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# Museums as Sites of "Being in Conversation": A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study

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MUSEUMS AS SITES OF “BEING IN CONVERSATION”  
A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

RANDY C. ROBERTS

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Ph.D. in Leadership and Change Program

of Antioch University

in partial fulfillment

of the requirements of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

June, 2013

This is to certify that the Dissertation entitled:

MUSEUMS AS SITES OF “BEING IN CONVERSATION”  
A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

prepared by

Randy C. Roberts

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Leadership and Change.

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Beth Lord, Ph.D., External Reader

date

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## Acknowledgements

Margaret Wheatley's (2005) description of what it means to "make the road by walking" is at the heart of my leadership practice and way of understanding. Leaders hold space for chaos, help others walk through it together, and learn new ways of being from the journey. Doing this work requires courage and willingness to proceed recognizing that the future is always unfolding. It calls on us to trust that as we walk, we create our path—and its edges, its textures, and its horizons—help us to find our way. There have been many leaders with whom I have traveled. With some I have wandered for many days and many miles and with others I have strolled a bit and then turned down a different trail. Although I have spent much time sequestered at my desk reading, writing, and wondering, I have never wandered alone. Many people have joined me on this journey and we have made our road by walking together.

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## Abstract

In times of great change, institutions must be able to adapt while not losing their essence, those qualities that are central, enduring, and distinctive. While it is understood and acknowledged that museums must change their approach to be relevant and sustainable in a world in which there have been monumental shifts in the ways that people communicate, access information, and experience connection, the essential qualities of museums are not well-defined or agreed upon. More than a decade into the new century and in spite of much discussion, contemplation, and experimentation, the 21<sup>st</sup> century museum model remains unsettled. To explore the question of essence, this study turned to the realm of philosophy and particularly hermeneutic phenomenology. Based in the work of Martin Heidegger and Hans Georg Gadamer, the study is designed to gain deep understanding of the museum visit experience particularly in terms of what it reveals about: the connection between human experience and museums; the work of museums as sites of exploring the question of “being-in-the-world” and “being-with-others-in-the-world;” and the essential role of museums as communal and cultural institutions. The research approach is based in hermeneutic phenomenology and includes a two-phase process involving twelve participants conducting narrated visits to museums of their choice, followed by post-visit conversations with seven of those twelve. Six themes emerged from the data: seeing the self; experiencing others’ experiences; being at the fusion of horizons; mindful presence; embodied experience; and touching and being touched. While not discussed explicitly in terms of what it means to “be-in-the-world” and to “be-with-others-in-the-world,” participants engaged in deep consideration of memory, identity, relationship across time and place, spirituality, life meaning and mortality. The act of being in conversation, which was at the center of how people encountered objects in the museum, emerged from this study as a defining feature of the museum

experience. It is in its role as a site of “being in conversation” with self, with others, and with objects that the museum is set apart from other institutions and activities. Implications for museum practice, leadership and change studies, and future research are discussed. The electronic version of this dissertation is at OhioLink ETD Center, [www.ohiolink.edu/etd](http://www.ohiolink.edu/etd)

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## Chapter I: Introduction

Just short of one week after the World Trade Center attack in September 2001, then director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art Philippe de Montebello was quoted in the New York Times saying, “People who haven't had the heart yet to go back to work have been coming here for a sense of serenity and the intercession of other people, rubbing shoulders in a kind of womb of culture. Hospitals are open. They're around to fix the body. We're here to fix the soul” (Kimmelman, 2001). Those visitors to the Museum in the weeks following 9/11 were likely not coming for reasons supported by the institution’s mission: *“To collect, preserve, study, exhibit, and stimulate appreciation for and advance knowledge of works of art that collectively represent the broadest spectrum of human achievement at the highest level of quality, all in the service of the public and in accordance with the highest professional standards.”* Rather they came seeking something outside of what is traditionally thought of as the role of museums in society.

A decade later, in January 2011, as violent unrest shook the streets across Egypt, hundreds of citizens rushed to circle the Cairo Museum, linking arms to create a protective barrier warding off vandals and looters. It was surely not the economic worth, entertainment value, or even the educational importance of the museum that these young people were willing to protect with their lives. Rather, they were safeguarding the spirit of their people, their stories and symbols, those cultural artifacts that are essential to their shared identity and help to define who they are as a people.

These are but two striking examples of the value of museums. There are thousands of other stories that could be told to illustrate the myriad ways in which museums have affected the lives of individuals and communities. Yet, there is an ongoing struggle across the field to

understand the role of museums in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, an understanding that will guide the responsible use of museum resources for our own and future generations.

Developing a shared understanding of the essential contribution that museums make to society is by no means a new discussion. It is in fact a discussion that seems to ebb and flow throughout museum history. Early museum reformer John Cotton Dana often raised the question of museum purpose. In his pamphlet, *Should Museums be Useful?*, Dana (1927) wrote, “in spite of the efforts made by museums to hold some of the slight power to attract which they once enjoyed, their influence wanes” (p. 5). He asked “How make a museum useful? Why museums at all?” (Dana, 1927, p. 3). In his report on a 1930 study of museums conducted by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Paul Marshall Rea (1932) noted that “museums have developed in a strangely casual way. They have neglected amazingly to define their objectives, to measure their results, and to analyze their experience” (p. 4). A decade later in 1942, museum educator Theodore Low wrote, “The word ‘museum’ has little if any meaning the way it is used today” (Low, 2004, p. 31).

The discussion of museum meaning and purpose continues to this day with urgent issues of sustainability and relevance seeming to hang in the balance. Former museum director Robert Janes (2009) called for museums to reconsider their “underlying purpose, meaning, and value” (p. 13). He wrote:

Museums have led a privileged existence as agenda-free and respected custodians of mainstream cultural values....Museums are privileged because they are organizations whose purpose is their meaning....The failure to ask ‘why’ museums do what they do discourages critical self-reflection, which is a prerequisite to heightened awareness, organizational alignment and social relevance. Instead, in the absence of ‘why,’ the focus is largely on ‘how,’ or the clichéd process of collecting, preserving and earning revenue. (p.16)

In the introduction to the updated edition of *Reinventing the Museum*, Editor Gail Anderson (2012) asks: “What role should the museum assume? What services can the museum offer that will be meaningful for the public in a complex and ever changing world?” (p.1).

It is the question of essence and human connection that I believe is critical to the value of museums, and ultimately to their sustainability and survival. We live in a time of complexity and fast-paced change. New technologies continuously expand and hasten access to information. New ways of communicating have introduced alternative avenues for connecting to ideas and to people. Non-place based interconnectedness has changed the ways in which people understand themselves in their communities and in the world. At the same time, changes in the economy have raised pressure on non-profit organizations to provide broad public value and to demonstrate their worth in measurable ways. Given this shifting environment, museums, which are traditionally slow to respond, must be able to adapt gracefully and quickly to meet unfamiliar challenges.

In these kind of circumstances, Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009) assert that it is critical to “distinguish the essential from the expendable,” to know what is “so precious and central to an organization’s identity and capacity that it must be preserved. What even if valued by many, must be left behind in order to move forward” (p. 65). In times of great change, institutions must be able to adapt while not losing their essence, those special qualities that are essential to their identity; characteristics that Albert and Whetten (1985) describe as central, enduring, and distinctive.

It is important to recognize, however, that it is precisely at these moments during which identity-related characteristics may be questioned that resistance often increases and powerful inertial pressure can take over (Albert & Whetten, 1985). The tendency for tension between

change and stasis to heighten when identity is at stake may offer some understanding about the observable distance between calls for change in museums at a field-wide level and the slow pace of change at an individual institutional level. If museums define themselves by their activities—as places that collect and preserve objects and present exhibits and programs—then changes in the form of those activities may be perceived as threats to identity. Resistance to change is likely to increase. If museums define themselves by their underlying purpose, rather than by their activities, then changes to form may be less likely to be understood as a threat to identity and more likely to be seen as a path to increased possibility.

Inevitably the future is unknown, but having a shared understanding of purpose provides a basis for moving forward with coherence and focus. Museums need to know themselves and clearly grasp what they are that is unique to their core purpose. In the absence of this understanding, efforts to be relevant in today's world can easily pull museums into a trap of diminishing their potential value by meeting needs that are attainable and even valuable, but are not using their unique resources to the greatest potential. The ultimate result of this type of “shape-shifting” to fit an identified need compromises the integrity of the museum institution and could result in a perception of museums as being so much like other organizations and institutions that the value of their very existence is lessened.

### **Personal Meaning**

I am fascinated with museums. As a child I was lucky enough to be introduced to them early on and I have always been enchanted by the magic of being close to a creative masterpiece or an artifact that has survived over hundreds of years. I love the stories museums hold. I am also a collector of stuff and have my own “cabinet of curiosities” that I love to add to and rearrange and look at.

Over the years, though, I've developed a bit of a love/hate relationship with the institution of the museum and with the museum field. I find myself questioning why museums matter if they matter, how they are valued and who they value, how they are used and how the way they are used can change. I wonder whether or not museums are able to act as change agents or if their role as reflectors of society and social norms is so embedded that they are more suited to following than leading. Perhaps more importantly, I worry that museums often reinforce social norms that create barriers for outsiders.

As a long-time museum practitioner, I have approached my work from the perspective of one who believes that museums are political environments, places that have the potential to challenge privilege and marginalization. At the same time, after more than thirty years in the museum field, I have come to recognize the limits of activism in a generally conservative environment. While I remain committed to opening museums to their communities and ensuring that programs, exhibits, and collections reflect multiple voices and diverse perspectives, I have come to doubt the wisdom of relying on changes to the existing model of museum practice as the best way to make museums more meaningful and more available. I continue to believe that museums have an ethical obligation to be genuinely accessible and that if they are not doing important work that strengthens their entire communities, the argument for public funding is one that is not easy to support in this time of great need and limited available resources. How to best be of value is a challenging question and the search for answers is complex and ongoing.

Over the past few years, I have talked to many people about the museum experiences that were most meaningful to them. Even when the discussions are brief, there is often a story to share; experiences of "being" in museums that people are eager to tell. It is not unusual for words to stop in the telling and for the gesture of hands touching heart to replace the voice.

While I have been thinking about the power and problem of museums for many years, I was surprised by the emotion that seemed so present for many. I began to wonder what was happening in these museum experiences that seemed to touch a place beyond the mind, beyond knowing.

As a practitioner, it has been a challenge for me not to leap directly from the idea that something powerful is happening to the responsibility of making sure that my work supports the possibility of that experience happening for everyone. It is a short leap, then, from possibility to barrier. Without fully appreciating the powerful moments shared, I have found myself engrossed in analyzing what museums do that creates those walls, physical and invisible, that dim their potential as touchstones of “being.” Yet I continue to find that my journey leads me back to the beginning, to the experience. I have come to a place of believing that without unpacking the essential connection between museums and being-in-the-world, without understanding the lived experience of those who have found connection in museums, museum leaders will continue to waste precious energy and wisdom, addressing symptoms, often with brilliance and great success, but without actually touching the true challenge.

Sometimes I think that museums are too focused on trying to balance power and equalize access by changing the process and approach to traditional museum activities. Sometimes I worry that museums are too focused on outcomes that are concerned with doing and knowing. For those who are committed to museums being relevant, it seems that the path most taken is to focus on addressing urgent needs; needs that are rarely defined in terms of the critical human need to gather and be. I believe, however, that many of the outcomes that would result from an increased focus on supporting engagement in “being” would ultimately advance many of the action-oriented outcomes to which museums are committed, but may not be as well positioned to

support. There is a tendency, though, to focus on changing existing activities to address immediate needs, rather than looking anew at the work of connecting people to being human, a function for which museums are well positioned and which, I believe, they can fulfill very effectively.

### **Grounding the Museum Experience in Being**

I believe that museums have been struggling over the last several decades to find a place of relevance and meaning, to genuinely contribute to building better communities and serving the needs of individuals, and to define the new normal in a world that no longer derives knowledge from objects, looks to institutions for answers, or defines reality through materiality. There have been many changes put in place in the service of ensuring that museums matter. Museum visits have been moved out into the streets and onto computer screens, objects can be virtually manipulated and QR codes make layers of information available with the touch of a finger. Museum visits often include many opportunities to touch, create, and talk back. There are comfortable places for children and the elderly; museums have become more welcoming and friendlier.

In spite of these changes, however, as Van Moer, De Mette, and Elias (2008) pointed out “there is remarkably little evidence in practice that museums shape their exhibits and educational tools by the actual experiences of visitors” (p. 43). Although it is broadly discussed and acknowledged that meaning is constructed and that visitors are de facto involved in meaning making, museums continue for the most part to communicate predefined messages; the traditional role of education as information sharing is still predominant in museum exhibits and programs (Ansbacher, 1998; Hennes, 2002; Van Moer et al., 2008). Several years ago, in the course of my own studies, I raised the question of museum purpose with members of my

academic cohort. One of my peers responded to my inquiry with a bit of exasperation, saying that “obviously museums are about education.” She went on to talk about her experience as a young woman being taken by her mother to see artwork of the Harlem Renaissance. Without this visit, she explained, she would not have known these great Black artists and would not have been able to pass on that knowledge to her own children. She concluded by teasing me about asking a question that had such a simple answer. When I asked her why it mattered to her that she had this knowledge to pass along, she stopped talking for a long time. “Well, it’s my heritage,” she eventually responded, “it’s important to me.”

I share this story to suggest that rather than “education” being an obvious answer to an easy question, it is, rather, an easy answer to a complex question. And I suggest that although it has served as the answer museums have been using to explain their purpose for many years, it is too simple and too uni-dimensional to truly address the complex role of museums. The American Alliance of Museums (AAM) [the organization previously known as the American Association of Museums], which has been a central player in questioning and defining the role of museums over the past century, remains committed to approaching museums essentially as educational institutions. In recent correspondence, Ford Bell, President of AAM, explained, “At AAM, we believe that museums are essential educational institutions, providing important educational opportunities, “K to Life,” as we say.” He went on to say that museums are also community institutions that address “whatever community problems you can name,” and economic generators that are essential to the tourism industry. Bell concluded, though, “At their core, I believe museums are educational institutions” (F. Bell, personal communication, September 9, 2012).

It is important to note that museums are granted their non-profit designation based on their status as educational institutions, which may account for some of the reluctance to move far from that definition in spite of the fact that there is a body of visitor research indicating that the purpose of museums reaches way beyond education, even as it is understood in the broadest sense. I believe that the meaning and work of museums is situated in the realm of the philosophical, rather than in the function of the practical, and that at their epistemological core, museums are about creating the possibility for direct interpretive experiences with art and objects, with people, and with the self. These interpretive experiences, in turn, create the possibility for reflection and understanding. It is in this way, I believe, that museums can live their value by embracing their essential role as places that hold the question of “being” and understanding.

What does it mean to ground museum experience within a framework of “being”? Primarily it means honoring that which is unique about museums and stretching those qualities to their fullest rather than duplicating within the museum’s walls what can already be found in daily life. It means creating an environment in which people can be truly present, without distraction and “busyness.” This does not necessarily mean a quiet, contemplative space; it is, rather, about holistic involvement in experience whether it is filled with joy, anguish, awe or any other mix of emotions. To understand museums as sites of “being” rather than educational institutions challenges the notion that museums are about free choice learning, about the information held in their collections, about providing alternative forms of cognitive experience. It suggests rather, that museums are about immersion in exploration of self and spirit, about experiences that lead to fulfillment of human nature, to authenticity, and to being present in the present while being aware of the past and the future. Museums in this sense are places of human experience that do not offer explanations, but support knowing.

My understanding of museums as sites of “being” is informed by the work of philosophers Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, both of whom were interested in the question of “being” and the connection between “understanding” and “being.” I have studied their approaches to “being” and have used much of their work as a foundation for exploring how museums may be understood as sites of “being.” The question of what it means “to be” is deeply layered and complicated. Beyond its inherent complexity, the question is made even more difficult in that it calls on beings to reflect on “being” from within a state of “being,” a condition that Heidegger (1978) believed can never be fully resolved. Nevertheless, the question of “being” is at the heart of understanding and I would suggest it is present even if it is not always articulated. I suggest also that the question of what it means “to be” is central to why museums exist and why they matter. Museums as are positioned to hold the question of being; this is not to say that museums hold the meaning of being, but rather that their work is situated in this essential and profound question.

In his later work, Heidegger (1971) considered the way in which humans dwell in the world; a phenomenon he described as “always a staying with things” (p. 151). This cannot be understood as a subject/object dichotomy, but must be understood in terms of relationship, the fundamental totality. He considered lived experience the foundation for producing meaning and emphasized active involvement in inquiry. Knowledge is not something that is perceived as a spectator, but is something that the learner is a participant in effecting. Further, knowledge resides in a totality that is not parsed and analyzed, but is absorbed in its wholeness.

For Heidegger (1978), each person’s experience is a dwelling project of being-in-the-world that develops its authentic existence “in terms of its ownmost distinctive possibility”

(p. 435). Authentic human beings understand themselves in terms of their own distinctive possibilities for developing themselves as beings-in-the-world. They experience a “felt engagement concerning possible ways for being-in-the-world” (Su, 2011, p. 64). According to Heidegger, being-in-the-world is always “associated with a state of mind or mood” (Su, 2011, p. 64); it always indicates situatedness in the world and affectedness toward the world.

Gadamer, a student of Heidegger, was primarily interested in understanding, which he saw taking place at the “fusion of horizons,” the place between the known and the yet to be known (Bontekoe, 2000). He believed that “being” is grounded in the present through recognition of the past and openness to the future. Horizons are by nature permeable; the crossing from known to unknown is constantly in motion (Gadamer, 1989). Understanding is always situated in the present, but is formed within the context of the past. Understanding emerges in an integrative way, flowing between the parts and the whole, the present and the past, as part of the hermeneutic circle. Bontekoe (2000) explained the hermeneutic circle: “The object of comprehension, taken as a whole, is understood in terms of its parts, and this understanding involves the recognition of how these parts are integrated in the whole. The parts, moreover, once integrated, define the whole. The whole is what it is by virtue of its being composed of these parts” (p. 3). Further, Gadamer believed that dialogue is essential to understanding and that it is through dialogue that human beings come to see their own understanding and other ways of understanding. Meaning emerges through dialogue. It is important especially to the connection between Gadamer’s understanding of “being” and museums, that he included art as a potential actor in the dialogic process. Ultimately, he believed, the role of art in dialogue is not to know the artist’s meaning, but to find the viewer’s own truth through dialogue with the artist’s work.

Heidegger's discussion of the question of being and Gadamer's contributions in terms of understanding provide a rich context in which to consider the role of museums. This effort to place the museum construct in the realm of the philosophical acknowledges Lord's (2006) assertion that a lack of philosophical engagement has contributed to a fundamental problem in how museums define their role, described by museum leader Mark O'Neill (2006) as a need for adequate and coherent definition of the nature and purpose of the museum. O'Neill (2006) argues that "museums can only be as good as their analysis of society and their awareness of the reality of people's lives" (p. 19). To this I would add that they must also hold a deep and cohesive understanding of their purpose and the ways in which their unique resources can be used to respond to individual and social needs, and that it best serves museums and society for this understanding to be situated in a philosophical context.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This research was designed to gain deep understanding of the museum visit experience particularly in terms of what it reveals about: the connection between human experience and museums; the work of museums as sites of exploring the question of "being-in-the-world" and "being-with-others-in-the-world;" and the essential role of museums as communal and cultural institutions.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by several overarching questions: How do museum visit experiences connect to "being-in-the-world" and to "being-with-others-in-the-world"?; what are the specific features of the visit experience that facilitate or block those connections?; how do study participants respond to those experiences that connect to being human and to those that

create barriers? Given the nature of the research, there are other questions that arose and were considered during the course of the research.

### **Research Approach**

This study is situated in hermeneutic phenomenology and hermeneutic philosophy, which consider understanding of experience to be an essential aspect of “being.” A hermeneutic phenomenological study involves the researcher and participants in peeling back layers of description to reveal the essential qualities of the lived experience (van Manen, 1990). Researcher and participants engage in the arc of the hermeneutic circle, moving between parts and the whole with each informing the other, until meaning emerges. The researcher becomes the research instrument and must ensure that the voices of participants, as well as her own voice, are fully present in the understanding. Based on the lived experience of museum visits, my research explored museums as sites of understanding and “being” through an interpretive process involving participants and the researcher. This approach was chosen because the intent of the study was to develop a deep understanding of a particular lived experience rather than a universal truth that can be quantified (Higgs, 2001).

This study took place in two phases. First, participants conducted a series of narrated visits. This approach involved in-the-moment narration as a museum visit was taking place. Participants talked through their visit to any museum of their choosing and described their experience especially as it related to “being.” I did not share my understanding of “being” so as to encourage the participant’s meaning to emerge. The second phase of the study involved follow-up unstructured in-depth conversations with a subset of the participants to further explore their visit experiences.

Data were interpreted through a thematic reflection framework (van Manen, 1990) identifying significant phrases, themes, and concepts and a general sense of emerging meaning (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002). Based on the narrated visit data, I pursued deeper understanding of emerging themes through in-depth interviews. Based on the narrated visits and interviews, I then wrote a description of the phenomenon. Finally, I wrote an interpretive essay linking the literature about “being” to the participants’ lived experience. I believe that this type of study can contribute to the knowledge base within the museum field since there is currently little qualitative research exploring the deep meaning of museum experience particularly as it relates to the human experience.

## **Conclusion**

I am often struck by the urgency with which people talk about the question of the 21<sup>st</sup> century museum construct against a backdrop that feels slow moving and frenetic at the same time. There is recognition of the need for change to make museums valuable to their communities; there is deep passion for museum work, communities and citizens; there are many questions about what museums do and many attempts to respond to community needs and desires by presenting activities that are what visitors want. Without a shared understanding of the purpose of museums, however, the energy that is put into changing to make museums relevant is likely to result in adjustments to current practice that will not keep pace with broader changes in society or make best use of museum resources.

I go back to Heifetz’s (1994) theory of adaptive leadership, which warns against applying technical solutions to complex challenges that traverse barriers of knowledge, skill, and function. Times of great change often create conditions that call for organizations to “hit the reset button” (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 64) in ways that can redefine institutional activities. In this kind of

changing environment, Heifetz et al. (2009) stress the importance of ensuring that institutions are situated in their essence, in what makes them unique and valuable.

In these changing times, the museum's traditionally defined purpose as an educational institution and its primary function as a collecting institution are in question. Rather than focusing on adjusting practice in an effort to preserve some form of the traditional activities of collecting, preserving and interpreting, I suggest that the museum field would find greater benefit through investing in better understanding the essence and role of these unique institutions. This shift in understanding could then lead to fresh perspectives on using museums' rich resources and expertise to contribute to society by fully developing museums as sites of human understanding and connection, places in which people are absorbed in the question of what it means to "be-in-the-world."

## Chapter II: Review of the Literature

This review of the literature provides a multi-layered context in which to situate understanding of the lived experience of the museum visit, particularly as it relates to museums as sites of hermeneutic phenomenology. I come to my research from the position that having a shared field-wide and institutionally accepted way of understanding museum purpose is important to the value of museums to individuals, to communities, and to society. Questions logically emerge from this point of entry including what the state of that shared understanding currently is and why shared understanding matters.

Since my research is situated in the experience of museums in the United States, the section of this chapter focusing on museums refers to U.S. museums. Specifically, it focuses on two questions: how are museums understood today and how did they arrive at this place. In examining the story of museum evolution in the U.S., it is clear that there is a consistent narrative thread of questioning museum identity and role that runs throughout. This literature review begins with an examination of that questioning.

To contextualize periods of questioning and change, I present an overview of U.S. museum history. This section focuses on the development of different types and models of museums and how shifts in the museum field connected to what was happening in the external environment. There are four major focus areas: the connection between external shifts and internal adaptations; the paradigm shift from a focus on objects to a focus on the visitor-object relationship; the way in which finances and business models have affected museum work and image; and the efforts to better understand and create the 21st century museum.

This overview of U.S. museum development reveals a field that seems to exist within an ongoing state of questioning identity and purpose, a strain of questioning that often seems

disconnected from how most institutions function. To better understand this type of organizational and field-wide change, and to better understand its importance in developing stability and advancing growth, it is useful to contextualize museums within the framework of field theory and organizational identity literature. This is especially informative in terms of understanding the pace and process of change as it relates to the observable gap between what is discussed at field-wide leadership levels and what seems to be occurring at individual institutions.

The identity literature points to the formation of organizational understanding as taking place with both internal and external constituents. From this perspective it is clearly informative to examine how museum visitors understand the purpose of museums and how they, in practice, use museums. Interestingly, the visitor studies literature, particularly the body of studies focused on motivation, reveals that visitors tend to understand the museum from the perspective of purpose, rather than from the perspective of activity. It is particularly salient to this study that many visitors, in fact, understand their visit experience in terms that connect to aspects of “being” and “being-with-others.”

The final section of the literature review provides a context for understanding the philosophy of “being,” especially as it is discussed through the work of philosophers Martin Heidegger and Hans Georg Gadamer. Both Heidegger and Gadamer explored how understanding is integral to “being,” how people make meaning of “being-in-the-world.” It is in the context of their work on “being” that I have framed my study of museums as places in which people consider the question of “being.”

### **The Question of Museum Meaning and Purpose**

The story of the development of museums in the United States is often told as a rather simple and straightforward tale. It begins with a fascination with the wonders of the world,

evolves into an “upstairs/downstairs” drama featuring intrigues of class, power, and politics, and concludes with the current characterization of museums as educational institutions that are essential to the vitality of their communities. Throughout the story, there are subplots about audience, finance, representation, objects, and experiences. There are colorful sidebars featuring particular institutions that do not fit the dominant narrative. For the most part, though, the traditional telling of the history of museums in the United States follows a fairly linear plotline, describing a coherent and logical course of development that neatly progresses from a focus on objects and information to a focus on visitors and experience to a focus on contributing to communities and to society by providing the museum’s resources to be of service in whatever ways are valuable to the museum’s constituents.

There is significant evidence, however, that the actual history is much more complex, and perhaps more idiosyncratic, than the story we have learned to tell. At the heart of this history is an ongoing “identity crisis” in the museum field; a struggle to define that which is at the core of museums’ *raison d’être* and which is essential to the meaning of the museum construct across the range of type and activity. Museum scholars and leaders have referenced this “identity crisis” across the past century.

One of the foremost museum luminaries of our time, the late Stephen Weil continually questioned the intellectual foundation upon which museums rest; what he described as “the widely accepted and bedrock cluster of concepts that justifies the existence of such a considerable institution, determines its functions, shapes its values, and provides guidance for its future direction and growth” (Weil, 1995, p. 84). He went on to assert that at one time there was a solid foundation, but that the elements that shaped that foundation had become shaky at best.

To move forward with any surety, he suggested, would require the construction of a new narrative structure, a new foundational understanding of purpose.

The question of why museums exist often appeared in the literature in the context of introducing a new approach to making museums more relevant and meaningful. For example, in his 1927 pamphlet, "Should Museums Be Useful?," John Cotton Dana asked, "why museums at all?" (p. 3). "Unfortunately no one seems to know precisely how to improve museums" (p. 1). Dana moved from these concerns to an explanation and defense of his concept of a community museum; a concept that rejected many of the traditional notions that museums existed to preserve and exhibit the cultural masterpieces that the wealthy and well educated had identified as being valuable. It was not coincidence that Dana's concept of museums in service to their communities and especially to public education paralleled John Dewey's progressive education movement. As G. Hein (2005) explained, "Dewey's educational philosophy and practice is developed for a moral and social purpose. His educational philosophy stems from his belief in democracy and his faith that progressive education was the way to achieve a more equitable and democratic society." Progressive education itself emerged from the larger Progressive Movement, which responded to the social issues arising from the rapid growth of industrialization with an agenda to reform inequities of power, wealth, and justice. While Dana's concept of the community museum demonstrated a new model for museum practice that affected the field and is seen even today as being an important movement in the field, it did not affect the predominant model of the traditional museum that continued to thrive and continues, in fact, to exist today.

In 1945 coinciding with the end of World War II, Francis Henry Taylor wrote:

We have reached a critical period in American museums as anyone confronted with a budget can tell too plainly. It is impossible for us to continue as we have done in the past.

The public are no longer impressed and are frankly bored with museums and their inability to render adequate service. (p. 23)

The Great Depression had gravely diminished philanthropic support. It had become clear that museums had to be of public value or they would not be sustainable. F.H. Taylor (1945) crafted a strong and succinct argument to this end, writing “[curators] should never forget that they are, first and last, public servants and not private collectors spending public funds for objects about which they wish to write learned and obscure treatises....Properly considered, every activity of an art gallery is essentially educational” (p. 36). He went on to tie the role of museums directly into the needs of a postwar society:

Twelve million soldiers and sailors will be returning to civilian life; twenty odd million industrial workers will be absorbed with them into a peacetime economy. They will want some means of recapturing the schooling from which they were so abruptly taken. More than ever before the American museum will be called upon to fulfill a social function ... Our job is to deal straightforwardly in human values” (F.H. Taylor, 1945, pp. 49-50).

Three decades later, Duncan F. Cameron (1971) wrote:

There is abundant evidence of an identity crisis in some of the major institutions, while others are in an advanced state of schizophrenia....Put in the simplest terms, our museums and art galleries do not seem to know who or what they are. Our institutions are unable to resolve their problems of role definition. (p. 11)

At about the same time scholar Alma Wittlin (1970) suggested, “It should be a fascinating goal to search for the specific, intrinsic contribution [museums] can make to human well-being. We may then be in a position to answer the question ‘would we invent museums if we did not have them?’” (p. 43). It is of little surprise that the role of the museum would be questioned at this time of social and political upheaval in the United States. The ways in which society was changing were in direct contrast to the traditional ways in which museums continued to function as guardians of the objects and stories of the elite and powerful. Poet June Jordan’s response to the 1969 exhibit “Harlem on My Mind: The Cultural Capitol of Black America” offers a

powerful illustration of the gap between the way museums functioned and the new way that people were envisioning their stories and their power to tell their stories. Jordan wrote:

Take me into the museum and show me myself, show me my people, show me Soul America. If you cannot show me myself, if you cannot teach my children what they need to know – and they need to know the truth, and they need to know that nothing is more important than human life – If you cannot show and teach these things, then why shouldn't I attack the temples of America and blow them up? (Jordan as cited in Schwarzer, 2006, p. 20).

Each of the instances described above has marked a time of questioning in the museum field. John Cotton Dana's thoughtful consideration of museum purpose at the turn of the twentieth century; Francis Henry Taylor's warning of the need to change or become irrelevant at the end of World War II; and Duncan Cameron's and Alma Wittlin's questioning during the civil rights era of what role museums have in society and what difference they make in people's lives each were connected to disruptions and reconsideration of rules. The connection between shifting power and change is clearly illustrated as museums attempted again and again to organize in ways that were meaningful both internally and externally.

The shifting and reshaping that is evidenced across the history of U.S. museums is no less present today than it was a century ago. In 2009 for example, Robert Janes raised an almost identical question to the one asked forty years ago by Alma Wittlin, "If museums did not exist, would we reinvent them and what would they look like?" (Janes, 2009, p. 14). Janes raised this question in the context of waving a warning flag, bringing attention to his concerns that in a time of great need around critical issues like climate change and global sustainability museums are attending to attracting customers and being entertaining, a wrong-minded approach, he feared, that would render the museum institution irrelevant.

