

CASE STUDY

“I Recommend Dancing”

Brooklyn Museum’s History of Inclusion and Moment of Transition

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Brooklyn Museum Façade Photo by Brittney Najjar

The Brooklyn Museum has pursued a number of unconventional directions to address its community's current and emerging needs. It practices a contemporary approach to its encyclopedic collection, allowing intersectional feminist theory and critical race theory, for instance, to inform and problematize ancient works. It has opted for accessibility rather than grandeur in its facade. Many Brooklyn residents are introduced to it through its crowded Saturday night parties, rather than its substantial collections of American, Asian, European, and African art objects. It once exhibited a work that was made in protest of the museum itself.¹

These instances, by no means exhaustive, reveal an important characteristic of the museum: its agency. For at least the last two decades its leaders have inured themselves to controversy, weathering explicit criticism, to pursue a distinct vision of what the museum should be. One outcome of this vision has been the deliberate diversification of the museum's staff with respect to people of color, which is the cause for this case study.

¹ Colin Moynihan, "Brooklyn Museum Puts Artwork from Its Critics on Display," *New York Times*, April 8, 2016, accessed July 17, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/09/arts/design/brooklyn-museum-puts-artwork-from-its-critics-on-display.html>.

In 2015, Ithaka S+R, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD), and the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) set out to quantify with demographic data an issue that has been an increasing concern within and beyond the arts community: the lack of representative diversity in professional museum roles.² Through the survey we found that 28 percent of museum staff were people of color (POC).³ However, in the intellectual leadership positions, identified as educators, curators, conservators, and senior administrators, POC composed only 16 percent. Most of the racial/ethnic diversity within museums existed in facilities and security positions, indicating that aggregate statistics mask substantial differences across job types.

When we looked specifically at the Brooklyn Museum, which employed 395 people in 2015, the total staff was 40 percent POC.⁴ In roles we categorized as intellectual leadership, POC occupied 42 percent of the positions—a figure approaching the diversity of the borough, which is 48 percent POC.⁵ When we asked Arnold Lehman, director of the museum from 1998 to 2015, why the Brooklyn Museum was more diverse in these intellectual leadership positions, he noted that it hadn't always been that way. During his tenure he had prioritized diversity in hiring and surrounded himself over time with staff who shared that value.

² Please see the appendix at the end of this paper for a fuller description of the survey, methodology, and how we selected museums for inclusion in this case study series.

³ Roger Schonfeld, Mariët Westermann, and Liam Sweeney, "Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey," Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, July 29, 2015, https://mellon.org/media/filer_public/ba/99/ba99e53a-48d5-4038-80e1-66f9ba1c020e/awmf_museum_diversity_report_aamd_7-28-15.pdf.

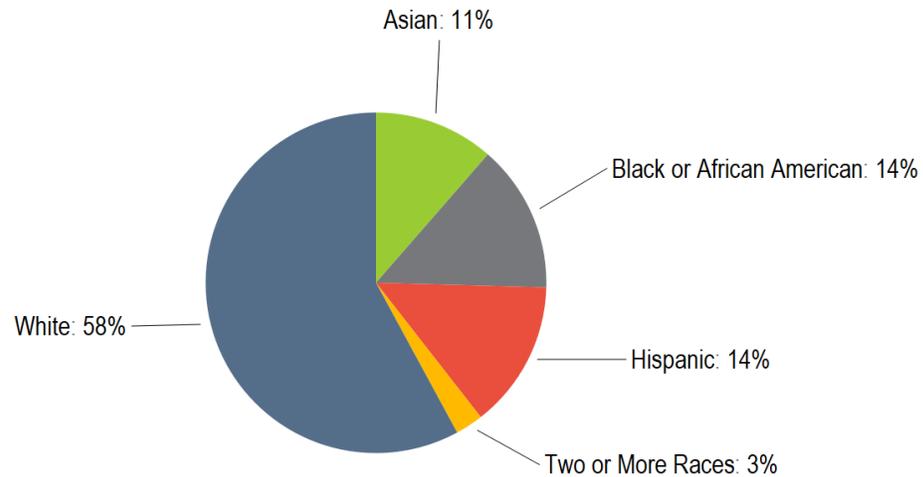
⁴ This project benefitted greatly from the contributions of the advisory committee. Our thanks to Johnnetta Betsch Cole, Senior Consulting Fellow at the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation; Brian Ferriso, Director of Portland Art Museum; Jeff Fleming, Director of Des Moines Art Center; Lori Fogarty, Director of Oakland Museum of California; Alison Gilchrest, Program Officer, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation; Susan Taylor, Director of New Orleans Museum of Art; and Mariët Westermann, Executive Vice President, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

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And we are grateful to Anne Pasternak, Director of the Brooklyn Museum, for her willingness to participate in the study, and David Berliner, President and COO, for his many contributions to the project.

⁵ Our attention to POC as a primary focus of diversity issues results from two factors: (A) Race/ethnicity data was available in human resources systems whereas other measures, such as LGBTQ and disability status, were not. (B) Of the data we collected (age, gender, and race/ethnicity) the clearest barriers to advancement existed for POC, according to our analysis.

Figure 1. Racial/Ethnic Composition of Brooklyn Museum’s Educators, Curators, Conservators, and Senior Administrators.



Our research for this case study, which included demographic analysis, interviews with current and former staff and directors, participant observation, and archival research, yielded a distinct set of lessons and challenges that we hope will be helpful to the field. The lessons of the Brooklyn Museum may be especially instructive for museums that are seeking to prioritize equity in structural ways, remove barriers for staff advancement, and deepen engagement in underrepresented communities.

