As a culture and a people, we have the permanent, immovable past, in the form of objects. And we have the impermanent, shifting present, as created by those who perform as temporal actors influencing the past, present and future. People themselves as they live have no preset story or cohesive narrative, not if they're living right. Yet once those people are no longer living and can no longer act of their own accord, then the external narrative of those lives and the times in which they lived begins to form. The story congeals and the objects begin to speak in place of the individuals. Those objects become priceless as physical proof of a life and a time. But not a single thing in the entire world is as important as a living individual to continue the dialogue with the past, to create and perpetuate the value of those objects. Without people, objects are empty. Therefore, the most important focus museums can maintain is not on objects, but on visitors.

Museums are gatekeepers, ultimately. It is a responsibility museum professionals take seriously, and it is one with a wealth of possibilities. One of those mandates is to preserve the past as a means to understanding the present. However, few in the museum field have ample opportunity to

present current events, either due to institutional procedure, a paucity of resources or a perceived disconnect with mission. Yet, if museums, as Elaine Gurian states, are the tangible evidence of the spirit of a civilized society, then it is the responsibility of public institutions to craft some portion of their displays to confront the present, the culture most relevant to visitors today.

I will discuss this in two parts: First I will talk about the two approaches to the past that affect how museums view themselves, and then I will discuss the importance of featuring the present, and briefly discuss methods by which current events can be introduced.

We'll begin with an object. | Imagine a coin. Choose whatever coin you like, whether | a Roman denarius, |a Greek drachma, |a Japanese yen, |a Yap stone |or the quotidian American quarter, originally based |on the Spanish pieces of eight. I've given you one to make the process easier. |A coin functions in a number of ways – as a representation of wealth most obviously, but also the product of a civilization, an object of metal artistically rendered, the material evidence of human processes on

the earth. A coin is also a connection between time, linking us to the past both visually and metaphorically, although its physicality is very much in the present. It is itself a perfect metaphor for museum practice, as its temporal weight has certain equivalencies to museums themselves. We'll come back to this, but I want you to hold onto that penny.

Now, a coin has an obverse side and a reverse side. |And when you flip a coin, calling heads or tails, both sides bear equal importance. |Let's apply this dual thinking to museums. There are two diametrically opposed, more-or-less-famous quotes that influence the way we in museums think. The first is by |British author L.P. Hartley, |used by historian David Lowenthal for the title of his book |"The Past is a Foreign Country". This statement has many potential meanings. The past is exotic; it is enticing the same way |a weekend in Bali is enticing. It is a place with certain appeal and charms, but few of us would want to be there permanently lest reality set in and we resort to our natural discombobulation in such a setting. We in the present lack the conceptual background necessary to fully understand what the past was like. It is not merely a context issue, either; we do not have the same visceral environment. |We do not dress

the same, |eat the same foods |or engage in the same activities and therefore on a sensory level we do not have the point of reference needed to fully synthesize our knowledge with their experiences. In the world of the present we can never fully appreciate the past because we can never actually immerse ourselves in it in the same terms as it was initially created.

Museums tend to amplify this reaction, equal parts dissonant appeal and bewilderment, by their very design. |By placing objects in glass boxes thereby limiting interactivity with them, and rarely providing opportunities for exploration beyond didactic label copy, museums inadvertently create a level of separation between visitors and objects. While the need to preserve objects is paramount to the responsibilities museums undertake as part of their missions, visitors might find themselves in a position of being less valuable than the objects on display. We have a multi-sensory approach to the world around us, but museum displays often have no sound, no smell and limited physical presence.

This separation is further intensified by the subject matter often presented in these institutions. The lives of visitors are ongoing and immediate, with shifts taking place in the present and future tenses. Museums, however, tend only to present the past, usually the distant past, which for most of us is as foreign as |modern Lapland |or ancient Greece. Most nonvisitors can be forgiven for believing that museums do not hold anything relevant to their lives, and when they do come, they are only provided with | dry, authoritarian text panels and objects that they cannot touch, not an immersive, interactive sensory experience relevant to the ways they experience the world. Because of this lack of context and contact, the past is not merely a foreign country; it may as well be another planet. |Mars, for instance.

And speaking of a different world, let's look at another famous quote, |this time from William Faulkner. |"The past is never dead. It isn't even past." Although as opposed to Hartley's statement as possible, it is equally true. The present is built on the past, an amalgamation of old and new, and it is impossible to ever completely separate the two from each other. Looking from this perspective, the past may be a foreign country, |

but it is not a foreign animal: we recognize ourselves in its gaze and we reflect on it to help guide us through our own present and into the future. The past is a valuable tool for understanding who we are today.

