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Rethinking Volunteerism: How Contemporary Art Museums Can Lead Institutional Change

Museums are among the few institutions in the United States that hold public trust. Broadly, their duty is to preserve art and artifacts vital to both domestic and international culture. In addition, these spaces are intended to broaden public knowledge and provide interpretation of historical and present events as expressed through visual means. As museums have grown in US society, they have taken on more responsibility to the public. Examples include education initiatives, community outreach, and volunteer programs. While they have attempted to consider the needs of their visitors, they have created a space that privileges a white, upper-class audience. These spaces become unwelcoming to many when the staff does not represent the diversity of their community and there is an expectation of knowledge and wealth when entering. While many factors of museums impact this environment, one major factor is the reliance on volunteer docents as front-facing educational staff. This systemic issue will of course take much effort and restructuring to correct. However, there is an avenue for instigating change that should be taken. Museum volunteer docent programs should be restructured from institutional labor to community support.

It must be noted that museums rely heavily on volunteer labor, and many were founded by grassroots volunteer groups. However, as institutions have grown substantially, the reliance on unpaid labor is inexcusable. This particularly applies to museum docent programs, which are often the source of most volunteer positions. For the purpose of this essay, when referring to

volunteers, this will denote docents. Having front-facing educational staff be unpaid and under-trained is damaging for both the museum and visitors. Rather than disbanding all volunteer work, museums have an opportunity to rethink what it means to be a volunteer at a museum. Service to the community is the essence of why museums were ever created. This proposal will look different depending on the institution and their community's needs. In particular, contemporary art museums have favorable conditions to promote this work as they often engage with living artists whose work centers around ideals of social justice. By engaging with contemporary artists whose work is relational and participatory, contemporary art museums are able to spearhead institutional change and model how museums can create a true system of community care.

In order to investigate how volunteer docent programs can be adjusted to be more equitable, first the current state of institutional reliance on free labor must be addressed. Second, case studies of how museums across the United States are engaging with this demand for change will be examined. The benefits of hindsight and an outside perspective are undeniable, but there is much to be gained from unpacking what choices museums have made and how these have been received by their communities. In addition, examples of how living artists are creating environments for community engagement and for other artists will provide case studies for potential partnerships. By finding what institutions have done well, as well as identifying artists with socially engaged practices, these models can be expanded to propose a new solution to museum volunteer programs that is unique to the contemporary art museum.

Volunteering within one's community is not unique to museums. Most often, individuals feel drawn to a particular cause and want to share their time or resources to lend a hand. This not only is done to boost one's self-worth, but also to improve social engagement, reduce stress, and

often to learn new skills.<sup>1</sup> Essentially, people want to feel as though they are a part of something. When looking at a demographic overview of who volunteers in the United States, the stand out qualities of the group include that it is 42% male, 22% Black, Asian, or Latinx ethnicity, 66% are under the age of 55, and 49% have obtained less than a college degree.<sup>2</sup> Turning instead to the demographics of museum volunteers, the representation shrinks. Research in this particular area lends towards anecdotal, but that in itself is notable. Most museum staff admit that the majority of their docents are above the age of 55, white, female, and middle to upper-middle class.<sup>3</sup> What this then reveals is that the volunteer opportunities, such as docent work, either do not welcome a diverse participant pool or the requirements, such as time commitment, restrict who is able to fulfill the role.

Institutions have an opportunity here to rethink how they engage with volunteers and what their goal is in having these roles available. As museums undergo immense change to their structures, it is vital to consider the impacts of volunteer docent programs. As scholar Tara Young reveals in her research on the topic, these programs have damaging effects on the institution. Volunteers cannot be held to the same standards as full time staff, resulting in underqualified people leading major education efforts.<sup>4</sup> In addition, working for free results in lower pay for salaried education employees.<sup>5</sup> There is a possibility here for institutions to create programs or partner with universities training museum educators so that the volunteer docents are able to give stronger, better informed tours. What is often ignored is that it takes time away from museum staff and funds away from the institution to organize these trainings that can only

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Merritt. "Museums and Equity: Volunteers," *American Alliance of Museums*, July 22, 2019. <https://www.aam-us.org/2019/07/22/museums-and-equity-volunteers/>

<sup>2</sup> Merritt, "Museums and Equity ..."

