

The Comfort in Being Sad: Memorial, Museum, and Kurt Cobain

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

University of Washington

June 2015

Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Department of Museology

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Abstract

Museums, monuments, and archives have long been used to memorialize noteworthy individuals and events as well as being repositories of history and culture. These memorializations have typically served to enhance a specific narrative that is endorsed by the institutions that present them, whether as part of national myth building or to show particular aspects of a historic figure. In the 21st century, increasing focus has been placed in day-to-day life on figures from popular culture. To remain relevant to the community a museum must preserve pop culture figures as well as historic or political figures. This paper utilizes the exhibit *Nirvana: Taking Punk to the Masses* at the EMP Museum in Seattle, WA and its treatment of Kurt Cobain as a case study of pop culture memorialization in the museum by examining its presentation and curatorial intents, particularly its methodologies for preventing the lionization of its central figure.

The Comfort in Being Sad: Memorial, Museum, and Kurt Cobain

Every generation has a tragic figure, a hero of the people whose life is cut short suddenly, dramatically, sending shock waves of grief through the body of the populace. For my parents, that wave crashed from the window of a Dallas book depository and onto the balcony of a Memphis hotel; for many others of their generation it came again when the King of Rock ‘n’ Roll slipped gently into the Memphis night, or on a December evening in Manhattan with an Englishman's blood on the sidewalk. For my generation – the late side of “Generation X” and the early birds of “Gen Y” – that first spasm of disbelief hit on April 5, 1994, when Kurt Donald Cobain, alone in his Seattle house, pulled the trigger that ended his life. It was my 20th birthday.

Across America it is easy to see points of memorial referencing President Kennedy: the JFK Presidential Library in his native Boston; countless statues and public spaces named for him (I myself attended John F. Kennedy Junior High School); his profile on our currency; museum exhibitions like the recent display of the Vanity Fair photoshoot he did as President Elect with his young family (“The Kennedys | Portrait of a Family: Photographs by Richard Avedon,” 2010). Practically every city in the nation has a road, a plaza, a statue, or similar that bears the name or likeness of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. A great deal of effort has gone into understanding these modes of remembrance that hold positions of authority in a nation's history and how they work toward shaping public memory and consciousness, though by nature

many of them memorialize events as much or more than individuals (well-studied examples include the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., and the 9/11 Museum in New York). Scholars as diverse as American public historian Erika Doss and Indian political historian Ramachandra Gaa have explored the way that memorial structures can be and are used in the creation of national myths and shaping the historical narratives that are taken as cultural fact by bodies of people – facts that are traditionally transmitted through the medium of museums and monuments.

In Western culture, and particularly in the United States, the twenty-first century has brought an increased cultural identification with the items and individuals of entertainment and lifestyle – so-called popular culture. Movie series bring more and more ticket sales as they continue on, be it *Harry Potter* or *The Hunger Games* or Marvel's multiple-record-setting *Avengers* franchise; the BBC's *Doctor Who* is more popular now than at any time in its fifty year history; I am more commonly approached by strangers as a fan of Wil Wheaton or Joss Whedon's *Firefly* than I am as a citizen, a gender, or an ethnicity. In 2011 the city of Vancouver, British Columbia, descended into chaos and riots *because their hockey team lost the Stanley Cup finals*. As the ties of ethnicity and geography continue to be broken down by modern communication – and particularly the internet – we see increasingly that cultural ties based on chosen aspects of life like music, movies, and other fandoms are often as or more important to individuals than traditional culture. This immersion and identification with produced, marketable culture is readily seen at the myriad anime and comic book conventions attended by thousands annually, as well as the PAX expos for the gaming sub-culture and

countless smaller gatherings dedicated to both more and less obscure pop culture elements from Star Trek to *The Big Lebowski*.

In a society that holds so dearly to its pop culture, is it surprising that many of us define watershed moments through its purveyors? Is it a stretch to say thousands, even millions, of lives were changed by the murders of Selena Quintanilla-Pérez, Biggie Smalls, and Tupac Shakur, or Kurt Cobain's suicide? As stardom and deep, personal fan connections become easier and more commonplace (as an example, compare Wil Wheaton's very personal blog against the fan club communications of stars from the 1950s) and those celebrities inevitably pass from this mortal coil, it increasingly becomes the purview and responsibility of the museum to hold memory of pop culture figures after their deaths – so long as the museum maintains its traditional position as the caretaker of public memory (though that is a conversation beyond the scope of this paper). Even assuming the necessity of preserving pop culture, which persons should be remembered? Which of the many versions of a given figure is to be enshrined?

As we shift our gaze away from historical process and look at these more ephemeral definitions of culture, the methodologies of remembrance become less distinct. Specifically, there seems to be a lack of discussion regarding the ways in which memorial projects are constructed for the remembrance of figures who have shaped the popular culture of music, film, television, and literature. This is not to say that there are not countless works dedicated to preserving the memory of those individuals – there has practically been a full sub-field of the publishing industry dedicated to books which biograph actresses and their ilk, or re-publish photographs taken of rock stars in the act of being cool. What has not been done – with the

notable exception of Doss' *Elvis Culture: Fans, Faith, and Image*, which itself does something slightly different – is an examination of the *process* by which these memorials of our cultural icons have been produced. That curatorial decision process, based largely on limitations of space and the particulars of artifacts to be displayed, is the fundamental piece of exhibit creation that shapes the manner in which its subjects are depicted. Understanding the application of curatorial choice in the creation of museum memorial is critical to understanding how these types of exhibits create, or fail to create, impact upon their audiences.

