

The fashion in museums to move from the ***particularity of objects*** as the primary way of conveying knowledge, towards a more
experience orientated
approach has been well documented. The contemporary museum loudly proclaims its role as a 'site for social, community and individual transformation'. Speaking at the
Museums Association 2013 conference
, Carol Rodgers, executive director of education, communities and visitors at the National Museums, Liverpool, spelt out the therapeutic role of museums, including the need to build *'sustained relationships with the health and social care sector'*
. Meanwhile, introducing a discussion on 'the emotional museum', National Museums, Liverpool director, David Fleming noted approvingly that museums were finally waking up to the fact *'that academic, sterile and dispassionate approaches to display are no longer acceptable to the public or funders'*
.

While many criticize the new museum's assimilation of quasi commercial, marketing, tourism and branding strategies, often in competition with rival tourist entertainments, only a brave few defend the museum's role as custodian of centuries of human culture, and the ***role and responsibility of curators***
for sharing their knowledge with the wider community. Besides some lingering nostalgia for the patrician style of 'retro' art historians like Kenneth Clarke, faith in people's desire for knowledge, understanding and enlightenment through art has become literally '
so last century
'. When a major, much loved art institution like Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum subjects its public to the 'therapeutic interventions' of de Botton and Armstrong, shouldn't we be campaigning for the belief in the transcendent quality of art rather than this ubiquitous banality of relevance?

In the face of a ***relentless and instrumentalist culture*** of accountability, employability, social impact and relevance, the role of the curator as a public intellectual engaging audiences with artists continues to be diminished. This retreat of the curator throws
questions of judgment
onto visitors who often feel unequipped for the task. Denied access to the curator's knowledge which could deepen our understanding and enjoyment of the art on show, are our experiences as visitors being diminished? Most of us respect, appreciate and want to share in the curators' authoritative knowledge which is no more elitist than being an authority on engineering or medicine, so why have so many museums and galleries – with some honorable exceptions - become so defensive about their role? How can we reconnect and rebuild trust between curators and audiences?

Some background readings and viewings

The Art of With , by Charles Leadbeater, Cornerhouse March 2009

If the Museum is the Gateway, who is the Gatekeeper? by Bernadette Lynch, extract from Inclusion under Pressure, Winter 2011

A perverted view of art , Tiffany Jenkins, spiked 10 April 2013

Let's stop being defensive about the value of arts degrees , by Wendy Earle, The Guardian 29 May 2014

David on whether London is overrated as a place for artists , by Dave Bowden, IdeasTap 2

April 2014

Art Is Therapy review – de Botton as doorstepping self-help evangelist , by Adrian Searle, The Guardian 25 April 2014

Audience ejects crowd-surfer from classical concert , by Miranda Prynne, The Telegraph 20 June 2014

Pubic hair – now officially offensive , Ivor Jones, spiked 15 July 2014

Exhibit B: a guilty pleasure , by Tiffany Jenkins, spiked 2 September 2014

Watch video of the speaker and audience comments below. Thanks to Dan Clayton the documentary filmmaker from Leeds for this.

Discussion Partners



The New Mills Festival is a 2-week annual celebration of community and cultural spirit through a diverse range of activities from talks and walks to concerts, gigs, exhibitions and an impressive lantern procession. The overall aim is to enrich the community's experience of and participation in different creative activities.