<sup>3</sup> Tara Young, "Why Museums Must Stop Using Volunteer Docents and Start Paying Their Educators," in *For Love or Money: Confronting the State of Museum Salaries*, ed. Dawn E. Salerno, Mark S. Gold, and Kristina L. Durocher (MuseumsEtc, 2019), 265-282.

<sup>4</sup> Young 271

<sup>5</sup> Young 269-270

go so far when attempting to replace other, more formalized education.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it is more valuable for museums to recognize that docents are a major part of their educational initiatives and should be paid positions. This then opens the opportunity for new volunteer roles to be developed. As volunteers have played a major role in supporting and prolonging the life of these institutions, they should not be abandoned. What must happen instead is a restructuring of what it means to volunteer with a museum.

As museums are under hypercritical watch in this era, some have already begun taking steps to rethink and repurpose their volunteer network. As an initial case study, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, Massachusetts (ICA Boston) addressed concerns of racism and unprofessional docents in 2017. Palace Shaw, one of the museum's visitor assistants, overheard a volunteer guide struggle to answer questions from her school-aged group about racism, identity, and history, all topics that artist Nari Ward addressed in their exhibition.<sup>7</sup> A moment that stood out to Shaw was when the guide "compared Afro-textured hair to different kinds of animal fur."<sup>8</sup> When brought to her supervisor's attention, Shaw was met with a lackluster explanation essentially saying that nothing could change because the guide was a volunteer and not a staff member.<sup>9</sup> This is unfortunately not an uncommon story. Similar accounts can be found across institutions due to the lack of accountability within volunteer positions.

Since the 2017 incident, ICA Boston has worked to restructure their volunteer programs to mitigate issues. For docents, there is increased focus on pedagogical best practices and an additional emphasis on implicit-biases awareness training.<sup>10</sup> While these additions are vital, it

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<sup>6</sup> Leigh Kindrade, "Culturing Volunteers: Volunteer Programs in Collecting Institutions." *INSITE Magazine*, July & Aug. 2013, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Sophie Haigney, "Museums Have a Docent Problem." *Slate*, August 18, 2020. <https://slate.com/culture/2020/08/museums-train-white-docents-talk-race-art.html>

<sup>8</sup> Haigney

<sup>9</sup> Haigney

<sup>10</sup> Haigney

does not fully eradicate potential issues that are inevitable when relying on unpaid workers to fulfill an educator role. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began affecting the United States heavily in 2020, ICA Boston has pivoted to engage volunteerism in a different way. In April of 2020, museum director Jill Medvedow made a decision to utilize their East Boston campus, known as the Watershed, to distribute fresh produce to their community.<sup>11</sup> This marked the institution's shift from internal to external community care. Later, in February 2021, Medvedow worked with her education team and local artists to create and distribute art supplies and activities for students who were remote learning and unable to participate in traditional field trips.<sup>12</sup> Some of the activities created by artists included dance, watercolors, and other ways to engage creatively.<sup>13</sup> In these initiatives, ICA Boston has created a unique program that allows the institution to both engage with their network of artists and support their community in a time of need. While these programs are primarily run by their staff, the museum has successfully found a pathway to engage with their volunteer network should these programs continue post-pandemic.

Similar to ICA Boston, the Queens Museum began a partnership with local non-profit La Jornada in June 2020 to distribute food to families in need.<sup>14</sup> Since it began, this program has served over 47,000 families and engaged with over 70 volunteers from organizations like Commonpoint Queens and Elmhurst Corona Recovery Collaborative.<sup>15</sup> What is notable about the Queens Museum's work is that they recognized both a need within their community and a

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<sup>11</sup> Andrea Shea. "Veggies, Not Art: The ICA's Watershed Becomes A Fresh Food Hub for East Boston," *WBUR*, April 21, 2020.