Not surprisingly, in the museum field, calls for change often are associated with larger societal shifts that cause disruptions in the functioning of institutions. These types of external

shifts are broad and diverse ranging from such forces as economics, politics, representation, technology, and the ontological nature of objects. An overview of the ongoing questioning of museum purpose across the field and the lack of significant and profound change that has yet to take hold, raises questions about the solidity of the field, the work of individual institutions, and the ways in which museum leaders are approaching the definition of museum purpose. A brief overview of the evolving nature of museums in the United States illustrates the ways in which museums have grown and developed over the past 150 years and how they have reflected and responded to social, political, and economic influences. It also illustrates the fragmented nature of the field-wide narrative that underpins the museum construct.

### **The Development of Museums in the United States**

From their earliest incarnations, museums in the United States were conceived of as educational institutions (Brigham, 1995; Hein, 2000; L. Roberts, 1997) founded on a belief in "equality for all through rational enlightenment" (L. Roberts, 1997, p. 4). In understanding the sentiment of this intention, it is important to recognize that the definition of who is part of the "all" who qualify for "equality" has varied throughout the nation's history, however it is generally accepted that museums in this country were founded on the belief that they had a responsibility to educate the public across edges of class and status (Brigham, 1995; Hein, 2000; L. Roberts, 1997).

The best-known early museum was Charles Willson Peale's American Museum in Philadelphia, which opened in 1786. Featuring organized collections of natural specimens as well as art and entertaining "scientific wonders," the museum was intended to appeal to scholars and to a broader, general public (E. Alexander, 1997; Brigham, 1995; Conn, 1998; Dennett, 1997; Melber & Abraham, 2002; Wittlin, 1970). Peale saw the museum as both a commercial and

public undertaking, and understood that its economic health was directly tied to attracting paid customers by providing what they were interested in seeing (Brigham, 1995; Skramstad, 1991). He was, however, sensitive to the power of social rank, and accorded special privilege to those with social status. In much the same way as celebrity endorsements are used to position products today, Peale believed that attention from the wealthy and well-known helped to bring people into the museum, thus supporting its ongoing operation (Brigham, 1995). Peale's museum brought together natural specimens, art, and historical objects all in orderly scientific display, but his promotional material often featured the odd and unusual; for example "a golden pheasant given to George Washington by the Marquis de Lafayette" and a "two-headed snake" (Brigham, 1995, p. 36). Despite his interest in promoting a scientific view of the world, Peale's museum was in many ways a precursor to the "dime museum," a form of entertainment that featured objects, both real and fantastic.

A mainstay of entertainment from the mid-1800s to the turn of the last century, dime museums had mass appeal. By mixing the authentic with the fake in an effort to "wow" their customers, they bridged the gap between the cultural elites and the general populace (Dennett, 1997). Perhaps the foremost promoter of the "dime museum," P.T. Barnum established emporia across the country that presented natural wonders and entertaining experiences designed to inspire awe and amazement in their paying customers (E. Alexander, 1997; Pitman, 1999; Wittlin, 1970). At about the same time that dime museums were soaring in popularity, museums dedicated to the serious study of science, natural science, and history were being established at academic institutions and libraries. These private institutions, like the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia and the Trumbull Gallery at Yale, were intended for educated audiences who were interested in study of their collections (E. Alexander, 1997).

Private collections and entertainment emporia aside, most historians identify the beginning of the American museum movement as dating to the 1870s (Burt, 1977). During this period, at about the same time that Barnum was leaving his “Museum of Marvels” for the circus, many large cultural institutions were being established in America's big industrial and commercial centers. These public institutions like the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (1876), and New York's American Museum of Natural History (1869) and Metropolitan Museum of Art (1871), which were supported both by public and private funds, drew attention to the economic and cultural power of these large cities (Burt, 1977). Less dependent on paying customers than the more entrepreneurial and more broadly accessible “dime museums,” these institutions were intended to educate and uplift, rather than to entertain (Pitman, 1999; Skramstad, 1999). Relying mainly on their wealthy donors, well-supported museums in large cities began to focus on amassing and caring for their growing collections from which they derived their cultural authority and in which they placed their primary reason for being (Skramstad, 1999; Wittlin, 1970).

In spite of the underlying intention to make their collections available to a broad public, these museums were shaped by and for their wealthy supporters, often serving as grand personal monuments to their donors (Burt, 1977; Conn, 1998; Duncan, 1995). As Duncan (1995) points out, art museums especially were pulled in the direction of serving their donors, in spite of their best democratic intentions. This pull to serve those who supported them often resulted in museums becoming places that intensified class differences rather than places that lowered barriers and elevated society by bringing people together (Garibay, 2011).

Large urban museums announced the cities in which they were located as hubs of commerce and culture, and their patrons as men and women of wealth and status. Their

architecture and their exhibitions were intended to serve as visual displays of power and position (Conn, 1998; Duncan, 1995; L. Roberts, 1997). In spite of the existence of other types of public-centered models, these wealthy, high profile institutions that served as symbols of economic and cultural power became the defining image of museums in the United States over the next century (Skramstad, 1999). As Garibay (2011) asserted, “from the earliest founding of what were arguably the very first public American museums, a tension already existed between who was catered to and who was left out—not only in terms of audience but also in terms of who defined culture and what was worth collecting” (p. 8).

Even as traditional museums were becoming established, there were several prominent 19<sup>th</sup> century museum leaders who fought this trend, actively advocating the development of education-based, community-centered museums. George Brown Goode, who was appointed assistant secretary of the Smithsonian in 1873, twenty-seven years after its founding, shifted the institution's focus from scientific research to collecting and displaying the nation's historical development, natural history, and art (Skramstad, 1999). He once stated that a good exhibition consists of an idea illustrated by an object, and he argued that the museum should be an institution of ideas for public education (Zeller, 1989). Goode saw the museum primarily as an educational institution and set about to transform it, in his famous words as quoted by Stephen Weil (2002), "from a cemetery of bric-a-brac into a nursery of living thoughts" (p. 87).

At the turn of the twentieth-century, education reformer and museum visionary, John Cotton Dana founded the Newark Museum. A forward thinking leader, Dana was a champion of developing public education institutions that understood community needs and provided services in response to those needs (Weil, 2002). Many of Dana's actions and writings of the early twentieth century seem prescient today. He saw public museums as having an obligation not

only to be useful, adding to the happiness, wisdom, and comfort of members of the community, but understood also the need for accountability in return for the public support being received (Weil, 2002).

The 1920s and 1930s was a period of opposing forces in the museum field, pitting the conventional museum with its orientation to connoisseurs, the wealthy and the educated middle class against a reform model that embraced a broad audience based on understanding the museum institution as having an obligation to serve the public good. DiMaggio (1991) described these two models in a way that is reminiscent of some of the disparate ways in which museums continue to function to this day:

The typical art museum of the 1920s sought to increase its collections as rapidly as possible and to boost its budget in order to acquire more art and preserve what it acquired....By contrast, the reformers sought to follow the strategy successfully employed by public libraries: rapid expansion of budget and staff through extension of public service and attendance and increases in municipal support. (pp. 271-272)

During the 1930s the museum industry in the United States was booming in spite of economic hardship in many sectors (DiMaggio, 1991). Along with growth of traditional museums, a new type of museum was being established in celebration of the industrial revolution that was shaping the country. Industrial museums focused on providing education and entertainment, particularly in terms of the introduction and celebration of new technologies. The Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago and Henry Ford's Edison Institute in Dearborn, for example, focused on creating experiences that promoted understanding of the machines and industries of the time. Beyond their focus on science and industry, these museums told stories that connected to the lives of ordinary citizens. Their focus was the everyday, not the finest, the famous, or the celebrated (Conn, 1998). While popular with the public, these institutions generally were not warmly accepted by other museums, which saw their mix of authentic and

recreated material as undermining the movement toward building authentic collections and professionalizing museum work (Skramstad, 1999), and most likely saw their focus on the commonplace as undermining connoisseurship and the authority of those experts who determined what should be valued and preserved.

The large museums of fine arts and those institutions of science, industry, and history were just a few of the many types of museums that coexisted during the twentieth century. Various approaches waxed and waned in popularity during the first half of the century as other aspects of the social and cultural universe shifted around them. As the country entered the tumultuous era of the 1960s with its increased awareness of disenfranchisement and oppression in the United States bubbling to the surface, the less visible citizens of the nation—people of color, Native peoples, women, immigrants, laborers, children—were represented very minimally in museums, if at all (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Wallace, 1995). It was during this time that the civil rights movement brought attention to the ways in which a single dominant perspective had been framed as the one true story across the country's telling of its history; museums were no exception (Anderson, 2004; Stewart, 1994).

As the civil rights movement led to a new social history movement, the official version of the great American story became increasingly open to challenge. Voices that had been silent or at best peripheral began to rise up and demand their place in the story. Beyond that, people began to assert their right to tell their own stories (Anderson, 2004; Stewart, 1994). This increased focus on viewing culture and history from the inside out presented a challenge to the traditional ways in which museums operated. Over the past four decades, this challenge has called to question the very function and meaning of museums in the U.S.

As expectations have changed, many museums have consciously worked at shifting their identity from inwardly focused institutions dedicated to the care, study, and display of objects to outwardly focused institutions committed to serving visitor and community needs (Weil, 2002). This shift both follows and reflects changes that have taken place in the public and non-profit sector. Museums are now called upon to fulfill their role as social enterprises, accountable to the public and responsible for providing products and services of public value (Weil, 2002).

**From caring for objects to caring for people.** For museums, the legacy of the 1960s was a radical shift in focus, audience, operations, and mission (Anderson, 2004; Campbell, 1994). Museums started to address questions of identity, objectivity, and privilege that had been obscured in their focus on collections and information (Hein, 2000). Where the primacy of the object had in the past allowed museums to present themselves as an 'undistorting lens' through which the object speaks (Weil, 2002), there was a shift to understanding that objects embody multiple truths (Chambers, 1999; Crew & Sims, 1991). The "collective self" represented, which was once accepted as "truth," began to be more closely examined with respect especially to "others," both beyond and within dominant cultures and national boundaries (Kaplan, 1995). As the gap between collectors and the collected narrowed and museums became more aware of the inherent power of the invisible voices proclaiming value through exhibits and collections, the museum's responsibility to make ethically informed choices started to become more evident (Duncan, 1991; Gurian, 1991; Sullivan, 1994).

The ways in which the social and political changes of the 1960s entered the museum field are key to understanding the transformations that have taken place. At the start of the mid-twentieth century, most museums in America continued to be defined by their collections. The key functions of the institution were broadly understood as the acquisition, care, study,

exhibition, and interpretation of collections. The museum held in stewardship objects that were seen as representing the best accomplishments of society and embodying the shared history, beliefs, and identity of the community (Duncan, 1991). Little attention was paid to the connection between perspective and interpretation. The viewpoint was presented as a single "truth" told by the object. The museum's voice as it explained the truth of that object was seen as transcendent (Anderson, 2004; Weil, 1990). In this world of things, curators were the dominant voice of authority and the locus of organizational power. "Power relations within the museum...[were] skewed towards [those] who made decisions in relation to...what may be viewed, how it should be seen, and when this is possible" (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, p. 7).

The rise of multiculturalism and demand for visibility and multiple voices in the telling of shared cultural history, called into question many of the decisions being made by those in power in public organizations. Activists calling for vast social changes seemed to have seen what those working in museums may not have seen; the moral dimension of the decisions being made about what was valuable, who was worth listening to, and the very nature of relationships among citizens in shared communities. Stephen Weil's anecdote about the event that sparked his interest in the meaning of museums illustrates the dynamic environment of the 1960s and the state of a museum community that was just beginning to understand its own power.

Weil (2002) described attending his first American Association of Museums meeting in 1970. Members of the Art Workers Coalition took over the stage at New York's Waldorf Astoria where the convention was being held and demanded that museums adopt aggressive positions against the Viet Nam war, racism, sexism, and oppression of all disenfranchised groups. Weil credited this confrontation with forcing museums at that time to think about what they did that was of public benefit, whether they could and would challenge establishment values, and

whether they really possessed the power to play a role in affecting social change. This raised a fundamental dilemma for Weil about the worth of museums, calling into question what many in the field had believed were self-evident truths "that museums were entities precious in themselves—fully as worthy of preservation and even reverence as the objects held in their collections" (Weil, 2002, p. 95).

Power was beginning to shift in museums. The dominance of the curatorial voice was being questioned from both outside and within. The understanding of museums "as political arenas in which the power of dominant groups is asserted" (Kaplan, 1995, p. 55) was starting to surface. It was within this atmosphere of shifting power and priorities that museum education, and increasing numbers of museum educators, most of whom were women, emerged as a driving force for change. At the American Association of Museums' 1973 annual meeting, a small contingent of museum educators, angered by the lack of respect for and attention paid to the role of public education in museums, threatened to secede from the Association (Hein, 2000; Pitman, 1999; Weil, 1999).

Seeing themselves as visitor advocates, these women took on the power hierarchy on behalf of unheard others (Hein, 2000). Their protest resulted in the formation of a Standing Professional Committee on Education within the American Association of Museums, but more importantly it increased the influence of museum education in a way that profoundly shifted how museums understood their audiences and their missions. Educators focused a light on the importance of hearing multiple voices in every aspect of museum function. Their work, which challenged the status quo and the museum's institutional authority (Chambers, 1999; L. Roberts, 1997), led the way to broadening the museums' focus beyond an emphasis on caring for objects to an equal emphasis on caring for people.

In recognizing museums' largely invisible role in conferring value, educators actively advocated for inclusion of multiple perspectives and audiences. Over the past four decades, many women and men have taken leadership roles in shifting museum education and its values of inclusion from the basement to the hearth of the institution. By the mid-1980s, in fact, education was seen as the "spirit" of the museum (Hein, 2000). The AAM "Museums for a New Century Commission Report," published in 1984, and its "Excellence and Equity" policy statement, adopted in 1991, are often identified as turning points that secured a new outward-looking vision for museums (Hein, 2000; Melber & Abraham, 2002; Pitman, 1999; Weil, 1999). Both of these reports, which included input from across the field and ultimately had tremendous impact on the direction of the field, were initiated by educators and broadly embraced by museum leaders in many disciplines.

The 1984 Report of the Commission on Museums for a New Century acknowledged the plurality of voices in American society as one of the important forces of social change, which it supported. The report supported recognition of the 'global community' and encouraged respect for ethnic and cultural differences (Hein, 2000). "Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums" (Hirzy, 1992) centered on ten recommendations designed to "place education – in the broadest sense of the word" (p. 3) at the center of museum activity, create inclusive institutions that welcome diverse audiences, and call on museum leadership and resources to promote this new institutional purpose.

It is significant to note that more than a decade after the publication of "Excellence and Equity," the American Association of Museums' "Mastering Civic Engagement" report, published in 2002, identified the major barrier to museums becoming "civic enterprises" as the widespread perception of museums as places that are not deeply engaged in their communities

and that hold “control of knowledge, expertise, and learning” (Garibay, 2011, p. 25). Based on dialogues held across the country involving museums and their communities, the issues identified in “Mastering Civic Engagement” served as a reminder that although museums had shifted in understanding their role in society and were making significant efforts to shift their practice and their place in their communities, a significant gap continued to exist between what was imagined and what was.

As Garibay (2011) pointed out, “while no museum-field wide statistics exist, data from a number of studies...indicate that museumgoers in the United States are still predominantly well-educated and White” (p. 2). Despite ongoing efforts across the museum field “most museums simply do not reflect the demographics of the communities in which they are located, either in their staff or in their visitors” (Garibay, 2011, p. 2).

**The museum business.** Museums, like other non-profit organizations, are faced with financial challenges that factor into every type of decision about how they operate. In fact, not surprisingly, museum funding sources have shifted in ways that parallel the inward to outward movement of the past four-plus decades. Pre-1960 most museums were supported mainly by wealthy individual donors; by the mid-1970s there was a funding mix including individuals, corporations, foundations, government sources, and earned income (V.D. Alexander, 1996). In the 1990s, increased pressure for greater self-sufficiency led to efforts to operate non-profit organizations more entrepreneurially, bringing greater dependence on earned revenue (Suchy, 2004). At the same time, in 1995, just less than 30% of museum income in the United States was from government sources. This created financial motivation to be attentive not just toward traditional visitors, but to the larger public (Weil, 2002).

Like other organizations, both private and public, the motivation and understanding of the role of museums is shaped by practical forces in the external environment. External pressures include market forces, need for audience growth, competition for leisure time, and audience demographics. In the current economic environment, there are added financial and accountability pressures. Museums have been forced to pay increased attention to all aspects of funding: earned income; government grants; and private and corporate donations. In some ways, this very real need for attention to the motivation of funding sources has supported the direction of the "new" museum. Reliance on the box office and on government and corporate funding has encouraged greater attention to drawing audiences by better reflecting what they want (Rice, 1999; Weil, 1999).

As McLean (1999) pointed out, however, those charged with maintaining the financial health of organizations often merge the notions of "audience growth" and "audience development." Increasing the number of paying customers does not always align neatly with an organizational mission that is built on commitment to reaching out to underserved audiences and enlarging the universe of those who are served by museums. A very real threat of commercialization leading to the creation of exhibits and programs designed to have mass popular appeal could work against the achievement of care-based goals, which risk being seen as drains on the museum's financial resources (McLean, 1999; Pitman, 1999). As Danielle Rice (1999) observed, "If the public is treated as consumer, the museum will target very different audiences than if the public is seen as citizens equally deserving of opportunity" (p. 46).

Concern about the powerful role of financial sustainability in steering the direction of museums has been broadly discussed over the past two decades. As Stephen Weil (2002) reminded museum leaders a decade ago, resources must always be seen in service to a "clear and

worthwhile purpose" and not as an end in themselves. With this assertion, Weil challenged 21st century museum leaders with the task of defining that clear purpose that would be worthy of public and private support. Leaders across the field continue today to evolve new approaches to developing museums that make a difference in society and civic life even as rapid changes occur in the ways people choose to spend their time, in what they value, in how knowledge is produced and disseminated, and even in what is held as true and meaningful.

**The 21st century museum.** More than a decade into the new century, and in spite of much discussion and contemplation, the 21st century museum model remains unsettled. With rapid changes in technology and their effect on how people communicate, access information, and even relate to one another, the recurring question about the role of museums has taken on a new twist. Schwarzer (2012) asks, "what is the role of the museum when faster, smaller, interconnected devices have changed the way individuals all over the world obtain, negotiate, and relate to information, objects, culture, and each other?" (p. 220). There are some who have attempted to define the parameters of an effective museum for this time, and others who have attempted to shift the work of their institutions to reflect new ways of functioning in society. As has been the case during times of change across the past century and a half, there is disparity across the field, with notable examples of institutions that have changed in response to societal changes and notable examples of institutions that have shifted little if at all.

Anderson (2012) described the complex changes museums are facing including: new technologies that have changed the way people learn, communicate, and build relationships; increased demands for non-profit accountability; heightened economic pressures; and even changing perceptions of what constitutes place and belonging. Given these larger societal shifts that are directly related to museum function and form, Anderson (2012) pointed out that,

“reinventing the museum is not just about adding a program, reinstalling a gallery, or increasing financial reserves—it is a systemic shift in attitude, purpose, alignment, and execution” (p. 2). She offered a framework for understanding the shift from a “traditional museum” to a “reinvented museum,” organized around “institutional values,” “governance,” “management strategies,” and “communication ideology” (pp. 3-4).

Central to the shifts she sees as essential to the relevance of museums in the 21st century, Anderson (2012) highlighted the following: museums can become vital to their communities as gathering places for civic engagement and dialogue; financial sustainability cannot be disconnected from public engagement and therefore, public engagement must become the responsibility of all museum leaders, both staff and Board; museums are obligated by an implied social contract with the public to actively engage with diverse people and communities; collections remain central to museums and their use and their meaning must be further examined; engaged and effective leadership at all levels is essential to the work of museums; and the museum’s mission must be relevant and strategies must be responsive, innovative, flexible, and thoughtful. Finally, Anderson (2012) concluded that museums are living organisms that are responsive to their environment and will, thus, always be in a process of reinventing themselves.

In many ways, Anderson’s approach paralleled the work of the Institute of Museum and Library Services’ (IMLS) (2009) overview of the 21<sup>st</sup> century shifts that are changing the work of museums and libraries. This report organized the shifts around three areas: the economy, societal needs, and audience expectations. It posited that the move from an industrial to a knowledge economy has required increased creativity and critical thinking in the workforce. Learning has changed with more access to information and more broadly available access to educational experiences of all types. The line between formal and informal education has

become blurred and people have become accustomed to personalized and easily accessible experiences that they can take part in creating. To meet the new needs of this changed society, IMLS (2009) outlined changes that would contribute to the relevance of museums and libraries: use of collections to actively engage with diverse communities and audiences; broad involvement as partners in community learning; the creation of experiences that connect people within and across their existing social units; focus on audience as essential to mission; and activities designed to enable participation and co-creation.

One example of a museum that has undertaken intentional effort to rethink its way of working in response to 21st century changes is the Dallas Museum of Art. Pitman and Hirzy (2010) described the shift at the Dallas Museum of Art from a traditional emphasis on “collection, preservation, presentation, and interpretation of art” (p. x) to a broadened mission that boldly claims, “We ignite the power the art, embracing our responsibility to engage and educate our community, contribute to cultural knowledge and advance creative endeavor” (p. 8). As part of its work over the first decade of the 21st century, the museum made a commitment to put the visitor at the center; to learn about their visitors and how they made meaningful connections to artwork and then provide the resources and approaches needed for them to make connections. In 2008, the museum opened the Center for Creative Connections (C3), a multi-form space designed as a participatory creativity lab. Staff introduced new approaches to programming and reached out to new audiences. Despite these changes, it is interesting to note that a recent review of the museum in Frommer’s On-line Travel Guide mentioned the current exhibitions and the general quality of the exhibit and building design, but did not include any references to C3 or to the museum as a visitor-friendly place. The museum looks like a traditional art museum and seems to be projecting a traditional image notwithstanding its efforts.

Although there seems to be acknowledgement on a field-wide level that shifts in society call for shifts in understanding the work of museums, change seems to be sporadic and incremental. Silverman and O'Neill (2004) examined the quality and pace of some of the changes that have been taking place and concluded that in spite of epistemological changes in most 20th century knowledge fields, museums have remained "dominated by 19th century concepts of human nature" (p. 37). They saw these simplistic concepts often expressed through familiar dichotomies such as: "our messages versus their meanings;" "keepers of culture versus makers of culture;" "collections versus the public;" and "learning versus aesthetic contemplation." Silverman and O'Neill claimed that failure to recognize the complexity of the 21st century museum construct has led to rigidity in museum practice. "Despite great strides by some institutions," they argued, "much of the field still operates amid simplistic oppositions that seem more reflective of a fear of change than of faith in tradition" (Silverman & O'Neill, 2004, p. 38).

As a further result of this resistance to embracing complexity, museums tend to define themselves by the discreet and easily understandable activities they do rather than by their purpose, which would require a more complex approach and understanding. This focus on activity, which is often not situated explicitly in purposeful context that is institutionally shared and accepted, has resulted in what Silverman and O'Neill (2004) described as "minor adaptation that avoids significant change" (p. 37).

In an attempt to rethink what it will mean for museums to be relevant and sustainable in an increasingly diverse society in which how people approach learning, how they communicate, and even what they consider "material culture" is rapidly changing, the American Alliance of Museums has established the Center for the Future of Museums (CFM). Their website (<http://futureofmuseums.org>) describes CFM's purpose:

AAM's Center for the Future of Museums helps museums explore the cultural, political and economic challenges facing society and devise strategies to shape a better tomorrow. CFM is a think-tank and research and design lab for fostering creativity and helping museums transcend traditional boundaries to serve society in new ways.

The work in which CFM is engaged is certainly thought provoking and the information about future trends and the ways in which they may affect museums can be very useful in terms of considering strategic approaches to traditional museum activities. Thus far, however, much of the Center's work seems to focus on understanding population and information trends and imagining how museum activities might shift to better accommodate new audiences and better use new technologies. What seems to be lacking is consideration of a new paradigm for museums that delves substantively into museum form and function. While it is worthwhile to look at the way societal changes affect museum activity, it is equally, if not more important, to examine the ways in which changing needs may call for new constructs. This is not just about moving exhibits to the streets and labels to handheld devices. It is about the very essence of the work of museums in society.

There are some scholars who have examined change in museums in the context of their essential work. For example, Conn (2010) examined how changes in object-based epistemology have affected the work of museums. He pointed to three periods of perceived crisis in museums—the late 1920s and early 1930s, the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century—that correspond to “moments when the nature of the American public shifted in significant ways and museums faced the challenge of responding to those changes” (p. 15). He related changes in museums to concurrent changes in epistemological understanding and argued that at the start of the new millennium there was a significant shift in the relationship between objects and epistemology; objects had come to be less important in how knowledge is created. Conn (2010), in fact, postulated that the rise of “other kinds of activities inside the

museum...educational, recreational, and commercial” might correspond with the “disappearance of objects” (Conn, 2010, p. 26). Interestingly, he pointed to the art museum as an exception, stating that “art objects continue to function largely as they did when American art museums began filling up with collections one hundred years ago” (p. 26). The master narrative put on view at art museums remains largely unchanged; in Conn’s (2010) view “this narrative and the way art objects are used to articulate it have proved remarkably resilient, even in the face of all the ruptures brought on by modernism” (p. 28). Art history apart, Conn questioned what the role of museums becomes if knowledge is no longer held in the objects held in museums, and suggested that a deep examination of the museum construct is called for.

### **Field-Wide Understanding and Organizational Identity Matters**

“Who are you?” said the Caterpillar. This was not an encouraging opening for conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, “I— I hardly know, sir, just at present—at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.” (Carroll, 2004, p. 59)

Looking across the history of museums in the United States from their earliest incarnations to their most recent forms, it seems clear that the museum field is one that exists within a context of substantial discord about form and function. Rather than becoming more clearly focused and aligned concerning the core work of museums, it seems that the museum field has been continuously shifting shape, often in minor ways, and often in service to survival rather than in ways that create greater stability and focus. It may be that in struggling to fit ever changing molds, museums somehow have not been able to find, or perhaps to hold, the essence that makes them uniquely what they are.

To better understand why the museum field seems to be continuously moving through periods of identity crisis and to frame the importance of how these periods affect growth and stability, it is useful to contextualize these changes within a framework of institutional theory

and specifically the Theory of Fields. It is useful, also, to consider organizational identity theory and specifically to consider the seeming gap between consistent field-wide discussion of change and the slow pace and scope of change that seems to be occurring at an individual institutional level.

This discrepancy between conversation at the field-wide level and the slow pace of change at the organizational level is a topic of much discussion today. Kathleen McLean, a contemporary leader in the museum field, shed light on this issue in her 2007 article for the fiftieth anniversary of the journal *Curator*. Looking at how exhibit approaches had changed since *Curator* was first published in 1958, she reviewed the articles appearing in the journal during its first year and found little difference in what was being discussed then and in 2007.

She wrote:

I detected a disconcerting similarity between much of what was written those many years ago and what is still being debated today. To test my hunch, I called a respected colleague and read to her quotes from the 1958 articles without disclosing the date or the source. She proposed that while the ideas might not be new, they are contemporary ideas that generally have not yet been but should be put into practice. (McLean, 2007, p. 110)

DiMaggio (1991) observed a similar disconnect in the context of his study of the construction of the art museum field in the U.S. from the 1920s through 1940s. “What is striking,” he wrote, “is how little conflict occurred inside organizations and how much was played out at the level of the field” (p. 268). He noted that individuals seemed to have been playing dual and conflicting roles, challenging the system from a field-wide perspective while actively maintaining the status quo in their own institutions. In many ways this push and pull is understandable in terms of organizational identity and the process of change. Even when changes in environment clearly call for organizational change, how organizations understand themselves and how they operate tends to be inherently inertial (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Realignment of external and internal

constituents around shared understanding of direction is a necessary component of change at the field-wide and institutional level (Gioia, Thomas, Clark & Chittipeddi, 1994; Ravasi & Phillips, 2011).

Fligstein and McAdam (2012) defined a field as a:

...constructed mesolevel social order in which actors (who can be individual or collective) are attuned to and interact with one another on the basis of shared (which is not to say consensual) understandings about the purposes of the field, relationships to others in the field (including who has power and why), and the rules governing legitimate action in the field. (p. 9)

Established fields share a set of broadly accepted rules or structures by which they are internally shaped and externally understood (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). These rules define the overarching goals of the social institution, how it serves its functions, and who participates (Swidler, 2001). It is within the context of these defining rules that the distribution of resources and power is determined (Fligstein, 2001).

When the rules that have been broadly accepted no longer work, the field can be seen to be in crisis (Fligstein, 2001). It is at these junctures that there is often uncertainty about how to move forward. Sewell (1996) attributed this hesitation, often accompanied by questioning, to a lack of surety about “what actions [are] safe or dangerous, moral or wicked, advantageous or foolish, rational or irrational” (p. 848). Emerging from these external or internal shifts that disrupt the status quo, reshaping—sometimes modest and sometimes significant—often occurs. Powell and DiMaggio (1991) referred to this movement from disruption and disorganization to stability and organization as field structuration or crystallization.

DiMaggio (1991) specifically examined the structuration of the art museum field over a twenty year period. His conclusions are particularly salient in understanding the broader museum field and the challenges that continue to play out in terms of change, identity, and

shared understanding. DiMaggio (1991) highlighted three aspects of field formation: models of diffusion; tensions within the institutionalization process; and the tension between external pressures for change and internal forces of inertia. Whereas institutionalization in most industries has tended to focus on the local level and play out in a somewhat organic way, Dimaggio (1991) noted that:

The diffusion of museums was guided and shaped by the emergence of fieldwide structures at the national level, outside the boundaries of particular museums...and this professionally constructed environment was the site of much organizing by actors who wished to change the museum's structure and mission. (pp. 286-287)

In that case the outside organizers were corporate funders, however similar influence can be seen from federal agencies like the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the National Endowment for the Arts and from professional organizations like the American Alliance for Museums and the Association of Art Museum Directors.

DiMaggio (1991) also observed that while most studies of institutional diffusion demonstrated that organizational form becomes more legitimate as it is accepted, in the case of the museum there was a “contradictory dynamic whereby the legitimation of the form empowered and authorized the museum reform movement, which offered delegitimizing criticism of museums” (p. 287). In that case, institutionalization created the conditions for change rather than for stability. Finally, DiMaggio noted that while leaders recognized a need for change they often borrowed models from other fields and did not come to agreement on what form the museum should adopt. This broad ranging field-wide debate among a minority of professionals did not penetrate to the institutional level and, thus created a situation in which there was a disconnect between conversation at the field-wide level and action at the institutional level.

This calls to question how those actors at the institutional level are playing a role in change and in defining museum identity. It is not unusual for organizations to examine the question of identity, to ask “who are we” and “how do others understand us.” According to Albert and Whetten (1985), these questions are most likely to occur during times of environmental shift that might threaten the way an organization is understood both internally and externally. The concept of organizational identity was proposed by Albert and Whetten who used the term in reference to the central, enduring, and distinctive characteristics that define how the organization is understood. Research has shown that organizational identity is less broadly accepted and less stable than originally theorized (Corley, 2004; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Multiple internal and external factors including personal context, power dynamics, and competing values, affect perception of what is central, enduring, and distinctive. Studies have also found that relative stability is important to organizational success in that internal and external constituents are more likely to be satisfied and committed when there is a high level of clarity about organizational form and function (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991).