Historian Steven Conn describes museums as creators of synecdoches and metonyms, by which a singular object within them will stand for the whole of a particular species, event, genre or other category. Museums have clearly played a role in social memory formation by highlighting particular events, individuals, geologic periods and cultural movements through their collections. | These objects, as arranged and interpreted by museums, serve as mnemonic devices for the totality of our national and cultural identity, presenting for our viewing pleasure our achievements, our universe and our collected wisdom, a demonstration of how we have progressed. As museum thinker Nina Simon has observed, social networks are made of individuals focused around particular objects, and in a museum context objects can be used to connect people to museums. But through display culture, museums also restrict and define what parts of that greater global identity are genuine human achievements and discoveries. Furthermore, museums legitimate some activities at the

expense of others through passive exclusion, essentially dividing up the world |like a pizza. I

This process of self-defined definition is not entirely negative, however. The best example to prove this statement is the rise of museums such as |Te Papa in New Zealand in which the institution uses methods of display that have previously excluded the indigenous Maori from Western narratives of progress to their advantage. Here, the museum's use of modern technology and permanent exhibits transcending past, present and future create a sense of the Maori as a living, modern culture that is part of the world today.

The use of museums to define individual pasts in relation to a more inclusive present will only continue. Museums, which act as places of neutrality and perform as accepted venues for displaying heritage and culture, can place marginalized and disenfranchised groups on equal footing with their oppressors. It is no longer true that history is written solely by the victors. Memorialization through the creation of museums presents visual and tangible proof that these people exist and matter.

Particularly in museums such as these, the past is both past and present, as much current practice as historical proof.

These two ideas of the past - as foreign place and as present influence - are metaphorical sides of the same coin, and both have implications for museums in the present. Whichever viewpoint a museums chooses for itself, both of these ideas show that it is not enough to have interesting objects on display. It is not enough to write mission statements declaring that the museum is a place for learning and enlightenment. It is not enough to do visitor studies and write surveys. Museums must actively consider |how to reach out to audiences by reaching into their lives. Museums have an unfortunate, but well deserved, reputation | as large buildings filled with dead things and weird paintings and dusty old bric-a-brac. That reputation has been fostered through creating exhibitions that continue to speak to only a sliver of the communities they serve. This needs to change.

The challenge is clear: How can museums reach into the lives of their publics? Piaget's stages of learning emphasizes that |humans cannot

process new information until we are prepared to receive it. This suggests that |museums must connect information the public is likely familiar with to information that they are not. While collections tend to be focused on certain areas of time and place, however, we who are living, we in the present, must be able to connect the past as displayed in the museum to our own lives. Elaine Gurian has explained that |object-based museums conform to expectations placed on them from without, and that "inclusionist" museums, |which use technology to enhance their exhibits, claim to be more accessible to their audiences. Neither approach, however, focuses on the lives of their visitors and responds to them in as close to real time as possible. Neither approach discusses the possibility of posing the collections in response to current events and framing exhibits in the context of our time. If the past is indeed a foreign country, a persnickety one that refuses to back down and lie still, then the present is the result of all that humankind have accomplished, good and bad. It is the only common ground some of us can claim with others. If institutions are to remain relevant, they must speak directly about the events and concerns of those they claim to serve.

The American Association of Museums, in their landmark 1991 publication *Excellence and Equity*, makes this point clear through this statement: |

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> "Museums can no longer confine themselves simply to preservation, scholarship and exhibitions independent of the social context in which they exist. They must recognize that what we are calling the public dimension of museums leads them to perform the public service of education – a term we use in its broadest sense to include exploration, study, observation, critical thinking, contemplation and dialogue" .

Let's look closely at the idea of social context in museums. They do not create |a social context by themselves – they are part of society, functioning no longer only as preservers, scholars and exhibitors, but as a reflection of the needs, desires and concerns of their communities. The outreach they conduct must be on the level of their audiences, and must be inclusive of events and subjects meaningful to them. Museums exist to serve their audiences, and collections are perhaps the most remarkable means by which this can be achieved.

Therefore, if museums are to be relevant, and if they are to act as good citizens in their social contexts, museums have a moral obligation to serve their publics by confronting current events directly. We are now an instantaneous society, one in which information is readily available |to virtually everyone through the egalitarian powers of the Internet. Museums are valued, according to Gurian, for their thoughtful perspectives, their "timeless" meaning making and their neutrality in the face of competing ideologies. This thoughtfulness, however, plus a certain institutional malaise in some instances, can prevent museums from presenting current events at all. |The teachable moment |and the teachable object are disconnected by a lack of perceived opportunity and possible resources. The visitors, however, are present-oriented, and if museums are indeed places of meaning making, then visitors will seek us out to find examples of meaning relevant to their lives.| Museums and cultural institutions must focus on today, because they do a disservice to the public not to represent them as they are, in the times in which they live. |

Aside from becoming present oriented, cultural institutions need to be available. A number of institutions are not open after 5 PM. Now

museums, in addition to acting as places of knowledge and discovery, are also places of refreshment, as noted as early as 1917 by |John Cotton Dana. The restorative powers of visual culture and the intriguing beauty of the natural world can easily provide mental refreshment, an alternative to other gathering places. But no one can come to experience this if |they're not open. Their primary audience will naturally consist of people who will come when they are available, and if they are only open one evening a week at most, it would be very difficult to develop a regular audience outside of the current constituency. If museums want new visitors, they have to meet their audience's limited freedom to come and visit. It is a loss for both parties when visitors cannot partake of what museums can do.

