

Art Spaces as Third Places for Everyday Political Talk

An Honors Thesis by

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Abstract

Contentious subject matter is often avoided in conversation. Additionally, there are not many places in which open discussion on these topics is considered acceptable, but the country needs them. In this thesis, I discuss third places as places of gathering for various individuals and the integration of everyday political talk, natural civic discussion (Oldenburg, 1999; Kim & Kim, 2008). The data analyzed in this study consists of ten transcripts from ten interviews conducted over zoom. The result of the analysis shows that art museums do foster everyday political talk through the elements of visualization, facilitation and the environment. Visualization consists of the visual nature of art within museums breaking down themes and framing discussion about important subject matter to make it less intimidating and accessible to more people. Facilitation can be summarized as art museum staff leading guided discussion, creating educational events and curating different exhibits in order to further explore the messages in the art and help audiences reflect. The final theme, the environment of the museum, means that art museums have a welcoming atmosphere, attend to current events and create opportunities for conversation by making physical changes to the space. This investigation works to fill the gaps of knowledge that separate third places, everyday political talk and the quality of conversation within art museums.

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Americans are more politically divided now than they have been at any point within the last two decades (Political Polarization in the American Public, 2014). Specifically, individuals' opinions tend to consistently align with Democrat or Republican viewpoints, which is decreasing ideological overlap between parties (Political Polarization in the American Public, 2014). People are disagreeing on everything, leading to the separation of entire neighborhoods, friend groups and families. Civility is closely connected to emotional comfort and dialogue, which is why it is considered to be an effective strategic tool, and why incivility is often hard to react to and creates discomfort (Herbst, 2010). Incivility comes in many forms, but tends to shut down conversation in any instance. Additionally, Herbst (2010) explains that a critical aspect of civility is that an individual can express an opinion with some level of comfort. Acting uncivil, such as shutting down conversation, making unjust claims and name calling are some inherent barriers to civil dialogue (Herbst, 2010). Without ways to discuss important topics in a calm and safe environment, society is only going to become increasingly polarized.

Due to the polarization of society by contentious topics that gain traction in the news and separate a multitude of individuals, people need places where they can feel comfortable having conversation, and continue to feel safe. This is especially prevalent as technology and the current global pandemic force us to communicate via video camera and stay inside of our homes. Important conversations that can lead to action are often controversial, and yet these emotionally-charged discussions also possess the potential for monumental change. Although people can feel uncomfortable discussing controversial topics, as they may damage personal or professional relationships, these conversations are necessary. A "third place" provides an advantageous environment to converse without the fear of offending others and being able to have free-flowing discussion.

A “third place,” as explained by Oldenburg (1999), “is a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work” (p. 16). The concept of third place comes from the idea that the first place is home, where individuals reside, and the second place is work, where individuals have a daily obligation or commitment (Oldenburg, 1999). The third place, conversely, attracts “regulars” that frequent the location to enjoy each others’ company and participate in informal conversation. The environment, including the physical arrangement and atmosphere, fosters gathering and sociability, making it easier to initiate and continue conversation. Oldenburg wrote about the location and environment of third places in great detail, focusing on communal spaces such as bars and pubs; cafes and coffee houses; and small businesses, and localizing third places to neighborhoods. Oldenburg’s work is marked by nostalgia for third places, emphasizing their dwindling nature as physical locations. However, there is a noticeable gap in third place research regarding the quality of conversation and typical subjects of discussion within third places.

This research sets out to understand qualities of conversation and how contemporary “third spaces” can foster discussion through their visual, educational, and environmental elements. Art spaces and museums are the focus of the research, as the visual elements of the art and pedagogic atmosphere of the space lends itself to be a catalyst of important conversation. The art museum is able to reach a wide variety of individuals with diverse perspectives, as these spaces are ubiquitous in society (Schorch, 2013). Additionally, art museums can draw their audience into engaging with important themes (Sintas et. al., 2014) and participating in active reflection continuing outside of the museum. Many diverse constituencies also gather in these spaces because art museums are considered trustworthy institutions (Schorch, 2015).

To understand the quality of conversation, this research examines features of “everyday political talk,” or casual, non-forced political conversation, (Kim & Kim, 2008) in a third place and the tradition of theorizing dialogic deliberation. Dialogic deliberation consists of sharing opinions openly without having to come to consensus, but understanding one another (Kim & Kim, 2008). Together, everyday political talk and dialogic deliberation focus on individuals negotiating rules and norms for democratic engagement while co-constructing shared meaning surrounding important civil and societal issues (Kim & Kim, 2008). Additionally, Kim and Kim (2008) mention Buber (1965), when they explain that “real conversation” that is genuine and spontaneous happens in places in which people feel comfortable, separating this type of dialogue from more superficial conversation (p. 203).

