

# ARTFORUM

Eric Crosby 'Present Tense: Eric Crosby on Art Museums and the Rhetoric of Relevance' May 2025



Above: View of the 58th Carnegie International, 2022-23, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. Mezzanine,

SITUATED THROUGHOUT Carnegie Museum of Art are survey kiosks intended to capture visitor feedback. We ask a standard set of questions to better understand demographics, staff effectiveness, the in-gallery experience, and so on. As the museum's director, I review the survey responses every quarter, and they tell a consistent story: Our visitors want to have fun, spend time with friends and family, learn about art, and experience something new. The last question—"Is there anything we could have done to improve your experience?" —is where I turn first. There I hope to find guidance on how we might make the museum—and by extension art—play a more essential role in public life. And yet, it would seem from the answers that if we turned up the heat, lowered the cost of parking, and smiled more often, everything would be OK.

But everything is not OK. Museums are imperiled by acute financial, social, and ideological challenges. The bitter culture wars of our day are making matters

even worse. Responding to the precariousness of our moment, museums have reified the problem with an unfortunate watchword: relevance. The term caught fire during the pandemic as the *raison d'être* of museum workers and their professional associations. Now codified by the press, relevance forms the basis of today's go-to crisis management discourse for cultural organizations seeking to prove their worth in a landscape of diminishing revenue and eroding trust.

Institutional rhetoric matters. The language we use on museum walls and websites and in visitor maps and annual reports has real-world effects. And increasingly, I feel our rhetoric fails to capture the complexity and consequence of our work, which at its best creates meaningful ways for humans to be in relation to art.

Relevance is a particularly sticky word, one that lacks nuance. It tells us what is supposed to matter, not what really does. As a binary, it homogenizes the concerns of disparate publics, not to mention the ways that such publics value museums

as resources for use. Relevance is as blunt an instrument as the equally sticky pre-pandemic catchphrase visitor engagement, and we would be wise to recognize that the two are close cousins if we want to escape our current bind.

Since the 2008 global economic downturn, our under-resourced museums, no longer buoyed by onetime blockbuster exhibitions, have come to rely more on revenue generated by repeat visitation. However, to “experience economy” consumers motivated by the next big attraction, permanent-collection displays and niche special exhibitions can be hard sells. So-called visitor engagement strategies offered museum professionals the promise of new ways to refresh their offerings and capture untapped revenue. Gallery response stations, hands-on activities, family-friendly wall labels, immersive digital experiences, and other branded novelties were thought to animate otherwise static presentations. If such strategies—accessories to the art itself—were to effectively increase visitors’ levels of engagement, surely they would return with their wallets. The problem with this principle was and continues to be that it presumes a museumgoing audience needs whatever the museum defines as “engagement” and that art itself is ill-equipped to provide it.

It is as if crossing the threshold of a museum and having one’s own experience—in one’s own body, on one’s own terms—somehow represents for the industry an insufficient level of interaction to sustain consumer loyalty.

Fast-forward to March 2020. The Covid-19 shutdown made in-person museum visits impossible. Earned revenue plummeted, and the promise of visitor engagement collapsed. The American museum was in crisis: Could institutions effectively engage an audience with a couple of Zoom programs a month and a steady feed of “social content”? The answer was an emphatic no, even though the many regional and national surveys conducted during the period showed that patrons appreciated the effort. The crisis of visitor engagement was further exacerbated by the rapid succession of institutional critiques posed by the Black Lives Matter movement, highly visible staff unionization efforts, social media takedowns of institutional virtue signaling, and organized efforts to decolonize cultural organizations. Assuming a trip to the museum was even possible given the disruption of the pandemic, what imaginable benefit could existing “visitor engagement” tactics have for members of the public demanding answers to questions about deep-seated histories of systemic racism, dispossession, and inequity?

The field’s assumptions about visitor engagement now underlie the crisis of relevance we find our museums in today. By and large, we have addressed such questions of relevance with politically safe museum content and symbolic reforms, just as we addressed allegedly disengaged visitors with meager in-gallery novelties.

It would seem to some that showing the work of Black artists could make a museum pertinent to the Black Lives Matter movement without necessitating an explicit expression of solidarity with that movement’s principles and demands. Could such exhibitions—and the carefully crafted social media messaging around them—make museums more relevant and hence financially sustainable? Judging by our actions over the past five years, museum leaders think the answer is yes, even if most also acknowledge that there is a long path ahead to redress the systemic issues at hand. Many of our museums have gestured toward operational reform through the creation of new diversity officer roles, the implementation of implicit bias training, the establishment of staff-led coalitions and employee resource groups, and other corporatized DEI strategies. However, our field’s crisis of relevance will not simply be ameliorated by exhibition content and occupational infrastructure, just as disengaged museumgoers will not be reformed through trite strategies of visitor engagement. What is missing in the conversation is a fundamental examination of the language we use to describe our work, how it shapes our value systems and professional practices, and how it keeps us attached to deeply entrenched assumptions about what museums think people need.

