



Q&A with Diane Jean-Mary

What do audiences think about the role of fun in museum exhibitions? And as creators of exhibitions, is it acceptable to make space for fun when the world is in the grip of seismic events – including a global pandemic, a reckoning with historic social injustice, and escalating climate change? In this issue, editor Ellen Snyder-Grenier interviews Diane Jean-Mary, Chief Strategy Officer at LaPlaca Cohen and leader of the firm’s ongoing Culture Track study, to learn how her work might inform our practice.



Diane Jean-Mary is a global strategy consultant with expertise in organizational change and transformation for the field of arts and entertainment. As Partner and Chief Strategy Officer at LaPlaca Cohen, Diane oversees a dynamic range of projects, nationally and internationally, on cultural entrepreneurship, mission and purpose development, brand strategy, strategic visioning, and audience development across non-profit and corporate creative institutions. She also leads the firm’s ongoing Culture Track study, an insights and innovation platform dedicated to addressing the most pressing challenges in the cultural sector.

Diane brings with her a multifaceted background in management consulting, consumer insights, behavior change, and corporate innovation. Prior to joining LaPlaca Cohen, Diane served as Associate Director of Consumer Analytics and Partnership Development at Sony Music Entertainment and as a Senior Consultant in the Finance and Economic Development practice at Booz Allen Hamilton.

Diane pursued an interdisciplinary education, operating at the intersection of business, storytelling, and socioeconomic justice. She earned a B.A. in Hispanic Studies–Economics from Columbia University, with a concentration in Film Studies. She also holds professional certifications in International Business from Georgetown University and Narrative Film-making from the FAMU Film School of Prague.

Q Ellen For the benefit of those who are unfamiliar with LaPlaca Cohen, could you talk a little bit about what you do and why?

A Diane LaPlaca Cohen is a strategic consultancy dedicated to the fields of culture and creativity. Over the past three decades, we have partnered with cultural organizations across all disciplines to help them navigate times of uncertainty, transformation, and moments of broadening and redefining their audiences. We think of culture as broad – not just museums but parks, architecture, film, music, festivals, food – anything that fosters greater empathy and connection within the vast spectrum of human experience, really anything that helps us as people understand what it means to be human. We work largely in the United States but are growing internationally to ensure the relevance and impact of the cultural sector around the globe.

As chief strategy officer, I probably have the most fun job at LaPlaca Cohen. I have the pleasure of working with arts and culture organizations to define their purpose, vision, and impact, and I get to lead an inspired team of strategists and researchers working to uncover bold solutions for our clients. Everything we do is informed by research, ideation, and organizational authenticity, always with an eye toward disrupting the field.

Q Tell us about Culture Track; what you are trying to accomplish with it?

A We started Culture Track (culturetrack.com) in the wake of 9/11: a time of great uncertainty not unlike the moment we are in now, but for different reasons. We began the study as a means of helping the cultural sector process that level of uncertainty, focusing on bolstering the future resilience and sustainability of cultural institutions and on serving audiences in the ways they needed most. Ultimately, we understood that the audience was at the center of the

institution's work, so we designed the study to center their voices and to guide how the sector should ultimately transform.

That tradition lives on. We have now fielded eight iterations of Culture Track. The latest, *Culture + Community in a Time of Crisis*, follows through on our people-centered mandate. Part of the magic is in the research and insights and reporting, but also in disseminating the material to spark dialogue and action in the sector.

Q Could you tell us about your takeaways from the work you've done around identifying "fun" as a key motivator for visitors to cultural institutions in general and specifically as it relates to museums?

A For *Culture + and Community in a Time of Crisis*, we heard from over 122,000 people in this country about what they want from arts and culture. One of the primary motivators they expressed was fun. It comes as no surprise to us considering that adventure, wonder, play, and pure enjoyment (my personal recipe for fun) are missing from many of our lives as we shelter in place.

That said, fun has topped the list of audience desires for the last two iterations of the study. In the context of museums, which are often combating perceptions of being elite, snobby institutions where only the upper echelons of society are welcome, fun is a special kind of mandate. What people are asking for is for the museum to shake itself of the formalities of the past to become a more playful, immersive, enjoyable experience. They are asking for museums to come back down to earth.

One finding I consider particularly powerful is that many people are taking creativity into their own hands: 81 percent reported doing something creative during COVID – painting, singing, cooking, etc. People are taking on the role of artists themselves.



People are becoming the engineers of their own leisure and enjoyment, perhaps because we've lost so many of our structures during the pandemic. I'm emboldened by the fact that people intuitively sense the value of creativity, that it's such an essential resource in their lives. If museums can lean into this desire for self-driven creativity and help people explore their own creative process, either through digital offerings or as audiences return to their doors, they will only be more relevant.

