# Editor's Picks

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**HANS ULRICH GUMBRECHT: Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey. Stanford, CA (Stanford University Press) 2004, 200 pp.**

**DONNA WALKER-KUHNE: Invitation to the Party. Building Bridges to the Arts, Culture and Community. New York (Theatre Communications Group) 2005, 192 pp.**

**DOUG BORWICK, (Ed.): Building Communities, Not Audiences: The Future of the Arts in the United States Winston-Salem, NC (ArtsEngaged) 2012, 370 pp.**

**NORA STERNFELD: Das radikaldemokratische Museum. Vienna (DeGruyter, Edition Angewandte) 2018, 288 pp.**

**RICHARD SANDELL AND ROBERT R. JANES (Eds.): Museum Activism. London, New York (Routledge) 2019, 436 pp.**

**PETER SAMIS AND MIMI MICHAELSON: Creating the Visitor Centered Museum. London New York (Routledge) 2017, 214 pp.**

The U.S. based German literary scholar Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht delves deep into a crucial prerequisite for engagement in his cultural philosophy. In his 2004 volume, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, Gumbrecht unravels the tensions in the philosophical debate between hermeneutic traditions of meaning making and the counter-project of understanding presence as a matter of deep and spatial experience. Just one year later, the theater consultant and arts manager Donna Walker-Kuhne published *Invitation to the Party: Building Bridges to the Arts, Culture and Community*, an engagement guide for arts marketers in which she promotes "compassion, a willingness to

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understand the history of our many disenfranchised communities and their reluctance to embrace unfamiliar experiences, people and products" (WALKER-KUHNE 2005: xiii). While these two publications seem unrelated at first sight, their shared concern for meaning making and for establishing connections for engagement, provides a broad framework for the engagement concept. Understanding engagement as something that propels in an environment of presence, and as something decidedly more than a tool or strategy, we might begin our considerations where Gumbrecht explains presence further. He understands the word presence as a "spatial reference" and explains further that "What is 'present' to us (very much in the sense of the Latin form *prae-esse*) is in front of us, in reach of and tangible for our bodies" (GUMBRECHT 2004: 17). The production of presence determines its intensity. Basing his definition of production on its Latin root, *producere*, literally meaning to bring forth, or to pull forth, Gumbrecht concludes that "the phrase 'production of presence' would emphasize that the effect of tangibility that comes from the materialities of communication is also an effect in constant movement." (GUMBRECHT 2004: 17). This discussion of the potentials for deep experiences and their spatial dimensions opens the door to look at modes of engagement with art and culture. This matters because presence, as prerequisite for engagement practice, sets the baseline for the commitment, the unavoidable physical, social, and emotional involvement that engagement, as it is understood here, requires.

Walker-Kuhne comes to engagement from practice and informed by many years of experiences managing theaters and theater productions. In *Invitation to the Party*, she argues from the perspective of the marketer and with the understanding that changing demographics of the twenty-first century "demand that you change how you do business, not just for the sake of our collective cultures, but for the survival of our institutions" (WALKER-KUHNE 2005: xiii). Audience development is the means through which Walker-Kuhne seeks to make connections with diverse audiences; the arts are understood as "the only pure vehicle we have in today's society that crosses cultural and ethnic barriers and allows people to transcend their differences" (WALKER-KUHNE 2005: xiii-xiv). Unlike Gumbrecht's scholarly approach, Walker-Kuhne's book understands itself as "a practical and inspirational guide" (WALKER KUHNE 2005: 21ff). However, her book is also written from personal experience and based on the conviction that finding new communities through engagement of "people who are different from you" (WALKER-KUHNE 2005: xiii) is crucial for arts management practice. The

book first introduces overarching principles of audience engagement, strategizing and planning to then present a toolkit for building audiences; and finally examples and case studies, mostly from the performing arts, but also, in one case, a museum. Pondered as a pair, Gumbrecht's and Walker-Kuhne's approaches render engagement three dimensional and deep: the centrality of presence as prerequisite for engagement on the one hand, and the proactive and pragmatic dimension of engagement that understands its deep socio-racial implications.

