

Collaborative Creativity:  
Creating Participatory Experiences in Art Museums

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**Abstract**

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As contemporary culture becomes increasingly participatory, art museums are striving to find new ways of incorporating participatory experiences into their institutional practices. They are introducing exhibits, spaces and programs where a collaboration between museum staff and visitors produces new experiences and ideas. This paper presents four case studies from museums across the United States that have introduced collaborative experiences to their visitors and audience members. It explores the institutional messaging surrounding these participatory programs or exhibits and the ways that visitors actually engage with these experiences. This paper exposes a lack of clear institutional vocabulary that could be used to describe these projects in ways that could be clearly communicated across the field. In response, it proposes a framework that can be used to classify and discuss future participatory projects in art museums.

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*Thank you to my amazing parents.  
I could not have done this without you.*

## INTRODUCTION

While the population of practicing artists and the number of arts organizations in the United States have both increased drastically in the past 40 years, the public demand for the arts has not grown to match these increases (Zakaras and Lowell, 2008, 2). Instead, analysis of the National Endowment for the Arts' Survey of Public Participation in the Arts suggests that the audience for many of the arts is actually declining (DiMaggio and Mukhtar, 2004, 169). If this trend is to be halted or reversed, arts institutions must think creatively about ways that they can create more demand for arts experiences.

One way that art museums are responding to this declining audience is through the inclusion of participatory or collaborative experiences within the museum space. This trend reflects an overall cultural shift towards collaborative practices in the development and sharing of content. This paper presents four case studies from institutions across the United States that explore the broad range of ways that art museums are introducing the ideas of participation and collaboration to their programs and exhibitions. It will consider institutional motivations for introducing these experiences and how visitors engage with their art museum experience. One of the main difficulties with such a project is that each institution uses different vocabulary to discuss its projects, which can isolate these projects and prevent other institutions from learning about their successes or failures. Additionally, the words that art museums use to describe their projects often do not describe the visitor's experience of participatory exhibits or programs. By analyzing the words that are used to describe each case study, this paper works towards

developing a meaningful system of classification that can be utilized to describe participatory art experiences in a way that can be useful to future art museum practitioners. It also serves to expose the gulf that frequently can be found between the way an institution describes its programming and the reality that is experienced by the visitor.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This literature review will serve to situate this paper's research in the contemporary cultural climate. It will explore the ways in which media and cultural theory discuss and explain participation, past research into participation in the arts, and how museum theorists explore participation. This review will provide an overview of ways that people participate in culture and explore how museum practice reflects or can be adapted to include this participatory impulse.

## **COLLABORATIVE CULTURE**

In order to better understand why participatory practices are being incorporated into art museums around the country, it is first helpful to characterize the cultural climate that necessitates this incorporation. Media theorists have begun to identify a widespread trend toward participatory activities in many different sorts of media, facilitated by rapidly-evolving technology.

First it is productive to clarify what precisely constitutes "participatory culture." Jenkins, Puru-Shotma, Weigel, Clinton and Robison (2009) state that a participatory culture is one in which a certain set of conditions exist: a relatively low barrier to expression and engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, a belief that an individual's contributions to the culture are significant, and freedom to participate in a variety of ways according to an individual's skills and interests (xi-10). They suggest that this type of environment leads to widespread participation in the production and distribution of various forms of media and allows individuals to feel comfortable building on others' work. This

study states that participation is a feature of contemporary culture, and participation leads to the establishment of a “distributed knowledge system” (70) with many co-creators. Within this system participation is motivated by an individual’s desire to contribute, rather than an outcome that is planned and controlled by an omnipotent media producer. This widespread participatory impulse manifests in many different ways, including membership in shared-interest groups, collaboration on fan videos, remixes of songs, adding to Wikipedia entries in the user’s area of expertise, and activities like blogging or producing podcasts. All of these activities demonstrate an increased level of comfort with and confidence in the notion of participating in contemporary culture (9).

One of the most common terms that is used to describe this increased comfort level with participation and content production is “crowdsourcing,” a term coined by Howe in a 2006 article in *Wired* magazine (<http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.06/crowds.html>). He states that the rise of internet sites such as Wikipedia have taught consumers that they too can be content producers. As each user becomes a producer, they add their talents to an increasingly massive pool of collective knowledge, skills and content (including photography, internet coding, video footage and much more). An individual or a business who is looking for a particular sort of content can now draw on a large store of information with very little effort, pulling what is needed out of the crowd. This concept of crowdsourcing is a useful illustration of one type of participation that is facilitated and encouraged by contemporary cultural and technological

practices, but it is by no means the only way that participation has infiltrated individual and corporate cultural practice.

This participatory trend has in fact evolved past the creation of a collective knowledge system. After attending a conference on blogging in 2006, journalist Jay Rosen posted a highly opinionated manifesto entitled “The People Formerly Known as the Audience” ([http://archive.pressthink.org/2006/06/27/ppl\\_frmr.html](http://archive.pressthink.org/2006/06/27/ppl_frmr.html)). This blog entry defines the difference between traditional media production (exemplified by radio and television), which followed a one-direction route from a few producers to isolated individual consumers, and contemporary media production (including podcasting, inexpensive home videos and blogs), which allows individuals to produce and distribute their own content. He argues that this new horizontal flow of information from person to person is perhaps more significant to contemporary culture than the existing official media channels. The “do-it-yourself” attitude of individuals who are creating their own blogs, podcasts, videos and remixes surpasses Howe’s idea of crowdsourcing and promotes an empowered citizenship that is fully comfortable taking control of their cultural experiences.

While the previously cited authors focus primarily on the idea of cultural *production*, there are additional modes of participation that do not directly result in the creation of new information (Bruns, 2007). For example, if a customer rates a recently-purchased product on Amazon.com or a similar online purchasing site, their review will have an incremental effect on the overall quality of Amazon’s product ratings but no truly *new* cultural production (Bruns, 2007, 2). Bruns contends that participation is much more complicated than a simple broadcast of

content from producer to consumer. Instead, culture is now transmitted through a complex web of networked information generated by many individuals in many contexts. To describe this complex relationship between content, consumer and producer, Bruns introduces the term “produsage” (2007, 3). This term is used to describe situations where four conditions are present: content is created through a communal development process, individuals are allowed to move fluidly between roles according to their skills and interests, content is understood to be continually under development and is allowed to evolve and change, and contributors understand their contributions are available for community use and adaptation (Bruns, 2007, 3). This interpretation of participation removes the focus from the notion of a finished product and instead highlights the inclusive and fluid nature of a culture that encourages this kind of collaborative practice. No one individual only produces or only consumes culture – instead a group of people experience and create culture simultaneously.