<https://www.wbur.org/news/2020/04/21/ica-watershed-becomes-a-fresh-food-hub-for-east-boston>

<sup>12</sup>Andrea Shea. "ICA Distributes 1,200 Art Kits to Boston Public School Kids for Creative Nourishment Amid the Pandemic." *WBUR*, February 11, 2021.

<https://www.wbur.org/news/2021/02/11/institute-contemporary-art-kits-bps-students>

<sup>13</sup> Shea "ICA Distributes ..."

<sup>14</sup> "La Jornada Food Pantry at the Queens Museum," *Queens Museum*, accessed November 30, 2021.

<https://queensmuseum.org/in-the-community/la-jornada-and-together-we-can-food-pantry-at-queens-museum>

<sup>15</sup> "La Jornada ..."

network of volunteers looking to lend a helping hand. This museum has successfully modeled a program that continues to engage their community without providing roles that are best filled by paid staff members.

In addition to their work during the pandemic, the Queens Museum is leading institutional change by recognizing their community's needs and utilizing their power to promote their wellbeing. Other notable work includes creating Immigrant Movement International Corona, which is a center for "immigrant education, arts, and activism."<sup>16</sup> Throughout their initiatives, there is a clear attention to the audience. These programs are not simply copied and pasted from other institutions. Instead, the Queens Museum has listened to the needs of their community and responded critically, thoughtfully, and creatively. What is to be learned here is that institutions must recognize their place and use their privileged position to lift up their particular community.

As a final case study, there has been a recent major shift at the Art Institute of Chicago. In September of 2021, docents received an email notice from Women's Board Executive Director of Learning and Public Engagement Veronica Stein that the volunteer program was ending.<sup>17</sup> Instead, a new, paid program is being created to increase diversity within the role and ensure that educators are paid for their work.<sup>18</sup> While the past volunteers were encouraged to apply to the new program, this was a prompt end to their long held roles. The docents and media outlets quickly criticized the institution, claiming that they "hate white people" and are wrong to make

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<sup>16</sup> "In The Community," *Queens Museum*, accessed December 2, 2021.

<https://queensmuseum.org/in-the-community>

<sup>17</sup> Rebecca Zorach, "Why the Art Institute of Chicago's New Docent Program Faces Whitelash." *Hyperallergic*, November 9, 2021.

[https://hyperallergic.com/691425/why-the-art-institute-of-chicagos-new-docent-program-faces-whitelash/?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=D111021&utm\\_content=D111021+CID\\_cd19f3101145832345984d52760a11e0&utm\\_source=hn&utm\\_term=Why%20the%20Art%20Institute%20of%20Chicagos%20New%20Docent%20Program%20Faces%20Whitelash](https://hyperallergic.com/691425/why-the-art-institute-of-chicagos-new-docent-program-faces-whitelash/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=D111021&utm_content=D111021+CID_cd19f3101145832345984d52760a11e0&utm_source=hn&utm_term=Why%20the%20Art%20Institute%20of%20Chicagos%20New%20Docent%20Program%20Faces%20Whitelash)

<sup>18</sup> Zorach

this change.<sup>19</sup> Following trends in museum structural shifts, however, the Art Institute made a choice that promotes inclusion and pays attention to the needs of their Chicago-based audiences. The violent, angered backlash of their actions shows that volunteer networks are dangerous when snubbed. As the new programs are not yet fully underway, it is too soon to tell if this choice proves valuable for the institution. However, museums looking for avenues to make change should take note of this controversy. How leadership communicates to their staff must be thoughtful and careful. The current volunteer docents many museums have are a strong network of supporters that clearly value the institution. However, they are often not representative of their community and can lessen the effectiveness of educational initiatives. In order to prevent backlash, museums should instead offer different avenues for volunteering that maintain these networks, strengthen community ties, and allow for docent work to become paid positions.

