

Executive Summary

“Inclusion: Investing in Our Communities”

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Trustee to Trustee: Workshops and Tools for Museum Governance

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“Reciprocity: Community in the 21st Century Museum”

Amalia Mesa-Bains spoke from the perspective of a clinical psychologist who has been a public school educator for over twenty year. A trustee of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, she used the term “we” to refer to trustees throughout her remarks. Greeting the group in Spanish, she immediately emphasized the importance of language and vocabulary. In recent years, we’ve used different terms, moved from “multicultural” to “diversity” to “inclusion.” Unfortunately, discussion has not always been accompanied by action, practice, or policy.

In considering language, Mesa-Bains throughout about what it means to be a trustee. “One in whom we place trust” is a very powerful role, particularly in a conflicted age when ethics is at stake in almost everything we do. As stewards, we are responsible not only for the collections, but for the environment. In some institutions that trust extends beyond objects to the legacy of nature and the world around us. With virtual reality descending upon us, our responsibility to our collections is called into question. With escalating demographic change, our ability to represent the audiences and memberships of our institutions must be considered.

Our responsibilities go well beyond art and artifacts because we belong to a world of transforming relationships. In this complex world, the relationship between museums and their communities is one of the most important aspects of reciprocity. As we consider changes in our institutions, we must realize that we are a transitional generation of leaders. We may be called upon to make decisions now that we will not see the results of within our lifetimes. We must have faith and a passion for what we do to operate without the benefit of a measure of success.

As a generation of transitional leaders, we must seriously examine our motives. Often they begin at a grassroots level with communities making demands and institutions struggling to respond. We cannot discuss inclusion without recognizing and addressing exclusion. We like to think of inclusion as something positive, but it puts us as a central in the power relationships because we are the ones who include, as opposed to being included. Realizing the tradition of patrimony in our institutions, we cannot assume that we are all working together toward a common goal. We must ask

- Common to whom?
- How do we define what is common in a pluralistic society?

Because the notion of inclusion suggests that we have the power to include others and define the conditions of the relationship, Mesa-Bains prefers to talk about “**reciprocity.**” Reciprocal relationships

with communities will require the museum to reorient itself so that it is not the central entity which includes others through the gate-keeping process, but part of a series of communities.

Many trustees tend to think of inclusion as a set of activities we can delegate by hiring someone or diversifying our board a bit. But inclusion requires our participation. Starting by questioning the very nature of our institutions, this can lead to profound change, which is always difficult. Asked if she thought inclusion is really threatening to institutions, Mesa-Bains said, "Yes, because it's about redistributing resources and sharing leadership.

This kind of change takes time, but we tend to want quick solutions. In trying to synthesize before the full flowering of process has occurred, we reach what Tomas Ybarro Frausto calls a "premature attempt at synthesis." Because we are uncomfortable not being able to control things, we try to find immediate solutions to the demand for inclusion, appointing task forces, setting goals, and moving along. It is hard to accept the notion that we may have to spend a number of years in a transitional period when new voices and new knowledge come into the institution and begin to change it.

Redressing history is crucial. We must change the way we view the past to make changes for the future. As much as we want to move forward with inclusive practices on our boards, staffs, and programs, we must also ask:

- What is in our collection?
- What are the objects that we've been stewarding?
- Who has contributed them?
- How have they been collected?
- Is there another way of looking at our collections?

As an example of redressing history, Mesa-Bains pointed to the CHARA (Chicano Art Resistance and Affirmation) exhibition, which began at the White Art Gallery at UCLA. This collaborative venture provided the opportunity for Chicanos to assemble an exhibit that reflected the social movements in their culture. While the curator of the White Museum had the final say, there was very broad-based participation in planning the exhibit. When it traveled to other locations, it was always assigned to the education department. Diversity was not dealt with at the level of senior curators or trustees.

Mesa-Bains chose the Teotihuacan exhibition as an effort towards inclusion that had both positive and negative impact. The exhibition raised questions about redressing history and about how the Bay Area community would relate to an exhibition of sacred objects from the year 250 A.D. The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco reached far into the community to assemble a large steering committee. In its early meetings, the group expressed concern about the spiritual practices related to the sacred objects, wanting to be sure that they were treated with respect in the museum.

