Brooks and curator of the project, mailed letters to the approved sites which introduced *Brooks Outside*, the museum's partnership with de Casabianca, the potential impact of participation, and what the exhibition would entail. The majority of the sites were unoccupied commercial spaces, as these most

closely suited the aesthetic, which made getting in touch with their proprietors more challenging than anticipated. Dumlao estimated that two-thirds of owners never responded, likely because most proprietors infrequently check mail sent to unoccupied spaces. Of those who did respond, some immediately rejected the request, some were enthusiastic about the chance to participate, and some were hesitant about what it would involve. After all, it's not every day that you receive a letter from a museum asking for permission to 'paint' an undetermined, semi-permanent work of art on your commercial property. Ultimately, twenty building owners signed agreements to participate with *Outings Project*.

De Casabianca visited Memphis in the spring before *Outings Project* was to be installed. This visit served as a way for him to become acquainted with Memphis and the Brooks' collection in person, as well as meet the community collaborators with whom he would be working. De Casabianca toured the museum with fifteen members of Memphis neighborhoods, including Broad Avenue Arts District, Cooper-Young, Crosstown, Downtown, East Memphis, Frayser, the Medical District, Midtown, Orange Mound, Soulsville, and the University of Memphis. Facilitated by Brooks, this meeting between de Casabianca and the community members would lay the groundwork for the selection of characters from the Brooks' collection which would eventually be placed into their neighborhoods. Since the neighborhoods in which the characters would be placed include residents from a wide array of cultures and backgrounds, the museum wanted to ensure that the communities were able to choose which paintings would be shown in each location.



Figure 3: Julien de Casabianca and members of Memphis communities tour the museum together to select the characters which would be pasted into their neighborhoods. Photo courtesy Kathy Dumlao.

Cast of Characters

In many previous iterations of the project, de Casabianca had personally selected the images to be used; however, in this instance – and several others – he willingly adapted the project to ensure a successful collaboration for the museum and the community collaborators.

Additionally, de Casabianca had always used characters from paintings without copyright restrictions – typically those painted from the Renaissance to the end of the 19th century – as options from which to choose characters. In order to ensure the inclusion of paintings by local artists in the Brooks collection, additional copyright research was necessary. The museum and de Casabianca ultimately decided that it would be worthwhile to request copyright permissions for more recent paintings so as to have a selection of characters that would be more representative of the collection, and of the city of Memphis.

Once it was decided to include a broader range of paintings in those from which characters could be chosen, de Casabianca and the community collaborators began the selection process. The group met at the museum to view the paintings and decide on which characters would be “liberated” from the museum walls. Many of the characters included in the exhibition were from paintings by beloved regional artist Carroll Cloar (American, active in Memphis, 1913-1993), whose artwork is well represented in the Brooks Museum. Other characters were chosen from paintings by artists such as Winslow Homer (American, 1836-1910), Arthur Bowen Davies (American, 1862-1928), Katherine Augusta Carl (American, 1854-1938), and Luca Giordano (Italian, 1634-1705), among many others.

During the week of installation, the community group met to cut out each character with scissors, then began traveling across the city as a group with wheat paste to affix each character on a wall at a predetermined location. On the final day of installation, the museum hosted a free Community Day, which included food trucks, art-making, a DJ, an artist demonstration, and a talk by de Casabianca in the Brooks’ auditorium. Throughout the process, Brooks took on the role of facilitator, utilizing institutional infrastructure, leadership, and organization to ensure the successful execution of the project.

Facilitated Participation

The role of the museum as the facilitator of *Outings Project* in Memphis was a significant factor in the success of the exhibition, as the curator was able to ensure the execution of the artist’s vision while still allowing space for participants to shape the direction of the exhibition. Nina Simon describes this type of institutionally organized and community directed program as “facilitated participation.”⁴ Reflecting on her changing thoughts about best practices for a participatory museum, she describes facilitated participation as valuing the “diverse experience and knowledge of community members.” In the case of *Outings Project*, Brooks, as the organizer, used its infrastructure and expertise to bring the project to fruition. Brooks was initially responsible for bringing de Casabianca to Memphis, and throughout the process, the curator made all necessary arrangements to ensure that the project was successfully executed. For example, she organized all logistical and legal aspects, selected locations, obtained permission from property owners, ordered supplies, scheduled meetings between the artist and community members, organized and documented the installation of characters, and organized the associated events at the museum.