Each of these institutions' actions have valuable information for other museums to glean. Where contemporary art museums can begin spearheading this change is by engaging with their networks of contemporary artists. The main focus for collaboration should be among artists that have a practice rooted in audience engagement. There are three definitions that encapsulate these styles of art: participatory art, relational aesthetics, and socially engaged practice. Beginning with participatory art, this style describes works that “directly [engage] the audience in the creative process so that they become participants in the event.”<sup>20</sup> Second, relational aesthetics is a term from curator Nicolas Bourriaud which applies to artists that act as “facilitators rather than marketers” and create art that “gives audiences access to power and the means to change the world.”<sup>21</sup> Finally, socially engaged artists have a practice that too requires audience participation

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<sup>19</sup> Zorach

<sup>20</sup> “Participatory Art.” *Tate*, accessed December 5, 2021.

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/participatory-art>

<sup>21</sup> “Relational Aesthetics.” *Tate*, accessed December 5, 2021

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/r/relational-aesthetics>

and engages them in “debate, collaboration or social interaction” to create a work of art.<sup>22</sup> With these definitions in mind, one finds that many contemporary artists fall into these categories.

As artwork becomes increasingly conceptual and experiential, it is not difficult to locate artists in a museum network whose practices lend themselves to a connection with volunteer work. In order to illustrate how art can lead to positive community impacts, three case studies will be unpacked. The intention here is to locate contemporary artists who could become potential partners in spearheading new volunteer-based programs. By highlighting contemporary artists that have museum relationships and relational practices, institutions can recognize the connection between art and community care. This will allow institutions to end volunteer docent programs and replace them with new, community-facing positions created in collaboration with living artists. Maintaining a relationship with volunteers is vital for the continued legacy of these institutions. By connecting these two networks, contemporary art museums will lead change that sparks creative, community-centered solutions across the field.

Beginning in the early 1990s with Gillian Wearing, *Signs that say what you want them to say and not Signs that say what someone else wants you to say* was a project in 1992-1993 that best exemplifies her practice. This work is made up of over 500 photographs of strangers Wearing approached on the street in London and asked to write what they were thinking.<sup>23</sup> Here Wearing investigated the public image of individuals versus their private identity, looking into the performance of human existence.<sup>24</sup> As this same sentiment informs her more recent works, Wearing’s relational practice makes her an ideal candidate for partnership and engagement with

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<sup>22</sup> “Socially Engaged Practice.” *Tate*, accessed December 5, 2021.  
<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/s/socially-engaged-practice>

<sup>23</sup> “Gillian Wearing.” *The Art Story*, accessed December 5, 2021.  
<https://www.theartstory.org/artist/wearing-gillian/>

<sup>24</sup> “Gillian Wearing”



contemporary art institutions. Her works are often reliant on the participation of others. By joining Wearing with a network of volunteers, a host of creative solutions are possible.

Looking next to the socially engaged work of Sean Starowitz, his works in Kansas City, Missouri best exemplify how he works with communities. His 2014 project *Fresh Bread* recognized a need in food desert communities and provided affordable loaves of bread in under-resourced areas.<sup>25</sup> This work also calls attention to the over 12,000 abandoned properties across Kansas City, most concentrated in food deserts.<sup>26</sup> Starowitz's project recognized a need for access to nutrition and used a socially engaged method to fulfill it. His method also breaks out of the traditional art institution format, making it more accessible and welcoming to a wider audience. This practice can easily translate into an outlet for institutional collaboration. Contemporary art museums could propose the extension of this project with the help of their network of volunteers, or work with Starowitz to spearhead new, unique projects that assist the local community.

As a final example, the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija centers around creating relationships over a meal. *Rirkrit Tiravanija: (who's afraid of red, yellow, and green)* was organized by the Hirshhorn in 2019. In this exhibition, participants shared a meal of curry together in a gallery filled with murals, drawings, and documentary shorts discussing political protests in Thailand.<sup>27</sup> The artist's purpose in this work is to create an environment that is welcoming, encourages discussion, and functions as a space of forming connections with one another. As this is a core tenet in volunteer work as well, Tiravanija is a prime candidate for contemporary art museums to engage with to find innovative opportunities for volunteer work and community

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<sup>25</sup> "Fresh Bread." *Sean M. Starowitz*, accessed December 7, 2021.  
<http://www.sean-starowitz.com/fresh-bread>

<sup>26</sup> "Fresh Bread"

<sup>27</sup> "Rirkrit Tiravanija: (who's afraid of red, yellow, and green)." *Hirshhorn*, accessed December 7, 2021.  
<https://hirshhorn.si.edu/exhibitions/rirkrit-tiravanija-whos-afraid-of-red-yellow-and-green/>

building. Again, the main focus here would be for the institutions to partner with the artist, create community-centered projects, and fulfill the plans by utilizing the museum's network of volunteers.

