



# HISTORICAL PRESENCE IN VISUAL CULTURE

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## Curator—Curatorial Studies Towards Co-creation and Multiple Agencies

Erin A. Peters

### Abstract

Erin A. Peters reflects on her objectives as a curator and educator, and the agency of museum visitors as co-creators.

### About the Author

**Erin Peters** is Joint Lecturer in Curatorial Studies at the University of Pittsburgh and Assistant Curator in Science and Research at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History. Peters holds a MA in Egyptology, a MA in Museum Professions, and a PhD in art history, for which her dissertation, "Egypt in Empire: Augustan Temple Art and Architecture at Karnak, Philae, Kalabsha, Dendur, and Alexandria," won the 2015 University of Iowa D. C. Priestestersbach Dissertation Prize in the Humanities and the Fine Arts. While completing dissertation research, Peters was a Metropolitan Museum of Art Chester Dale Fellow in the Department of Egyptian Art where she was the primary researcher for the Digital Department's MediaLab and Egyptian Art collaboration, "Color the Temple." The collaboration (re)colored the Augustan temple of Dendur using projection mapping technology to engage museum visitors by showing the temple in a way it had yet to be seen at the Met—in (virtual) color. The Met's project is an example of the kind of collaborative work that Peters hopes to build on in working towards a robust museum profession for the future.

# Curator—Curatorial Studies

## Towards Co-creation and Multiple Agencies

Erin A. Peters

When asked to contribute an essay about the agency of curatorial practice I thought the timing was ideal for a reflective exercise to inform my own practice and teaching. I recently completed the first academic year of my post as Joint Lecturer in Curatorial Studies in History of Art and Architecture's (HAA) Museum Studies program at the University of Pittsburgh and Assistant Curator in Science and Research at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History (CMNH). My position was created as part of a larger project to build a robust

collaboration between HAA and Pittsburgh's rich cultural institutions funded by an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant awarded to HAA. My charge within this larger project is to continue to develop my practice as a museum curator in the Carnegie Museums of Pittsburgh (CMP) so that I can be best prepared to teach museum studies students about curatorial practice and the museum field overall.<sup>1</sup> The particulars of my placement in CMP, my explorations of the current state of the museum field in preparation for teaching, the run of my spring 2016 course "Introduction to Museum Studies in the Carnegie Museums of Pittsburgh," and reading the transcript of the 2014 panel "Curatorial Practice as Production of Visual and Spatial Knowledge," published in *Contemporaneity* edition 4, put me at a perfect prospect to reflect and forecast hopes for my own curatorial practice and teaching curatorial studies.<sup>2</sup>

Beginning with the panel discussion will be a productive start to the exercise. The panel brought together curators of art, science, and digital data for a conversation about how curating creates visual and spatial knowledge in general and in specific disciplines.<sup>3</sup> The conversation showed general themes, in which curator of contemporary art Dan Byers and theorist of curatorial practice Terry Smith both emphasized the importance of exhibition making in curatorial practice.<sup>4</sup> Curator of the Hall of Botany, Cynthia Morton, described her role as a scientific researcher nominally separated from the exhibit process, instead making her information available in academic/scientific publications.<sup>5</sup> Thinking through the idea of "digital curation," Alison Langmead talked about how making digital data (images) available is "exhibiting" within a digital space.<sup>6</sup> I'll add my own perspective to the mix here. My academic training in Egyptology, art history, museum studies, and museum practice as a fellow in the Department of Egyptian Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art prepared me to be a curator of material culture from Egypt as a specialist in which exhibit-making is one part of the job, on equal footing with carrying out an active research agenda as a steward of

<sup>1</sup> The Carnegie Museums of Pittsburgh is comprised of four distinct museums: Carnegie Museum of Art, Carnegie Museum of Natural History, Carnegie Science Center, and The Andy Warhol Museum.