Figures 4 and 5 (left to right): Julien de Casabianca and a community collaborator consider Leon Bonhomm's painting, *La Femme en vert* (*The Woman in Green*), 1909, for inclusion in *Outings Project*. (right) The character from Leon Bonhomm's painting, *La Femme en vert* (*The Woman in Green*), 1909, pasted into the Medical District neighborhood of Memphis. Photos courtesy Kathy Dumlaio.

The participating community members, as project collaborators, decided with de Casabianca which characters would be selected from the collection, and decided which character would be pasted into their respective neighborhoods. They then helped de Casabianca and his team members install the characters. De Casabianca was the conceptual director, setting the tone for the project – such as ensuring the appropriateness of the selected locations and characters – and overseeing the installation of characters.⁵ By inviting community partners to direct portions of *Outings Project*, and by acting as facilitator between artist and community groups within the framework of exhibition development, Brooks was in a position to ensure the project would be inclusive of the diverse neighborhoods and audiences in Memphis, and provide those involved with a sense of ownership in bringing *Outings Project* into their communities. This sense of community ownership and inclusivity is one of the most important aspects in becoming a museum without walls.

Sharing Curatorial Authority

During the planning stages of *Outings Project*, Brooks was conscious of the responsibility to represent the community completely and to ensure everyone in the city felt represented in the decision-making process. However, it can be challenging to define inclusion and collaboration in a museum setting.⁶ In this case, the museum decided on a collaborative approach at the outset, wherein community partners would shape the project in order to meet the needs of the community. The result was that the characters used in the exhibition were selected by the communities in which they would be pasted – not chosen by the artist or curator based on what they felt each community might prefer. This adaptation was significant, in that it provided

the participants and those who live in the communities a stronger bond with the art itself, and therefore a stronger relationship with the museum. This key aspect of *Outings Project* in Memphis illustrates the value of sharing curatorial expertise with audiences. By removing the idea of the museum as the “expert” on art, and by making space for communities to bring their expertise to the decision-making process, Brooks was able to develop partnerships based on mutual trust and respect. Such partnerships lay the groundwork for continued inclusivity and meaningful participation, which in turn fosters community pride and a sense of ownership in the institution.

While community programming at the Brooks Museum is typically organized in relation to an exhibit within museum walls, *Outings Project* was specifically designed so that the project itself was the exhibition, thereby blurring the line between exhibition and programming. This hybridized exhibition leads us to consider the differences between curatorial practice and educational programming in art museums. Both are concerned with providing museum visitors with knowledge about artists and artistic practice, and both provide a setting for engaging with art. It is in this space of common ground between exhibitions and programming that community collaboration is best suited, and which provides space for community input. For example, with *Outings Project* in Memphis, Brooks was able to achieve two important outcomes. First, they invited communities to view the museum and artworks as their own, which in turn built stronger relationships with the communities and the museum. Second, the museum was able to gain meaningful insight from the participants about how it can support creativity and the arts outside of the museum walls.



Figure 6: Julien de Casabianca pastes the final character, Memphis artist Kate Carl's *Portrait of Bessie Vance*, ca. 1890, onto the façade of the Brooks Museum. Photo courtesy Kathy Dumlao.