What these artists demonstrate is that contemporary art is often reaching beyond the institution and working directly with communities to create their work. Social issues such as political polarization, lack of access to fresh food, and questions surrounding the human internal experience are not new, but the ways in which artists highlight them is changing. As contemporary art institutions already have networks and connections to participatory and socially engaged artists, they have the necessary tools to create unique opportunities for collaboration between artists and community members. By utilizing their position in society, museums can become spaces of social engagement and social care.

Volunteer work is characterized by its impact on the community. While docent work is vital for museums to fulfill their mission of education, it must be filled by paid staff. If this structure is not changed, institutions will continue to privilege a white audience and isolate their diverse visitors. In 2018, The Guggenheim Museum found that 73% of their visitors were white, whereas New York City's population is only 43% white.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the National Gallery of Art found in February 2020 that the last month's visitors were 70% white and mainly 55-75 years old.<sup>29</sup> While this is only a small sample of the United State's major museums, it reflects that the institutions are dominated by a white audience. If museums are to be spaces for communities, major changes must take place. In addition to damages to the audience, unpaid docents devalue the work done by paid education staff and lead to lower salaries for trained professionals.<sup>30</sup> As

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<sup>28</sup> Nancy Kenney, "Exclusive survey: what progress have US museums made on diversity, after a year of racial reckoning?" *The Art Newspaper*, May 25, 2021. <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/05/25/exclusive-survey-what-progress-have-us-museums-made-on-diversity-after-a-year-of-racial-reckoning>

<sup>29</sup> Kenney

<sup>30</sup> Young 269-270

scholar Xóchitl M. Flores-Marcial discussed, “Institutions cannot ethically showcase cultures without ensuring that they also include and engage with people who come from the communities they are highlighting.”<sup>31</sup> Restructuring docent volunteer programs to be paid staff positions will allow the institutions to prioritize diversity in their hiring practices, creating a more representative front-facing education team. In doing so, these spaces have the potential to become more welcoming and engaging for all.

This structural change is difficult, but creating alternate ways for volunteers to work with museums and artists will maintain community relationships while allowing for necessary modifications to education staffing. Contemporary art museums are well positioned to lead this effort. By combining their network of socially engaged artists with volunteers, they can create unique projects that provide community-centered solutions to major social issues. This proposal is not one-size-fits-all. It requires attention to the specific needs of a museum’s community and the willingness to allow artists to lead their own work. As contemporary art institutions are well versed in commissioning and implementing these socially engaged projects, each museum has the necessary skills and resources to see this through. As museum professionals Moya McFadzean, Liza Dale-Hallett, Tatiana Mauri and Kimberly Moulton explain, “Museums that are good at listening, collaborating, empowering and creating achieve results that are long lasting and provide a means to significant societal change.”<sup>32</sup> With a willingness to take risks and think creatively, this proposal will lead institutions to utilize their privileged position in society. As

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<sup>31</sup> Xóchitl M. Flores-Marcial, “Getting Community Engagement Right: Working with Transnational Indigenous Stakeholders in Oaxacalifornia.” *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture* January 1, 2021; 3 (1): 98–108. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1525/lavc.2021.3.1.98> page 98

<sup>32</sup> Moya McFadzean, Liza Dale-Hallett, Tatiana Mauri and Kimberley Moulton “Inside Out/Outside In: Museum and Communities Activating Change” in *Museum Activism*, ed. Robert R. Janes, and Richard Sandell (Routledge: 2019) 256-267 (page 266)

result, artists' practices will be encouraged, communities will be strengthened, and museums will become true spaces of care.

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