The 20th anniversary of Kurt Cobain's death combined with his band, Nirvana, being inducted into the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame in the same year (2014) has presented an occasion where there is both a public interest in Cobain's legacy and an institutional willingness to visit or re-visit Cobain and his life, as evidenced by the discussion panel hosted by EMP Museum in honor of the anniversary of his death. This paper seeks to address the methodologies of memorialization and their impact in the field of museum exhibition by analyzing the creation and implementation of EMP Museum's *Nirvana: Taking Punk to the Masses*. This analysis should provide insight for institutional thought regarding the presentation of exhibits that memorialize, biograph, or otherwise touch upon the legacies of departed figures in popular culture while helping to understand how certain curatorial choices affect these kinds of exhibitions.

Literature

“The past is integral to our sense of identity... Ability to recall and identify with our own past gives existence meaning, purpose, and value.”(Lowenthal, 1985) David Lowenthal uses that statement to sum the core of what cultural memory pertains to and means. As scholars of public memory are quick to point out, though, the recollection of that past – particularly of a collective, shared past – requires a vehicle or container of some type in order to transmit identity out of the past. In a real sense in Western culture the vehicles of public remembrance have traditionally been museums, monuments, memorials, and archives (for purposes of this paper I will treat these terms and institutions largely synonymously; all four present public forums for the remembrance of the dead and are equally valid under the terms with which I will discuss memorialization).

It is inherent in the nature of the museum to be allied with and perceived as performing the protection and preservation of both history and public memory.(Chakrabarty, 2002) Andreas Huyssen goes so far as to label them “compensatory organs of remembrance”,(Huyssen, 1995) or what Alison Landsberg would call prosthetics for memory (Landsberg, 2004), though strictly speaking she includes the museum with all manner of non-organic (i.e., organic as in being non-technological in any sense and relying solely on human remembrance) media that reproduce or represent the past. Historically, museums and monuments have been used in this role to help preserve and promulgate views that are nationalistic and reinforce hegemonic systems of control; a cursory glance at monuments built in the 19th and early 20th century reveals a long list of memorials that are chock full of representational symbolism that presents narratives confined almost exclusively to concepts of military victory and the valorization of national ideals (Haskins, 2007). This tendency to rely on “dogmatic formalism” and a restating of reality into idealized forms (Bodnar, 1991) as a whole has reinforced the notion that history is the province

of elite, primarily white, males and that women, workers, minorities, and youth have only gradually gained entrance into the realm of national remembrance. (Haskins, 2007)

In the present concept of the pursuit of public memory – one that is increasingly democratized by the participatory nature of both museum and digital culture as a whole (as both Chakrabarty and Haskins outline in detail) – there is a very real debate on questions regarding agency and representation. (Haskins, 2007) Who is permitted to be memorialized? Which version or image is to be preserved and remembered? Which person or institution is capable of doing so? Do they have any legitimate claim to that memory? What does that memorialization even look like in the post-industrial world?

It is difficult to speak about modern memorial in the United States without discussing the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., as designed by Maya Lin (also known as The Wall). What the Vietnam Veterans Memorial does is remove the valorization of conflict and nationalistic idealism from a monument to a war and reduces it to a simple, elegant statement on the loss of individual human lives; gone are the symbologies of the nation and in their stead are simply the names of the dead carved into a wall shaped as a chevron, the simple form that is repeated in variation to denote American military rank. That simple fact – that it does not elevate either the war or the nation – makes it remarkable, perhaps unique, in federally-constructed monuments. What makes the Memorial even more remarkable has been the decision of the National Park Service to take in, catalog, and preserve as much as practicable the ephemeral memorials that are placed at The Wall by individual visitors, that their efforts to remember and honor their dead can be passed forward with the official government

remembrance. This process of collecting ephemera has critically expanded the way in which the Memorial serves to enshrine personal remembrance in an official capacity, engendering a blurring between sanctioned, controlled memorial and the idiosyncratic memories of diverse individuals and cannot be overstated as a watershed moment in the participatory aspect of public memory. (Doss, 2010)(Haskins, 2007) This process has been repeated in the practices of the National September 11 Memorial and Museum to mixed critical review. (Sisto, 2014)(Gopnik, 2014)

Public memorial becomes even blurrier when we scrutinize the methodologies and histories of individual memorial sites dedicated to specific individuals. A compelling example is the George Washington Birthplace National Monument, which is given an exhaustive institutional history by Seth Bruggeman in his *Here, George Washington Was Born*. At the Birthplace Monument, the National Park Service engaged in an often acrimonious struggle with the Wakefield National Memorial Association (a group made of mostly women descended from veterans of the American Revolution, as many memorial associations of the Colonial Revival at the start of the 20th century were) over how the site of the first President's birth should and would be interpreted. By raising money privately and funding the construction of what would turn out to be a wildly historically-inaccurate replica of Washington's birth house the Wakefield Association endeavored for several decades (largely between 1920 and 1965) to impose their specific, idealized, and sanitized vision of what life on the 18th century Virginia Neck was like (abjectly minimizing or flat refusing to discuss slavery in pre-Revolution Virginia, for example). In this way, a small group of entitled-feeling individuals succeeded in taking control of a foundational piece of American mythology (as divorced from history). (Bruggeman, 2008)

Ultimately, the National Park Service would regain full control of the Birthplace Memorial site, but it cannot be calculated how long or how far afield the version of Washington's image that the Wakefield Association promoted will remain. (Bruggeman, 2008)

But George Washington is still a figure of politics and myth, so far removed from 20th and 21st century life that even major details of his biography are shrouded in mystery and untruth (e.g., the famed story of the silver dollar being thrown over the river – a feat unlikely for a firearm of the time, let alone a young man's arm) that persist in culture as if they were canon laid down by the Christian God Almighty (or Mother Gaia, or Shiva, or Odin, or the Flying Spaghetti Monster, if you prefer). What happens as we move to smaller figures, more fleeting ones? How does the control of image and legacy start to alter when we are speaking about mere private individuals, even ones of widespread cultural fame?

