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Creativity and culture for all? Enhancing cultural participation in museums and galleries

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Abstract:

Museum, gallery and festival visitors have been the subject of a great deal of research interest in recent years. However, to date little headway has been made in terms of developing a rigorous and valid theoretical understanding of museum visitors, their reasons for visiting and the value such visits hold for them. In particular, the ways in which the creative individual interacts with the curated creativity in a museum or gallery has received insufficient attention from museum studies scholars. Art museums and galleries should be places to celebrate the innate human capacity for creativity and its expression over the decades, centuries and millennia. However, the failure to construct a sufficiently diverse and inclusive form of creativity in art museums and galleries may help to explain the exclusionary role they have come to play in modern societies. Access to the elite institutions of creative expression in Western cultures has long been the reserve of the privileged. This chapter reviews the current state of research on the role of audience creativity and cultural resources in engagement with formally curated culture. The chapter then presents an empirical case study that sheds light on the ways that cultural audiences (dis)engage when encountering opportunities for creative expression within a museum context.

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Visitors to museums, galleries and festivals make their way through experiences that have been designed to immerse them in particular visions of creativity and culture. These formalized visions of creativity generally privilege the historical legacies of wealthy individuals and families, often presenting a very limited concept of creativity that fails to resonate with large segments of the public. In many ways the curated creativity put forward in art museums and galleries clashes with the rich diversity of creative expression taking place in everyday life. This clash between formally curated creativity and everyday creativity has helped to erect an invisible social and cultural wall between the most prestigious cultural institutions and members of the public who feel like such high culture is ‘not for them’ (e.g. Bourdieu & Darbel, 1991/1969). From this chapter’s discussion of the role of everyday creativity in unlocking access to curated creativity, we can see the fundamental nature of creative expression across different segments of society.

To date researchers have made little headway in developing a rigorous and valid theoretical understanding of these members of the public as active agents critically negotiating between institutional visions of creativity and culture, and the personal, social and cultural visions that motivate their engagement in such activities. In particular, scholars of museum studies have not paid sufficient attention to the ways in which an individual’s everyday creativity interacts with the curated creativity in a museum or gallery. Art museums and galleries meant to be places in which the intrinsic human capacity for creativity is celebrated, displayed in its various forms over the decades, centuries and millennia. In principle, this should be a social inclusive domain that resonates with publics from across the socio-economic spectrum. However, in practice there is a longstanding pattern of such spaces for representing creative expression acting as drivers of cultural distinctions between different social classes, reinforcing social inequalities. Indeed, access to elite institutions of

creative expression in Western cultures has long been restricted to the privileged. The failure to construct a sufficiently diverse and inclusive form of creativity in art museums and galleries may help to explain the exclusionary role cultural institutions have come to play in modern societies.

This chapter focuses on the role of audiences' creative expression in encounters with creative artifacts within formally curated culture. The chapter presents an empirical case study that sheds light on the ways that cultural audiences (dis)engage when encountering opportunities for creative expression within a museum context. The case study uses ethnographic methods to explore the creative responses of young mothers entering the hallowed halls of institutionally consecrated creativity for the first time as adults. Their responses show the pull of creativity as a way into cultural participation, as these mothers develop new cultural meanings with their children through guided craft activities and engagement with high art. The chapter shows that everyday creativity can provide a bridge into the exalted creativity on display in the world of museums and art galleries.

There is a common view of art museums, not as beacons of creativity, but as bastions of social and cultural distinction and exclusion. This chapter begins by a key study within the social scientific literature in past decades that has underpinned this view. A large-scale European study of art museum visitors conducted almost half a decade ago identified a number of barriers to inclusion, based primarily on class and education level (Bourdieu & Darbel, 1969/1991).

Duncan (1995), for example, drawing on Bourdieu and Darbel's findings and arguments, even suggests that museums are "engines of ideology" (p. 3) designed to serve the interests of the state, city, consumerism, and patriarchy. Such conclusions demonstrate a persistent suspicion that the exclusivity of museums serves to reinforce class, gender, and other distinctions. Duncan (1995) describes this view of art museums as the "political" theory

of art museums' power to affect audiences and perpetuate social divisions. However, in recent years there have been increasing efforts to reach out beyond the conventional bourgeois audiences for fine art in order to bring in a broader range of visitors to art museums. It has been argued that museums and other cultural institutions can offer significant contributions towards a more inclusive social base of visitors (e.g., Lawley, 2003).