Ran and Golden (2011) noted that during perceived identity threats, situations in which those features that have been accepted as central, enduring, and distinctive are challenged, there is increased urgency to define organizational understanding. In these periods, which Whetten (2006) called “fork-in-the-road choices” (p. 221), identity construction often occurs. During these periods of change and examination internal and external constituents reconsider their perceptions of organizational identity and the possibility exists for an altered collective understanding to emerge. It is during these periods, it is important also to note, that resistance to

change often increases and those who are comfortable with the existing identity may hold tighter to the status quo (Albert & Whetten, 1985).

I believe that it is important at this juncture to return to the questions that underpin this discussion. Most significantly, does it matter whether or not there is a shared understanding of the role of museums across the museum field and across internal and external constituencies? Beyond that, how would a field-wide identity be defined and what are the barriers to shared understanding? I believe that part of the challenge lies in how museums define their central, distinctive, and enduring characteristics. By describing these characteristics in terms of what museums do rather than why museums do what they do, the museum construct becomes less stable when aspects of its form are challenged. That is to say that if museums are defined by being places that present exhibits and programs and that collect and preserve objects and artifacts, changes in how external and internal constituents perceive objects and presentation, for example, become identity questions. If museums were defined as places of connecting with people and ideas around shared experiences or as places of encountering the horizon between past and present in which people can become more fully present, then specific activities could shift without those adaptations to new technology or new ways of understanding becoming a perceived threat to the core identity of the museum's work. The body of literature about visitor motivation, which is reviewed in the next section, sheds light on how external constituents understand and use museums, and supports the notion of shifting how museum identity is considered from activities to broader purpose.

### **What Visitor Studies Tell Us About Museums**

One point of entry into better understanding the essence of museum purpose is to mine the body of research about visitors that has been developed, particularly studies over the past two

decades that have examined visitor motivation. Information about why people visit and use museums and what role their motivation has on how they experience museums, helps to inform understanding of the role of museums from the perspective of the external constituent.

Ultimately museums exist to serve people and it is those people who visit—and those who choose not to visit—who are the experts in how museums can best be of value to their communities and to current and future generations. Both the perspectives of external and internal constituents contribute to answering the question posed in numerous ways over the past century: what need do museums fill and if they did not exist, would that need be strong enough to warrant their creation?

**Research context.** The earliest recognized systematic research about museum visitors was conducted in the 1920s and 1930s by Edward Robinson and Arthur Melton at Yale University. Their studies focused on environmental design, examining physical design factors and their influence on visitor behavior (Bitgood, 2002). It was not until many decades later in the 1990s that studies about museum visitor motivation began to be conducted and reported. The unfolding of the field of visitor studies and ongoing development of research strategies and areas of concentration provide context for understanding the importance of the current interest in and emphasis on visitor motivation both for museum researchers and practitioners.

Following Robinson's and Melton's studies in the 1920s and 1930s, there was little notable activity until the 1960s when Harris Shettel and Chan Screven began to apply behavioral learning approaches to assess cognitive and affective learning in exhibits (Bitgood, 2002). During the 1970s, several large institutions routinely began to collect visitor evaluation data and some set up internal offices of research and evaluation. In the late 1970s Robert Wolf and his associates developed an approach called "naturalistic evaluation," which used qualitative

methods of data collection and looked at the whole museum experience rather than a specific exhibit or program (Wolf & Tymitz, 1978). Other important researchers situated in cognitive and behavioral paradigms also began conducting studies during this period including: Minda Borun at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia, Frank Oppenheimer at the Exploratorium in San Francisco, and John and Mary Lou Koran at the University of Florida. John Falk, one of the leading visitor motivation theorists and researchers, first published studies about factors influencing school field trip learning in the late 1970s. Also during the late 1970s and early 1980s a group of researchers introduced the use of an ethological approach to the museum visitor studies field, conducting behavioral observations at the Lawrence Hall of Science at the University of California, Berkeley (Bitgood, 2002).

By the 1980s the visitor studies field had begun to establish itself and multiple frames of reference including cognitive developmental, behavioral, and others were being applied to study various aspects of visitor experiences. Areas of study included: exhibit and program development and evaluation; conceptual orientation and circulation/physical facilities; visitor services and customer relations; and audience research, which is connected with marketing and messaging.

From the time of the inception of visitor studies in museums until the early 1990s, research focused largely on how visitors responded to and received proscribed messages whether through exhibits, programs, or other materials (Lawrence, 1993). Researchers were interested in finding out what people learned based on the message delivered. If the message was not adequately transmitted and received, the museum program or exhibit was considered to have failed. Those who did not pick up the intended message were presumed to have gained nothing significant from the experience (Stylianou-Lambert, 2009).

In the early 1990s, Falk and Dierking began developing research about multiple dimensions of learning in museums. This was partially in response to their disagreement with behaviorist models of museum learning, which postulated that given the “right” stimulus, visitors would have the “right” response (Falk & Dierking, 1992). That is to say, visitors would learn what the museum wanted them to learn. In 1992, Falk and Dierking proposed an “interactive experience model” of learning that took into account three contexts of museum experience: personal, social, and physical.

Across the 1990s, many other researchers also studied a broad range of learning in museums including: the effect of social connection on learning (Borun, Chamber, Dritsas, & Johnson, 1997; Schaubel, Banks, Coates, Martin, & Sterling, 1996), the connection between learning and conversation (Leinhardt, Crowley, & Knutson, 2002), and the connection between personal relationship with content and learning (C. Cameron & Gatewood, 2003; Paris, 1997; Thyne, 2001). Rather than focusing on simple transfer of knowledge, these studies looked at how visitors make meaning through their experiences.

By the late 1990s, the literature reflected a greater awareness of visitors as active participants who construct meaning based on their personal experiences, connections, feelings, and sense of identity (Bagnall, 2003; Heath & vom Lehn, 2004; Worts, 1996). D. Spock (2006) described how these kinds of changes in research reflected and ultimately supported a changed understanding of museum practice. Tracing the roots of changed understanding to the adoption in 1992 of AAM’s *Excellence and Equity* policy document, D. Spock described a logical progression of change in practice and understanding. Institutions were called on to “understand, develop, expand, and use the learning opportunities that museums offer their audiences” (Hirzy, 1992, p. 7). By putting “the seal of legitimacy on trends already well underway” (D. Spock,

2006, p. 170), *Excellence and Equity* became an eloquent manifesto turning the focus of museums to building relationships with people and communities, understanding and respecting visitors as well as collections, and calling into question previously accepted standards of success and quality. Coupling the timing of *Excellence and Equity* with the rising call for public accountability, the stage was set for a shift not just in the focus of museums, but also in the focus of evaluation and research, which provided the evidence that museums were putting education at the center.

This raised a new set of questions about education and learning: what kind of learning was happening in museums; how was it recognized when it happened; how was it measured? As museums began to focus a spotlight on learning, it became clear that they “weren’t necessarily so adept at conveying information many museums wanted to convey, particularly when they stuck with what museums thought was important, while failing to take into account the museum learner’s own proclivities” (D. Spock, 2006, p. 168). As Doering and Pekarik (1996) reminded program and exhibit developers, “museum visitors are not blank slates on which we write. They attend a museum...usually because they have some level of interest in the subject and some knowledge and opinions about it” (p. 20). Doering and Pekarik called this personal story line the visitor’s “entrance narrative.” They asserted that there was evidence suggesting that most satisfying experiences were those that resonated with and confirmed or enriched the visitor’s worldview.

As museums began to learn more about the visitor experience, a deeper and more complex understanding began to surface about what people did in museums and how and why this influenced learning. This understanding, in turn, has had an effect on museum practice, bringing attention to visitors throughout the process of exhibit and program development and

museum planning. It has contributed to shifting the understanding of learning in museums from a model of the museum as authority delivering information and imposing value to an emphasis on the role of visitors constructing meaning from their individual viewpoints. It was in this context, beginning in the early 1990s, that visitor motivation began to be explored in the research.

Motivation seems to be understood in two complementary, but distinct, ways in museum visitor research. It is broadly acknowledged and accepted that visitors are active participants in learning in museums, and as such understanding what motivates their learning and engagement is seen as important. Over the last decade there has been more of an effort to understand what motivates people to visit and engage with museums at all. This represents a shift from a widely held belief that people come to museums to learn and has opened the door to more extensive research about the range of motivations that are indicated.

**What motivates learning and engagement in the museum.** Falk, Moussouri, and Coulson (1998) studied the ways in which visit agendas shape the learning that occurs in the museum. The study relied on a relativist-constructivist approach based on the assumption that individuals bring prior knowledge and experience into every situation and these individual conditions shape their perception and their experience. Consequently, each person's learning is different, and methods of understanding learning that assume everyone starts in the same place and should end in the same place are flawed. Findings showed that "visitors' motivations significantly affected how and what they learned from the exhibition" (Falk et al., 1998, p. 112). Education and entertainment were the two most cited motivations; in interviews these two motivations were described by participants as being essential ingredients of the museum experience. The researchers noted that this study pointed to a need for increased understanding

of the meaning of “education” and “entertainment” in the context of museums and the scope of the multi-dimensional visitor agenda.

Researchers from the University of Pittsburgh have been examining learning in museums since the mid-1990s and, since 1998 have conducted a series of studies looking at conversation as both a process and an outcome of museum learning. Focusing on grandparent/grandchild interaction in museum settings, Leinhardt and Knutson (2006) found that participants engaged in learning as suited their agenda, which fit into three identity related role categories: storyteller, sharer of family knowledge and information; playmate, learner and teacher who focuses on enjoyment; and modeler of caring social interactions (p. 235). Inherent in this finding was the notion that visitors have an agenda that transcends the "curatorial agenda," the museum's teaching agenda, and the meaning of specific objects.

**Beyond learning: Visitor motivation broadly considered.** Based on B. Simon's (2004) self-identity research, Falk began to theorize that museum visitors should be viewed as “active meaning seekers” who engage in “self-reflection and self-interpretation about their visit experience” (Falk & Storksdieck, 2010, p. 195). According to B. Simon (2004) people make sense of specific situations through a lens of understanding their roles and actions as they relate to identity. Falk considered museum visits in this context, postulating that visitors enter their experience with a set of expectations related to their understanding of what the museum offers and their own “perceived personal and social identity-related roles and needs” (Falk & Storksdieck, 2010, p. 195). Falk and his team defined five identity clusters: explorers (curiosity-driven visitors who expect to find something of interest); facilitators (socially motivated and focused on enabling the experience of their group); professional/hobbyists (seeking to fulfill a content-related objective); experience seekers (perceive the destination as important and seek the

position of having “been there and done that”); and rechargers (seeking contemplative and/or restorative experience). Over the last decade Falk has been developing a theory of identity-related visitor motivation. Researchers are in the process of testing and refining the five identity clusters described above.

Exploring people’s perceptions of art museums and their reasons for visiting, Stylianou-Lambert (2009) conducted a study with museum visitors and non-visitors. The conceptual model of her research combined sociological and psychological approaches in looking at how museums are perceived, “defined as the ways in which individuals make sense of museums, inside and outside their walls, in relation to their daily lives and their conception of self-identity” (p. 142). Through her research Stylianou-Lambert identified eight categories of perception or museum perceptual filters (MPFs): the professional, art-loving, self-exploration, cultural tourism, social visitation, romantic, rejection, and indifference. Professionals describe art as integral to their work and life; they use museums for inspiration or as a direct resource for work. Art knowledge is important to them. Art-lovers are drawn by the emotional and aesthetic quality of artwork and are interested in connecting to art and artists. They visit museums for sensory pleasure and a sense of “personal wholeness.” Self-explorers use the museum as a resource to stretch themselves, learn and do new things, and to know themselves better. Cultural tourists are motivated by finding information about the culture and history of a place, and by experiencing what a site has to offer. Social visitors are motivated by doing something with others; they are not engaged with the museum beyond using it as a place to visit with others. Social visitation, however, is often a secondary, rather than a primary filter. Romantics think of museums as lovely places to visit, but they do not actually visit. Study participants using this filter often expressed a feeling of not belonging at an art museum. The rejection filter was applied to those

who expressed negative perceptions of museums, usually dismissing them as being for the rich and for the pretentious. The indifference filter was used to describe those who did not visit museums and did not consider visiting an option at all.

Packer (2008) focused on the museum as a restorative environment, and argued that “relax[ation] and recovery from the stresses of life” (p. 33) are among the motivations for museum visiting. Even within the most broadly defined terms, she asserted that learning outcomes are not sufficient to explain the uses and benefits of museums. Packer’s study was grounded in two conceptual frameworks: the concept of “psychological well-being,” which comes out of the positive psychology movement, and “mental restoration,” which was developed in the field of environmental psychology (p. 35). The concept of well-being is situated in two perspectives: hedonic, defined in terms of happiness or pleasure, and eudaimonic, defined in terms of self-realization and personal growth. Psychological well-being is a combination of hedonic and eudaimonic features described in terms of the following elements: autonomy, personal growth, environmental mastery, purpose in life, positive relations, and self-acceptance (Packer, 2008). The study found that many visitors came to the museum seeking some kind of restorative experience generally expressed in terms of relaxation, peace and tranquility, and thoughtfulness. Evidence was also found for elements of psychological well-being including personal growth, purpose in life, positive relations, and self-acceptance.

C. Cameron and Gatewood (2000) studied visitors to historic sites in the town of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania to investigate what people were seeking from their visits, especially looking at affective or emotional experiences. The researchers intentionally focused on whether or not people were seeking “a deeper and more meaningful connection with a place or time period,” (p. 109), an experience they term “numen-seeking.” The Latin word “numen” is used to

describe a spiritual type of experience that can happen with a place or objects from the past. The study found that numen-seeking was a conscious motivation for about one third of the study participants.

Over the last decade, researchers have identified a range of visitor motivations in addition to education/learning and entertainment/enjoyment, including: social interaction (Falk, 2006; Packer, 2008; Packer & Ballantyne, 2002; Sanford, Knutson, & Crowley, 2007; Slater, 2007; Stylianou-Lambert, 2009; Thyne, 2001); identifying as a good parent (Longhurst, Bagnall, & Savage, 2004; Poria & Reichel, 2006; Thyne, 2001); sense of belonging (Longhurst et al., 2004; Stylianou-Lambert, 2009; Thyne, 2001); restoration (Falk, 2006; Packer, 2008; Packer & Ballantyne, 2002); experience-seeking (Falk, 2006); connecting with personal identity (Poria & Reichel, 2006; Stylianou-Lambert, 2009); and escaping daily routine (Slater, 2007). Almost all studies over the past decade found that there are a variety of motivations and that people can have the same experience, but experience it differently depending on their motivation.

The past two decades of research about visitor motivation reveal an evolution of knowledge as well as evidence of serious gaps in understanding. The exponential growth in recognizing the breadth of visitor experiences in museums is paralleled by growing interest from practitioners in becoming better informed about what visitors are seeking from museums. Across institutions, museum professionals understand the importance of providing experiences that align with visitor motivation. The evolving sophistication in understanding the complexity of visitor motivation, and by extension the role of museums, is notable. In moving away from trying to fit visitors into a mold of museum as teacher and, instead, responding to what they are seeking, I believe that the connection of museums with “being-in-the-world” begins to emerge. Many of the motivations that have been identified—restoration, connection, self-understanding,

relationship, meaning-making—are qualities of being immersed in an authentic experience of being.

### **Philosophy of Being**

Human beings are apt to become engaged in hermeneutic understanding in the context of “any experience that serves to disrupt the ordinary, taken for granted aspects of existence” (McManus Holroyd, 2007, p. 2). In these types of experiences, people are more likely to attend to making meaning of their own being-in-the-world. Through these types of experiences, people are concentrating not on “knowing more but on knowing differently” (McManus Holroyd, 2007, p. 3). Meaning emerges through interaction of the world and the individual; the individual is constructing the world as the world constructs the individual (Lavery, 2003).

Heidegger’s understanding of “being” provides a context for approaching museums as sites of connecting with the question of humanness that immerses people in the phenomenon of “being-in-the-world,” providing an environment that supports meaning making. In his later work, Heidegger considered the concept of dwelling in connection with “being.” Applied to museums, this suggests moving away from the notion of visitor as spectator and instead understanding that museum-goers are in a condition of being embedded in an ongoing flowing practice of meaning creation and authentic experience. The focus is on the primary experience of being, rather than on the secondary experience of learning. Following is an overview of Heidegger’s philosophy and approach to the question of “being,” particularly as it relates to the museum as a site of hermeneutic phenomenology.

Martin Heidegger was strongly influenced by his teacher Edmund Husserl’s interest in understanding a broad range of things, ideas, and social structures, but was, himself, focused on the question of what it means to “be” (Lavery, 2003). He described his chef d’oeuvre, *Being*

*and Time* as a work of hermeneutic phenomenology and considered interpretation to be part of how one exists (Bontekoe, 2000; Cohen & Omery, 1994; Lavery, 2003).

Heidegger was profoundly interested in the question “what does it mean to be?” and sought a way to “get beneath the surface of this question” (Bontekoe, 2000, p. 63). He believed that human beings are “thrown” into a world of pre-existing meaning, structure, and organization; a person’s situatedness in the world is integral to that person’s understanding of the world. Heidegger’s approach to phenomenology was mindful of the notion that it is difficult to reflect on being when one is a being and is in a state of being. Since consciousness emerges partially as a product of history and pre-understanding, it is impossible to eliminate pre-conceptions, although he suggested that they could be brought to the forefront of awareness in a way that allowed the true nature of a phenomenon to reveal itself (Bontekoe, 2000; Lavery, 2003; Morse, 1994).

Heidegger’s understanding of *Dasein* (literally “being-there”) is critical to his philosophy of hermeneutic phenomenology. In *Being and Time*, he wrote, “*Dasein* is a being that does not simply occur among other beings. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that in its Being this being is concerned about its very being” (Heidegger, 1978). *Dasein* is always “with others.” Heidegger asserted that “being-in-the-world” is “being-with-others-in-the world” and meaning emerges in the context of relationship or community (Inwood, 2007). By its nature, *Dasein* is a temporal being, but it is not in the present; *Dasein* is always projecting the future and forming experiences based on the past (Ream & Ream, 2005). According to Ream and Ream (2005) “The nexus of the past and the future, as defined by the present, creates the reality with which *Dasein* must contend” (p. 590).

It is in this nexus, the moments of the present, that *Dasein* lives in an authentic or inauthentic way. Inwood (1997) defined Heidegger's understanding of authenticity as the state of "being true to one's own self, to be one's own person, to do one's own thing" (p. 26). Humans live authentically when they orient themselves to being itself; resisting the urge to hide. This means an orientation to the future, an integration of the past, and a presence in the present (Ream & Ream, 2005).

Heidegger believed that the "normal condition for most [human beings] most of the time" (Inwood, 1997, p. 27) is one of inauthenticity, which he defined as being lost in the world and/or being lost in the self (Ream & Ream, 2005). This is an unreflective state, a hiding from being, "in which one gives oneself over to idle talk, to empty curiosity, and to the dictates of the "they" (Bontekoe, 2000, p. 75). "*Dasein* is inauthentic in so far as it does things simply because that is what one does" (Inwood, 1997, p. 27). In a state of inauthenticity "humans ignore their ownmost distinctive possibilities and measure their worth by pursuing the interpretation of anyone else toward the world and conforming to the possibilities that anyone can see in oneself" (Su, 2011, p. 64).

Authenticity was closely tied for Heidegger to how *Dasein* responds to angst, which he described as an unsettledness that disrupts understanding of the world (Ream & Ream, 2005). To avoid facing the causes of anxiety and anxiety itself, *Dasein* may become engrossed in what Heidegger referred to as "busyness." This can create a "tranquilized sense of selfhood" while "simultaneously promot[ing] a sense of alienation at the deepest point of human existence" (Ream & Ream, 2005, p. 592). By dealing with anxiety, Heidegger suggested, *Dasein* is able to reach its true ontological potential. Uncovering being is possible because *Dasein* in its authentic state is able to understand the truth.

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), a student of Heidegger's who further developed the field of hermeneutic phenomenology, was primarily interested in how understanding is possible in the experience of the lifeworld (Gadamer, 1989). The concept of historicity of understanding is critical to Gadamer's approach and one of his important contributions to the hermeneutic tradition. He saw understanding as being intrinsically temporal and interpretation as being dependent on past experience, projections of the future, and understanding of the present.

Understanding always takes place at the fusion of historical and present horizons (Bontekoe, 2000). Being is grounded in the present by recognizing learning of the past and remaining open to future possibilities. The "fusion of horizons" between the known and the yet to become known is a condition of living. Horizons are by nature permeable; the crossing from known to unknown is constantly in motion (Gadamer, 1989). The value of the hermeneutic process is fully realized when the process leads to meaning in the contemporary world since understanding is based on questions being asked in the present.

Because understanding is always situated in the present, and information is situated across time and flows in a stream from multiple directions, understanding takes place in an integrative way, expressed through the hermeneutic circle. The circle is made up of the various parts that flow into understanding, and the whole, which emerges from and contextualizes these parts (Bontekoe, 2000). Interpretation presents itself as "an inner unfolding of meaning" (Dobrosavljev, 2002, p. 607).

This meaning emerges in part through what Gadamer (1989) called *bildung*, "keeping oneself open to what is other—to other, more universal points of view...to distance oneself from oneself and from one's private purposes means to look at these in the way that others see them"

(p. 17). Graaff (2008) discussed *bildung* particularly in context of the work of Kerdeman (2003) who attributed the essence of self-formation and transformation to the work of seeing the unforeseen. Gadamer (1989) talked about the transformational experience of seeing the unforeseen in a way that reveals a previously unseen piece of the self as being “pulled up short” (p. 268). This may occur when attitudes that are not congruous with self-understanding are disclosed, often in recognition of the Other in some part of the self (Gadamer, 1989). Intersubjectivity, the way human beings are shaped by their encounters with others, is at the center of the notion of authenticity, which is critical to understanding hermeneutics and to the conception of museums as sites of hermeneutic phenomenology.

According to Vessey, Gadamer and Heidegger’s perspectives about authenticity differed in critical aspects related to their understanding of intersubjectivity. Although Heidegger himself never explicitly delineated separate theoretical approaches to intersubjectivity, Vessey described three distinct hypotheses that emerged from Heidegger’s work: the phenomenological thesis, the ontological thesis, and the authenticity thesis. The phenomenological thesis said that we are always aware of other people and objects in our environment and come to know ourselves in relationship with others. This is especially important in terms of understanding empathy in that according to this belief, people do not have to get outside themselves and enter another’s mind to understand an other; in fact human experiences are saturated with the presence of other human beings. According to Vessey, this understanding leads to Heidegger’s ontological thesis that “being-in-the-world” is “being-with-others-in-the-world.” Fundamentally *Dasein* is *Mitsein*; to be is to be with.

It is in the consequence of this ontology that Heidegger and Gadamer differ. Heidegger characterized the state of “being-with” as problematic in that people are drawn to live by the

terms of the “we” and in that way are living inauthentically. Being part of the whole, what Heidegger called *Das Man*, people conform to be part of the oneness of human beings, rather each being an individual “I.” Vessey explained that “for Heidegger at the heart of becoming authentic is the need to free ourselves from all corrupting relations to others” (p. 5).

Gadamer on the other hand believed that beings exist in dialogue with each other and that it is in the context of this dialogue that the authentic being can become fully realized. Dialogue with others is essential to self-understanding. For Heidegger the authentic individual emerges by turning away from others to differentiate the self; for Gadamer the authentic individual emerges through turning toward the other to participate in dialogue. In dialogue, human beings become aware of different ways of seeing and become more aware of their own ways of seeing. Dialogue calls for understanding one’s own view in a way that understanding is open to others and calls for openness to understanding the views of others.

Meaning emerges through dialogue between the interpreter and the author/text. Those engaged in understanding are active participants bringing their perspective, their historical consciousness, to the conversation. Gadamer saw the hermeneutical experience as “an open ended dialectical exchange in which the past and the present communicate” (Serequeberhan, 1987, p. 58). Particularly important to Gadamer’s contribution to hermeneutics and to understanding hermeneutics in the context of museums, is his inclusion of art as having a role in understanding through dialogue. In fact, Gadamer (1976) asserted that:

The work of art and its expressive power cannot be restricted to its original historical horizon.... The creator of a work of art may intend the public of his own time, but the real being of his work is what it is able to say, and this being reaches fundamentally beyond any historical confinement. (pp. 95-96)

Gadamer (1976) went on to explain that:

When we say that the work of art *says* something to us and that it thus belongs to the matrix of things we have to understand, our assertion is not a metaphor, but has valid and demonstrable meaning. Thus the work of art is an object of hermeneutics. (p. 98)

Ultimately the purpose of dialogue with art is not to recreate the artist's meaning, but to find the viewer's own truth in the artist's expression.

There are many elements of Heidegger and Gadamer's consideration of "being" that seem relevant to the experience of museum visitors and to the museum form and construct. Gadamer's work, rooted in the humanist tradition, points to the integration of dialogue in being and understanding being. Through dialogue human beings connect with "being" and "being-with." The human experience occurs and is understood through the act and interaction of conversation, literally through the act of living together. Meaning making emerges from dialogue with other human beings and with objects and artwork; this type of dialogue is key to museum visitor experience. From their place outside the ordinary flow of life, museums disrupt the day-to-day in ways that can lead to deeper understanding of what it means to be-in-the-world. By being situated in the present, but also presenting the past, museums can be seen as presenting access to the fusion of horizons. The museum experience may elevate awareness of pre-understanding in ways that make it more possible to be present in the present. In some ways, the museum becomes a manifestation of the hermeneutic circle: a place in which people move naturally between the parts and the whole in integrative ways, a place in which people become immersed in the experience of "being" and "being-with."

### Chapter III: Research Approach

*“From a phenomenal point of view, to do research is always to question the way we experience the world; to want to know the world in which we live as human beings”*  
(van Manen, 1990, p. 5)

#### Introduction

Ways of approaching research are grounded in the researcher’s values, assumptions, and worldview and in the nature of the research question being studied. I approach my research from a Constructivist ontology, which maintains that there are multiple realities constructed through experience, rather than an overall truth that exists and can be discovered. As each person experiences a phenomenon from her or his unique context, there are many different realities that may be experienced. In this sense, I believe that research is “shaped from the ‘bottom up’: from individual perspectives to broad patterns, and ultimately to theory” (Creswell, 2007, p. 22). Based on the purpose of this study and on my worldview, I have chosen a qualitative approach that is concerned with coming to a deep understanding of a particular rather than discovering a universal truth that is measurable and broadly applicable (Higgs, 2001, p. 46).

Hermeneutic phenomenology and hermeneutic philosophy, which are concerned primarily with the function of understanding as an essential aspect of “being,” provide the overarching framework for the research. By engaging participants and the researcher in a process of “reflective discovery” (McManus Holroyd, 2007, p. 1), this research explored the connection of understanding to being and particularly how museums work as sites of understanding and being.

When I first began reading about phenomenology I wrote in the margin of my book, “museums are essentially phenomenological enterprises.” I was responding to how Rehorick and Bentz (2008) described phenomenology as “a return to direct experience as the source of

knowledge” (p. 6). It seemed clear to me then that a phenomenological approach would be elegantly aligned with studying the museum as a place of phenomenology. This understanding expanded as I was introduced to hermeneutic phenomenology, a concept that Heidegger described as “a profound examination of the conditions of being human which make interpretation possible” (Bontekoe, 2000, p. 62). Hermeneutic phenomenology, as understood through the work of Heidegger and Gadamer, is concerned not with “develop[ing] a procedure for understanding”, but with “clarify[ing] the conditions that can lead to understanding” (McManus Holroyd, 2007, p. 1). From a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, meaning is constructed by human beings within the context of their personal frame of reference as they engage with the world they are seeking to understand (Crotty, 1998).

I have come to believe that at their epistemological core, museums are concerned with creating opportunities for people to become interpretively ensconced in direct experience—with artifacts and objects, with art, with other people, and with stories—to enable deep ontological reflection. Based on this understanding, I have chosen to contextualize my research within a philosophical framework of hermeneutic phenomenology and focus the study on understanding the human experience of visiting a museum from the perspective of a participant in that experience.

In order to capture the essence of participants’ experiences and better understand the qualities of those experiences that connect with exploring “being,” data were gathered through narrated museum visits and in-depth interviews. This research approach is aligned with my interests as a researcher, my love of writing and storytelling, my deep trust in people’s voices as the primary source of knowing, and ultimately my question about the museum experience and why it matters. This chapter provides an overview of the philosophical framework from which

my research approach emerged, frames the research purpose and question, and outlines the study design.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research is to gain in-depth understanding of the lived experience of the museum visit and to consider what the phenomenon of the museum visit reveals about: the connection between human experience and museums; the work of museums as sites of exploring “being-in-the-world” and “being-with-others-in-the-world;” and the essential role of museums as communal and cultural institutions.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by several overarching questions: How do museum visit experiences connect to “being-in-the-world” and to “being-with-others-in-the-world”?; what are the specific features of the visit experience that facilitate or block those connections?; how do study participants respond to those experiences that connect to being human and to those that create barriers? Given the nature of the research, there were other questions that came up during the course of the study; those questions were considered as they arose.

### **Understanding Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

The philosophical origins and key features associated with hermeneutics, phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology are important considerations in situating research in these approaches. Beyond basic understanding, there is some level of complexity about these traditions, which are both philosophies and research approaches, and which as Lavery (2003) pointed out: “are not stationary, but rather dynamic and evolving, even today” (p. 3). An overview of the evolution and major qualities of each approach provides a foundation for understanding the fit for researcher, research question, and approach to research. I have

intentionally avoided the use of the word “methodology” in this discussion since, as van Manen (1990) wrote: “in a serious sense there is not really a method understood as a set of investigative procedures that one can master relatively quickly...the method of phenomenology and hermeneutics is that there is no method!” (p. 30).

**Hermeneutics.** With disciplinary roots in philosophy, linguistics, and theology (Patton, 2002), the term “hermeneutics” comes from the Greek verb “hermeneuein” and noun “hermeneia,” meaning “to interpret” and “interpretation” (Crotty, 1998; Palmer, 1969). This is from the same root as Hermes, the Greek messenger god who interpreted to humans the words of the gods. Hermes was not merely a messenger repeating the words of the gods; he was an interpreter able to make clear what might not be immediately understandable (McManus Holroyd, 2007).

Freidrich Ast (1778-1841) is credited with moving hermeneutics into the realm of formal inquiry, recognizing that the task of hermeneutics went beyond understanding the written word to interpreting the author’s meaning. In fact, for Ast, the purpose of hermeneutic inquiry was to re-create as exactly and objectively as possible the author’s intent. This calls on the interpreter to eliminate the subjective or accidental. Ast suggested that the task of genuine understanding is accomplished through a dialectical circle in which the whole and its parts are interwoven in an iterative process that enables the interpreter to reach a full understanding of the particulars and the whole, which in relation to each other reveal meaning (Bontekoe, 2000).

Although he was not recognized as a hermeneutic theorist in his lifetime, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) was an important figure in the field largely due to his influence on philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, who identified him as the founder of modern hermeneutics (Bontekoe, 2000; Kenny, Jahn-Langenberg, & Lowey, 2005). A leading Protestant theologian,

Schleiermacher conceptualized hermeneutics in epistemological terms seeking to understand how humans understand. His work was based in two major assertions: people are fundamentally language-based beings and understanding of text depends both on linguistic context and on personal context (Bontekoe, 2000). He further believed that the linguistic and personal sides of interpretation are practiced in tandem, leading to his concept of the hermeneutic circle.