Another essential component of contemporary culture is that it is actively distributed and transmitted through a network of involved users. Jenkins, Li, Krauskopf and Green (2009) introduce the widely-used concept of “viral” media and define it as media that spreads from one user to the next through a variety of means ranging from word-of-mouth transmission to video remixes posted to YouTube.com. However, they argue that the idea of viral distribution places too much emphasis on replication of one original idea and can ignore the ways that information and content get repurposed, altered and even transformed as they move from one user to the next (Jenkins, Li, Krauskopf and Green, 2009, 1). Instead, they propose that

contemporary culture and media should be understood as falling into one of two categories: “sticky” or “spreadable” (Jenkins, Li, Krauskopf and Green, 2009). “Sticky” media follows the traditional broadcast model of communication mentioned in Bruns (2007). It is carefully designed and released by an official content producer and is intended to retain its original content for a long period of time. “Spreadable” media is influenced by a variety of stakeholders and is transmitted to many consumers, who then feel free to adapt and even remake content to suit their needs or communities (Jenkins, Li, Krauskopf and Green, 2009, 2). This notion of spreadability implies a greater degree of agency on the part of the consumer and aligns the cultural content nicely with Bruns’ concept of produsage.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR DISCUSSING PARTICIPATION IN THE ARTS**

In order to relate this participatory trend to art museums, this section will focus on how participation is discussed in writing specifically about art. In 1968, Roland Barthes wrote that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author” (45). This essentially can be understood to mean that when a consumer begins to make meaning from their experience of a work, the author’s (or artist’s) control over the interpretation and transmission of that work is taken away. Barthes places the agency of cultural experience and understanding firmly on the shoulders of the user rather than the producer. This coordinates nicely with Bruns’ (2007) aforementioned theory of produsage, which also implies that cultural experience is found not in the initial production of an idea or artifact, but in subsequent interpretations and transformations.

In addition to considering an individual's experience with a work of art, there is a social or communal aspect that is implied with this networked interpretation of culture. Maroevic (1995) notes that the concept of culture began in a social environment, and any meaning that is derived from a cultural experience must therefore be understood as a product of a complex set of social understandings and learned values (24). An exhibition of objects and artworks derives its meaning from the infinite possible connections between those objects and the people who are viewing them. The visitors create a productive experience as they interpret objects according to their own interests, knowledge and even imagination, all of which are influenced by their relationships with each other and with the culture they inhabit (Maroevic, 1995, 36).

While Maroevic views cultural consumption as a networked social experience, Kaplan (1995) characterizes participation in the arts as a "public, secular ritual" that contribute to a "social representation of collective self" (37). She is careful to note that this representation of the collective is often only decipherable to those people who have the background knowledge or social status to understand what this art experience signifies. This implies a cultural encounter that is often mediated by these knowledgeable few (perhaps the highly educated curatorial staff or an equivalent party). Rather than the equalizing network of cultural communication envisioned by Jenkins et. al. (2009), Rosen (2006) and Bruns (2007), Kaplan's version of cultural experience more closely resembles the traditional producer-to-end-user chain of media consumption.

## **STUDYING PARTICIPATION IN THE ARTS**

This section will focus on the ways that recent researchers have studied arts participation. Some studies have focused on how institutions think about arts participation, while others have emphasized the audience's motivations and experiences in participatory settings. When these two perspectives are brought together, one may gain a more comprehensive sense of how arts participation is understood in contemporary research.

In 2001, the RAND corporation completed an extensive study of over 100 institutions nationwide that were seeking to increase their publics' involvement in the arts (McCarthy and Jinnett, 2001). This study had two purposes: first, to understand how individuals become involved in the arts, and second, to identify ways that arts institutions can more actively influence an individual's decision to participate (McCarthy and Jinnett, 2001, iii). McCarthy and Jinnett state that an institution might increase participation through a broadening of its audience base to include more people who are predisposed to participate in the arts, a deepening of its current audience's level of involvement, or by diversifying its audience to include individuals who typically would not consider participating in the arts (2001, 3). In order to achieve any of these impacts, an institution must identify the behavioral "levers" that are appropriate for influencing a particular type of participation, and then it must carefully match its own resources and resources available in the community that will appeal to these "levers" (McCarthy and Jinnett, 2001, 4). While this concept seems fairly simple, this analysis actually serves as a valuable reminder

that institutions must consider their motivations *and* their intended audience in order to increase participation.

In addition to considering the motivations behind participation in the arts, recent studies have also emphasized that there are many kinds of activities that can be categorized as “participation.” A 2004 study funded by the Wallace Foundation’s START program, which seeks to create standards and practices that enhance arts participation, brought 20 arts organizations together in an attempt to understand how their audiences view participation (Brown, 2004, 2). Through a series of in-depth interviews and focus groups, the study participants developed a set of five terms that could be used to describe different modes of arts participation. These terms are listed below, moving from most active (user-controlled) to most passive type of participation:

1. *Inventive* participation engages the mind, body and spirit in an act of a unique and new artistic creation, regardless of skill level.
2. *Interpretive* participation is a creative act that brings alive or adds value to an existing work of art, either individually or collaboratively.
3. *Curatorial* participation is the act of intentionally selecting, organizing and collecting art to satisfy an individual’s artistic sensibility.
4. *Observational* participation occurs when an individual selects or consents to an arts-based experience, usually motivated by some expectation of deriving value from the experience.

5. *Ambient* participation involves the experience of art, whether consciously or subconsciously, that was not purposefully selected by the individual who is experiencing it – the art “happens to” them.

(Brown, 2004, 12)

These terms are useful because they provide a clear way to categorize the various types of art experiences an individual might encounter. With a clarified understanding of these types, an institution is better situated to create the type of experience that suits its needs and the needs of its public.

While the population of practicing artists and the number of arts organizations have both increased drastically in the past 40 years (the U.S. Department of Labor found a 127% increase in professional artists since 1970, and the U.S. Department of Commerce reported a 9% increase each year in the number of arts organizations), the public demand for arts production has not grown to match these increases (Zakaras and Lowell, 2008, 2). Instead, analysis of the National Endowment for the Arts’ (NEA) Survey of Public Participation in the Arts from 1982 to 2002 suggests “ongoing attrition in the audience for many of the arts” (DiMaggio and Mukhtar, 2004, 169). If this trend is to be halted or reversed, Zakaras and Lowell contend that arts institutions and the state cultural sector must collaborate to create more demand for arts experiences (2008, 71). This analysis is significant primarily for its acknowledgement of the influence that state arts policy and grantmaking can have on an institution’s ability to create participatory experiences. When this study was published, only 6% of state arts agencies’ grants were awarded to projects specifically endeavoring to broaden or increase arts

participation (Zakaras and Lowell, 2008, 77). The vast majority (approximately 71%) of available funds were allotted to supporting existing programs or the exhibition and preservation of existing works of art (Zakaras and Lowell, 2008, 77). After examining this data, one can begin to understand why institutions might have a difficult time prioritizing participation – it is not understood or funded well by state agencies, so it is difficult to support and sustain.

