

Towards Shared Authority

Community-Authored Labels
Expand Expertise, Spark Relevance,
and Build Relationships

Melanie Parker, Alison Crites, Amelia Wiggins

Community-authored exhibition labels have the power to expand expertise, spark relevance, and build relationships that extend beyond an exhibition's run. Diverse stories told through community-authored labels open up new insights into works of art, connect with visitors' own histories, and facilitate human connection. In the process, they can support museums' efforts to center community and share authority.

In the case studies presented here, we (interpreters from the Detroit Institute of Arts, Southern Vermont Arts Center, and Delaware Art Museum) reflect on our experiences collaborating with community members to write labels. We examine success in terms of relationships fostered and personal meaning sparked. By illuminating the differences in our institutional sizes and approaches, we underscore the adaptability of this work to support distinct project and/or organizational goals. The examples speak to the power of this model to redefine what effective exhibitions can look like.¹

Detroit Institute of Arts: Expanding Representation through Community Collaboration

Stand in the museum and be brave enough to look like a fool. Say these names out loud. If you can't feel a name, if there is a name that shuts you down, go and search out their story. It will lead you to deepen your understanding of yourself.

Say their names.

Now say your own.

In 2017, writer and performance artist Sherina Rodriguez Sharpe authored this call to action (fig. 1, p. 58) following the second and final gathering of

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A Detroiter Responds

My first instinct is to shut down in the presence of Antonia Clifford's work, lest I connect and begin to feel the depth of my rage. I do not want to imagine, if I were killed today, that I would be reduced to the twenty-two letters of my name.

How many black women does it take to make a case that we are valuable? 100? And this pain's got to fit on a sign. Black grief, black loss, black rage must be orderly, or it will be renamed "riot."

*How do I make these women whole again?
How do you reassemble a puzzle that you can't even see?*

Say Shulena Weldon's name out loud. Notice your inflection. Shulena. Weldon. Say her name, remembering she deserves to be free.

Stand in the museum and be brave enough to look like a fool. Say these names out loud. If you can't feel a name, if there is a name that shuts you down, go and search out their story. It will lead you to deepen your understanding of yourself.

Say their names.

Now say your own.

—Sherina Rodriguez Sharpe

Writer, Editor, Performer; Executive Director of Obsidian Blues

Fig. 1. Full text of Sherina Rodriguez Sharpe's response as it appeared in *Art of Rebellion* (2017).

anniversary of the Detroit Rebellion of 1967. The five-day uprising was one of the largest instances of civil unrest in United States history and a response to pervasive housing and employment discrimination and police brutality against Black residents.²

Coming Together

In addition to attending focus groups and facilitating an in-community consultation, the curatorial-interpretive teams from the DIA and our partner institution, Detroit's Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History (aka The Wright), anticipated that forming an advisory panel of Detroiters with varying expertise – artists, scholars, activists, and a psychologist – would ignite deeper, more nuanced conversations and considerations than we could have had on our own.³

As we formed the nine-person panel, we intentionally avoided participants whose professional backgrounds would align too closely with that of our in-house staff. Instead, we sought those who could *expand* in-house expertise through their experience with adjacent subject matter (e.g., urban social geography or literature). The panel was intergenerational; most participants were African American. Some had preexisting relationships with the museums, while others were new contacts. We offered each participant a \$500 honorarium.

To ensure adequate time for both the panelists and project teams to process and reflect on our meetings, we held two three-hour meetings two months apart (**fig. 2**). Through a combination of facilitated and open conversations, the exhibition teams shared plans, ideas, and questions for the

an advisory panel formed to help shape the exhibition *Art of Rebellion: Black Art of the Civil Rights Movement* at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA). Sharpe's response was sparked by one of the pieces in the show: artist Antonia Clifford's poster for the 2014 exhibition *Blood at the Root: Unearthing the Stories of State Violence Against Black Women*, which overlaid the names of 100 Black women and girls killed by police against the assertion "Say Her Name."

Curated by Valerie Mercer, DIA's head of African American Art, *Art of Rebellion* was part of *Detroit 67: Looking Back to Move Forward*, a citywide effort spearheaded by the Detroit Historical Society to mark the 50th

participants to react to and evaluate. The considerations and challenges they posed to us transformed the final products.