However, precisely how this social inclusion agenda can be implemented given the entrenched socio-cultural barriers has not been explored in sufficient detail. For example, a recently published UK government report on a major government-funded National/Regional Museum Partnership Programme shows that for most museums community inclusion work is relatively new, and that such outreach activities are “very resource-heavy, demanding staff with specialist skills and experience, and a commitment to opening up the museum to new ideas and new ways of working. Not all museums in the programme seemed able or ready to cope with that” (Greenhill et al., 2007, p. 43). This report found that “some museums...were failing to grasp what was needed” (p. 38) to widen access and community participation. Yet there is little robust guidance available about what is needed to achieve social inclusion for cultural institutions charged with curating civilisations' consecrated creativity. For many cultural institutions, authentic and effective work to promote social inclusion work is hampered by a lack of clear guidance about how to go about it. Indeed, not only are effective social inclusion programmes hard to find amongst museums and galleries, there remains a significant evidence gap between the aspirations of those museums who do believe in the potential benefits of engagement with the arts, and the existence of reliable and valid data demonstrating such benefits.

Social Class and Cultural Exclusion

The cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has done significant work to demonstrate the relevance of the social class-linked “cultural capital” factor in people's appropriation of

culture. Bourdieu's term cultural capital refers to a cross-domain type of non-economic resource that are deployed to establish and maintain distinctions between people that are exclusionary in nature. Cultural capital, in Bourdieu's model, is not simply accrued like money. The value of this form of capital emerges through struggles for dominance, power and resources by social agents and institutions that often have competing interests in keeping the dimensions of a given cultural field in place to maintain their privileged positions. Bourdieu's generative book *Distinction* uses this concept to uncover methods of exclusion that operate beneath the surface in social reality. Indeed, the study underpinning *Distinction* was more recently recreated in the UK context, with the findings re-emphasising the intertwined nature of culture and social class ([Bennett et al., 2009](#)). These exclusionary processes operate across a range of domains, including the arts, sports (Stempel, 2005), reading habits (Wright, 2006), etc. The systemic patterns revealed through Bourdieu's analysis helps to explain how equity problems are reproduced through social relations over time, even after financial barriers to cultural inclusion have ostensibly been addressed (for example, through free entry to museums and galleries).

As part of a large-scale research project on European art museums, Bourdieu and Darbel (1969/1991) argued that social class was a paramount factor in both the enjoyment (or not) of art and in patterns of rejection of art museum visiting. On the basis of their research, they posit that "museums for all" is in fact "false generosity, since free entry is also optional entry, reserved for those who, equipped with the ability to appropriate the works of art [through their middle or upper class upbringing], have the privilege of making use of this freedom" (p. 113). Clearly this argument draws on Bourdieu's aforementioned classic study *Distinction* (1984), which shows the role of "taste" in constructing cultural distinctions along class lines. Yet, inherent in Bourdieu's model is the agency of the individual, which enables them to develop creative responses to new and on-going circumstances.

Recently, the Understanding Everyday Participation research project in the UK has sought to challenge the status of museums and art galleries as the guardians of culture in society. They have argued for a new look at everyday forms of culture that have for too long been overlooked and undervalued.

This project proposes a radical re-evaluation of the relationship between participation and cultural value. We are used to thinking about the benefits of the arts as a traditional way of understanding culture and its value but what about the meanings and stakes people attach to their [often creative] hobbies and pastimes? [...] Orthodox models of culture and the creative economy are based on a narrow definition of participation: one that captures engagement with traditional institutions such as museums and galleries but overlooks more informal activities such as community festivals and hobbies. The project aims to paint a broader picture of how people make their lives through culture and in particular how communities are formed and connected through participation. (<http://www.everydayparticipation.org/about/test-showcase-page>, last accessed 20 February 2015)

This project builds on work by researchers such as Lemke (2000, p. 284), who argues that meanings are made and remade as “the trajectory of the developing social person takes him or her from classroom to classroom, from school to schoolyard, to street corner, to home, to the shopping mall, to TV worlds”. The case study in this chapter evaluates the possibility that everyday creativity can be used as an intervention to connect culturally excluded individuals and the orthodox cultural institutions led by art museums and galleries that curate the venerated creativity of Western societies.