Key Findings

We identified several key approaches employed by the Brooklyn Museum that have proven important to the promotion of institutional diversity and inclusion:

1. **Welcome:** Staff and leadership, during interviews, said unambiguously that they have embraced a civic duty to be a welcoming space. This is more than a platitude; the terms “civic” and “welcoming” are loaded in the context of the museum’s environment.
2. **Culture and Structure:** One of the ways the museum achieves these goals is through organizational structure. Departmental changes and unconventional curatorial relationships allow discourse to emerge between the public, culturally specific scholars, exhibitions, and the permanent collection. These structural changes manifest from the leadership’s vision and are executed across departments.

3. **Leadership:** The mission-driven climate and structural changes that have supported the museum’s inclusion, diversity, and equity efforts stem from leadership, according to both junior and senior staff. From their perspective, if the director’s office does not own and constantly return to these issues, it will be very difficult to bring about change.

Challenges and Tradeoffs

We also observed challenges to pursuing inclusion, diversity, and equity, in some cases from the museum staff and in others from outside sources:

1. **Controversy:** Some in the arts community criticized the museum for moving away from its traditional mission as it expanded its exhibitions and programming to reach a broader audience.
2. **Sustainability:** Budgets are always limited, so the museum faces questions about investments in diversity initiatives and the challenge of sustaining its forms of community engagement over the long run.
3. **Donors:** To pursue programming that strays from an established art history narrative, the museum has had to renegotiate its relationships with donors and other supporters and has risked a source of funding.

History and Context

With roots dating back nearly 200 years, the Brooklyn Museum has transformed alongside its complex environment. While demographers predict that non-Hispanic whites will become a minority in the United States by 2035, this has been the case in Brooklyn for decades. In order to understand the museum’s relationship to a variety of communities, it is important to briefly examine the multiple transformations the borough has undergone, and the context in which the museum engages its public.

Originally established in 1823 as the Brooklyn Apprentice’s Library, Brooklyn Museum staff recognize its history as a place of social inclusion. It was Brooklyn’s first free circulating library, built through community organizing (and conceived in a local bar). This seminal identity evolved as the museum embodied the grandeur of the Gilded Age. The current museum building was originally designed by the architects McKim, Mead, & White, known for iconic designs at the turn of the twentieth century such as the old Pennsylvania Station, Columbia University, and the Washington Square Arch. In a way, the structure’s design was an amalgam of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Museum of Natural History, and had it been completed to specification it would have been the largest museum in the world.⁶ But Brooklyn’s course changed in

⁶ Linda S. Ferber, *Brooklyn Museum* (London: Brooklyn Museum and Scala Books, 1997).

1898 when, after a controversial referendum, it merged with Manhattan and other boroughs to become New York City, and construction of the museum halted in 1927. At one-sixth the size of the original design, the museum is second-largest by square feet in New York City, after the Met. The Met and the Brooklyn Museum have an uncommon relationship, at least in one measure: no other US city is home to two distinct encyclopedic art museums.

Museum staff point to one of its early curators to show that it has long been a progressive voice for art history. Stewart Culin (1858–1929), a pioneer in ethnography and one of the museum’s chief curators, collected over 1,200 African objects from dealers in Europe and displayed them in the Brooklyn Museum in 1923. Culin made explicit his curatorial intention for this work, stating, “The entire collection, whatever may have been its original uses, is shown under the classification of art; as representing a creative impulse and not for the purposes of illustrating the customs of African People. It is this characteristic of expressiveness which may explain the influence Negro Art is leaving upon the work of many recent painters and sculptors.” The exhibition was the first instance in an American museum of showing African art *as art*, rather than as artifact.⁷

Between the Civil War and World War II, the population of Brooklyn increased twentyfold, from around 140,000 to nearly 2,700,000. Shortly after the Civil War, race relations were stressed as an increasing number of European immigrants worked to establish their foothold in Brooklyn at the expense of the black community, emphasizing a narrative of white supremacy.⁸ Racial tensions would persist and become more complicated in the twentieth century.

Brooklyn was a thriving base of manufacturing for much of the early twentieth century, and during World War II the Brooklyn Navy Yard experienced dramatic growth, tripling in terms of employment—from 32,948 employees in 1941 to 96,090 in 1943.⁹ But during the postwar years, Brooklyn’s demographics changed dramatically. White flight, fueled by government subsidies in outlying communities, created a dramatic shift in the racial composition of the borough; between 1940 and 1990, Brooklyn gained 1.3 million POC and lost 1.5 million white people.

⁷ Kathleen Bickford Berzock and Christa Clarke, eds., *Representing Africa in American Art Museums: A Century of Collecting and Display* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011).

⁸ Craig Steven Wilder, *A Covenant with Color: Race and Social Power in Brooklyn 1636-1990* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

⁹ *Ibid.*

In the latter half of the twentieth century, manufacturing industries collapsed, the Navy Yard closed, and the borough grappled with issues of crime and disenfranchisement. While this was happening, however, a meaningful reinvestment was being made in the once-popular theater, Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM). In 1969, arts administrator Harvey Lichtenstein partnered with Wall Street banker Seth Faison to bring BAM back to prominence. They involved modern dance pioneer Alvin Ailey, who emphasized a focus on marketing to Brooklynites rather than bussing audiences in from Manhattan. They persuaded the Chelsea Theater Center to move in, presented the first production of Amiri Baraka's *Slave Ship*, and eventually became a home away from home to choreographer Pina Bausch. By 1976 BAM's audience had grown six fold. The organization began providing in-kind support for local and federal development projects like the Cinderella Project and the Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation. BAM's focus on modern dance, its choice to engage its local community instead of pursuing the Manhattan audience, and its investments in its own neighborhood played a large role in a cultural renaissance in downtown Brooklyn.¹⁰

These cultural forces interacted with a shifting real estate market to bring about significant displacement. Responding to cheap industrial waterfront real estate, developers and city officials pursued a course of "urban renewal" that would lead to the gentrification of many parts of the borough, relying on a narrative of obsolescence to make the removal of industrial work and deregulation of rent politically palatable.¹¹

This complicates a renaissance narrative, as the borough's mainstream cultural capital and real estate values have increased since the 1990s. It is within this context that the Brooklyn Museum operates as a public institution. It is part of the Cultural Institutions Group (CIG) in New York City, a group of 33 organizations built on city land that receive substantial municipal funds.¹²

¹⁰ Julia L. Foulkes, "Streets and Stages: Urban Renewal and the Arts After World War II," *Journal of Social History* 44, no. 2 (2010): 413-34, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25790364>.