One resounding message was that although the exhibitions intended to present a national look at art-making as a catalyst for social change from the Civil Rights era to today, participants still expected more Detroit-specific representation in the narratives. As the DIA team digested what this feedback meant for our exhibition, three main considerations surfaced:

- The project scope and timeline made exhaustive changes to the premise and artwork checklist challenging.
- While we had identified multiple perspectives as an intended interpretive

approach, we had not yet determined whose perspectives they would be, or how they would manifest.

- No one group can speak for all Detroiters. But the diverse perspectives and experiences of the panelists – and their existing engagement with the exhibition – made them an ideal group with whom to collaborate.

With these factors in mind, we concluded our final meeting with a reflection and writing activity that we hoped would refine our interpretive plan around these Detroiters' perspectives. We simulated a gallery in our meeting room, and panelists selected two artworks, one from each institution's exhibition. They spent 50 minutes reflecting on their choices. Some wrote and submitted

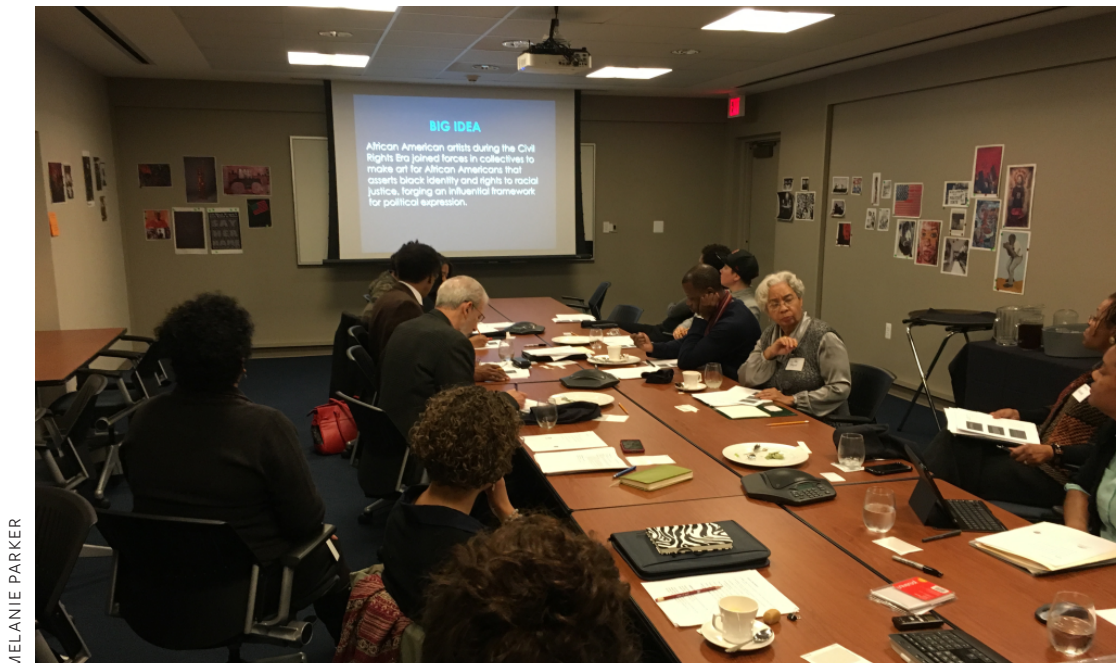


Fig. 2. Advisory panel meeting at the Detroit Institute of Arts, January 2017.

MELANIE PARKER

their thoughts on the spot, while others refined and emailed them later. The prompt was purposefully loose. We asked them to consider:

- how the work made them feel;
- what thoughts or emotions it sparked for them; and
- what they hoped others would notice in the work or think about while viewing it.

At the start of the activity, we offered one-page sheets with brief information about the artworks for participants who would feel more grounded by having it; most did not. On reflection, this was probably unnecessary and risked being counterproductive. At the heart of the exercise was the notion that a range of perspectives can coexist about art or historical events based on individuals' experiences. To use standard art historical information as a baseline could potentially limit or bias perspectives.

From Reflection to Labels

After considering the reflections in conjunction with the exhibition text already drafted, the DIA team chose to include all as object labels. Presented under the heading "A Detroiter Responds," we paired some with museum-written text to offer varied insights into the artwork. In other cases they stood alone, adding interpretive text where none was planned. In one instance, we replaced a drafted museum label because the Detroiter response was more compelling.