Understanding emerges through interplay of language (the grammatical) and the author's personal context (the psychological) (Bontekoe, 2000). The objective of the hermeneutic process for Schleiermacher was "to reconstruct the thought of another person through interpretation of his utterance" (Palmer, 1969, p. 89), shifting from "the science of deciphering text to...the art of understanding language" (Bontekoe, 2000, p. 26).

Like Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) conceptualized hermeneutics in epistemological terms (Bontekoe, 2000; Palmer, 1969). Dilthey rejected Schleiermacher's linguisticity hypothesis, believing instead that understanding is a process of life itself. That is to say that expression is not first through language, which is then followed by understanding, but that human beings as understanding, interpreting beings in all aspects use language as a way of expressing understanding (Bontekoe, 2000). Further, Dilthey asserted that lived experience is the key to understanding human expression (Palmer, 1969). The emphasis then is not on understanding the inner life of others, but on understanding the world from a perspective of shared or common experience. This leads to Dilthey's important contribution to the evolution of hermeneutics, the attention to historicity (Bontekoe, 2000; Palmer, 1969).

Dilthey's view of the hermeneutic circle reflects his inclusion of historicity as an essential element of understanding. Understanding emerges from an interchange of the whole and the parts, but the sense of the whole shifts continuously over time and situation. Meaning is

not a single truth, but is perceived from individual horizons within the hermeneutic circle. The position of the author and the interpreter are, therefore, integral to the process of understanding.

**Phenomenology.** Phenomenology, which is rooted in philosophy, seeks to discover the essences of particular phenomena by focusing on the lived experience of individuals or groups of people (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998; Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002; van Manen, 1990). The two basic assumptions underlying phenomenology are: there is an essence to shared experience (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002); the nature of a phenomenon—“that which makes a some-thing what it is and without which it could not be what it is” (van Manen, 1990, p. 10)—can be understood through study of experience as it is lived.

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is the founder and a central figure of the phenomenological movement (Cohen & Omery, 1994). His method was based on discovering internal essence through reductions of phenomena to the essential elements of the experience (Patton, 2002). Husserl’s method involved two stages of activity, eidetic reduction and phenomenological reduction. Eidetic reduction is a technique whereby all extraneous perceptions are removed and only the essential features remain. The essential features establish certain, indisputable knowledge. Phenomenological reduction is also known as epoche or bracketing (Morse, 1994). Since his conception of phenomenology was built on an understanding that phenomena are knowable in a pre-reflective or pre-predicative state, Husserl believed that the subjective experience could be separated from the objective phenomena through a process of bracketing the subjective to get at the objective (Crotty, 1998; Morse, 1994). Husserl considered his approach, transcendental phenomenology, as a method of “reaching true meaning through penetrating deeper and deeper into reality” in order to uncover new or hidden meanings (Lavery, 2003, p. 2). This viewpoint embraces the concept of intentionality; it is by turning concentrated attention

toward an experience that the particular experience is separated from the stream of experiences and is available for examination.

**Hermeneutic Phenomenology.** Entering the world of phenomenology as a disciple of Husserl's, philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) went on to challenge, and ultimately to reject, some of the key ideas of his teacher. While he was strongly influenced by Husserl's interest in describing a broad range of things, ideas, and social structures, Heidegger, himself, was focused on the meaning of being (Lavery, 2003). He considered his major writing, *Being and Time* (1927), to be a work of hermeneutic phenomenology and considered hermeneutics as an ontological process. That is to say that understanding is a process in which and through which one exists as a human being (Bontekoe, 2000; Cohen & Omery, 1994; Lavery, 2003). Rather than the phenomenological focus on description of lived experience, hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on understanding lived experience.

Heidegger believed it impossible for human beings to bracket in the way that Husserl asserted (Bontekoe, 2000; Lavery, 2003; Morse, 1994), although he suggested that preconceptions could be brought to the forefront of awareness. He saw the hermeneutic circle as a way to clear away assumptions that might be in the way of clear understanding so the true nature of the phenomenon could reveal itself (Bontekoe, 2000; Morse, 1994).

The field of hermeneutic phenomenology further evolved through the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002). Following on Heidegger's philosophical approach, Gadamer rejected methodology as a means for discovering truth arguing that "the preoccupation with objective method or technique is really antithetical to the spirit of human science scholarship" (van Manen, 1990, p. 3). Like Heidegger, Gadamer rejected the idea of bracketing based on his belief that a person immersed in "being-in-the-world" cannot stand outside pre-understanding of

her lifeworld and the historicity of experience (Lavery, 2003). Personal context inevitably creates a biased perspective, which is unavoidable and essential, and which, in fact, Gadamer believed is critical to the act of understanding (Schwandt, 2001). Gadamer's primary interest was not in developing a "right way" to find truth, but rather in the fundamental question of how understanding is possible in the experience of the lifeworld (Palmer, 1969, p. 164).

Gadamer's approach looks not at reconstructing the author's meaning but at understanding the author's experience in reference to the reader's experience. Truth in this sense is revealed through dialogue (Palmer, 1969). As Bontekoe (2000) explained:

Even if the author's intended meaning could be accurately reconstructed... what we would have is a dead meaning—a meaning which was appropriate to, and arose out of, the circumstances of another place and time—a meaning with which, for this very reason, we cannot enter into a living relationship. (p. 98)

Gadamer argued that understanding is intrinsically temporal and must always be seen in terms of past, present, and future. All interpretation is situated in past experience, ideas of the future, and present understanding. Forming the horizon of the present depends on the past. Gadamer saw the crux of the hermeneutical task as "the fusion of horizons." A horizon is the furthest point to which we can see; it is not a fixed point as a shift in perspective can shift the horizon. Horizons fuse when meaning is reciprocally constructed by the interpreter and the author/text. This dialogue can reveal the possibility of multiple meanings that deepens understanding and reveals multiple truths.

Perhaps Gadamer's most important contribution resides in the realm of aesthetics. He believed that truth may be situated in a work of art as readily as it may be found in scientific theory, logic, or language. As Palmer (1969) explained: "as soon as we stop seeing a work [of art] as an object and see it as a world, when we see the world *through* it, then we realize that art is not sense perception but knowledge" (p. 167). "In an encounter with a work of art we do not

go into a foreign universe, stepping outside of time and history;...rather we become more fully present” (Palmer, 1969, p. 168). In this way, art contributes to self-understanding. Meaning emerges in a dialogue between the artwork and the viewer. Beyond offering aesthetic pleasure, art reveals being (Palmer, 1969). In much the same way as understanding text is about the writer/reader dialogue, Gadamer believed that it is ultimately important not to recreate the artist’s meaning, but to find the truth in what the artist has to say, which is always in some way the viewer’s own truth. This understanding is especially important in terms of understanding the connection of being and the museum experience.

This brief overview of the development of hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on those perspectives and approaches that are relevant to understanding hermeneutic phenomenology as a research approach. Especially as concerns Heidegger and Gadamer, there are many other elements of their ontological perspectives that are important to the philosophical understanding of “being” as it is framed in this study. A discussion of Heidegger and Gadamer’s philosophical understanding of “being” is included as part of the review of the literature in Chapter Two.

### **Hermeneutic Phenomenology as a Research Approach**

The research questions in this study were designed to explore museum visitor experiences and the connection to “being-in-the-world” and to “being-with-others-in-the-world.” Although there is a body of research about visitor experience, there is little research that explores the deep meaning of what takes place in a museum visit specifically as it relates to the human experience, particularly focusing outside of specific museum activities. Phenomenology is an appropriate research approach for this exploration of how people experience the “meaning, structure, and essence” (Patton, 2002, p. 104) of a phenomenon in which they are engaged participants.

A hermeneutic phenomenological study intertwines participant understanding and researcher interpretation to peel back layers of description in a way that reveals the core essence of the lived experience (van Manen, 1990). It is the role of the researcher to collect and interpret descriptions of visitor experiences, and to apply theoretical and personal knowledge to understand the structures or essences that constitute those experiences. To understand another's lived experience, according to Heidegger, the researcher must become engaged in the arc of the hermeneutic circle, spiraling within parts and the whole until meaning emerges. That is to say that to do phenomenological research, one must first become a phenomenologist (van Manen, 1990). Since the most important research tool is the "inquirer's own consciousness" (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998), the researcher must absorb the language of phenomenology and must be self-aware and able to understand the essence of her own experiences. According to Bentz and Shapiro (1998), "the researcher becomes the instrument of articulation....The research must create an in-dwelling awareness" (pp. 101-102). At the same time, the voices of participants must be heard. In this way, the researcher ensures that participants are fully present in the study, while also maintaining her own full presence.

**Researcher positionality.** In hermeneutic phenomenological research, the researcher is integrally involved as a participant in the research process; her subjective view is acknowledged as a filter through which phenomena are understood and knowledge is constructed. In this construct, the researcher "assumes a learning role rather than a testing one" (Ryan, 2007, p. 18). The perspectives of the researcher are present in the understanding developed as it is through her lenses that what is significant and interesting come into focus. It is important, therefore, for the researcher to make clear her understanding, biases and beliefs.

I approach my role as a researcher from the perspective of one filled with questions – wondering what it means to “be-in-the-world;” curious about how others understand life and how we live together in a world in which there are many truths; seeking to understand how museums, the places with which I have intertwined my life, may be places in which “being-in-the-world” and “being-with-others-in-the-world” are considered and embraced. Much of my work has centered on the concept of mindfulness, that is to say “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 5). My research, my studies, and my museum practice, all focus of the process and approach of conscious living.

I have worked in the museum field for more than three decades in a variety of roles ranging from customer service to volunteer management to marketing to program development to organizational leadership. Over the years I have been a passionate advocate for developing the role of museums as places of building community, bringing people together in ways that enable multiple viewpoints to be seen and heard. It is fair to say, though, that during my 30-plus years of working in the museum field, I have come to question whether or not museums are genuinely positioned to do the critical work about which we often speak. I have found myself questioning why museums matter if they matter, how they’re valued and who they value, how they’re used and how the way they are used might change.

I bring to my museum work a strong background in social justice and a strong personal sense of fairness and equitable access to shared resources. I believe that as public institutions museums must be accessible and play a meaningful role in society. To do that they must know their communities, work collaboratively, represent multiple perspectives and embrace multiple learning styles. What I recently have come to see as being of perhaps even greater importance

though, is that museums need to know themselves. I believe that it is critical for museums to understand their essence, what they are that is unique to their core purpose. In the absence of this understanding, efforts to be relevant in today's world can easily pull in the direction of distraction, what Heidegger (1978) described as "busyness," rather than in the direction of authentic connection.

Sometimes I think that museums have tipped too far in the direction of action, chasing ways of being valuable to society that may not be well aligned with their strengths and core purpose. I have seen museums focus so intently on doing what they think people want that they lose sight of their own unique resources. There is a belief it seems that for museums to be seen as valuable in society they must be perceived to address urgent needs, needs that are rarely defined in terms of what I see as the critical human need to gather and to be.

In my view, however, many of the outcomes that would result from more attention to creating environments that support engagement in the question of "being" would ultimately support the action-oriented outcomes to which museums are often committed. The tendency, though, is to focus more intensely on the end goal, than to pay attention to the work of connecting people to being human, a function for which museums are well positioned and which, from my perspective, they can fulfill very effectively.

I believe that museumgoers are in a condition of being embedded in an ongoing flowing practice of meaning creation and authentic experience. The focus is on the primary experience of "being-in-the-world" and "being-with-others-in-the-world," rather than on the secondary experiences of looking and learning. As one who has long grappled with the chasm between how dedicated museum professionals imagine their work and the reality of what they are able to deliver, it is my hope that broadened understanding of museums as sites of connecting with

humanness that immerse people in the unitary phenomenon of “being-in-the-world” will contribute to developing more meaningful, powerful, and valuable museum practice.

### **Study Design**

The challenge in conducting research in the realm of hermeneutic phenomenology is to find the most effective way to peel back the layers of experience, to touch the central stream of feeling, and to connect to that deep place beyond what we think we feel. To move toward this level of understanding of lived experience, particularly in terms of how museums connect with “being-in-the-world” and “being-with-others-in-the-world,” two primary data gathering approaches were used: narrated museum visits and phenomenological interviews. Both of these ways of understanding were designed to bring forward detailed descriptions of the lived experience of a museum visit from the perspective of the person experiencing the phenomenon. These approaches enabled the researcher to hear the specific way in which participants described their responses; the researcher is able to gather participant’s stories (Patton, 2002, p. 341). The purpose and protocol of each of these approaches is described below.

**Narrated visits.** This approach, which I developed and pilot-tested, enabled direct access to the experience of a particular museum visit in the words of the person moving through the experience. In the participants’ narration as they experienced the museum and in their understanding of how the visit connected with their sense of “being,” I was able to gather evidence of authentic, unmediated, and in-the-moment lived museum visit experiences.

The pilot study involved two participants, a man and a woman both in their fifties, who were acquaintances of the researcher. The process was the same as the one used in the study; each participant was given a digital voice recorder and asked to visit a museum of their choice and narrate the whole of their visit. One visited a history museum and one an art museum.

While the focus of their visits differed, they both provided robust narration that ranged from description of surroundings to reflection on feelings to story-telling and thoughtful consideration of a wide variety of ideas. As a researcher it was powerful for me to have direct access to museum visits as they were unfolding. I had entered the process with some doubt about how much people would share and whether what they were actually experiencing would go beyond looking. In both cases the narration was rich and deep; the experiences held striking similarities and marked differences. They touched on memory and self-understanding, awareness of place, coveting things, and connection between the past and present. Both participants felt positive about the process; they both expressed in some way that recording themselves may have contributed to them being more focused in the experience than they might have been otherwise. They both also noted that they enjoyed the process and would happily participate in a similar process again. Based on this pilot study, I decided to use the narrated visit approach for my dissertation research with no change in how it was conducted.

For my dissertation study, there were twelve participants in the narrated visit phase each of whom was given a digital recorder and asked to talk through a one-hour visit of any museum of their choosing. They were asked to pay attention particularly to ways in which their visit triggered connections for them to the notion of “being.” The researcher’s understanding of “being-in-the-world” and “being-with-others-in-the-world” was not elucidated so as to encourage each participant’s personal understanding to emerge.

Following the participants’ visits, they returned digital voice files and I listened to and transcribed each visit. The transcripts were then reviewed against the audio files and my field notes and corrections were made to prepare the data for further review (Creswell, 2003). Each participant was then sent her or his transcript to review for accuracy. Transcripts from this phase

of the study were reviewed and studied for emerging themes prior to the start of phase two – in-depth phenomenological conversations.

**In-depth conversations.** The second phase of the study involved unstructured in-depth conversations with seven of those who participated in the narrated visits. After reading and reflecting on transcripts of all narrated visits, I invited seven participants—whose narration seemed to lend itself to additional conversation and who indicated a willingness and ability to participate further—to take in a post-visit conversation. Using the narrated visit transcripts as a starting place, the purpose of these conversations was to increase interpretive insight by gaining deeper understanding of the meaning of the museum visit for the participant through reflection and dialogue. Follow up conversations were conducted with participants until saturation was reached; that is to say that no new ideas or understanding continued to emerge. Two conversations took place with three of the seven and a third conversation took place with two of those three. I then transcribed those conversations and used those data, along with the twelve narrated visits transcripts, to identify emergent themes.

**Field notes.** Beyond the participants' stories collected through narrated visits and in-depth interviews, it is critical that the researcher's field notes are understood as part of the data collected. These records of what the researcher experiences and thinks are an important source of information particularly in terms of thoughts, reflections, insights, and questions that occurred during the research process (van Manen, 1990). For this purpose I kept a research journal throughout the process and referred to the journal notes especially during the process of interpretation.

**Sampling strategies.** Since this study was intended to gain in-depth understanding through approaches that called on participants to express themselves verbally, to spend time

visiting a museum and possibly to continue the conversation in follow up interviews, and to reflect on human experience as they understand it, I chose to use purposeful sampling to identify participants. Identifying participants in this way enables the researcher to “select information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (Patton, 2002, p. 46). For this study I specifically used maximum variation and snowball sampling strategies.

Maximum variation sampling can be used even with a small sample size to identify and interpret themes that are common to an experience cutting across a variety of other factors that differentiate participants. According to Patton (2002), “any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared dimensions of a setting or phenomenon” (p. 235). Participants were identified by the researcher from the pool of individuals known to her who expressed willingness to participate and self-identified as being able to conduct a narrated visit and to participate in in-depth interviews if asked. Based on maximum variation within characteristics including age, gender, education, and race, six people were invited to participate. Of those originally invited, all agreed to participate but only five actually completed their visits. When it became clear that one person was not able to find the time to complete her narrated visit, the researcher invited another individual.

In order to increase the diversity of participants and to reach beyond those known to the researcher, snowball sampling was used to identify six additional study participants. The purpose of this sampling strategy is to identify prospective participants who are not known or easily accessible to the researcher (Patton, 2002). In this case, each initial participant was asked to identify another participant who had at least some difference in the identified characteristics and might be interested in and able to be part of the study; three of the six provided a connection

to another participant. One participant identified two other participants and one of the “second round” participants identified a participant. I contacted each of the participants, explained the format and commitment involved and invited them to participate.

**Data interpretation.** Data analysis was based in phenomenological and hermeneutic principles and in accepted approaches to interpreting narrative research data. Throughout the research process, I remained aware of pre-research assumptions and continually considered those assumptions in the context of the research. Data were interpreted using a thematic reflection framework (van Manen, 1990). After collecting all narrated visit data I listened to each narration and recorded my responses in my research journal. I then read through all narrated visit transcripts again. Through this initial step I identified significant statements, emerging themes, and overarching concepts, and developed a general sense of the overall meaning of participant experience (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002). These data were used to frame in-depth conversations that took place as the second phase of the research. Following these conversations, I used a similar process to that followed in phase one of listening to and transcribing recordings, reviewing transcripts and field notes and then identifying significant statements, emerging themes, overarching concepts, and overall meaning.

Based on the understanding that emerged from this process I wrote word pictures of each participant’s narrated visit incorporating their voices and their understanding with my understanding. These word pictures were organized around “clusters of meaning” (Creswell, 2007, p. 61) that offered an understanding of the essence of the visit experience (Creswell, 2007). As Polkinghorne (1989) explained, the intent of this kind of description is that the reader will come away with the impression that he or she “understand[s] better what it is like for someone to experience that” (p. 62). According to van Manen (1990), “the essence or nature of an

experience has been adequately described in language if the description reawakens or shows us the lived quality and significance of the experience in a fuller or deeper manner” (p. 10). From the word pictures, six overarching themes emerged.

The final step in the data interpretation was to write an interpretive essay linking the literature about museums and “being-in-the-world” to the themes identified through the initial data analysis. This type of interpretation is based in the flow of the hermeneutic circle, moving between parts (here defined as the data) and whole (here defined as understanding of the essence of the phenomenon in broad context) to amplify the meaning of both the data and the essence (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007).

### **Quality Measures**

Unlike the realm of quantitative research in which validity and reliability measures are widely accepted quality standards, qualitative research quality standards are more broadly debated. For this study the criteria that served to ensure quality were credibility, transferability, and dependability (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The credibility standard is concerned with establishing that research results are true to the voice of study participants. Transferability refers to the possibility of the research results being applicable beyond the particular circumstances of the study. Dependability standards are based in the adherence of research protocol to accepted standards that are reported in enough detail that the study design could be repeated regardless of whether or not the same results emerged.

In adherence to these quality standards, I ensured that the voices of participants were included throughout the text, used rich description that authentically represented participant experience, engaged in member checking to ensure that data were accurate and credible from the perspective of participants (Creswell, 2007), maintained a detailed audit trail ensuring access to

methods, procedures and decisions as the study unfolded (Merriam, 2002), documented all conversations, meetings, and correspondence to ensure accurate reflection of interactions, and ensured transparency and accountability in the research process by recording and transcribing all interviews and narrated visits.

### **Ethics**

Approval was received from the Institutional Review Board of Antioch University prior to conducting research. Once Institutional Review Board approval was received participants were invited to be part of the study. Participant identity has been kept confidential; pseudonyms chosen by participants are used throughout the study. An informed consent process was used to ensure that participation is voluntary and that participants were able to withdraw from the study at any time. All research records are securely stored and will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study. Participants have been and will be treated with respect in all circumstances. Their narrated visits and interviews were listened to intensely and respectfully and their time and energy has been valued and acknowledged.

## Chapter IV: Study Results

She looks like she's from Mexico. She reminds me of a wonderful woman Renee from Omaha, Nebraska. Just a beautiful woman who is also an artist and matter of fact we have a wonderful angel she did sitting in our house. This could be Renee. Hello Renee. That's nice. Very nice...when you see something on a wall and all of a sudden it reminds you of someone you know.

Avi

People are curious about other people. That's why we have a tradition of storytelling and painting, art and literature. I think that's how people find that out and why we think that's so special and why we preserve it and display it.

Ilsa

It seems that people want to explain their place in the sun I guess. That they were here, what it was like; I mean all kinds of purposes. I look at journals, diaries, and I look at art, even at wall carvings from millions of years ago. I mean people are anxious to tell others their experiences on this planet I think. For what reason I don't know. I mean just so they're not anonymous I guess.

Darcy

The twelve participants in this study visited ten different museums including: a natural history museum; a history museum; a multi-disciplinary state museum; a multi-disciplinary museum, library and garden; two university art museums; and four art museums. Each person visited the museum of their choice and recorded their visit. I conducted follow up interviews with seven of the participants and had multiple conversations with three of those seven. Each of the visits was personal and unique and the narration ranged from detailed descriptions of every object encountered to intermittent musings to audible emotional expressions that were without words. This chapter presents an overview of the research process, word pictures of each participant's particular experience, and an introduction to the overarching themes that emerged from the set of narrated museum visits and post-visit conversations.

### Research Process

This research was designed to capture the essence of museum visitors' lived experiences to lead to a better understanding of how the visit experience connects with understanding "being"

and “being-with-others-in-the-world.” The three research questions for this study specifically focused on: the ways in which museum visit experiences involve visitors in the act of “being” and “being-with;” the specific features of museum experiences that facilitate or create barriers to that involvement; and the ways in which visitors respond to the phenomenon of “being” in the museum and potentially to barriers blocking that experience.

Based in hermeneutic phenomenology, the study involved twelve participants who agreed to narrate their visits to a museum of their choice and to participate in post-visit conversations if requested. The participants represented a purposeful sample using maximum variation and snowball sampling strategies. Of the six people I originally invited, all agreed to participate but only five actually completed their visits. When it became clear that one person was not able to find the time to complete her narrated visit, I invited another individual. I asked each of the six participants to identify another participant and three of them did that. One participant identified two other participants and one of the “second round” participants identified a participant. The twelve study participants represent a diverse group including six males and six females ranging in age from their early twenties to their late seventies. Their work backgrounds and familiarity with museums vary. The sample includes teachers, mental health workers, library workers, poets, professors, a budget examiner, and a scientist. Although there was less racial and ethnic diversity than I had intended, three people-of-color did participate including a Latino, an African American woman and an African American/Latina.

I contacted each of the participants and explained the purpose and format of the study, the time commitment, and the expectations. Once they agreed to participate, I sent them an Informed Consent form, which they completed and returned to me. I then made arrangements for them to have a digital recorder and ensured that they were able to operate the recorder.

Following their visit, participants either returned their recorder to me or downloaded their recording. I transcribed the narrations, which ranged from four pages to twenty-five pages, and began to review them for key phrases, words, and descriptions of experiences, thoughts, or feelings that seemed to reoccur. Based on their narrated visits, I engaged in post-visit conversations with seven participants. I had a second conversation with three of those seven and a third conversation with two of those three. I then transcribed the conversations and used those data, along with the transcribed visits to identify emergent themes.

Based on a thematic reflection framework (van Manen, 1990), I listened to and read the transcripts multiple times and marked significant statements, reoccurring experiences and responses, and words and phrases that seemed to be important to the participants. I then returned to and immersed myself in each participant's experience, including the narrated visit transcript and interviews, and began to more deeply understand the character and essence of each. Based on this understanding, I developed what I am calling word pictures of the participant's visits, which bring attention to "clusters of meaning" (Creswell, 2007, p. 61) and emerging themes. While the word-pictures are based on my interpretation of the participants' lived experiences, they are intended to represent their experiences and rely heavily on their words and voice. From the gallery of word-pictures and the transcripts, six themes emerged, which are described at the end of this chapter. Since this research approach is based in particular experience I will begin with an overview of each participant's visit and reflections.

### **The Visits and Post-Visit Understanding**

The narrated visit approach calls on participants to talk through the whole of their experience as they visit a museum. The intention is to be with the participant in an unobtrusive way so that the researcher can gain understanding based in authentic, in the moment lived

experience. The approach was not without challenges as some people had difficulties operating the digital recorders or downloading their files. In two cases, part of the visit was not recorded, and in one case the narration was only intermittent. Combined with follow up conversations, there was enough substance in all of the visits for them to be important to include in the study.

Participant response to the act of narrating was mixed with several people noting that it kept them present and focused, several mentioning that they were self-conscious, and one mentioning that after about twenty minutes he forgot that someone was listening to him. In our post-visit conversation Joshua recalled, “At the beginning it was awkward. I mean going around and talking into this thing. But like twenty, thirty minutes into it, it was just easier and easier. It just really started to flow.”

Several people mentioned that they were very much aware that I would be listening to what they were saying. Ilsa notices, “Even though you’re not responding, I’m talking to you. So I’m telling you what I’m thinking about, what I’m seeing. So I am in some sense having a conversation with you.” Others, who did not directly mention this feeling, spoke as if they were in conversation. For example, at one point Zia mentions that she needs to take a break and turn the recorder off. When she next speaks, she says, “O.K. let me explain my situation here a bit. There are a lot of people around and it’s just too dark and too crowded. You know how that is.”

For several participants, the act of talking was important to their visit experience. Gabe notices, for example:

The dialogue between myself and this recording device spurred on the dialogue within myself that I’m not normally conscious of when I’m looking at art or walking around a museum...talking out loud makes it real and forces me to own my own words, my own psychic ruminations. And that’s a really positive thing.

As he is ending his visit, Avi talks about the experience:

If I had to think about one of the things that this experience is doing for me with the tape recorder I'm seeing how art really—and I hadn't thought about this before—I'm sure I've done it all my life in one way or another, but I'm really seeing how art jumps you from one space to another, from one time to another. It really does. It just really does.

Although each visit had its own character and participants ranged in approach from wandering, talking and occasionally looking, to looking and describing every work of art, all of the narrated visits were rich in content. The gallery of word-pictures that follows is intended to offer a view of the complex and singular nature of each individual museum experience and of the common themes and connective tissue that reflect the larger whole. I have chosen to write the word-pictures in present tense as that form is congruent with the voices of the study participants as they narrated their visits in the moment.

*Avi*

This experience just now is totally contradictory to that quote I talked about from Bob Dylan where he says “museums are like graveyards,” because...it's like they capture you and they take you wherever your DNA allows them to. So depending on your history and depending on the experiences you've had, a good museum can allow you to tap into that and bring that to the paintings as the painting allows you to tap into it. It is kind of reciprocity.

A poet, storyteller, and retired psychiatric social worker, Avi is loquacious in describing various aspects of his visits to two art museums, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) and the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento, California. He talks about personal memory, creative expression and inspiration, connection to art and to people, experience of the physical space, sensations of being transported and “jumping back and forth,” aesthetic experience, and meaning-making.

His visit to SFMOMA begins with an interaction with a Matisse painting that he describes as “a mind blower.” He talks about coming upon the painting that he recognizes from “every single art book I ever looked at since I was a kid,” and finding himself in front of “her full

face looking right at me...and here I am looking at her and I'm thinking about being a kid." He goes on to describe the experience as "throwing me all the way back." This reminds him of other similar experiences, which he describes, including one in Washington, D.C. in which he came upon Picasso's "The Lovers" and was transported across time and space. He says, "All of a sudden I was back in my apartment growing up in New York looking at that incredible Picasso print and here is the real thing." In the course of his visit, Avi becomes aware of how he is moving between being present in his experience as it happens and being present in his past experience: "This is crazy, this thing with your mind," he says. "It jumps back and forth when you look at a piece of art....Here's this piece with an amazing series of figures and Jim Morrison and the Doors in the middle of it and all of a sudden I'm back at a concert...and there's Jim Morrison doing his thing."

Avi's experiences of being transported are closely linked to personal memory; something he looks at reminds him of past experience or of a path taken. At one point, a book he has stopped to peruse in the museum's reading room throws him back to his work in the 1960s. He says, "I took a different road and I really still value the road I took and I feel it had depth and helped many people and in a crazy way as I read this letter from the artist it is similar to me." The personal nature of the experience is perhaps best summed up in Avi's observation that "it's almost like you're in a weird way looking out of a window, but it's like your window."

The experience bridges past and present, and also touches on possible future activity. Inspired by collages he sees and appreciates, Avi imagines getting back to his own collage work. "I've got some other ideas of collages I want to do and this really propels me to think about it," he says. In a similar vein, Avi notes a creative possibility that did not come to pass, telling the story of a welding class he took that did not pan out as he had hoped. He says, "I never finished

the welding class, cause it was inside and hot and I wanted to do it in the open but there was nobody to teach that to me. So that's one of those things you wanted to do, but you don't do."

Although Avi's visits were much attuned to personal memory, he was certainly aware of physical space and aesthetic responses, which seem to be intertwined for him. On several occasions he mentions how the art is displayed and how that affects his aesthetic experience. He says, "I think the way you put things up on a wall allows you to not only gaze into something, but it's like almost everything around you says look, look, look at me. Without competing for each other." He wonders at one point if having a bench in front of a particular painting would enable "you to sit and let the painting work its magic on you."

Avi is deeply moved by particular artwork, offering rich descriptions that touch on the physical and emotional. Looking at a Jackson Pollack, for example, he says, "the colors are wild and exciting and there's patterns and it's almost like delicious fragrances and...I can see all the brushes and the strokes." In his visit to the Crocker Art Museum Avi is particularly drawn to a painting by the artist, Joan Brown. He describes the feeling, "This is amazing, so rich...I mean her hair, her face; everything about her is just moving, just beautiful. This is a living, breathing painting...I wanna turn and walk and look at some of the other paintings in the room, but I can't. Her face just stares out and she's got me."

### *Sofia*

I'm a historian, not an art history major and I tend to look for what's behind things and the story. I'm a writer also, so I always want to know the story.

A recent college graduate studying public and oral history, Sofia is very familiar with museums, but is visiting the Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens for the first time. Although she frequently mentions the physical nature of the experience, much of

Sofia's visit focuses on empathic engagement with the artwork, seeking stories, and personal connection. She also touches on aesthetic experience.

Even as she is approaching the museum Sofia mentions that she "is very intimidated by the surroundings, a very well-to-do neighborhood, which kind of sets the stereotype for art museums." Once she actually enters the building, she finds the staff immediately welcoming, but is distracted on and off during her visit by a lack of orientation to the physical space. She says, "The map is a little bit in hieroglyphics. It's difficult to read...I have no idea where the entrance was and therefore I have no idea where I am." At one point later in her visit, when she is looking for a particular artwork, she says, "Now he said that *The Blue Boy* was in Gallery 11. Now I'm not seeing gallery numbers, but there's a sign. Nope. Okay, I'll just keep looking."

