

Pushing Our Practice with MUSEUM THOUGHT LEADERS

CROCKER
art museum

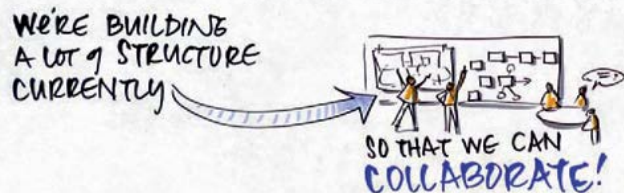


Introduction

This is one of a two-part series sharing lessons learned through the Crocker Art Museum's IMLS-funded project focusing on building capacity to better serve families and other audiences. The first booklet focused on best practices in cultivating family audiences. This second booklet summarizes words of wisdom from four highly regarded museum thought leaders who in September 2012 participated in POP-Ex (Pushing Our Practice Exchange), a two-day symposium at the Crocker Art Museum.

Our POP-Ex speakers were: Kathleen McLean, Principal of Independent Exhibitions; David Mickenberg, then President and CEO of the Taubman Museum of Art; Mary Ellen Munley, Principal of MEM & Associates; and Nina Simon, Executive Director of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History. The panelists participated in a wide-ranging dialogue moderated by Daryl Fischer, Principal of Musynergy. They addressed questions related to the role of leadership in serving communities, how museums navigate the sometimes competing priorities between content and audience, and the role of experimentation in project development.

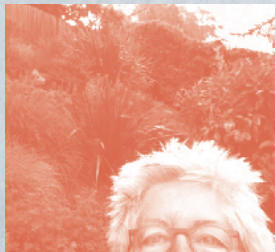
These conversations were taped and also documented in real-time by graphic recorder Emily Shepard. Her POP-Ex illustrations, which added significantly to the vibrancy of the conversation, are used as illustrations throughout this booklet. We extend our thanks to Emily for bringing a delightful and insightful visual element to the program.



While it was difficult to winnow down an incredibly rich conversation that engaged our panelists and over 120 museum colleagues who gathered from throughout California and beyond, this booklet captures a representative sampling and includes sections of Shepard's wonderful documentation of the discussion. We hope these ideas stimulate, provoke, and challenge our museum colleagues across the country to reflect deeply on the purpose and process of our work.

Thanks to IMLS for its tremendous support in funding this project; to Daryl Fischer for her many contributions; to Deputy Director Randy C. Roberts and Special Projects Manager Rachel M. Tooker for their leadership; and to our panelists, colleagues, and Crocker Art Museum staff for coming together to explore ways that we can push our practice to move towards deepening the relationship between museums and their communities.

Lial A. Jones
Mort and Marcy Friedman Director & CEO
Crocker Art Museum
May 2013



KATHLEEN MCLEAN

Principal of Independent Exhibitions



DAVID MICKENBERG

former President and CEO of
the Taubman Museum of Art

MARY ELLEN MUNLEY

Principal of MEM & Associates



NINA SIMON

Executive Director of the Santa
Cruz Museum of Art & History

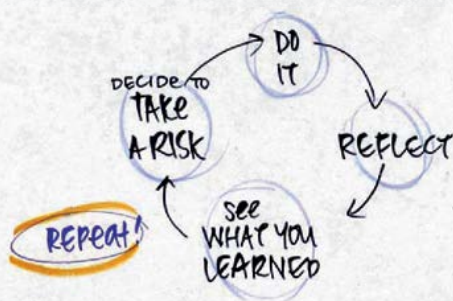


We thought long and hard about who to invite to POP-Ex to spark new thinking about pushing our practice. We chose Kathleen McLean, David Mickenberg, Mary Ellen Munley, and Nina Simon because we knew they would challenge and inspire participants in many ways—as thought leaders, cutting edge practitioners, luminaries, and *agents provocateurs*. The following excerpts from their dialogue show that they did all of that ... and more, calling it like they see it, sometimes agreeing and sometimes challenging one another. Each of these comments warrants serious reflection so choose a few and continue the dialogue with colleagues in your own museum.