The interpretive team did a copy edit only for clarity, accuracy, and readability. We did not attempt to mold the reflections into our

institutional guidelines for length, style, and voice; it was more essential that the writer's voice be authentically maintained. In one instance where a multipage response was too long to fit on the wall and maintain legibility, we worked with the writer to excerpt a portion. All writers approved the final text before printing. We omitted one response at the participant's request.

Assessing Impact

The social, political, and emotional significance of the Rebellion in Detroit's history demanded a self-awareness of the limits and biases inherent in the DIA's institutional voice. To meet this responsibility, *Art of Rebellion* iterated approaches to inclusive interpretation cultivated over many years through the leadership of Swarupa Anila, then Director of Interpretive Engagement. In 2017, Anila examined this project as an example of polyvocality, a "tool to fracture the traditional, univocal Westernist authority of museums."⁴

Exhibition exit surveys did not assess the community-authored labels specifically, and we cannot determine whether visitors perceived a shared authority between the writers and the DIA.⁵ But visitor comments suggest the community authors' perspectives strengthened personal connections and local relevancies – the facets earlier evaluation indicated we were missing:

"Say [Her] Name – really hit me, I said their names – I cried, it was a good cry."

"[T]he 'Detroiter's Response'...really pounded merit into how some others may perceive/respond to events/pieces."

Additionally, the relationships developed through community label writing extended beyond the project to foster the development of a new work of art shared with hundreds of visitors. Inspired by *Art of Rebellion*, advisors Sherina Rodriguez Sharpe and Chace Morris collaborated with six contemporary Detroit artists to form a collective. In the exhibition's final hours, they filled the large, open courtyard at the heart of the museum with a standing-room only, multimedia performance of *CROSSROAD*, which "explored how rebel-art can hold grief & healing as a form of resistance."

The Southern Vermont Arts Center: Rebuilding Trust and Relevance through Centering Community Voices

Figure 3 provides two texts for comparison; consider how they resonate differently. The one on the left uses facts to unsettle the reader and highlight the destructive impact of humans on the earth. The one on the right takes a narrative approach, foregrounding the writer's feelings of connection that turn somber as she reflects on our changing climate. This is the one that a community member contributed to a 2021 exhibition,