Case Study: Everyday creativity and cultural participation

This case study focuses on a group of socially excluded young mothers. It examines the experiences of these mothers using ethnographic data collection and open-ended questionnaire data, examining their responses to a series of creative activities put on by an art museum (the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, UK). How do different forms of everyday creativity connect with previously excluded visitors as a way into high culture? How do creative processes promote or delimit any cultural value that might emerge from this encounter? These are the questions I address in this section.

The museum's aim for the family outreach visits on which this case study focuses was to introduce the mothers to the museum, enhance their engagement with institutionally recognized art, and give them an experience which instils confidence in an otherwise unfamiliar cultural setting. Young mothers who attend short child play sessions at a local community centre were invited by the museum education officer to participate in this outreach activity. A playgroup leader at the community center invited mothers attending the play session in the week before the scheduled museum-based family outreach visit. The mothers had to arrange their own travel to get to the museum on the day of the outreach visit.

The outreach visit was comprised of the following three elements, lasting a total of about two hours:

1. *Arrival and greeting* (approx. 15 min). The mothers arrived in ones and twos with their children. They were ushered through the reception area and into the studio / workshop room downstairs, where they were offered tea and cookies.
2. *Gallery Visit* (approx. 20 min). The mothers and children were led upstairs from the workshop through the main gallery and into a specific room where the education officer invited everyone to sit down, and got out a storybook (storytelling being the first iteration of the everyday creativity used in this intervention). The story was

chosen because it corresponded with an aspect of the museum collection; the education officer then highlighted this correspondence to the mothers participating in the programme. A different room within the museum galleries and concomitantly a different story were selected for each of the two visits examined in this study. The first visit was to a gallery with pre-20th century paintings and furniture; the second was to a room filled with pre-World War I pottery and fine china. Here animal toys were used as the next form of everyday creativity designed to connect with culturally excluded visitors.

3. *Studio-based craft workshop* (approx. 80 min). Upon completion of the story, the education officer led the mothers and children back downstairs to the workshop. This was done slowly, allowing the mothers and children the opportunity to stop briefly and look at objects in the museum collection on their way out. Once in the workshop, the next form of everyday creativity, a craft-based hands-on activity that was explicitly linked to the museum collection (and the story read by the education officer), was explained and then handed over to the mothers and children to conduct together. Halfway through this period, the education officer introduced a second craft activity to be carried out by the mothers and children. Linked to the gallery component of the visit, the craft activities changed for each session. Thus, an internally consistent theme was maintained for each outreach visit.

Data for this study were gathered primarily through photographically documented ethnographic observation and qualitative interviewing over a period of four months, including two outreach visits at the museum and four data collection trips to a local community center during the playgroup session. Access to the participants for this study was obtained through an organiser / leader who facilitated the loosely organized community center playgroup meetings attended by the young mothers for their very young (under 3 years old) children to

play in a group setting. In general, sampling for the study was as inclusive as possible, seeking participation from a broad range of mothers in this group. Participation in the museum-based aspects of the research was effectively self-selecting based on whether the mothers arrived with their children at the museum for the outreach activity. All such individuals were included in the sample.

The total sample size was 13 mothers. The mothers who had been to the museum sessions range in age from 17-22. One mother had a level two qualification in childcare (i.e., two years of post-secondary education), which was the highest education level within the group. Most of the mothers had no secondary school qualifications.

A major component of the present study was ethnographic data collection in the form of non-participant observation punctuated with short, informal qualitative interviewing during the outreach visit experiences. The observation dimension of this research was documented in part through taking numerous pictures on a digital camera (about 250 over the course of the outreach visit). Fieldnotes also were taken during the ethnographic observations. All interviews were conducted at the community center playgroup meetings and the museum. They were recorded, professionally transcribed and analyzed systematically following standard procedures (for details, see Jensen & Holliman, 2009) with the assistance of the computer-aided qualitative data analysis software program *Atlas.ti 5.2*.