Q Acknowledging the context of our times – with the global coronavirus pandemic and rising protests for racial justice – and reflecting on your work, do you think visitors think it's okay to have fun? As exhibition developers and designers, is it “okay” to create fun experiences for visitors?

A It's necessary to have fun. I want to pair that with our current moment of social unrest and the ongoing movement for racial justice. You can hold fun in one hand while holding contemplation and process around critical societal issues in the other hand. They are not in tension with one another.

People often associate fun with playfulness, and depending on the setting, that becomes more or less important experientially. But, you can still have levity within an experience that is also exposing and unpacking the sins of our society. The National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC does it well: it's an entire complex of navigating visitors through traumas of race, but you have moments of pop culture and play and tactile immersion to lead you through a full emotional arc filled with sadness, joy, self-reflection, illumination, and empathy.

Q I'd like to invite you to do some blue-sky thinking. Knowing what you know, are there certain elements/approaches/something else

that you think exhibitions should include to meet visitors' desire for fun? Also, what would you advise someone creating an overall interpretive plan for exhibitions at their institution to always remember?

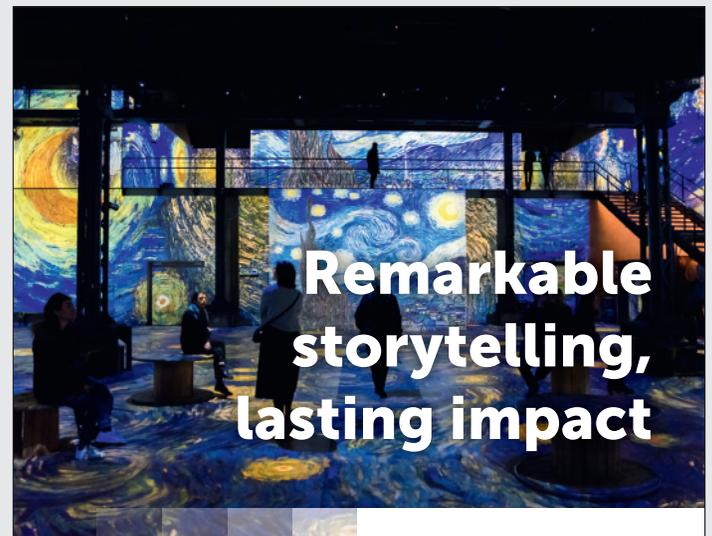
A Any experience that helps people connect with their loved ones in a novel way will be a major hit across the board. We've been in our homes and pods with others or isolated alone, and we need togetherness more than ever. The pandemic definitely complicates our preexisting rituals of gathering, socially, communally, and culturally. This is a time to get creative with how we connect, physically distancing but not necessarily socially distancing. I believe that the arts and cultural sector can play a big role in connecting people back to one another through virtual offerings that help us experience something together, even while physically apart. There also seems to be an opportunity for museums to help parents and caregivers educate children. So many parents are attempting the precarious balance of homeschooling their kids while also managing their professional identities, so anything to help make those families' lives easier can be a real asset.

Another opening in this moment is the need to redefine what we hold to be culture in this country. Especially since much of *Exhibition's* readership is made up of curators, exhibit planners/developers, and designers, it's important to realize that these are often the people who define what a museum believes to be culture. The public is now questioning the longstanding prevailing presumption that museums should be white-centered spaces. It takes the awareness that most of the prominent museums around the world are, in fact, culturally specific institutions that center white (often European) art and artistic practices. So for those museums to stay relevant in a society that is moving toward a more diverse and equitable vision, it must redefine what it holds as culture.

And, this should only be done in cooperation with the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) artists and organizations that the cultural world has excluded from curatorial and creative leadership.

Transformation requires not just self-evaluation but a genuine desire to change; a true willingness to eliminate harmful practices and course-correct historic injustices. It goes beyond one exhibition, beyond Band-Aid fixes. It calls into light that the arts have been a tool for subjecting black and brown people around the globe – but also acknowledges that art can be a powerful tool for healing our society. It just can't be superficial. It has to start within, through a commitment to ongoing investment and, in many cases, divestment – creating new space for a brighter, more just future.

White-led museums often see value in diversity; they hold visions of a world where visitors of every color, ability, and income level feel welcome within their doors. That is common. Less common is the museum that boldly steps in the path of change to earn the rare spot of relevance and loyalty in the lives of marginalized communities. Change is the more difficult path, full of complexities and vulnerabilities that unpack the power dynamics of culture, legacy, and wealth in our society and within institutions. I still have hope that museums can flourish and reclaim an essential role in our lives, despite and because of this collective pandemic-induced experience of existential reckoning. After all, that is what culture is here for – to help us make sense of our own humanity.



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