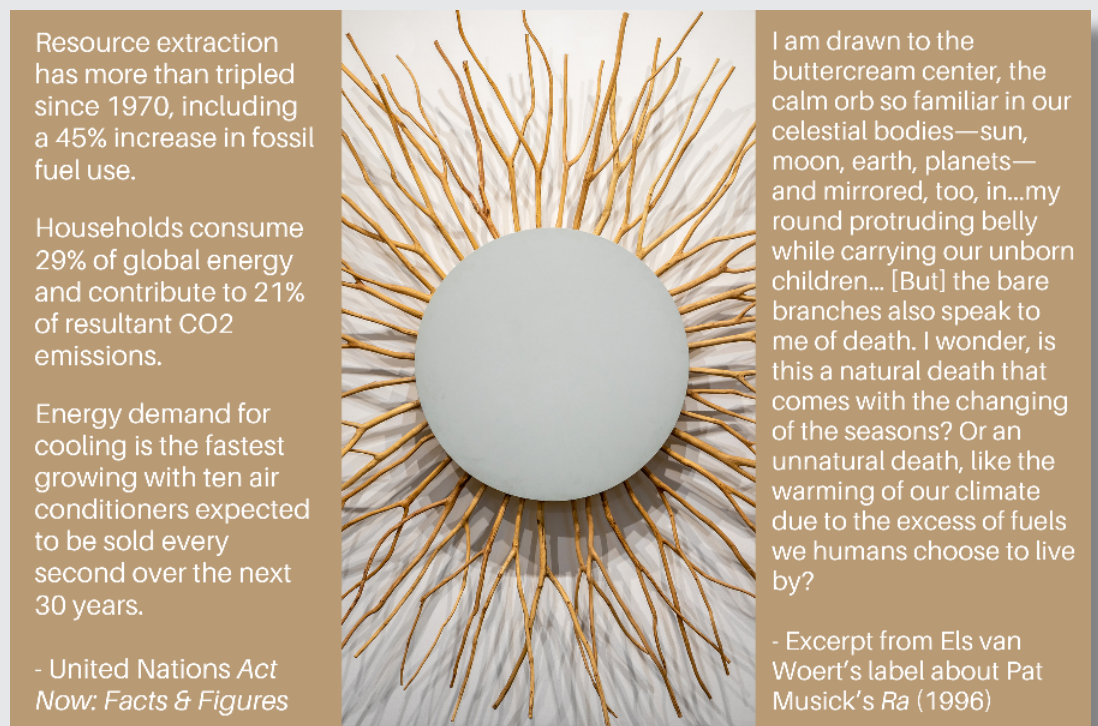


Fig. 3. These quotations represent different approaches to talking about climate change: fact-based and narrative-based. The one on the right appeared on an exhibition label at the Southern Vermont Arts Center.

Our Tangled Choices: Art and the Environment, at the Southern Vermont Arts Center (SVAC).

As the sole exhibition planner at SVAC, my role combines curation, interpretation, and exhibition management. While conducting research for *Our Tangled Choices*, I came across the work of Per Espen Stoknes, who advocates for a radical departure from the data-driven and catastrophic ways that the scientific community and media have traditionally framed climate change.⁶ His vision for more effective communication – emphasizing storytelling and peer-to-peer sharing – aligns with visitor-centered interpretive practice, which SVAC is increasingly embracing. Centering community voices in *Our Tangled Choices* presented the opportunity to uplift the personal over the scientific or the academic. For visitors, it would feel as if they were gaining insight from a group of friendly and informed neighbors rather than a room full of climate change experts.

Recruitment

Intending this engagement to be an in-person experience, I determined that a group size of eight to 12 people would be ideal. As a relative newcomer to the area, though, I relied heavily on my colleagues to help with recruitment. We targeted people with experience in agriculture, waste management, and conservation as well as those connected to local recreational activities like fly-fishing, hunting, and skiing. Invitees received a document containing information about the purpose of the initiative, time commitment (about five hours), honorarium (\$125), and sample images of the artwork (artists and title removed). It also emphasized that no prior art or writing experience was necessary.

In the end, 11 people joined the project, including some of the above as well as poets, a science teacher, a politician, and a high school student. The majority of participants who accepted had some level of connection with SVAC or a staff member. By contrast, the invitations extended to Black and Indigenous individuals were more akin to cold calls, and none of these recruits joined the project. This outcome reflects SVAC's historical lack of connection with BIPOC communities, due in part to our location. Vermont is among the whitest states in the country – as reflected in our all-white staff and board – which makes building audiences of color challenging.

The lesson learned is that the demographic makeup of your community group will likely mirror the existing relationships you and your institution already have. Depending on your demographic goals, relationship building may need to begin long before recruitment. In some cases, you will want to understand what reparative work first should happen before engaging or re-engaging a particular community. At SVAC, we are actively working to build new audiences. One strategy we've used is diversifying the representation of artists. And, based on feedback, we have addressed some of the financial barriers that often prevent artists from historically marginalized communities from showing their work here.

Sessions

The group met during the evenings at SVAC for two hours at a time. During the first session, they spent about 20 minutes looking at printed images of the artwork, about 30 in total. Most were sculptural works that evoked a range of organic forms. Participants recorded their initial reactions to an

open-ended prompt. Then, everyone voted for a work of art they found visually striking, a work they found intriguing, and a work that felt confusing or challenging.

Their written responses and votes laid the groundwork for a facilitated discussion, which demonstrated that a single work of art can provoke multiple interpretations. The discussion also offered participants opportunities to build upon one another's ideas, whether through reconsidering or expanding their initial perceptions. As the discussion wound down, the guest facilitator for the next session, a local writer, invited participants to jot down any memories the artwork surfaced for them. These notes formed the foundation for session two's focus on developing a personal response to a specific artwork.

When the group gathered again the following week, we looked at examples of community-written labels from exhibitions at other museums and talked about their attributes. This was a fruitful way to convey the following:

- Stories are more resonant than facts. We encouraged participants to lean into writing in the first person even if it felt uncomfortable.
- Everyone in the room is a climate expert in their own right. We wanted the group to write about what they saw and felt rather than try to sound "academic."

Participants selected the artwork they wanted to write about; some chose to respond to the same piece. Throughout the evening, the group had dedicated time

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For visitors, it would feel as if they were gaining insight from a group of friendly and informed neighbors rather than a room full of climate change experts.

