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Community Museum

By Maria Mortati

In “Take Your Time, Olafur Eliasson”, Madeline Grynsztejn said: “The context between the cultural and commercial spheres over thinking and doing is one of the defining tensions in contemporary Western society. And the museum is the knife-edge location where this context is being played out, for there the conditions that determine or influence our sense of self are scrutinized in a conscious and concentrated way.”

Major art museums have been grappling with this question of providing a place for the public to look at themselves and their world through a non-commercial lens. As Ms. Grynsztejn puts it: “...we have arrived at a point when art, the museum, and cutting-edge commerce increasingly share visual modes of organizing meaning and express related ambitions to provide the individual with what have been described as “models of experience, opportunities for self-recognition, and the ingredients of identity”.”

One approach to maintain this identity space for the public (in large institutions) is to offer big, bold, and sometimes luscious immersive experiences- such as Eliasson’s. I’d like to talk about another. It’s a local, low fi, and nimble approach we’ll call the “Community Museum” model. Yes, along with farmer’s markets and food carts, museums have a place in the back-to-local world.

These are small institutions or ad-hoc spaces where the primary ingredients for visitor experience are: location, participation, elevation, and sharing. What they have in common is that they are more about providing a place for their public to shine and share, and less about suggesting what they ought to know.

In the Denver Community Museum, Jaime Kopke created a place for her neighborhood to respond to her “challenges” and participate in culture and identity- all in a neighborhood setting. At the San Francisco Mobile Museum, we are experimenting with taking the “making” and the museum to the neighborhood (and our first exhibit is a collaboration with the DCM).

When I began the Mobile Museum I wondered if it would result in a nuance on the “wisdom of the crowds”. Yet through the process of making and sharing our participants are having deeper experiences and deeper thinking about their world than they would have without it. They are also inspiring their peers (our visitors) to participate. These informal environments also fit their level of making experience. All together, it seems to fill a need for creating moments of intellectual pause and reflection for the public, as well as a platform for cultural expression by the curators.

In this small scale context, I see a world where the curator is also part journalist, part community ringleader. The visitor is at times audience, artist, and critic. The coming together of these two groups makes the museum.

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