

Beyond the Turnstile: Making the Case for Museums and Sustainable Values

by Selma Holo & Mari-Tere Álvarez

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Reviewed by Susana Smith Bautista

As museums in the modern age have become more responsive to their public(s), their exhibitions and public programming are often viewed by critics as more populist than scholarly, more entertaining than educational. Museums now strive to bring in disparate groups from underserved communities and to make connections across ethnic, racial, and disciplinary borders. The problem with these encouraging transformations, however, is that they are still supported by quantitative metrics--numbers. The success of bringing more people into the museum is most commonly demonstrated to trustees, foundations, media, and public agencies in terms of increased attendance rates. In *Beyond the Turnstile* (2009), Selma Holo and Mari-Tere Álvarez challenge us to think about metrics and values beyond simply numbers. They describe how most museums are based on a business model and often seek leaders with sound fi-

nancial management skills and administrative experience. While not dismissing the value of business skills, the authors argue that such skills should be merely a means to achieve something greater, which they call *museum values*, *sustainable values*, and *societal good*. "This is the good that makes [museum] visitors experience their lives as better and richer than they would be if the museum did not exist *for them*." These universal, more subjective values include: public trust, primacy of collections, relevance, inclusion, globalization, creativity, new alliances, authentic experience, generating and disseminating knowledge, and communication. They are "methods that will require a harmonious blend of integrity, flexibility, and dynamic engagement with our staff, our profession, our patrons, and our publics."

Holo and Álvarez cite the recent financial crisis that is compelling museums to reconsider business

practices and sustainable values that form their indispensability. Indispensability is not assumed, as the authors boldly assert, and must be clearly exhibited to the public. The authors also refer to the popularization of museums as an additional motive for asserting their distinction. “We need to prove that the experiences we offer cannot be replaced by a theme park, book, or trip to the shopping mall...we must offer a unique approach to understanding the world.” Museums are assuming new roles and functions, yet as they develop closer ties to the public education system and diversify their programs and activities, they are in threat of losing their distinction, which is often about authenticity. Distinction comes not merely from the uniqueness of “real” objects but from the museum’s ability to distinguish itself as a unique experience, one indispensable to society and all its members.

The strength of this book is in the breadth of its arguments taken in the form of vignettes by forty different writers from around the world (Spain, Iraq, Mexico, Venezuela, Afghanistan, Canada, U.S.). These writers include highly regarded museum directors, curators, trustees, academics (international and public affairs, history, philosophy, anthropology, education), public arts administrators, architects, art

historians, musicians, and visual artists. The typology of museums represented is just as diverse: science museums, national museums, history museums, natural history museums, botanical gardens, war memorial museums, and archaeological sites. This breadth is intentional, as the authors predict greater communication “among museums and across traditional boundaries.” For change to occur in the evaluation and measurement of museum success, it must take place throughout the entire field and not just within museums. Measurement is ultimately about accountability, which is a reciprocal relationship between museums and their public. As the authors wisely foresee, “Society will only nurture its museums if it is clear that they, in turn, are nurturing society.”

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