At this point I turn to Erika Doss and her exploration of the legacy, image, and fandom of Elvis Aaron Presley. Before I begin, I want to stress that the fundamental difference between what Doss examines in Elvis culture and what I am examining regarding Kurt Cobain is that all of the entities discussed by Doss – fan clubs, associations, corporations, individuals, and even museum-like organizations – are private entities, existing on a public sphere solely to interact with the idea and/or person called Elvis Presley. My goal is to integrate Doss' concepts of the privatization of public image with the ideas discussed above relating to the institutionalizing of public memory of the individual.

That being said, Doss begins her assessment of Elvis' legacy by commenting that Presley's "abiding cultural symbolism [is] not to be found... only in his music or biography, but among his many diverse and conflicted images and what they mean to the people who look at them, make them, and collect them." (Doss, 1999, p. 4) This statement – and much of the ground she moves forward to cover – explicitly puts forth that there can be no single, definitive image of Elvis and that what is produced in his name is neither coherent nor ever entirely untrue, from a memory perspective. Legally, Presley's estate (Elvis Presley Enterprises, or EPE; often called Elvis, Inc. by its detractors) has control over the usage and distribution of most images of Elvis; they promote several sanitized versions of The King, from the poor-kid-done-good rockabilly image of young Elvis to Elvis the soldier and patriot to the Elvis who famously gave away diamond rings and Cadillacs. (Doss, 1999) In the eyes of EPE, there never was an overweight, drug-addled Elvis or an Elvis who engaged in wild sexual excess or an Elvis who crossed racial lines to befriend blacks in 1950s Mississippi and ultimately popularize an inherently black style of music. (Doss, 1999) EPE takes great strides to maintain the "official" version of Elvis, litigating at even the slightest provocation and even issuing cease-and-desist orders to fan organizations that sell hand-crafted mementos during the annual "Elvis Week" event in Memphis.

In stark contrast to EPE's Elvis imagery are an assortment of memorial "shrines", for lack of a better word, that Elvis' fans have created in their own attempts to "shape their sense of self" through "Elvis's image as an intimate, as someone who shares secrets and listens to their problems." (Doss, 1999) Doss's best example of this is GracelandToo, the home of Paul MacLeod and his son Elvis Aaron Presley MacLeod, which has been open to the public since

1991 to display and share their immense collection of Elvis objects, memorabilia, and ephemera. (Roadside America, 2015) This collection, while not aiming in any specific way to portray Elvis as anything other than the idolatrous object of the MacLeods' affections, also takes no pains to censor any specific thing from the narratives that their objects tell. What the MacLeods display is their construction of Elvis, a mythology that was built as Paul MacLeod lived his life in fascination with The King. All of it is there: young, hopeful, and poor Elvis; his hips and the Ed Sullivan Show; the end days of obesity and addiction. Visitors at GracelandToo take with them their own image of Elvis Presley, uncontrolled and wild. (Roadside America, 2015)

Doss makes the leap that "ownership of Elvis himself is claimed through ownership of his image." (Doss, 1999) Further, she paints the disputes over what should be permitted as Elvis' image "parallel those over knowledge itself, over how and what American history should be presented in public schools, over who is entitled to certain ideas and information." (Doss, 1999) Even in the presentation of pop ephemera, the celebration of a life that has given countless people enjoyment, the spectre of how ideas are formulated, dissected, and passed on looms menacingly. Is it such a wonder that these men and women, these Elvis fans, should cling tightly to their own specific images of the man? After all, to them this is a war of ideology.

In summary, the literature of public memorial has cast a great deal of light on the purposes for which the living utilize remembrance of the dead, primarily in historically and politically motivated arenas. The use of the museum, in all of its forms, has been well-documented in its ability to transmit the ideas that institutions, organizations, or governments might have regarding specific events or historical figures. The limited writing that has been done

on pop culture memorialization has focused fairly narrowly on personal memorials, the control of commercial usage of image, and the places they interface. What does not surface is a treatment of institutional intention in regards to popular culture; this paper endeavors to fill that gap with an exploration of *Nirvana: Taking Punk to the Masses* as developed and presented by the EMP Museum.

Methods

The conception of this project stemmed from a number of factors coinciding: the twentieth anniversary (in 2014) of Kurt Cobain's death, the induction of Nirvana into the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame the same year, a number of announced (and often un-materialized) projects regarding Kurt and his legacy, and my own presence in Seattle – with my personal connection to the date of Kurt's death – at the epicenter of what would logically be the focal region, geographically, of efforts to remember and make sense of his life. Given that set of circumstances it followed that I had a rare chance to explore the act of assembling remembrances of a widely-recognized popular figure both directly at the place where his legend attributed his rise and with timing that aligned in a close manner with important anniversaries (both his death in 1994 and the release of *Nevermind*, Nirvana's breakout record, in 1991). These, then, are the primary factors which led to the selection of Kurt Cobain as the focal point of the memorial projects that this research would address.

The research for this paper began with broad internet searches for exhibitions and events that pertained to Kurt, Nirvana, and/or either of the anniversaries mentioned above. These

searches produced a fairly broad list of museums, sites, and individuals that had something to do with creating remembrance; this list was shortened by removing non-museum, non-public art projects (e.g., film and book projects) as well as projects that would not be deemed professional under the American Alliance of Museums best practices guidelines. A final short list of institutions and exhibitions were then contacted for participation in this research.

