Knowledge in Debate:  
The Power Relationship between Museums and their Audiences

Abstract

Is it possible that the early 21st century citizen has lost the ability to marvel? Not just questioning the status quo but truly being amazed at what can exist in the natural world. Is this an old-fashioned notion to an audience well past the Victorian age of scientific experimentation? Perhaps we have also run out of patience for curiosity, for trusting our own instincts, as we demand to be told what separates fact from fiction by those we elect to provide information about our culture. The increasing trust with which we empower our institutions, media and cultural ambassadors allows us to stop thinking about deciphering the culture we are living in. It’s possible that if we have stopped questioning what we are told, we are loosing our authority over the power we established to design and interpret our culture. I propose that because of the possibility of complacency, new outlets have been created by and for a questioning audience. These outlets return the power of authority to the citizen. They encourage the audience to participate in the exhibit by testing the faith of the viewer in the truths the curator presents.

This new audience signifies a revival of marvel. Select museums are creating exhibits on our culture that rely upon the viewer to complete the experience by
questioning what is presented, in turn questioning our culture. This encourages a dialogue between the exhibit and the viewer, and empowers the audience by providing a set of truths but demanding that each viewer arrives at individual conclusions. This, I believe, is an attempt to identify the trappings that exist and mislead us to assume certain truths.

The Museum of Jurassic Technology presents exhibits of natural history in a familiar and traditional 19th century format: long vitrines, dioramas and academic labels telling you what you should be seeing. What you are presented with, however are exhibits so bizarre, with contents so unusual that you initially assume it is a parody of a natural history museum. On display is a lead slab that we are told contains a bat, although no bat is seen. The museum claims the bat was able to fly through solid objects until it was captured in this dark block. There is a carved fruit stone (possibly almond) with a detailed label describing a scene that doesn’t appear to be present at all. This collection is presented with complete sincerity, using symbolic exhibition methods of a ‘legitimate’ institution. We are presented scholastically defended curiosities and told they are facts. The decision to believe in the truth of what we are presented with is left entirely up to us, and that, I believe, is the moment where the power is transferred to the audience. The audience then gets to sift through not only a voluminous collection of artifacts, but also the possibility that everything presented could be completely fabricated, even under the auspices of being displayed in a museum.

The online museum, Web Wunderkammer exhibits a collection of photographs of oddities and curiosities, solicited from the impartial (?) online community. Images can be sent in by anyone from this vast pool and are curated and displayed at the discretion of the owner. The collection contains images of artifacts with the apparent caveat that their
importance or meaning is suspect. For example, the first image is a can of paint that will protect you from a nuclear blast. It looks authentic enough; there is a credit that explains its history and provenance. But there is also an implied suspicion in the belief that a coat of paint can protect us from death. Web Wunderkammer is a museum that allows its audience to participate in deciding what is a legitimate artifact of our culture.

These ideas came from readings by Michel Foucault on the power of curiosity and knowledge and Annie E. Coombes on the history of the museum. My research will also include the history of the Wunderkammern and cabinets of curiosities and the importance of placement and labels in the museum vernacular. By developing the emancipated role of the audience in certain museums, I’m curious to discover if there will be a shift in our culture towards a new relationship between fact and fiction. Why is this questioning of interpretation important now? Can we look forward to a new interpretation of the museum?
“Knowing too much can actually be a severe limitation.” David Wilson¹

Two contemporary museums in America hope visitors will leave curious and a little unsure as to what exactly they have just experienced inside. If as they return outside, blinking at the world they live in, they pause to examine their familiar surroundings in the same way as they scrutinized the plausibility of the exhibits, the museums have succeeded. At the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles, California, visitors are often observed walking around, marveling at the impossibility of what is on display, not sure if the dioramas presenting natural history and art can be trusted to be true. In Austin, Texas, the Museum of Natural and Artificial Ephemerata inhabits half an apartment, sharing the living quarters of the two curators. Visitors must make an appointment to visit and are then confronted with unusual personal artifacts of dubious sources and value. The structure these institutions take is similar to a traditional museum; they have permanent collections, temporary exhibitions, donors, business hours and charge admission. However, does meeting certain conventional criteria suggest museum exhibits are bound to be true or accurate? If a museum asks the audience to in turn ask themselves this question of authenticity, does that change the role or worth of the museum? Does this question challenge the assumed authority of the institution of museums?