Using everyday creativity as a bridge to consecrated creativity

The results presented here integrate ethnographic observation data from the outreach visits to the museum, with interview and qualitative questionnaire data collected over a four-month period before, during and after the museum visits. In this section, I focus on the relationship that participants have with the museum, the role of their experiences of cultural institutions, their expectations of the outreach visit, and their perceptions of each component of the facilitated visit observed for this case study.

There was a clear development in the demeanour of the mothers over the course of their visit to the museum, which I will argue is due to the integration of everyday creativity into the participants' appropriation of the formally curated creative content of the museum. Early in the visit, the mothers arrived looking reticent and tentative. They continued to appear uncertain and ill at ease - speaking only rarely, maintaining a stiff posture and not smiling - throughout the initial greeting over tea and biscuits, as well as in the first half of the walk through the gallery. However, from the first period of story reading (a form of everyday creativity that takes place in the home) in one of the larger rooms in the gallery, the mothers began to appear more at ease (e.g. more relaxed posture, more smiling). Most mothers sat on the floor with their children while the story was being told, whilst two mothers sat on a nearby bench and chatted quietly. Overall, this creative activity provided a manageable introduction to a small selection of the museum's collection. However, once the mothers were back in the workshop listening to the instructions from the education officer for the craft activity, they appeared to revert to their initial reticent demeanor. Once the workshop-based craft activity was fully underway, mothers once again seemed to relax and visible indicators of this reticent demeanor dissipated entirely as they engaged in the prosaic creative activity of producing craft materials in a low-structure context.

Play and toys as everyday creativity bridges to high culture in the gallery space

Tina drew attention to the use of toy animals as a creative tool from everyday life for engaging children with the curated creativity of the museum collection. It is noteworthy that this technique of handing out toy animals to the children during the storytelling activity was also used to involve the mothers, with the bag of toys sometimes handed to the mother to administer. Once again, this serves to demonstrate the value of using creativity (informal play) as a bridge to widen participation in the otherwise inaccessible creativity of the art museum's collection.

The children were each given one of the toys used in the story in the second visit, then invited to go around the gallery identifying other animals in the collection. The children then carefully inspected the objects displayed in this gallery. Tina commented on the use of animal toys in this gallery-based component of the outreach visit.

Interviewer: Is there anything you think worked particularly well?

Tina: The toys worked well as we were going around [the pottery room].
That worked pretty well. Down to like their level. (Interview at
Museum at End of Visit - 9/2/10)

The mothers who accompanied the children as they walked around the museum considered this aspect of the visit highly effective. The use of animal toys engaged the mothers in the activity through everyday creativity in the form of play, rather than allowing them to be passive bystanders while the education officer delivered the story activity). This active role for mothers is important to ensure that mothers begin to feel comfortable in an unfamiliar environment.

Perceptions of craft time. After the gallery visit, the education officer led the mothers and children back to the studio room, in which had begun their visit with tea and biscuits. First, the education officer explained the craft activity linked to the collection. At this early stage, the body language of mothers indicated reticence and hesitance (e.g. leaning away from the education officer, stony-faced expressions, arms folded, stiff posture), as can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Mothers' hesitance at beginning of craft time (24.11.09)



As soon as the mothers and children began creating their craft objects, initial reticence (see Figure 2) melted away and the mothers gave every indication of becoming fully engaged in the activity with their children. Informal but creative activities can encourage integration and familiarity in an otherwise inaccessible environment.

Figure 2: Mothers displaying initial reticence at beginning of workshop time (24.11.09)



Indeed, interview participants consistently praised the craft component of the visit. In the following extract, the craft time was highlighted as a positive experience for the participant's daughter.

Interviewer: Was there anything about the workshop that worked particularly well?

Jenny: I think because they [the children] do like making stuff and that, it's just the sort of thing like clay and stuff, and I don't really have a lot of those kind of materials at home. But it's something for them to make. So that sort of stuff [worked particularly well]. Just general different things. Yes, it's good. [Participant turns to her child.] You liked it, didn't you? Having a run around? (Interview at Community Center after Visit - 1/12/09)

In addition, the craft activity could be viewed as a means of connecting the museum collection with the important child activity domain of play, an important form of everyday creativity. The following extract shows the perception of this craft time as a form of play.