¹¹ Winifred Curran, "Gentrification and the Nature of Work: Exploring the Links in Williamsburg, Brooklyn," *Environment and Planning A* 36, no. 7 (2004): 1243-1258; Weber, Rachel, "Extracting Value from the City: Neoliberalism and Urban Redevelopment," *Antipode* 34, no. 3 (2002): 519-540.

¹² "City-Owned Institutions," NYC Department of Cultural Affairs, accessed May 07, 2017, <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcla/html/funding/institutions.shtml>.

A Civic Duty to Be a Welcoming Space

Former director Arnold Lehman told us that to be welcoming means to make visitors feel as comfortable as they would be in the neighboring Prospect Park. Toward this end, the Brooklyn Museum has taken after BAM in at least two ways: leveraging dance to engage its neighbors and ending the cycle of bussing in Manhattanites.¹³ Shifting attention to the local community has become part of its mission to be a museum for the public. While the Brooklyn Museum is uniquely public given its status as a CIG member in New York City, Lehman feels strongly that other museums should share this public mission: “One way or another every museum in the country is a public institution. The minute you take one donation and receive a tax credit for it, you can no longer call yourself a private institution.”

At the Brooklyn Museum, civic duty is related to embracing, supporting, and celebrating the borough’s communities that had been underserved for much of the latter half of the twentieth century: Flatbush, Crown Heights, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Prospect Heights, and Park Slope. The museum thinks critically about which communities have been underserved historically, in order to design programs and space where these communities feel welcome.

Controversy

One of the explicit steps toward making the museum more welcoming included the 2004 redesign of the entrance, yielding a street-level glass pavilion. This is a space where local teens socialize after school, and staff report that students feel comfortable treating it as a public space, even if they do not enter the museum’s galleries.

Some find this gesture anathema to the very idea of a museum. In fact, an article in the *New Criterion* offered advice to Lehman shortly after the glass pavilion was introduced, “Go back to being an art museum. People know the difference between a park or emporium and a museum [...] Good art is enough of a lure for those who are interested in art. Leave the others to their own amusements.”¹⁴ The former director of the Met, Philippe de Montebello, also criticized the new entrance: “I think the current glass entrance defeats that very purpose and the exhilaration felt when a person who wasn't brought up in a mansion is able to walk into a mansion. By taking away the majesty of

¹³ Arnold Lehman told us that, before his time, the Brooklyn Museum kept a bus outside the Met to transport visitors who were averse to the subway.

¹⁴ “If you pander, they won't come,” *New Criterion* 22, no. 9 (May 2004): 3–4.

the entrance, they've taken away the majesty of the experience.”¹⁵ Such perspectives run counter to the Brooklyn Museum’s perspective—that, rather than granting a glimpse into the lifestyles of the extremely wealthy, the museum strives to realize a civic goal to make their neighbors feel at home.

The 2004 inauguration of the new pavilion was accompanied with an exhibition called *Open House*, a comprehensive survey of Brooklyn artists. In response to the exhibition, the *New Criterion* wrote, “Like us, you probably know several serious artists who live and work in Brooklyn. None was represented in this silly exhibition.” Rather, they claimed, “The curators got every black, Hispanic and female artist they could lay their hands on.” Among the artists included in the exhibition were Martha Rosler¹⁶ and Rico Gatson.¹⁷

Encyclopedic museums experience pressure to conform to familiar expectations from certain critics.

Open House clearly ran counter to the expectations of many for a museum responsible for vast collections of antiquities. This sample of reactions indicates that encyclopedic museums experience pressure to conform to familiar expectations from certain critics. Board member Sandra Williams-Cornwell spoke to this point. She was inspired to join the museum’s board after *Sensation* (1999), an exhibition including an iconoclastic portrait of the Madonna, sparked a controversy that threatened municipal support for the museum.¹⁸ In considering the Brooklyn Museum’s relationship to the press, she made an important distinction, recognizing that criticism can be valid when it addresses a lack of rigor in scholarship. “But if you’re going to base your criticism on the political elements and not on the quality of what’s being shown, I think that’s just noise,” she said. In hiring Anne Pasternak as its director in 2015, the board made a clear decision to continue and expand Lehman’s initiatives to be deliberately inclusive of a broad set of

¹⁵ Robin Pogrebin, "Sketching a Future for Brooklyn Museum," *New York Times*, August 7, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/08/arts/design/08museum.html>.

¹⁶ Martha Rosler is a feminist artist well known for her 1975 video art piece *Semiotics of the Kitchen*.

¹⁷ An artist currently featured in a solo exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem, Rico Gatson was reviewed in the *New York Times* the same month the *New Criterion* article was published. See Holland Cotter, "Rico Gatson," *New York Times*, May 20, 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/21/arts/art-in-review-rico-gatson.html?_r=0.

¹⁸ Abby Goodnough, "Article Title," *New York Times*, September 24, 1999, <https://partners.nytimes.com/library/arts/092499brooklyn-museum.html>.

underrepresented communities and to engage in dialogues around social justice. One of the ways this approach has calcified is in the museum’s “Target First Saturdays” programming.

Target First Saturdays

Famous in Brooklyn for big dance parties, talented local performers, and multigenerational crowds, it is hard to imagine the spectacle that is Target First Saturdays at the Brooklyn Museum. Staff at the museum describe it as utopian. At an event this spring, it was evident that the energetic crowd that earlier filled the museum’s pavilion had spilled into the front plaza. Visitors are welcome to mill through the lobby—drinking beer, eating empanadas, and striking up conversations with neighbors—or press on to the exhibitions. During First Saturdays, ticketed exhibitions are reduced in price. There are also workshops and performances in the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Auditorium. In the third-floor atrium, a dense crowd took part in a dance workshop.



