

G(hosting) Institutional Memory through Exhibition-Making

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70733/ov4wm5huzk9i>

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Abstract

“G(hosting) Institutional Memory through Exhibition Making” processes Crossman and Liu’s curatorial work on *Open Admissions: Michael Rakowitz and Early Amherst College Collections* (January 28–July 6, 2025), part of a year-long collaboration with Iraqi-American artist Michael Rakowitz at the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College. Founded in 1821 in Massachusetts, Amherst College holds collections that offer a measure of institutional history and change. The College’s art museum, the Mead, serves as the exhibition’s site for its curators to question conventions of making history, learning, the role of museums, and museum display. Co-written by Liu and Crossman, the essay poses the question: How can curators use exhibitions to work through contradictions between institutional structures that reproduce colonial legacies and the current ethical ambitions of individuals who activate museums?

The exhibition explores “negotiation” as a collaborative interplay between “ghosting” the parts of institutional practice that no longer serve their mission and hosting the dialogues and partnerships that encourage transformation. Within this framework, the curators trace the relationships of two pairs of core concepts that guided the exhibition’s development: disorientation and hospitality, habits and disruptions. Their text reflects on the importance of negotiation as part of their curatorial practice—taking a step back and sharing authority at times, while also allowing disorder or uncertainty to live within the system itself and accepting that incompleteness and absurdity are not problems to be solved but conditions to be inhabited, even if disorienting.

Footnotes

1. Our work with Rakowitz began with “Part of an Impossible Task: Michael Rakowitz” (August 24, 2024–January 5, 2025), which brought together his sculptures of Northwest Palace Room H panels from his series *The invisible enemy should not exist* (2007–ongoing) and works from the 2023 exhibition “The Monument, The Monster, and the Maquette” to explore how power is defined through cultural artifacts. Rakowitz’s work and the Mead’s Assyrian reliefs from the Northwest Palace of Nimrud, built by Ashurnasirpal II in the ninth century BCE, began a dialog about how history is told through objects and the role of institutions in this process.
2. “Us” refers to the authors Liu and Crossman, and is used to reinforce that this text, like “Open

Admissions,” was written collaboratively.

3. Sternfeld, Nora. “Introduction: How do we imagine a museum of the future?” and “Where Does Mediation Stand: An Introduction.” In *The Radical Democratic Museum*. London: Routledge. 2026. Like Sternfeld, we explore the museum as a site that is both inside and outside of society: “[the museum] is an intermediate space in which a different possible future can be negotiated and imagined against the backdrop of history.” This case study reflects how we sought to negotiate pedagogical and political aims through a collaborative process that allowed for divergence and agreement.
4. The Mead Art Museum opened in 1950 under the directorship of Charles H. Morgan, absorbing some of Amherst College’s collections like the Assyrian reliefs that preceded the museum. Images 2–3 track key dates and the movement of collections across campus since the College’s founding in 1821.
5. The CHI seminars “Crossing Cabinets: Collecting and Disseminating Across Material Boundaries,” 2023–25, and “Amherst’s Plaster Casts,” 2024–25, enhanced our conversations with faculty and staff about Amherst College collections and early collecting histories.
6. Historian Priya Satia is concerned with how history is told, made, enlivened; art, as she notes, offers an alternative to history. So, while Rakowitz’s art, the objects of past eras, can be annotated or include texts with different histories, they also are poetic; they embody multitudes and contradictions that we gesture at without resolution. Satia reminds us that “The very word ‘history’ comes from the Greek *istoreo*, meaning ‘to inquire.’ More than truth-telling or a search for models, we might reclaim it as an open-ended search for truth, in the manner of poetry.” Satia, Priya. *Time’s Monster: How History Makes History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2020.
7. Mbembe, Achille. “The Power of the Archive and Its Limits.” In *Refiguring the Archive*. Dordrecht: Springer. 2002. DOI: 10.1007/978-94-010-0570-8_2.
8. Amherst College’s athletic teams were casually called the “Lord Jeffs” and Lord Jeff was the unofficial mascot until 2016.
9. Some of this work is validating emotions as integral to how political meaning, identity, power, and representation are understood. Doyle, Jennifer. *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2013. As Doyle describes in this text, scholars and critics are conditioned to write from an “analytical” standpoint devoid of feeling that can lead to an oversimplification of art that invites political questions and emotions.
10. For example, the label for panel S-06 includes the following information: “Location: Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio; year excavated: 1847, by Austen Henry Layard at the palace of Ashurnasirpal II in Kalhu (Nimrud); previous collection: Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, accession #: S.1855.3; acquired in 1856, Gift of Dr. Henry John Lobdell (Class of 1849); year sold by Amherst College: 1942, in even exchange by Amherst College to Joseph Brummer Gallery for the 12 objects on display; year purchased by the Cleveland Museum of Art: 1943; current inventory #: 1943.246; Fueled by an insatiable appetite for Near Eastern antiquities, sites throughout Iraq are being worked daily by teams of looters in search of “merchandise.”—Selma Al-Radi.
11. The palace symbolized power and served as the seat of government for Ashurnasirpal II. Over the centuries, the palace was abandoned, damaged by environmental causes and human conflicts, looted, and ultimately destroyed by ISIS in 2015
12. Graham Harman’s Object-Oriented Ontology advocates for a non-hierarchical perspective in exploring people, works of art, archives, and other kinds of materials together. We draw from Harman’s reflections alongside anti-imperial theoretical perspectives and practices like those of Amy Lonetree (Ho-Chunk) and Walter Mignolo. These writings, among others, inspire and shape our commitment to decentralizing curatorial authority, bringing forward the often-invisible frictions in the curatorial process, and exposing moral and pragmatic considerations together, finding meaning across a web of objects and agencies.
13. Loyer, Jessie. “Collections Are Our Relatives: Disrupting the Singular, White Man’s Joy That Shaped

