EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

> Experience occurs continuously, because the interaction of live creature and environing conditions is involved in the very process of living.[1]

IN 1932, AS the first William James Lecturer at Harvard University, American philosopher and educator John Dewey (1859–1952) shared his reflections on the experiential engagement between art and viewer. In 1934, these reflections were published as *Art As Experience*, considered by many to be Dewey's most influential writing on aesthetics.

In his discussion of the "live creature" subject to such experiences, Dewey writes:

> works [of art] are products that exist externally and physically. In common conception, the work of art is often identified with the building, book, painting, or statue in its existence apart from human experience. Since the actual work of art is what the product does with and in experience, the result is not favorable to understanding … . When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance, with which esthetic theory deals. A primary task is thus imposed upon one who undertakes to write upon the philosophy of the fine arts. This task is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience.[2]

This description of the generic work of art extracted from "operation in experience" could just as well take as its subject the museum venue itself. Isolated from the ways in which "live creatures" *live* (verb, not adjective) museum spaces and experiences, a wall is built around museums too. They have been viewed historically as elite, exclusive and excluding, and impersonal—as antiseptic to intimacy.

And yet it is precisely the intrusion of humanized experiences into museum spaces that has revised this historical vision in the past few decades. Museum experiences—cultivated by curators, educators and marketers alike—have come into sharp focus as the reason for being of these communal spaces. Professional organizations such as the American Alliance of Museums have called upon their members to reconceive museums as community cornerstones and promoters of physical and emotional well-being. The once silent, hallowed spaces have come alive with the boisterous sounds of school children, the laughter and jovial conversation across groups of elders, the sounds of music, community art-making, and communal assembly, all representative of new experiential interactions between Dewey's "live creatures" and museums no longer walled off from them. Typically, volumes of essays within the fields of art history, museum studies, and museology that have addressed museum functions have tended to focus on collecting, communicating, exhibiting, and educating. In this volume, we have chosen instead to focus on the relatively unexplored territory of "experiencing." We examine the kinds of human experiences and interactions that have converted the once unapproachable

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1 John Dewey, *Art As Experience* (New York: Penguin, 1934), 36.

2 Dewey, *Art As Experience*, 204–5.

Figure 0.1. Visitors in Woodmere's gallery viewing *Amelia* in *Freedom's Journal: The Art of Jerry Pinkney*. Photograph by Darryl Moran. Courtesy of Woodmere Art Museum.

museum to a space of enlivenment and enrichment; and of experiences, moreover, that take place most constructively and even transformationally in a museum context. All the contributors to this collection have sought to bring experiential models to life in their essays: models of education, of sensory engagement, of celebrating cultural history, of confronting the past as a vehicle for changing the present and envisioning a different future, and of bridging the divides that were only deepened by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in 2020. Several of the essays reflect on what may be perceived as more traditional experiences, such as those of teaching and learning within a museum setting. Others overtly and insistently challenge museums and museum professionals to overcome their adherence to a comfortable *status quo* (comfortable for some, that is) and to lead the way as change agents in revamping and re-envisioning a new role for museums of inculcating diversity, equity, inclusiveness, accessibility, and civic responsiveness and responsibility. This volume is additionally unique in its juxtaposition of experiences within museum walls and outside of museum walls; and in its trajectory from pre-COVID pandemic sensibilities to post-pandemic necessities and inventions.

To borrow a metaphor from Hildy Tow's chapter in this volume and from the artist Jerry Pinkney whose work inspired it: this is a collection of essays that envisions an "arc of promise" extending from museums such as those originally described by Dewey, which isolate themselves and the objects they contain from the experiences that are in and of the world; to museums fully engaged in facilitating evocative, provocative, and very human experiences; museums that enact the promise, as Bryan Stevenson puts it, of "[getting] proximate."[3]

That having been said, this volume does not by any means present an homogeneous set of perspectives. While the experiential through-lines of performativity, embodiment,

3 Ruth Hobday and Geoff Blackwell, *Bryan Stevenson: On Equality, Justice, and Compassion*. I Know This to Be True series (San Francisco: Chronicle, 2020), 36.

caring, community and—inevitably––COVID-19[4] are threaded in between the overarching thematic sections of the book, there are through-running tensions as well. For example, some of the essays conceptualize diverse viewers' distinctly different, very personal experiences as fundamental to fully realized encounters with museums' spaces, collections, exhibitions, and programs. Other essays advocate for museums' responsibilities as "corrective" and directive, to provide strong narrative frameworks as a form of redress and re-education, filling in deeply ingrained deficits of cultural knowledge and understanding that have given rise to social inequities and injustices.