Although Sofia does seem always to be aware of the physical nature of her experience, most of the time she seems to be engaged in looking at and connecting with the artwork. She notes that she is very responsive to color and comments on her aesthetic responses frequently. She says, "it's this great blue...and it makes me feel calm and at peace and that's because it's this certain shade of blue." She later talks about being particularly drawn to a painting of a woman wearing a "beautiful golden gown. It's like marigold gold. It's nothing I've ever seen. It's so beautiful."

Sofia's connections to the artwork often seem to be associated with an emotional response to the faces depicted, and especially to the eyes. Her descriptions of eyes range from, "he looks like he has eyes that are beyond his years, too much wisdom," to "his eyes are like chocolate pools of thought, he seems very earnest," to "they look a little bit like horror movie eyes and a little bit haunted."

Throughout her narration, Sofia's involvement in her experience is very personal; her responses to what she is seeing are immediately connected to emotions. Looking at a painting of Diana the Countess of Crosby, she says, "I love her face. She looks like she's off to an adventure....She looks like she's above whatever her station is. She's not fearful of reprimands." She responds to a painting of Lady Jane Long by saying, "She looks like a complicated woman. At first she looks innocent, but then when you look at her more you see that she's bored, or that she's full of mischief. Or maybe she's a bit wary. It makes you wonder what's going on in her life." At one point, Sofia notes a connection so deep that she wants to physically reach out and touch the paintings.

There are several instances in which Sofia makes a direct connection between what she is looking at and her own experience. Looking at a sunset image, she is reminded, "Before I was old and tired, I liked to get up with the dawn and see the day begin. Or be out at sunset and see the rainbow of color. This was at a happier time when I was less stressed." In another instance, she connects a portrait of a Revolutionary War General with soldiers fighting today. She says, "When you see him, you think of Red Coats and the war, but then you realize that even though we are God loving Americans who fought for independence, we fought against men. Kind men and mean men who had homes and families and lives...kind of like our soldiers today." In her deep empathic connection, Sofia refers to these ancestors who fought as "we."

At one point during her visit, Sofia notices, "I guess what I am looking for in a piece is human emotion. I want to empathize and feel what they're feeling." Following her visit, she reflects, "I really look for human feeling in a piece because I don't want to feel like they are inhuman. When they don't say something to me, when they don't speak to me in a certain way and I don't care about their story, I just lose interest."

*Rick*

There always seems to be a natural compulsion to look for your favorite. I don't know why that is. My wife and I certainly always do it and I'd have to say in this exhibit my favorite is that Sargent. I'm gonna go back and look at it. That's the painting of Madame Escudier and the more I look at it, the more I like it. I didn't realize it had a nice deep green background, very dark green. But I still can't get over the way he did the face with little sparkles in it...this lady just looks so happy and content with herself. I do like it. I also like the Corot of the unknown woman, the haggard worn look on her. I think I like it most for her face. Her face looks like she's had a bit of a tough life and she's just looking at you for some help, or at least understanding. Sad eyes.

Rick is a retired New York State budget examiner who has an interest in art and museums.

He visited the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts to see two new exhibits that sounded interesting to him, as well as to visit some of his old favorites.

Rick is a very attentive visitor, looking at every piece of art and spending quite a bit of time with many. During his visit, he describes in detail what he is looking at and his response to it. In our follow up conversation, he offers further insights into his visit experience, noting that he has been giving it quite a bit of thought.

Rick seems to be very much aware of his aesthetic responses, frequently noting what he likes or does not like about a piece. Looking at a John Singer Sargent portrait for example, he says, "She's basically in black. She's a redhead, very deep brown eyes. She has a black hat with a very bright white ribbon on it and what strikes me is that she's got a very bright pin on front and bright earrings and he's painted it in a way so we get little bits of a luminescence almost like jewelry, diamonds sparkling in spots. It's a really neat painting. I like the colors. I do like this piece." He often mentions colors; several times noticing that he tends to like the more muted colors. "Here's a platinum print, basically black and white—guy on the water—on the edge of a bank or stream in a rowboat with a hat on. Very somber, like an overcast day. I do really like this one. I kind of like somber ones apparently." In our post-visit conversation, Rick mentions

that he tends to find himself “reacting to color.” “It’s odd,” he says, “because a lot of the art I like is what I would call somber with more muted colors....I think in general I tend towards the somber look—maybe that’s a reflection of my personality.”

In addition to his frequent mention of color, Rick often responds to faces in the artwork, noting aesthetic qualities of the paintings as well as his emotional response to the people being portrayed. He says, “You see that this lady is quite happy with her life or happy with something and the way her face just kind of jumps out from the painting cause he made that one of the brightest parts of the painting, that and the bow in her hair. Big bow I might add. Her face looks nice.” Several paintings later, he says, “This is clearly not a woman of means and she’s got that worn look on her face. Her eyes look sad. Unnamed woman. She’s looking straight at us like she wants us to reach out to her....I do like this portrait.” Towards the end of his visit, Rick mentions being drawn to a portrait of the Spanish historian Philippe de Guevara. He says, “He’s got a massive body. Long dark beard. And his face above his beard is illuminated in a drape, a greenish drape....I like the guy’s eyes. The artist did a great job on this man’s face. He looks like a man of intelligence but not a guy you would want to mess with. He’s got a hard look to him.”

At times Rick seems to be in conversation with the artwork. He wonders what the artist was thinking or what the bigger story behind a particular scene might be. Looking at a Winslow Homer winter scene for example, which he finds himself coming back to, he muses, “It doesn’t really convey a sense of foreboding even though it’s nice and dark and you could see the potential for an accident with this sleigh on a cold winter night. The colors are somber and dark and then there’s the white snow. The notion of traveling home is really resonating. You know you’re traveling and you’re out and the idea of home gives you safety, shelter, contentment. I’m

going to punch in the number on my tablet and see if I'm anywhere near what the artist was going for on that." Rick discovers that the expert interpretation is that the piece is about "man being dwarfed by nature." In a follow up conversation, he reflects on seeing something different than the artist may have intended. "My initial reaction is that I got it wrong, cause I'm not an expert and the curator is. You know, it doesn't detract from me enjoying it though....I guess I think that there's more than one valid view about what something means. There is a one-on-one relationship at some level when someone is looking at a piece of art." He adds that it helps to know about the artist to better understand the painting. "Even if you don't see it the same way the artist intended, it still helps to sort of know who is talking to you and it makes the artwork have more richness."

Although much of his visit is focused on looking at and connecting with the look and story of the art itself, Rick does mention several personal memories that are evoked during his visit. Looking at a Winslow Homer painting, he is reminded of one of the first "art type things" he ever bought, a print of a work by Homer that he describes in detail. In the exhibit *In/Visible: Women of Two Worlds*, he describes another poster he purchased when he was in college. Reflecting later on moments of personal memory that came up in his visit, Rick says, "a lot of things actually came through my head and I was really thinking about where my head was at that time. Of course I was a much younger person back then and I was thinking about personal things, aspects of my life. I wasn't thinking about the art so much to tell you the truth. I didn't dwell on it, but a lot went through my head."

Rick seems to be very present and engaged throughout his visit, but he does note that he misses talking with his wife about what he is seeing. "We do enjoy coming to museums together and we don't always like the same thing. In fact most of the time, we don't...no, that's not true.

We usually find a number of things we like and then there are a lot that we don't agree on." In our post-visit conversation, he adds, "For us the experience is not really complete without the conversation. We always talk about what we saw and what we liked and why we liked it. That's a big part of it for us, including talking with other folks who are into museums or art or whatever." He also mentions wanting to have more of the story behind what he's seeing, especially about the artist's world.

Particularly in the exhibit *Back Stories*, he was hoping for more about the artist's personal lives, the kind of information that he characterizes as "gossip." He talks about an exhibit that he and his wife loved about the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood that featured "lots of gossip that they told us about who was sleeping with whom and the artists sleeping with their models and that kind of thing and I suppose I was looking for some of that here but I didn't get it." Following his visit, Rick talks about the fun of the more salacious aspects of gossip, but notices also that, "it is interesting to learn more about what was happening in another time and place and to get a little more personal information....I think the connection with other people is important. Now most of the time I don't get that when I go to an exhibit. I mean you look at the art or whatever is on display, but when you do get the rest of the story as well, I just think that's really neat."

*Bruce*

Aside from my positive outlook on life that sees possibilities everywhere, I would say that museums probably bring that out for me. Particularly the Field Museum is a sort of—I don't know how to describe it—but it's one place that holds a lot of places within it I would say. It has huge sections based on human history as well as natural history from all over the world as well as animals from all over the world. It's a lot to think about possibly doing and seeing and it's about a lot of places you've never been and never seen and that you may only ever experience through the museum.

Bruce is a recent college graduate who currently works as a political organizer and library programmer. His visit to the Field Museum in Chicago was blanketed with often-humorous banter, but also held moments of connection, personal reflection, memory and imagination. In a conversation following his visit, Bruce shared deep reflections on past/present/future connections, personal possibility, and the work of museums.

Throughout his visit Bruce is very much in conversation with his surroundings, often directly addressing the animals on display. He mentions that he loves to visit Sue, the dinosaur in Stanley Field Hall, with whom he has private chats. He says to the hyena on display, “those whiskers are intense. Girl, you need to trim your mustache.” He looks at a penguin and says, “You’re enormous. You must be an albatross. Yes, you are. The Wandering Albatross. That’s a pretty prescriptive name. I’ll bet you have a purpose in where you go.” There is a sense that this direct address is not just a casual way of talking, but is an indication of how connected Bruce feels to the animals on display. This is borne out in his references to endangered species and the need to be active in conserving natural resources. In spite of the playful way in which he encounters the displays, Bruce indicates a keen awareness of the reality that the animals on display are scientific specimens. “You know it always strikes me,” he says, “that these tiny little lion babies are really cute, but also really dead. They had to die and get taxidermied to get put in this exhibit. And someone behind the scenes had to put their tiny little eyes into cute sleeping positions.”

There are four overarching ways in which Bruce seems to frame his exhibit encounters: in terms of personal memory; as sources of information to feed his curiosity; as evidence of historical connection; and as inspiration for what could be. While it does not seem to come up frequently, there are several instances in which Bruce mentions that something reminds him of

something personal. While looking at an exhibit about Africa for example, he says, “I used to have a little game called Go Travel Africa...it was like Go Fish, but with African countries on the cards. Wishing I’d spent more time with that game right now.” In the same exhibit he remembers, “I used to pretend I was hunting poachers because naturally I had to protect the tigers. They’re endangered. I mean it wasn’t just tigers. I would hide out in the backyard and wait for them to come by. All of these carvings of animals remind me of that.”

Beyond childhood memory connections, Bruce notices larger connections between the past and the present. Looking at a collection of vases in the Egypt exhibit, he notices, “They look like they could reside in my home today. Very much in the style I’m used to in my own house. Sort of interesting. Thousands of years ago and it’s the same as today. Well, not exactly the same.” In reflecting on this observation post-visit, Bruce says, “people working so long ago made designs that were so effective and did so well without any of our modern technology. And we can mass-produce things now. We can make a lot more of them. We can make them faster. We can get them across the globe in a day, but even back then what they made was just as effective. It worked just as well. It makes me feel a connection across time and a respect for people who came before us.”

During his visit, Bruce wonders about how the specimens in the exhibits were collected and what it was like to work in the field as a scientist. He says, “Field Museum scientists collected these animals long ago...I wonder how the animals would feel about that. And I wonder if scientist actually means hunter.” Later he thinks about what that experience might have been like. He says, “I was thinking about when all those animals must have been acquired and all the people who must have been out collecting the animals and how that’s a whole set of experiences and the scientists who were behind the scenes and writing the copy...so aside from

the animals and the culture and the lives of people displayed, I was thinking about how connected we are to the lives of the people who created these exhibits for future generations.”

In addition to increasing understanding of the natural world, of past/present connection, and of his own life course, Bruce’s visit seems to open his imagination to possibility. This ranges broadly from places to which he’d like to travel (“I should go to New Zealand or Australia”), to areas in which to develop expertise (“I wish I were good at identifying leaves...it makes me want to become an expert on plants”), to future career paths (“here’s an explanation of what scientists can learn from dung...maybe I’ll become a poop scientist”), to fantastical imaginings (“I want to live in an underwater reef. That would be neat”). Bruce’s museum visit seems to be a jumping off point for digging in, for reaching back, and for stretching out. This brings to mind one of the first things he said when he walked into the Field Museum to begin his visit, “I don’t know. This Hall is so big I’m always taken with how large it is. I had a dream that I could swim through the air and I was here, swimming through this space.”

### *Ilsa*

I have some reflection on the exhibit and what it says to me...It’s about racism in this country and how some people have triumphed over it and how people have come through hardships, how families have come through slavery and how they have managed to survive and strive and do great things—some of these women. And I think each artist has a motif...The whole image of flying that Faith Ringgold uses...people had dreams and they were able to overcome obstacles by flying above them. And in Aminah Robinson’s work there are those gnarly hands that reach out to you and I think that’s about these women who have accomplished their accomplishments by their own handiwork...and I think it’s both a message and a challenge to the observer. I think it challenges the observer as to what are you gonna do with your own hands? What are you gonna accomplish?

A frequent museum visitor, Ilsa is a social worker whose visit to the Opalka Gallery of Russell Sage College is filled with detailed description and interpretive consideration of the artwork she views in *Stories and Journeys: The Art of Faith Ringgold and Aminah Brenda Lynn*

*Robinson*. Although Ilsa describes her experience as it is happening beyond looking at, appreciating, and understanding the meaning of the work on display, the majority of it is focused in these three areas. In post-visit conversations, she talks at length about personal reflection that was happening as she visited but did not talk about at that time. She also discusses her response to the physical space and her experience in the space.

Ilsa is very engaged in the artwork throughout her visit, describing each piece in detail, reading aloud the words that are part of it, offering explanations of the artist's meaning and her own understanding. For example: "Now I'm looking at a painting combination fabric collage kind of piece called *People of the Book*. And the fabric part is all done with men's ties...and they're kind of flattened and curled around the face of I'm thinking it's a woman...and it's just very colorful and she looks serious and dignified, maybe a little sad....The book, of course, brings up the connection of the bible so I could kind of connect it with the idea of do unto others as you would like them to do to you and we're all people of the same book and we're all human beings and we all need homes and we all need to look out for each other. So I'm kind of taking that message from it."

She seems to take in each piece, actively looking at details of color, construction, and content. Sometimes she goes no further in her narration, but frequently she ponders meaning. For example, Ilsa shares her experience of a soft sculpture by Faith Ringgold, "She looks like she's very comfortable being herself and she's wearing her fancy earrings even though she's got her hair curlers on and she's got a very pretty dress and she's apparently comfortable showing her cleavage so I'd say she's pretty self-assured, this momma." At another piece by Aminah Robinson, she observes, "Half of the picture are these gnarly hands that are folded against each other—and then on paper it's collaged with pieces of fabric, old buttons all kind of sewn on top

of each other and a plastic bag, like a refuse bag, and some fancy braided cord that's unwinding and you get this kind of image of life coming apart. Because the fancy cord is unraveling and the person's eyes are half closed and their mouth and their face looks kind of worn down and sad."

Frequently faces and hands seem to be central to Ilsa's response to the work she is taking in. She looks at a watercolor called *With Love*, and says, "The main thing about this piece is the lips and the closed eyes wanting to kiss you and the hands are like an offering. It's like she's offering something to you." She responds to portraits of four accomplished women, saying, "Each face is very individualistic and you look at it and you try to get a sense of what life has written in the face and in the hands of these ladies." A figure in a jazz quilt "has her hands on her hips and her elbows out and she looks like she's telling it like it is...and you feel like you're in the nightclub and you're hearing what the group is saying."

In addition to delving into the meaning, Ilsa responds to the artistry of many of the pieces, noting technique, color, and construction. "This one has an edge that's all geometric and like an eye-cat kind of design," she says. "And it has more darker colors...this one is grayer, kind of lavender gray and dark blue and oranges and purples so a little more serious and a little less cheerful than the other one." Describing a quilt that she "just loves," Ilsa says, "there are big poppy colored flowers and yellow flowers and white flowers and all these leaves and a big tree with red flowers on it and there's three children, they're running each in a different direction and there's three butterflies they're running after and it's just joyous and colorful and action packed."

During her visit Ilsa touches only briefly on a personal connection to the art she is seeing. She notices that several pieces relating to ancestors "reverberate with my interest in my own family and trying to trace my family genealogy." "It's all about what we pass down to our children," she says. In our post-visit conversation, she mentions that she thought quite a bit

about the notion of family and relationships and past-present connection during her visit, but did not talk about that so much as she was “in the experience.” In reflecting on how several of the quilts resonated with her own feelings about family and connection she says, “I think in all this stuff you have dreams that are not all your own dreams but are the dreams of your forebears, your ancestors, your family and that is what you are....I think it’s very lonely to be an isolated individual and I think to have a good sense of who you are you have to know where you came from. And I think that knowing people who are a part of you...knowing their stories and knowing what they were able to do with their lives...helps you know who you are.”

In thinking about her exhibit experience Ilsa notices a difference between the featured artists, explaining that Ringgold is more personal and Robinson is more political. She prefers the more personal pieces because they “give you more of a peek into her life and her family.” “I always had this kind of thing about wanting to know how other people live,” she says. “I think all humans need to feel connection, but I think that there’s something more about peeking into someone else’s life that is a certain thrill.” In reflection, Ilsa also mentions the physical experience of the visit, the power of the real and the urge to touch, and how the artists’ creativity inspires her.

In spite of describing the Gallery as being comfortable, Ilsa finds the exhibit presentation confusing. She notes, “You can get a sense of what you’re looking at right away. There are no turns; there are no hallways. You are in the space the moment you come in the door.” She goes on to say, however, that “there were no titles, no little placards next to each piece. So when you look at the piece...you don’t know whose piece it is, when it was done, what it’s about...and they had this Gallery Guide and that had the pieces in it, but it was just frustrating, particularly because it was hard to find the pin prick little dot on the wall with the little number. It felt like

things were out of order and that was frustrating.” Ilsa does say at one point that she may actually have engaged more with the piece because there was no information to distract her, but her overwhelming sense of the interpretive design was that it was confusing and frustrating.

There were two other important observations that Ilsa shared in our post-visit conversations. First she talks about the power of seeing the real artwork as opposed to seeing images in a book, and how there is something about being close to something powerful that can make you want to touch it. Talking about seeing the *Tar Beach* quilt, which is used as an illustration in a popular children’s book, Ilsa says, “You know the book is manufactured. It’s printed. This is something obviously touched by the artist’s hand....I mean I wasn’t so bold as to touch it, but it looked very touchable.” In a second conversation, she tells the story of going to see the exhibit a second time with some of her co-workers, “I said there’s the Tar Beach quilt and we walked over to it and we’re looking at it and Mary says to me ‘can I touch it?’ and I said ‘no, no you can’t touch it.’ But she really had the impulse to feel it....It was not protected in the sense of having some barrier between us and it or a roped off area or anything. So if nobody was looking at us, we could have touched it, but I said no we shouldn’t be touching it.”

Finally, Ilsa mentions that although she hadn’t talked about it during her visit, she found the work itself inspirational in terms of stimulating her desire to return to working on craft projects that she had abandoned in various states of completion. “The hands in many of the pieces seemed to me to be a challenge...it engaged me to think what am I doing metaphorically with my hands, but also concretely because I’m a craftsperson to some extent. What am I making of my story?”

*Zia*

I guess what I like about the whole idea of the museum is that it really could take you to a place that you never could have been. And they have these objects and they can put it together to help you have that experience and learn about the artist... This photographer did so much; it seems like it could have been a better exhibit. He kind of gets the short end of the stick.

Zia is a teacher and coach who loves going to museums and seeks experiences that feed her curiosity. Her visit to the New York State Museum to see the exhibit *Seneca Ray Stoddard: Capturing the Adirondacks*, is characterized by disappointment and a feeling of missed opportunity. During her visit, Zia is very much aware of being distracted by aspects of the physical experience. She appreciates the photographs themselves, but is disturbed by the lighting, the crowds, the labels, and the general physical condition of the museum. She seems to be working hard to be attentive to the historic images, and comments on connections to the past, differences between past and present, and a desire to have more information and more of the story. In a post-visit conversation, Zia talks about feeling that the experience fell short on the aspects of visiting museums that she most appreciates: getting context for what you are seeing, information that leads you to want to know more, and inspiration, which she describes as “like a juicing; like you just feel good.”

Although she expresses excitement about going to see the particular exhibit she chose, Zia’s visit is marked almost immediately by the distraction of the physical space. Upon entering the museum building, she comments, “there is no directory...like you can’t figure out where you’re going.” Once she makes her way to the exhibit, before beginning to look at the photographs, she says, “It’s a kind of tricky space to show something cause it’s kind of like a walkway so there’s a lot of people just walking and talking through...things are like scattered around. I guess it captures a lot of people, but I’d like to be able to be a little more quiet with

everything.” From time to time throughout her visit, Zia comments on the noise of other people walking and talking and notes that it distracts her from being able to really get into the exhibit.

Beyond the placement in a passageway, Zia finds the poor lighting and minimal information provided to be disrespectful to the artist and to the visitors. She notes, “It’s hard to see the photographs in the light. You get lots of reflection and the lighting is just difficult....This is just a disrespect of the artist.” She mentions a lack of information and context frequently during her visit, “they have little write ups on the wall, but they’re sporadic. It’s hard to get a flow of this.” Later she goes on to explain, “There was this picture of tennis, but they don’t say what the activity is...they just call it ‘clubhouse’...and then they have a picture of a summer kitchen, which looks like it’s poor people, but they don’t tell you what it is or who they are, and then there’s a picture of an Adirondack home, but it’s not guiding you enough to know what kind of people may have lived there.” In her post-visit reflection Zia explains that she expects the museum “to create an environment that is conducive for you to be able to imagine and think and experience in some way the time period that the pictures are taking you back to and whatever goes with that. This experience created dissonance; it was not harmonic. The display kind of got in your way. It wrecked the flow.”

In spite of the physical distractions, Zia did have moments that connected her with the past. She puts herself in the photographer’s shoes, imagining what it would have been like to use his camera equipment. “Oh my God,” she says, “he had to lug like huge equipment to take these photos. That was so much harder than what we have now.” She takes note of an 1890 photograph of the Statue of Liberty that shows people fishing in New York Harbor and comments on their wool coats and bowler hats. “What a difference if you went down and saw

someone fishing there now.” She sees and talks about class structure, inequality, and destruction of the land.

Zia’s reflection about the past/present connection is most vivid in her experience of looking at photographs of logging, the consequences of which she has seen with her own eyes. She says, “Here’s a picture of the devastation up by Tupper Lake where they cut every tree down. It looks unbelievable and he shows logjams from the logging in the river and it’s just hideous.” In her post-visit reflection, Zia goes on to say “that area never rebounded....It reminds you how those things just alter how things happen and how you learn from that not to repeat the same mistakes and how it can go forward—our generation too if we don’t pay attention to things that don’t work as well to things that do work.”

While the bonds between past and present fascinate her, Zia says that she is more interested in learning than in making personal connections. She describes her experience as one of “looking.” “I want to be educated. Other people around me were saying things like ‘that’s where Uncle Vinnie’s boat is docked.’ I’m not interested in that really.” Reflecting on why she loves to know “factual tidbits,” she says, “It helps you think about something new and then when you know something new you start to be creative and your imagination expands. It keeps leading to new things.” Overall, Zia summarizes her visit, “I don’t like the way they’re displayed. I don’t like the location. I’m a little bit of the cranky museum visitor, but I love the photographs. They’re fabulous. And I think they’re really fascinating.”

*Rebecca*

I don’t know anything about art. I’ve not even ever taken an art history class so I can only react to things kind of viscerally and cause I guess that’s the way my mind works. I like to make connections between things.

A librarian and senior administrator, Rebecca's visit to the Crocker Art Museum is a meandering journey filled with stories and musings, interrupted by sporadic attention to individual artworks. During the course of her visit, which covers almost the entire museum, Rebecca touches on personal connections and memories, interpretation of artwork, aesthetic experience, physical space, and random thoughts about topics as diverse as mortality, creativity, and social barriers.

Almost immediately upon entering the museum, Rebecca comments on the welcome presence of a café in the lobby area. As she heads towards the exhibits, she notices a door that seems broken and is "hard to open." She says that she feels intimidated by a staircase in the museum's historic wing: "Now this is really weird. Do we get to use this staircase? It's really beautiful. You know it feels intimidating...oh people are coming down so I guess I can go up." Throughout the visit, she responds to the physical space in much the same way she notices the art. At several points she expresses frustration at being lost, occasionally noting that she is passing an artwork as she is looking for the way out. She says, "So here I am again. Walking in a circle. So I don't know where to go out of here. Hope that I can find my way where I need to go. But this is beautiful. Edmund Charles Tarbell, *In the Station Waiting Room, Boston.*"

Much of Rebecca's interaction with the artwork is focused on personal memory. "You know it is interesting," she says, "when you look at certain pieces and they remind you of other experiences that you've had. I'm standing in front of some Greek pottery...and it just reminds me of when Kaia was little taking her to the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore or the Metropolitan Museum of Art and having amazing adventures with her." She goes on to connect Meissen ceramics with going to garage sales, a mourning wreath with a missed opportunity in her youth to purchase a mourning ring, a painting of the Palace of Fine Arts with a picture of

Janis Joplin in that location that is a favorite of her husband's, a Matisse with a trip to the Barnes Collection with her friend Nancy. It is not the content of the artwork that seems to evoke memory for Rebecca, but the experience of looking at it that reminds her of something she already knows, but would not otherwise be thinking about.

As she travels through the space, Rebecca muses about a variety of topics including how the value of artwork is determined, ideals of beauty over time, the differences between museum and library visitors, the challenge of being defined by creative expression, and the true story of Van Gogh's death. Some of her wonderings seem to be inspired by artwork and some not obviously connected to what she is encountering. Interestingly, in addition to Van Gogh, she makes several other references to mortality mentioning E.B. Crocker's death, the death of artist Luis Jimenez, an artwork about a man who died of AIDS, and the mourning wreath. She notes the connection to mortality in passing, in the case of E.B. Crocker saying, "It goes to show. So he did this and he did that and then he had a stroke and then he went on the grand tour and he did not enjoy his collections or his magnificent gallery for long and he died. It looks like he might have been gouty if that's the right term."

There are moments during the visit in which Rebecca seems to be connecting past and present, imagining what it would have been like to be present in another time. Upon entering the museum's historic ballroom, she says, "It's kind of funny to be in this room where you can actually imagine a debutante ball and women in their finery and men in their finery and their white tie and tails and dancing and you know the clink of glasses and all that and then to look out the window and here is this very modern looking structure and frankly it's not all that pretty." She goes on to note, "as a farm girl I just can't imagine the experience of living like this."

*Ana*

There is a lot of text in this area and all those things on display are behind glass...you have to do a lot of work. I don't feel fully present; I am more in my head. Everything seems so apart. I don't really feel connected to what I am seeing.

Ana's visit to the New York State Museum in Albany is marked by an unfulfilled search for connection. A social worker by profession, Ana focuses as she enters the museum on the feeling of the physical space especially as it relates to comfort and welcome. She notices that although there are many families visiting, which draws her to want to see the displays, the space itself seems cavernous. She says, "The museum is in kind of a warehouse type structure so you see the open ceiling, you see kind of like pipes and lighting and all of the wires....I don't really like the feeling. I like museums like the Clark where it's more cozy. The lower ceilings. I feel more comfortable." Ana's visit seems to be disrupted throughout by physical challenges. She comments on a lack of seating ("it would have been a lot better if I had been able to sit down and really listen to it"), dull lighting ("unlike the lobby, which was vibrant, it's really dull, the lighting; with really high ceilings too so there's a lot of shadow and nothing pulls you in"), difficult way finding ("the setup of the exhibits is really confusing and just by turning a corner you lose your way"), and the exhibit design itself ("everything in this museum is very contained; if you're just looking to browse you're not gonna find a whole lot.").

Although she does wander through the museum and stop at several exhibits, much of Ana's visit narration focuses on her response to a display about 9/11. She talks about wanting to feel connected, but not having an emotional response to the objects on display. She says, "There's this piece of steel, huge piece of steel....I see twisted pieces of metal. I see a fire truck that is severely damaged in the front—the rubber on the tires exploded and melted...but I don't know; I'm not drawn to anything. The impact is just not there." What does connect for her, she

says, is “an interview with a firefighter...who actually went up into the Towers and came back down helping people out. Most of his company perished when the Tower collapsed, but he got out....That personal account was most touching. The twisted pieces of metal were just hard to connect to.”

In her post-visit reflection, Ana talks about her personal desire to respond emotionally to the exhibit. She says, “When I was at the exhibit—I mean there’s just this expectation that it is going to mean something to you and it is going to be emotionally evoking and when I was there...it was really hard to see the objects as part of the actual event in time and I don’t know if it was a failure of my imagination or what, but it’s hard for me to put it in real time and hard for me to feel the connection. I mean I couldn’t integrate those objects and the event into something that was meaningful for me and therefore emotionally evoking.” In the course of our discussion Ana realizes that what she is looking for is more about a human connection than a connection to the event itself. She says, “What I do remember that was more emotionally evoking to me were some of the gifts that the people of New York received from people in other countries. So there was a quilt...and each piece of it was dedicated by a child in a classroom from Canada and their messages of peace and love and compassion were on there and that spoke to me. And the words of that firefighter. That was about a person talking to other people. And I think that’s what matters to me. The pieces of the building just didn’t do the same thing.”

Ana also expresses the desire for human connection in her post-visit recollection of an exhibit of historic photographs by Seneca Ray Stoddard. “Whether it’s something like I can’t imagine wearing those clothes or I can’t imagine having to chop all that wood or I have sat in an Adirondack chair like that—I wonder what it would have been like to live back then,” she says.

“I imagine myself in the position of the people in those photographs. I appreciated the ones that were landscapes, but it was definitely the people ones that I was most drawn to.”

Throughout her visit and in our post-visit conversation, Ana talks about being drawn to certain objects and disinterested in others. She does not know why she is drawn to some things and not to others, but describes the feeling as “something in the back of my head that says you shouldn’t walk past this, you shouldn’t walk away.” When she is taken by an object, she talks about being so focused that she doesn’t “want to move away” and is apt to “lose track of time.” In the end, Ana expresses some disappointment in her visit, saying “I don’t know if it’s my mood today, but nothing is really jumping out and pulling me in.”

### *Gabe*

For me it’s not about the inherent worth of what’s under the glass. What’s under the glass could frankly be a bubble gum wrapper of recent vintage. It doesn’t need to be anything more than trash. What’s important for me is that by putting it in that Plexiglas box or in the frame or on the wall or on the pedestal, that my experience suddenly is drawn to it and I’m forced to truly see something, to acknowledge something, to appreciate it perhaps if I give it thought. But to certainly say aha it is here.

Gabe is a psychologist who does not frequent museums. During his visit to the Crocker Art Museum, he responds to artwork through personal reflection and broad ranging musings about a variety of topics from the human condition to the value of objects to the connection between philanthropy and immortality. He moves constantly between being focused on looking and being preoccupied by a frenetic search for deeper meaning—in his words, “ruminating and meandering within the context of my focus, but not limited by it.” Everything he looks at seems to make him think of something else. Nineteenth century African art inspires an impassioned riff about sexuality, shame, and the roots of sexual aggression. A small teapot he admires and wants to take home with him makes him think about context and how the piece, itself, will become

something different if it is on his shelf instead of in a museum. A fountain pen becomes the jumping off point for a deep and complex consideration of elegance. Gabe says:

If you're going to pen an important letter, use a bloody well important pen. There is something about elegance that is missing these days. So many people seem to look at elegance as a kind of status symbol, a way of letting somebody else know that you've acquired more, that you are of greater social worth because you are writing with a Mont Blanc pen or you are wearing a Savile Row suit, but the truth is that elegance is about far more than that. It is a metaphor that one wraps their life with; it says this is important, that you are important because you have a relationship with yourself that makes you care enough to want to use an elegant pen to pen an important letter; that you are worthy because you are mindful and present.

