

Reflecting on the Museum Association’s Learning and Engagement Manifesto

Cultural rights and cultural democracy – A case study from the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM), Kayleigh Bryant-Greenwell, Head of Public Programs, SAAM

“Access to and participation in culture is a basic human right.”

Full inclusion and participatory access to culture is increasingly becoming a defining issue in 21st century American museums. As public callouts of exclusion and oppressive behaviors escalate it is clear that museums are not doing enough to truly be institutions for all people. Lack of equitable representation of historically marginalized cultures and peoples continues to fester discord between museums and their publics.

Now, as museums respond to new challenges risen in dual pandemics: the Covid-19 global health crisis and the ongoing racial inequities and violence plaguing American society, we must reimagine how we embody inclusion in our work.

That’s exactly what we did in public programming at SAAM. In late 2018 we adopted a new inclusion policy and strategy to determine how we would present multivocal programming with our audiences. Looking back and evaluating our recent presentation history, we found we had the opportunity to do more to progress our inclusive values.

We determined that all multivocal programming, including but not limited to panel discussions, symposia, and conversations could no longer reflect an “entirely homogenous” perspective. Meaning that programs presenting multiple views need to present a *diversity* of multiple views.

Jump ahead to 2020, where beginning in mid-March in response to the coronavirus outbreak and subsequent institutional closings, we are now presenting an entirely digital slate of public programs. Applying our inclusion policy in the most avant-garde

way to date, we presented our first-ever entirely women of Color roster of speakers for our popular endowed series, *Clarice Smith Distinguished Lectures in American Art*.

We seized the opportunity to amplify voices of Black, Indigenous, and Brown women leaders in the arts, resulting in our most viewed programming of the entire decade-plus old series. Our presentation with artist Bisa Butler, a Black woman, garnered a 77% increase in views compared to the total views from the previous two years combined, and proves to be in the top three most-viewed programs in the entire series.

Representational inclusion is one way museums can safeguard the cultural rights of all people. Inclusion that goes beyond tokenism and exploitation is a fundamental principle of cultural rights and cultural democracy. Now is the time for museums to infuse inclusive practices into every aspect of our work.



Caption: A visitor views Nam June Paik's *Electronic Superhighway*, 1995, collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Image provided by Smithsonian American Art Museum.