Tracing the Through-Lines

To one degree or another, all of the essays in this volume evoke the power of museum experiences that are at their core performative. Part One opens with an essay by Garreth Heidt that documents the experiences of one American middle school's students as they (quite literally) moved and performed their way through learning in the spaces of—and around the objects on display in—a neighbouring college art museum. The performative requisite of "learning by doing" introduced by Heidt is picked up in subsequent essays in Part One. Klare Scarborough and Miranda Clark-Binder, in their essay on the implementation of Lasallian practices of teaching and learning within the walls of another American university art museum, cite Dewey's insistence that "genuine knowledge and understanding are the 'offspring of doing.'" Florence Gelo explores medical students' and residents' performative engagements with works of art inside museum galleries that shape and hone the students' capacity for self-reflection, for empathetic listening, and ultimately for full and deep engagement with their prospective patients. Additionally, Gelo attributes to museum spaces themselves the potential to grant visitors "shelter" and respite along with opportunities for self-care and renewal.

Essays in Part Two encompass a range of performative experiences viewed within Megan Bayles's and Patricia Maunder's essays as in and of individuals' bodies. Bayles writes about museum visitors' changing patterns of self-identification with foetal and other human specimens on display in American science museums and other cultural spaces during two different centuries. As she describes it, "[v]isitors' own bodies become not only the means by which they take in the content of the exhibit, but also produce that content. Their own bodies become experimental and experiential sites." Maunder focuses on museum visitors experiencing individual "awakenings" stimulated by the revelatory performance of touch. She specifically prioritizes bodily engagement as an experiential means to an end: that of developing relationships with visual imagery in the absence of, or in tandem with, sight, of facilitating fully sensory experience.

Jessica Ruhle's essay views performative experiences in relation to gatherings of bodies where the intent is specifically to build community. Ruhle explores the various ways in which congenial, welcoming art museum spaces and purposeful, empathetic

4 The global pandemic that began (officially) in 2020 not only delayed the completion of this volume but also reshaped and reformed its content.

staff facilitators can create the conditions for visitors living with dementia and their care partners to rediscover the joys of community, connection, and validation. Ruhle writes "relationships matter and extending a radical welcome to museum visitors with dementia can establish a mutually loving community that is not fostered by simple inclusion in a standard public tour." She further describes this optimum experience as "the intangible connection of *relationship*."

The chapters that make up Part Three focus on museum experiences whose meaning derives from their siting in particular places: locations alternatively fraught with histories of racism and violence, infused with previously buried architectural and archaeological structures' significance, or echoing with the muffled voices of long-forgotten mothers and babies. To borrow another phrase from Stevenson, "the power of place" in each of these chapters is brought to life through the revisiting and revoicing of silenced, forgotten, or eclipsed identities, all inextricable from their "places."

Ball and Sullivan write about their work to restore the unwed mothers and babies of South Australia's nineteenth-century Destitute Asylum from historical erasure, "We understood that performance could, in the words of De Groot, contribute to meaning by reinserting the body, making the empty landscape of the past live again." Thomas Otten's essay sets forth the mission of a museum in development, MiQua, to reframe and renew archaeological fragments and architectural monuments in the Archaeological Quarter of Cologne as relics of a distant past that his museum is charged with bringing back to life for visitors. In his essay, Otten envisions them as memorials to that past but also as iconic *loci* of association, imagination and interpretation.

In a way that speaks to both of the other essays and is also quite different, Stevenson reflects in one portion of our interview on a continuing project of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) in which the descendants of African Americans who were lynched are encouraged to collect soil at the lynching sites and then transfer it to the EJI's National Memorial for Peace and Justice. As Stevenson describes it,

> People dig that soil, it can be really emotional and really overwhelming for people and they are surprised by it. But I tell them that's because there is power in that soil. That soil contains the sweat of those who were enslaved, it contains the blood of those who were lynched, it contains the tears of those who were humiliated during segregation. And it contains the potential for life that you have given it when you bring it into our space, because we can turn that soil into a monument, an emblem, an icon that represents a different future.

He is perhaps calling out a different kind of embodiment here, a different kind of performance, a visceral experience through one's own body of others' bodies and lives (in essence, through their relics). The "power of place" here also entails bodily re-placement, from the place of lynching to a place of memorialization and restoration.

In the Time of COVID

The essays in Part Four reveal some of the intractable impediments and the often serendipitous triumphs shaped by a pandemic that from 2020 on, irrevocably reformed institutions' missions and altered people's lives across the globe. All three essays are

centred on experiences around art-making, whether through performative acts of making, themselves, or through viewers' engagement with the work and vision of a particular artist. In each case, the potency of the accounts and experiences lies not only in the lifting up of community members but also in the performative nature of museums' "pivots" from pre-pandemic to post-, and their radical commitments to revitalizing their constituents' connections and experiences even in the uncharted territory of enforced physical distancing and isolation.

