

The partnership between JJ and the CMA represents a challenge to the hierarchy between photographs displayed in galleries and museums and those available to people every day on their smartphones.

#MobilePhotoNow: Two Art Worlds, One Hashtag

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In the winter of 2015, the Columbus Museum of Art (CMA) co-curated an exhibition with the loose-knit mobile photography collective known as JJ Community. *#MobilePhotoNow* included images created in response to a series of prompts and shared on the photo sharing and social networking application Instagram®. The exhibition reflected a community-based curatorial practice (Keys & Ballengee-Morris, 2001) demonstrating new possibilities for participatory art and culture in the age of social media. This portrait of how the project came to be is presented as an example of how art world factions might be brought together, in both virtual and real spaces, through interactive technologies and practices.

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In 2007, the Columbus Museum of Art (CMA) in Columbus, Ohio adopted this mission: "To create great experiences with great art for everyone." When compared with other museum mission statements, CMA's may seem simplistic.¹ There is no mention of collections, conservation, or the international art world. But considering the statement in relation to experiments in programming and exhibition the museum has engaged in over the past decade, the intention of these words, and the complex relationships they beckon between art and people, is clear.

The 2015 exhibition *#MobilePhotoNow* offers one example. The show explored and put on display forms of community-based curatorial practice (Keys & Ballengee-Morris, 2001) that have developed within our digitally-enhanced participatory culture (Jenkins, Ito, & Boyd, 2015; O'Neil, 2014). Featuring pictures made by over 200 Instagram^{®2} photographers from around the world, this exhibition helped the museum break down barriers to entry for artists and viewers and build bridges between factions of the artistic community. What follows is a portrait (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) of the exhibition describing how it came to be and key factors that enabled its evolution. It is followed by theoretically-grounded advice for art educators interested in teaching their students to reflect on their own participation in digital social networks and related collective curatorial practices.

Mobile Photo Then

In 2012, The Columbus Museum of Art, in collaboration with The Jewish Museum (New York, NY), mounted *The Radical Camera* highlighting images made by members of The Photo League. The Photo League was a group of socially engaged photographers working in New York City who took their cameras out of the studio and into the streets. They focused their lenses on the lives of everyday people, including minorities and other overlooked communities, doing

¹ For a complete report and analysis of this mission statement, see Coldiron (2015).

² Instagram is a social media application used mostly on mobile communication devices to share images. Users *follow* other users, some of whom they know in life and others whom they know online only and communicate in response to images they post. Users can *tag* their images with key terms to enable others with similar observations and interests can find their images.

everyday things from the end of the Great Depression to the start of the Cold War. Inspired by photographers like Lewis Hine and Dorothea Lange, members of The League "propelled documentary photography from factual images to more challenging ones—from bearing witness to questioning one's own bearings in the world" (Evans & Klein, 2012, p. 22). The group included many prominent photographers like Paul Strand, Sid Grossman, Weegee, and Lisette Model.

One could easily draw a line connecting The Photo League and 21st century citizen reporters who use smart phone cameras to share what they see and hear in their own communities. CMA Digital Communications Manager Jennifer Poleon drew another connection between another Photo League-sponsored activity, known as "Photo Hunts," and digital photo sharing applications and practices gaining traction at the time the *The Radical Camera* was on view. During their camera-enabled scavenger hunts, League members assigned one another a prompt, went out to take photos in response to that word or phrase, then came back to develop the pictures, and post them in a pop-up exhibition (Silverman, 2015). Poleon related these themes to *hashtags*³ that photographers were using to connect their images with others' in emerging online venues like flickr and Instagram[®].

Between 2012 and 2014, Poleon and her colleagues launched their own series of hunts. Challenges were inspired by ongoing exhibitions at the museum. Catherine Evans, the CMA Curator of Photography who co-curated *The Radical Camera*, selected images from the submissions for each category which were displayed in the Community Gallery of the museum's Center for Creativity. Nanette Maciejunes, CMA's Director, recalled that walking into the opening for the show she didn't recognize anyone. "That's when I knew we were onto something. We were connecting with a new audience" (N. Maciejunes, personal communication, February 6, 2015).

³ Hashtags are terms used to label images on Instagram and other social media sites to help other users find images with similar content. They appear after a caption like this: #hashtag.