In summary, this research examines art museums as third places and emphasizes how such spaces can encourage individuals to engage in everyday political discourse in their community. Additionally, a main goal of the research is to explore the qualities of conversation that occur. Further, the research looks at everyday political talk to understand how community dialogues exist within third spaces at art museums and how the leadership within these art spaces organize these discussions. The central research question can be summarized as *How do art spaces act as “third places” and cultivate “everyday political talk”?*

Literature Review

Third Spaces

A place can be analyzed by its physical qualities as well as its social and societal connection. According to Stokowski (2002), the meanings behind the spaces in which individuals spend the majority of their time are understood by their socially constructed nature — mutual understanding created in the space will determine whether these individuals will

return. In terms of categorizing these places, Oldenburg (1999) states that individuals exist in three distinct places: the first place being home, the second being work, and the third being a public place that is not associated with the home or workplace. The first two places are those that individuals need to return, either back to their families or their jobs. The third place is one that individuals choose to go back to because of the atmosphere of the place (Oldenburg, 1999). Third places are not owned by the individuals who gather; instead, the nature of the space, and subsequently, the nature of the conversation, is determined by those who visit. Therefore, third places open the door for valuable conversation that includes engaging with diverse perspectives on a consistent basis.

Third places, as Oldenburg (1999) states, work differently than the other places in which people exist. First, the third place provides participant diversity. Often in other places people are only exposed to those who share qualities similar to themselves. Therefore, when individuals converse, they are hearing opinions that are like their own and are not getting a chance to have their perspective expanded (Eliasoph, 2000). This lack of exposure to different perspectives also creates hesitancy for many individuals to speak their mind in public settings, preventing them to get the chance to fully express themselves. Second, the third place provides new situations that can surprise individuals as well as challenge them to discuss a novel topic (Oldenburg, 1999). By pushing oneself to try new things, such as visit a third place with new people, mutual interests can be shared in order to find common ground (Eliasoph, 2000; Oldenburg, 1999). Finally, the third place stays alive for the collective need for genuine conversation and novel interaction (Oldenburg, 1999). It is important for people to connect with one another in a place in which they feel comfortable and can discuss important ideas (Stokowski, 2002).

Shared understandings are formed in third places. Aside from new people, there are individuals that regularly visit third places and therefore have a larger impact on the atmosphere of the space. For example, certain language and humor is formed by the range of personalities, just like in the other spaces in which individuals exist (Oldenburg, 1999). So, depending on who is there, the space can feel different and create new, changing connections. However, the group space does not belong to one individual that visits and therefore offers the opportunity to create a collective identity (Stokowski, 2002; Oldenburg, 1999). By interacting with others and creating a space in which people feel comfortable, a community environment is formed. People are able to talk about their different ideas and experiences, which others can relate to and help form shared meaning (Stokowski, 2002). People can speak to the things that matter to them in third places without the fear of offending others that are close to them, or bringing it up in a place that it is considered inappropriate. Ideas about what is right, just, and prevalent can be expressed openly in a shared, diverse space (Stokowski, 2002).

Additionally, the use of “third space” is introduced to complement “third place,” as the word “place” implies more of an investigation of the physical location and building structure. Although Oldenburg (1999) understood third places to exist at a physical spot, other scholars, such as Wright (2012) and Soukup (2006) examine qualities of communal “spaces” in a broader context, such as online or virtual spaces, thus introducing the concept of third space. Therefore, this research will employ the use of third space to allow for more inclusive conceptualization and account for the other dimensions of these spaces including the quality of conversation, the context and the environment.

Everyday Political Talk

Third spaces can encourage civic participation through everyday political talk. In addition to creating mutual understanding within communities, Oldenburg (1999) describes the nature of conversations, saying “nothing more clearly indicates a third place than that the talk there is good; that it is lively, scintillating, colorful, and engaging” (p. 26). I argue Oldenburg’s description opens the possibilities for everyday political talk to transpire. When Kim and Kim (2008) describe everyday political talk, they discuss discourse in a prescriptive manner, meaning that interaction is understood as holding a collective purpose in society. Everyday political talk opens natural opportunities for deliberative conversation in which important and timely issues can be discussed (Kim & Kim, 2008). These conversations must be arrived at naturally, as the goal is not to create consensus, but to converse in a way where all parties are heard and listening to the other (Kim & Kim, 2008). In a third space, people can have conversations that allow for mutual understanding of the perspectives around them without having to come to consensus. If civic and societal issues were to come up naturally in conversation, everyday political talk provides for the possibility that these conversations could lead to tangible civic action in the future (Kim & Kim, 2008). I would suggest this likelihood could increase within a third space, as the space is one in which people can feel comfortable around one another without feeling forced into an opinion.