<sup>2</sup> Nicole Scalissi, et al., "Curatorial Practice as Production of Visual and Spatial Knowledge: Panel Discussion, October 4, 2014," *Contemporaneity: Historical Presence in Visual Culture* 4, no. 1 (2015): 144-163. The panel was part of *Debating Visual Knowledge*, a symposium organized by graduate students in Information Science and History of Art and Architecture departments at the University of Pittsburgh, October 3-5, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Scalissi et al., 144.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 145 and 147.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 149.

collections. In my experience, a curator of ancient art (or other historic art) is significantly different from a curator of contemporary art, and seems to blend practices of art and science curators. In looking for commonalities across curators of contemporary art, science, digital data, and ancient material culture from the information here, perhaps it can be said a curator generally uses research, knowledge, and opinion to select and collect, and combine elements (objects and ideas) into a different thing than the thing was alone before being collected and combined (in a museum collection, an exhibition, a research publication). In this vein, and in simpler terms, a curator selects a thing as important through research and expertise, cares for and preserves it, interprets it, and makes it available and viewable.

Two things immediately strike me as missing in such a curatorial practice: the agency of people (audiences) and of objects/things. If looking to reception theory, and agency of material culture, a more nuanced and holistic picture can come into view.<sup>7</sup> When looking for the agency of people in the 2014 panel publication, there were few positive allusions, and panelists were more generally disparaging towards audience participation. For instance, in his published reflection on the panel, Dan Byers commented that

The public remains the most vital voice within any museum, and differentiates it from the academy. Knowledge and experience is shared, and in the sharing, culture is made. But as the emphasis is placed on spectacle, and on audience 'development,' 'engagement,' and 'participation,' (all concepts which are very easily bastardized today towards lowest common denominator ends), art museums could benefit from curators who have also spent long years in conversation with artists and researching in private.<sup>8</sup>

But if we go beyond seeing audience participation in museums as solely something to seek, entice, and therefore control, and also take participation as a given through reception, more productive practices of curator-audience co-creation could be developed. In reception/viewer theory, meaning is made through individual reception and perception, as well as social interaction.<sup>9</sup> This meaning-making happens parallel to or apart from constructed meaning imposed through curatorial messages. If we were to appreciate audience self-made meaning as equally valuable as our specialist meaning, and to solicit it in

<sup>7</sup> For instance, Wolfgang Kemp adds to reception theories and describes the "beholder" with "preconditions" like specific gender, presence, and history, which intrinsically inform an experience with a work of art (which has its own set of preconditions). In Kemp's methodology of reception aesthetics, beholders actively converse/participate with a work of art (or an exhibition, etc.), and bring innate meaning that comes from the particularities of a beholder's and an artwork's contexts. Wolfgang Kemp, "The Work of Art and its Beholder: The Methodology of the Aesthetics of Reception," in *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Subjects in Contemporary Practice*, ed. M.A. Cheetham et. al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 180-96. Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) remains the primary source for the agency of material culture.

<sup>8</sup> Alison Langmead, Dan Byers, Cynthia Morton, "Curatorial Practice as Production of Visual and Spatial Knowledge: Panelists Respond," *Contemporaneity: Historical Presence in Visual Culture* 4, no. 1 (2015): 161.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Christian Heath and Dirk Vom Lehn, "Configuring Reception (Dis-) Regarding the 'Spectator' in Museums and Galleries," *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, no. 6 (2004): 43-65; Fred Myers, "Social Agency and the Cultural Value(s) of the Art Object," *Journal of Material Culture* 9, no. 2 (2004): 203-11; Rolf Steier, Palmyre Pierroux, and Ingeborg Kränge, "Embodied Interpretation: Gesture, Social Interaction, and Meaning Making in a National Art Museum," *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction* 7 (2015): 28-42.

an active process of co-creation, audience participation could be more nuanced than “spectacle.”<sup>10</sup>