Building Relationships That Last

In assessing how *Outings Project* took shape for Memphis, we should consider the practical aspects of incorporating community collaboration into exhibitions. While *Outings Project* lent itself to the facilitated participation model, many exhibitions and public art projects may not

allow for as many voices during the development stage. In considering where and how collaboration can fit into exhibition development, it is useful for any museum to keep in mind that the key to a successful collaborative project is defining from the outset the various roles, accountabilities, and expectations. In the case of *Outings Project*, the artist supplied his vision, the community provided direction, and the museum acted as facilitator; this balance of roles can only be achieved when the artist and community place their trust in the institution. This relationship and level of trust between the institution and the community it serves is the most important consideration in developing a collaborative exhibition.⁷ The relationship building process was the cornerstone of *Outings Project* for Brooks and was evident in the museum's stated mission for the exhibition, one element of which was to enhance community outreach. The question at the outset was how to reach beyond the existing educational programs and create an experience for participants in which they would feel invested in the outcome. Ultimately, by sharing curatorial authority with the communities it serves, the museum was able to ensure meaningful participation and a successful outcome for the artist as well as for the participating communities.

List of Figures

Figure 1: A character from Arkansas artist Carroll Cloar's painting, *Where the Southern Cross the Yellow Dog*, 1965, pasted into the Orange Mound neighborhood of Memphis. Photo courtesy Kathy Dumlao.

Figure 2: One of three "monumental" characters in *Outings Project* in Memphis. Four girls from Carroll Cloar's painting, *Wedding Party*, 1971 were pasted into the South Main neighborhood of Memphis. Photo courtesy Kathy Dumlao.

Figure 3: Julien de Casabianca and members of Memphis communities tour the museum together to select the characters which would be pasted into their neighborhoods. Photo courtesy Kathy Dumlao.

Figure 4: Julien de Casabianca and a community collaborator consider Leon Bonhomm's painting, *La Femme en vert (The Woman in Green)*, 1909, for inclusion in *Outings Project*. Photo courtesy Kathy Dumlao.

Figure 5: The character from Leon Bonhomm's painting, *La Femme en vert (The Woman in Green)*, 1909, pasted into the Medical District neighborhood of Memphis. Photo courtesy Kathy Dumlao.

Figure 6: Julien de Casabianca pastes the final character, Memphis artist Kate Carl's *Portrait of Bessie Vance*, ca. 1890, onto the façade of the Brooks Museum. Photo courtesy Kathy Dumlao.

Notes

¹ As Black explains, "Museums have the potential to attract people who are radically different from each other. Institutions that facilitate social, cultural and generational mixing are a core underpinning of a civil society. If we wish to support civil engagement we need to build on these qualities, by reaching out to wider audiences and, through our approach to display and programming, encourage conversation between visitors." Graham Black, "Embedding Civil Engagement in Museums," in *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift*, ed. Gail Anderson (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2012). 276.

² Black states that a museum without walls “should both encourage local communities to share their experiences with visitors and encourage users to go out and actively explore the locality.” Black, “Embedding,” 273.

³ “The series began in 2014 when Casabianca visited the Louvre and felt empathy for a glum-looking girl in the corner of a painting. ‘I had a ‘Prince Charming’ impulse,’ he explained. ‘I wanted to free her from the castle to give her a second life.’” Emma Taggart, “Massive Painting of Neoclassical Girl Takes over a Seven-Story Building,” *My Modern Met*, October 11, 2018, accessed December 04, 2018.

⁴ Nina Simon, “The Participatory Museum, Five Years Later,” *Museum 2.0*, March 04, 2015, accessed December 02, 2018.

⁵ We have borrowed the idea of the artist as the conceptual director from Pablo Helguera’s handbook on Socially Engaged Art. Though *Outings Project* has not been discussed as a Socially Engaged Art practice, Helguera’s description of the collaborative SEA format can be useful in organizing a collaborative exhibition. Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook* (New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2011), 51-57.

⁶ Nina Simon, Graham Black, and Pablo Helguera are of particular help in defining types and methods of collaboration, but various authors have discussed guidelines for inclusivity and community collaboration in museums and civic life, including Stephen Weil and Sherry Arnstein. Stephen Weil, “From Being about Something to Being for Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum,” *Daedalus* 128, no.3 (1999): 229-58. Sherry Arnstein, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation,” *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35, no. 4, 1969: 216-24.