There are different levels of deliberation in which one wishes to participate, leading to specific results. Conover and Searing (2005) explain that the deliberative system works outward from the most civically-involved participants to the least involved. Those in the center of the involvement are choosing to put themselves in the midst of the political action, such as the courts and parliament, and those on the outermost rings choose to be less involved for a number of

reasons (Conover & Searing, 2005). In general, people are more willing to talk about contentious issues in private settings, conceptualize the issue on their own, and make real “moves” toward helping if they possess genuine interest (Eliasoph, 2000). Therefore, pushing people into structured deliberation may not yield the most fruitful results. I argue unstructured conversation, such as that produced in third spaces, can form results such as reciprocity, mutual respect, and open access to various members of the community, much like optimal results achieved through structured conversation (Conover & Searing, 2005). Those that choose to have honest conversations about civically-grounded issues are likely doing it to improve social awareness, rhetorical understanding, and narrative interest from their peers (Conover & Searing, 2005; Eliasoph, 2000). These genuine reasons for participation spark interest in civic issues and lead people to want to participate, even if they start from the outermost ring of engagement (Kim & Kim, 2008).

Feeling free and having natural conversation directly impacts an individual's willingness to speak on contentious issues. People talk about contentious subject matter primarily with the people with whom they agree (Wyatt et. al., 2000). Therefore, individuals tend to feel free to speak their mind in private and less free to speak in public locations. This lack of freedom then inhibits the ability to have conversations exploring new viewpoints by restricting expression (Wyatt et. al., 2000). Natural conversation occurs when subject matter is brought up in a linear sense; that is, it seems to flow. When civic topics are brought up spontaneously, people tend to feel more inclined to share their natural opinions with others (Wright, 2012). Third spaces lend themselves to more open minded and non-judgemental expression, which allows this type of free flowing conversation to occur. According to Graham et. al. (2015), often these non-political conversation threads end up being the most productive. Conversation starts and ends naturally,

sparkling genuine curiosity and interest as people continue to reflect on their talk (Graham et. al., 2015). As people return to third spaces for enjoyment on a regular basis, (Oldenburg, 1999) relationships can continue to strengthen. This can lead to a multitude of topics arising, which has the potential to ultimately create civic action within the community (Graham et. al., 2015). Third spaces can create an environment where people feel free and comfortable discussing a variety of topics. Art spaces have the potential to break down barriers of discussion and form relationships by adding visual stimuli in a community environment.

Art Spaces

Receptive audiences are attracted to art spaces due to their visual and dynamic nature. Duncan (1989) states that museumgoers today “bring with them the willingness and ability to shift into a certain state of receptivity” and prepare themselves for a “particular kind of contemplation and learning experience” (p. 91). Buildings dedicated to art attract an audience who is willing to expand their perspective and reflect in the museum. Patrons are able to notice themes within the pieces and have a desire to connect with those societal topics. Cartwright (2017) also emphasizes the art museums’ capacity to foster patrons’ best intentions: to learn, to grow, and to connect with others on a new level. In this sense, a museum is unlike many other everyday spots.

Art is a universal medium that is able to speak to a broad audience, while representing social themes. Museums are places that bring people together to view displays of political topics and timely subject matter (Duncan, 1989). Within art, important social themes are portrayed and can create a significant impact for visitors (Schorch, 2013). Based on the themes within the exhibit, different individuals are more able to closely connect with the topics. The curators are then able to craft these messages for particular audiences, as in showcasing messages that closely

relate to diverse groups of people (McLean, 1999). Although different topics speak more to some people, a wide range of individuals are able to reflect on themes within art pieces displayed at museums, as the visual nature of art speaks universally to audiences (Schorch, 2015).

The impact of the messages is emphasized by the multisensory experiences of the exhibition (Steelman et. al, 2018). Art museums are places that are active, inviting museumgoer interaction, whether that be through reflection, discussion or a participatory exhibition. The messages within the art are therefore able to further sink in and be felt by the audience through this additional level of objective and subjective experience sharing (McLean, 1999; Steelman et. al, 2018). Physically adding to an exhibit can also have a lasting impact for those that participate, as the addition you are making is going to be a semi-permanent addition to the museum for others to observe. The different dimensions of the art museum — visually and through active reflection — can lead to productive discussion and the further understanding of important themes (Steelman et. al, 2018).