One possible way to increase participation in the arts might be to focus on ways that technology can be used to remove barriers to participation. A 2008 NEA study reveals that 53% of all U.S. adults have participated in the arts through digital or electronic media (National Endowment for the Arts, 2008, 10). This kind of participation includes listening to radio or internet broadcasts about the arts, using the internet to view works of art online, and creating and posting original works of art online. While the majority of these types of practices could be characterized as primarily *observational* forms of participation (Brown, 2004, 12), the creation and posting of original works seems to be a more active or *inventive* sort of participation that is facilitated by easy access to technology and a supportive internet community. Additionally, the NEA found that the use of new media and cultural forms facilitated greater access to the arts in general for rural populations or individuals who identified as racial or ethnic minorities (National Endowment for the Arts, 2008, 12). This seems to indicate that alternative modes of participation (facilitated by technology or perhaps by other institutional programming) could increase the potential audience for an arts experience. This sort of data provides institutions

with convincing evidence of the power of non-traditional experiences to increase overall participation in the arts.

A 2011 study commissioned by the James Irvine Foundation moves beyond the basic statistics surrounding arts participation in an effort to understand the many different ways that contemporary culture is moving “from a ‘sit-back-and-be-told culture’ to a ‘making-and-doing culture’” (Brown, Novak-Leonard and Gilbride, 2011, 3). This study results in the development of an audience involvement spectrum (pictured below) that describes in detail the different ways that this participatory impulse manifests in the arts.

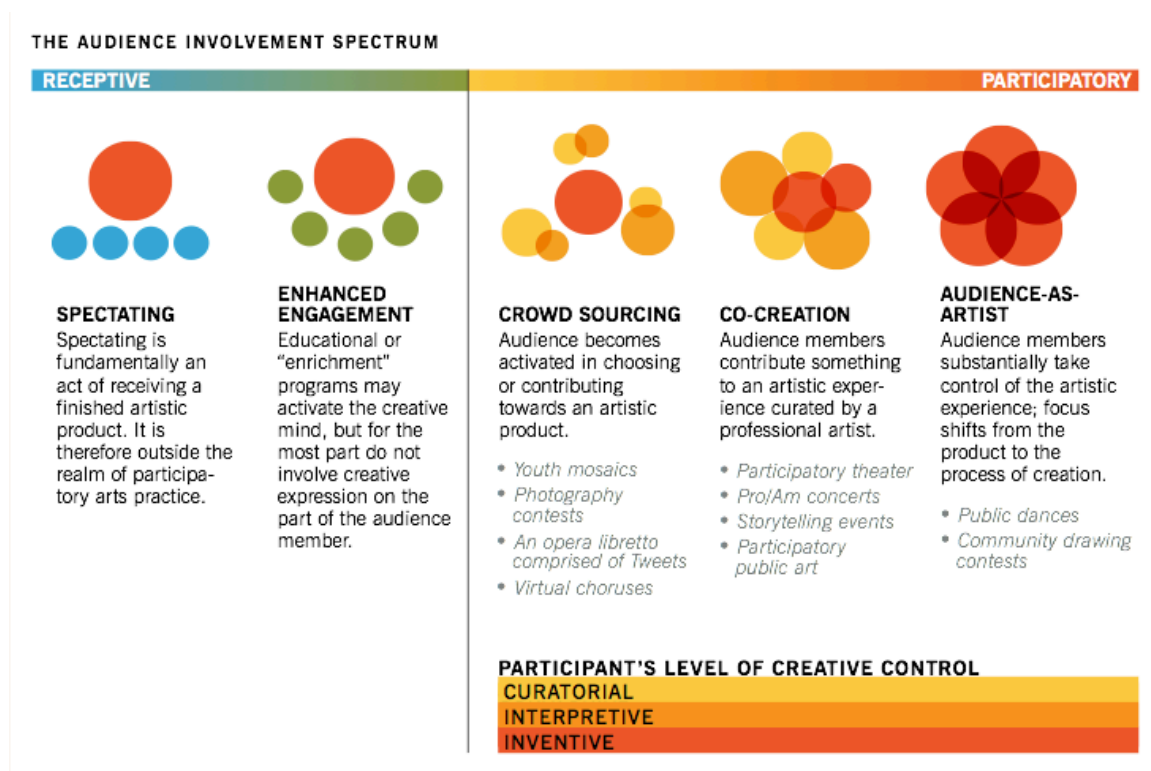


Figure 1: The Audience Involvement Spectrum (Brown, Novak-Leonard and Gilbride, 2011, 4)

This spectrum (which expands on Brown's previously-cited work in 2004) reflects an increasing interest in the level of control individuals or even communities have over their experience of the arts. For the purposes of this study an experience is "participatory" if it is expressive in any way, whether or not it results in the generation of new artistic content (Brown, Novak-Leonard and Gilbride, 2011, 5). This is significant because it relates directly to the notion of communally-assembled culture that is posited in Maroevic (1995), Bruns (2007), and Jenkins, Li, Krauskopf and Green (2009). This study is particularly interesting because it notes that there are several available outlets (particularly via the internet) that a user could choose to use to experience art and culture. People are no longer bound to visiting an institution to have these experiences, and they are therefore beginning to demand more control over what they see, hear, read and do when they choose to visit. Brown, Novak-Leonard and Gilbride suggest that institutions should consider how they would like to fit into the audience's "cultural ecology" in order to remain relevant and widely-used (2011, 8).

## **MUSEOLOGICAL WRITINGS ON PARTICIPATION**

Much of the writing regarding participation or audience engagement in the field of museology is focused on the potential educational benefit of this sort of museum experience. Hooper-Greenhill (1994) contends that there is a definite shift in the field from didactic, carefully controlled museum exhibitions to experiences created for an actively participating audience (67). She believes that in order for museums to successfully enter the modern era and engage with this active audience,

they must understand how constructivist learning theory will enable them to better serve their publics' educational needs (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994, 68). Education, when defined by constructivism, is understood to be the process of an individual coming to understand or know new information in an experience that is based in their social and cultural framework (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994, 68). If a museum is guided by this learning theory, Hooper-Greenhill contends that it will be able to establish communication with its individual visitors (1994, 70). This communication will be much more sophisticated and nuanced than a simple transmission of content from museum to visitor; rather, it will begin a negotiation between institution and audience wherein many potential meanings are accepted as valid.

Hein expands on this application of constructivism to the museum field, tying learning theory to the writings of John Dewey (1998, 2). He notes that constructivism's emphasis on experiential learning rather neatly pairs with Dewey's long-held belief that there is an inherently educative potential to any experience (Hein, 1998, 2). Hein believes that a focus on the museum visitor or user is the most logical and useful way to develop museum programs and exhibitions that maximize the "inherent potential of objects to contribute to human growth and learning" (1998, 13). In addition to being a strong advocate for the application of constructivism to museum programming, Hein also provides a useful framework to evaluate a museum's educational policy. He states that any museum that claims to educate its visitors should be able to clearly explain how a visitor's experience contributes to his or her education (Hein, 1998, 18). One can draw an interesting parallel between Hein's focus on visitor experience as the catalyst for learning and

Freire's belief that knowledge includes (or even necessitates) an actively participating learner (1973, 44). For both of these authors, and indeed for Dewey as well, knowledge is firmly based in the learner's circumstances and actions. These authors provide a useful lens through which to examine participation – if a museum claims that it educates through its programs and exhibitions, the theory of constructivism calls for the institution to include the visitor in the creation of meaning. Participatory or collaborative experiences seem to be a logical method of establishing this inclusive relationship between museum and audience.