How can museums be present and available, and do it within budget? Perhaps the most immediate solution would be a thoughtful consideration of the collection and a quick read of the New York Times. Let's take a current hotbutton topic, such as |Occupy Wall Street. An image of a protestor holding up a sign in peaceable protest. And then compare that |with Andy Warhol's image of the Birmingham Race Riots, a picture of a picture. And then compare that |to an image by Honore Daumier of sheep

in a field, with the caption "Ah, poor sheep! No matter what you do, you will always be shorn.". |These three images, placed together, illustrate the use of art as a protest medium, particularly three different types of art – homemade signs, photography and mass-produced prints. But there's a deeper issue as well that can be addressed, notably the history of protest. Protest and public outrage over fiscal and social inequality have been landmarks of the human condition throughout civilization, and by using a variety of images spanning different time periods museums can connect the present to the past through collections and thoughtful interpretation.

To consider another perhaps less contentious example, |a dinosaur is not just a dinosaur. |It's a bird. |It's oil. |It's a fortune telling tool. |It's an example of climate change. Objects continue to assume new meanings as researchers continue to study them and understand their underlying meanings and intricacies. To quote George Braque, "Art is meant to disturb. Science reassures", and institutions as places of sciences and art and history have the power not only to disturb, but also to heal and inform and guide.

Museums do not need to construct large-scale exhibitions to create this relevance. Nina Simon has explored the use of targeted questions, museum settings and object placement in order to provoke and inspire audience responses. Web-based resources such as the |Minneapolis Institute of Art's Object of the Week can be presented as quick lessons accessible to a broad public, potentially drawing in visitors who may seek a fulfilling experience that addresses the world in which they live. Other museums such as the| Newseum in Washington DC have developed an internal working structure and built templates for exhibits that allow them to respond quickly to events as they are happening. But institutional approaches can be more gradual and still be effective. When designing exhibits, museums should consider how to make connections between the subject matter at hand and topical, even controversial events taking place today. That should be core to any public institution's belief system - that they are here to serve their public as they happen to be. But they must also trust that their visitors are able to make their own connections as well.

It is possible the solution may be as simple as |shifting hours, inviting more visitors at their leisure. Something as basic as opening our |galleries

and cafes to community groups to use as gathering space may be just enough to trigger audiences to come and connect their world with the institution's offerings. Ray Oldenburg's research on the third place in society should not be dismissed; museums as public places can offer themselves as unique alternatives to bars and coffeeshops, providing a creative, intelligent space for recreation, curiosity, exploration and education. Community libraries have already begun to expand hours and incorporate new programming to draw new audiences, such as the city of Chelsea Library's Poetry Night events and the Library Tours featuring local band |The High Strung. For a truly creative example, the St. Clair Shores Public Library has reinstated its Paws for Reading series, | in which children may read a book of his or her choice to a dog in the library itself for up to fifteen minutes.

To meet some of the more difficult challenges I mentioned, such as immersion and interactivity, we should consider longer-term solutions that work with a number of different lifestyles and learning types. Developing innovative outreach tools such as |video games and phone applications can allow for user feedback and interaction that is both engaging and

participatory. With the average gamer being 37 years old, |and with over half of all individuals over 50 playing games on a daily basis, video games do not address only the young. Social media has already been pounced on as an outreach tool by most institutions, but let's think about the interactivity permitted by games. The MMORPG, or multiplayer online role playing game, permits visitors |to assume different roles and perform tasks, solve puzzles and interact with each other and with objects in ways they would not be able to in real life. Alternate reality games, which take place either on a computer or in the museum space, also offer most of the same benefits. Some of these ideas – and these are only a very few – are easier to implement than others, and anything incorporated must make sense for the museum and its community. But when museums cease to think of themselves as merely benign and past tense, they have the ability to enact real change and gain ground as a realistic, even exciting option for visitors.

|Remember that coin I told you to take? Look at it closely. Now flip it, and as you do be prepared to call heads or tails. Heads, focus on the future. Tails, focus on the past. They will lead to different directions and,

ultimately different conclusions. While some museums have a policy of only focusing on individuals who are deceased or events that have occurred in the past, the relevance of solely past-oriented exhibits to the pressing concerns of today's audience can be limited. It is important to have a framework for relating the displays on exhibit to the lives of visitors, and the more meaningful the connection the more likely the visit will be remembered and, hopefully, repeated. There may be two sides to this coin, but only one main issue: making museums meaningful to a modern audience. However museums consider the past, it is important to be available and to help create deep connections between objects to the experiences of visitors. Objects remain useful, as long as museum professionals and institutional partners consider all of their contexts at once.