When the museum visitor is given the power to decide whether to believe or suspect the institution as an authority of truth, this is the moment an important

transference of structural power from the museum to its visitor happens. Museums can empower their audience with curiosity and marvel by suggesting uncertainty at the event of viewing.

Experiencing this hesitation is generally absent from traditional academic institutions, which confine their audience with prescribed lectures. Attempting to engage the audience with sermons of predictable specifics is rarely successful, primarily because the effort is perceived as insincere. In a sincere environment, hesitation and doubt will lead to curiosity and marvel and this will engage the audience with the collections on a very personal level. Museums that exhibit collections creating visitor engagement shift the power structure to the visitor who is required to participate in order for the full success of the experience. Using an established museum vocabulary, full of symbols of authority, the Museum of Jurassic Technology and the Museum of Natural and Artificial Ephemerata present collections with elastic scholastic legitimacy. Visitors to these institutions are encouraged to appropriate the truth for themselves. They must work toward the experience of visiting, and this results in the reward of empowerment.

The museum has the capacity to empower the visitor by shifting the authority of knowledge within the relationship from the museum curator to the visitor. When a museum gives the visitor an opportunity to marvel, to be curious, to ask questions, that is the museum sharing the power of its authority with the visitor. As soon as the visitor begins to marvel, this begins visitor engagement with the collections. On a larger scale, this engagement extends to the institution and the role of the institution in our culture. When the audience begins to ask for this experience, then I believe the power structure has totally shifted.
‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A ‘regime’ of truth.²

The “regime of truth” mentioned above by Michel Foucault can be transparently slid, over the structure of a traditional museum. Visitors and curators at one time occupy the same space and traditionally rely on each other for existence. Each participant feeds this circular power relation. Whether we consider them accomplices in this game of truth is the matter in question.

The power relationship between the institution and the citizen was established on a model of scholarship. Museums are revered as institutions of learning, so pious they were initially built to resemble temples.³ These institutions maintain a secular status by promoting scholastic authority. There is a certain zeal involved, however, with the willingness to allow museums a final authority on a given subject. This authority is manifested in museums as placement. Artifacts in museums are displayed with a presumed authority of knowledge. This defers to a traditional, academic linear knowledge. This knowledge is born from order, and extends to materials, to provenance, and it determines the value of the artifacts in our culture.

In this frame, there is an established trust between the scholars and the audience. This relationship is built on educational authority on the part of the institution and its curators. By sharing predetermined knowledge the museum ensures an understanding of

the collections with the audience. However, this guarantees that the power structure in
the experience of viewing is consistently weighted toward the institution. For this
relationship to succeed, the audience is required to trust and believe the institution is the
source of knowledge and truth.

To control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and its highest
values and truths.⁴

At the beginning of its history in the late 18th century⁵ the museum positioned
itself in a powerful role of defining cultural values outward towards an audience, towards
the community. This power can be seen as dependant on the visitors who right away
understand the vocabulary in which the museum conveys its information, in the form of
collections. This vocabulary is a set of tools the institution uses to impose its power and
authority. By arranging artifacts to reflect a scientific order they are seen as authentic.
This model reflects the contemporary concept of establishing authenticity via
classification. This principle was extended to create order in personal collections like
Wunderkammern and Cabinets of Curiosities. Correct placement is important to assure
the visitors that science and scholarship was consulted. Proximity to an authentic artifact
would imply value to something with perhaps suspicious provenance. Placing an art
object next to a piece with less apparent artistic value gives it value by association. This
effort was to assure a certain expected validity of the collector to the viewer.