Art spaces foster a shared sense of belonging and understanding that is formed within the larger community. Creative spaces encourage personal growth through individual reflection and in groups. Cartwright (2017) explains that these spaces often push people to their full potential, expand their limits and explore new ideas through considering contentious subject matter and conversing with others. Going out of one's comfort zone is not encouraged in all spaces, and requires more trust and comfort to accomplish. Additionally, Timm-Bottos et. al. (2015) describe a neighborhood art hive, La Ruche d'Art, in which members of the university and greater community gathered on a regular basis. The authors go on to describe that people who specialized in different disciplines would gather here to learn from each other as they worked in the space (Timm-Bottos et. al., 2015). Students found the physical location of the art space in the

center of the community to be extremely engaging, as well as the art itself making the space more comforting. Additionally, the space had many regulars who would take part in crucial discussions, which they described as helping them understand different cultural perspectives (Timm-Bottos et. al., 2015). The communal orientation of the art space is what allows for equality and comfort within museums (Duncan, 1989). Collective identities and mutual understanding was able to form through the relaxed and educational nature of the space.

Art spaces, as third spaces, can act as contact zones for many individuals. Contact zones as defined by Pratt (1991) are “social spaces where different cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other” (p. 34). Within contact zones, individuals co-construct meaning surrounding societal themes and negotiate differences of power (Pratt, 1991). The museum facilitates important dialogue, as it is a space that encompasses many different perspectives and brings together a variety of different people. No one owns these spaces or dictates the conversations within them (Oldenburg, 1999), allowing for free discussion on common ground (Bodo et. al., 2009). Therefore, museumgoers are able to experience those from all different backgrounds come together in order to negotiate meaning (Bodo et. al., 2009; Schorch, 2013). Diverse experiences within the space can open opportunities for dialogue, as people encounter and talk to others whom they did not come with to the museum (Bodo et. al., 2009). These interactive, and inclusive experiences help to bring people together in a common environment while sharing a multitude of perspectives (Steelman et. al, 2018).

Schorch (2015) explains that many museum studies have failed to identify the impact of the museum outside of the knowledge that it provides on specific exhibits. Educating people through shared experiences with others from diverse backgrounds has been discussed, but not the topics within the conversation (Schorch, 2015). More studies need to be conducted regarding the

narrative experiences of museumgoers and, specifically, dialogue and civic participation, to understand the impact of art on engagement of these themes in everyday life. Studies also lack emphasis on the quality of reflection after museumgoers have left the space, and merely identify whether the act is happening. For example, Sintas et. al. (2014) explain that museum visitors likely remember their experience in the space by picturing the exhibits that they visited. This means that a large amount of what the visitor takes away from the museum is based on the physicality and layout of the building. The authors also explain that this internal or external reflection occurs based on the communicative experience had in the museum and the interaction will determine how likely one is to continue the conversation with others outside of the museum (Sintas et. al., 2014). Although these are some of the key aspects in understanding visitor behavior, they still do not fill the gaps of knowledge in terms of quality of conversation. This research aims to fill these gaps in the research by connecting third places and everyday political talk to the implicit qualities of the atmosphere of art museums.

Methods and Analytic Framework

Design

In this study, interviews provide the primary method of investigating and understanding the perspective of professionals within museums, as they are the ones that witness conversation surrounding art firsthand. Data collection methods was approved by UNH's Institutional Review Board (IRB) under #8438, Civic Conversations in Art Spaces. The recruitment that followed was conducted using convenience sampling first (Tracy, 2020) — people whom I knew firsthand — as these were the most easily accessible candidates for interviews. From there, snowball sampling was used, in which participants were asked for recommendations of other potential interview candidates (Tracy, 2020). However, per the IRB protocol, I only asked for the names of

other museums or galleries that were holding civic discussions, not the contact information of the individuals involved. At the end of each interview, after the participants were asked descriptive, in-depth questions about their experience in art spaces and their perspective of the civic conversations in art museums, I would ask my interviewee for a recommendation of individuals doing similar work.