EMP Museum in Seattle and its exhibition *Nirvana: Taking Punk to the Masses* was selected based on accessibility, depth of information available, and their focus on pop culture. In addition to personally viewing the exhibit I conducted an interview with its curator, Jacob McMurray, and was able to review the full text of the exhibit as well as examine a number of documents relating to the design and implementation of *Taking Punk to the Masses* including two “Nirvana Concept Documents” from the beginning and end of 2009 that were intended to serve as conceptual development guidelines and an internal EMP presentation that outlines the structure of the exhibit close to its opening. This information provided by Mr. McMurray, along with a recording of a panel he led entitled *Come As You Are: The Legacy of Kurt Cobain and Nirvana* which was conducted as part of EMP’s functions surrounding the twentieth anniversary of Cobain’s death, forms the core of the resources I utilized for my examination of the exhibit.

Collectively, the primary documents and interview pertaining to *Nirvana: Taking Punk to the Masses* have been used to create a detailed case study of the methodologies for memorializing Kurt Cobain and Nirvana at EMP Museum. I then took that study and applied the lens created via my review of the literature to ascertain the effectiveness and importance of *Taking Punk to the Masses* as an example of memorialization of popular culture within the

museum setting. Fundamentally I was looking for the ways in which conscious institutional thought was put into the portrayal of the band, the man, and his death in the exhibit and what that could mean for further exploration of pop culture legacies. I examined both the exhibit and the conceptual documents for decision points where the depiction of Cobain was consciously utilized in specific ways (specific to the exhibit, not specific ways I was looking for). I also tailored my interview with McMurray to cover his process as curator in making those decisions and to clarify any external influences that may or may not have been present during the design of the exhibit.

Findings

This section describes my exploration of EMP Museum's (henceforth EMP) treatment of Kurt Cobain, Nirvana, and their respective legacies in the exhibition *Nirvana: Taking Punk to the Masses* and shows as much as possible the institutional and curatorial intentions behind the exhibit. I aim to highlight points where specific curatorial vision directs the exhibit and its depiction of Cobain. Visual aids (photographs, etc.) that are relevant to this discussion are found in the Appendix.

The exhibit is contained in a gallery on the second – and main – floor of EMP that had, for roughly ten years previous, housed an exhibit called *Northwest Passage*, a wide-ranging and unfocused collection of musical artifacts from the Pacific Northwest (McMurray, 2015). This gallery begins at the top of the stairs that go to the primary gallery spaces and is the closest large gallery to the main ticketing area, placing it as arguably the most focused-upon exhibit of the museum's long-term and in-house exhibits (at the time of this writing – Spring 2015 – a travelling extra-cost Star Wars exhibit dominates the signage in and around the museum entrances). The exhibit title sign and opening text are clearly visible from the stairs as a visitor ascends but the introductory area is not.

Rounding the corner into the start of *Taking Punk to the Masses* the visitor is confronted by wall-size enlargements of black and white Charles Peterson photographs of Dave Grohl, Krist

Novoselic, and Kurt Cobain – also known as Nirvana – framed by quotes from each of the band members and Peterson. Cobain’s photograph, taken at a show in 1990 at Seattle’s Motorsports Garage, captures him in mid-jump; Peterson’s accompanying quote says, “After his death, this photograph became metaphorical for Kurt floating heavenward.” (McMurray, 2011b) Along with the gigantic pictures are three objects: one of Grohl’s drum kits, walled off in the corner; an electric bass used by Novoselic toward the end of the band; and the Mosrite Gospel that Cobain is playing in the massive picture on the wall behind it. The two guitars in their vitrines stand vertically like monoliths in the center of the space.

Leaving the introductory scene, the visitor moves into a section entitled “Building the Infrastructure.” This small area – blocked from the remainder of the exhibit by large hangings with punk concert flyers printed on them – has a small lounge area where film of oral history interviews with various punk and Pacific Northwest underground music figures plays on a loop; an infographic postulates on what requirements might be for a “thriving local music scene” (McMurray, 2011b); Charles Peterson’s work is again blown up to mural size – here depicting kids dancing at a Replacements show. This area also contains the first of four “record walls”, displays of album covers presented with headphones and music players that allow visitors to hear selected tracks from each of the displayed albums. Here, the record wall has twenty-two records from underground and “indie” bands originating across the United States that range in time from The Germs in 1979 to Fugazi and Sonic Youth in 1988; per the wall text: “As the 1980s wore on, the underground scene grew, and gradually several bands, including R.E.M., the Replacements, Sonic Youth, Dinosaur Jr, the Pixies, and others, broadened their sound while maintaining their punk roots.” (McMurray, 2011b) A second interactive station – a touch-screen table that plays

and shows various media – allows the visitor to plumb some of the EMP collection relating to the bands and scenes discussed here. The only artifacts on display are a pair of drawings that Kurt made in high school (a punk “American Gothic” and a satirical sketch of Ronald Reagan) and two accompanying photographs of him from the time.