Daryl Fischer • Principal, Musynergy

Pithy, Paradigm-changing Words of Wisdom

Touching on a broad range of topics, these comments are little gems that run the gamut ... erudite, off-the-wall, gutsy, humble, wise, witty, counter-intuitive, profound. What they have in common is that they all challenge us to break free of the constraints of convention, make time for reflection, be bold in our experiments, and embrace our failures as valuable opportunities to learn.



If you have never gone to a movie (a matinee) some workday afternoon, shame on you! Seriously. You know, or gone off for a walk.... We need those breathing spaces because that's where the energy comes from, that's where the creativity comes from.... Things have to incubate.... So I wish for you all, every now and again, a weekday afternoon matinee.

MARY ELLEN MUNLEY

The dichotomy that exists is not the dichotomy between content and audience, the dichotomy that exists is really between the 19th Century and the 21st. When you look at it like that, there's this magnetic draw back to the 19th Century... in part because it's comfortable, it's well defined. We all grew up in that tradition and it's failed. It's failed for a lot of different reasons, for many institutions do not have the identity, the context, the circumstances, the underpinnings, the foundations, or the knowledge that existed when we created the prototypical major encyclopedic museum in this country.

DAVID MICKENBERG



TAKING TIME
FOR REFLECTION,
FOR QUIET,
AND FOR
NOT DOING
IS REALLY
IMPORTANT.

“For the first time in my career since 1974, I stopped. I took two months off in July and August. I told myself I was going to do nothing. I gardened; I took two hours to have breakfast. I had never done that before. I felt terribly guilty. I was afraid that ... everybody was going to forget about me. But, I became a different person and I realized [that] taking time for reflection, for quiet, and for not doing is really important.”

— *Kathleen McLean* —

Accountability isn't only being able to say, "We could tell you from the beginning what we were going to do, and by God we did it." There is another kind of accountability, which says we understand that this is an organic kind of process that is going on and it is developing as it goes along. It doesn't mean that it is out of control, but it is developing as it is going along. Our responsibility to be accountable is to be paying very close attention to how it is developing.... So we can be aware at any given moment: Are we heading where we want to head with this and where people want us to head with this? What do we have to do in order to be able to readjust? What has emerged that we were not expecting, but [is either] right on target or is taking us someplace else?

MARY ELLEN MUNLEY

I think too often in the museum world, we use the notion of being responsible as a means for not stretching. I get hyperbolic about this because I am trying to balance out the other side, which is so cautious, and so conservative, and so unwilling to take risks that I sometimes feel like saying, "Get on the diving board, put a blindfold on, and jump!" And, let's just hope there is water, but at least let's not spend five years testing the water!

KATHLEEN MCLEAN



IF YOU LEARNED SOMETHING DIFFERENT THAN WHAT YOU EXPECTED (WHICH IS ANOTHER WAY OF REFRAMING FAILURE, A MORE POSITIVE WAY) THEN THAT IS ACCEPTABLE.

—*David Mickenberg*—



The leadership of the institution needs to create an environment where if you learned something different than what you expected (which is another way of reframing failure, a more positive way) then that is acceptable. Unless you have the foundation in order to experiment and to succeed in a different way, and to learn something you didn't expect, then it is going to be hard for staff to respond in an experimental manner.

DAVID MICKENBERG

We have some fantasy out there about how perfect and tidy museums are that failure means anything short of perfection; and we all know that there is no such thing as perfection.... If you really say we are going to do an experiment because we are asking a question, then the question gets answered. You find something out. And that isn't failure. Even if what you find out is not what you thought.

KATHLEEN MCLEAN

There's no question that you need some ways to be able to guide yourself through a process. We all need that. There isn't a "creative person" out there who doesn't spend an enormous amount of his or her energy doing systematic things.... When you find the best of the creatives in almost any field, they will have studied deeply parts of things that they want to know about so that they can unleash their own creativity.

MARY ELLEN MUNLEY

Most designers will say constraints are really what allow you to be creative. But we tend to just constrain ourselves to death in the museum community. We need to be more experimental; we need to say "Let's try something goofy." I don't know if it has to have a hypothesis, has to have a rigid structure put to it. Just the practice of experimenting will get us much further down the line.... I'm a great fan of taking risks. It's a spark; it's whatever you do when you create creativity.

