Jennifer Wild Czajkowski and Shiralee Hudson Hill’s Transformation and Interpretation: What is the Museum Educator’s Role? A Critical Review

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Jennifer Wild Czajkowski and Shiralee Hudson Hill's "Transformation and Interpretation: What is the Museum Educator’s Role?" examines the ways in which art museums, such as the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) and the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), have developed and implemented “relevant, dialogic gallery spaces” where broader audiences can engage in nuanced meaning making (Czajkowski & Hill, 2008). This article begins with a brief exploration of the historical transition that has been taking place in museums over a period of many years, highlighting the ways in which the museum model has “slowly been moving away from that of authoritative
lecturer before a passive audience to that of a partner in dialogue with interested, engaged community members” (Czajkowski & Hill, 2008, p. 255). Following this historical sketch, Czajkowski and Hill implement a compare-and-contrast case study that scrutinizes the permanent collection reinstallations and major architectural projects at the DIA and the AGO. This case study approach illustrates how museum educators, working from the “margins of their museums’ hierarchical organizations”, play a pivotal role in championing the metamorphosis of museum spaces into locales of “openness, possibility, creativity and transformation” (Czajkowski & Hill, 2008, p. 262).

Moreover, this article employs a number of rhetorical strategies that serve to challenge and guide the reader’s thinking about how art institutions have, or have not, defied the traditional norms of exhibition display. The intent of Czajkowski and Hill’s article is to inspire museum educators of all types to look critically at the positions available within museum hierarchies, and to see the opportunities that may exist for creating and implementing meaningful exhibitions that can engage, challenge and educate traditionally marginalised audiences. As the results from the DIA and the AGO case studies illustrate, museum educators are becoming increasingly removed from their “constitutionally and psychologically” isolated positions within institutional hierarchies and are becoming more engaged in museum transformation; for the margin is the very place where the dominance of hierarchical power can be deconstructed and challenged (Czajkowski & Hill, 2008, p. 259-60).

The two case studies presented in this article have a great deal of resonance within cultural institutions today. For example, in 1999 the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis launched an extensive rethinking of the gallery as a town square in order to deploy discourses of critically engaged citizenship in a self-conscious way (Meszaros, 2008). Much like the installations at the DIA and the AGO, the initiatives taken on by the Walker Art Centre provided “opportunities for visitors to first articulate their opinions, and then, followed by discussion and comparison with others’ opinions, consider how these opinions and ideas are acted upon in civic life” (Meszaros, 2008, p. 158).

Doon Heritage Crossroads in Waterloo Ontario is another example of a cultural institution that has made extensive efforts to provide its visitors with more dialogic gallery spaces and more opportunity for experiencing nuanced meaning making. In 2007, Doon undertook a $28 million expansion project. From the moment the project began, Doon conducted feasibility studies, market research surveys and a variety of other “inreach” initiatives that allowed the community of Waterloo to make active, dialogic decisions about the ways in which their museum and living history village was to be transformed. Moreover, upon completion of the project in 2011, Doon’s new building will feature a multi-coloured glass panelled façade, embedded with various quotes or phrases from individual members or community groups, underscoring
the importance that Doon has held as a communal institution since its creation in 1912 by the Waterloo Historical Society.

A final example of an exhibition that has created opportunities for individual meaning making is the Royal Ontario Museum’s 2009 Nuit Blanche installation: *Vanity Fair Portraits: Photographs 1913-2008*. Through the use of a non-linear, anti-chronological display and a number of vaulted LCD televisions screens allowing the “modern portraits to talk to the contemporary ones”, this exhibit – despite its authoritative text panels and lack of visitor engagement – provides guests with the opportunity to explore portraits and book covers from *Vanity Fair* magazine in a nuanced way that is coloured by audience interaction and conversation.

As Jennifer Wild Czajkowski and Shiralee Hudson Hill’s article illustrates, there is a transformative shift that has been taking place in cultural institutions for a number of years, as educators working from the margins of their hierarchical institutions strive to create exhibitions and displays that encourage and promote dialogue, interaction and a broader spectrum for individualized meaning making.
References