The third section of the exhibit – “The Northwest Underground” – endeavors to show “bands from the Pacific Northwest... generating buzz in underground circles” (McMurray, 2011b) as Nirvana formed and through the band’s early incarnations. The left wall is dominated by a map which locates various bands in different municipalities throughout Washington and Oregon, with narration on headphones available; another record wall provides access to the music of 28 bands recorded between 1987 and 1991 (the years between Kurt’s initial forays into music and the breaking of Nevermind), many of whom are listed on the map. A second interactive table provides access to more pieces of the collection and interviews. Here finally begins the cavalcade of objects related to Kurt and Nirvana, as the right wall gives way to a lengthy section of built-in cases that house a wide array of artifacts; small cases that contain 4”x6” snapshots, cassette tapes, papers that include hand-written lyrics and fan club form letters, and even fragments from smashed guitars are affixed to the railing that distances the visitor from the main cases. The primary wall cases hold the earliest of identifiable Nirvana relics – the tape recorder Kurt cut his first demos on, a suitcase used as a makeshift drum kit, Krist’s “Nazi Punks Fuck Off” shirt. As the cases curve to the right, more objects are added that depict their leaving Aberdeen, rising through the Seattle/Tacoma scene with former drummer Chad Channing, and finally signing to Sub Pop records and the recording of *Bleach* (“The sessions cost \$606.17 to record, which was paid for by Chad Channing’s friend Jason Everman, who would join Nirvana

as their second guitarist in February.” (McMurray, 2011b)). Factual blurbs float around objects that can be pinned to the times being described, often with photographs in the rail cases that show the band or friends with the objects and at the events discussed.

“Taking Punk to the Masses”, the titular fourth section of the exhibit, melds seamlessly with the prior section; the area is focused on the curved wall of objects from the period of Nirvana’s success. This begins with the recording and release of *Nevermind*, the associated tour, and goes forward through *In Utero*, *MTV Unplugged*, and the final demise of the band after Kurt’s suicide. All of this is done in the space of a single wall mural of another Peterson photograph – this time of Krist, Dave, and Kurt in 1993 – blown up to the same size as the previous ones. The cases of objects here are dense, not crowded, and tell their stories in as succinct a manner as possible (for example, the success of *Nevermind* is mostly shown through “Smells Like Teen Spirit”, with the guitar and sweater Kurt wore in the video and the MTV Video Music Award statue that it won; the end of the band is shown only by two instruments from the *MTV Unplugged* performance plus the set list and a ticket from their final show in Munich). Another record wall showcases bands that directly benefitted from Nirvana’s success and scene uplift – Soundgarden, Alice in Chains, Pearl Jam – as well as Nirvana’s own records; another monitor showing interview clips and an interactive kiosk sit in the corner area opposite the wall cases.

The final scene of *Taking Punk to the Masses* is a photograph by Alice Wheeler of a young fan in a t-shirt bearing Kurt’s face at the August, 1994 Lollapalooza festival that Nirvana was scheduled to headline; it hangs beside the final record wall, a batch of recordings that Krist

Novoselic selected as things that directly influenced Nirvana. There is little in the way of eulogy in the wall text, only broad gestures at legacy: “While Kurt Cobain’s suicide in April 1994 was essentially the death knell for grunge, the repercussions of Nirvana’s epic journey still resound.” (McMurray, 2011b)

A major section of *Taking Punk to the Masses* was removed subsequent to its opening in order to make space for an expanded Jimi Hendrix exhibit; it did not exist at the time I was able to view the exhibit. Jacob McMurray referenced this as the “Confessional” (McMurray, 2015), a space just outside the primary exhibit which was equipped with recording equipment so that visitors could add their own stories and anecdotes about Nirvana to a looping roll of segments that played on a monitor outside the “Confession booth”. This is how visitors were prompted to record themselves via signage inside and outside the booth:

[Outside of Confessional gallery sign]

Share Your Nirvana Story

A band is only as strong as their connection to the fans. How do you connect to Nirvana? Share your Nirvana story inside.

[Sign inside confessional gallery]

How do you connect to Nirvana? Share your Nirvana story inside this booth.

Share Your Nirvana Story questions

What is your favorite Nirvana song? **OR** Share your own Nirvana story.

What do you think is Nirvana’s legacy? **OR** Share your own Nirvana story.

Did you ever see Nirvana in concert? **OR** Share your own Nirvana story.

What is your favorite Nirvana record? **OR** Share your own Nirvana story.

Do you remember when you heard that Kurt Cobain died? **OR** Share your own Nirvana story.

What is your favorite Nirvana video? **OR** Share your own Nirvana story.

What style of music is Nirvana? Is it punk? Is it grunge? **OR** Share your own Nirvana story.

What other bands have been influenced by Nirvana? **OR** Share your own Nirvana story.

What do you like best about Nirvana? The songs? The sound? The lyrics? **OR** Share your own Nirvana story.

Do you remember when you first heard “Smells Like Teen Spirit”? **OR** Share your own Nirvana story. (McMurray, 2011b)

For those who are familiar with Cobain’s life and the story of Nirvana, there are things that might seem to be missing from the narrative of *Taking Punk to the Masses*. Courtney Love, Cobain’s widow and the mother of his daughter, is mentioned exactly twice – first in the fact that they got married, and again at the birth of Frances Bean – and both of those are in the same paragraph of text describing the events of 1992 (McMurray, 2011b). She appears in three small snapshots spread between two rail cases. Kurt’s depression and addiction to heroin are also almost unmentioned, and all but one of four references to his drug habit come in the paragraph that describes Nirvana’s final tour and Kurt’s suicide.