KATHLEEN MCLEAN

I was recently talking to a curator from a very large American art museum who wants to do this experiment and is really, really, nervous about failing.... One of the things I said to him was, "Look, you are failing right now to connect with a lot of visitors, and if you don't take this risk [in what I thought was a very conservative way] to change your interpretive strategy, you are going to continue to fail in the way that you just happen to be more comfortable with."

NINA SIMON

[Leaders] need to be really flexible. This isn't just for the directors. It's for all of us. We're marching along, we think we have a great idea, and then some new information comes up. We need to be able to go off in another direction without taking six months to prepare [ourselves]. While our museums do feel like they are these giant tankers out there in the ocean, we can't be. We need to be more like little speed boats and tug boats.

KATHLEEN MCLEAN

**I'M A GREAT FAN OF TAKING RISKS. IT'S A SPARK;
IT'S WHATEVER YOU DO WHEN YOU CREATE CREATIVITY.**

— *Kathleen McLean* —

Community engagement

Many of the following comments sprang from a question about the changing role of museums in society and the role of leadership in serving our communities in new ways. There was consensus that museums can better engage with their communities through active participation, mutually beneficial partnerships, authentic relationships, and a public service mindset—one that gives the needs of the community as much weight as the needs of the museum and values the community's resources as much as the museum's resources. Leadership is situational but it always helps to shift our focus from internal to external concerns, do more listening than talking, and choose our words carefully. Authenticity is an aspect of leadership that resonated for several speakers, whether in the claims we make about the value of our institutions or in the relationships we cultivate with community members.



One of the things that matters hugely is authenticity, and one of the things that bothers me is that we are so trapped in claiming that museums are about something that they are not really about. We are arguing about the economic value that we provide to communities.... I think that part of the leadership role is being able to know in your gut and to be able to articulate what it is that museums really are about, and to believe that if you do what you are really about then the money and support follows.... There is an energy that comes with authenticity. There is an excitement that comes with it. There are relationships that develop around it.

MARY ELLEN MUNLEY

Need to
ARTICULATE/DO
WHAT YOU'RE
REALLY
ABOUT





**THIS IS WHAT
MUSEUM LEADERSHIP
LOOKS LIKE —
TO BE FOCUSING
MORE BROADLY ON
WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO
OUR COMMUNITY.**

“When I think about leadership in serving communities in new ways, I want to talk about it in terms of two big ideas — one is about figuring out a mission that matters to your whole community and isn’t just about what happens inside your building and the other is about partnering with your community to really determine how you will pursue that together.... Jane Werner, who is Executive Director of the Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh, said, “Our museum is in a neighborhood of Pittsburgh that is one of the most dangerous and unpleasant places to raise a child, and our mission is to make our neighborhood the best place to raise a child in Pittsburgh.” I remember hearing her, and thinking “My God, this is what museum leadership looks like — not to be focusing on ourselves and what happens inside [the institution], but really to be focusing more broadly on what’s important to our community.”

— *Nina Simon* —

My board had to learn about listening to the community. I learned in this process [that] the definition of community is extremely confusing and problematic. And so part of my role as a leader is to redefine terminology ... to make sure that the institution is talking the same language and to make sure that the language of the community is the language of the institution, and to be able to be flexible enough to change priorities and to respond to the input that you are getting.