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for freewriting in response to questions or prompts offered by the facilitator. She also brought the group together a couple of times to talk about editing strategies. In an anonymous survey, a couple of participants noted how helpful it was to have this structured time for getting started, implying that it might have been challenging to complete their labels without it.

Another participant shared that he wished the experience included time for people to share their drafts aloud: “It’s been my experience that the vulnerable sharing of reactive writing often bonds people together.” This valuable feedback highlights the potential for these in-person sessions to facilitate multidirectional relationship building, not just between participants and the museum, but also among community members themselves.

Implementation

About two weeks after the second session, participants submitted their final labels and indicated whether SVAC could use their content as part of promoting the exhibition. They also had the option of uploading a headshot. Not all participants chose to provide permission or their photographs. Depending on how important these elements are, consider mentioning them up front as expectations.

Community labels formed the entirety of the exhibition's interpretation with the exception of the introductory text that I wrote myself. Initially, I left open the option to write traditional labels but later made the decision not to do so after reviewing the participants' submissions. Their writing covered such a range of content, from the personal to the interpretive, that institutional labels felt unnecessary and even redundant (fig. 4).

The labels ranged in length from 80 words to nearly 600 because I had not established a word limit (most were 200 to 300 words). Since first-person narrative writing tends to be more readable, I hoped visitors would be willing to engage with the longer text panels. Anecdotally, I observed this happening during my occasional visits to the galleries. However, we did not have the resources to conduct formal visitor evaluation to test this assumption.

I did issue a survey to the community label writers, however. It revealed that many appreciated that SVAC published their response as is rather than taking a more rigorous editing approach. This finding raises the question: in the

context of community labels, should we uphold the same word count limits and other standards that we have for institutionally authored interpretation?

Myriad studies demonstrate that the visitor experience is impacted by the amount of in-gallery content, among other variables, that visitors encounter.⁷ In addition, holding external contributors to different standards may devalue the importance of community-engaged work in the eyes of internal stakeholders. On the other hand, community participants may feel constrained by something like a length restriction, potentially undermining the quality of their response or willingness to participate. This compels us to consider: who is the label for ultimately, and can it serve the visitor and the community writer equally? How your museum answers these questions depends on the larger institutional goals that a particular exhibition supports, which may include developing relationships with the community members authoring labels.

One of SVAC's current strategic goals is to shift external perceptions of the museum through showing that we value, engage, and support our local communities. To lead this work, in 2019 the board of trustees hired the first director in SVAC's nearly 75-year history to come from the field of museum education. Historically, SVAC has served an insular circle of artists and collectors, many with seasonal ties to the area. Today, through new efforts like keeping our doors open year-round, expanding our public programming, and offering scholarships, we are making strides to rebuild relationships with community members and connect with new audiences.

Fig. 4. A community label appears in the final exhibition alongside the artwork it considers, Michelle Lougee's *Ubiquitous* (2015–2021).



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Community-authored labels often add relevance for visitors by sharing stories that center the local community and its history.

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Developing a more collaborative approach to SVAC’s exhibitions process also supports this institutional change work. There’s evidence that we achieved some success in this regard. As one participant noted, “I have always struggled with my perception that SVAC devotes too much space, time and energy to art that does not connect with ‘regular’ people...this was a step in that [right] direction!” Another wrote: “This project completely transformed my impressions and relationship to SVAC. I had never before visited SVAC. I’ve been back several times since, and felt more comfortable [each time].”

Post Project

Where does the Southern Vermont Arts Center go from here? Certainly, the relative success of our first-ever community-engaged exhibition process has laid the foundation for continuing this type of work. It also highlighted some key areas for growth, such as diversifying our relationship building efforts as well as integrating visitor evaluation into our process. We are taking steps in both areas.

In addition, sustaining relationships with the 11 original participants is paramount. For example, we’ve extended complimentary invitations to the group and their guests to attend several events and programs. More substantively, one of the participants proposed the idea of convening a group of poets to respond to artwork in a future exhibition. He is currently recruiting participants and, this fall, will lead the writing portion of the engagement.