He goes on to talk about the ways in which “you author your own life by not merely the large choices you make...but by the small things.” And he concludes with the observation that, “so many people like to pretend they're not engaging in a kind of masquerade ball...and yet we're wearing masks all the time.” Gabe arrives at this thought from his starting point of a single pen in a case. In a similar style, Gabe moves from reading a hundred-year old letter from Margaret Crocker to her son-in-law William Beck mourning the passing of her daughter Nellie, to brief reflections about the “singular horror” of losing a child, to a sidebar about the eloquence of the written word, to a self-revelatory recognition that “my need to speak intellectually about the eloquence of that time period is about me trying to defend against the emotions that come up from the horror of that letter and intellectualize it away.”

Self-aware and reflective throughout his visit, Gabe recognizes and acknowledges that his experience is situated in his own frame of reference. In responding to an African artwork, for example, he says, “To my western eyes, it always looks as if one African carving is similar to the other African carvings.” At another point he specifically notices the personal and temporal nature of his museum experience, saying, “be mindful that if I'm having a relationship in the moment

between myself and that piece of art, it's not merely that piece of art. It's that piece of art within that environment within that moment."

During the course of his visit, Gabe discusses his relationship with artwork at length. In seeking to "bond with" a particular artwork, for example, he finds himself unable to feel connected and attributes that to a lack of understanding of "the artist underneath it, or rather the artist's individuality." He talks of appreciating the artwork as an aesthetic object, but says, "I can't feel like I'm in dialogue with it. It doesn't feel like I'm having a relationship with the art. It leaves me feeling rather cold." At another point, he admires a painting of Catwoman by Mel Ramos. "Oh now this is cool, this is cool," he says. After spending more time with the piece, he begins to find it aggressive. "The eyes are aggressive, her lips, the whip she's holding is aggressive. The breasts are aggressive, her pointed boots are aggressive." Finally he concludes, "I actually find this kind of disturbing and don't want to look at it too long."

#### *Darcy*

The exhibit was memorable. I'm glad I decided to go. It really connected the past fifty years with today. Yeah, it resonated very clearly. In a personal way.

Although she is not a big talker, Darcy's visit to the Francis Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College touches, albeit briefly, on a number of subjects including physical space, past/present connection, personal memory, aesthetics, and the importance of art and objects. A retired teacher who has been studying religion for the last few years, Darcy chose to visit *Someday is Now: the Art of Corita Kent* because she is familiar with her art and work as a social activist in the 1960s. "I was anxious to see it," she explains, "because her anti-war posters were very popular. In fact we had posters of her work in our kitchen."

Darcy thinks the exhibition is “wonderful,” and intends to go back and spend more time with it, although she describes the way it is exhibited as a “barrier” and “frustration.” She explains, “many of the posters have text on them and the ones hanging way up high you can’t read so they have a booklet with the text in it and you are to follow along with the text and coordinate it with the way the walls are lettered. That is in the booklet, the walls are lettered. The walls are not lettered on the wall itself.” Darcy notes that she has time so it’s not such a problem for her, but that other people are having the same problem, and if she didn’t have time she would be even more frustrated.

In looking at Kent’s prints, Darcy is moved by their aesthetic appeal and by the memories they evoke. She is taken by the creative expression and the boldness of the colors and design. She says, “even if you don’t know who she was, just the creativity of it.” She describes the artist’s style—“she takes a word like “love” and puts it in all these bold colors, but not straight on. It’s all over the place and then there are all these bold paints, all bold bright colors....The colors are fantastic.” Darcy’s memories of the 1960s seem equally bold. There is energy in her voice as she talks about feeling connected to the artwork because it’s from that era. “I think the sixties were exciting in that the people—we—were working for social justice. There was an energy. There was also awareness about the cost of doing social justice work, which we don’t hear so much today. For instance there were the Berrigan brothers who we know went to jail for their beliefs and people are doing that today, but it’s not as prominent in our consciousness.” Darcy goes on to say, “Maybe it is time to revisit some of that thinking.” For her, the exhibit evokes personal memory and a call to action. She says, “The amazing thing to me is how these posters resonate with today’s world; that those conditions that existed in the 1960s exist as well today. We’re still at war, still fighting for social justice on the most basic level.” Through the

museum experience, she makes a connection between what has been, what is, and what is to come.

*Joshua*

There are some very large engines, old locomotives. You know it reminds me of being a kid and my dad used to have a train layout...and one year my grandfather came to visit and I remember they spent a ton of money on model trains—and they didn't have much money. My granddad ended up building a whole shed on his property. It was his train shed and...when I went back after he died I remember his train shed was falling down and...it was very sad. I mean we're such caretakers of things like lawns and here's this whole hobby that he had and he was spending probably hours on it and then it just had been neglected.... Like his vision that he had created was totally dismantled and that was kind of hard for me to process cause I don't know maybe it's something around mortality, like we're not here long and then we're gone and I was thinking about where we put our energy and our love and what we create and what is left behind.

Joshua is currently a geologist who is considering moving on to a more people-centered career. His visit to the California State Railroad Museum is rich in personal memory and self-reflection. He seems to move between relating what he is seeing to larger universal understanding and, also, to his own life and self-understanding. After looking at a display about railroad baron Charles Crocker that talked about his domination of the workforce and reputation for finding fault with almost everything, Joshua notes, "I definitely think there is a role in society for those personalities. That is not me. Seems like a stressful life to be such a critic all the time." On a lighter note, he wonders about men and their beards. "Old dudes and beards," he says. "Like a lot of old guys had beards back then....I wonder if it was a physical display of their manliness....I don't really prefer to have a beard. I'm not really sure I can grow a good beard. I've tried several times...I can't really grow a good mustache either, but I don't think that's a reflection on my manliness."

His visit seems to be inward-focused, returning frequently to personal connections and reflection. Immediately upon entering the museum, he remarks, "There's a train in the

lobby...makes me want to ride it. Reminds me of my grandfather had this train growing up and we used to ride it in his backyard.” Later he is walking through a sleeper car and notices a dresser that reminds him of his grandmother. “I miss May,” he says. “That was my grandma.” Throughout his visit, objects and displays remind Joshua of stories of his own past and evoke wonder about the lives of his ancestors. After seeing a photograph of an 1873 railroad survey crew, for example, he says, “Looking at that picture it’s like weird to think that it easily could have been one of my ancestors....I wonder what life was like back then. Like I wonder what my ancestors’ reaction to the railroad being built was—like if they were for it and excited about it or if they thought it was a stupid dream.”

In thinking about the past, Joshua expresses a great deal of empathy, often commenting on what it must have felt like to live back then. At a display about building tunnels, he says, “Most of the elevations were over 6000 feet; they’d work even through winter nights. That seems like it’d be very cold. And they’re tunneling through granite. That couldn’t have been easy work. Very hard. Very hard.” At another display about construction, he says, “I guess these men did this by choice, but it just seems like very hard work. It makes me feel spoiled in my job sitting in my adjustable chair...Blasting dynamite—I wonder how many of them died.” On several occasions Joshua seems almost to take responsibility for things that happened in the past. After reading a label about Chinese immigrants, for example, he says, “They played crucial roles in building the Central Pacific. I guess they could not find enough white laborers. Wow. We’re such elitist assholes. Huh...they were skilled workers and we got upset so there was a backlash against Asian immigration.” In our post-visit conversation, Joshua reflects on this and other similar responses. “I guess I identify as a White male and I know that I am privileged and I think to ignore that is discrediting. I would like to say I’ve earned everything, but it’s built on

such a heritage of White privilege, of White male privilege, that I think to not recognize and acknowledge that and take some responsibility is discrediting to all the people who have had to struggle.”

Joshua’s self-reflection during his visit is mixed with curiosity and interest in knowing more about the railroad and the people who made it work. He says, “It’s inspiring—the ingenuity of human beings. Kind of absurd, too. Like an absurd amount of work. I mean someone had to have a strong vision and a strong will to make all this happen. It makes me feel like I’m not much of a visionary. Or maybe I just haven’t found something in my life that I’m so inspired by that I want to take on a larger vision or a project on that scale.” At one point he is very moved by a display called, “Talking Without Words,” that focuses on non-verbal means of communication that enabled workers to “talk” to each other across the loud noise of the trains. He says, “They used to talk with lantern signals, flag signals, hand signals due to the noise around rail yards there was this whole language using signing and whistles. They had a spoken language—various kinds of lights, shapes, colors, which seem lost in history, which makes me sad. Sad I think cause I can’t experience it. I think that’s a hard part for me...I want to experience everything.”

This notion of what was, what is, and what could be is present through Joshua’s visit. Looking at produce shipping labels in a refrigerated railroad car display for example, he notices, “A lot of these included pictures of travel. And it’s like with airplanes and futuristic travel and how we used to romanticize travel and it had so much more meaning and grandeur. Pride—we had pride. And sometimes I feel like I missed out on being in that time when there was this pride in craftsmanship and when things were maybe slower. It was just different I think.” In our post-visit conversation, Joshua mentions that thoughts about possibility, choice and loss were present

for him throughout his visit. He says, “Seeing other people’s experiences and looking back at how people lived made me think about my own life. You know in the middle of your life you start to think about—there’s still a lot of excitement because I mean I still feel very full of possibility...but every time you make a decision, you’re kind of cutting off other possibilities.” He goes on to describe the deep connection for him between his visit to the Railroad Museum and thoughts about life, “I think that trains are kind of nostalgic in nature because even though we see them today, they’re much less a part of transportation and also when you’re a kid, you’re into trains—or at least I was—and it reminded me of my grandfather, my father, and childhood and so you just think about how quick that time is gone and so I was thinking about life and also about death.”

*Carlos*

There’s always that feeling that I’m entering a zoo. Things are just put there for other people’s amusement. I guess I just choose to focus on saying this is me and I just want to bear witness that I was here to see this and I see this because I’m connected with it. So even if you’re behind the glass, I still am gonna connect with you. Even if I can’t physically hold you in my hand, I’m gonna connect with you.

Carlos’s visit to the Brooklyn Museum of Art to see the exhibit *Life, Death and Transformation in the Americas*, is an emotionally charged experience, which during the course of the visit was expressed in few words, but in many sounds. A bi-lingual poet and professor, Carlos reads many labels aloud in Spanish and English as he visits and often utters expressions like “aha,” “ooooh,” “oh yeah,” and “Mmmm.” Much of the verbal response discussed here is based on a follow up interview conducted about one week after his visit. During the visit, Carlos is very much aware of physical space; he muses about what he is reading; he mentions being fascinated by certain objects, and he is clearly responding affectively to what he is hearing and

seeing. In our follow up conversation, he talks about the spirit power he felt, his personal connection with place and people, stories sought and stories found, and creative inspiration.

Carlos's visit begins with his observation that the museum is very quiet, a different feeling than his usual visits on free nights. He mentions that he has decided to go to the fifth floor to see a particular exhibit, which he describes as Indigenous. On his way to the exhibit, he stops four times for directions but does not seem bothered by having to work hard to find his destination. At one point as he is on his way, Carlos reads aloud, "One must turn to the past to move forward." He pauses, reads the quote a second time and then says, "It's time to move forward. Forward to the fifth floor." Finally, he is on the fifth floor and asks for directions to the exhibit entrance. When he is told to go past the big painting with the sun he says, "Past the sun. Thank you. Past the sun. That's very poetic."

During the course of his visit, Carlos seems very present, reading labels, murmuring about what he is experiencing and occasionally commenting on a particular object or label. In a musical cadence he reads the names of the Mexican states shown on a map, "Sonora. California. Oaxaca. Yucatan. Hmm. Mosquito Coast. Curious." Later, after a long pause in front of a Haida totem, he reads, "Each person traces his or her genealogy and identity back to ancestral housing given by the creators at the beginning of time," and then in what sounds like a chant, repeats, "*el principio del tiempo, el principio del tiempo, el principio del tiempo.*"

During his visit Carlos seems most taken with the music that is present throughout the exhibit. In his post-visit reflection he discusses this at length, noting how "there was one place that just really called me because it had a crumhorn—a seashell horn—playing. That just really affected me the most. I was just pleased to be surrounded...it was energetic for me. Like a real spiritual power there." He mentions also the spiritual connection for him of several Central

American tapestries that include original written language. The tapestries and musical instruments tap into his passion for language and sound. Even without understanding the written words, Carlos sees the tapestry as a way of touching those who have gone before. He says, “Here’s a way I can connect with another human being. It’s a form of connection.”

Overall for Carlos the exhibit was a way of connecting to a cultural and personal past. He expresses a special connection to the Taino heritage, his own heritage, and especially notices how the exhibit brings together different parts to create a whole picture. “It just really got to me. The faces, and it’s not just the faces....It is a representation of life, what ideas are, how values are expressed. It’s not enough to just see one thing. It’s visual and aural you could say, and it’s bringing it to one place.” Beyond the cultural connections, Carlos finds personal connection as well. He talks about how the seashell horn reminds him of his fascination with beaches and trips to Puerto Rico. He says, “I can see those marvelous abundant seashells in their full pristine color – the full glory of what comes out of the earth. That was my memory.”

While the experience of his museum visit is moving for Carlos, something he describes as “feeling it through the heart,” he does mention the negative aspects of taking “things out of context, which makes it harder to put together a complete picture.” He notes that the exhibit is “as respectful as I can expect,” but that when things are removed from their place and put in a case, they are in danger of becoming removed from the energy and power they hold. In the end, though, Carlos seems to conclude that it is in his power to make connection. He says, “The glass can stop my hands, but it can’t stop my heart.”

### **Emergent Themes**

This study involved twelve individuals, each of whom shaped his or her own visit through the lens of his or her particular worldview. They came to the experience from different

places and each chose their own place to visit and experienced it in a personal way. Nevertheless there were patterns that resonated across participant experience and distinct overarching themes that emerged. Six themes were drawn from the data: Seeing the Self; Experiencing Others' Experiences; Being at the Fusion of Horizons; Mindful Presence; Embodied Experience; and Touching and Being Touched. The themes are introduced below and discussed in depth in Chapter Five.

**Seeing the self.** One of the most frequently experienced aspects of the museum visit is the triggering of personal memory, described by some as a feeling of being transported to an earlier time. Although in the moment the memories may seem to pass through the realm of consciousness without a great deal of reflection or mulling over, the layers of thought and feeling that are evoked do seem to rise to some level of knowing for the participants. The visit also serves for some as a jumping off point for self-reflection about a broad range of considerations triggered by interactions with objects, artwork, and ideas. There is also a pattern of identifying objects that are personally appealing or unappealing, which seems to be a way to signal identity, saying something about oneself to define the self and to find points of connection with others.

**Experiencing others' experiences.** The museum is identified as a platform for being in touch with the lives of others across time and place, often discussed in terms of broadening the realm of experience by providing access beyond the visitor's own bounded lifeworld. Through objects and artwork, visitors connect with others' life stories, often empathically putting themselves in the place of the other. This can lead to recognition of multiple perspectives and multiple roads between and among people, ideas, and feelings. The overall experience is one of being in relationship with objects, other people, and the self.

**Being at the fusion of horizons.** The museum experience happens at the horizon of past, present and future affording the possibility of occupying multiple spaces and places simultaneously. Participants describe a feeling of being present in the present and at the same time being immersed in another time that has passed in a way that feels very present in that realm. Often the past/present experience also involves an awareness of the continuum of time and touches on what may happen as the future becomes the present. In this continuum of time, historical consciousness rises to the surface.

**Mindful presence.** The museum is experienced as a place in which meaning unfolds, rather than as a place in which knowledge is acquired. Visitors are actively engaged in consideration of meaning as they create their path through the physical space and interact with objects on display. They are in relationship with the museum and in conversation with the objects encountered, often touching on story as part of their interpretive experience. For some, the museum seems to be a safe place to consider difficult topics, to find emotional connection, and to become in touch with the authentic self in a way that involves being present, attentive, and open.

**Embodied experience.** Human beings are of mind and body, and the museum experience involves the total being. There is no mindful presence without physical presence; museum visitors' physical experience is integrated and not separable from their cognitive or affective experience. Aesthetic response, meaning making, and understanding happen in the context of physical experience. While visitors seem to be very much aware of themselves as physical entities, the museum, itself, seems to be less attentive to this aspect of human existence.

**Touching and being touched.** There are moments within the museum visit experience that seem to go beyond the cognitive, affective, and physical realms, reaching into a place that involves transcendence, awe, and spirituality. These experiences are often described in terms of

being touched by an object or artwork in such a powerful way that the viewer is held in time and place unable to turn away, or experiences a flow state, losing track of time. Sometimes the experience is noted as an almost indescribable feeling that draws one into a place of deep energy. The object or artwork is central to these powerful moments, which are often associated with an urge to physically touch the material object that is the spiritual link. While these powerful experiences do not always occur during the course of a museum visit, they are an important part of the connection between museums and being-in-the-world.

## **Chapter V: Interpretive Essay**

“Many institutions cannot decide whether they wish to be a museum, as a temple, or wish to become the public forum,” wrote Duncan F. Cameron in 1971. In his essay, “The Museum, a Temple or the Forum,” which has been reprinted numerous times and is widely read and discussed to this day, D. Cameron (1971) raised the question of whether museums are best suited to serve as temples “within which [are] enshrined those things ... held to be significant and valuable” (p. 17) or to take on the role of the public forum, “a place for confrontation, experimentation, and debate” (p. 20). While he suggested that both of these functions are valuable and necessary, D. Cameron (1971) posited that the two are not compatible in the single institution of the museum. “The acceptance into the museum of the untried and experimental tends to devalue those things that are properly in the museum....The forum is where the battles are fought, the temple where the victors rest” he wrote (p. 21). In fact, he concluded that it is the role of the museum to serve as the temple in the presence of the forum, “accepting and incorporating the manifestations of change” (D. Cameron, 1971, p. 24).

### **Temple or Forum**

More than four decades later, disagreement about the role of the museum continues to ensue with a renewed focus on the treatment of objects, people, ideas, and stories. Nina Simon’s (2013a) recent blog post about museums and white privilege, for example, stirred up a wave of passionate responses to the following assertion:

The "temple for contemplation" construct is the most damaging myth about museums in existence today. It doesn't match actual visitor behavior....It doesn't match visitor motivation....It doesn't match arts engagement preferences for active, social experiences. And yet it looms in the popular culture, preventing would-be participants of all backgrounds from discovering the ways that a museum visit can fulfill other identity-related needs.

N. Simon's post engendered 78 responses over a period of several days, and although the post, itself, included a broad range of commentary about whiteness and museums, the responses focused on her assertions about the museum as temple. Reaction was passionate on multiple sides, including cries of unfairness from white males, laments about increasing illiteracy and decreasing attention to attaining a well-rounded education, and reminders of the bias inherent in how the dominant culture determines the value of objects and stories. One person even suggested that, "poorer people and people of color are even MORE likely to value the quiet" (Katz, 2013). He went on to note, "I am reminded, too, of W.E.B. DuBois's eloquent discussion of how the disadvantaged can engage with elite, white, Eurocentric culture and embrace it (critically) as part of their own experience" (Katz, 2013).

As a follower of N. Simon's Museum 2.0 blog, I encountered this heated on-line discussion as I was immersed in writing the word-pictures emerging from my study. Notions of representation, connection, encounter, and even spirituality were clearly part of the experience of my study participants and the question of the role of the museum is certainly central to the questions I have been contemplating. I was moved to enter the conversation and offered the following response:

This discussion makes me wonder if there is confusion about museums as places of expressing humanness and museums as places of contemplation. Perhaps, the connection between whiteness and the idea of the museum as temple is based in the limited notion of awe and worship being relegated to a mode of quiet contemplativeness. Humanness is expressed through connection, relationship, playfulness, joy, ecstasy and in lots of other ways of being as well as through reflection and contemplation. I think about museums as temples through a lens of knowing that people sing in temples; they dance, they talk, they celebrate and they reflect. Museums, to me, at their best are neither purely about quiet contemplation nor about social interaction; they are about understanding and participating in what it means to be human in all of its complexity.

After writing this response I realized somewhat to my own surprise that it was informed not only by my work in museums, my reading, and my study, but also by my personal experience

growing up as a Reform Jew. Although I had not previously made this conscious association, I recognized that the disconnect I felt with the idea of quiet reverence equating with respectful engagement was formed in my childhood by my involvement in a religious tradition that honored conversation and questioning and that demanded responsiveness in the face of injustice. This realization, in turn, has led me to consider the connection between the construct of the temple and the construct of the museum.

In Reform Jewish tradition the terms “temple” and “synagogue” are both used to refer to a communal place of gathering, worship, and study. In fact, the temple or synagogue is understood as being three different houses: a house of gathering (*beit k’nesset*); a house of study (*beit midrash*); and a house of prayer (*beit t’fillah*). As *beit k’nesset* the synagogue is a place of welcome and community, bringing people together around life experiences to celebrate, support, and to be in relationship. In its role as *beit midrash*, the temple is a place of interpretation, deepening knowledge through information, connection, and conversation. As *beit t’fillah*, the temple is a place for nurturing the soul, creating opportunities to find meaning in life and become spiritually centered.

If we are to embrace this understanding of the temple, then I would assert that the museum is indeed a form of temple, not in terms of holding in awe objects of value, of presenting a singular truth against which perception may be measured, or of keeping sacred space that must be appreciated in silent reverie, but in terms of its role in deepening understanding of self and others, opening pathways to finding meaning, touching on the power of spirit, and connecting human experience and relationship across time and place. Participants in this study experienced the museum in these ways: as a place of coming together and finding connection with the self and others; as a place of interpretation and understanding through

conversation with the self, others, art and objects; and as a place for finding deep life meaning and connection that may reach into the realm of the numinous. These three broad ways of experiencing the museum hold the six themes that emerged from the study participants' narrated museum visits: Seeing the Self; Experiencing Others' Experiences; Being at the Fusion of Horizons; Mindful Presence; Embodied Experience; and Touching and Being Touched. These six themes in turn hold a new perception of the role of museums as places of interpretation and understanding that have the potential to disrupt the commonplace in a way that can bring people into deep conversation with the whole self, with others, with the past, present, and future, with memory and possibility, with the spirit, and with the question of being.

In this sense, the museum and the temple serve a common purpose – disrupting the everyday in a way that creates open space for dwelling with others in the ontological act of being, which by its nature encompasses thinking, acting, and feeling from which meaning emerges. In this sense, the museum and the forum also hold a common purpose – serving as a gathering place for conversation and dialogue. And yet, museums are neither temple nor forum, nor are they temple and forum. Rather, as holders of material culture and of stories of human and natural phenomena, museums have a distinctive role to play in creating the conditions for conversation-based encounters from which understanding the question of “being-in-the-world” and “being-with-others-in-the-world” may emerge. This understanding of the role of the museum as a site of conversation with self, with others, and with objects that creates space for the question of what it means “to be” and “to be-with” is borne out in the lived experiences of the participants in this study. My interpretation of the study results, which is informed by the philosophies of Heidegger and Gadamer, is organized around the six themes that emerged from the participants' narrated visits and post-visit conversations.

### **The Hermeneutic Circle: From Fore-Understanding to Uncovering**

Human understanding is always situated in a moment in time, informed by what has gone before and based on what is known at the points in which understanding unfolds. The act of understanding is integrative, building in a circular, non-linear fashion. In his seminal work, *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1978) recognized this construct, the hermeneutic circle, as the central structure through which human understanding emerges. Each foray into understanding is built on pre-understanding, which results in new understanding that becomes the pre-understanding upon which the next layer of understanding is based. It is from within this spiral of the parts and the whole that new understanding continues to emerge.

Understanding the lived experience of another person, therefore, requires the researcher to become engaged in the hermeneutic circle, moving between parts and the whole, peeling back layers of understanding, and interpreting the meaning that emerges. Understanding happens from within a dynamic interplay of pieces of new information, which become integrated in the whole. The whole is understood in terms of its parts and the parts define the whole; in this way each contextualizes the other (Bontekoe, 2000).

Understanding moves within the hermeneutic circle in arcs that reach in two directions; projecting forward from a place of fore-understanding and returning in the context of uncovering new knowledge. Gadamer and Heidegger drew a connection between fore-understanding and prejudice or preconception, defined not in a negative sense, but as the recognized place of historical consciousness which undergirds present understanding. This is reflected in Heidegger's (1978) assertion that "Every questioning is a seeking. Every seeking takes its direction beforehand from what is sought" (p. 45).

Researchers enter the hermeneutic circle with awareness of fore-understanding, clarifying their perspective and understanding as they enter. Preconceptions cannot be eliminated, but it is essential to become conscious of them. Human beings are shaped by their fore-understanding and at any given moment, they are influenced by their immediate situation. The challenge, then, is to “let things show themselves as they are in themselves rather than imposing our presuppositions on them” (Bontekoe, 2000, p. 73). It is also important, as Gadamer (1976) pointed out, to understand that meaning is in an ongoing state of unfolding and is never absolute. As Gadamer (1976) noted, “understanding is always interpretation, and hence interpretation is the explicit form of understanding (p. 274).

**Fore-understanding.** I come to my research as a museum practitioner with more than three decades of experience working in a variety of different types of museums in a variety of positions. I am fascinated with stories and drawn to material objects, which I see as holders of ideas and connection. In my personal encounters with museums I have often found deep meaning in the museum experience. I have been moved in an almost indescribable way by artwork and by historical objects and images. I have been witness to people coming together across difference and finding connection as part of museum programs. I have seen the delighted faces of adults and children engaged in their own moments of memory or creativity. At the same time, over the past three decades I have experienced museums as places of power and prejudice. I have seen dominant culture elevated and “outsiders” diminished. I have entered, and sometimes lost, battles for attention to people holding a place as important as attention to things; for caring as much about what the visitor experiences as about whether or not a donor feels adequately honored. I have heard museum leaders justify privileging some in the interest of

obtaining funds, and have had the experience of being silenced by institutional power when I challenged tradition from the inside of a tradition-bound institution.

As a practitioner and a student, I know that the work of the museum is political in much the same way that any life lived intentionally is political. Because the significance of power and justice is amplified in the symbolic atmosphere of the museum, the message of the museum takes on elevated status. The potential to challenge privilege and marginalization is recognized by many museum leaders, and there are many museum workers actively engaged in creating welcoming spaces that embrace multiple perspectives. Realizing the possibility of museums in ways that contribute to living well and leaving the world a better place is at the center of my work and my studies. I have long been engaged in a search for meaning in the work of museums; meaning that I believe exists and that I believe can be better understood through becoming open to moving between the parts and the whole, between the “how” and the “why.” I enter the study of the lived experience of the museum open to the experience of others, aware of the issues facing museums and society today, and eager to find meaning in the journey.

**Uncovering.** Twelve people participated in this study. Each of them came into their visit with their own fore-understanding. While the study focused on the participants’ lived experiences of particular visits to particular museums, each of their experiences were clearly shaped by their lifeworld. There was no visit that did not reference other experiences or make direct connection to the meaning of things in individual context. In this sense, each visit was a journey from fore-understanding to uncovering, a traversing of the hermeneutic circle. Participants shared their immediate experience and usually offered their understanding of the experience; some as part of their narration, others in follow up conversations, and in some instances both as they visited and in conversation following. As the researcher, I then immersed

myself in all of the narration, and sought to understand the participants' understanding. Through this "double-hermeneutic" approach (Smith & Eatough, 2007), I identified patterns and themes. This process was a true unfolding as themes emerged through reading, re-reading, noticing particulars and their relationship to the whole, looking at how the whole connected to the particulars, moving back and forth in interpretive relationship with the data. According to Smith and Osborn (2003), "Meanings...must be obtained through a sustained engagement with the text and a process of interpretation" (p. 64). This process of interpretation makes sense of the findings (Patton, 2002), in this case providing the basis for an understanding of museums as sites of "being in conversation," an understanding that emerged through the hermeneutic process.

### **The Lived Experience of the Museum Visit**

Study participants visited museums of their choice and created narrated visits, recording themselves talking through their experience as it happened. Each person came from a particular perspective and entered the narrative with his or her own fore-understanding. Each had a unique experience, visiting different places at different times and under varying conditions. There were, however, strong patterns that emerged and similarities of understanding that were apparent and important. In further examining each emergent theme, there are two overarching commonalities that are worth noting.

Although the nature of the visits varied markedly, objects and artwork were central to all of the museum experiences. While it may seem obvious that this would be the case, I think it is worth stating since the nature of the interaction with objects is at the center of the way in which I understand museums' connection with being. It was particularly notable that there seemed to be in most cases, a relationship between the participant and the object or artwork. The object was neither appreciated solely as a material creation, nor was it merely a jumping off point for story

or memory. Rather, it was considered as an entity with which the visitor was in conversation. This relationship runs through several of the themes and will be further discussed in the context of those themes.

Secondly, the museum visit was generally a social experience. Because of the nature of this study, participants made their visits alone. In spite of this condition, participants were for the most part very conversational in their narration and in their interactions with objects. They often talked to the objects or wondered aloud about them in a way that was more akin to conversation than to studious inquiry. Several participants talked to other visitors in the course of their visit, and several bumped into people they knew and paused to talk to them. Most participants referenced wanting to tell someone something about their experience and several reflected on being alone and missing having someone there with whom to share the experience. The attention to objects and the social nature of the visits run through the narratives. These common features of the visits suffuse the six themes that emerged through this study.

### **Seeing the Self**

One of the most frequently experienced aspects of the museum visit is the triggering of personal memory, described by some as a feeling of being transported to an earlier time. Although in the moment the memories may seem to pass through the realm of consciousness without a great deal of reflection or mulling over, the layers of thought and feeling that are evoked do seem to rise to some level of knowing for the visitor. The visit also serves for some as a jumping off point for self-reflection about a broad range of considerations triggered by interactions with objects, artwork, and ideas. In addition there is a pattern of identifying objects that are personally appealing or unappealing, which seems to be a way to signal identity, saying something about oneself to define the self and to find points of connection with others.

**Personal memory.** Museums have long been identified as sites of memory, with their collections holding stories of shared culture and history. Interestingly, the participants in this study seemed to connect more in the realm of personal memory than collective history. Even when memory was triggered by historic objects, the memory often was personal. For example, looking at a historic railroad car, Joshua noticed the configuration of the seats facing each other. He wondered about what it would have been like to be face to face with strangers for a long trip. This led him to remember a time when he “used to talk to strangers on airplanes,” but now, he said, “I prefer to mind my own business.” After looking at another railroad car, Joshua remembered an incident from his youth when he climbed out of the family car to watch a train go by and inadvertently stood on an anthill. “I remember crying in pain the whole way home and my mom felt horrible cause she was holding my hand while I was standing there in an ant hill,” he said.

Several of the older participants connected artwork with memories of posters or prints that were part of their lives as young adults. As she looked at Corita Kent prints from the 1970s, Darcy talked about the politics of the day, but shared her most personal memory as having a poster by the artist hanging “in our kitchen.” Avi remembered a poster that hung in his apartment when he was a young man, and noticed that the feeling was one of being “thrown back” to another time. Rick, too, remembered posters that hung in his apartment, his first art purchases. In follow up conversation, Rick noted that although he mentioned the memory only briefly during his visit, he did dwell in the remembering, recalling where he was in his life back then. “I hadn’t thought about those things in years,” he said.