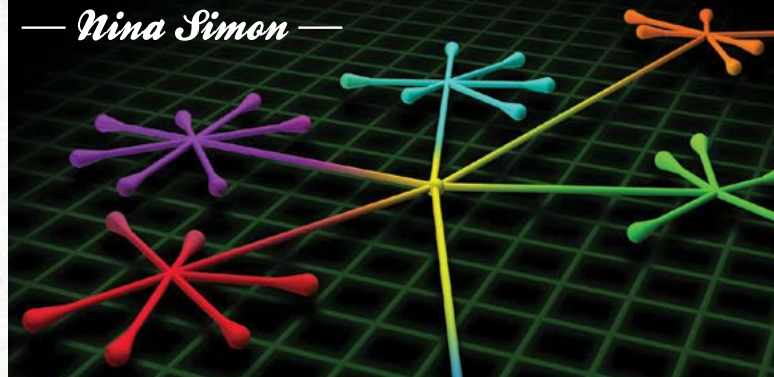
DAVID MICKENBERG

A lot of times, especially when we are going to go to "underserved audiences," we go with this sense that we have something to give you, and we just keep coming with our clipboards, our packets and our stuff, and we never shut up and say, "Let me come and see what culture means in your community and let me be an audience to that and let me pay for it," you know? I think we really need to figure out how we are going to be open to the community, not just in terms of them coming to our doors, but us really saying, "Hey, we want to be with you in this and we want to figure out ways to do that together."

NINA SIMON

WE CAN BE PLACES THAT BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER, THAT MEDIATE EXPERIENCES.

— *Nina Simon* —



The situation from institution to institution is different, and where you lead, how you lead, who you listen to, and what leadership you can give to the community is something that is going to manifest itself over a period of intense listening and learning from the community.

DAVID MICKENBERG

If we can be places that bring people together, that mediate experiences so people look at other visitors and say, "Wow, here is another person from my community and I can make a connection with them, I can learn about them, I can have a positive experience with them," it's not just going to change what happens in museums, it's going to change what happens outside, too.

NINA SIMON





We are going back to something much more fundamental, which is why do you even collect? And you collect because you are going to have an impact on your community. You collect because the community is going to be better off because you are collecting, and because you are showing collections.

DAVID MICKENBERG

WHAT does
CULTURE
MEAN to YOU?

WHAT are
community
Assets?

LISTEN
to your
CONSTITUENTS

WE collect...

TO BUILD
A BETTER
COMMUNITY

If you are a leader of a community organization, you need to be a member of that community. You need to be out there attending things and doing things and participating with your neighbors and community members in ways that give you a sense that you really understand the soul of the community. Otherwise, it is very hard to be authentic.

KATHLEEN MCLEAN

We went from being about to close financially, to being on a really good track. This didn't happen because we brought in some name brand show. It happened because we changed how we related to our community and really created experiences that connect with what people are about here.

NINA SIMON

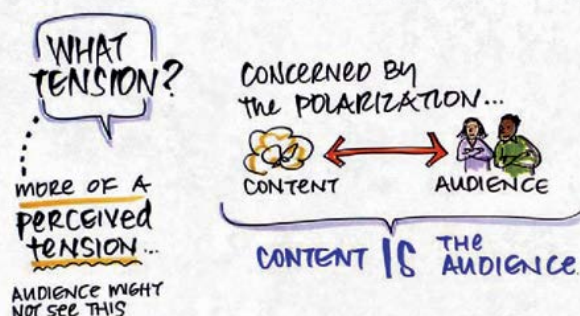
Museums have the opportunity to open people's thinking on current issues. Look at program design and decision-making to maximize the potential outcomes. In museums and through art people can: confront important, real topics and issues; practice meaning making; listen to different points of view; have a valued voice; and make personal connections.

MARY ELLEN MUNLEY



The value of objects/ the reasons for collecting

A question about the tension between content and audience and the merits of imparting information versus inviting our audiences to create their own meaning sparked many of the following comments. Although thought leaders objected to what they saw as the false dichotomy of the question, they pointed out the value and the inevitability of tension, which may be rooted in the knowledge that both our collections and our audiences matter deeply. Encouraging multiple perspectives about art and questioning assumptions about museums can help us navigate through these currents in a way that employs our collections and exhibitions in service to our visitors.



I want to pick up on [the concept of] pathways in, because our museum is one where we really aggressively pursue active participation for visitors around works of art and historical objects. I look at every visitor who walks in my door, and I say, "OK. You have something creative to contribute here. You have a story that needs to be in our history gallery. You have a creative skill that needs to be encapsulated in some way around art."