Target First Saturday Dance Workshop Photo by Amanda Parmer

After the dance lesson, the DJ started a set and the room shirked the choreography and continued dancing. The lights were kept low, and surrounding the dance floor were Rodin statues. It felt carnivalesque. Lehman describes how he shifted the atmosphere: “I

kind of reordered the guards that they had to be really hospitable. I mean, no one could be on top of a painting with a ballpoint pen, but they weren't to shush or ask them to step away; it was their neighbors who were there." In a gentrifying part of the borough where many establishments tacitly signal which kind of patrons they cater to, Target First Saturdays is the rare community fixture where Brooklyn's various ethnic communities engage casually.

One criticism of the Target First Saturdays is that the large crowds are drawn to dance, not to engage with the art. However, during this event, which drew over 17,000 people, the Egyptian and American collections attracted strong crowds. While the permanent collections often seem empty during the week, during Target First Saturdays they see attendance more akin to those regularly attracted by the special exhibitions.

The first iteration of Target First Saturdays in the mid-1990s drew 2,000 people, and the event grew steadily until, after fifteen years, attendance suddenly spiked. "Two and a half years ago something happened, some viral event," Lehman told us. "We went to 17,000, then 21,000, then 25,000, then 30,000 people at a First Saturday. And [the city] closed us down. There were 5,000 people out on the plaza waiting to get in. It just was not sustainable. We had this harsh reality of trying to figure out what to do to avoid disappointing all these people who came from all over the city. We had members of city council who came from the Bronx to see what was going on." Lehman told us there was discussion of installing egresses in the form of large multistory outdoor staircases that would accommodate the NYFD regulations, but he couldn't find a way to make it work financially. In some cases, when the dance party grew too big for the atrium, they would hold it in the parking lot. Lehman said, "There is the issue of how museums think of themselves as civic places in addition to being a museum per se. The nature of being a committed civic institution changes the dynamic. I recommend dancing to all these institutions. Big time."

The civic nature of the Brooklyn Museum was raised by several interviewees. Eugenie Tsai, the John and Barbara Vogelstein Curator of Contemporary Art, invoked it when addressing the criticisms that some of the exhibitions have been too populist, lacking substance.¹⁹ Tsai, who has curated exhibitions and long-term installations such as *Raw/Cooked* (2011),²⁰ and *21: Selections of Contemporary Art from the Brooklyn*

¹⁹ Robin Pogrebin, "Brooklyn Museum's Populism Hasn't Lured Crowds," *New York Times*, June 14, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/15/arts/design/15museum.html?pagewanted=all&module=Search&mabReward=relbias%3Aw%2C%7B%22%22%3A%22R%3A17%22%7D&_r=0.

²⁰ "Raw/Cooked: Kristof Wickman," Brooklyn Museum, accessed May 07, 2017, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/raw_cooked_wickman.

Museum (2008),²¹ acknowledged the danger of overt populism in exhibitions but suggested that for public institutions there is a “sweet spot.” She stated that “at a place like the Brooklyn Museum that takes public money, you really have a responsibility to your visitors to give them a chance to interact with art and culture in ways that they don’t have a chance to in their day-to-day lives.”

Lehman explained to us that in order to identify this “sweet spot,” the curatorial team conceptualized a three-circle Venn diagram, with one circle representing community, one representing collections, and one representing mission. Intersecting these three aspects of the museum guided their curatorial practice, which in some instances drew negative media attention, Lehman told us. For instance, the *Observer* highlighted two Brooklyn Museum exhibitions, *Star Wars: The Magic of Myth* (2002) and *Hip-Hop Nation: Roots Rhyme and Rage* (2000), saying, “When arts institutions invoke ‘the community’ rather than the public at large as their primary constituency, you can be certain that something crucial—like, say, artistic standards—is being sacrificed on the altar of identity politics, in this case the politics of race and class.”²²

While inclusivity fits into narratives of institutional identity for many contemporary and culturally specific museums, the above criticisms of the Brooklyn Museum reflect some of the frictions that encyclopedic museums may encounter from audiences or critics who expect to have access to a more familiar, and perhaps exclusionary, experience with art. In order to determine whether inclusivity fits into the institution’s mission, it is therefore important to think critically about who the museum sees as its audience.

Structuring Dialogues: A Culturally Specific Center, an Encyclopedic Collection, and a Public Perspective

The Brooklyn Museum’s example demonstrates that a strong and committed leader can foster conversations exploring inclusion, diversity, and equity such that the emergent dialogues result in meaningful changes in the museum’s relationship to the public. However, it offers us an example of the challenges that emerge when these conversations fail. In either case, the Brooklyn Museum has designed structures within the institution to guide decision-making and dialogue, rather than relying solely on climate or consensus. These structures guide the museum’s approach to difficult conversations and

²¹ “21: Selections of Contemporary Art from the Brooklyn Museum,” Brooklyn Museum, accessed May 07, 2017, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/21_selections/.

²² Hilton Kramer, “The Brooklyn Museum Gives Open House on Dumbing Down,” *Observer*, May 16, 2004, <http://observer.com/2004/05/the-brooklyn-museum-gives-open-house-on-dumbing-down/>.

allow it to stay nimble, keeping up to speed with developing discourses of social justice and inclusion. The museum also sees a connection between staff diversity and long-term sustainability. It has occasionally implemented an unofficial model for building staff diversity in spite of financial restrictions.

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Pasternak's approach to thinking critically about the Brooklyn Museum's audience involves structuring the institution in order to facilitate opportunities for listening and initiating conversations. She engages staff in nonhierarchical meetings, pays attention to contemporary revisions to art history, practices humility in acknowledging her own social conditioning, and builds bridges between curators and the public. There are a number of ways the museum's structure facilitates and emphasizes these efforts.