The first of those “omissions” – the lack of Courtney Love – can be explained, in one sense, fairly simplistically. One of the strongest backers of the exhibit from its conceptual stages was Krist Novoselic, and large quantities of the objects displayed originated with him or his ex-wife, Shelli Hyrkas. But despite approaches to Love through Nirvana’s management and Cobain’s estate for artifacts and input, McMurray says he “never heard a peep from her... until about three weeks before we [opened the exhibit]” (McMurray, 2015). It is difficult, if not potentially legally complicated, to address the history and lives of the living in a public format without their knowledge or consent; to “make sure that all these people who were part of this story feel like... it’s actually being told in a way that’s respectful and honest and to the truth.” (McMurray, 2015) Simple prudence in the face of Love’s lack of participation means that *Taking Punk to the Masses* should interface with her associations to Cobain as little as possible –

even if, as McMurray says, the singer's widow still has not seen the exhibit. Still, McMurray is "sure that if Courtney and Frances had been involved that would have changed things quite a bit." (McMurray, 2015) It should be noted as well that by choosing to be less involved in the exhibit the Cobain estate allowed *Taking Punk to the Masses* relative freedom from the kind of image control and commercialization that a more aggressive estate – such as EPE – might have imposed on the EMP.

Discussing the methodology behind electing not to discuss Cobain's private life and issues is more complex, as it involves both significant institutional thought and an evolution through the development of the exhibit as to how the specific themes of *Taking Punk to the Masses* would be presented. A nutshell version of that thought can be seen in a brief story that McMurray related to me:

"There was a time in the past when Courtney wanted to give us Kurt's ashes and have them on display and we talked about it, and we're just like it's just too weird. It's like that would be a huge attendance boost but it would also turn us and turn that into something very different than what we want to be...we don't want to be a shrine." (McMurray, 2015)

Immediately, that statement makes clear an institutional perspective that, at the very least, EMP is not interested in becoming a mausoleum or a pilgrimage site for the cult of a given pop-culture saint, even at the cost of projected numbers at the door. With a practice, then, that specifically discludes the literal cemetery interpretation of memorial, *Taking Punk to the Masses* must present the work and legacy of Cobain in a manner that specifically fails to anoint or canonize him in that fashion. The fundamental technique the exhibit uses is to focus a broader brush, to be mainly about the band and the scene and not specifically the man – "it is decidedly not a Kurt Cobain exhibit, even though Kurt Cobain will obviously be a major player in the

Nirvana exhibit; but you know it was really about Nirvana and not solely about Kurt.”(McMurray, 2015) In this way, as guided by the concept documents, *Taking Punk to the Masses* does not present a direct eulogy or tribute to the individual but rather carefully crafts the circumstances that led to the enduring fascination with the individual by laying out more than a decade of musicians leading up to *Nevermind*. Though clearly a comparison that is not remotely similar in social or historical importance, this technique is akin to presenting the accomplishments of MLK or Malcolm X as a history of the Civil Rights movement where the work of decades of predecessors shape the environment where those great personalities were able to sit at the apex of what they stood for; from that perspective, it is less important to present their endings than it is to present the continuums that shaped their lives and works. In this sense, *Taking Punk to the Masses* doesn't need to handle the myth of Kurt's death because it tells us how the myth became possible. That being said, as late as the December, 2009 concept document the “Legacy of Cobain” was stated as: “Kurt was the unwilling leader of a cultural movement, and his violent death by his own hand transformed him into a martyr for many at the time. This continues today.” (McMurray, 2009b) Even for the museum professional, canonization is a difficult human urge to suppress.

Another technique for preventing the direct lionizing of Cobain was a focused effort to present everyone involved as human, to show “the joys and challenges of being in a band on the journey from obscurity... as well as the excitement of being a devoted music fan.” (McMurray, 2009a) This is why there is an emphasis on the “kind of candid photographs” that were provided by Novoselic and Hyrkas; McMurray wanted to “emphasize that humanity and... dispel the mythology surrounding Kurt Cobain and the band and show these kids, basically, playing music and doing goofy things and the humor. You never hear the humor in the Nirvana story at all.”

(McMurray, 2015) *Taking Punk to the Masses* takes great pains to show Nirvana in that light; the vast majority of the pictures of the band on display are 4"x6" snapshots of them leaning on a van, at airports, in restaurants, at parties. The fact that the opening scene is one of huge, larger-than life blow-ups of Nirvana and Kurt as gods of rock juxtaposes well against the fragile intimacy of the rest of the exhibit's treatment of the band, presents "the dichotomy between rock star persona and the everyman." (McMurray, 2011a)

Perhaps, though, what the EMP did best with memorializing Cobain is no longer part of the exhibit: the Confessional. McMurray estimates that a third of the exhibit and its impact was eliminated by the removal of the oral history booth (McMurray, 2015); as seen with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the "collectors" of Elvis, the 9/11 Digital Archive, and a number of other memorials (Doss, 2010), one of the most potent tools of modern memorial is the participation of those outside the institution to be part of the memorial process (Haskins, 2007), and removing the Confessional eliminates that direct participation from the visitor. The recorded stories of the visitors – "Do you remember when you heard that Kurt Cobain had died?" – does the same thing that the roses and stuffed bears and letters do at The Wall: they permit the individual to bring their own specific remembrances into the greater public dialog and let the perspective of those who actually do the grieving to be presented. One of *Taking Punk to the Masses*' stated goals was to explore "the sometimes contentious relationship between "objective" musical history and the subjective fan experience." (McMurray, 2011a) This was done in part with the recorded oral history presentations of those people who were a part of the events around Nirvana, presenting their memories and recollections that inevitably contain a lot of emotions and perceptions that are not part of "factual" data. By allowing – encouraging – the visitor to add themselves into

that process lets them do the thing that Elvis Presley Enterprises does not do: permit the fan to own part of an institutional remembrance.