Falk and Dierking provide a slightly more nuanced evaluation of how the visitor's previous experiences, cultural situation and several other factors affect the learning that occurs in a museum (2000). They base their work firmly in the previously-established notion that learning is constructed, rather than imposed by outside forces. However, where Hooper-Greenhill (1994) and Hein (1998) focus mainly on the visitor's overall experience and seem content to observe whether or not learning occurred at all, Falk and Dierking delve in to a deeper level to examine *how* and *why* learning does or does not occur. They state that there are several factors that influence how or if a visitor learns (Falk and Dierking, 2000, 140). These factors can be grouped into three categories: personal context, sociocultural context and physical context. Within the personal context, Falk and Dierking assert that an individual's expectations about the museum experience, any prior knowledge, interests or beliefs, and the ability to choose and control what they learn will determine whether or not learning occurs (2000, 141). These factors all closely align with and explain the constructivist theory discussed above. The sociocultural

context is defined by how individuals behave with others in the museum space. The authors state that most museum visitors go to museums as part of a social group, and members of these social groups use each other “as vehicles for deciphering information, for reinforcing shared beliefs, for making meaning” (Falk and Dierking, 2000, 141). This sociocultural mediation within a group creates opportunities for collaborative learning (Falk and Dierking, 2000, 141).

In addition to the potential for learning that lies in one’s membership in a social group, museums also offer a second way to learn by interacting with others: facilitation by strangers who are perceived to be knowledgeable (Falk and Dierking, 2000, 142). Interactions with docents, tour guides, gallery staff, and any other individual who possesses additional information about the museum’s content could be interpreted to be an example of this facilitated learning. This concept relates to the more traditional concept of transmitted culture (Kaplan, 1995), which Falk and Dierking acknowledge as a valid method of transferring information, although it is strongest when it is supported by the other, more individualized or collaborative contexts mentioned above. The learning that occurs in the museum space is most effective when it extends outwards into the life of the visitor – it requires “enabling contexts” in order to become complete (2000, 142). This neatly expands the reader’s conception of museum educational practices to connect to all aspects of any museum visitor’s life. In addition to meaning that is constructed within the museum, further meanings will be developed and adapted based on the visitor’s experiences and communications.

While these authors demonstrate the field of museology has clearly been considering the issue of audience engagement for quite some time, the majority of this consideration has been focused on the educational outcomes that are possible with this sort of practice. This focus neglects to allow for the consideration of the many other potential results of an engaging, participatory museum experience. Schultz (2011) writes that a collaborative creation of museum meanings holds great potential for engaging with marginalized community members and breaking down perceived barriers against participation in museum activities. She believes that a participatory environment allows the museum to develop relationships with community members and even to create future experiences that better suit their needs and desires (Schultz, 2011, 2). Simon, a prominent museum professional with a deep interest in participation, discusses the many ways that she has observed participation and collaboration in a museum setting (2010). She states that participation can lead to several possible outcomes, including self-expression, increased visitor comfort within the museum, and community support for future museum projects (Simon, 2010, 8-16). While these outcomes are harder to quantify or explain than the traditional educational goals, Simon argues that they are equally important for the creation of a robust and culturally relevant museum experience (2010). Finally, Soderqvist argues that a more engaging and responsive museum environment, filled with opportunities for visitors to collaborate in the creation of content, will lead to the creation of a “distributed curatorial expertise” that provides access to the most current thinking in any field (2011, 73). This thinking implies that the public has the potential to completely produce the content found within a

museum, rather than the more conventionally understood model of the public consuming content produced by the museum. Soderqvist ties this notion to the concept of “Web 2.0,” which he defines as a knowledge and information architecture that transforms passive users into active producers (2011, 73). In addition to coinciding nicely with the cultural theories that were previously discussed in this paper, Soderqvist’s perhaps somewhat-radical thinking demonstrates how much had yet to be discovered about the potential outcomes of participatory museum practice.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This research began with a thorough overview of available writing on the topic of participation. This review of the literature structured the research and informed the selection of appropriate case studies.

Four art museum case studies were selected after conducting a thorough search for the various types of participatory experiences that are available in art museums across the United States. These examples were selected based on their highly visible nature – they were all found during the course of an online search for participatory art museum experiences. After the selection of these case studies, the researcher conducted a thorough review of all available information about each museum’s project. This included gathering all text from the museum’s website and any press releases or newspaper articles mentioning the project, as well as conducting informal, unstructured telephone interviews with museum representatives when possible. These interviews focused on the institutional motivations and important concepts that were considered in the creation of the project in question. They also discussed any documentation of visitor responses to the project, as well as any community or institutional partnerships that contributed to the project’s development.

In order to relate these case studies to the most contemporary work in the study of participation, it was determined that the Audience Involvement Spectrum proposed by Brown, Novak-Leonard and Gilbride in their 2011 study of arts participation would provide a suitable framework for the analysis of each case (4). This spectrum moves from least participatory to most participatory, classifying

experiences as spectating, enhanced engagement, crowd sourcing, co-creation, or audience-as-artist (Brown, Novak-Leonard and Gilbride, 2011, 4).

