

The Imaginary Museum

The Importance of Imagination

2014

By Marcus Civin

I have been teaching the graduate course Interdisciplinary Approaches to Curatorial Practice (IACP) at Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) since 2011. In the first two years that I taught the course, I think I spent so much time focusing on the general problems with the culture of museums that many of the students said: *Forget museums. There are too many problems there.* This year, in IACP, I have tried not to let the students walk away from museums. I have made a habit of saying: *But, some of our ideas could be represented there, in museums. Some of that history could be ours. Maybe the museum could be a useful institution. Why not go in there? Why not somehow work there?*

Ellen Lupton, director of MICA's Graphic Design MFA program, is also a curator concerned with the future of museums. The two of us decided to encourage our students to work together to propose imaginary museums. What would they come up with if they did not have to worry about budgets, about permissions, about real estate or about other physical limitations? What would our students come up with if they could immediately call museums into being and then direct them, program them, populate them? Could student-directed museums be absurdly unrealistic, but provocative, reflect high-quality thinking, look crisp and resolved if not ever actually needing to be fully realized? What is the next newest museum? What comes after museums? What will the word "museum" even mean in the future?

The Graphic Design and Curatorial Practice students have come up with museums, anti-museums, parodies of museums, nomadic museums, museums as centers for scholarship, activist museums, museums with every object for sale, and museums more on the web or on the street than in a fixed position. These imaginary museums pose questions upon questions, questions like: *How do you curate data? What if museums exhibited mostly notes—the beginnings of ideas—rather than resolved ideas or finished products? Can you free the museum from the corporation? What about a secret museum, or secrets within museums? What if a museum felt like a search engine? What if a museum felt and looked like a cruise ship?*

None of the student-generated museums are one thing. Each one is flexible. Many of the museums have multiple simultaneous platforms. And, many of the museums don't look too much like other museums. These new museums are museums because the curators and designers say they are. These museums don't correct existing museums. These museums are here for now.

After all, these students are coming to you in large part as representatives of a light-up-server-farm of diagrammed-emoticon-beeping-buzz. They are not limited by anyone's hardware. They are nimble. They think of new spaces as new spaces. They want to understand history, but they break hard with convention. These students have something to say. They're texting through a google-ized sensorium. They think while they tweet, while they pin, while they map, while they roar. They're texting to try and nail down this post-post-modern cultural froth. They are insistent that old spaces should not un-necessarily determine the geography of new spaces. New spaces have new entryways. New spaces have new vocabulary, new heroes, new jokes, new value, and new monuments.

One of our lodestars for this Imaginary Museum project is John Cotton Dana (1826-1929). A rebel and a great American populist, this librarian pioneered open stacks and children's reading rooms, he bought and lent library books in the native languages of immigrant populations living in the vicinities of the libraries where he worked, and he literally advertised reading. As the

founding director of the Newark Museum, he wanted no grand sculpture hall, he wanted local industrial displays; he wanted visitors to be able to observe the handiwork that goes into making a museum; he wanted a diverse and cheaply acquired collection used by students and lent freely to home, studio, school, factory, and churches. He wanted the museum to be a central node in the community. Yet, to Dana, the community as a whole was ultimately more important than the museum itself.

A reporter from the *Newark Evening News* wrote up Dana's address to a 1916 American Association of Museums Conference. "It is easy to get exhibits," Dana said, "but hard to get brains." In the spirit of John Cotton Dana, one student in IACP, Kimi Hanauer, wrote: "A museum promotes learning and social awareness through the distribution of art and information, attempting to serve a broad audience." In presenting her own museum, Hanauer also referenced David Joselit's recent book, *After Art* (Princeton University Press, 2012), and argued that a museum must become a blob, "a structure which is in constant change and interaction, a structure which also transforms and moves between disciplines and forms, all the while interacting and reacting with its audience."

Many students at MICA want to be truly interdisciplinary and they also want to make social change. They want magic, they want improvisation—jazz, dub, and rock-and-roll—but they look to family centers for inspiration. They want art to make a difference. Still, they are not interested in the nebulous zone of patronizing social practice do-goodery. They want to root down in communities where it means something to stand up and speak.

I asked the Curatorial Practice students participating in Imaginary Museum to read some of John Cotton Dana's writings that I dug out of the dusty archive at the Newark Library. The students collaborated to create a suggestive and forceful list. Some points are stolen or paraphrased from Dana, some are re-purposed, and some are new. Please take these twenty-five points with you as you explore the Imaginary Museums these students are designing and curating. Imagine these points emblazoned on a tile frieze or scrolling along a digital ticker running above the imaginary pillars of great imaginary museums.

THE IMAGINARY MUSEUM COULD BE A USEFUL INSTITUTE THAT WOULD HAVE:

1. Free admission
2. Free shuttles for visitors in need
3. A well-paid staff including teachers
4. Childcare facilities and staff
5. Paid interns
6. Pets on the premises
7. A teaching collection of thought-provoking objects of every material and medium
8. Displays on art and objects in relation to social conditions
9. Performance
10. Films and round-the-clock screening rooms
11. A minimum of white walls
12. Sunrooms, natural light, and solar energy
13. Comfy furniture
14. Outdoor play space
15. Photography permitted
16. A place for your own art
17. Local industrial displays
18. All collections on-line and open source
19. A library with free scanners and printers
20. An art lending library
21. A department encouraging the use of the city and its surroundings
22. Science and art collaborations

23. Branches of the institute in storefronts, schools, and religious institutions
24. Interactive technology that allows you to choose your own artwork to display
25. Interactive technology that allows you to engage with people living elsewhere