The Delaware Art Museum: Community-Created Interpretive Content as a Strategy for Change

The Delaware Art Museum (DelArt) started incorporating community-created content into special exhibition interpretation in 2018 as part of a larger institution-wide effort to reflect our diverse local community. The use of polyvocal interpretation had been sparked by our 2017 strategic plan, which envisioned the museum as a welcoming and inclusive vital hub where community members could come together to engage in cultural and civic discourse through the lens of art.⁸ Seven special exhibitions, as well as the museum’s recent main-floor reinstallation, have subsequently incorporated community-created content into audio tour stops, in-gallery video, and object labels alongside traditional curatorial text.⁹ Other shifts in exhibition planning reinforce shared authority, such as the use of exhibition advisory committees, focus groups, prototyping, and, recently, the copresentation of a major exhibition with a local artist collective.¹⁰ Community-authored labels align with DelArt’s vision and values by amplifying diverse perspectives, expanding sources of expertise, and kindling relationships with the community members whose voices are centered.¹¹

DelArt’s community-authored labels expand the sources of expertise drawn on to interpret works of art. Writers, often intentionally chosen from outside the field of art historical scholarship, bring with them rich experiences and expertise. Contributor Dr. Roderick L. Carey, Assistant Professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences at the University of Delaware, shared how his background shaped his label (fig. 5). “In my research I advocate for shifting the representational lenses that engulf Black boys and young men. Likewise,

in my label, I hoped to challenge viewers’ assumptions about what representational forms Black masculinity can take and comment on the beautifully diverse ways it shows up in the world.” Community-authored labels often add relevance for visitors by sharing stories that center the local community and its history. For the exhibitions *The Loper Tradition* and *Afro-American Images 1971: The Vision of Percy Ricks*, Wilmington leaders reflected on artists that impacted our city’s cultural history and generations of Delawarean artists.

***Untitled (State to State Ball)*, 2005**
Gerard H. Gaskin (born 1969)

Archival inkjet print

COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTION

Ballers

On a basketball court somewhere, some Black men turned it. Black men, “ball players,” who came to “ball.” In their sweaty tops, with muscled arms, they compete intensely, with piercing focus, while onlookers snap and film and cross their arms. Some cheer, some jeer; yet all adore them because, “he’s one of us! They’re all of ours!”

And you’re there too! And they hear your eyes, feel your taunts, see the names you call them. Still, their mirror reflects back boldness, bravery, Black beauty. With the mirror facing you, can you see what these ballers share with you?

It’s the most resounding human yearning for acceptance somewhere, for adulation somewhere, for a place somewhere to matter. And on this crowded court, we cheer for those picked last or never, for those brave little Black boys who build gowns of bedsheets and for Black men somewhere who turn basketball courts to ballrooms.

—Roderick L. Carey, PhD, Assistant Professor, University of Delaware, Department of Human Development and Family Sciences

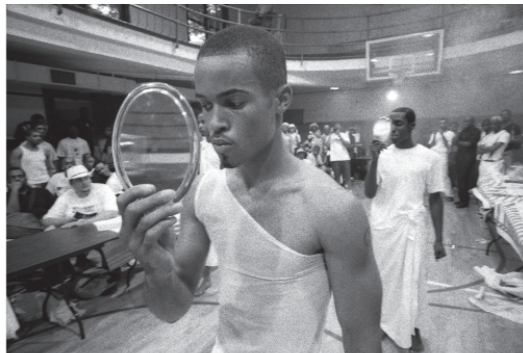


Fig. 5. Dr. Roderick L. Carey’s label text and the photograph it relates to: *Untitled (State to State Ball)*, by Gerard Gaskin.

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In editing community-authored labels, I aim to keep as much of the author's unique perspective and voice intact as possible.

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These labels are meaningful for a significant portion of visitors. Exit surveys across six exhibitions show that 46 percent of surveyed DelArt visitors reported reading a community-authored label or listening to a community-authored audio tour stop. Thirty-eight percent of survey respondents agreed that a community contribution label changed how they saw the art it relates to. Further study could investigate further how these respondents' views of art are changed by community-authored labels. Overall, 54 percent showed interest in reading or hearing community members' responses to works of art in the future. When community-created interpretive content was first implemented at DelArt, demonstrating visitor interest helped build support for this strategy across departments.