Understanding the values of the communities we seek to serve is essential because reciprocity can only be built on mutual respect. Recognizing this, the museum decided to have a *limpia*, or ritual cleansing, of the objects when they arrived. Dancers came and everyone, including the director, participated in the *limpia*. That was an important gesture for a museum leader because his willingness to adapt to a practice that was not his own said to other people, This is not just about a steering committee and target audiences; this is about a respectful relationship.

Two areas of the Teotihuacan exhibition were problematic. The goal of attracting bilingual docents from the community did not fit well with docent policies. Institutional practices of when tours were offered and how much they cost ran counter to the economic, social, and cultural realities of the group the museum was trying to attract. The second challenging area was the opening itself. The museum wanted to attract a large audience of families and people of all ages and classes. But the dignitaries that came from Mexico were from a different social background and experience. The highest ranking ministers of cultural affairs, they expected a ceremony appropriate for such a sacred exhibition so when they entered a room with two thousand people swigging Margaritas and chomping on flaming shrimp they were shocked! In dealing with local communities and their international families, museums must look at the complexity of those relationships.

The Star Wars exhibition at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts illustrated that the influence of **mass media** and the draw of **popular culture** can be just as important as ethnicity in attracting new audiences. As the boundaries of communities change, this powerful phenomenon links all kinds of different communities together. Fiercely debated by the board, the exhibition raised questions about the whole notion of what is art, the distinction between high and low culture, the goals of the institution, and whether it is appropriate to cater to the mass market. When we're exploring reciprocal relationships, we can't settle for easy definitions of diversity. Popular culture, mass media, and youth culture are all part of the complex world in which we live.

Mesa-Bains reiterated the need to develop a language corresponding to changes in our population and our audiences. Shifting from a premise of lineage and patrimony, possession and privilege, to accessible interpretation we must develop a language about art and culture that people can exchange and enjoy as part of a social encounter. That requires a fundamental shift because many of the practices associated with museums are so contemplative that you can find more quiet in a museum gallery than you can in many churches. Museums are asking

- Are we part of the world of leisure, the world of entertainment?
- Can we create a learning space that has social dimension to it?

Serving new audiences requires an understanding of what Mesa-Bains referred to as "intimate behaviors."

- Who are your friends?
- Whose children have your children been raised with?
- Where do you shop?
- What informal networks do you belong to?

Those frames of reference steer the directions your institution can go. Intimate behaviors and institutional practices are very tightly linked. Unless you have a critical mass of people in your institution—on the board, on the staff, in the volunteer corps—who are familiar with the intimate worlds of diverse communities, it's difficult to build a reciprocal relationship.

Museums often appoint **honorary committees** and task forces for special exhibitions, but over the years, communities have begun to recognize a pattern. They realize that they are rarely represented on eth boards of institutions, but are sought out when an exhibition or event of a diverse nature needs to be promoted. Many task forces dissolve after helping to plan an event, leading the institution to say

“they weren’t very interested; we just don’t know what went wrong.” But, in fact, you didn’t get to know these people—you never went to their meetings, their institutions, or their organizations. Museums should think in terms of becoming part of a community, rather than drawing one out. In forging mutual relationships with new audiences, our efforts must not be sporadic and targeted, but continuous and cumulative. Then we won’t have to keep going back to square one each time. It makes more sense to get to know the community first and then develop programs than to plan programs and then try to find the community.

Inclusion requires deep **staff changes** that go beyond the level of education and community outreach departments or guard staff. Our institutions must invest in young, emerging, diverse leadership. Rather than saying, “We’ve looked, but we can’t find any of those trustees for our board or any of those curators for our staff,” we must help them, educate them, bring them along. Community knowledge comes in many forms; it is not simply academic. It may be narrative history, oral history, or the wisdom of elders. The Galleria de la Raza has launched a project called *Regeneracion* that provides art students in California with opportunities to produce exhibitions, catalogs, and brochures. Most importantly, it teaches them how to find funding and organize themselves. In only three years, this project will produce as many as twenty young Latinos who will end up in the field of arts and culture. Imagine the impact if larger-scale institutions would commit to developing emerging, young, diverse leadership!

Mesa-Bains concluded by showing slides of works of art created by artists from diverse cultures. Divided into two sections—“redressing history” and “an alternative chronicle”—these works reflect the deep experiences and meanings of communities we aim to attract and serve. In many ways, the images tell a greater story than audience polls and marketing strategies. They tell a story that is not known or spoken of within our museums; it is that conversation, those relationships, and that reciprocity that is at stake in making the museum a vital place that ignites action in this century.