Wood and Latham (2009) call this kind of object-triggered memory “object knowledge” and they suggest that it is one way of understanding the role of objects in museums. “The idea of

object knowledge,” they assert, “draws heavily on the assumption that there is a personal meaning generated through each and every interaction with an object.” They go on to reference Susan Pearce’s (1994) assertion that meaning is not held by the object itself or by the experience of the visitor, but by interplay of the two, which they identify as a “transaction” (Wood & Latham, 2009). This understanding of the object-visitor encounter is aligned with Gadamer’s (1989) assertion that meaning emerges in the space between the artwork and the viewer. This type of encounter extends beyond art to other objects as well; meaning is revealed through the encounter of the object and the viewer.

I would posit, moreover, that meaning unfolds through conversation, a specific type of encounter, which Gadamer (1989) described as a mutual exchange “taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion” (p. 383). In a true conversation the subject is involved as an integral entity, participating in turns and detours, silences and echoes that lead to understanding. In the types of personal memory encounters that occurred in this study, the meaning of the object was held in the space of conversation, with viewers referencing the object or artwork as it related to their life experience. They stayed with the object as they remembered, coming back to it as a participant in the conversation. In this way, the object was not merely a trigger that pulled in the direction of memory, but was actively involved in the memory conversation. The types of memory conversations that took place ranged from fleeting and momentary to profound. Throughout her visit, for example, Rebecca mentioned memories that were coming up, “You know when you look at certain pieces they remind you of other experiences that you’ve had,” she said. She remembered places she has visited, time with her daughter, a photograph of her grandmother, friends she hadn’t seen in a long time. All of these memories were connected with objects and artwork that she stayed with as she remembered, but the in-the-moment connection

seemed to pass quickly. On the other end of the spectrum, Joshua's encounter with a model railroad layout evoked such strong memories of his grandfather's life and their relationship that he dwelled with the object and the memory, spiraling between feelings, memories, and the object in a way so profound that he actually wept in the telling. These types of personal memories, whether fleeting or profound, bring the visitor into conversation with the object and with the self.

**Revealing the self.** Similar types of object-based conversations, based not in memory, but in self-reflection, were also prevalent throughout the visits. Carlos talked about a seashell horn that brought him to visions of "Puerto Rico and...those marvelous abundant seashells in their full pristine color—the full glory of what comes out of the earth." A display of ancient calendars drew him in because of his fascination with "how all around the world different cultures measure time differently....I want to know how they measure time." He described both of these object encounters as a jumping off and a coming back. He moved from the object to his understanding back to the object and out again to his personal response. In a similar way Ilsa described the artworks she encountered, talking about what they meant to her. As she was leaving the museum, she paused to reflect on the motifs she saw throughout the exhibit and specifically mentioned her fascination with "the hands...those gnarly hands that reach out to you." She saw the hands as being integral to what the art was saying about the people it depicted, but she also saw them as a personal message, almost a challenge to her asking "What are you gonna do with your own hands?"

Like the personal memory conversations, these encounters with objects and artworks were based in conversation between the object and the visitor, which revealed the self to the self. When asked specifically if they learned anything about themselves in the course of their visit, most participants said they did not, although most also said they were 're'minded of things they,

in a sense, already knew, but that came into their consciousness specifically because of their experience in the museum. For example, Ana “realized the extent to which [she is] a visual person,” something which was not surprising, but that she had not specifically thought about. Ilsa was very much aware that the appeal of certain pieces in the exhibit for her was connected to her love of “prying into other people’s history and private lives.” While this was something she knew about herself, the museum experience brought it forward and motivated her to consider why that glimpse into other people’s worlds was so compelling.

The meaning of the object and the museum experience is held not in the content or in the story, but in the conversation that takes place between the viewer and the viewed. As Dudley (2010) wrote:

Museum objects never stand alone. The physical things in museums...comprise one element of a composite, but rather than being part of an object-information package, they exist within an object-subject interaction. This is the interaction between inanimate, physical thing and conscious person. (p. 5)

The experience is situated in the relationship between the object and the viewer, and takes place in the physical space of the museum, which contains and participates in shaping the relationship.

**Identifying the self.** Throughout the visits, participants often noted whether they liked or disliked a particular artwork or object. For example Rick frequently mentioned liking certain pieces, often noticing his response to color or composition. He talked at length about liking one exhibit and not liking another. At one point during his visit he mentioned that “there always seems to be a natural compulsion to look for your favorite,” and he wondered why that is. In follow up conversation, Rick returned to the question of why people tend to notice what they like and don’t like and want to share those responses. He said, “I don’t think you’re looking for validation...I don’t need someone to tell me what I like is legitimate...I don’t know. Maybe it’s about sharing your perspective, sharing something about yourself.” Bruce talked about liking

certain exhibits and not being attracted to others, as well. In reflecting on why he thinks about what he likes and does not like and tends to share that with friends, Bruce remarked, “It’s a way of letting your friends know you know them and of sharing who you are, what you’re into, and connecting around that.”

I would suggest that the identification of objects that appeal and those that do not, is one way of enacting identity in the museum. This act calls first for self-identification of what is liked (what the viewer identifies with) and what is not liked (what the viewer distances himself from), and then for declaration of those preferences, which is in some sense an identity claim. As Lois Silverman (2010) explained, “Identity is the ongoing effort to assert, affirm, and modify our similarities to and differences from others” (p. 54). The relationship between museums, objects, and visitors creates a space in which identity can be expressed and affirmed (Rounds, 2006; Silverman, 2010).

In Jay Rounds’ (2006) exploration of museums as sites of “identity work” (p. 133), he discussed the ways in which museum visits can be tied to the construction of identity. He said, “We construct a kind of master narrative of identity to tie the threads of our lives together, and we signal that identity to other people in a variety of ways....Visiting a museum can...serve [as a way of] signaling identity” (p. 137). He went on to suggest that, “the museum offers a perfect setting for public performance of identity....Visitors [can]...enact their own identities” (p. 142) in the context of museum exhibits and objects. The notion that declaring likes and dislikes serves as a way of doing identity work in the museum is supported by Silverman’s work on identity and personal meaning-making. As she stated, “In museums, visitors experience and express their individuality through personal meaning making, those subjective responses like

opinions, evaluations, feelings, imagination, and memories that arise when they encounter museum objects and exhibits” (Silverman, 2010, p. 57).

### **Experiencing Others’ Experiences**

Study participants experienced the museum as a platform for being in touch with the lives of others across time and place, often discussed in terms of broadening the realm of experience by providing access beyond the visitor’s own bounded lifeworld. Through objects and artwork, visitors connect with others’ life stories, often empathically putting themselves in the place of the other. This can lead to recognition of multiple perspectives and multiple roads between and among people, ideas, and feelings. The overall experience is one of being in relationship with objects, other people, and the self.

Heidegger asserted that “being-in-the-world” is “being-with-others-in-the-world” and meaning emerges from within relationship or community (Inwood, 2007). Museum experiences are often experiences of meaning-making, spaces of connection in which ordinary objects become extraordinary and people find themselves with others and within others. Beyond connecting people and providing pathways to shared experience and shared possibility, museums offer opportunities to move outside the edges of what is readily attainable. “You can’t experience it all,” Joshua lamented during the course of his narrated visit. “You can only experience a lot of life through other people and their experience...In a museum you can experience another human being’s experience in a way.” Museums offer connection with the human yearning to stretch beyond the edges of one’s own life and to extend the world of possibility.

**Possibility and lost possibility.** Following his museum visit during which he expressed interest in others’ experiences and a desire to perhaps share some of those experiences someday,

Bruce reflected on how his visit connected him with possibilities. “Museums bring out possibilities for me more than other places,” he said. “Particularly the Field Museum...it’s one place that holds a lot of places within it...It’s a lot to think about possibly doing and seeing and it’s about a lot of places you’ve never been and never seen and that you may only ever experience through the museum.” In describing her disappointment in her visit as she was preparing to leave the museum, Zia offered a similar observation: “What I like about the whole idea of the museum is that it really could take you to a place that you never could have been.” Rick also mentioned, “One of the reasons I visit museums is to basically be exposed to things that I’ve never seen or experienced before and which normally I won’t be able to experience.”

The notion of memory, possibility, and what I am calling lost possibility, the diminished expectation that what is possible will come to pass, were recurring themes emerging from the narrated visits. It was interesting to note that there seemed to be a connection between life stage and prevalence of relationship to possibility, memory, and lost possibility. In this sense the museum becomes a place in which the past, present, and future come into focus. Notions of what could be, memories of what has been, and recognition of what may never be are present in the museum experience. This evokes for me the image painted by Robert Frost (1916) in his poem *The Road Not Taken*. The poem begins with the picture of one tarrying in the present, looking into the future as far as can be seen:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth.

The third stanza tells of a choice made without knowledge of how the path will unfold and with recognition that the horizon of the present and the future is always shifting in ways that make impossible the possibility of choosing a different path from the same place again.

And both that morning equally lay  
 In leaves no step had trodden black.  
 Oh, I marked the first for another day!  
 Yet knowing how way leads on to way  
 I doubted if I should ever come back.

The experiences of others' experiences that are open in the museum seem to present pathways that stretch into places unknown, not unlike Frost's roads. Younger study participants, those in their twenties, seemed to move with ease from looking at an object or artwork to imagining a future possibility. "One day I hope to visit Rembrandt's museum," Sofia casually mentioned in response to a painting that was "not a Rembrandt." Ana looked at historic photographs of the Adirondacks and noted that she needed to see those small towns some time. Bruce, too, talked about places to which he planned to travel, jobs he thought he might like to consider, and the idea of living in an underwater reef someday. All of the participants also mentioned memories to some degree, but the older individuals seemed to dwell in memory much more than the younger. The older participants also mentioned possibility, usually in the realm of some form of creative expression they were eager to try. For example, looking at an artwork, Avi said "I've got some ideas of collages I want to do and this really propels me to think about it."

The few participants who could be considered middle aged seemed to straddle the realm of memory and the realm of possibility. Joshua, especially, who is in his middle years, grappled with questions of possibility and lost possibility throughout his visit. Lost possibility for him took the form of possible futures that would never happen and experiences of the past that he would never experience. He described a system of communicating with whistles and hand

signals, for example, which had been used by early railroad workers, and said that it all seemed “lost in history, which makes me sad. Sad I think ‘cause I can’t experience it. It’s something I won’t experience.” In post visit conversation, he reflected on the feelings of possible loss that recurred during the course of his visit:

I can almost see myself in these parallel lives and it’s like what if you chose this path—and how it would go. In fact I feel frozen...in making these decisions because you’re like cutting those paths off....You know in the middle of your life you start to think about...I mean there’s still a lot of excitement because jeez I still feel very full of possibility....I love the idea of possibility. But every time you make a decision you’re cutting off other possibilities.

Remembering, imagining what could be, and mourning what is unlikely to be are common responses to moving through life and occur throughout the process of aging. The museum seems, though, to be a place in which awareness of these responses becomes elevated.

**Being in relationship.** The museum experience is one of being in relationship through conversation. Whether that relationship is with the self, with others, or with objects, it is central to the way in which the museum is experienced. Even visitors who are alone in the physical space are in a condition of “being-with.” This connection can readily be seen in the way that participants’ engaged with artwork and objects. Sofia, for example, sought connection with the people depicted in each artwork she viewed. She referred to what their faces were telling her and talked about her desire to “empathize and feel what they’re feeling.” “I guess what I look for in a piece is human emotion,” she said. Ilsa, too, attributed feelings to the images she saw: “They all look kind of thoughtful and subdued and she is singing out loud and...she looks like she’s telling it like it is.” At another quilt, she said, “Everybody actually looks happy even though they may have done some not so great things so it all works out in the end.”

The way in which participants responded to artwork is reflective of Gadamer’s (2006) assertion that “Art is able to build bridges that reach beyond the enclosure and space in which it

originated” (p. 60). As he explained, the conversation between the viewer and the work of art is not about reading something into the art or pulling something out from the art, rather it is about “tarrying” with it in a way that he described as an “intensive back-and-forth conversation that... lasts until it is ended” (p. 71). It is in the conversation, in the relationship, that meaning emerges.

### **Being at the Fusion of Horizons**

The museum experience happens at the horizon of past, present and future affording the possibility of occupying multiple spaces and places simultaneously. People describe a feeling of being present in the present and at the same time being immersed in another time that has passed in a way that feels very present in that realm. Often the past/present experience also involves an awareness of the continuum of time and touches on what may happen as the future becomes the present. In this continuum of time, historical consciousness rises to the surface.

Gadamer (1976) explained the concept of “horizon” as “the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have. To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion” (p. 304). The ground for understanding exists in mediation between the past and the present, “a comprehensive horizon in which the limited horizons of text and interpreter are fused into a common view of the... meaning with which both are concerned” (Linge, 1976, p. xix). Gadamer (1976) identified the fusion of horizons as the crux of the hermeneutical task. Understanding emerges in the present within the context of the past. Since every understanding is also self-understanding, it is not only the other that is understood, but also oneself and one’s possibilities.

In bringing together the viewer or visitor in the present with objects and experiences of the past, the museum can be understood to stand at the fusion of horizons. Even within the context of a visit, the horizon may move affording opportunities to develop views of the present and glimpses of the future that rest in understanding of the past. “In every present moment,” Gadamer (2006) wrote, “not only is a horizon of the future opened up but also the horizon of the past is in play” (p. 60).

Encounters at the fusion of horizons were a feature of all of the narrated visits in this study. Zia moved back and forth between historic photographs of logging at Tupper Lake and her own experience today of a barren landscape at that place. “Tupper Lake never rebounded,” she said. “I’m just imagining if they thought about how that would change things; how it’s such a less appealing place now and how you learn from that not to repeat the same mistakes.” In her encounter with prints from the 1960s, Darcy noticed “how much they resonate with today’s world...Those conditions, which existed then, exist as well today. We’re still at war, still fighting for social justice on the most basic level.” A display of taxidermied animals led Bruce to consider how they had been collected, what the conditions were at the time, and what the scientists who were involved in the collecting may have felt about their work. In these examples, visitors traveled between the past and the present, encountering what was and what is in an act of historical consciousness. As Linge (1976) explained, “The past is never simply a collection of objects to be recovered or duplicated by the interpreter, but rather...an effective history that alone makes possible the conversation between each new interpreter and the text or event he seeks to understand” (p. xvii). In this sense the museum is experienced at the fusion of horizons, both in the ways in which visitors move between past and present as they understand the present

in the context of the past, the past in the context of the present, and each in their own context, and in terms of how meaning unfolds across the continuum between object and viewer.

### **Mindful Presence**

The museum is experienced as a place in which meaning unfolds, rather than as a place in which knowledge is acquired. Visitors are actively engaged in consideration of meaning as they create their path through physical space and interact with objects on display. They are in relationship with the museum and in conversation with the objects encountered, moving between looking and understanding, often touching on story as part of their interpretive experience. For some, the museum seems to be a safe place to consider difficult topics, to find emotional connection, and to become in touch with the authentic self in a way that involves being present, attentive, and open.

**Unfolding meaning.** According to Heidegger (1978), human beings are interpretive beings. Indeed, the process of interpretation, itself, is what human beings are, not something they do (Palmer, 1969). Human beings attempt to make sense of the world in a way that is usually below the level of consciousness, as a condition of the lived experience of “being-in-the-world.” I would suggest that in the space of the museum, people enter the realm of the hermeneutic; understanding is elevated to a level of consciousness and intentionality. Visitors become active in seeking and constructing meaning, and become aware of their participation in the act of understanding.

Throughout the narrated visits in this study, participants engaged in profound consideration of meaning and life experience. Although each of the visits was unique, all moved between the act of looking and the act of engaging in conversational encounters in a search for understanding. For example, Ilsa talked at length about her understanding of what the exhibit

she visited said to her. She often moved between artworks and noted take-away messages that resonated with her life understanding. For example, she compared two quilts by different artists and reflected:

I think if we juxtapose the idea of the Tar Beach quilt where Cassie Lightfoot is ‘free to go wherever she wants to go for the rest of her life,’ with the Tent City quilt, we see that those individuals are not free to go wherever they want to go for the rest of their lives. They’re in Tent City....And it’s about obstacles and overcoming and sometimes it’s not just about trying hard.

Rick also reflected on the human condition in response to particular artworks with which he was engaged. In the context of an ongoing conversation with a painting entitled ‘Sleigh Ride’ by Winslow Homer, in which was drawn in by a sense of darkness approaching across a snowy scene, Rick considered the comfort of home. He said:

I think about the safety and security of home. Regardless of whether it’s a sleigh ride or a car, you’re on your way home and you look forward to getting there. You may have had a good time when you were out, but it’s hard to beat going home unless you’re going home to an abusive relationship or something.

After coming to his own understanding, Rick wondered if he was “anywhere near what the artist was going for on that.” When he discovered that the curator’s interpretation was that the piece was about “man being dwarfed by nature,” he initially doubted his own understanding, but later noted that there is “A one-on-one relationship at some level when someone is looking at a piece of art,” and that more than one interpretation is possible.

If the primary construct for the museum visit is conversational encounter with self, others, and objects, then the question of the museum’s role in interpretation becomes critical.

Traditionally, exhibits and objects are interpreted primarily through text in the form of labels. It is interesting to note that like Rick, other study participants noticed and responded to the content and form of interpretive text. Sofia sees something in a painting that does not match the explanation offered. “At first I thought he was kidnapping her,” she said. “But the label says

he's offered to carry her. It's still hard for me to believe that he's not kidnapping her, but let's just move on."

In his narration, Avi suggested that learning about the artist's life is more important to him than having technical information. He said:

Sometimes those little pieces of paper that they stick next to a painting are designed to bring someone into the painting a bit more, but sometimes all they do is give a whole bunch of data....When you read...about the life of the artist and you...are attracted to the art it really, really knocks you out.

Zia, too, noted a desire for information that would help her to contextualize what she was encountering. "It would help if they frame it," she said. "There are a bunch of pictures with no connecting threads....These little write-ups on the wall are sporadic....They're somewhat organized by themes, but then they're not." How the museum supports understanding, and participates in the conversation, in a way that adds to and does not interrupt the visitors' direct connection with the art or object, is a critical question to consider.

Participants in this study frequently mentioned labels in the context of seeking understanding. Several noted that they found labels distracting and felt compelled to read them, sometimes at the expense of concentrating on engaging with the objects and artwork in front of them. Some talked about feeling that they had misunderstood what they saw if the museum's explanation was different than what they understood. There seemed to be little awareness of the fact that the labels were another person's interpretation; rather, they were seen as the truth provided by the museum. There was an exception to this understanding that I believe offers a suggestion of one way in which museums may more intentionally be a participant in the conversation, rather than the presenter of the "right" answer.

Rick, an experienced museumgoer, had somewhat of an "aha moment" during his time in a special exhibit that was curated by a member of the public. After spending quite a bit of time

looking at the artwork and reading the labels, he noticed that the curator had displayed the paintings in a way that supported her thesis. If she had displayed the work in a different way, it would not have carried the same message. He wondered if the artists intended to convey the messages that their work was being used to communicate. Rick realized that he had become aware of this because the curator discussed in a video and labels why she had chosen to hang the work in a particular configuration. In spite of his many years of museum going, this was the first time he had thought about the curator's role in interpretation.

I would suggest that if the museum is to be a participant in conversation, the voice of the museum should have a face. The fore-understanding of the individual representing the museum should be transparent in much the same way as the visitor/curator of the exhibit mentioned above was introduced and her story was featured. I would propose that exhibits should be authored and information about the particular perspective and position of the author should be shared.

In addition to identifying and introducing the authors of exhibits, creating labels that provide context, rather than answers, would contribute to supporting conversation. Participants in this study seemed to want information that would help them decode what they were seeing so they could reach their own understanding. In this way the museum can help to provide a common language for discussion. The museum in essence hosts the conversation, participating in a way that invites others to participate equally.

It is important to recognize, as well, that in the museum meaningful conversations are not limited to the particular interpretation of an object or artwork. In this study, for example, there were numerous instances in which encounters raised larger questions about human understanding and experience. Rebecca was moved by an African artifact, labeled "the linguist staff," to consider how the value of an object is determined. "What does it really mean?" she asked.

“This whole thing about what’s valuable is so interesting cause there are people who don’t like this stuff and the line between what’s valued and what’s not seems very arbitrary and very much determined by people who may be very limited in their point of view.” Gabe noticed a donor appreciation wall during the course of his museum visit and entered into an animated discussion about benefactors and motivation for giving. He remarked:

I think sometimes that while people deserve to be acknowledged I wonder if the goal here is to make them feel that by extension they have power. They have substance. They have worth. That just like the art they’re associating themselves with, there is something immortal in essence, immortality totem, to being a benefactor....I wonder if part of the impetus for their donation is the physical plaque, which provides some kind of mythic immortality.

In the heightened awareness of the museum, even a sign or a small object can evoke a strong response. In this case, Gabe’s encounter with a donor wall led to a conversation about power, worth, ego, and ultimately notions of death and memory.

**Being-toward-death.** As Silverman (2010) asserted, museums are among the resources that can serve to support people in understanding the complex concept of death. “From Egyptian mummies to funerary art,” she wrote, “death, like sex, seems to appear in nearly every museum” (p. 84). Situated at the fusion of horizons and in the realm of hermeneutic encounters with objects and stories that lead to understanding being, it makes sense that museums include references to death and opportunities to enter into conversation with the phenomenon of “being toward death.” As Heidegger (1978) explained, there is no lived experience of death; there is only lived experience of the death of others’ and the act of dying for the self. “Being toward death” is, in fact, the state of being alive since the only way that human beings experience the phenomenon of death is in the experience of life, which is being toward the end of being. Heidegger (1978) wrote, “The ending we have in view when we speak of death does not signify

a being-at-an-end of *Dasein*, but rather a being toward the end of this being. Death is a way to be that *Dasein* takes over as soon as it is” (p. 303).

It was interesting to see that many of the narrated visits touched, albeit briefly, on thoughts of mortality. Joshua mentioned death and dying on several occasions during his museum visit. He looked at a display about railroad surveyor Theodore Judah and noticed that he had died helping women and children board a boat in the rain. “What an honorable way to go,” he noted. Joshua also talked about men who worked building the railroad and wondered how many had died blasting dynamite. He spent quite a bit of time dwelling with the memory of his grandfather and lamented the way in which the things his grandfather had cared for in life were not honored after he died. Rebecca, too, mentioned mortality throughout her visit, talking about new theories about Van Gogh’s death, retelling a story she heard about the death of artist Luis Jimenez, taking note of an artwork about a man who died of AIDS, and commenting on a label about the death of E.B. Crocker. Gabe noticed his own reaction of changing the subject quickly to move away from the pain expressed in a historic letter from Margaret Crocker following the death of her daughter. He mentioned that “the unnaturalness of the child dying before the parents is always horrific and singular,” and then quickly changed the subject before catching himself and commenting on this intentional distraction.

**Authenticity.** Heidegger (1978) asserted that the concept of “authenticity” is entwined with the concept of “death;” it is only in death that the anonymous, conforming person is no longer. According to Vessey (2010), Gadamer believed that, “Our own death is the sole time when future possibilities cannot overturn our present self-understanding. Death—our own death—makes our past fixed by making our future non-existent so it is only at the point of death that we become what we are (p. 4). At death, human beings are freed from the inauthenticity of

living by the terms of the “we,” a way of living that Heidegger posited is inauthentic.

Disagreeing with Heidegger, Gadamer believed that human beings exist in dialogue with one another and that it is in this conversational relationship that the authentic being can become fully realized (Vessey, 2010). For Heidegger the authentic individual emerges by turning away from others to differentiate the self; for Gadamer the authentic individual emerges through turning toward the other to participate in conversation.

I believe that living authentically calls on each individual to develop their own values, to know themselves, and to live in their own right way. At the same time, the authentic self cannot emerge when each individual is “enclosed in their own heart” (C. Taylor, 1991, p. 9). Self-understanding, which is a requisite to authentic living, is not contained within, but emerges through connection. In the context of this understanding of authenticity, the museum can be seen as a place of being in touch with the authentic self. Through being present and open in conversation with the self, others, and objects, museum visitors can understand multiple ways of seeing; they can better understand themselves and others; they can see shared stories through multiple lenses and understand singular objects from multiple angles. When the museum environment disrupts the ordinary in a way that enables people to be present in themselves in the space, museums can be sites of authentic engagement with the self and others. This authentic experience is less likely to happen in spaces that are distracting; spaces in which busy-ness pulls the attention, not allowing the conversation to take its course.

### **Embodied Experience**

Human beings are of mind and body, and the museum experience involves the total being. There is no mindful presence without physical presence; museum visitors’ physical experience is integrated and not separable from their cognitive or affective experience. Aesthetic response,

meaning making, and understanding happen in the context of physical experience. While visitors seem to be very much aware of themselves as physical entities in a physical space, museums, themselves, seem to be less attentive to this aspect of human existence.

Probably the most consistent feature across all of the narrated visits, in fact, was awareness of the physical experience, which included comfort, navigation, and the ways in which the museum provided context for understanding. Participants were aware of themselves as physical beings and of the museum as a physical space in which their experience was situated. The attention of participants to this aspect of the visit is particularly interesting because it is often overlooked in museum research and practice. Almost a century ago the notion of the physically exhausted museum visitor was brought to light by Pope (1924) who asserted that, “most visitors to a museum leave rather like discharged patients from a hospital, instead of refreshed and exhilarated” (p. 21). While the kind of museum fatigue he identified has been much discussed, there is still a lack of understanding about and attention to the physical experience of the museum.

Two decades ago, a study by Hood (1993) drew attention to what she identified as “environmental factors” that affect museum visitors, particularly “comfort and caring” (p. 710). “Comfort,” she explained, “relates to both physical and psychological elements—the museum building and its amenities and to the visitors’ abilities to work the system” (p. 713). Working the system is based in being able to crack “the museum code of objects, language and symbols” (p. 713). “Caring” is how the museum responds to the visitors’ comfort-related needs. In the introduction *The Convivial Museum*, McLean and Pollock (2010) wrote:

We focus on the physical character of museums, and aspects of the environment that help make museums wonderful public spaces. Seating, lighting, whether a door is open or closed: the physical context is often overlooked, but has profound effects on the quality of the museum experience. (p. 1)

It is notable that twenty years after Hood's well-circulated research, museum leaders are still identifying physical experience as something that is "often overlooked" (McLean & Pollock, 2010, p. 1). The participants in this study bear out that assertion.

**Comfort.** As Serrell (2006) pointed out, "Good comfort opens the door to other positive experiences. Lack of comfort prevents them" (p. 41). The comfort of museum visitors encompasses many aspects of the museum experience ranging from exhibit design to label placement and style; from lighting to sound; from seating to space configuration that supports conversation. All of these aspects of the museum visit are part of the embodied experience and all were mentioned by study participants. The welcoming nature of museum spaces was identified in various ways connected with architecture, aesthetics, openness, light, and ease of access. For example Sofia said, "The buildings are beautiful, the outside entrance is very beautiful. It's very open." Later she noticed a bench with no pathway to reach it in front of a fountain that was dry. "That's not very welcoming," she said. Darcy specifically mentioned that the museum she visited was "a very welcoming place. There are floor to ceiling windows so it's a bright area."

On the other end of the spectrum, several participants felt an immediate disconnect as they entered the museum space. Ana and Zia, who both went to the same museum, seemed to be distracted in ways connected to physical discomfort throughout their visits. Ana described the "warehouse type structure" of the museum as she entered and said that she was not comfortable. She was seeking a feeling of connection with what she saw and was not able to find that during her visit. Much of that feeling of lost connection could be attributed, she noticed, to the displays, which created physical barriers between the visitors and the content. Zia mentioned the shabbiness of the actual structure, including a cracked wall, which she found distracting. The

exhibit she had come to see “had no natural flow....It didn’t take you on a journey at all. It left and came back and you had to figure out where you should go next.” She expressed a lack of comfort in the space noting that, “The distractions take you away from being in an environment that is conducive for you to be able to imagine and think and experience in some way the time period that the pictures are taking you back to.”

**Seating.** Hood (1993) noted that museums can be very difficult places in which to relax, and yet, relaxing is important to being present, which is an essential aspect of engaging in hermeneutic encounters. McLean and Pollock (2010) called attention to the importance of seating in enabling visitors “to relax and stay awhile” (p. 73). Mentions of seating are peppered throughout the narrated visits in this study across age levels and types of museums. Avi engaged in a compelling encounter with an artwork for example and reflected:

I’m sitting on a bench. Actually it’s kind of comfortable, soft. I’m in front of a Mark Rothko and generally I can’t say I am enamored of Mark Rothko. But looking at this one and just sitting here I almost feel like you can get into it. I mean literally flow into it.

He attributed the experience in part to being able to relax and stay with the piece. “I guess I’m advocating more benches,” he said.

In a similar way, Ana noticed that although she was drawn to a particular video display, she was not able to appreciate it because she was not comfortable standing. She said, “It would have been a lot better if I had been able to sit down and really listen to it.” As Hood (1993) observed, in American museums it is expected that people will not sit on the floor or even lean against a wall. The kind of seating that is provided if there is seating is often not designed for comfort. Hood (1993) pointed out, “Backless hard benches proclaim ‘Don’t tarry long here.’” This is especially important in the context of Gadamer’s (2006) assertion that understanding meaning through conversation with art requires “tarrying” with it in a way that he describes as an

“intensive back-and-forth conversation that...lasts until it is ended” (p. 71).

**Navigating.** Being able to physically move through the museum in a way that contributes to being present in the experience, rather than distracted by a sense of feeling disoriented or lost, is another important condition of being comfortable and present. Being disoriented and distracted by confusing spaces and lack of clear wayfinding was a common element of the narrated visits. Ana noticed that “the setup of the different exhibits is really confusing and just by turning a corner you lose your way.” Gabe and Rebecca both experienced moments of being lost. Rebecca hit a dead end at one point and spent quite a bit of time frustratedly walking in circles. “I’m looking at the signs that say ‘exit,’ she said. “So I’m gonna head out this way and—nope. It says, ‘Emergency, alarm will sound.’ How the hell do you get out of here?” In the same museum, Gabe had a similar experience. “I’m stuck in this place. Now the question is where the hell do I go? I don’t know but I’m gonna keep walking.”

Moving through physical space was just one of the navigational challenges that emerged. Perhaps even more distracting was the confusion surrounding exhibit design and object labels. Despite the fact that she found the exhibit space welcoming, Darcy mentioned that some of the artwork was hung too high for her to fully appreciate and that the guide book intended to assist visitor navigation added to confusion in that it was laid out according to lettered walls, which were designated in the booklet, but not marked on the walls. Rick encountered a similar challenge using a handheld electronic tablet to identify paintings. The titles of the paintings, he explained, were “down on the board below near the floor,” placed in a way that he had trouble finding and seeing. Ilsa, too, complained that the pieces in the exhibit she visited were marked with “a very tiny little pinhole number down at the corner of the pieces,” which she did not notice until halfway through her visit. Although she noticed being distracted by the way this

labeling worked, she also wondered if the fact that she had no information made her “engage more with the pieces.”

**Understanding.** Mind and body are two aspects of one process, a process that is organic in its unfolding. As Johnson (2007) explained, “An embodied view is naturalistic, insofar as it situates meaning within a flow of experience that cannot exist without a biological organism engaging its environment. Meanings emerge ‘from the bottom up’ through increasingly complex levels of organic activity; they are not the constructions of a disembodied mind” (p. 10). Often visitors respond physically to objects and artwork, describing feelings of being pulled in, repelled, transported. Meaning emerges through encounters, which involve the body as well as the mind.