I could not detect the agency of objects/things in the 2014 panel discussion, which is likely a reflection of the curatorial tendency to privilege the “original” context (or life) of an object or idea. Indeed, we generally go to great pains to “reenact” the context of the original moment of creation through research and interpretation; this is especially the case for myself and other curators of ancient material culture. This is true across different types of institutions, from anthropology, archaeology and natural history, to art museums. Even with different intentions of interpretation and display—i.e. between a didactic presentation that values knowledge and an aesthetic presentation that values the aura of an object—information about the original context (as we understand it) is usually conveyed through reconstruction, recreation, or label data. This kind of reenactment disregards an object’s presence and agency through time, and particularly its contemporary context as a museum object. Going forward, if we recognize our understanding of the original context of an object or idea as one story, and present an object as a museum object by using materiality as a museological theory, we can be transparent and egalitarian in our presentation of objects and ideas.<sup>11</sup> Through transparency and exposure of an object’s lives (a multiplicity of interpretations), we can participate in critical curating,<sup>12</sup> and also move beyond institutional critique to become a post-critical and reflexive museum profession by uniting theory and practice.<sup>13</sup>

In striving to unite theory and practice, and looking back at different understandings of curators and curatorial practice discussed here, I find it important to ask: what does this mean for me as a curator, and for the kind of curating I teach students so they can be best prepared for what curating will look like in the future? Towards this question, I will cast the net wider to think how curators function within their larger institutions, communities, and the larger museum field. For this task, museum studies—a fast developing field of study that looks at the whole of the museum profession, from daily tasks to the overarching theoretical principles of museum practice and operation in and relation to society—can be useful. Trends in museum studies can help neutralize and contextualize a curator’s practice to be holistic rather than isolationist. For instance, the trend towards the democratization of museum professions and tasks places curators as one force in a larger interconnected picture, in which exhibitions are one task. But does democratization mean doing away with specialty and rigor? I would say no; in my practice, rigorous scholarly training and practice is the core of what I can contribute. Indeed, I see specialist scholarship and research as necessary to the core of museum work so that we can be accountable for the information and experiences that we present. At the same time, I realize my perspective is only one in a web of interwoven and interdependent ones, which, in addition to a vast array of colleagues and publics, also involves objects’ and audiences’ agency.

<sup>10</sup> As in Janna Graham and Shadya Yasin, “Reframing Participation in the Museum: A Syncopated Discussion,” In *Museums After Modernism*, edited by G. Pollock and J. Zemans (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2008), 157-72; Catherine Evans, “The Impact of the Participatory, Visitor-Centered Model on Curatorial Practice,” *Journal of Museum Education* 39, no. 2 (2014): 152-61.

<sup>11</sup> Peter H. Welsh, “Re-Configuring Museums,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 20, no. 2 (2005): 116.

<sup>12</sup> Dorothee Richter and Rein Wolfs, “Institution as Medium: Curating as Institutional Critique?” *OnCurating* 8 (2011): 3.

<sup>13</sup> Victoria Walsh, “The Context and Practice of Post-Critical Museology,” in *From Museum Critique to Critical Museum*, ed. K. Murawska-Muthesius and P. Piortowski (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 195-214.

Through the process of reflection for this essay, I've identified a number of elements that I will strive to make a part of my own work as Assistant Curator and Lecturer of Curatorial Studies. I will base my practice in rigorous scholarly research with a research program in which I can participate actively in the fields relevant to ancient material culture in order to be a capable steward for the collections at the CMP. I will relate my research to the collections and also with the larger societal picture of our contemporary world, so that my work is in dialogue with a broad range of people and circumstances. I will be an advocate for the mission-driven model, while supporting missions to be nimble, in dialogue with the past, participating in the present, and with an eye to the future, in order to avoid the entrenched mantra: "we do things this way/don't do things that way." I will be transparent, and use difficult information and stories as productive points of dialogue, which may encourage us to take on blame and actively combat the colonial notion that we are here to make people better with art/knowledge by bringing them into contact with objects/ideas that we think are important. I will avoid educating people and interpreting objects, but instead acknowledge *and* encourage the agency of people and objects as part of curatorial work. Rather than seeing myself as a collector/caretaker for objects, space, and ideas, and then creating visual, sensory, scientific knowledge, I will aim to be a facilitator in complexity and practice curation that is ever evolving, seeks many stories, and appreciates a wide range of value systems and expertise. I hope to do this by combining my curator (specialist) authority with object and people/audience agency, both solicited and unsolicited; seeking out the least familiar and the "lowest common denominator" to shock my learned practice from comfortable process, which will ideally generate new methods of approach; and striving for true diversity that is beyond cultural, racial, or ethnic, forcing interaction with ideas I believe to be wrong in order to promote genuine freedom of thought. This kind of curatorial practice may help me prepare the next generation of curators and museum professionals for whatever the future may bring.