Participants

The participants in this study included a range of professionals that are connected to art spaces. Of these 11 individuals, there were art museum curators, art museum educators, facilitators, an artist, a coordinator of a private art collection, a director of an arts center, and a retired volunteer. Six of the participants were connected to university museums in some capacity, and of the five others, only three interviewees were directly involved in the for-profit sphere. Participants primarily represented the state of New Hampshire, but there were also individuals from Connecticut, New York, and Florida.

Data Collection Methods

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted and recorded over Zoom, with the exception of one that was conducted in person and recorded using Zoom and two backup recorders. There was also one group interview conducted with two participants. For this reason, the study includes 11 participants and only ten interviews. Individual recruitment occurred via email and over the phone. The interviews ranged from 25 minutes to 49 minutes, with most averaging about 35 minutes. All of the interviewees were asked a series of in-depth questions about their experiences in art spaces and, specifically, how they saw political talk take place within these spaces (See Appendix: Interview Guide).

Once the interviews were completed and collected, the recordings were then transcribed verbatim. However, in order to maintain privacy, the data was de-identified, all of the participants were given pseudonyms in the transcriptions and any blatant context clues were removed. The ten transcriptions ranged from 8-15 pages in length and totalled 119 pages.

Data Analysis Methods

Data analysis is based upon the phronetic iterative approach, which “alternates between considering existing theories and research questions on the one hand and emergent qualitative data on the other” (Tracy, 2020, p. 211). Therefore, the data was carefully examined iteratively to create primary cycle codes, or different themes, trends or concepts in the data (Tracy, 2020). Primary cycle codes are used to create descriptive meaning within the data. The codes were then named in order to get across their essence in brief wording. While this was occurring, a codebook was created, in order to lay out all of the themes in an organized fashion and display their name, meaning, and different examples all in one centralized format (Tracy, 2020). The first cycle of codes was made up of 16 different themes. The organization of the codebook then made the second cycle coding easier, where the data was then collapsed into more focused and interpretive themes, resulting in three overarching secondary codes that addressed the research question (Tracy, 2020).

Analysis

Despite their diverse experiences, interview participants came to many of the same conclusions, leading to three common themes that illustrate the cultivation of everyday political talk within art spaces. In the following analysis, I explain these three intersecting dimensions within art museums and provide examples that explain the opportunity for rich civic discussion. The visual representations of the art; opportunities for interaction or facilitation; and the

environment and contextual qualities of the space are the main themes that arose when participants conceptualized the conversation in these spaces.

Visual Representations of Art

Participants' responses underscore the visual nature of an art museum and the social issues that can be illustrated through exhibits. Art can be very captivating and powerful, which was discussed by various interviewees, emphasizing that different individuals connect with different images or motifs within art. Visual expression conveyed by artists can have deep, societal meaning that can create controversy. Yet, these themes are often able to be approached through the accessibility of the images, paintings, and sculpture in the museum, as art creates an additional entry point to important subject matter. In this way, artworks can frame controversial topics in ways that draw more participants into discussion and create a willingness to speak that would not have existed otherwise. Additionally, rich discussion forms from visually expressing difficult topics, as it provides a concrete way through which to process emotions. Finally, art can be considered a common language across different viewpoints and perspectives, as all types of people can view, engage, and enjoy exhibits.

Art frames difficult subjects in ways that invite participation and can make patrons willing to share personal experiences. When asked about how art allows patrons to explore themes in larger society, one facilitator explained the draw of an event surrounding race and racism:

We get a lot of people who are willing to do this art project with [us], who I don't think would otherwise maybe choose to go to a conversation about race. And so... We have some people who are already part of the dialogue... But we have other people who find the conversation about race because they're excited about the art. And so I think art is an entry point for a lot of people. They're excited to be creative. They're excited to produce art and the conversation comes along with that. And so I think in some ways art makes it a little bit easier to talk about hard things.

In this example, the facilitator illustrates that discussion surrounding important and timely issues

such as racism can seem inaccessible to people. Discussing racism in terms of artistic representations creates another avenue through which to process the themes involved. Without this entry point, the discussion of timely subjects could be less appealing to some individuals and therefore negatively impact the conversation due to poor turnout. The connection to art — looking at pieces and being creative — allows the conversation to be less intimidating to share with others. In this sense, the art allows people to be pushed out of their comfort zone in order to approach challenging topics. The facilitator continued:

[Art] sort of like brings down barriers between people a little bit, like you're working on a common goal together and so you're in this together and I think it can help people sort of relax and be in the moment and bring down barriers that might be there. But I think also because art can elicit emotion. And I'm talking about race specifically, but race also elicits a lot of emotion no matter what race you are and what experience you have in society. And so it's another entry point, to like either see art or be part of making art that hits a certain emotion that might connect to how you might feel about political issues, if that makes sense.