- Collections.” In *The Collector and the Collected: Decolonizing Area Studies Librarianship*. Ed. Meagan Browndorf, Erin Pappas, and Anna Arays. Sacramento: Library Juice Press. 2021. “Boundless” was a project that included a two-part exhibition curated by Heid E. Erdrich (Ojibwe) in 2023–24, development of curriculum, a catalog, and changes to the Mead’s practices and collections.
14. “The collection is animate, and there is an emotional response to visiting our relatives.” Loyer, “Collections Are Our Relatives,” p. 12.
 15. Taking inspiration from Amherst College professor Ludmila Ferrari’s 2025 undergraduate course “The Common Arts: Gardening, Telling, Making Refuge” and our work with Rakowitz on an iteration of *Enemy Kitchen* (2003–ongoing), our thinking about radical hospitality deepened and became pliable as we sought to understand the dynamic needs and imagined desires of the objects, to the richness of their symbolism, material, and cultural histories. Participants from the local academic communities, students, staff, and faculty cooked with Rakowitz and gathered with other area residents of the area to share a meal and stories, creating a space for connection.
 16. Bishop, Claire. *Radical Museology: Or, What’s ‘Contemporary’ in Museums of Contemporary Art?* London: Verso, 2012.
 17. Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Michigan Press, 1997).
 18. The format of the disorientation guide was suggested by the Mead’s head of education, Emily Potter-Ndiaye, offering anchors while maintaining the exhibition as a site reflective of a process or conversation without resolve.
 19. Feejee mermaids were widely exhibited in Western museums and sideshows during the nineteenth-century, most famously in P.T. Barnum’s 1842 exhibition, which left contemporary observers uncertain of its authenticity. See Steven C. Levi, “P.T. Barnum and the Feejee Mermaid,” *Western Folklore* Vol. 36, No. 2 (1977): 149–158.
 20. O’Neill, Paul. *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2012. Sternfeld’s *The Radical Democratic Museum* is a useful reference here, too, as it thinks through pedagogical goals and different forms of mediation that have been tested in museums. “Open Admissions” directly addressed the embedded status of the Mead within Amherst College, exploring learning across multiple collections, disciplines and time, while seeking to level longstanding hierarchies within the institution.
 21. Ngai, Sianne. *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form*. City: Belknap Press. 2022.
 22. Anna Watkins Fisher argues that parasitic resistance emphasizes “exploiting the host’s vulnerabilities,” carrying an inherently confrontational edge that presupposes artists are always dependent on or oppositional to institutions—a fundamentally pessimistic framing that may not account for more collaborative or generative models of institutional engagement. Watkins Fisher, Anna. *The Play in the System: The Art of Parasitical Resistance*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2020.
<https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478091660>.