Mobile Photo Now

JJ Community

CMA's photo hunts drew worldwide participation, including members of the JJ Community on Instagram®. JJ is a virtual collective, bound together by a common hashtag (#jj) members use to mark their images. Most posts are made in response to daily prompts published by the community's leaders, known as editors. "It's a place to come together for inspiration and encouragement" (J. Johnson, personal communication, March, 2016). Some prompts are formalist like *black & white* or *group shots* while some are object-oriented like *cars*, *the beach*, or *winter*. Others are more conceptual and thought-provoking like *where I live*, *tourist trap*, and *freedom* (see Figure 1).

Thousands of people around the world post responses to these prompts. Each is assigned a unique hashtag (i.e. "#jj_forum1055"). When a user posts an image with the daily hashtag, she is expected to find and respond to at least three other posts in that forum. The opportunity to share work and obtain feedback from peers transforms the act of making and posting images from private amusement or documentation to a creative act of connectivity. As Davies and Merchant (2009) found in their observations of similar groups on the photo sharing site flickr®:

Discussion can remain steadfastly about the images and content of the group—but frequently interactivity develops in such ways that identities are explored and presented through the modalities of word and image. Interactivity is usually enthusiastic and lively; people learn about each other's lives—often allowing for cross-cultural comparison and learning; mentoring relationships often develop; in-jokes emerge through banter and fun; people sometimes even email or send gifts; and it is often through groups that new friendships might form that result in face-to-face interaction. (p. 43)

JJ Editor Kevin Kuster describes the community as a modern-day pen pal project, one which yields nearly immediate responses. JJ founder Josh Johnson echoed this idea in his remarks at the opening of #MobilePhotoNow when he expressed his personal love for the community he helped create. In a shaky voice, he described Instagram® as a place where "this buttoned up preacher's son could be himself" (J. Johnson, personal communication, February 6, 2015). He reminded the audience of the connection between dopamine and addiction, how we respond emotionally to immediate response and gratification. Try 30 second feedback, he suggested before warning, "Powerful things can have pluses and minuses. Some

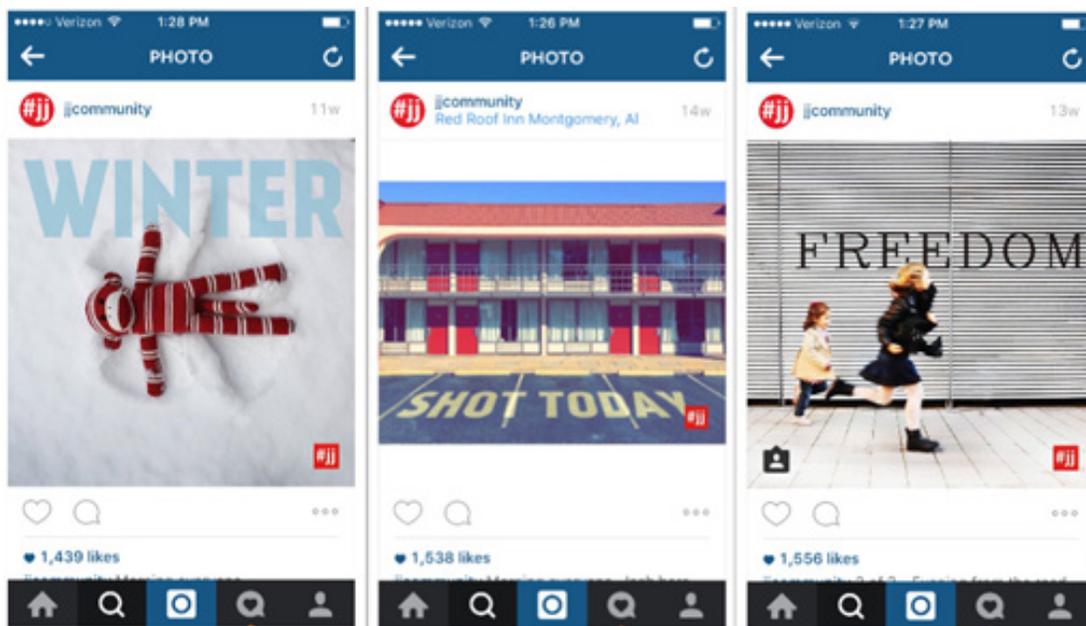


Figure 1. Select prompts from the JJCommunity Instagram® feed.