One way in which Pasternak works to initiate these conversations is by using messaging meetings to break down barriers between departments. These meetings are an important part of Pasternak's vision for the institution. In them, representatives from every department in the museum come together to share ideas and listen to each other regarding the planning for forthcoming exhibitions. As Adjoa Jones de Almeida, director of education, described, "Anne's style invites dialogue and conversation. It's an informal approach that opens up the ability to converse." This is underscored further in the monthly staff coffees Pasternak hosts with president and chief operating officer David Berliner. The informal gathering allows for an exchange of ideas. Berliner says that stemming from these efforts, "there is a cohesion occurring around culture." This is evident from the frequency with which common language is used across departments and levels of seniority. Diversity is typically described as "healthy," and commitments to pursuing courageous conversations and working toward revising the canon—concepts Pasternak feels are central to the museum's mission—were common among most of our interviews with curatorial, public programming, and education staff.

These dialogues have persuaded Pasternak that the museum's diverse audiences ought to see their cultural heritage reflected in an institutional setting. One way this is realized is

in the Egyptian galleries, where senior curator Edward Bleiberg has made explicit connections between Egyptian and African heritage, both in the wall text introducing the gallery and in the works on display. The wall text rejects the racist perspective that nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians held, which excluded Egypt from African heritage. Next to the text appears a piece by Lorraine O'Grady, which juxtaposes ancient Egyptian statues with black men and women and emphasizes this connection.



Lorraine O'Grady, *Young Queens*, from the series *Miscegenated Family Album* (1994)

Developing a welcoming institution is hard and constant work, as Pasternak described, opening up about some of the challenges she and the museum have faced: “Every week, if not every day, I am being exposed to more and more layers of my social conditioning.” Her approach is to practice humility—to “shut up and listen”—advice she extends to all white leaders. When visitors with children asked her why all black boys in the museum’s artwork were depicted as slaves, she changed the works hanging on the wall. She wants her commitment to these issues to be measured by action. She told us, “There’s a tension around mission. Some museum directors will say the number-one priority is to protect,

preserve, and study their collections. But one might posit the number-one purpose is to inspire, serve, and educate their audiences and be a truly public institution for courageous conversations.”

But in some cases the museum has faced challenges in maintaining positive community relations. Pasternak acknowledged that this has been especially difficult in cases where the museum worked to respond to calls for deepening their commitments to inclusion. She experienced resistance to the institution’s position in the community when the museum unwittingly rented their auditorium to a group of developers for a convention last year. The auditorium is rented to increase revenue, typically hosting community groups. But in this case the developers’ program was at odds with the museum’s work of inclusion, and generated protests and negative publicity.²³ Pasternak’s efforts to start a dialogue were challenged: “It’s much more charged today than it was [when I was at Creative Time]. I wish these [diversity] initiatives had come along eight years ago. It will be very hard for museums to change now, given the climate.” She mentioned the controversy at the 2017 Whitney Biennial as an example of a discouraging level of friction between the institution and those protesting Dana Schutz’s painting *Open Casket* (2016),²⁴ saying, “I’m a big believer in building bridges and working together, but that may be a generational difference.” Pasternak is concerned that high-profile controversies will chill efforts in the museum community to increase inclusion and address social justice issues.

Public Programming and Curatorial

Some of the museum’s structural changes have focused specifically on elevating the influence of their audience’s voices upon curatorial perspectives. This is perhaps most evident in the closer relationship between the public programming and curatorial departments. Public programming had been part of the education department until fall 2016, when Pasternak made it part of curatorial. As Alicia Boone, director of public programming, explained, “We kind of have our finger on the pulse of the public.” Her department is responsible for programs like Target First Saturdays, which is usually organized as a thematic response to an exhibition, or a timely larger theme such as Pride

²³ Developers were addressing questions such as, “How can investors take advantage of demographic change.” For more on the controversy see: Claire Voon, “Artists Denounce Brooklyn Museum for Hosting Real Estate Summit,” *Hyperallergic*, November 17, 2015, accessed July 25, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/251948/artists-denounce-brooklyn-museum-for-hosting-real-estate-summit/>.

²⁴ For more on the controversy see: Lorena Muñoz-Alonso, “Painting of Emmett Till at Whitney Biennial Sparks Protest,” *Artnet News*, March 23, 2017, accessed May 29, 2017, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/dana-schutz-painting-emmett-till-whitney-biennial-protest-897929>, Benjamin Sutton, “In Fake Letter,” *Hyperallergic*, March 23, 2017, accessed July 18, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/367347/in-fake-letter-dana-schutz-demands-removal-of-controversial-painting-from-whitney-biennial/>.

Month or Women’s History Month. She told us, “It’s really significant, this switch for public programming. The department now has a seat at the table; we can participate in a conversation about what exhibitions should be put up.”

Boone now offers public programming’s perspective to colleagues like Carmen Hermo, assistant curator at the Sackler Center for Feminist Art. Hermo indicated that having programming at the table was helpful, and welcome: “Public programming for us, even in the *Year of Yes*, can bring out things not as present in the objects—queer perspectives, environmental activism, or indigenous issues.”²⁵ Hermo added that programming could be helpful in bringing attention to the absence of a certain community. But she clarified that the conversation isn’t antagonistic; the relationship is collaborative, rather than tokenizing. And as Boone put it, “We don’t need to dilute curatorial to make this work.”

Boone was surprised to learn that the Brooklyn Museum had been selected for this study based on its diversity, particularly because she had recently moved from the more diverse education department (50 percent POC) to curatorial (18 percent POC).²⁶ As she put it, “The education department is truly diverse. It feels really healthy. It’s good for conversation.” In her new role, she told us, “I’m trying to learn how to say things diplomatically. To figure out the timing. To offer feedback in the feedback session. I have no curatorial experience, but my voice is important.” This challenge is twofold. Boone is bringing knowledge from her connection to the Brooklyn community, and from the experiences that come from working in a setting as diverse as the education department. She is working to translate this experience into useful advice in a curatorial context. That curatorial welcomes public programming’s voice is noteworthy, speaking to a collaborative spirit across departments, rather than a siloing of expertise. Take, for instance, the 2017 exhibition of radical black female artists, *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women 1965–1985*. The title came from the education department.