DelArt's Process

The Delaware Art Museum's process differs in some respects from that of the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Southern Vermont Arts Center. We convened writers in one introductory meeting that served as a time to introduce and connect the participants, orient them to the exhibition and label

writing process, and allow participants to choose artworks to write about. However, most of our communication consisted of individual emails between staff and writers. A one-page form names the participating writers, outlines the timeline and process, briefly describes the exhibition and interpretive goals, and sets parameters for label length, content, style, and author identification. We ask for 60 to 150 words (the high end is longer than our in-house labels), emphasize a personal response to the work of art, and for many exhibitions, we encourage contemporary connections to our time and city. We invite authors to write in their own voice and consider writing as they would talk to a friend. We print authors' preferred identification on the label. We have at times added a "Community Contribution" header above the label text, but omitted this in the most recent exhibition. Consistency in label design across community authors and curatorial text avoids hierarchies between sources of expertise.

At DelArt, community-authored labels go through the same editing process as curatorial labels, albeit with a lighter touch (fig. 6). As the museum's interpreter, I edit curatorial labels for clarity, accessibility, and alignment of message with exhibition goals and supporting interpretation, including panel text. In editing community-authored labels, I aim to keep as much of the author's unique perspective and voice intact as possible. Curators also review community-authored labels for historical accuracy. Any edits suggested are usually for length, clarity, or to lightly reorganize text by moving visual description to the top. Accessibility for the reader, measured in reading level, word choice, and sentence length, is balanced against preserving the unique tone and choices of the

Fig. 6. An excerpt of Ryan Hartley Smith's writing for an audio tour stop showing staff edits.

...

I am involved in the action and not an impartial spectator. ~~Not only that, -~~ I am the pirate closest to the treasure who has the best chance to grab it, since the men fighting have their backs to me. ~~The diagonal elements keep moving~~ As my eyes move around the image, ~~which starts to feel like scanning~~ I start scanning for possible exits to make my escape.

So what is the exception that snaps me out of the scene? ~~There is an~~ The exaggeration in the characters' facial features. ~~It that~~ reminds me of political cartooning styles from this era-- ~~stereotyped~~ images which often dehumanized immigrants and people of color. ~~It reminds me that e~~ Even in the escapist, imaginary fantasy that Pyle is asking me to jump into, ~~is affected by the racial politics of its day. t~~ can't be completely untangled from the racial politics of its day.

Conclusion added to the above text by the author in response to the first round of edits, and then shortened in a final editing round:

Illustration has the power to transcend two-dimensional boundaries and also to impose one-dimensional legacies. The two conflicting experiences I have when looking at this image remind me of illustration's power to transcend two-dimensional boundaries in some ways and impose one-dimensional legacies in other ways. These are enduring possibilities and dangers I keep in mind when I create contemporary illustrations in my studio.

My name is Ryan Hartley Smith, and I am an illustrator and teacher at the City University of New York.

AW Amelia Wiggins

Consider going further with one more line here - can you connect this thought to today's time and illustration or visual images today? You could do this with a statement or with a question for the viewer, eg How do the illustrations/images we see around us today continue or confront the legacy of racial injustice?

@mention or reply

AW Amelia Wiggins

Ryan, wow - that conclusion is really something, and I am going to be thinking about illustration in a new way for a long time. Transcending 2-dimensional boundaries but imposing 1-dimensional legacies. Powerful stuff.

We are way over the word limit, so I took a stab at deleting anything that seemed extraneous and really trying to boil down the end to one line. Apologies for yet another round of edits that I'm asking you to approve, but I'm really excited about this and think it's worth one more look.

@mention or reply

author when editing. Sometimes, I encourage authors to go deeper along a line of insight – as exemplified in the marked-up text for an audio tour stop in [figure 6](#). In other instances, I ask them to share in writing an idea they told me in person, or strengthen a connection back to the work of art. Authors review staff’s suggested edits and have final approval.

Ripples of Impact

The impact of community-authored labels often goes beyond the exhibition in which they are displayed. We have found that the relationships forged through this process continue to deepen after the closing date. At DelArt, label writers have gone on to lead programs at the museum, participate in new interpretive projects, and guide exhibitions as community advisors. DelArt is now looking at exhibition community advisors and label writers as a pipeline for potential board of trustee prospects. Label writers also help with recruiting new community contributors for upcoming exhibitions. It is the continued cultivation of relationships after exhibitions close that can lead to greater institutional transformation.

Conclusion

There isn’t – and shouldn’t be – a one-size-fits-all approach to community-authored labels. We offer these examples and learnings to help museum colleagues think through decisions and structure early and with intention within the specific contexts of their own projects.