Similarly to Walker-Kuhne's book, Doug Borwick's authored and edited volume *Building Communities, Not Audiences: The Future of the Arts in the United States* (2012) is reflective of the state of affairs in U.S. American cultural discourse of the past two decades. The book is presented as "an essential primer for any member of the arts community—artist, administrator, board member, patron, or friend—who is interested in the future of the arts in the U.S." (BORWICK 2012, publisher's overview). Borwick frames the topic by first mapping out the historical background of the "arts/community divide" (Part I), and subsequently discusses the rationale and obstacles for narrowing the divide. He concludes with an outlook for "The Future of the Arts in the U.S." (Part IV). Parts II and III cover engagement practice across a broad range of institutions and scenarios in short guest essays ranging in art disciplines from chamber music, dance, museums, opera, orchestras, and theatre as well as an array of arts administration perspectives. Like Walker-Kuhne, Borwick positions his book as a guide for practitioners and communities. However, the author, blogger, arts administrator, educator and community engagement advocate, Borwick argues from the perspective of communities and emphasizes the need to deepen connections with communities rather than bolstering the established institutions that are supposedly serving them. Borwick highlights the need to understand broad demographic shifts in U.S. society and the urgent necessity for arts institutions to connect to those members of the public that were not raised in Euro-centric artistic and cultural traditions. It is clear for him that survival of established arts organizations hinges on their ability to engage effectively with a far broader segment of the population than has been true to date. For Borwick, the root cause of a disconnect between arts organizations and their potential communities has to do with a growing disjunction between today's U.S. societal fabric and traditional Euro-centric arts programming. He finds that, as long as arts institutions don't reflect the actual ethnic and cultural constitution of a society, they may not be viable in a capitalist democracy. Such viability, according to Borwick, "is only assured if it can fully support itself through earned revenue, or if 50% plus one of the voting population is

passionately committed to it." What is clear to him in 2012 is still often true today, that neither earned revenue nor passionate commitment of more than half of the voting population "are true of our established institutions" (BORWICK 2012: 25). The book is an emphatic cross-disciplinary and collaborative call for arts advocacy and community engagement. While Walker-Kuhne argues for meaningful racial and ethnic diversity in arts institutions and their audience development policies, Borwick emphasizes the grass roots, an institution's respective community pointing out that "it is from community that the arts developed, and it is in serving communities that the arts will thrive … Communities do not exist to serve the arts; the arts exist to serve communities" (Borwick quoted on his book's back cover). Both Borwick and Walker-Kuhne argue from within a neo-liberal society and with arts institutions in mind that try to arrange and negotiate their relationship to the marketplace rather than critiquing it.

A more critical perspective on engagement practices and the hegemonic structures of (art) institutions is noticeable in a body of literature that focuses on museums. This is not surprising given the embattled state and legitimacy of museums as institutions. As a consequence, calls for systemic and structural changes have grown louder in the last decade. These calls focus on art object restitutions, decolonization of museums, and greater diversity and inclusion. The most recent controversy about the International Committee of Museum's (ICOM) definition of the essential values of the contemporary museum is an indicator of this call for change. Placing emphasis on "participation" and place of "experiences," the definition positions the museum as "inclusive" and as fostering "diversity and sustainability" (ICOM 2022). The product of a thoroughly coordinated grassroots debate, the new language presents a compromise between the old definition, adopted by ICOM in 2007, and one that had been presented during ICOM's Kyoto meeting in 2019. The Kyoto draft defined the museum as activist, as a site of "critical dialogue" (ICOM 2019) and as active participant in contemporary conflicts and debates. The spectrum of definitions between the 2019 version, which triggered an institutional identity crisis at ICOM, and the one of 2022, provides a backdrop for the main concerns reflected in publications evolving around matters of museum engagement. A central question posed in the context of the debate about museum values asks whether the museum should be primarily the guardian of cultural heritage, an inclusive forum, or an active agent of change. The Kyoto version responded to the tremendous political, social, and cultural changes around the globe and the need for museums to respond to them, including the colonial and

exclusionary roots of many Western museums and calls to decolonize them. However, the language of the Kyoto draft sounded to critics too much like an activist manifesto or mission statement rather than a definition. The opposition to the 2019 draft prompted a rethinking of the decision-making process at ICOM and resulted in the latest, agreed-upon version three years later.