Figure 2. Visitors posting to Instagram from the gallery. (Photo credit: Tim Perdue)

of us spend too much time taking pictures. But, if you have to have an addiction, taking pictures isn't really a bad one to have" (J. Johnson, personal communication, February 6, 2015).

In addition to the feedback participants receive from other users, JJ editors select images each day to highlight, just as CMA did with their photo hunts. When Johnson and Kuster noticed members of JJ using the hashtag #CMAphotohunt, they contacted the museum about a possible partnership. Kuster, who worked as a photo editor at *Playboy* for nearly two decades, reported that the museum

was very collaborative. . . . Taking all my experiences [into account], typically museums have a high brow perspective; 'We are the arbiters of good taste and we'll tell you what's good.' But they were very impressed when they saw the level of talent displayed in our community. (K. Kuster, personal communication, May 12, 2016).

From her perspective, CMA Director Maciejunes noted how JJ's work paralleled the museum's commitment to celebrating and enabling participation in the creative process (personal communication, February 6, 2015). Speaking about the exhibition, Maciejunes lights up. She recognizes that she and her staff had

something to learn from JJ and the engaged following they amassed.

From Pixels to Paper

During the Fall of 2014, CMA and JJ Community collectively organized four challenges inspired by images from *The Photo League: street, portrait, black & white, and community*. Collectively, these forums generated 45,000 submissions from approximately 5,000 photographers in 89 countries. A jury process through the JJ Community yielded about 600 images with 320 finalists selected by Tyler Cann, CMA's Curator of Contemporary Art, and independent curator Lisa Kurzner. Of those, just over 100 photographs were printed and mounted for display, this time in one of the museum's main galleries (see Figure 2). Final selections that were not printed were included in a slideshow that played as part of the exhibition.

Merilee Mostov, CMA Chief Engagement Officer, heard from participants that seeing their work hanging in the museum filled them with a sense of pride, different from what they had achieved through their digital postings and interactions. "You made my dreams come true," one participant told Mostov, who suggested seeing their work on the walls of the museums "links people to the museum, each other, and the

community” (personal communication, February 10, 2016).

Kuster reiterated these sentiments and spoke to the importance of these images in the museum context.

I’ve always known that there’s something about an image printed and put on a wall. It takes on a new importance and excitement, especially in the digital age. On our phone it seems disposable. There are always more. But when you stop and print and frame and hang it, people stop and say, “This is important.” (personal communication, May 12, 2016)

Kuster’s comments support the notion that as we clutch our phones like security blankets, we still find comfort in tangible objects and images selected and

displayed in museums (Davis, 1995). The fact that photographers traveled to Columbus to see their work on display at the museum supports this notion. Jill Shomer, a writer, photographer, and magazine editor from New York, for example, made the trip to Columbus to see her work at the museum although she has over 40,000 people following and responding to her Instagram feed. Tim Needles, an art educator from Long Island, also made the journey. Needles had someone take a photo of him in front of his image hanging in the museum (see Figure 3) and posted it on Instagram® in what Kuster described as a self-reflexive feedback loop (personal communication, May 12, 2016).

Lingering Factions

The partnership between JJ and the CMA represents a challenge to the hierarchy between photographs displayed in galleries and museums and those available to people every day on their smartphones. However, not all factions of the art world agree that these images hold equal artistic merit. CMA took a creative and curatorial risk hosting this show. At the time of *#MobilePhotoNow*, the International Center of Photography (ICP), had yet to honor Instagram® photographers with time and space in their galleries (Pollack, 2015). ICP seems to be moving in that direction under new leadership, though some, including *New Yorker* critic and ICP guest curator at ICP Vince Aletti, oppose the move:

Instagram® could not interest me less. . . . Instagram® is an exciting way for people to communicate, but it is so ephemeral and so of the moment. How do you build a show around that, and why would anyone want to see a show about that when they can sit at home and scroll through their feed? (as cited in Pollack, 2015, para. 8)

As if anticipating such criticism, CMA Director Maciejunes noted in an interview about the exhibition, “We are a serious museum and we do serious work. I think this shows mobile photography is reaching a new level of creativity and I think we’re all



Figure 3. Tim Needles self-portrait with his photograph (top right in red) displayed at The Columbus Museum of Art as part of *#MobilePhotoNow*. (Photo credit: Tim Needles)

going to need to take this seriously in the art world” (Hutmacher, 2015).