In summary, *Nirvana: Taking Punk to the Masses* creates a specific narrative thread that intentionally places Kurt Cobain, Krist Novoselic, and Dave Grohl into a framework that reduces their mythical statures to simply being three young men playing punk rock – talented, hard-working, and lucky young men – who happened to become the apex of a pyramid that had been being built for over a decade. This approach serves to contextualize Nirvana in a greater scope of musicians while also allowing the visitor to use their own memories to expand on what they might have meant on a public and personal level, and initially invited the visitor to add their personal remembrances to the record.

Conclusions

What does all of this mean? What are the lessons that should be carried forward from *Nirvana: Taking Punk to the Masses* for institutions and curators? Why is there a need to maintain care of presentation beyond the historian's pursuit of truth while exhibiting memorials to those remembered only for their parts in pop culture?

I will begin by answering the third question – why bother being careful about pop culture memorials – with an anecdote. On April 5th, 2015 – the twenty-first anniversary of Kurt Cobain's death and, coincidentally, my 41st birthday – I spent most of the morning and some of

the early afternoon in Viretta Park, a 1.8 acre postage stamp of greenery on Lake Washington Boulevard East in Seattle. It happens to directly abut the property where Kurt Cobain spent his last moments in a room above the garage; if you look through the trees carefully, you can see the roofline of that structure beside the main house. Viretta Park is the home of two benches, both of which are covered in graffiti – 99% of which has to do with Kurt, either celebrating him or telling him that he is missed. When I arrived that morning both benches were strewn with objects: notes, flowers, coins, cigarette lighters, guitar picks. As I waited and watched, people slowly drifted into the park in ones and twos to walk up to the first bench, look at it in silence, then take a picture and possibly leave an offering of their own. Then they would walk to the second bench, repeat the motions, and silently walk back to the sidewalk. This happened every ten or fifteen minutes the entire time I was there. As well a small handful of people settled in to talk to each other about Kurt, his life, his music, and how their lives and problems have echoes in Kurt's frailty and the music of Nirvana. Some of them appeared to be in their mid-twenties, and could not have been out of grade school when Kurt took his life. They were still talking hours later when I left.

How is that an answer? As long as there is a need in people to express their love to a dead musician that they never met, as long as they will come to the place of apotheosis and give up tokens of themselves to someone that moved them, as long as strangers are moved to open their hearts to each other for no reason other than they all felt something in the music they heard, then as professionals we need to make certain that the stories we tell about those heroes can withstand the subjective truth of the fans as well as the objective truth of the artifacts. It is their scorn – that of the believers – that can break an exhibit as soon as it opens. As Jacob McMurray said about planning *Taking Punk to the Masses* – “[I] felt this massive internal pressure, you

know, we have every reason to fuck this up. The community probably is already thinking that if the EMP is doing a Nirvana exhibit that it's bound to fail." (McMurray, 2015)

By all accounts, however, it seems that McMurray and the EMP did not drop the ball, as it were, with *Taking Punk to the Masses*. Seattle Rex – a website devoted to the cultural scene of Seattle – said, "You will never see a more complete, more intimate, more personal exhibit than this one." (Seattle Rex, 2011) Charles Cross' review in the Seattle Times attested to the exhibit's deep emotional impact." (Cross, 2011) Heather Kaplan at Consequence of Sound called it "one of the most efficient exhibits of its genre" and "a once in a lifetime exhibit that oozes with heart and passion." (Kaplan, 2011) Even with critical praise, the community reaction that McMurray was wary of can perhaps be summed best in an anecdote he told me: while taking a group of DJs from the influential Seattle radio station KEXP through the exhibit, one of the DJs who had been part of the original scene and was active in getting grunge onto the radio told him that "she came in expecting to hate it" but left "moved" and "totally digging it." (McMurray, 2015)

The potential failure that was feared for *Taking Punk to the Masses* could have been very real, and stems from the dichotomy of what has to be done with exhibits that memorialize the recently deceased – presenting a narrative that is both honest and reflective while maintaining respect for and cooperation from those who are still alive and part of that story. There is a lot to be learned from the approaches that EMP took regarding that dichotomy:

"I tried by and large to do things that were related to the band and their music and much less about any sort of personal stuff that was going on, and part of that too I think was [that] besides Kurt everybody else is alive. We have this luxury of being relatively anonymous and not having exhibits about the dumb shit we did in our twenties, and that's what this exhibit is, in a way... as the curator I have a responsibility to be respectful to

the content and to the people while still telling this truthful story. I think that it's a different approach than say somebody like [Cobain biographer] Charles Cross – who I think is a great guy and I really appreciate the work that he's done, but Charles takes this approach where Charles is about THE TRUTH and revealing all of the truth and some of that truth is really ugly, you know, and some of that truth if it was about me I would not want it seen... To me it felt very different than doing an exhibit about Hendrix or the Beatles or something that feels ancient, this feels pretty present and we're talking about people's lives, so I feel like there's a way that to do both. It's like in the end an exhibit is not a documentary, it's not a novel or a biography... we don't have the luxury of going into every nuance and every detail, [the] exhibit is this finely crafted lie that resembles the truth in one or two threads and so already you're compromising the truth.” (McMurray, 2015)

Ultimately, I believe that what McMurray is saying with these statements is that we, as curators, have the daunting task of navigating how to present as much of the “truth” as possible while making it so that those who were involved will still be as comfortable as possible with what our institutions present to the public. In short, curatorial responsibility flows in both directions – toward the audience and toward the subject; in the case of pop culture memorial, the subject will always be broader than one singular person, and the limitations of the exhibit format will always cause you to make choices that tilt a narrative in one direction or another. By consciously choosing to navigate away from personal matters like love and addiction, and by gathering as much personal anecdote as possible from both those who knew Cobain and his fans (the visitors), the EMP created a structure where specific objective truths are neither concealed nor accentuated and the experience can be filled with whatever the visitor desires to get from it.

