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Isn’t It Time for Art History to Go Public?

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Public engagement is on a lot of people’s minds these days—in museums, universities, and professional practice conversations among art historians. Museums are reconsidering what it means to truly serve their audiences. Universities are embracing service learning pedagogies and community partnerships. Recent sessions at national and regional conferences, including at the College Art Association (CAA) (2014, 2015, 2017, 2019), SECAC (formerly Southeastern College Art Conference) (2015, 2019), and the Midwest Art History Society (2018), have directly examined how art historians connect their research, teaching, and other activities with people and interests beyond the scope of typical professional practice.¹ It feels like a groundswell. And yet, looking broadly at our discipline, public scholarship remains marginalized—an exception, rather than an expectation. It is time for that to change.



Fig. 1. Public program in conjunction with *We’re Open, Come In: The House Life Project*, Richard E. Peeler Art Center at DePauw University, March 18, 2019. Exhibition curated by Laura Holzman in collaboration with community members from the House Life Project and IUPUI Museum Studies students. Image courtesy of Richard E. Peeler Art Center, DePauw University

Public-oriented practice in art history is not new. There is a well-established tradition of curators developing projects that are rooted in scholarship and presented to an audience that includes far more than other art historians. Similarly, art critics write for audiences with varied types of expertise. But we need to be more consistently explicit about the value and role of public scholarship within our discipline. We must recognize the many forms that public scholarship can take. We must connect public engagement in art history with related practices in other fields and the large, interdisciplinary body of scholarship that surrounds them. We must strengthen the growing network of publicly engaged art historians who can share strategies for success, contribute to evaluating each other’s work, and advocate for the value and rigor of what we do.

Public scholarship is a way to counter challenges to the relevance of art history.² It is a way to connect academic knowledge and community knowledge. It is a way to honor social knowledge.³ It is a way to share expertise, so that more people have access to reliable information. It is a way to support the democratic potential of museums and higher education, not only by expanding who can use scholarly tools and findings but also by leveraging those findings in ways that help informed community members advocate for the issues they care about.

Public scholarship in art history manifests in many forms, and practitioners build their work on a variety of foundations. In the absence of a discipline-wide consensus around what to call these activities, I like to describe them as “engaged art history,” an inclusive term that accounts for the numerous ways in which art historians who pursue public scholarship connect with a range of audiences, partners, social issues, ethical priorities, institutions, and more. The term also builds on the handy hashtag, #ArtHistoryEngaged, that Jennifer Borland, Amy Hamlin, Karen Leader, and Louise Siddons launched in 2015 to recognize public engagement in our discipline. Often, engaged art historians select topics of study that pertain to matters of overt public interest. Engagement may also emerge from a scholar’s research methods and publication outlets. Many follow the model of the public intellectual who shares knowledge outside of academia by writing op-eds or lecturing to community groups. Some draw from feminist art history, where there is a legacy of integrating scholarship and activism. Some have turned to socially engaged art, a participatory practice in which artists address social issues by collaborating with people who do not identify as artists, as a template for how art historians might apply their professional skills. To a lesser extent, some engaged art historians are deliberately building on models of public scholarship that have been developed in other fields such as public history, applied anthropology, and digital humanities.⁴

At the same time, other scholars have left art history or its related institutions in pursuit of more satisfying paths to engagement. Leaving academia or the museum world for other professional contexts can be a marker of success, particularly when training in art history develops skills and knowledge that are beneficial in other settings. But when scholars committed to engagement leave because they are unsupported by their discipline or their institution, those of us who remain must reckon with how we are failing those colleagues and the communities with which they work. Regardless of whether we practice public scholarship, we have a responsibility to educate ourselves about this mode of art history and support those who pursue it.

For me, a professor committed to engaged art history, public scholarship is about building a rigorous and integrative practice where research informs teaching, where teaching supports

research, where we learn from the knowledge held in various communities, and where we contribute to those communities with the work that we do. I find that the definition of public scholarship proposed by Scott Peters, a leader in the field, resonates strongly with my approach. For him, public scholarship is “creative intellectual work that is conducted in public, with and for particular groups of citizens. Its results are communicated to, and validated by, peers, including but not limited to peers in scholars’ academic fields. Scholars who practice public scholarship seek to advance the academy’s teaching and research missions in ways that hold both academic and public value.”⁵

With this in mind, as other scholars of civic engagement have argued, it is constructive to think of scholarship as a spectrum, where the practices and products range from “traditional” to “democratically engaged.”⁶ Traditional scholarship includes the research methods and modes of dissemination that are already common in our discipline: conducting research independently or in collaboration with other scholars and presenting that work in academic books and journal articles. Democratically engaged scholarship is purpose-driven work that results in community change.⁷ It is highly collaborative: academic and community partners share authority to define project goals, create new knowledge together, and build a more participatory democracy. The products of that work can vary depending on the nature and needs of each project. They can take the form of academic publications or they can look very different. My democratically engaged scholarship has produced public programs at a local museum, exhibitions curated in collaboration with community partners, transformative relationships, and a renewed sense of agency and visibility for my partners. Other democratically engaged scholarship might yield reports, policy changes, or new alliances among stakeholders. Traditional and engaged scholarship are not discrete activities; instead, they are different inflections of the vital process of methodically generating, sharing, and applying knowledge.

