

Community Engagement Through Curatorial Practice: A Case Study of Torrance Art Museum's Curatorial Process and Programming

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A current buzzword for the nonprofit sector is “engagement.” Organizations and funders are searching for ways to engage their communities. Max Presneill presented at the 2012 CAM Annual Conference session titled “Civic Intimacy” to share how his work as Curator at the Torrance Art Museum (TAM) meaningfully engages the community and maximizes resources. Presneill believes community is not always defined by geographical location and boundaries but may also be a group of people with shared interests. He compares such communities to fans bases that will travel far distances to see their sports teams play. Despite TAM being a city’s museum, Presneill focuses on engaging a community of art lovers in greater Los Angeles, which primarily are artists.

TAM has few similarities with other Los Angeles museums. TAM is funded by the City of Torrance and is located at the Torrance Civic Center, adjacent to other municipal buildings such as the public library and courthouse. TAM is a non-collecting museum with no governing Board of Directors and does not perform fundraising. These traits make competing with the larger institutions of Los Angeles impossible.

As a result, TAM plays a different role of a museum through artist-centric curating and programming. Contrasting the traditional method of curating art, Presneill also curates artists through what he calls “crowd sourcing curating.” He employs this method for one exhibition each year. Crowd sourcing is a way TAM connects with its audience through a more proactive engagement. Presneill acknowledges the wealth of knowledge outside of the museum and through crowd sourcing curating TAM is able to expand its pool of resources and is more attuned to a dedicated community of art lovers. The museum becomes more responsive to its community and through ongoing actions to engage artists, TAM moves closer to an artist-centric space. Instead of solely utilizing the talents

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of artists, TAM works with them to produce exhibitions that are meaningful to the artist community.

Presneill compares TAM to the *kunsthalle* model, a German term for an art hall. A *kunsthalle* is not only a place to exhibit artwork but also a space for the sharing and germination of ideas. Similarly, TAM is space for ideas to be realized within the museum's galleries. Thus, Presneill's practice transforms from curating to producing. Presneill's background and work outside of the museum is within alternative art spaces; he was Director and Curator at Raid Projects for ten years and currently is Curatorial Director for ARTRA. He feels that there are a lot of lessons that can be learned from the world of alternative spaces and sees an integration of those lessons with the museum practices in the way TAM operates. Although TAM could be perceived as an alternative space, Presneill reassures that TAM is not in opposition to the institution of museums, just playing a different role. TAM is finding a model that makes sense for its size and resources while playing with the notions of what the museum ought to be doing.

TAM not only questions what its own role is as a museum, but also explores ideas of art, curatorial, and museum processes through its group exhibitions. TAM shows mostly group exhibitions because Presneill is interested in how fluidity of meaning is expanded when artworks are exhibited together. This can produce a different type of show from exhibitions concerned with a lineage of themes or subject matter. And as a small museum, it is logical to exhibit as many artists as possible. TAM's staff is made of practicing artists. The staff selects artwork not simply on common themes, but common processes. Presneill notes that for an artist their artwork is multi-layered with meanings that change everyday. Presneill's curatorial process is an artistic process, exploring the making of exhibitions in new ways.

For one exhibition, Presneill and Assistant Curator, Jason Ramos, brought together four artists that they felt have similar processes and should work together. They put them in a room to collaboratively create an exhibition around their work. The artists were

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empowered to develop an exhibition with artwork they wanted to see next to their own. They contacted other artists and galleries themselves to obtain artwork; this correspondence was then followed-up by TAM staff. The success of the curatorial process and satisfaction of the artists are indicators of success for Presneill.

This Fall TAM will be having its annual *Baker's Dozen* exhibition that always includes thirteen upcoming artists. For this year's exhibition Presneill and Ramos will not be selecting the artists; instead, they have brought on thirteen different curators to select one artist each. The curatorial process is meant to explore and exhibit the influence of a curator and the curatorial practice and provoke thought about what is canonized by curators and institutions.

Another way TAM engages its artist community through curatorial practice is bringing people of the art world together. Following the *Baker's Dozen*, there will be an exhibition of all the artists that run Los Angeles artist-run spaces. The curatorial process began in May with an initial meeting at TAM. Presneill and Ramos met with 22 artists, representing over 20 spaces, to discuss the exhibition that Presneill predicts will include over 100 artists total. One of the artists jokingly compared the meeting to King Arthur's Round Table, the artists being the knights of the Los Angeles grassroots art world. In the jest of the comparison, the artists acknowledged the importance and opportunity in convening. The structure of the meeting was open, including authentic dialogue about the notions of the exhibition and the catalog being that the individuals in the room represented not only themselves, but also the spaces they operate. The room of artists, including Presneill and Ramos, were motivated as they began an artistic process of creating the exhibition.