In talking about why she was drawn to a particular exhibit for example, Ana explained, “I wanted to be in a room where it felt more like home and where I could approach what was displayed without any rush and without having to compete with other visitors to get near the text.” She noted that she wanted to be physically close to the images on display. Following his museum visit, Carlos reflected on seeing the objects “through [his] heart.” “I wasn’t so much thinking as feeling it,” he said. Avi’s encounters with art, as well, were clearly situated in the physical. During his visit he described his way of approaching an artwork, “They say c’mere, c’mere. And you go over and it’s like what you do when you’re focusing a camera. You move close and then you back up and it becomes a different piece. You focus on a different part.”

These interactions that take place between the viewer and the object are closely related to the way in which Gadamer (2006) saw the unfolding of aesthetic experience. “An experience of art is like this,” he wrote. “One is absorbed in it...One carries with the work of art” (p. 71). The truth of the art emerges from within the conversation between the viewer and the viewed. “The

viewer of a painting looks for the right distance from it, a distance where it truly comes forth,” Gadamer wrote. “Who dictates the right distance? Does one have to choose one’s own standpoint and firmly hold to it? No, one must seek out the point from which ‘it’ best comes forth” (p. 73).

**Disruption, distraction, and transition.** Heidegger asserted that human beings are apt to become engaged in hermeneutic understanding in the context of “any experience that serves to disrupt the ordinary, taken for granted aspects of existence” (McManus Holroyd, 2007, p. 2). From their place outside the ordinary flow of life, I have argued that museums disrupt the day-to-day in ways that can lead to deeper understanding of what it means to be-in-the-world. When the museum environment disrupts the ordinary in a way that enables people to be present in themselves in the space, museums can be sites of authentic engagement with the self and others. This authentic experience is less likely to happen in spaces that are distracting; spaces in which busy-ness pulls the attention, not allowing conversation to take its course.

Often lobbies and entry areas are among the most frenetic places in the museum. Visitors enter and are faced immediately with noise, visuals, choices, and need to interact. They move from the everyday, usually leaving behind a busy street or parking lot, and step into an environment that tends to be one of distraction and busy-ness. Often they encounter a gift shop or a café, elements of consumer-culture that are the outside world brought in. This cacophonous space tugs the visitor’s attention in multiple directions, rather than offering a convivial bridge from the outside in.

Beyond the entrance, exhibit galleries and program areas provide little to assist visitors in moving from the everyday to the environment of the museum, a place in which being present in the present matters. I would suggest that museums should offer spaces of transition through

which visitors are able to take leave from distraction and enter a space of presence. This is not necessarily about being quiet or serious; rather, it is about bridging the everyday and the museum environment in a way that creates the conditions in which museums can live their value.

I have experienced transition spaces that seem to work in this way at the Monterey Bay Aquarium's entrance to the *Open Sea* exhibit area, and at the Museum of Indian Arts & Culture in Santa Fe, New Mexico, at the entrance to the main exhibit gallery. In both of these places, the transition spaces evoked a sense of enchantment and a call to focus, with low lighting, music, collections, and comfort. Visitors entering the *Open Sea* exhibit, for example, walk first into a circular, high-ceilinged room that is dimly lit. Soft music is playing. In a tank that stretches around the circumference of the room, embedded in the walls overhead, thousands of herring swim in a single direction. The water is lit in a cool blue color that accentuates the shiny silver fish that dart and spin, many grouped in a singular motion that is mesmerizing. This space bridges a bright, noisy entry area and the cool, dark *Open Sea* exhibit area.

Although I visited the Museum of Indian Arts & Culture many years ago, I remember the transition space that bridged the lobby and its gift store and promotional videos, with the exhibit of Native American art. I remember coming in from a hot, crowded street through the busy lobby and entering into a cool, oval-shaped room in which the sound of flutes floated through the air. I remember my eyes adjusting to the low light as I sat on one of the wooden benches that circled the room and prepared for my art encounter to come. In both of these cases, people could have just walked through without stopping, but they did not. I watched people stop and stay, letting the environment surround and permeate them. I would suggest that these types of spaces are essential in supporting visitors in being present and creating the possibility for meaningful conversation in the museum.

Exhibit interactives and programs, and indeed, exhibits themselves, also have the potential to contribute to creating distraction or busy-ness especially if they are designed for the sake of activity or information-giving, or become so focused on providing the latest technology that they lose track of their role in supporting understanding through meaningful conversation. Museums function well when they communicate and connect using the tools and language of visitors, while paying attention to holding conversation at the center. As N. Simon (2013b) has pointed out, museums have to earn people's attention through helping them "make connections to the power of artistic mastery, scientific discovery, and historical leadership in ways that push [them] out of the everyday. We have to provide the interpretation, the linkages, and the sparks that bring people into meaningful engagement."

### **Touching and Being Touched**

There are moments within the museum visit experience that seem to go beyond the cognitive, affective, and physical realms, reaching into a place that involves transcendence, awe, and spirituality. These experiences are often described in terms of being touched by an object or artwork in such a powerful way that the viewer is held in time and place unable to turn away, or experiences a flow state, losing track of time. Sometimes the experience is noted as an almost indescribable feeling that draws one into a place of deep energy. The object or artwork is central to these powerful moments, which are often associated with an urge to physically touch the material object that is the spiritual link. While these powerful experiences do not always occur during the course of a museum visit, they are an important part of the connection between museums and being-in-the-world.

**Being touched.** As discussed in the Introduction, one of my motivations for conducting this study was the way in which people responded when asked to describe their most memorable

museum experiences. They frequently seemed unable to find words to describe their encounters with objects and artwork, often putting their hands to their heart as they searched for language to explain the experience. This led me to wonder what was happening in museums that was clearly beyond their educational or social purpose. These types of deeply felt museum experiences that people often talk about in terms akin to spiritual encounters are defined as being numinous, from the Latin word “numen.” This literally means “nod” and refers to a nod from the gods (C. Cameron & Gatewood, 2003), the acknowledgement of a spiritual force held by an object or place. Latham (2009) described this type of experience as “a deeply affective, transcendental, almost spiritual encounter one may have in the presence of a museum object” (pp. 6-7).

According to C. Cameron and Gatewood (2003), there are three dimensions that are present in numinous experiences:

Deep engagement and/or transcendence (losing the sense of time passing, intense concentration, feeling mentally transported, and flow, in the sense suggested by Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi [1988]; empathy (imagining earlier people’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences); awe or reverence (being on hallowed ground, spiritual communion with objects, a feeling of being on a pilgrimage and in the presence of something holy). (pp. 67-68)

Latham (2009) identified four aspects of numinous experiences: “Unity of the moment,” referring to its holistic nature involving emotion, cognition, experience, and object; “object link,” asserting the primacy of the object in the experience; “being transported,” meaning that the experience is felt “temporally, spatially, and bodily,” and “connections bigger than self,” related to the deep bridging of “past, self, and spirit” (p. 79).

There were two experiences that occurred during the narrated visits in this study that seemed to touch on the numinous. Carlos was mesmerized by an ancient crumhorn, which called to him both through its sound, which was being played in the gallery, and by its power as an object. During the course of his visit he responded to it with nearly wordless deep emotion

saying, “Shell trumpet. Ah. Mmmmm. Mmmm. Oh ah.” In post-visit conversation he remembered, “It just really called me....I was just pleased to be surrounded....There was a real spiritual power there....I just didn’t want to leave that spot.” Avi had a similar experience with a particular painting, which he described:

This is a living, breathing painting. This is not flat. And this is not ambiguous and this is not fuzzy. This is living, breathing...the way she lays colors on here is incredible. I wanna turn and walk and look at some of the other paintings in the room, but I can’t. Her face just stares out and she’s got me.

Other study participants, who did not have numinous experiences during their narrated visits, spoke in post visit conversations about having had these types of experiences. Ilsa mentioned that she has had what she termed “aha moments” in museums. “You go into a manic state,” she said. “All of a sudden you’ve got all this energy and everything you know seems to be connecting....In the moment, everything is sweet, you know?” Rick described an exhibit he had seen years ago that featured photographs of the last steam locomotives in use. “There was something about those photos that had quite an effect on me,” he said. “I was really charged up after that exhibit....It certainly went beyond looking at a photograph of a train....It was a mood they evoked, the lighting, the massive machinery. I can’t really describe the feeling I had.” Zia, too, noted that when museums really work for her, “It’s like an aphrodisiac....Like time stands still and you’re taking a pause just to be really in the experience.”

**Touching.** Latham (2009) identified the urge to touch or to be close to an object as a feature of numinous encounters. The participants in this study frequently mentioned a desire to touch or be physically near objects and artwork they found compelling, even outside the context of numinous experiences. Touch is the most direct connection between people and things. Through touching, people and objects are combined and differentiated. As Geisbusch (2007) commented, “While touching I am being touched, while being touched I touch the other –

allowing the experience of the world as contingent and interconnected, questioning the sharp divide between object and subject” (p. 80). To touch is human. It is an integral part of the way human beings experience the world (Pye, 2007).

Recognizing that the museum experience involves the whole person and acknowledging that museums have a responsibility to protect objects for future generations; it is not surprising that museums have an especially difficult relationship with touch. While it is certainly important that museums strictly enforce the protection of objects through restricting touch to those few whose jobs require them to handle the museum’s collections, it is unfortunate that the human desire to touch is not more broadly understood and accommodated. Rather, many of those charged with caring for objects seem to attribute visitors’ urge to touch to ignorance and a lack of respect for appropriate museum behavior. It is fascinating that many of the participants in this study, all of whom are well-educated, respectful and respectable human beings, noticed and spoke of a desire to touch or be close to an object or artwork.

Sofia responded to the subject of one painting to which she was particularly drawn by describing how it drew her in, “You want to reach out and hold their hand and walk with them and touch the painting, but you can’t because you know you will be tackled.” Rebecca had a similar response to a painting she admired. “I really want to touch this, but I know I can’t,” she said. “It’s mostly a painting with some musical notes and a kind of pulley and lever in the middle. I actually kind of really want to touch it so I better move on before I do something that I’m really gonna get in trouble for.”

In post-visit conversation, Ilsa described an interchange about touching that transpired between her and a colleague who she had brought to the exhibit with her following her narrated visit:

Mary says to me ‘can I touch it?’ and I said ‘no, no you can’t touch it.’ But she really had the impulse to feel it...It was not protected in the sense of having some barrier between us and it or a roped off area or anything. So if nobody was looking at us, we could have touched it, but I said no we shouldn’t be touching it.

If we are to understand museums as sites in which human understanding emerges through conversation with the self, others, and objects, then it makes sense that visitors would not be dissociated from their desire to touch during their time in the museum. Visiting the museum is an embodied experience, involving multiple senses. Although experiencing art and objects in museums is often limited to the realm of the visual that does not eliminate the human desire to engage with other senses, particularly with touch, in ways that are integral, rather than peripheral to the museum experience.

### **Museums as Sites of “Being in Conversation”**

For three decades I have participated in and witnessed the struggle in the museum field to define the essential role of museums in society and to align the museum’s activities with the perceived needs of their communities. I have seen museums shape and reshape their activities—exhibits, programs, interactives, collections—in an effort to be more meaningful and more sustainable. While many of these changes have contributed to making museums more accessible, the question of purpose remains unresolved. Over the years I have come to believe that understanding the purpose of museums is essential to activating their role in ways that best use their unique resources.

It was with this fore-understanding that I entered this study. As I pondered the question of museum purpose, I realized that through my own experience as a museum practitioner, observer, student and visitor, I saw museums as places that reflect and project the human experience in ways that go beyond the mind, beyond knowing. At the heart of their activities and their structures, I began to see museums as places that are unique in their role as sites of

understanding the self, others, and “being-in-the-world,” particularly in the context of those material objects with which meaning is formed. As Welsh (2005) noted, “Materiality establishes potent and charged relationships among people, things and spaces” (p. 105). Museums are the institutions in our society that are charged with stewarding and managing those aspects of material culture that have “acquired significance by association with time, aesthetics, personality, community, or discovery” (Welsh, 2005, p. 108). How the relationship between people and material culture is enacted is at the center of the purpose of museums as revealed through this study.

I entered the study with three guiding questions: How do museum visit experiences connect to ‘being-in-the-world’ and to ‘being-with-others-in-the-world?; what are the specific features of the visit experience that facilitate or block those connections?; and how do participants’ respond to those experiences that connect to being human and those that create barriers? The themes that emerged through the study resonated with Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s discussions of the question of “being.” While not discussed explicitly in terms of what it means to “be-in-the-world” and to “be-with-others-in-the-world,” participants engaged in deep consideration of the self as memory and in present identity, relationships with others and objects across time and place, and life meaning in a holistic and expansive sense. They touched, also, on the spirit and on experience that went beyond the physical and cognitive. Participants were engaged in hermeneutic experience in the space of their museum visit.

The role of conversation, which ran through the ways in which people experienced the museum, and which was at the center of how people encountered objects in the museum, emerged from this study as an unexpected and singular aspect of the museum experience. Indeed, it is in its role as a site of “being in conversation” with self, with others, and with objects that the

museum is set apart from other institutions and activities.

The hermeneutic circle is enacted through conversation. Moving between focused attention to the particular and expansive embrace of the full picture, between the parts and the whole, conversation calls for attentive participation and openness to the viewpoints of others. Conversation is not a means to acquire knowledge that is held; it is a process of coming to understanding. Conversation is the way in which museums function, creating space for understanding through engaging with the self, through exchanging with others, and through being in relationship with objects in ways that are meaningful and revealing. Moreover, I would suggest that conversation is not merely how museums work; it is why they are. Human beings see themselves through conversation with the self, others, and objects. They experience others' experiences; they bridge past, present, and future; they come to deep understanding; they are engaged and enveloped; they are touched beyond knowing. In this sense, the museum is not about the objects it holds and cares for; it is not about the educational or recreational experience of the visitor. It is about conversation in the space between the object and the visitor; the place of encounter and exchange in which there is a coming together.

### **Everyday Disruptions**

The forum.

They are seated, feet to feet, face to face.

Staring without looking. Poised to spar.

Knowing what they know.

Believing what they know they know.

The temple.

They are silent and in sound, held to earth, lifted by the breeze.

Dancing with abandon. Encased in the word.

Believing what they believe.

Knowing what they believe they know.

The museum.

They are seeking mysteries familiar and bewildering.

Holding the present, thrown to the past, seeing what has yet to be.  
In conversation with objects, with artwork, with the self, with others  
Present in this place, meaning emerges.

## Chapter VI: Implications for Practice, Leadership, Research

As a practitioner who has participated in conducting evaluation and research in museums and in developing programs, creating interpretive plans, and designing visitor experiences, one of my favorite questions through the years has been, “so what?” I often think about an experience I had as a young professional when I watched a room full of evaluators become enthralled by a conference presentation about a new timing device that enabled measuring the holding time of visitors at a zoo exhibit to the tenth of a second. The presentation never touched on why that degree of attention mattered. I was struck then, as I have been many times in the ensuing years, by a wave of cynicism mixed with curiosity. I wondered what ways of knowing might better serve to strengthen understanding of museum visitors. I wondered how the knowledge that was being generated contributed to creating more valuable museum experiences touching broader and more diverse audiences.

I undertook this study as that cynical and curious professional; carrying always the question of whether or not this research mattered. When I shared my thinking about museums and “being” with other professionals, I often was met with the same kind of response I myself had to the new timing device; interesting, yes, but so what? As I have engaged with study participants, spiraling in the hermeneutic circle, better understanding the parts in the context of the whole and the whole in the context of the parts, I have come to see the concept of “being in conversation” as a way of understanding that can have valuable implications for museum practice. I understand, also, that for the kind of change to happen that will unstick museums from where they are so they can be more valuable, museum leadership must change.

While conversation and dialogue occur in many places, the museum is uniquely positioned at the “fusion of horizons,” holding objects and artwork, disrupting the everyday in

ways that invite powerful and potent encounters. The spirited conversations that take place are pathways to connecting with understanding the question of being. How the museum hosts and participates in these meaningful conversations is central to their value. This understanding of the museum holds implications for practice, for leadership, and for future research, which are discussed following.

### **Conversation**

Understanding the museum as a site of “being in conversation,” calls to question the meaning of conversation, both as an activity and as a significant underpinning of hermeneutics. “Conversation,” in fact sits at the heart of Gadamer’s description of understanding. He asserts that meaning emerges through dialogic exchange between the interpreter and the author/text, and extends his definition of text to include art and material objects. Those engaged in this exchange are active participants bringing their perspective, their historical consciousness, to the conversation. Through conversation, meaning is resolved. This does not mean that participants reach agreement, but rather that understanding emerges in the context of each participant’s frame of meaning.

For Heidegger understanding turns inward; those engaged in the everydayness of their lives are not present in a mindful way. Through deep thinking, what I imagine as deep conversation with the self, people may become in touch with the question of what it means to be. In Heidegger’s later life, he turned to language as a mode of holding and expressing being. Through dwelling in the language of what is said and what is heard, meaning emerges. In this study, I have concentrated on Gadamer and Heidegger, but there are many others whose work would add to the discussion including Martin Buber, David Bohm, and Mikhail Bakhtin. Future studies might expand on the diverse perspectives on conversation and dialogue to increase

knowledge based in the connection between “being in conversation,” human understanding, and museums.

Beyond the philosophical, it is important to acknowledge conversation as an activity. There have been studies conducted in museums about conversation as a way of learning (Falk & Dierking, 2000; Leinhardt et.al, 2002; Leinhardt & Knutson, 2004) and museum scholars and practitioners have touched on conversation as an activity that takes place in the context of interpretation (Cunningham, 2004; M. Spock, 1999). In these cases, conversation is understood in a more limited scope than this study indicates. This study points to conversation as the central way of experiencing museums. How this activity takes place is important to understanding how museums can best support the way in which visitors are living their experience. For meaningful conversation to take place, I believe that the following elements must be present: people who are interested in understanding; shared language; respectful and active engagement as a talker and listener; awareness of the self; and openness to multiple perspectives. The importance of conversation and the ways in which conversation takes place hold implications for museum practice and for leadership practice.

### **Museum Practice**

Considering museums as sites of “being in conversation” requires rethinking many aspects of museum practice. Conversation requires common language, topics people care enough about to be engaged, interest in others’ perspectives, and willingness to participate. It involves the whole being and is situated in sensed understanding as well as cognition. As a host of conversations, museum spaces must be comfortable and inviting. They must communicate in multiple ways that conversation is welcome, that diverse perspectives are desired, that silence and sound are embraced. Beyond contributing to the conversation by creating space for it to

happen and by offering inspiration, the museum also is always a participant. Its setting is replete with visual messages; the objects it holds are presented in a way that reflects the museum's perspective. To support conversation, it is important that the museum participates in a mindful way, attentive to shared language, listening as well as talking, opening up to multiple right ways of understanding. It is particularly helpful to let visitors know that conversation is key to developing understanding among museum staff as well as between staff and visitors, and that the museum, itself, does not represent a singular perspective. The range of knowledge and multiple perspectives that museum staff hold is a critical element that the institution brings to the conversation. The way in which the museum participates in conversation should let others know that they are invited to participate as equal contributors.

In my own experience I have sat through discussions about why some people don't come to the museum even though a once-in-a-decade exhibit on a topic that relates to them is held or targeted collateral is distributed in their neighborhood for an annual program designed for their community. In these situations I have often responded by asking how likely we all would be to attend a party in the home of someone we have never met and with whom we have no relationship. I share this to say that museums will only live their value through holding conversation if they expand their relationships beyond those who currently understand their language; if they learn to speak in many languages; if they offer objects and artwork that are compelling to friends they have not yet met; if they stretch beyond the comfort of their expertise to be participants in a broad and diverse conversation that may hold no right answers. The implications for change in this area are myriad and touch on critical issues of representation in collections, in the stories being told, in the voices being heard. Much has been written on this topic and many are working to make museums more open and representative of multiple

perspectives. Understanding the ways in which current practice could better support conversation and, therefore, support museums in becoming more relevant and valuable, calls attention to the critical need to address these pressing issues.

### **Leadership Implications**

The implications of this research in terms of leadership rest in three areas: complexity and adaptation; conversation and relationship; and ways of knowing. Museums are complex systems, what Vaill (1989) described as environments of permanent whitewater. I believe that it is essential for leaders to understand this complexity so that they can better understand the kind of adaptive leadership that will ensure that museums increase in value to their communities as the social landscape evolves.

The role of the adaptive leader is to establish strategies and ways of working that enable leaders at every level to adopt approaches that support change. Adaptive leadership theory suggests that solutions to those important challenges that are not routine are best addressed in the context of shared leadership, recognizing that those in authority do not and should not be expected to have all the answers. Leadership occurs as part of a shared social context and relationships are central to leadership practice. The central tenet of shared or distributed leadership is that leadership is not the role of an individual, but is a process that includes multiple dynamic roles and multiple voices (R. Roberts & Johnson, 2009). Especially in museums where disciplines and areas of expertise are diverse and varied, staff has much to contribute from their distinct perspectives. Change depends on shifting away from traditional top down solutions and toward new ways of thinking that challenge even the most revered practices.

Relational leadership practice is based in a process of reciprocal interconnection that depends on shared goals, shared knowledge and mutual respect. This leadership approach

acknowledges that relationships among people, even those that occur in the workplace, include an aspect of emotional connectedness. Cognitive connections formed around shared goals and shared knowledge are intertwined with emotional connections that emerge in relationship. Beyond drawing on multiple expertise and empowering multiple voices, relational practice is a process by which a more holistic perspective is developed; it is integrative, not additive. Relational leaders facilitate the interweaving of multiple perspectives, creating a safe space for continuous growth and reciprocal interrelationships. Fletcher's (1999) concept of "fluid expertise" reflects a process of co-creation, calling on leaders to empower others and to be empowered. At its core, relational leadership is about shared understanding; the same kind of shared understanding that emerges through conversation. It makes sense then that the conditions that support conversation also support relational leadership and that understanding through listening, openness to multiple viewpoints, and speaking mindfully underlie meaningful leadership in much the same way as they support meaningful museum experiences.

This study approached understanding through the lens of lived experience; it was attentive to felt meaning as well as cognitive understanding, acknowledging that mind and body are two aspects of a single process. One of the findings, in fact, was that the participants' lived experiences were situated in the realm of the physical, the sensed, and the cognitive. Leadership studies would benefit from research focused on this kind of holistic lived experience, particularly in terms of the aesthetic dimensions of leadership. Hansen, Ropo, and Sauer (2007) used the term aesthetics as applied to aesthetic leadership to mean tacit knowledge drawn from sensory experience and felt meaning of objects and actions. While it is accepted that successful leaders often act on their gut feelings as well as rational judgment, there is a lack of understanding of

this sensory-based tacit leadership knowledge, a phenomenon that could be unpacked through studies based in hermeneutic phenomenology.

### **Future Research**

Based on this research, there are many areas of future exploration. I entered the study with a belief that qualitative approaches were most fitting for museum research. After conducting this hermeneutic phenomenological study using narrated visits and post-visit conversations, I am convinced that this approach yields rich and valuable results. The museum field would benefit through conducting more in-depth qualitative studies, and particularly studies based in hermeneutic phenomenology. This is an area that is underrepresented in museum studies (Wood & Latham, 2009). Hearing directly from visitors about their lived experiences is an invaluable way of knowing and should be more actively pursued.

This research was but a first step into using narrated visits as a way of understanding the lived experience of the museum. The approach, which I developed and which to my knowledge, has not been used outside of this study, resulted in rich in-the-moment access to the visit experience. Paired with post-visit conversations, the approach resulted in a wealth of data that reflected each participant's individual experience and their understanding of their experience. It would be interesting to conduct additional studies using the narrated visit approach. Beyond more of the same kind of study with more participants, future studies could focus on further exploring some of the themes that emerged. For example, narrated visits with differently abled people focusing on questions of embodied experience may yield important information about designing museum experiences. Focusing a study on museums and personal memory may help to frame experiences for older visitors. In addition, I can imagine similar studies being

conducted at specific exhibits and programs to better understand how visitors are experiencing these museum offerings.

There are limitations to the narrated visit approach that should be noted and may be addressed in future studies. Participants had to be able to operate a digital voice recorder, which turned out to be challenging for some. They were also called on to talk aloud in places where talking is sometimes seen as taboo. For those who mentioned this, some said they were awkwardly self-conscious and some said they felt more present. The study did require people to visit alone, a condition that for many of them was not their regular way of visiting museums. It would be interesting to do follow up studies with dyads in which their conversations with each other were recorded as well as each person's own conversations with themselves and the objects encountered.

The study also points to ways in which museums support conversation and ways in which they create barriers to conversation. It would be fascinating to make the kind of changes suggested in the study, for example different kinds of labels or more attention to physical comfort, and conduct similar studies in the same spaces. While it would not be possible to make a direct comparison, understanding the visitor's lived experience in spaces that were designed to support conversation could lead to new understanding.

### **The Road Traveled**

Over the course of this study I have given myself over to the journey, making my road by walking (Wheatley, 2005), uncomfortable at times with the messiness of my path, but trusting in the spiral of the hermeneutic circle. For me this was an exercise in mindful listening, alertly attentive to the voices of my participants and to my own voice as I understood their experiences and my understanding of their understanding. I was vigilant in attention to my fore-

understanding and conscious always of letting the participants' voices wash over me and fill me in their wholeness. It was not always comfortable to sit in the ambiguity of not immediately organizing, categorizing, and working to make sense, but I developed a trust in the hermeneutic process that was supported by the unexpected understanding that emerged. While I entered the study thinking about "being" and museums, I had given little thought to conversation, to the importance of the embodied experience, or to touching as a way of connecting. I was delighted that through the hermeneutic process, these fascinating themes emerged.

As a research approach, hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on deep understanding of a particular and the findings must be considered as one researcher's understanding of individual participant's lived experiences. One of my concerns going into the study was that participants would concentrate on doing and seeing, rather than on the whole of the experience. If the narration was a surface telling I worried that it would be unclear whether that was a true reflection of the experience or a flaw with the approach. In fact, the visits each had a unique character and all touched on the experience in sensory as well as cognitive ways. While I am awed by the depth and mindfulness of those who participated in the study, I am also aware that the experience of these participants does not necessarily apply to all museum visitors. The patterns that did emerge, however, were strong enough to suggest that the themes are likely to be found across museum experiences.

I do find myself yearning for more voices, more visit experiences. The richness of people's narration was compelling. Writing their stories through their words pushed me to be attentive to words and meaning in a way that grew my understanding of myself, of the individual participants, and of museums. It made me aware in my own practice of listening within the words that are spoken and the way they are heard. The process of the study and the themes that

emerged have pushed me to want to find a place in my practice to further open understanding through conversation.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the dissertation process I have read volumes and engaged in many hours of conversation about museums and their work, about how people understand what it means to be, about what connection there may be between understanding being, and understanding why museums are, what museums do, and what they might do better. I have come to believe through this process that the key to what museums are and why museums are, is held in understanding what people seek from museums and how those who do use museums experience them. It is equally important to notice what is missing from museum encounters and what barriers are constructed that block some from being present in their experience and, it may be inferred, block others from thinking of museums as places that are at all relevant to their lives.

Throughout this study I have been struck over and over again by the wisdom of the people I have encountered through their writings and through conversation. In choosing hermeneutic phenomenology as my research approach I noted my deep trust of people's voices as the primary source of knowing. This study has affirmed that understanding. I close with listening to words that have brought me deeper into the conversation.

I do think about being part of some kind of larger human family. And I think museums almost amplify that for me because you do see the timeline of our impact, positive and negative on each other. I think that's one of the gifts that people take away or can is that you can see these changes over time and how we've impacted each other and you can see the interconnectedness.

Joshua

You want to connect with this ancient drawing or sculpture of a person that's in front of you. You are here and now, but you're seeing this thing that some other human created, what 4000 years ago. You just want to connect. You feel it in your body. You feel this sense of connection across time to something that is part of you, but not part of you.

Ilsa

Museums are mirrors. In them we see the history and complicated features of ourselves, we the human beings.... In their display cases and gallery installations museums show us in tangible forms the qualities of our own perceptions, understandings, and ways of thinking. People are made up of many parts and pieces, physically, intellectually, and emotionally. Some of these parts are not easily compatible—and so we keep them separate, often unconsciously. Museums reflect this tendency; science, art, and history each have their stories. The next challenge for museums is to become places where wholeness can be glimpsed....My hope for the future of museums is that they will become places that help us sense wholeness so that our science, arts, and history may bring us insight, not simply knowledge. (Duke, 2012, p. 52)

## Appendix

## Appendix A – Informed Consent Form

Antioch University  
PhD in Leadership and Change  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD  
Human Participant Research Review

### Informed Consent Statement

You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Randy C. Roberts, a doctoral candidate in Antioch University's Ph.D. in Leadership and Change program. This research involves a study exploring connections between "being" and museums, particularly through the lived experience of museum visitors. The results of this study may be included in future scholarly presentations and publications.

#### *Study Process*

Participation in the study will consist of you visiting a museum of your choice for approximately one hour and recording your responses to the experience as it occurs using a digital voice recorder. The digital voice recorder will be provided to you and you will be asked to return it following your visit. The visit will take place at a location and time that are convenient for you. The audio recording you make as you visit will be transcribed. To insure accuracy, the transcript will be sent to you for review and you will have an opportunity to correct any misinterpretations or misunderstandings. The total time involved in this portion of the process should be no more than 3 hours. Following this phase of the study, you may be asked to participate in one or more conversational interviews lasting approximately one to two hours. Interviews will be scheduled to take place at a location and time that are convenient for you. An audio recording of the interview will be made and later transcribed. To insure accuracy, the transcript will be sent to you for review and you will have an opportunity to correct any misinterpretations or misunderstandings. If there are follow up questions after the transcript is reviewed, a second interview will be scheduled with your approval. The total time involved in this portion of the process should be no more than 4 hours.

#### *Confidentiality*

Your name will be kept confidential, unless you give permission for your name to be used in the study report. Your name will be used only if you expressly indicate that you give your permission. Audio recordings and all related research materials including this Informed Consent Form will be stored in a secure location and will be destroyed upon the completion of the student's doctoral dissertation.

#### *Benefits/Risks:*

There is no direct benefit to you as a result of participating in this study. The study is potentially beneficial, however, as a way of increasing understanding of the role of museums in terms of human connection and as a way of developing increased personal awareness of how your own experience of museums affects you.

There are no known risks to participating in this study.

*Rights:*

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may discontinue participation at any time without penalty. I have the right to express any concerns or complaints to the University Committee on Research Involving Human Participants at Antioch University (contact Dr. Carolyn Kenny, Chair, Institutional Review Board, Ph.D. in Leadership & Change, Antioch University, ckenny@antioch.edu, 805-565-7535).

*Questions:*

I understand that if I have any additional questions regarding my rights as a research participant I can contact the researcher, Randy C. Roberts (rroberts@antioch.edu; 614-202-4058), or her Committee Chair, Dr. Carolyn Kenny, Professor, Ph.D. in Leadership & Change, Antioch University, ckenny@antioch.edu, 805-565-7535).

*Documentation of Informed Consent:*

I understand that my signature on this form indicates that I understand the information provided to me about participation in this study and that I freely agree to participate.

\_\_\_\_\_ I give my permission for my name to be used in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not give my permission for my name to be used in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Name (Print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature

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