Art can elicit a lot of emotion for people, which often forces individuals to confront important topics. This facilitator described the dialogic experience as working toward a common goal, in which participants shared different experiences that required self reflection in order to understand another's perspective. The commonality that allowed for these barriers to come down was the visual dimensions of the art. Looking at pieces together and reflecting as a group allowed for individuals to process these emotions through the art. Another example of the framing ability of visual art is seen through using pieces to put difficult subject matter into perspective.

Visual art can give viewers unique realizations and opportunities to “put oneself into someone else's shoes” to allow for self-reflection and mutual understanding. One NH museum educator elaborated on a specific piece that allowed for audience reflection:

Fred Wilson's Iago's Desdemona is another case in point. So it's this black mirror and it... looks like sort of an 18th century mirror, but it's in black glass. It's playing off of these, these racist

typologies in Shakespeare's Othello. And although, okay, well I have to clarify the black glass thing, but it's just really weird. It's like looking at a mirror and it's like the black mirror on your phone. Like you don't have a perfect reflection and you see your own face. You know, it's like you have this experience of having black skin and it's just really, so it- it immediately brings up very big and provocative questions with groups.

This exhibit allows museumgoers to insert themselves into an important topic and explore it in a way that allows for self-reflection. By visually seeing themselves in this role, they are able to expand their perspective and put themselves in another's shoes. Such perspective-taking through self-reflection could be the catalyst that helps prompt a conversation the next time an important topic comes up.

In addition to captivating visual representations and catalyzing self-reflection, art exhibits can be a tangible way through which to engage difficult topics. Across the board, participants recognized visual art being a catalyst for important issues. When discussing how art can represent civic or political themes, one curator said:

An exhibition can galvanize a community. It can be controversial, I mean, surface a lot of those really difficult conversations and it can be a lightning rod for criticism. It can also be a celebration of community.

This example points to how emotion, controversy, and criticism gets directed toward the pieces. Difficult discussion can be hard to process — art, the physical representation of these issues, can attract the blame and harsh feelings. Therefore, an entire community can use a piece as a catalyst to discuss important issues, as focusing controversy, emotion, or even celebration is easier when there is a tangible outlet to which to attribute it. Having this outlet for criticism can lead to healthy, productive discussion. The same curator elaborated:

Rather than just focusing on abstract ideas or concepts, people can focus on the art and debate or comment, or think about, or reflect on the art itself. The ideas and the way that they're presented, rather than just trying to tackle the abstract concept. So, maybe that facilitates conversation by directing it toward something specific as opposed to something that's very general and maybe more elusive.

Thinking about complex societal issues in an abstract fashion can be hard to process or conceptualize. Being able to speak about a topic and direct this language to a tangible work of art can make it easier for individuals to reflect about issues and form ideas and opinions. This process can then lead to expressing these feelings with others in museums or being guided to conclusions during a program. This point is taken further, as an NH curator from a for-profit museum explained difficult subject matter in beautiful art:

So when we see something like this, it's a way to make a connection to realize that there's sort of more than our own individual stories or that we can sort of come and appreciate someone else's pain. So there's something that kind of goes beyond the individual. And so I just, I think art is such a great connector. It also can be easier. I find like literature, you know, when my kids are having a hard time about something, I sometimes find it easier to read something and then kind of, *Oh, there's something in that that might connect to what we're dealing with.* Because you have something else there that is not you per se, somebody else. But it is also you. So it's just kind of, it allows for a certain distance and for you to engage it, framing it, creating space around that conversation, a space for presence to the human condition and for self-contemplation and for contemplation of others.

Art gives you the space and context to deal with issues that are prevalent in your own life, while pushing you to expand your perspective to acknowledge and attend to others' experiences. The facilitator explained in this excerpt that art can provide concrete examples of themes that are prevalent in one's own life. By reflecting on the art and recognizing these themes, individuals can step back from these issues to receive sight of a larger picture. This process allows for a deeper connection with the art, as well as finding commonality and sharing similar experiences with others.

The discussion of the visual nature of art also includes an important aspect of art as a common language across a wide range of backgrounds. The accessibility of art as a universal medium allows diverse individuals to connect through exhibits and pieces despite their varying experiences. Speaking to this nature, a director of an NH arts center commented:

I mean, you know, somebody from Southeast, Southeast Asia, or South America that does not

... speak English, can look at a piece of artwork and I can look at that piece of artwork and, and, and get similar meaning, or be touched by it or understand it. So I think it's just, it's a universal language and I think that it helps to build bridges between, between people for sure.