NINA SIMON

A young girl with long brown hair and a white flower in her hair is seen from behind, looking at a large abstract painting. She is wearing a grey and white patterned sweater. The painting is dark with vibrant orange and yellow streaks. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

**IF YOU CAN RESPECT THE FACT
THAT THERE ARE
VARIETIES OF WAYS
TO INTERACT WITH ART,
THEN YOU ARE
IN A GOOD PLACE.**

“You want people who really deeply know and understand something to be a part of figuring out what the mix is going to look like. Strategy is really important in terms of being able to work through this natural tension. It is not a tension that we can have go away. It is not even necessarily a tension that is bad. It just is. If you can respect the fact that there are varieties of ways to interact with art, then you are in a good place. If you can't respect that, it is not going to work. I happen to be in a camp that believes that everybody is interested in art, and everybody can be fascinated by almost any work of art. It is the paths into it that need to be there. If you can find the paths, anybody will go there.”

—*Mary Ellen Munley*—

This is something I see every day, and it's not about content and audience, it's about different constituencies.... One of the things that constantly happens to me is that ... people will come up to me and they'll say, "When are we going to have a traveling show?" and what they mean is when are we going to have art by somebody whose name I recognize and that is somewhat vetted as good? I really look at that and I say, "What does that have to do with our museum and what we are trying to do?" I really try to get underneath that to understand why does this person want this thing?

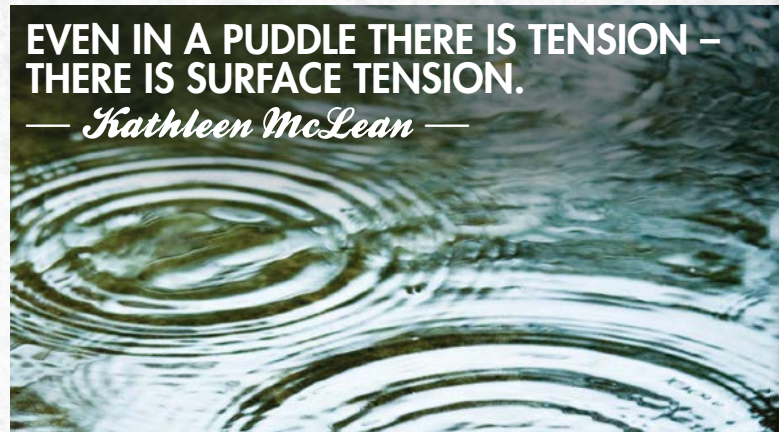
NINA SIMON

I mean there's nothing wrong with tension, and I think if you don't have any tension, you just have flab. It's just all like a puddle, right? Even in a puddle there is tension – there is surface tension. Tension isn't a bad word, but I think in this question, the thing that concerns me is the polarizing of these two notions of content and audience, because we are living in a world now where in all of our sciences and our arts we are revealing that things are much more conflated and interconnected and holistic and of a piece.

KATHLEEN MCLEAN

EVEN IN A PUDDLE THERE IS TENSION – THERE IS SURFACE TENSION.

— *Kathleen McLean* —



Your role becomes one of a knowledgeable facilitator. You don't want to take away the knowledge part of it; you don't want to take away the way that you see it. But, you need to be able to share that in a way that connects with people rather than trying to say to them, "This is the way I see it, this is the way that it is supposed to be seen; now you should want to see it that way, too."