#*MobilePhotoNow* stands as a suggestion that the camera phone ought to be considered as the next evolution in a long list of cameras including the Brownie, Polaroid, 35mm, and DSLR. Fred Richten, Dean of the school at ICP seems to agree, “I respect enormously the 20th-century traditions, but I don’t see the issue being which technology you use. . . . The question is whether you are making impactful images—not how you got there to do that” (cited in Pollack, 2015, para. 7).

Mobile Photo Meets Art Education

Discipline-Based Art Education (DBAE) was arguably successful in bringing studies of art history, interpretation, and theoretical analysis to bear on the studio production that dominated mid-20th century art classes. The movement was built around the work of various arts professionals including art historians and critics. However, little progress was made to inform students of the role curators play in museums and the world of art at-large. Even as art educators have moved beyond DBAE to adopt more comprehensive approaches to teaching and learning, curatorial practices have been largely ignored. Social media applications popular with users of all ages, like Instagram[®] and Pinterest,[®] can offer art educators easy entry into the study of curatorial activities.

Within the context of Web 2.0 social practices, use of the term *curate* has grown and is now used routinely, in everyday discourse, to apply to “any aspect of collecting and displaying tangible or intangible material culture” (Edmunson, 2015, para. 1). O’Neil (2014) notes it is human nature to collect and categorize. She suggests the use of social media-based curatorial practices by individuals and groups with shared interests highlight “how the citizen curator and their counterparts in cultural institutions have much in common in their practices and interests” (p. 2). The question that emerges for art educators relates to how they might engage students about the processes and implications surrounding their curatorial practices and help them consider their actions in relation to those of professional curators.

Tyler Cann, CMA’s Curator of Contemporary Art, suggests engaging students in curatorial practices can be as simple as asking them to “put two images next to each other, on a screen or a wall” (personal communication, May 18, 2016). He suggests educators should encourage students to, “Choose images carefully, so that you have a point. Get the students thinking about their similarities and differences. How does having them next to one another change their meaning? What do the images say to each other?”

In fact, many students already do this on their Instagram feeds where teens report making ongoing changes to the images they display (Dougherty, 2016). While most adult users continue to add an endless stream of images to their profiles, younger Instagrammers continuously delete and rearrange the images on their pages keeping as few as a dozen images at a time. One teenaged user told me, “People sometimes pick a theme. Mine used to be pink, but I’m transitioning to red and orange” (R. Spurgeon, personal communication, May 16, 2016). Setting and working within parameters such as this pushes Instagram from mindless amusement to a design challenge that echoes Cann’s description of curatorial activity.

According to a Pew Research survey (2015), 73% of teens in the U.S. possess smartphones. A great number of them are using Instagram and other photo sharing applications. Art educators can tap into that activity and help students reflect on their participation with this simple process based on JJ Community challenges.

- As a class, pick a theme and determine how long a challenge will remain open.
- Post and tag images related to the theme using a common hashtag.
- Vote on the best images in each theme. Discuss the results of the vote and collectively determine criteria for final selections for an exhibition.
- Display the show, in virtual or in real space, and solicit feedback.

This is just one straightforward example of how art educators might engage students in curatorial practice using Web 2.0 technologies.

Mobile Photo Moving Forward

In 1987, Blandy and Congdon (1988) launched the exhibition *Boats, Bait, and Fishing Paraphernalia: A Local Folk Aesthetic* at the School of Art Gallery of Bowling Green State University (Bowling Green, OH). The exhibition was intended to position functional objects related to fishing as objects of art. It was also a means of attracting new visitors to the gallery and “suggesting new ways of encouraging aesthetic contemplation, supporting a community based aesthetic and recognizing art in daily living” (Blandy & Congdon, 1988, p. 245). #MobilePhotoNow used the popularity of mobile photography to meet these same goals.

Like many museums today, a primary operating objective of the Columbus Museum of Art is increas-

ing community outreach and engagement, reaching into the community and inviting the public into the museum (Hein, 2000). Using a popular creative platform like Instagram® to achieve this goal builds on the inherently participatory nature of social media. Art educators interested in aligning their teaching with contemporary cultural and social practices should take note of changes in how museums and curatorial practices operate as a result of these developments. #MobilePhotoNow offers one model art educators can channel to explore such practices with their students.

Notes

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