People can connect over the ability of artwork to speak to many different types of individuals.

Two individuals can connect over themes that they both recognize, even if the interpretation varies. Art does not require a certain mindset to be understood or enjoyed. Elaborating on this point, a curator and educator from a FL museum stated:

I think that art has always been a place, or a conversation starter, right? And, also, a place where people often see themselves. So, it's a reflection of their concerns or their admirations. Or their passions and pleasures. So, I think that art is just another vehicle through which us as individuals and communities can learn from each other and also who we are. So, it's like, almost, like this kind of, like this connecting feature that just promotes the social aspect and of course the creativity of us, as humans.

People can connect through the commonality of the creative experience, and a shared experience, even if the emotions that are collected from the experience are triggered by completely different backgrounds. The curator in this example describes this process having the ability to bring whole communities together, illustrating the powerful nature of visual art. Sharing stories and making connections within the museum is apparent in this final example:

I feel like art, art connects everybody, no matter where you're coming from, you have something to bring to the, bring to the conversation. You have something, you always have something to, to say about it with your experiences or the way you grew up. Or perhaps you have a funny story that you could relate to the piece too. So I think that, you know, yeah, I think it connects us in many ways, individually and as groups. And I'm just always excited to, to listen to somebody and what they think about that piece or pieces, or even if maybe they don't understand it.

Everyone is coming to the museum with a different perspective and a different outlook on the art itself. Yet, in the setting of the museum people are able to come together and share stories about the same pieces of art in various interpretations. As the educator points out, some individuals may not understand exactly what certain pieces represent, but they can still relate to the art, even if it does not quite fit the artist's intended message.

The visual nature of art can be an extremely powerful tool in connecting groups of individuals. Taken together, the ability of art to frame difficult subject matter, serve as a tangible resource through which one expresses opinions, and act as a universal medium for all types of viewers all helps to create an environment of rich, civically-grounded discussion.

Facilitation

Participants' description of art museums presents the role of facilitation as the second theme in breaking down barriers of conversation among visitors. Although art can speak clearly to some audiences, others need guidance in order to discuss the messages that they see and further engage with those around them. Participants understood that the museum's duty is to help express the themes illustrated by the artist in a broad and accessible fashion. Interviewees expressed this idea of facilitation in different forms, with both regular museumgoers and new visitors. Facilitation, in the forms of guided discussion, education design and exhibit curation, is a key influence on group discussion in art museums that works in conjunction with the visual messages of the art.

Guided discussion is an important aspect in art museums, typically conducted by museum educators or curators during special events or exhibits. One educator speaks to the ability of guided dialogue about art easing the discussion of difficult subject matter:

Art can bring up some very intense topics. To your point about ease, like that word that I'm pivoting off of. I mean, there is, I firmly believe like- so I don't really want easy conversations, but you know what, if somebody wants to have an easier conversation, I'm not going to force them to talk about racism and keep pushing the point, that would be ridiculously inappropriate to them. So it's like thinking about what the visitor really wants and being like, you know, responsible to the people of the group. And not avoiding topics but then letting them really lead the conversation.

The educator clarifies that practice of guided discussion in the museum. The purpose isn't to push certain issues or jump right into timely subject matter. Instead, letting the visitor decide the

pace of the conversation can create an opportunity for topics to be brought up naturally. When people are able to start by making simplistic observations and personally connect with the rest of the group, discussion of deeper subject matter will likely follow. This process is further illustrated in an NH museum educator's example talking about leading museum discussion:

So there's no prescriptive way of doing this, prescribed way of doing this. But- the, the, the nature of questions that the educator asks are, tend to be open-ended. Right? So there's no, you don't ask yes or no questions of people. They tend to be questions that don't have a right answer, but could have multiple answers. And they are questions that are intended to capture the most varied perspectives because that's kind of what you're doing when you're facilitating a group is, you're banking all these different perspectives. And together they are used to then come up as a group with an informed interpretation.

This example describes the thought process behind facilitating conversation in a museum surrounding a specific piece of art. By opening the conversation up to questions that require thought and interpretation, many perspectives are being included. The educators and facilitators in the museum are not looking for “right” answers, but wishing to engage all types of individuals who are coming to participate in conversation and gain insight and perspective in the process.