⁴ Duncan 474-5.
⁵ Donald Preziosi, ed., The Art of Art History (London: Oxford University Press, 1998),
580. Glossary, see “museum.”
On display at the Museum of Jurassic Technology is the horn of Mary Davis of Saughall. This is a horn grown on the head of a woman from the 17th century. It is mounted on a piece of wood and placed on a wall with other horns and antlers, similarly mounted. This is a rich example of validity by association. A human horn from 1688 is snugly displayed with the horns of animals the visitor clearly recognizes as being horned animals. The horn of Mary Davis nudges the visitor off-balance a touch and the feeling lingers precisely because the viewer had to seek it out. The label is the only reference for this artifact; the horn is modestly displayed. It is referred to as a centerpiece but that connotes a certain pride in the horn rather calling attention to it as an attraction. The audience had to work to see the real exhibit and was rewarded for the effort. The reward is visitor empowerment from the inflating feeling of curiosity.

Provenance presupposes truth, the real, the trace of things as something transcendental – it goes beyond an object’s molecular uniqiunity. We want to take some of the assumptions out of provenance by approach in it as a kind of mechanical production, a special effect.  

Provenance is another powerful device used by museums to promote authenticity and value. The power rests in accepting or not accepting an artifact’s provenance. If this is transferred to the visitor, then they control the value of an artifact. The Museum of Natural and Artificial Ephemerata has in its collection a cigarette butt with red lipstick on one filterless end. The label reads:

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6 Kimberly Pendell, *We are Living in the Museum of Natural and Artificial Ephemerata: An Interview with Curators Jen Hirt and Scott Webel*, 2004, 6. See appendix.
Marilyn Monroe’s Cigarette Butt

THE MUSEUM PROUDLY BOASTS ownership of the last cigarette rolled and smoked by Marilyn Monroe, acquired and donated by a sanitary worker, one Mr. Atwick, who found it in Ms. Monroe's hotel waste basket the night of her untimely departure.

The visitor expects and is expected to believe the information on a museum label. Can this museum in Austin, TX have the last cigarette that Marilyn Monroe smoked on her last night on earth? Does the value of the cigarette increase because it belonged to Marilyn Monroe? Because it touched her lips on the day she died? The more important question to ask is whether the visitor believes it to be true or not. The curators have no doubt been asked whether this information is true and have presumably done the amount of research they saw necessary to support this label. Or they did not. The power of the label relies more on the audience participating in the truth put forward by it. If a visitor does not believe the label is accurate, does that make the label less true?

At the Museum of Jurassic Technology, some labels are so full of scientific information that they leave the reader overwhelmed and unsure of the text’s authority. There are historical accounts and provenance so densely specific as to be confusing in the least and often times unheard of and impossible. In one of the permanent exhibits, Bernard Maston, Donald R. Griffith and the Deprong Mori of the Tripiscum Plateau, the text describes the attempts of groups of anthropologists to prove the existence and subsequently capture a South American bat with the ability to fly through solid objects. The text continues to explain that the bat was caught, frozen in a block of solid lead and that artifact is precisely what the visitor sees on display. There is a fully detailed text
accompanying this block with illustrations and measurements. There is a listening device to hear the history of this subject and even an explanation of echolocation in bats. At the end of the story, a light comes up behind the lead block now made transparent by this illumination and through which we are afforded a view of the silhouette of the bat.

Can these exhibits possibly be considered as fact? These institutions are open and operating and calling themselves museums. The research is documented, but do we believe the documentation? The visitor recognizes that the methods used are the same symbolic methods as in a traditional or real museum. Both museums exhibit collections with a sincere approach to educate, enlighten and entertain their visitors with what is presented. By all accounts, according to the traditional form, museums agree. They agree silently and in the open that what they present is the truth, as they know it. They believe in their collections and displays, and why not? Scholars and academics are employed to defend these beliefs of museums and institutions.