Within an Encyclopedic Collection, a Culturally Specific Center

This year is the tenth anniversary of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, an exhibition and educational center devoted to the display and historical understanding of feminist art. The Sackler Center represents a structural way in which the museum works

²⁵ A Year of Yes takes the 10 year anniversary of the Sackler Center as an opportunity to reflect on the history of feminism through a variety of programs. “A Year of Yes: Reimagining Feminism at the Brooklyn Museum.” Brooklyn Museum: A Year of Yes: Reimagining Feminism at the Brooklyn Museum. Accessed May 07, 2017. https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/year_of_yes_reimagining_feminism.

²⁶ Data from the 2015 Demographic Survey of Art Museums.

to revise the canon; having a culturally specific center embedded in an encyclopedic institution means there is a voice emphasizing feminist values in a mission-oriented way at a curatorial level. It has developed a dynamic portfolio of resources for supporting feminist art, including Feminist Artbase, First Awards, the Council for Feminist Art, and the Women in the Arts annual award.²⁷ Typically, the Sackler Center has its own exhibition schedule that is installed around the perimeter of the permanent installation of Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* (1979). As of spring 2017, its exhibitions have expanded beyond the Sackler Center space and proliferate throughout the museum as part of the anniversary celebration.

Part of this expansion involves collaborations to integrate the center with the museum's broader holdings. For instance, in the Egyptian galleries, *A Woman's Afterlife: Gender Transformation in Ancient Egypt* explores recent scholarship on the counterintuitive relationship the Egyptians had to gender in the afterlife.²⁸ One of the few female Egyptologists in the field has unpacked a gendered puzzle: in short, because of the belief that the fetus was generated by the male, Egyptians would ceremoniously transform women to men at death, allowing them to rebirth themselves in the afterlife.²⁹ The Sackler Center's feminist perspective invites its audience to contemplate not only the nature of ancient Egyptians' relationship to gender, but also the nature of Egyptological scholarship. Edward Bleiberg, curator for Egyptian, Classical, and Ancient Middle Eastern Art, explained that scholarship in the field has rarely addressed issues of gender until recently. In fact, the previous standing theory on this gender switch was that it was little more than a hieroglyphic typo.

In this way, the Sackler Center for Feminist Art bridges the previously mentioned divide between collections and exhibitions, aiming, effectively, to revise the canon in ways responsive to the particularities of both ancient and contemporary contexts. The center was central to the curation of the aforementioned exhibition *We Wanted a Revolution*, which through its exploration of the art of radical black women also complicates traditional narratives of second-wave feminism. Catherine Morris, senior curator, says of the exhibition, "Brooklyn Museum in its community context is one of the most important places to revise feminist art history. Black women didn't embrace the term feminism and didn't feel welcome in the feminist movement." Morris is describing one of the

²⁷ "About, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center." Brooklyn Museum: About. Accessed May 28, 2017. <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/about/>.

²⁸ "A Woman's Afterlife: Gender Transformation in Ancient Egypt," Brooklyn Museum, accessed May 08, 2017, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/womans_afterlife_ancient_egypt.

²⁹ Kathlyn M Cooney, "Gender Transformation in Death: A Case Study of Coffins from Ramesside Period Egypt," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 73, no. 4 (2010): 224–37.

“courageous conversations” that Pasternak and several other interviewees feel is now central to their work. While the Sackler Center works to make visible an important intersectional revision to the history of feminism, it concurrently reshapes our understanding of traditional narratives in art history. Within an encyclopedic frame, a culturally specific center adapts to its environment.

Sustainability

Many leaders in the cultural sector have indicated through surveys conducted by Ithaka S+R that they consider the act of diversifying their institutions a threat to their sustainability. In the 2016 survey of Department of Cultural Affairs grantees, museum directors indicated that financial limits were barriers to diversifying staff.³⁰ The Brooklyn Museum experiences similar limits, given its significant budget deficit.³¹ When asked about overcoming these barriers, Lehman described one way the Brooklyn Museum worked around their financial limitations as they pursued this goal: using temporary grants to make new hires, then bringing the grant staff on full-time and sorting out permanent funding for the position afterwards.

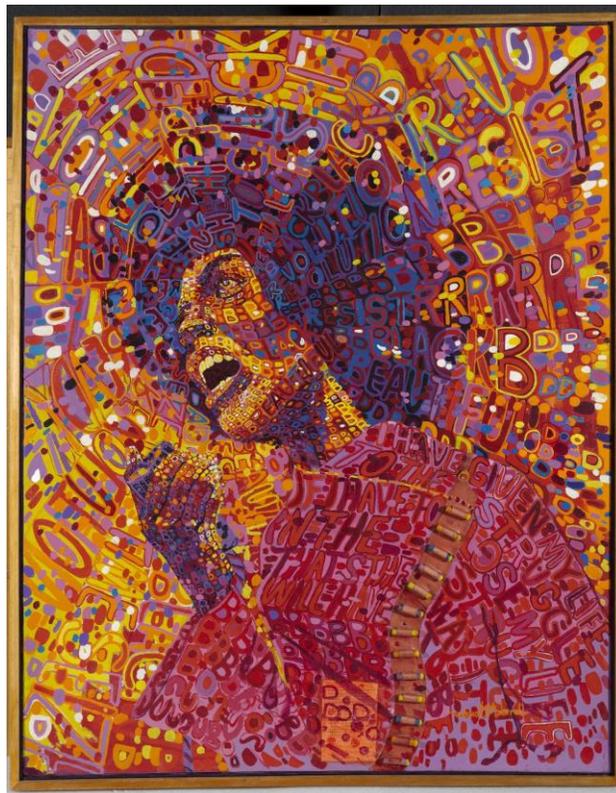
This, of course, also stresses the financial burden on the institution. But Lehman’s perspective is that committing resources toward diversifying staff makes the institution more sustainable in the long term. He described what he sees as a likely scenario, wherein cultural institutions will no longer attract as much corporate support as they once enjoyed and will eventually need to rely more heavily on individual, municipal, and philanthropic funds: “They are going to look at their institutions, not just museums, but symphonies and theater companies, and they are going to say, ‘Let’s look at your board and staff and program. We’re a city that’s 60 percent made of people of color, and what are you doing? What world are you living in?’” The scenario that keeps Lehman up at night, he says, is what will happen if institutions cannot find a way to make these changes naturally. In his words, “The problem if this happens is, in order to survive, people are going to be forced to change their program. The programs need to grow organically out of what institutions are, and if they don’t grow that way then they become shams.”