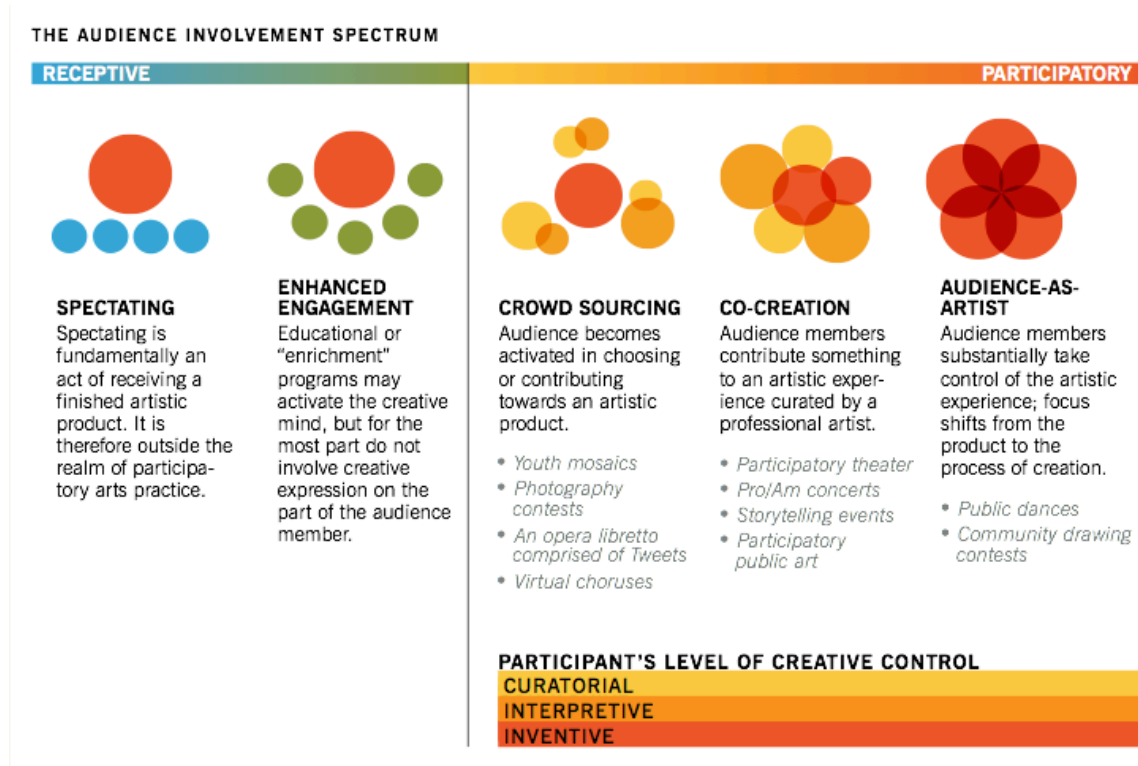


Figure 2: Audience Involvement Spectrum (Brown, Novak-Leonard and Gilbride, 2011, 4)

This model was also selected because it acknowledges the existence of many *types* of participation, in addition to discussing the *level* of a participant's involvement in the experience.

While the Audience Involvement Spectrum proved to be a suitable way to discuss the potential audience impacts of each example, it does not truly provide a way to examine the institution's interest in creating a participatory experience. In order to access this information, all of the available text (including website text, press releases, exhibit text) and transcriptions of any interviews were compiled into one document and processed through a word cloud generating application. This

technology examined the frequency of word usage and generated a visual representation of the most significant words in a text. Larger words in a word cloud meant that those terms had been used more often than the words that appeared smaller within the image. These images provided a valuable way to visualize the institutional messaging surrounding each case study, and allowed the researcher to determine which words were most important in the description of each experience. They also provided a clear point of comparison between case studies – once the word clouds were generated, they were examined for similarities and differences in order to determine whether or not there is a set of vocabulary words that institutions are using to describe this participatory or collaborative trend.

## RESULTS

### **Case Study 1: “Clark Remix, uCurate and uExplore,” The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute (The Clark), Williamstown, MA**

#### Summary of Case Study and Research Process

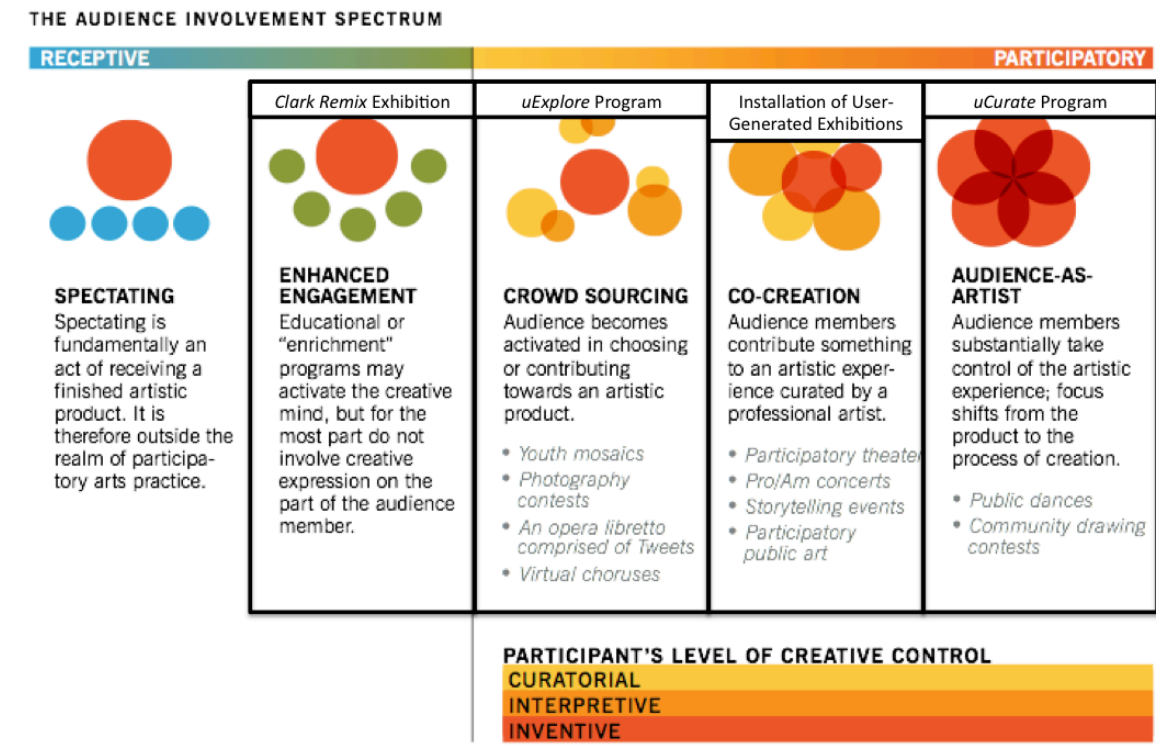
The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute (The Clark) is an art museum affiliated with Williams College in Williamstown, MA. It features works from a variety of time periods and regions, and it is dedicated to “advancing and extending the public understanding of art” (The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2012). *Clark Remix* is a new semi-permanent salon-style exhibition featuring paintings, sculptures and decorative objects from the Clark’s permanent collection. Rather than being shown with other objects from the same region or time period, these objects are hung or displayed close together with artifacts from many different cultures and eras, providing a new context for viewers to consider the artwork. Accompanying this sometimes-surprising exhibition are two new interactive programs: *uCurate* and *uExplore*. These programs were developed to allow visitors to learn more about the collection and the exhibition from computers at home or from tablets and kiosks located at the museum. *uExplore* provides detailed information about the 400 works on view in the *Clark Remix* exhibition, including audio and video components, and can be accessed in the museum galleries or via the museum’s website. *uCurate* invites users to select from the shown works to create their own virtual exhibition in a 3-dimensional representation of one of the

museum's galleries. The finished virtual exhibitions can be submitted to the Clark's website, where staff members will select several user-generated exhibitions to be actually installed in the museum's galleries. The user who submits the selected design will be brought in to act as a "guest curator" for the installation process (Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2012). This exhibit and its accompanying programs will be on view at the Clark for over a year.