The intentionality of the process behind *Taking Punk to the Masses* is what makes it succeed. Without thinking carefully on precisely which aspects of the Nirvana story to present it would have been easy for EMP to present “a story about Kurt and about drug addiction and high drama and depression and all these really kind of negative aspects” (McMurray, 2015) instead of producing an exhibit that is ultimately about connecting with music and the fond remembrance

of one of its most popular practitioners. The critical decision making process of the curator, the need and ability to grapple with major themes and issues while distilling them down to a handful of objects and a 12"x15" panel of wall text is what makes museum memorializations both very difficult and potentially very effective. By slicing the story of Kurt Cobain in the manner that it does, *Taking Punk to the Masses* uses the limitations of its form to tell a story that remains grounded and truthful while simultaneously allowing for the visitor to perceive and (formerly) present their own vision of the myth.

Appendix

LEVEL 2 EXPERIENCES

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REBEL, JEDI, PRINCESS, QUEEN: STAR WARS™ AND THE POWER OF COSTUME
Explore the creative process behind dressing an entire galaxy of Star Wars™ characters in this expansive behind-the-scenes exhibition.

NIRVANA: TAKING PUNK TO THE MASSES
The world's most extensive exhibition of memorabilia celebrating the music and history of Seattle grunge luminaries, Nirvana.

GUITAR GALLERY. THE QUEST FOR VOLUME
Experience the development of the guitar through the lives and accomplishments of the innovators and musicians who played them to fame.

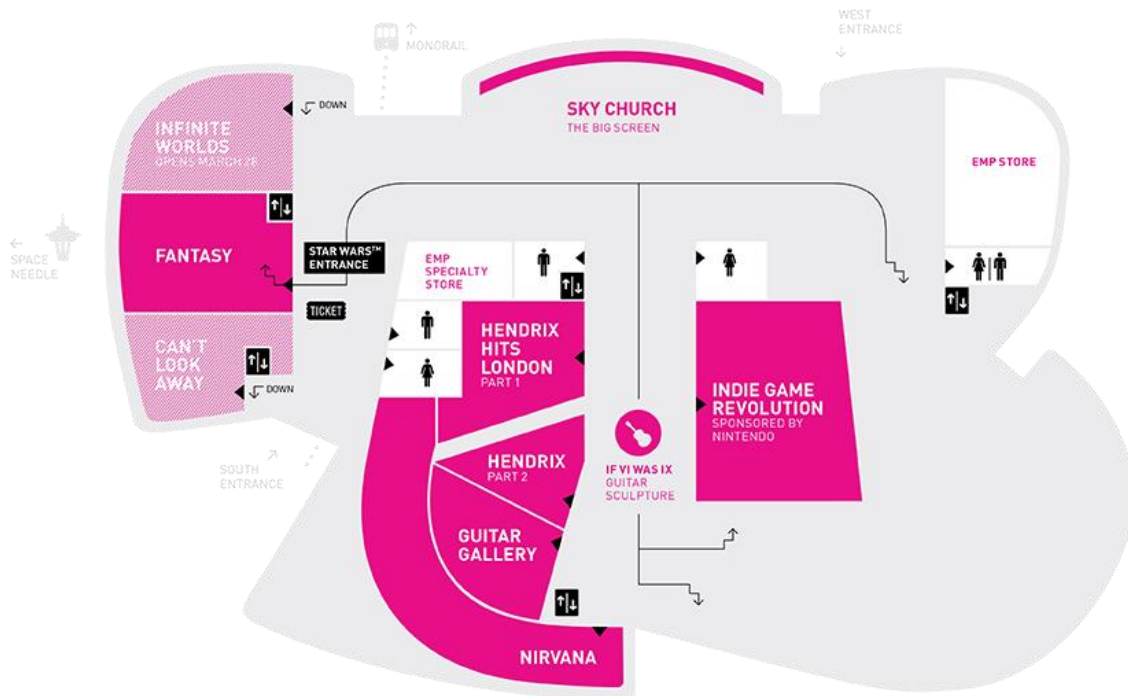
INDIE GAME REVOLUTION
Explore the most exciting and creative work contemporary video game culture has to offer through multimedia installations and 20 playable games.

HEAR MY TRAIN A COMIN': HENDRIX HITS LONDON
Lyrics, instruments, photographs, outrageous outfits, and rare concert footage show how Hendrix achieved prominence across the pond.

SKY CHURCH
The first of its kind, this centerpiece screen features curated content including musical performances, sci-fi film shorts, and audio-reactive visuals.

INFINITE WORLDS OF SCIENCE FICTION
Embark on an intergalactic adventure on board an alien spaceship which features more than 150 rare artifacts from sci-fi's most iconic films and television shows.

2 / TICKETING / INFO DESK
RETAIL STORES
GALLERIES
WEST ENTRANCE / EXIT
SOUTH ENTRANCE / EXIT



Map of the second level of the EMP Museum showing the location and relative size of *Nirvana: Taking Punk to the Masses* (from <http://www.empmuseum.org>)

Following photographs are by the author.



Introductory area of *Nirvana: Taking Punk to the Masses*.



Second area, mural and oral history presentation.



Second area showing interactive kiosk, record wall #1, and hanging dividers.



Wall cases and rail cases in area 3.



Rail case showing representational objects – snapshots and fan form letter.



Wall case containing *Nevermind* objects.



Final wall case displaying *Unplugged* objects.



Ending photograph and panel discussing Kurt & Nirvana's legacy.



View from end area of exhibit looking toward introductory area (exhibit curves to the left in this photo).

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