The range of values between the 2019, more activist and politically minded definition and the final, more museum task-oriented one reverberate throughout three works. Peter Samis' and Mimi Michaelson's: *Creating the Visitor Centered Museum*, published in 2017, presents inclusivity with a focus on the diversity of audiences; Richard Sandell's and Robert R. Janes's *Museum Activism* (2019) and Nora Sternfeld's 2018 publication about the radical democratic museum understand museums as political agents and as part of a broad philosophical system of representation. For Janes and Sandell, museum survival depends on taking an activist stance in contemporary debates on social and environmental justice, for example. For Sternfeld, the problematic entanglement of museums with neoliberal management concepts and market forces requires them to critically redefine the ways in which they talk about their objects, how they interact with communities, and how they engage with the world around them. While Sternfeld's work critically examines the entanglements of the concept of participation with market focused language and principles, Samis and Michaelson treat participation less politically and more as an educational and inclusive mode and one that enables museums to connect with visitors. Participation is different from engagement, but the two concepts interlock particularly in discussions of social practice and audience engagement as programmatic idiom.

The linkage between audience/visitor and the art institution is galvanized in a term that emerged in the 2000s, the "visitor centered" institution or approach. This shifting focus toward the visitor was astutely captured by the U.S. museum critic Stephen Weil in his seminal 1999 journal article for *Daedalus* titled, From Being about Something to Being for Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum (WEIL 1999). Weil not only described this transformation, but also embedded it historically and in terms of the peculiarities of U.S. American arts and cultural policy. What becomes apparent is that an important moment of this shift happened in the 1980s when museums began to take on educational roles and systematically reached out to schools and families. The educational role of art institutions and of

museums in particular, and the shifting focus on the visitor is a crucial
entry point for engagement practice. John Falk, founder of the Institute for Learning Innovation, and Emeritus Professor of Free-Choice
Learning at Oregon State University has focused his research, since the
1980s, on this concept of visitor centeredness and on the question why
the public visits museums. He contextualizes the visitor-centered institution as part of "the long-running debate about whether museums
should position themselves first and foremost as content authorities or
as public educators, often dichotomized as 'quality/education' versus
'quantity/entertainment'" (FALK 2016, 357). This old dichotomy formed
in the aftermath of the first blockbuster exhibitions of the 1970s paved
the ground for more recent contributions that investigate the systemic
change that a dedication to visitor-centered approaches by museums
can propel. In *Creating the Visitor Centered Museum* (2017) Peter Samis' (former associate curator of interpretation at the San Francisco
Museum of Modern Art) and Mimi Michaelson (education and museum consultant) discuss strategies to create a museum that embraces
the visitor through its mission and programmatic focus. The debate
has noticeably evolved from an urgency in the 1990s to explicitly distinguish museums from for-profit driven and entertainment minded
ventures. Samis and Michaelson introduce definitions and strategies
for visitors, leadership, and change in Part One; delineate ten different
museum approaches (from museums in the U.S., UK, the Netherlands,
and Germany) to visitor-centeredness in Part Two; and provide a concluding analysis of these approaches in the final, Part Three. The core
interest of this multi-year project, funded by the Kress-Foundation,
and based on the authors' research and in-depth qualitative interviews
with museum leaders, was to determine the outcomes of transformation of a museum to a visitor-centered approach; how a museum is
"made relevant to a broader range of visitors of varying ages, identities,
and social classes" (SAMIS/MICHAELSON 2017: front matter). Samis
and Michaelson further ask whether appealing to a larger audience
forces "museums to 'dumb down' their work" (SAMIS/MICHAELSON
2017: 165f); and what internal changes are required to institutionalize
the results. Tackling approaches ranging from the physical, immersive, emotive, and cognitive to the co-creative and meta-cognitive, they
conclude that both an innovative visitor-centered practice and museum change need a long-view perspective. In their view, creating a visitor-centered museum "is a hard choice that grows out of a sense of
duty to the public" (SAMIS/MICHAELSON 2017:176) and ultimately

"a decision to accept the responsibility that comes with being keepers of the public culture" (SAMIS/MICHAELSON 2017:176). *Creating the Visitor-Centered Museum* helps us to understand the spectrum of engagement modes of museums with their visitors and lets us recognize the long way museums have come from their first recognition of the existence and varied needs and interests of their visitors (SAMIS/MICHAELSON 2017).