Nikki Sullivan writes the following in her essay about her institution's programmatic pivot during COVID and its altogether unexpected consequences. "These kinds of opportunities for connection, which were way beyond our original [pre-COVID] vision, and which might well not have happened had it not been for COVID, enabled us all to learn so much more about each other's communities, to develop empathy for people and issues with which we might have had little or no previous contact… ."

Kristin Tollefson's narrative follows a related trajectory, but one uniquely enriched (and complicated?) by the fusing of two separate missions, both of which had previously ground to a halt due to COVID. Those parallel missions—one, a special community-based museum outreach project intended to engage older people through the power of touch; and the other, a gallery exhibition of Tollefson's own work—shifted back into gear through a deeply experiential collaboration that merged the two. As a result, Tollefson's work as an independent artist was brought into service in precise alignment with her work as Director of Education and DEI Advancement at her museum. Tollefson incorporates the voices of her fellow artists and collaborators in her narration of this project, whose lessons she describes simply as "Start where you are. Embrace creativity and give generously of time, materials and care. Use the assets of organization(s) to support individual(s) in thoughtfully considered physical and virtual spaces. … Continue the conversation."

The post-COVID hybrid educational experiences about which Hildy Tow writes in her essay revolve around programming created for public school students in connection with her museum's exhibition of the art of Jerry Pinkney, an award-winning American artist internationally acclaimed for his children's book illustrations bringing to life the experiences of African Americans, particularly the experiences of enslaved people and those who lived under segregation (as Pinkney had himself early in his life). The artist had said when asked about how museums should talk with children about slavery and segregation, "You can't have that arc of promise if you don't show where you came from. You can't move ahead until you know your history and how it started."

The programs described by Tow and the ways in which school children experienced them suggest a deeply purposeful if modest implementation by one museum of the kind of socially-engaged actions for which Stevenson called during our interview. At stake, according to Stevenson? The dire need to redress the deficits of knowledge and understanding that have permitted slavery in America to beget a tradition of lynching, and for the tradition of lynching to beget an epidemic of mass incarcerations that disproportionately affects Black Americans: each "begetting" a new iteration of slavery's legacy of white supremacy. In other words, Stevenson concurs in Pinkney's insistence on "[showing] where you came from" in order that we be able to "move ahead."

As Tow records, the students, when asked if they, themselves, believed in Pinkney's metaphor of an "arc of promise," responded in ways that revealed their own awareness of the power of his art and their experiences around it to signal change. "When asked if they saw an 'arc of promise,' many said it was clear that the two sets of images they had been viewing with museum docents represented change and progress, and that they'd like to believe 'more change was possible.'" Indeed, they wondered if the exhibition had been precisely designed to "make 'us see the differences.'"

Why Experience?

A range of answers to this question lies within each and every chapter of this book. Several contributors provide us with answers that are particularly direct and powerful.

Reflecting on the college museum that hosted the innovative learning and teaching experiences Heidt describes in his essay, he assesses the museum's role in this way: "the … Museum saw itself as more than a repository for valuable artifacts where the learning was unidirectional, from object to person … . Instead, it saw itself as part of a dialogue, a space where 'knowing was doing,' where learning was relational, embodied, and alive … a space for participatory experiences where students encountered artwork and in doing so, encountered themselves."

Reflecting on the role of the museum as a sanctuary of sorts for people living with dementia and their care partners, Ruhle views it through a lens of social justice and equity: "when museums prioritise this audience and offer opportunities for appropriate engagement and participation [read experience], the institutions make a public statement about the societal value of older adults and individuals with cognitive differences."

And Stevenson, asked to reflect on why museums should prioritize their roles as creators and conveyors of experience, responds

> When you live through something, when you experience something, it just has a reality that it can't have when it's imagined. I am much better prepared for the moment that I am in because I've been surrounded by people who have taught me really important things about struggle, … about being honest, … about perseverance, … about resilience. They've shown it to me and that experience has become really powerful as a form of modeling. And so if we can create museums that provide experiences that model things for people, that help them live, help them navigate complexity, help them overcome, help them get past trauma and struggle, then I can think of nothing more important we can do.

It is our hope that our readers will engage with this collection of essays as one set of models intended to inspire rethought responses to this moment and the many unpredictable moments to come: models of outside-the-box teaching and learning, purposeful and persistent acts of inclusion, of restoration, of empathy, of community building, and of caring. We are just at the start of this conversation, and there are many more voices in many more places around the world from listening to which we can all benefit. All rooted in experience. And all within (or without) museum walls.

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