Information about this program was gathered from a variety of sources. This example initially was discovered through a New York Times article about the innovative programming at the Clark (Loos, 2012). After examining the Clark's website and press releases, this experience was determined to be relevant to the interests of this research project and contact was made with the Curatorial Coordinator for the Clark. An unstructured telephone interview was conducted and transcribed by the interviewer on April 11, 2012. During this interview, the Coordinator repeatedly stated that this experience was an experiment and an opportunity for the Clark to provide more information about its objects in new and exciting ways. She noted that the Clark traditionally attracted an older audience so there was some fear that the technological component of this experience would prove alienating. However, she said that visitors of all ages have been observed in the galleries happily using the provided iPad tablets to experiment and provide fresh takes on the Clark's collections. While this experience is currently happening in the museum's space, the Clark's staff is still working out the specific details about how they will select their "guest curator" exhibitions. What is certain is that these exhibitions will change quickly in order to provide several opportunities to

experiment. She noted that it was refreshing to observe the curatorial staff relaxing and allowing new curatorial voices to enter the museum galleries. Overall, the Coordinator emphasized the experimental nature of this experience and the fact that its impacts were not yet known. Since this experience will be accessible for over a year, she noted that it would be possible to redesign elements as needed in order to reflect the users' needs and wishes.

### Audience Involvement Spectrum



**Figure 3: Clark Audience Involvement Spectrum**

It was somewhat difficult to place this experience on the Audience Involvement Spectrum because it is composed of three distinct parts: the *Clark Remix* exhibition, the *uExplore* program and the *uCurate* program. Because they

have varying levels of participation, each component will be evaluated separately. Because the visitors are not asked to actively contribute to the experience, the *Clark Remix* exhibition itself falls in the Receptive half of the spectrum. Content is being delivered to the audience from a knowledgeable authority. Because the salon-style hang does provide opportunity for the visitor to draw new conclusions about the connections between works of art, this exhibition might best be characterized as Enhanced Engagement. It is activating the viewer's creativity, but does not explicitly ask for any visible participation. The *uExplore* program appears to fall under the heading of Crowd Sourcing, where the audience is allowed to choose or contribute to their experience of an artistic product. The actual authority to create content still remains with the museum, but the visitor is able to investigate objects that interest him or her and in this way curate a more tailored and engaging exhibition experience. The *uCurate* program is the most participatory component of the Clark's art experience. The users that are creating their own virtual exhibitions are working within the Audience-as-Artist classification, shifting the focus of their experience from the finished exhibition to the process of individual creation. When the Clark selects a user-generated exhibition to install, this activity can best be classified as Co-Creation. The audience member has contributed significantly to an experience that is ultimately still created by a professional authority.



visitor experience in a meaningful way, it still is focused on the traditional curated display of artworks for the public.

However, the emphasis on new technologies (perhaps best demonstrated by the recurring “iPads” and “virtual”) demonstrates that the Clark is actively considering new ways to introduce its collections to the public. The size of the word “visitors” suggests a focus on the end-user of the exhibition and its accompanying programs, and “opportunity” carries an overtone of ambition or hope for innovation. While the Clark appears to be quite focused on traditional exhibition methods, its frequent use of words referencing change and the public seem to indicate that it is actively seeking to expand the ways in which visitors interact with its gallery spaces and art objects.

**Case Study 2: “Touch and the Enjoyment of Sculpture: Exploring the Appeal of Renaissance Statuettes,” The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore MD (January 21 – April 15, 2012)**

Summary of Case Study and Research Process

*Touch and the Enjoyment of Sculpture* was a temporary exhibition produced through a collaboration between the Johns Hopkins University Brain Science Institute and the Walters Art Museum. It explored the topic of touch from both a scientific and aesthetic perspective. Visitors were given some historical context about this trend towards tactilely pleasing sculpture in Renaissance Europe, and then were invited to handle replicas of small statuettes from the 1500s that were

originally designed to be “pleasurable to hold” (Walters Art Museum, 2012). They were then asked to consider which objects they found most enjoyable and to record their preferences and any other reactions they might have on iPad tablets in the museum’s galleries (Johns Hopkins University, 2012). This data would then be displayed in the galleries so that individuals could see how their responses related to those of other visitors. In addition to this technology providing a new way of responding to artworks, this method of data collection created a large pool of information that would then be used in further research conducted by both the Johns Hopkins neuroscience department and the Walters’ Renaissance and Baroque Art department.

Information about this exhibit was gathered from a wide variety of sources. An initial internet search for participatory museum experiences led to the discovery of the Walters’ website text about the exhibition. Contact was made with the Media Relations representative for the Walters. While she was unable to speak by telephone or to facilitate a conversation with another member of the Walters staff, she did provide copies of the press releases developed by both the Walters and Johns Hopkins, as well as a complete copy of the wall text used in the exhibition. Both press releases repeatedly state that the opportunity to touch the art (even in replica form) is the primary appeal of this exhibition. It should also be noted that this exhibition partnered with the Maryland State Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped to ensure that all text materials were available in Braille in the interests of providing access to the widest possible audience.

## Audience Involvement Spectrum

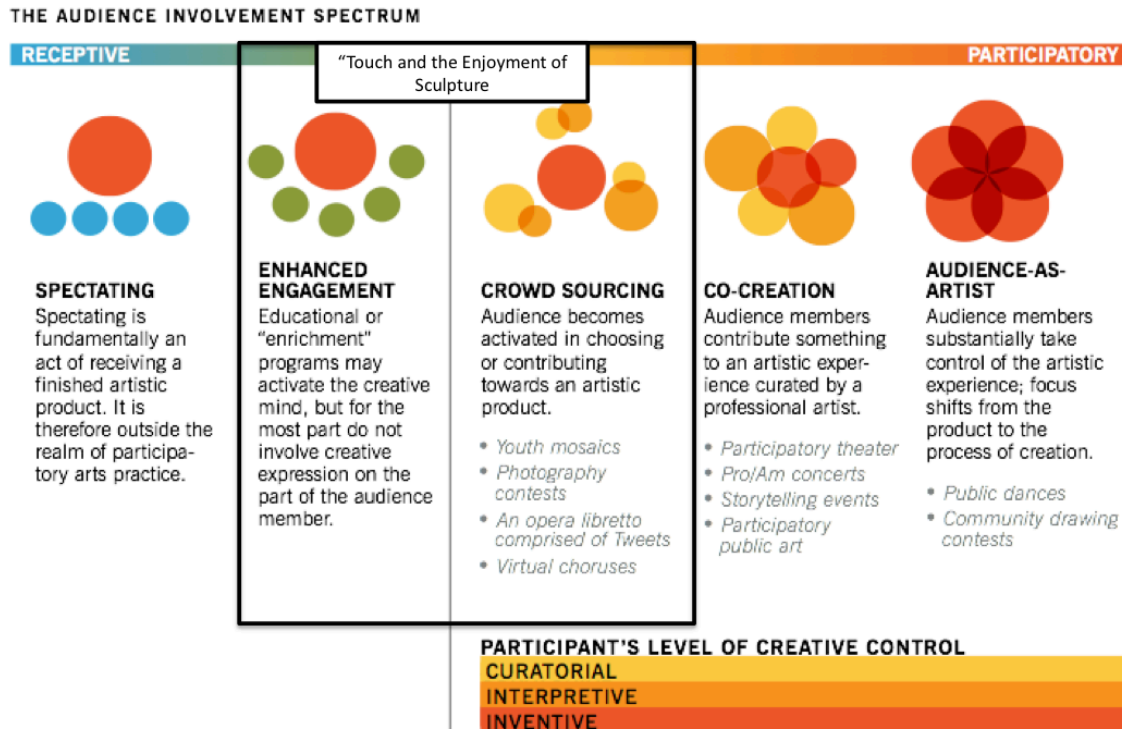


Figure 5: Walters Audience Involvement Spectrum

This art experience seems to fall between the Enhanced Engagement and Crowd Sourcing classifications on the Audience Involvement Spectrum. This is because the majority of the exhibit content is not directly influenced by visitor input. The curatorial staff at the Walters and the neuroscientists from Johns Hopkins collaborated to create an innovative exhibition, and then presented the finished product to the public. The argument for Enhanced Engagement can be made due to the fact that the incorporation of the sensation of touch provokes the visitor into considering artworks in a new way. It allows a closer, more personal connection with the work, but does not invite new creative expression. The Crowd Sourcing classification is also justifiable because of the collection of user-submitted data