Hamburg-based professor of art education, art mediator, and curator Nora Sternfeld is also interested in the visitor to the museum, but rather than as user, Sternfeld frames the visitor as *zoon politicon*—a political being that is tied up in social and political processes and relationships. She is thus not concerned with ways to improve museums, to prevent their calcification, or to develop best practices for museum engagement, but rather with a radical rethinking of the contemporary museum's legitimacy as site of public discourse. In the twelve essays of her 2018 German-language publication *Das radikaldemokratische Museum* [The Radical Democratic Museum], Sternfeld scrutinizes two essential components of the engagement paradigm—representation and participation. She contextualizes both as part of a discourse of artistic and institutional critique that began in the 1960s and that has since evolved. Accordingly, her book presents scenarios that aspire to the "creation of alternative spaces of action, forms of knowledge and publics" (STERNFELD 2018: 37). Her examples refer to, and deconstruct "curatorial core tasks, such as collecting, showing, organizing, researching, and communicating" (STERNFELD 2018: 37). Through this strategy, Sternfeld hopes to "not only critically analyze the museum (as the New Museology did [in the 1980s]) but localize and expand the museum's tasks based on a critical practice, which is located within the curatorial as such" (STERNFELD 2018: 37). Engagement is expressed through "actions and interventions from the field of art, and practices of a critical, cultural historical museum work and activist strategies" (STERNFELD 2018: 37).

Sternfeld takes a critical position in respect to the use of the term participation. For her, participation in contemporary museum practice, while seemingly inclusive and voluntary, is shaped by a mandate to join into a collective educational agenda. This vision of participation, according to Sternfeld, echoes, since the Enlightenment, through a German cultural educational narrative that called for art or "culture for all" (HOFFMANN 1979). It has led to today's questionable understanding of participation in museums as practicing art "with all" (STERNFELD 2018: 74), which both invites co-creation to those who could previously

not be reached as target group and, at the same time, demands that they function as "objects of representation" (STERNFELD 2018: 74). Sternfeld promotes a "democratic idea of participation" as alternative, which "takes a position and leaves open where it might lead" (STERNFELD 2018: 81). This understanding of participation, Sternfeld acknowledges in a rather uncommon frankness,

> means the need to confront the potential problems that arise with open processes and to face the uncomfortable questions of what to do if nothing unexpected happens; what if nobody wants to take action; what if we don't agree with marginalized reclamations? What if nobody has anything to reclaim? (STERNFELD 2018: 81)

Actions in "spaces of possibility" as Sternfeld calls them are "contradictory" (STERNFELD 2018: 81). These challenges, to Sternfeld, constitute the strengths, of participation, that she and her colleagues promote. Unlike any of the previously discussed authors, except for Gumbrecht, Sternfeld embeds her discussion of the radical museum in philosophical discussions of representation, drawing from Ernesto Laclau, reflections on culture and education as embattled (Giorgio Gramsci), and political scientist Chantal Mouffe's theory of hegemony and agonism. The latter provides a helpful framework for embracing a "practice that promotes dissent, that makes visible those things that the dominant consensus commonly obscures, with the goal to give voice to all those voices, who have been silenced within the framework of existing hegemonies" (STERNFELD 2018: 61). For Sternfeld, a radical museology (BISHOP 2012) has to formulate "solidarity with existing social struggles" (STERNFELD 2018: 61) instead of claiming the performative support for diversity and inclusion. Sternfeld's engagement is embodied in a set of five strategies of a

> radical-democratic, curatorial, and communicatory practice: 1) Challenging the archive; 2) appropriating space; 3) organizing counter-publics; 4) producing alternative knowledge; and 5) radicalizing education. (STERNFELD 2018: 64/65)

She calls these "para-museal strategies" (STERNFELD 2018: 64) for which she deliberately does not distinguish between artistic, curatorial, and educational approaches.

The problematic entanglement of engagement work with neo-liberal agendas is front and center in Richard Sandell's, and Robert R. Janes' *Museum Activism*. In their edited volume, they ask museums to take up the call as change agents (JANES/SANDELL 2019), while Nora Sternfeld suggests a recalibration of the museum through developing alternative, post-representative ways to engage with its objects and

communities, and by questioning the museum's traditional claims to authority. Janes and Sandell define activism by clarifying that it

doesn't necessarily mean conflict or protest; it can be on a small as well as large scale. It does not have to be conducted by someone who identifies themselves as 'activist', or who holds a particular position in society or within an organizational structure. Activism doesn't belong to 'other' people; we all have agency and therefore we all have the capacity to make change. (JANES/SANDELL 2019: 86)