³⁰ Roger Schonfeld and Liam Sweeney, "Diversity in the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs Community," Ithaka S+R, last modified January 28, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.276381>.

³¹ The Brooklyn Museum’s deficit, as of spring 2016, was roughly \$3 million. See Jennifer Smith, "Budget Cuts Looming for Brooklyn Museum," *Wall Street Journal*, May 18, 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/budget-cuts-looming-for-brooklyn-museum-1463612954>.

Donors

While Pasternak is able to promote employees with nontraditional credentials to important leadership roles, managing the expectations of donors can be quite different. Pasternak acknowledged that at times there have been conflicts between the museum's financial goals and its commitment to social justice. In one case she lost three donors over programming that included an event honoring the famous Black Power activist Angela Davis, depicted *We Wanted a Revolution*. When asked how museum directors can bridge these gaps and initiate conversations that may be uncomfortable, she explained, "Sometimes you have to ask for forgiveness not permission. Sometimes you put a seed out there and let it bloom later," adding that you can't invite board members who don't support the museum's mission, no matter how generous. In spite of the donor issues, the museum moved forward with the Angela Davis event.³²



Wadsworth A. Jarrell, *Revolutionary (Angela Davis)* (1971)³³

³² Alex Greenberger, "Angela Y. Davis to Be Honored at the Brooklyn Museum's Sackler Center First Awards," *ARTnews*, April 26, 2016, <http://www.artnews.com/2016/04/25/angela-y-davis-to-be-honored-at-the-brooklyn-museums-sackler-center-first-awards/>.

³³ © Wadsworth Jarrell., Gift of R.M. Atwater, Anna Wolfrom Dove, Alice Fiebiger, Joseph Fiebiger, Belle Campbell Harriss, and Emma L. Hyde, by exchange, Designated Purchase Fund, Mary Smith Dorward Fund, Dick S. Ramsay Fund, and Carl H. de Silver Fund Image courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

Leadership is Critical

While it can be tempting for museum leaders to delegate inclusion, diversity, and equity issues out of sight, to emphasize the systemic inequities that are too large for any single institution to change, or even to blame staff for the demographic composition of the museum, many interviewees at the Brooklyn Museum emphasized the importance of commitments from leadership on these issues.

One curator, who had worked at several major museums in New York before arriving at the Brooklyn Museum, noted the conspicuous absence of brown, black, and female artists from exhibitions and collections among her Manhattan employers. In these museums she was “seen by some as a nag, reminding them that there wasn’t representation from certain types of artists.” She still raises the same issues at the Brooklyn Museum but it doesn’t bother her colleagues. This has something to do with the diversity of staff—she’s not the only one with a lived experience that is different from the norm for encyclopedic museums—but it also has to do with a common mission. Her boss is white, as is her boss’s boss. But commitments to inclusion, equity, and social justice are common among them.

Because this curator has moved between several Manhattan museums, she was able to offer insight into the importance of networks to a candidate’s success in the hiring process. She shared that at one of the previous museums she worked at, human resources addressed the lack of diversity in the museum from a networking perspective. Citing research that showed homogeneity in social groups and the obvious power of such networks in hiring practices, this HR department claimed that the lack of diversity was the fault of the employees, and related to their social lives outside the office. But Lehman and Pasternak, as well as curators, educators, and public programming staff at the Brooklyn Museum, on the other hand, consistently centered the role of leadership in building a diverse staff and an inclusive environment. Tsai explained, “It’s all about leadership. If you want to talk about social justice, then your actions should correspond to your rhetoric.”

“Diversity is not about checking boxes, it is about our cultural competency and as such our efforts can never end.”

The message that a single initiative cannot solve the “problem” of diversity was just as consistent. Brooklyn Museum employees voiced that leaders can’t delegate the responsibility to the single person of color, and can’t expect that any single act will make the need for this work disappear. Pasternak put it this way: “A lot of people think if they hire one black curator it will all go away. The truth is you need multiple strategies that are going on all the time. Diversity is not about checking boxes, it is about our cultural competency and as such our efforts can never end.”

Nontraditional Paths

One of the ways leadership influences staff diversity is in the determination of relevant credentials for hiring and promotion. In some cases the museum has looked for candidates with nontraditional backgrounds, such as the current director of education, Adjoa Jones de Almeida. Rather than museum education, her background is in community organizing. In our interview she quoted Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), a seminal book in the field of critical pedagogy that uses Marxist class analysis to promote a model of education emphasizing praxis. She believes that “it’s unlikely I would be in this position, given my time in the field, anywhere else. The interest in social justice is unique among encyclopedic museums.” She indicated that her view of pedagogy in the arts would be considered radical by most but that “my understanding of museum education makes sense here.”