The more important question to ask is, do we believe in them? What proof do we need to experience to believe what a museum is showing us is the truth? Does contemplating the idea that what we see in a museum might not be the truth change our feelings about the validity of the museum and its power? The museum plays a role in our culture as an unflappable source of facts. This role allows the museum to comfortably sit in its position of power. Maybe we are uncomfortable being in control of the truth? Is that too much power for the viewer to experience or does it empower the visitor? Do citizens fear authority without power, even when ultimately they are in control of the dispensation?
In “The Masked Philosopher,” Foucault points out that curiosity is frequently referred to as a vice. Actually, he calls it a vice, right off the bat, but I do not think that he wishes to continue the bad connotation. His point is in the observation that history has mistrusted curiosity and branded it with harmful implications. The disdain of curiosity by history suggests that the act should be mistrusted, that you should be on the alert.

The danger of curiosity is perhaps due to its relation to inquiry. Asking questions, or being curious, is perceived as an attempt to weaken the authoritative structure. If citizens are content with authority, they do not display curious behavior. Reflecting on authority can lead to questions, which undoubtedly leads to being discontent. Therefore, inquiry or curiosity must be contained by the status quo to preserve its power and keep its citizens content. In this model, the authority in power wants to maintain the top-heavy power relationship with its subjects.

This relationship can be quickly applied to a museum and its visitors. Even with the imbalance of power, it is possible to be optimistic. With this authority, institutions could function as the custodians of their patrons, much like the artifacts in their vaults. Maybe this is a stretch, but this behavior can be seen as protective. Compassionate administration, perhaps. However, this effort can also be used to control the patrons and their impressions of what they are seeing. In the traditional model, the museum controls the interpretation of ideas and information that flows in and out of the authoritative structure. The patron, not explicitly called upon to be curious, maintains this imbalance.

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Can the patron be blamed for perpetuating this or does the museum hold some responsibility?

‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A ‘regime’ of truth.⁸

This is an issue of knowledge and power. The patron considers the museum to be in possession of more knowledge and so defers authority. Often, this could be the case. Knowing nothing about butterflies, a visitor goes to the Field Museum in Chicago, Illinois to learn about butterflies. The Field Museum assumes the authority of knowledge because the visitor is without knowledge of Lepidoptera, and presents the gift of authority. This example is simple and docile. A more complicated example of deferring power to an institution is the possibility that it can become a repetitive action. Giving power away is dangerous. This act makes the visitor complicit in the power system. This leads to thinking that if something is in a museum, it must be true. In this scenario, is the museum telling the visitor an artifact is authentic or is the visitor’s silence confirming the authenticity? Is the visitor an accomplice to the deferment of power to the museum by accepting the suppression of their autonomy?

Suppressing curiosity was a method thought to strengthen the power structure or institution. By withholding the citizen’s ability to question, the authority in power is denying them control. In this sense, the power being denied the citizen is not simply knowledge, but the act of questioning the knowledge.

⁸ Foucault 133.
Foucault continues⁹ that he is pleased by curiosity. Curiosity demonstrates a citizen’s engagement with the power structure. By being curious the citizen or museum visitor is active, participating in the experience. The experience is a dialogue of knowledge and the right to knowledge between the visitor and the institution.

It evokes the care one takes for what exists and could exist; a readiness to find strange and singular what surrounds is; a certain relentlessness to break up our familiarities and to regard otherwise the same things; a fervor to grasp what is happening and what passes; a casualness in regard to the traditional hierarchies of the important and the essential.¹⁰

Taking an interest in information is knowledge preservation. Being invested in the experience of an exchange of information ensures a dialogue between power systems. By expecting to marvel, the visitor is demanding power from the institution. Curiosity extends the experience of the information exhibited. The experience is more powerful resulting from the dual act of witnessing the information combined with being curious about it.