TAM works with what artists want to do and what they would like the exhibition to look like, of course, with practical approval from Presneill. TAM plays the role of artist supporter, not artist dictator. As a result, he must place trust in the museum's relationships with the artists. For the museum to engage with the community whole-

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heartedly, Presneill refrains from telling the artists what to do, unless there is impracticality. Presneill and Ramos do not select the exhibited artworks, granting the decisions to the artists; however, they oversee and ensure there is an elegant structure to the exhibition. Although there may be disappointments, Presneill has experienced great outcomes from following through with his trust in artists, but notes the willingness required to accept the outcomes of his curatorial decisions.

TAM is an artistic-centric museum through its curating process and exhibitions as well as through its programming. With little staff resources, public programming is not largely offered at TAM. However, TAM's doors are open to be used as a community space where, again, the community is welcomed to execute their own ideas. Presneill emphasizes the invitation for museum and art professionals to use TAM as a venue for programming such as panel discussions or movie screenings.

There are few ways for the audience to engage in the artwork outside of viewing the exhibitions. However, in efforts to utilize the resources of the small staff, professional development programming is offered; although, is unrelated to the museum's exhibitions. The professional development programming offered at TAM expands the museum's role in servicing the artist community. Aside from providing new ways to look at art and exhibiting artists through exhibitions, Presneill and his staff look at what else they can offer artists. One example was a "How to Produce Your Own Event" workshop. Presneill shared with participants his knowledge of organized events, which was realized through an artist-led event following the workshop. TAM's programming provides space for things to happen and shares the skillset of the staff with the community. Presneill claims such programming is also good public relations, which is also done through the sponsoring of outsider events that TAM can contribute to. However, Presneill is weary of the loss of autonomy when collaborating with other groups. TAM's responsibility to the community is the forefront of any collaborative interactions.

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Presneill does not measure success of the museum through attendance numbers; for him, some of the most successful exhibitions were attended by only small groups of viewers. The notions of success for engagement could challenge this perspective, as low attendance numbers could be perceived as low engagement. Nonetheless, he is strategic in selecting artists. Presneill pairs well-known artists with lesser-known artists to draw in audiences. It also functions with marketing necessities for name recognition and social media. One curatorial indicator of success for Presneill is being the first to recognize a talented artist and providing them their first museum exhibition. Under the governance of the City of Torrance's City Council, Presneill is allotted freedom to work with yet unidentified artists. Historically, some subject matter has been held to a higher scrutiny by the City of Torrance than at other museums. However, TAM has recently succeeded in policy change to ensure no censorship of art at the museum by the city. Presneill articulates that the viewing of new and challenging artwork calls for a reevaluation of one's comfort zone and boundaries of taste.

TAM engages with its community through its curator. Presneill's work does not end after selecting the artist and is a reminder that curators have the ability to also work with artists. At TAM, the community is not an afterthought. TAM's community is engaged long before any catalog is written or show card is printed. TAM's responsibility to its community is to produce thoughtful exhibitions and support artists in their careers.

TAM is a city government's institution, but does not solely serve the city of that government. There is an annual exhibition of South Bay artists where eligibility is based on the zip code of submitting artist. Outside of that exhibition, Presneill finds no obligation to serve only a geographic region with members that simply are not interested in art. The community TAM serves comes from wherever they are and TAM pays attention to that community. This may be a missed opportunity to engage local communities with TAM's exhibitions as well as local artists not participating outside of the South Bay exhibition with artists from other parts of Los Angeles. For Presneill, trying to serve everyone is a waste of resources because TAM's exhibitions are not for

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everyone. He notes that admission to the museum is free, so everyone is welcome. Perhaps an increase in staff and resources could allow for more exhibition programming that would support the engagement of local communities equal to TAM's engagement of the artist communities. Programming that builds accessibility of TAM's exhibitions for both the local and larger artist community could engage a broader audience and bridge the gap between the two communities. However, while working with limited resources, TAM engages its community of artists in the curatorial process and presents exhibitions that reflect that engagement. For the community members that did not participate in the exhibition process, they are welcome to propose their ideas to Presneill's crowd sourcing curating or learn to execute their own art encounters through TAM's programming.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR/CAM FELLOW



Kaileena Monet Flores-Emnace is expected to graduate with her M.A. in Arts Management from Claremont Graduate University in 2013. After earning her B.A. in Art Education and B.A. in Urban Studies from Loyola Marymount University, Kai discovered her passion for providing quality art education to her urban society, Los Angeles. Currently Kai works as an educator at various museums, including MOCA and LACMA. She also serves on the Board of MESC and on the State Superintendent's Blueprint for Creative Schools Task Force as a youth voice. Kai's art-making practice is fueled by the act of gift giving and is inspired by attending live music events.