Interviewer: What kind of things do you think she got out of [the museum visit]?

Katie: It's just playing with all that different stuff, all the creative stuff that she doesn't have at home. It's just that sort of stuff. It was nice for her to do different stuff and playing with the other kids and stuff. It's a good environment for her. (Interview at Community Center after Visit - 1/12/09)

In addition to the dimension of play, the extract above highlights the importance of the social dimension of the craft-based activity ("playing with other kids"). Participants also reported that the craft activity effectively linked with the children's broader interests. In the following extract, Sarah highlights her daughter's general interest in similar craft activities.

Sarah: She loves to learn to cut and stuff; she watches Mr. Maker on CBeebies [a children's television show] and then she tries to copy him. (Interview at Museum during Visit - 9/2/10)

These interview extracts show how mothers viewed the craft-based component of the outreach visit as an effective way to engage the children through an form of play focused on art. It was also clear from observing non-verbal communication that the workshop activity allowed both mother and child to engage together in the craft activities linked to the museum's collection. Indeed, despite the initial framing of the workshop activity as solely focused on the children's enjoyment, through the medium of everyday creativity the mothers were as actively involved in this process as their children (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Mother and child engaged in workshop activity (24.11.09)



Discussion

O'Neill (2002, p. 24) offers a helpful summary of the context this chapter addresses:

‘The demand that publicly funded art museums contribute to the creation of a more socially inclusive society poses a fundamental challenge to many assumptions about what these institutions are for and to how they function. To go beyond providing mere physical access to the presence of works of art (even if this is free) to providing intellectual and emotional access to the meanings of the works of art for all potential visitors [...] will require changes in the conventions of art museums’.

There is an uncomfortable and seldom discussed gap between informal, everyday expressions of creativity such as the craft activity analyzed in the case study, on the one hand, and the formally recognized and curated expressions of creativity that are consecrated by cultural

elites and celebrated on the walls of art museums and galleries. While everyday forms of creativity are easily accessible to publics from all walks of life, the exalted masterpieces in museums have long been a source of cultural distinction that reinforces social inequality. Moreover, cultural institutions are powerful players in the field of cultural consumption with particular interests in preserving and policing the distribution of capital within their field to maintain their own privileged positions. This may restrict their comfort in widening the tent to allow everyday creativity to be valorized alongside the creative products of fine artists. Indeed, a normative proposal in keeping with Bourdieu's project would target injustice by highlighting how 'legitimate' forms of culture are constructed and policed by the institutions invested in the preservation of their own position in the field. It is worth highlighting in this respect that the solutions to cultural exclusion do not involve merely increasing the prevalence of public reverence for high culture and its institutions, just as they are. Rather, we must attend to and challenge the role these institutions play in the legitimation and distribution of cultural capital within their fields of practice.

Nevertheless, the case study suggests that everyday creativity can be an effective way into engaging those who have traditionally been excluded from high culture with formally curated creativity. The very low level of prior interaction with cultural institutions presented an initial barrier to these individuals' attendance at the Fitzwilliam Museum. However, this barrier was addressed for a number of disadvantaged young mothers through the opportunity to visit the museum as part of a facilitated group with creative activities that provided a bridge between the individuals and the institution.

Everyday creative activities provide a way to bring play into the visit to encounter formally curated forms of creativity. It is clear that this approach of using everyday creativity-based interventions can reach individuals who may otherwise not be engaged by cultural institutions at all. It is crucial for participants to take an active role in the everyday

creative tasks as their pathway to engaging with the formally curated cultural displays in the museum. Such an approach provides an empowering experience for those engaged, overcoming the normal barriers relating to the need for cultural capital to approach such forms of curated creativity. The case study presented in this chapter offers preliminary evidence that the everyday creativity that populates people's lives across demographic categories can be a resource for enabling greater cultural and social inclusion. By harnessing these kinds of creative activities, cultural institutions can broaden their reach and ultimately begin combatting the social and cultural inequality that surrounds so many of the most prestigious cultural institutions. Moreover, the fundamental nature of this everyday creativity could provide a basis for shared understanding and interest well beyond the realm of public engagement with high culture and formally curated art.

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