Foucault ends this section by asking for a “new age of curiosity.” He calls for this by encouraging us to reject a “protectionist attitude,” one overly concerned with judging information without digesting it. He suggests that differentiating between good and bad information causes us to risk suppressing the good at the fear of the bad. He prefers many diverse paths of knowledge each with the possibility of both good and bad, or in

⁹ Daston and Park 9.
¹⁰ Daston and Park 9.
another sense, truth or falsehood. The overprotection of information can lead to strangulation.

“…no one may ever have the same knowledge again.”

This quote is from a letter written by Alice May Williams. It is one of several letters in a collection written to the Mount Wilson Observatory between 1915-1935, exhibited at the Museum of Jurassic Technology. This collection of 33 letters, each individually sent to scientists at the observatory over twenty years because the authors wanted to share their private knowledge of the universe. Each felt that their knowledge was powerful. Without mention of academic backgrounds, each felt a strong impulse to write to scientists without fear of ridicule. Mrs. Williams writes with desperation that her ideas on the universe be considered. The thought that she should die without sharing these ideas is distressing to her. She refers to the death of these ideas, should she die with them, implying they have life. So, she shares her power. Oddly, even with her desperation to be listened to, her letter continues by explaining her home life, information that she has moved, and ends with a comment about her knowledge of traveling to other worlds. This odd interaction between the average worries of a housewife and the discovery of new astral planes is just confusing enough to slip between sounding true and sounding fabricated.

I do not know, of course if the Mount Wilson Observatory took Mrs. Williams’ information and used it to explore the universe. I do not know if this letter or if any of

11 Feinstein.
the letters are real or fabricated. I know that David Wilson (coincidence?) claims them to be and displays them as such. I do not think their authenticity matters. I think that the value of these letters, of Mrs. Williams’ in particular, is that they display the desire to communicate knowledge, the faith in that knowledge and, in turn, they inspire faith on the part of the viewer.

The act of desiring and communicating knowledge is the power behind curiosity. The Museum of Jurassic Technology and the Museum of Natural and Artificial Ephemerata empower their visitors by returning the authority of knowledge back to the visitor. Their audiences are required to participate in the discovery of knowledge and this act is achieved by being curious. The decision to believe in the authenticity of the exhibits is left up to each viewer. This is the moment when the museums transfer their authoritative power to the audience. This happens in these sincere museums, despite the traditional museum trappings of vocabulary, placement or assumed scholarship, previous tools of institution control. Creating hesitancy in the experience of viewing an exhibit leads to curiosity by the viewer. When the viewer begins to ask questions of the information presented, emancipation from the power structure can begin. Perhaps the assumed knowledge is impeding the total experience of the relationship of the viewer and the collection. Perhaps the act of questioning authenticity is more important than the answer of true or false.

David Wilson says, “Knowing too much can actually be a severe limitation.” I do not think he is making an anti-knowledge, anti-enlightenment comment. I think he is leaving himself, and others, room to be curious. Perhaps the knowledge he is referring to
is the traditional, scholastic knowledge we are prone to assume is the only interpretation of events.

Last year I saw a piece of glass with a hole in it, on display at a history museum in Berlin, Germany. On the label, the provenance of this artifact placed it from the window of the car in which Archduke Ferdinand was shot. It was hard for me to believe that it was true. I thought about the age of the glass, the thickness of the glass, the probability of its survival. I thought about this piece of glass starting World War I. I feel that by being curious at all about its authenticity, I have prolonged that experience for myself. Now I remember the experience of wondering about the artifact, along with the dry dimensions of the exhibit. I remember the possibility of it being true. I think David Wilson wants his visitors to be amazed and to wonder. Not at the authenticity of his exhibits, per se, but at the possibility of their existence.

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12 This was in an exhibit on World War I at the Deutsche Historisches Museum, July of 2004.
Bibliography