Jones de Almeida described some challenges she has experienced in trying to raise awareness about the lack of minorities in art museums, saying the common refrain in the sector was that it was just “angry people of color bringing up this point over and over again.” The data from the Mellon Foundation’s 2015 museum demographic survey legitimized the issue to those who had previously been dismissive. She now teaches the survey results to her fellows and interns. Because of Pasternak’s willingness to promote someone with a nontraditional background, staff entering the field are being made aware of diversity issues at the start of their careers.

Conclusion

In some ways the Brooklyn Museum is idiosyncratic. It’s situated in a diverse part of a diverse city. It’s an encyclopedic institution with a contemporary attitude. Its location is historic, buffered by Eastern Parkway and Olmsted and Vaux’s Prospect Park. And it is the only encyclopedic museum in the country that shares its city with another.

Other characteristics are familiar to a number of museums and institutions in the cultural sector. Financial issues, attendance goals, and leadership transitions provoke

familiar conversations. The museum has to compete for the attention of a distracted public who have New York City as their backyard and the internet in their pocket.

But perhaps more significant to the shape the museum has taken than these external qualities is the agency of the museum's leaders. This characteristic informs the museum's mission, not in vague terms presented on the website's "About" page, but through fostering a shared perspective among staff. In the case of the Brooklyn Museum, that mission is an answer to the question, who is the museum for? There was a time when it operated as though it were aching to line up on museum row. Now the Brooklyn Museum is for the people walking Eastern Parkway, for those living in Flatbush, Crown Heights, Park Slope, Prospect Heights, and Bedford-Stuyvesant, and, more broadly, for anyone who wants to visit an encyclopedic museum that responds to the present discourse on social justice. Its staff discuss being public in a precise and intense manner. Among them, there is no ambivalence about who the museum is for.

Appendix

Case Studies in Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity among AAMD Member Art Museums

Three years ago, Ithaka S+R, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD), and the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) set out to quantify with demographic data an issue that has been of increasing concern within and beyond the arts community: the lack of representative diversity in professional museum roles. Our analysis found there were structural barriers to entry in these positions for people of color. After collecting demographic data from 77 percent of AAMD member museums and an additional cohort of AAM art museums that are not members of AAMD, we published a report sharing the aggregate findings with the public. In her foreword to the report, Mariët Westermann, executive vice president for programs and research at the Mellon Foundation, noted, “Non-Hispanic white staff continue to dominate the job categories most closely associated with the intellectual and educational mission of museums, including those of curators, conservators, educators, and leadership.”³⁴ While museum staff overall were 71 percent white non-Hispanic, we found that many staff of color were employed in security and facilities positions across the sector. In contrast, 84 percent of the intellectual leadership positions were held by white non-Hispanic staff. Westermann observed that “these proportions do not come close to representing the diversity of the American population.”

The survey provided a baseline of data from which change can be measured over time. It has also provoked further investigation into the challenges of demographic representation in this sector. Many institutional leaders are growing increasingly aware of demographic trends showing that in roughly a quarter century, white non-Hispanics will no longer be the majority in the United States, whereas ten years ago the white non-Hispanic population was double that of people of color.³⁵ This rapid growth indicates that cultural institutions such as museums will need to be intentional and strategic in order to be inclusive and serve the entire American public.

To aid these efforts, AAMD, the Mellon Foundation, and Ithaka S+R partnered again to launch a new effort to understand the following: What practices are effective in making the American art museum more inclusive? By what measures? How have museums been

³⁴ Roger Schonfeld, Mariët Westermann, and Liam Sweeney, “Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey,” Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, July 29, 2015, https://mellon.org/media/filer_public/ba/99/ba99e53a-48d5-4038-80e1-66f9ba1c020e/awmf_museum_diversity_report_aamd_7-28-15.pdf.

³⁵ William H. Frey, “A Pivotal Period for Race in America,” in *Diversity Explosion: How New Racial Demographics Are Remaking America* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 1–20, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7864/j.ctt6wpc40.4>.

successful in diversifying their professional staff? What do leaders on issues of social justice, equity, and inclusion in the art museum have to share with their peers?

Using the data from the 2015 survey, we identified 20 museums where underrepresented racial/ethnic minorities have a relatively substantial presence in the following positions: educators, curators, conservators, and museum leadership. We then gauged the interest of these 20 museums in participating, also asking a few questions about their history with diversity. In shaping the final list of participants, we also sought to ensure some amount of breadth in terms of location, museum size, and museum type. Our final group includes the following museums:

- The Andy Warhol Museum (Pittsburgh)
- Brooklyn Museum
- Contemporary Arts Museum Houston
- Detroit Institute of Arts
- Los Angeles County Museum of Art
- Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
- Spelman College Museum (Atlanta)
- Studio Museum in Harlem.³⁶

In shaping the final list of museums to profile, we also sought to ensure some amount of breadth in terms of location, size, and type.

We then conducted site visits to the various museums, interviewing between ten and fifteen staff members across departments, including the director. In some cases, we also interviewed board members, artists, and external partners. We observed meetings, attended public events, and conducted outside research.

In the case studies in the series, we have endeavored to maintain an inclusive approach when reporting findings. For this reason, we sought the perspectives of individual employees across various levels of seniority in the museum. When relevant we have addressed issues of geography, history, and architecture to elucidate the museum's role in its environment. In this way the museum emerges as a collection of people—staff,

³⁶ We focused on people of color for measuring diversity for two reasons: (1) In the 2015 art museum demographic study, we received substantive data for the race/ethnicity variable, unlike other measures such as LGBTQ+ and disability status, which are not typically captured by human resources, and (2) in the study we found ethnic and racial identification to be the variable for which the degree of homogeneity was related to the “intellectual leadership” aspect of the position (i.e., curator, conservator, educator, director). We are alert to issues of accessibility in this project, and although it was not foregrounded in our original project plan we hope to address these questions in more depth in future projects.

artists, donors, public. This research framework positions the institution as a series of relationships between these various constituencies.

We hope that by providing insight into the operations, strategies, and climates of these museums, the case studies will help leaders in the field approach inclusion, diversity, and equity issues with a fresh perspective.