Huffington Post. Words that feature prominently within this graphic include “touch,” “objects,” “perception,” “tactile,” “pleasantness” and “iPad.” The majority of these words relate directly to the interests of the researchers who generated this exhibit, focusing on the relationship between touch and aesthetics. “Objects,” “statuettes,” and “sculptures” all appear repeatedly, which could imply a focus on the artwork rather than the visitor experience. However, this graphic also highlights words like “perception,” “tactile,” “sensations,” and “pleasantness,” all of which are words that are defined by the people who experience them. While it is perhaps not overtly acknowledged, these words suggest that this exhibition would not function properly without the visitors who handled the objects and discovered the way that touch influenced their experience of them. The repeated use of “iPad” serves as a reminder that this was also a data-gathering exhibition, using contemporary technology to learn more about aesthetics through time.

### **Case Study 3: “Object Stories,” Portland Museum of Art, Portland, OR**

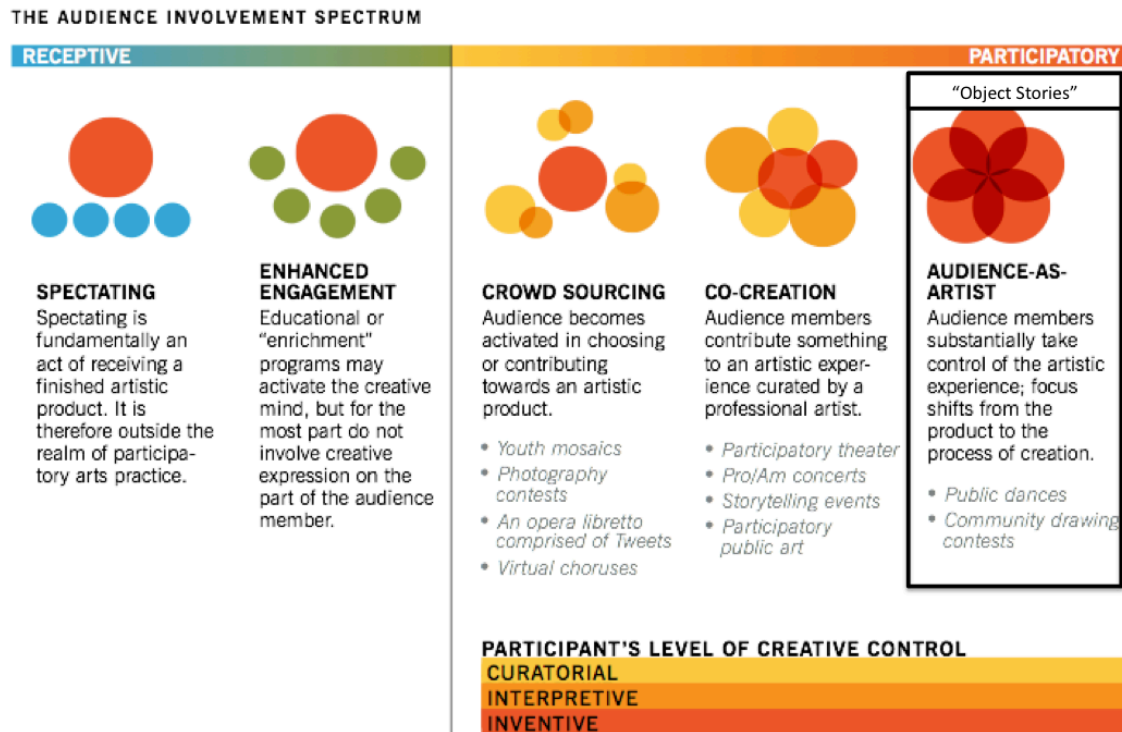
#### Summary of Case Study and Research Process

*Object Stories* is a project that invites members of the public to select an object that is meaningful to them, bring it to the Portland Art Museum, and share a story about it with museum visitors and the community. These stories are recorded in an on-site digital video recording booth and are published both to an online archive (<http://objectstories.org/stories/>) and to the *Object Stories* gallery area inside the museum. In addition to collecting video object histories from visitors,

*Object Stories* also featured an exhibition containing objects that were selected and explained by the public. This program is the first case study in this research project that has a concrete mission statement: to “actively engage the broad public and diversify museum audiences” (Portland Art Museum, 2011). This program began in 2009 and is still actively growing (as can be seen on its frequently-updated Facebook page).

This research draws from the text contained in various sections of the *Object Stories*' stand-alone website. This site features 5 sections: Home, Stories (the gallery of collected stories), Register, About, and How to Tell Your Story. Each section contains substantial text about the motivations for this project and the methods used to gather and display the visitors' stories. It also describes supplementary museum and community programming used to support the *Object Stories* experience, including storytelling workshops with Write Around Portland and videos created with Miracle Theater Group. These partnerships indicate a marked interest in integrating community groups into the museum's practice.

## Audience Involvement Spectrum



**Figure 7: Portland Art Museum Audience Involvement Spectrum**

This experience falls within the category of Audience-As-Artist on the Audience Involvement Spectrum. The Portland Art Museum provides the technical support and space for the audience to entirely create the content for this program. It is dependent on visitors' willingness to share information and control their own museum experience. It is also possible to partially classify this program under the Co-Creation category, as the final gallery and the supplementary exhibition are ultimately controlled and curated by museum officials. However, the emphasis on individual participation and the contribution of original content by the public suggests that the intention is truly that the audience should become the creator of this museum experience.



the success of the experience as a whole. “Objects” is obviously a prominently featured word, as the entire experience is dependent on visitors bringing their objects to the museum to be shared. By examining only the larger words in this graphic, it seems likely that an observer could glean the general purpose of the *Object Stories* program (a clarity that is somewhat lacking in the previously-discussed case studies).