The programmatic infrastructure of most art museums today is an inheritance of “edtech”-centered Boomer workplace administration. It is a “needs assessment”

organizational model that derives from post-1960s performance improvement discourse, and it perpetuates a damaging, paternalistic logic: If we could just find out what our visitors truly need, then we could devise ever-improving ways to give it to them directly. But human needs—even basic ones across multitudes, communities, and individuals—are always changing. What’s more, rarely do adults want their needs met without opportunities to exercise their own capacity to claim agency, assert preference, and set conditions for participation. Given the sheer complexity of defining needs that are always changing and publics who want what they want on their own terms, it is no wonder that museums, when designing “needs assessment”-based programs with their limited financial resources for evaluation, end up spinning their wheels, their efforts yielding employee fatigue and low return on investment.

What if, instead of assessing the “needs” of others to serve them better, museums simply started taking stock of their resources at hand, describing them with transparency to relevant publics, and encouraging their constituents to use them as they see fit? Our needs-assessment model is an inherited narrative that stems from a scarcity mindset. It asks, How might we best use as few resources as possible to meet specific, predetermined outcomes? On the other hand, a practice of resource assessment and sharing, even when resources are scarce, would operate from an abundance mindset. It could ask, What horizons of possibility for current and future use might we draw from what is already at hand? As a museum director, I understand the impulse to zero in with laser focus on the scarce; after all, scarcity signals risk, and risk can threaten jobs. And yet, even as scarcity looms, we are surrounded by abundance of all kinds—vast collections of art and information, ample spaces for gathering, basic amenities for individuals and groups, kindness and goodwill, myriad knowledges and intelligences, individual politics and beliefs, boundless capacities for learning, new and existing relationships, curiosities and questions, and worlds of thinking, feeling, and being through art.

Against the fraught backdrop of our culture wars, which museum will fare better: the museum that embraces the potential unknowns of abundance or the one that retreats into the anxious familiarity of scarcity?

Engineered engagement and manufactured relevance—which are in many ways part of the same discourse—have become integral to today’s museum business model. But they don’t have to be. We don’t need to subordinate human agency to earned revenue: We can uplift both. Social litmus tests with symbolic content and interactive experiments in engagement psychology are not the solution. People are. What if we resist the watchwords of our day and ground our work in human flourishing? What if our daily admissions numbers stop representing business trends and start representing real people? What if the perspectives, languages, histories, emotions, and politics of our staff and visitors are not problems to be fixed but rather answers to our problems? What if everyone already has everything they need to experience and appreciate art? What if every respectful visit to a museum is worthy of respect? In short, what if we assume that those who visit museums are very much alive and present, standing in their own agency and intention?



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To open our perspective, we need to start acting less like local institutions with global aspirations and more like global institutions with local aspirations. We need to start thinking like neighborhood museums. This is true for the largest metropolitan museums among us, too. A neighborhood museum is an essential and generative art resource for overall well-being for both individuals and communities. It invites positive social functioning, fosters connections between creativity and life purpose, and lets the complexities of art unfold with affirmation and wonder. It doesn't belabor assessing the “needs” of others and inferring how best to serve; rather, it commits to sharing what's at hand with imagination and openness, and in doing so, it is sustained by exercising its capacity to support the many ways people choose art as integral to social life. A neighborhood museum is attuned to changes that are ambient and incremental, and it amplifies those changes that have the power to shift perceptions by rewriting museum-speak. There is no user manual to make a neighborhood museum; there are no best practices, only situational possibilities.

What if a museum's curators upended the chronological nature of their permanent collection display and changed the name of its first gallery from “European and American Art, 1600-1850” to “What Brings Us Here?” Might the conversation between institution and its audience shift from the what, where, and when of collection objects to the who, how, and why of the museum itself? What if a museum committed to a programmatic high point every four years, inviting international artists and curators into its historic spaces to explore ever-changing ways of being in practice with art and each other? Might the museum seize the opportunity to reinvent itself each time, reimagine its role in the world, and create lasting relationships that give form to contemporary art history? What if programming staff began to turn their work inside out, transforming underused grounds into multi-form outdoor spaces for performance by the region's artists? What if that museum redirected its financial resources and marketing capacities to those artists and their publics directly? Might such a stage become a vital, lasting part of the city's performing arts landscape? What if educators initiated partnerships with local refugee resettlement agencies to make their museum available as a resource for art and artmaking to new residents? What if they started providing orientation information about the museum and its offerings in Arabic, Dari, Haitian Creole, Nepali, Pashto, Swahili, Ukrainian, and Uzbek? Might the museum's new neighbors choose it as a place to learn about their new city and share where they have come from? What if a museum stopped assuming its older patrons cared only about benches in galleries and art history lectures? What if it started responding to our society's alarming statistics about depression and loneliness among the elderly with a weekly array of drop-in activities that leverage the museum's abundant capacity to foster human connection through art? Might friendships be forged, lovers meet, minds expand, and bodies be refreshed?

Relevance and engagement are the default low bars of a satisfying life in relation to art. In museum practice, they are top-down technocratic concepts that foreclose on opportunities for our best work. And such opportunities are abundant even when resources are scarce. Shouldn't we aspire to more than hovering somewhere above irrelevance and disengagement? For that we would need entirely new watch-words. I propose imagination and possibility, aspiration and abundance. These can be the lodestars for our new, more emotionally available museum—a museum that allows people to be. Call a staff meeting, write these words on a whiteboard, sit in the discomfort of momentary silence, then just listen, and see what flourishes.

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