### **Erin Peters in Discussion with Annika Johnson, Co-Editor-in-Chief**

Erin Peters's vantage point at the intersection of multiple disciplines and institutions provides a unique opportunity to consider the ever-changing role of curator. When and how does curatorial agency come into play amidst the thicket of institutional visions, initiatives and everyday operations? How might curators soften disciplinary and institutional borders? Peters' personal mission statement that emerges centers on approach and action, and curatorial agency is here distributed among objects and their lives, and audience participants, who emerge as key co-creators in the mix. To follow up, I asked her a few questions about her experiences enacting this curatorial thinking (Annika Johnson).

**AJ:** How does the physical space of the museum factor in as an agent amidst (and literally housing) the tangle of viewer, curatorial, and object agencies? I'm curious specifically about your research on space in ancient Egypt and how this has influenced your thinking about museum space and audience agency.

**EP:** Excellent question—generally, I see the physical space (specifically the built environment) of the museum as part of object/thing agency, as it is in the realm of the physical/material. Just as objects housed within museums are actively charged with a myriad of stories, perspectives, and ways of communicating, so too is the space around them. Through this active agency, museum space controls and communicates. Your question about physical space makes me think about non-physical space and its agency. Of course there is virtual space, but also social space, mental space, ritual space, etc. I am interested in how

these spaces intersect with the physical space of the museum, and ways curatorial practice can engage with them.

**AJ:** You mention that we need to move beyond institutional critique, which struck me because self-reflexivity is now pretty standard within museum practice. Within the method of curatorial practice you envision, and in your experience working with ancient art, where is institutional critique productive and where does it fall short?


**EP:** You are right, institutional critique/self-reflexivity is a standard in much of today's museum work and curatorial practice. I see it as continually necessary because we are far from shedding our colonial 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century roots where museums and "art" are society conditioners, but we seem to be stuck in critique. I would say institutional critique falls short in the forever deconstructing of the museum/the market/the art world. I do think it is important to continue to expose the conditionality of art/knowledge in its economic, political, religious contexts and realities, but I don't see that critiquing the systems are enough to overcome ingrained structures or renew institutions. Rather, to move forward, we need to start constructing, which is where I see post-critical museum and curatorial practice as beneficial, as it calls for the development of metadisciplinary views and collaboration. The curatorial practice I hope for (and for our larger world-view) will continue to deconstruct, but also construct, ideally in some way not tied to our modern (Enlightenment) Western mindset.

**AJ:** After reading your *Innovation Studio* post "Students + Staff: Moving From Experiment to Practice," it seems that your students responded positively to the idea of a curator as *an* agent rather than *the* agent in interpreting objects.<sup>14</sup> As students of a totally digital generation, did this seem natural to them, or was there some resistance to this idea? What excited them most about the future of museums?

**EP:** Indeed, my students not only responded positively to the idea of a curator as *an* agent, it seemed completely familiar to them, and being *the* agent seemed foreign. As you note, it is likely that this comes much from their presence in a digital generation, which has democratized and pluralized access and authority through the internet. It seemed what excited them most about the future of museums is where museums can be active and positive participants in societies—as connectors of objects, people, time, and space. In many ways, my students struck me as leagues ahead in thinking about museum work and curatorial practice, and I'm excited to see them as not only future museum professionals, but integral in current and present museum work, by taking experience and moving to exploration, they can help us bring about necessary evolution.

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<sup>14</sup> Erin Peters, "Students + Staff: Moving from Experiment to Practice," *Innovation Studio* (blog), June 30, 2016, <http://studio.carnegiemuseums.org/students-staff-4/>.

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