#### **Case Study 4: “Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program (MAEP),” Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, MN**

##### Summary of Case Study and Research Process

The Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program is a curatorial department within the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (MIA). It began in 1975 as a way for regional artists to develop innovative exhibitions and relationships with the Minneapolis museum community. It features an elected board of Minnesota artists selected by their peers, who in turn choose other local artists to exhibit their works at the MIA. The MAEP serves to actively insert contemporary regional artists into a museum that displays works from all cultures and time periods. Since its inception the MAEP has successfully shown over 180 exhibitions of contemporary Minnesota artists, both in solo and group show contexts. It has also instituted the once-every-decade *Foot in the Door* exhibition, which invites any artist living in Minnesota to submit any work of art to be displayed at the MIA, provided it is no larger than one cubic foot (Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2010).

Information about this case study was gathered from the MIA's website content and also from an informal telephone interview with the Coordinator for the MAEP program. This conversation was conducted and transcribed on April 16, 2012. He discussed the increasingly successful *Foot in the Door* exhibitions, which have grown from approximately 700 submissions in the first show to over 5,000 in the most recent. He emphasized the MIA's deep interest in supporting local artists and enriching the arts community in Minnesota. He characterized the MAEP program as continually innovative and a true partnership between the museum and Minnesota artists. Additionally, the Coordinator noted that the quickly-changing nature of the MAEP gallery space allows for the representation of many viewpoints, the discussion of very current political or cultural topics, and the opportunity to experiment with new modes of artistic expression.

## Audience Involvement Spectrum

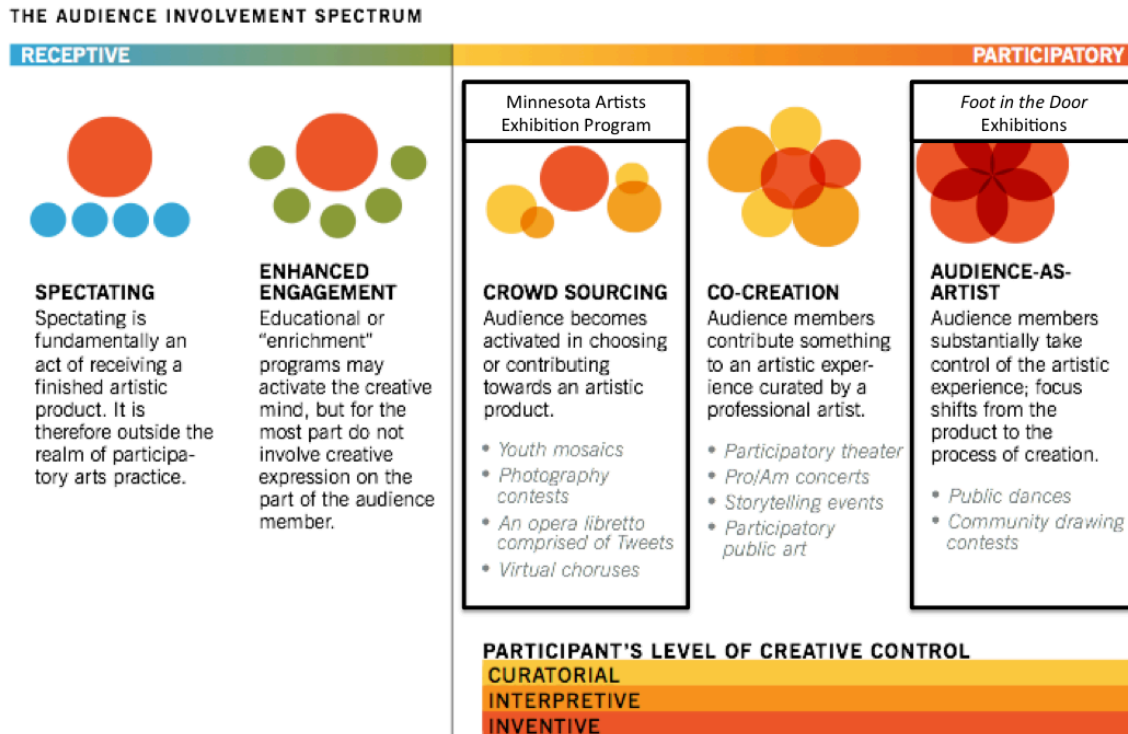


Figure 9: MAEP Audience Involvement Spectrum

The MAEP program overall is somewhat difficult to classify on the Audience Involvement spectrum. Because the MAEP board is elected from the artists' community at large, any individual could be elected provided they have support from their peers. This implies a high level of audience control over museum content (perhaps even Audience-as-Artist); however, the shows that are produced by the MAEP and MIA are facilitated and approved by the institution as a whole, which lessens the degree of public participation in the experience. It must also be noted that this program caters exclusively to the artists of Minnesota, and does not usually consider the wants or needs of the larger public who might not consider themselves to be artists. Bearing these facts in mind, the overall MAEP program is most likely



significant because of their emphasis on the community outside the walls of the museum. This program does not deal with a particular type of artwork or individual – it permits any sort of work as long as it is made by an artist in Minnesota. This programmatic approach to participation opens the MIA to the public and creates space where the institution and the community can interact in a new way. Again, words that describe or refer to people are emphasized here, perhaps indicating the institution or program’s interest in a space where the typical audience member (a Minnesota resident) can become a creator of content.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This project serves to illustrate the broad range of participatory experiences art museums are beginning to incorporate into their institutional practice. These case studies suggest that there is no one way that art museums are approaching this topic; instead, they are incorporating various types of participation into programs, exhibits or gallery spaces. The simple fact that each experience discussed above can be placed in a slightly different classification on the Audience Involvement Spectrum framework illustrates how nuanced this practice of participation in art museums is becoming.

In addition to simply demonstrating that there is are many types of participatory experiences available in art museums, these case studies also provide valuable information about the ways that these experiences are being discussed within these institutions. A word cloud was generated using all available text resources about all four of these examples of participatory arts experiences, and can be seen below.



contents and goals, neglecting to acknowledge their goals for the visitor's experience of these programs, exhibitions and spaces.

After examining these case studies, one must conclude that some sort of vocabulary to discuss these participatory experiences would greatly improve the information available about each case. When one considers the fairly dismal results of the NEA's Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (DiMaggio and Mukhtar, 2004), one cannot help but suspect that perhaps both institutions and the government agencies that measure arts involvement have not yet adapted their vocabularies to reflect this trend towards participation. To this end, it seems sensible to at this juncture recommend the widespread adoption of the Audience Involvement Spectrum (Brown, Novak-Leonard and Gilbride, 2011) as a more nuanced way to discuss the wide variety of types of arts participation available to the modern public. Adapting a set of terms with clear definitions would allow arts institutions to research previous projects that called for many types of participation and could allow government agencies to adapt their idea of participation to better reflect the current cultural climate.

This research, while limited in scope, demonstrates that participatory programming is being introduced into art museum spaces without being fully considered. It could greatly benefit these institutions to better understand the types of participation that their experiences provide for and the audiences that their programs are reaching or not reaching. This research could be expanded to a general survey of art museums in the United States, compiling more examples to better understand the words that are being used to describe the many different

sorts of participatory experiences available today. With a larger sample size, a database of “participation words” could be compiled and made available to arts institutions. This would further educate art museums about new ways to describe their non-traditional or participatory experiences more clearly and coherently.

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