⁷ Sherene Suchy discusses the importance of the museum creating positive emotions in the visitor in order to build a strong relationship. Sherene Suchy, “Museum Management: Emotional Value and Community Engagement,” *INTERCOM*, 2006, accessed January 10, 2018.

References

Arnstein, Sherry R. “A Ladder of Citizen Participation.” *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35, no. 4, 1969: 216-24.

Barret, Jennifer. *Museums and the Public Sphere*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

Black, Graham. “Embedding Civil Engagement in Museums.” In *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift*, edited by Gail Anderson, 267-85. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2012.

Conaty, Gerald Thomas., and Robert R. Janes. *Looking Reality in the Eye: Museums and Social Responsibility*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2006.

Crooke, Elizabeth M. *Museums and Community: Ideas, Issues, and Challenges*. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Davis, Chris. "Brooks' Outings Project." *Memphis Flyer*. October 04, 2018. Accessed December 04, 2018. <https://www.memphisflyer.com/memphis/brooks-outings-project/Content?oid=16638201>.

Helguera, Pablo. *Education for Socially Engaged Art a Materials and Techniques Handbook*. New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2011.

Golding, Viv. "Collaborative Museums: Curators, Communities, Collections." In *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections, and Collaboration*, edited by Viv Golding and Wayne Modest, 13-31. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

Butler, Alex. "The Streets of Memphis Have Been Transformed With Works of Art." Lonely Planet. October 16, 2018. Accessed December 04, 2018. <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/news/2018/10/16/julien-de-casabianca-memphis/>

Marstine, Janet. *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2010.

Memphis Brooks Museum of Art. "Brooks Outside: Outings Project." Accessed December 04, 2018. <http://www.brooksmuseum.org/brooks-outside-outings-project>

Mesa-Bains, Amalia. "The Real Multiculturalism: A Struggle for Authority and Power." In *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift*, edited by Gail Anderson, 104-13. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2012.

Onciul, Bryony. "Community Engagement, Curatorial Practice, and Museum Ethos in Alberta, Canada." In *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections, and Collaboration*, edited by Viv Golding and Wayne Modest, 79-97. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

Pollock, Griselda, and Joyce Zemanns. *Museums after Modernism: Strategies of Engagement*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007.

Sandell, Richard, and Eithne Nightingale. *Museums, Equality, and Social Justice*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012.

Sierzputowski, Kate. "A Neoclassical Girl Towers Over Memphis in a Seven-Story Wheatpaste by Julien de Casabianca." October 10, 2018. Accessed December 04, 2018. www.thiscolossal.com/2018/10/seven-story-wheatpaste-by-julien-de-casabianca/

Silverman, L.H. *The Social Work of Museums*. London: Routledge, 2010.

Simon, Nina. "The Participatory Museum, Five Years Later." Museum 2.0. March 04, 2015. Accessed December 02, 2018. <http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2015/03/the-participatory-museum-five-years.html>

Simon, Nina, and Jennifer Rae Atkins. *The Participatory Museum*. Museum 2.0, 2011.

Suchy, Sherene. "Museum Management: Emotional Value and Community Engagement." INTERCOM, 2006. Accessed January 10, 2018. <http://intercom.museum/documents/3-1Suchy.pdf>

Taggart, Emma. "Massive Painting of Neoclassical Girl Takes over a Seven-Story Building." *My Modern Met*. October 11, 2018. Accessed December 04, 2018. mymodernmet.com/mural-art-neoclassical-paintings-julien-de-casabianca/

Traverse, Anna. "Art Escapes Museums - Takes to the Streets!" *Memphis Magazine*. November 05, 2018. Accessed December 04, 2018. <https://memphismagazine.com/culture/art-escapes-museum-takes-to-the-streets/>

Weil, Stephen. "From Being about Something to Being for Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum." *Daedalus* 128, no.3 (1999): 229-58.

WREG. "French Artist Latest Project Showcased around Memphis." *WREG.com*, October 04, 2018. Accessed December 04, 2018. <https://wreg.com/2018/10/04/french-artist-latest-project-showcased-around-memphis>.