MARY ELLEN MUNLEY

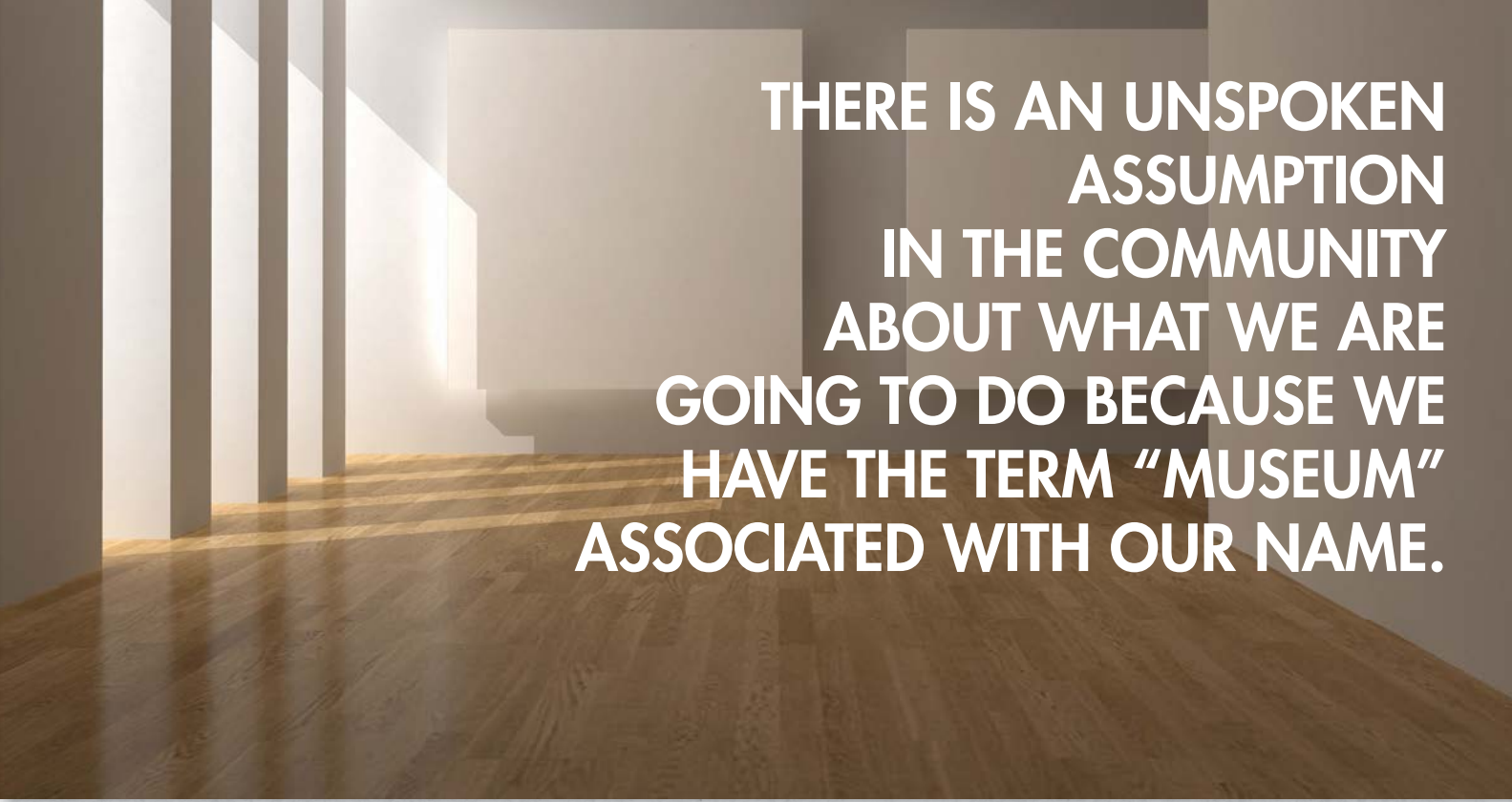
There is this automatic assumption on the part of donors, on the part of community leaders, on the part of [visitors] that we are going to be a mini-Met, and that the standards that exist ... are based on the standards that were established years ago.

DAVID MICKENBERG

Handwritten notes in blue ink:

- THIS IS A NATURAL TENSION... IT JUST IS
- BE A KNOWLEDGEABLE FACILITATOR
- VARIETY OF LEGIT. EXPERIENCES TO HAVE IN FRONT OF ART
- NEED TO RESPECT THIS





**THERE IS AN UNSPOKEN
ASSUMPTION
IN THE COMMUNITY
ABOUT WHAT WE ARE
GOING TO DO BECAUSE WE
HAVE THE TERM “MUSEUM”
ASSOCIATED WITH OUR NAME.**

“My trustees always want to know when I’m bringing in Degas. The fact of the matter is, Degas is irrelevant to who we are.... I’ve never had anybody question how we talk about a work of art. They will experiment with us on the technologies we use to talk about the work of art. But, there is an unspoken assumption in the community about what we are going to do because we have the term “museum” associated with our name.”

— *David Mickenberg* —



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This project was supported in part by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Any views, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent those of the Institute of Museum and Library Services.