When public scholarship looks different from traditional scholarship, traditional research design and assessment tools may fall short. There are frameworks for developing and evaluating public scholarship, although we may have to look to other fields to find them. For example, Imagining America, the consortium that supports “artists and scholars in public life,” is home to the [Assessing the Practices of Public Scholarship initiative](#), which develops democratically engaged methods for evaluating public scholarship, with the goal of empowering practitioners rather than simply auditing their work. Tools such as these can help support a rigorous practice of engaged art history in academic, museum, and community contexts.

Public scholarship can produce a deeper understanding of our subject matter, support the missions of our educational and cultural organizations, and strengthen our communities. But even when our institutions embrace the concept of public practice, they often lack the methods, vocabulary, and systems to evaluate and reward this kind of work. So public scholarship can become something that we do in addition to, rather than as part of, our core professional responsibilities. This is a challenge for engaged scholars across the field. It can be especially discouraging for scholars who do not have the security of tenure. To make engaged art history a realistic option for all interested scholars, we need a better road map for how to pursue and evaluate it. That map should be filled with landmarks, providing ready access to a variety of examples of public scholarship in art history. It should chart multiple routes to and through public engagement, noting factors such as ethical considerations, guiding theory, reliable methods, and models for evaluation. It should orient engaged art historians toward a community of colleagues who can work together to develop

a cohesive practice of public scholarship in our discipline. Ultimately, that map should reposition public scholarship as a central part of our discipline—a mindset, methods, and outcomes that are available to and respected by all art historians. The essays that follow contribute to this process by providing a set of intersecting and divergent approaches to engaged art history.

Join the Conversation

What are your experiences with public engagement in art history? Why have you embraced or avoided public scholarship? How do the ideas and examples in these essays sit with you? Send your thoughts to journalpanorama@gmail.com with the subject line “Bully Pulpit: Public Scholarship.” Letters to the Editor will appear in a future issue of the journal.

Notes

¹ The essays by Sarah Beetham, Theresa Leininger-Miller, and Amy Werbel, as well as parts of this essay, are based on presentations from a session on public scholarship that Werbel chaired at the College Art Association Annual Conference in 2019.

² Gregory Jay has discussed the potential of public scholarship to amplify the humanities more generally. “The Engaged Humanities: Principles and Practices for Public Scholarship and Teaching,” *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, 3, no. 1 (2012), <http://jces.ua.edu/the-engaged-humanities-principles-and-practices-for-public-scholarship-and-teaching>.

³ Carolyn Butler-Palmer, “Big Art History: Art History as Social Knowledge,” *Journal of Canadian Art History/Annales d’histoire de l’art Canadien* 34, no. 1 (2013): 148–65.

⁴ Amy Hamlin and Karen Leader describe examples of these approaches in “SECAC2015 Reflection: Socially Engaged Art History,” *Art History Teaching Resources*, November 13, 2015, <http://arthistoryteachingresources.org/2015/11/secac2015-reflection-socially-engaged-art-history>.

⁵ Scott Peters, “Introduction and Overview,” in Scott J. Peters, Nicholas R. Jordan, Margaret Adamek, and Theodore R. Alter, eds., *Engaging Campus and Community: The Practice of Public Scholarship in the State and Land-Grant University System* (Dayton, OH: Charles F. Kettering Foundation, 2005), 14. In the scholarship of democratic engagement it is common to use the term “citizens” in an expansive way. Instead of referring to people with a particular legal status, these citizens are those whom Harry Boyte, another leading scholar of civic engagement, has defined as “cocreator[s]/civic producer[s].” See, for example, Harry C. Boyte, “Public Achievement: The Work of Building Democratic Culture,” *Higher Education Exchange* (2018): 6.

⁶ Julie Ellison and Timothy K. Eatman, *Scholarship in Public: Knowledge Creation and Tenure Policy in the Engaged University* (Syracuse, NY: Imagining America, 2008).

⁷ See, for example, John Saltmarsh and Matthew Hartley, eds., *“To Serve a Larger Purpose”: Engagement for Democracy and the Transformation of Higher Education* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012).