While Sternfeld, as curator and museum educator, rethinks the museum from within—and with the philosophical support of Gramsci, Laclau, and Mouffe—Sandell and Janes commit to an activist mode through "inclusive, non-hierarchical ways of working" toward goals such as "dismantling inequalities and advancing justice" (JANES/SANDELL 2019: xxviii). Sternfeld's concept of engagement takes shape in her ideas for action in the museum that go beyond institutional critique. She urges the reader "not to play off critique against action" (STERNFELD 2018: 25) in today's museums, but to pay attention to strategies in museum practice that

not only critically address representation, but that exceed and challenge it, and create something that is not representation, but also involvement, relation, negotiation, dispute, intervention, positioning, etc. (STERNFELD 2018: 37)

As their chapters straddle theory and practice, Sandell and Janes highlight the need "for a turn towards more activist, critically engaged and purposeful museum thinking and practice" (JANES/SANDELL 2019: xxviii). In three parts, Sandell and Janes explore the path to museum activism: Nurturing Activism discusses the prerequisites for activism in museums. That means that, based on the recognition of one's own agency and untapped potentials, the authors explore "the changes in thought and action that are necessary to embed activist practice more deeply in the method and theory of museum work" (JANES/SANDELL 2018:36). Part II presents case studies as activism in practice, revealing "the tremendous diversity in this emergent field of practice, highlighting the many ways in which museum workers are instigating or aligning with broader efforts to bring about environmental, social and political change" (JANES/SANDELL 2018: 137). Part III assesses activism critically by addressing "robust, considered and constructive reflections on the obstacles, drawbacks, opportunities and lessons learned for activism" (JANES/SANDELL 2018: 291).

Sandell and Janes urge a rethinking of museum work as "systems thinking," (JANES/SANDELL 2019: 7) which, applied to museums, is about "interconnectedness and interdependence—collaborative organizational structure, shared authority, and strong community engagement"

(JANES/SANDELL 2019: 7). They find that systemic and social change turns out only to be possible through what they call social entrepreneurship, a coupling of service delivery and policy advocacy (JANES/SANDELL 2019). Detecting the locus of institutional greatness "outside the boundaries of their organizations" Janes and Sandell focus on this space rather than on "internal operations" (JANES/SANDELL 2019: 16). This puts them in contrast with Sternfeld's para-museological strategies of challenging the archive; appropriating space; organizing counter-publics; producing alternative knowledge; radicalizing education. For the museum as active agent of cultural change and as public institution, they suggest three legitimate expectations Firstly "to be open to influence and impact from outside interests;" second "to be responsive to citizens' interests and concerns;" and third, "to be fully transparent in fulfilling these two expectations" (JANES/SANDELL 2019:15). Sternfeld's reference to Mouffe's agonism is echoed in Sandell's and Janes' engagement with the thoughts of Canadian writer, political philosopher, and public intellectual, John Ralston Saul's (1995) discussion of discomfort and its deep correlation to participation. For Ralston Saul,

> we cannot ignore the fact that the Western world's, citizen-based democracy … is dependent upon participation, and to participate is to be permanently uncomfortable—emotionally, intellectually, spiritually. Museums will need to embrace this discomfort and uncertainty in order to become the authentic participants they are equipped to be, and to make good on their singular combination of historical consciousness, sense of place, and public accessibility. (RALSTON SAUL qtd in JANES/SANDELL 2019: 17)

The books and ideas in this essay are by no means comprehensive. They rather present an eclectic yet elemental set of concepts relating to engagement in arts institutions, and the tensions that are only growing more pronounced as publics seek respite in the arts in a quickly transforming world. Visitor-centeredness, as well as the more recently popularized and critically discussed concept of activism in museums, along with the museum's claim to radically democratic potentials, are expressions and configurations of engagement of varying claims, impacts, and impetus. In their art institutional uses in the post-George Floyd era of DEIA and BLM, visitor-centeredness and activism are also part of a broader debate about their respective actualizations and of their demonstrated effects and outcomes. What meanings do we assign audiences and their development and what does it mean when we talk about community and their engagement?

Not only do we have to be present to engage, but we also must embrace the presence of our historic reality, of the evolving circumstances in which we engage individuals, groups and communities, and the arts.

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