We recommend carefully considering your approach to recruitment. Relying solely on existing networks within the museum and its established audiences may continue,

rather than disrupt, inherent power structures. *The Participatory Museum*, written by former Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History director Nina Simon, is a practical guide for making institutions more open and relevant. It includes resources for evaluating the intended relationship between museum and community participants.¹²

For each of our institutions, community-created interpretive content relates to and supports larger institutional change. Because labels are easily changeable, adding community voices in this form can be an early step toward making museums more visibly representative and welcoming. For example, staff members have used labels to amplify the words and expertise of locals and, in some cases, to center those who have been previously excluded.

As more museums adopt this interpretive model as a method of diversifying voices, we must also continue to examine the hierarchies of power that shape our institutions, including who’s at the table when proposing, vetting, and approving exhibition projects. And although labels are highly visible and effective for visitors, they are ultimately only valuable to the writers and the visitors who enter the exhibition. This strategy is most effective when paired with audience building and diversification resulting from larger changes across an institution. One opportunity to do so is nurturing the relationships built through label writing to continue after the exhibition closes.

Still, labels are an exhibition staple that visitors know how to use. They are capable of sparking contemplation, wonder, and personal connection. What better place to disrupt the museum’s voice as a singular authority? ■

1 To help readers understand the range in size among the institutions, we are providing approximate annual operating budgets for comparison: Southern Vermont Art Center – \$1.3 million; Delaware Art Museum – \$4.8 million; and Detroit Institute of Arts – \$38 million.

2 To learn more about the 1967 uprising in Detroit and its causes, see Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, updated revision (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

3 While developing *Art of Rebellion*, the DIA partnered especially closely with the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History (The Wright), whose own exhibition *Say it Loud: Art, History, Rebellion* featured some overlapping themes and artists, yet with distinct execution.

4 Swarupa Anila defines polyvocality as “the integration of many voices and streams of discourse.” For a more robust discussion of polyvocality and its applications in inclusive interpretive practice here and in other DIA projects, see Swarupa Anila, “Polyvocality and Representation: What We Need Now,” *Museum Education Roundtable Blog*, July 2017, <https://www.museumedu.org/polyvocality-representation-need-now/>.

5 Exit surveys assessed visitor satisfaction with exhibition elements on a 10-point scale. Though we did not evaluate the community-authored labels specifically, 74 percent of surveyed visitors ranked the information on exhibition labels as excellent, a score of nine or 10.

6 Author Alison Crites was first introduced to Stoknes’ research through an issue of *Exhibition*, which featured an interview with him. See “Q&A with Per Espen Stoknes” in “Can Exhibitions Save the Planet? Tackling Climate Change and Environmental Threats,” *Exhibition* 39, no. 1 (Spring 2020), 19–21, <https://www.name-aam.org/exhibitionspring2020>.

7 The Australian Museum provides a comprehensive overview of key findings and a bibliography related to exhibition text and visitor behavior, available on its website at <https://australian.museum/learn/teachers/learning/writing-text-and-labels/>.

8 Delaware Art Museum, “Delaware Art Museum Strategic Plan: 2017–2020,” <https://delart.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/2017-Strategic-Plan.pdf>.

9 Community-created interpretive content has been integrated into a variety of exhibitions at DelArt. Creators have included local faith leaders, children, exhibiting artists’ students, contemporary illustrators, and Black Wilmingtonians. They have responded to works that include Pre-Raphaelite paintings, American illustration, photography, modern and contemporary art.

10 Amelia Wiggins, “How the Delaware Art Museum is Centering Community Voices in Interpretive Planning,” *Alliance Blog*, June 4, 2021, <https://www.aam-us.org/2021/06/04/how-the-delaware-art-museum-is-centering-community-voices-in-interpretive-planning/>; Margaret Winslow, “Looking Back to Look Forward: Examining Institutional Racism in Reprising ‘Afro-American Images 1971,’” *Alliance Blog*, February 11, 2022, <https://www.aam-us.org/2022/02/11/looking-back-to-move-forward-examining-institutional-racism-in-reprising-afro-american-images-1971/>.

11 Delaware Art Museum, “DelArt’s Commitment to Inclusion,” <https://delart.org/mission-vision/>.

12 Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010), 187–90. Available online at <http://www.participatorymuseum.org/read/>.