The next example, a continuation from the last excerpt, highlights some common questions and question structures that were given as examples during the interviews:

Beginning questions tend to be super open-ended like, and observation-based, like, *Take a minute to look at this. And Who wants to kickstart us? What do you see? What do you observe?* And so they're very, very broad. And as people answer, depending on what you said, they say, then the next step is you take those questions and you start tightening up. For example, if someone says, *I see, a female figure with long hair looking down at her baby, looking down at a baby in her arms and tears ran down her cheeks. The baby, the baby's legs have red marks on them and it's mouth- it's head is tipped back over its mother's forearm and its mouth is wide open and its eyes are shut.* That's the description. The next question would be, *When you see a face like that and you see her holding this way and the baby's body's displayed this way, what is that expression? And what does that body language suggest to you, right?* So then that's sort of taking you a little bit further along, which is different than, *Can you tell me what this painting is about?*

This example describes the typical process of walking people through a facilitated dialogue in an art museum. The nature of the questions are all open ended and get more specific, or “tighten up”

as they advance. Any visitor could answer these questions, as they are based on observation and therefore invite all participants to answer. By guiding patrons through these questions, the facilitator helps the group to surface observations, draw conclusions, and share experiences in ways that still require critical thinking.

The second way facilitation is observed in the museum is through educational program design. Specifically, interviewees discussed the use of physical participation with exhibits during tours that allowed for patrons to feel more comfortable participating. By using written communication as the discursive elements within these programs, participants could make a lasting impact on both the exhibit and future museumgoers. In particular, one museum educator reflected on a university museum project that allowed for a larger percentage of the campus population to be involved:

Well, the project was a really interesting way for people to think about what freedoms they have, and rights they have as United States citizens. And what's important to them with the, with the, with the lawn signs, [what] freedom means to them, and it was like four different prompts.... They were able to fill out a lawn sign and we installed it on campus, but they were allowed to take that with them and think, really, what does freedom mean to me? And how am I going to use it in my everyday life? And what does it mean to me in my everyday life? And so exhibits like that, I think, you can really take outside of the museum walls and apply it to your life or think about what you're doing and what values are important to you.

In this example, the interviewee is reflecting on an event that was held by the university art museum called *For Freedoms*, in which there were four different prompts, freedom is __, freedom to __, freedom for __ and freedom from __. The participants were then given different lawn signs where they could use their own experiences to fill in the blanks. Critical thinking is emphasized in this example, as the lawn signs were going to be displayed for several weeks. Getting students to think about the issue of freedom and make a tangible contribution, resulted in the feeling of commonality among participants and reflection for viewers. Similarly, an art museum educator speaks to an exhibit called *Hauling: A Site-Specific Project* that she

remembers drew people in:

So my work, there in interpretation, was to think about a question. One question that would really bring visitors together. And so these take a lot of time to come up with the right kind of- So my question there was ultimately, *What do you haul?* And we had hundreds of responses and I did them as luggage tags hanging up, cause like to put it together all tied into it. Though it was like people saying things like *the weight of my parent's expectations* [or], *the trash every night*. Like it was the most banal thing to the most painful thing, to, you know, like it was just amazing as a catalyst for conversation.

In this example, the educator created a more active conversation by making the participation a written component. Individuals may not have wanted to share what they “hailed” out loud.

However, because the interaction with this exhibit was able to be done in writing and without attaching a name to your answer, participants could still engage in co-constructing meanings with another. Individuals were able to gain a perspective into each other's lives by reading the rest of the luggage tags, reflecting on others’ perspectives and subsequently adding to the display themselves.

The final way in which the facilitation in art museums is apparent is through exhibit curation. The layout of the pieces and the way in which one moves through the museum is important to interpreting themes and understanding artists’ intent. The process of curating the exhibit takes careful consideration, especially when involving civic and societal themes. In this first example, an art coordinator speaks about how an exhibit in the area exemplifies a curator’s duty within a museum:

Yes, again, the museum environment and the curator have a responsibility. They are able to tease out or unpack a theme in a highly controlled way, and I don't use that word negatively. I use it in that a curator typically has parameters for how they are presenting physical objects. And those parameters often relate to a theme, to an overarching issue. So for example, right now the New Museum — here's another resource. The New Museum in New York City is presenting an exhibition that is titled *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America*. Art meaning art and, and, and sadness in our country. And this is a, an exhibition of 37 artists. And it is, again, this idea of artists who are addressing concepts of mourning, commemoration, and loss as a direct response to the national emergency of racist violence experienced by black communities across the United States. Again... museums and curators do have a responsibility to that national dialogue.

In this example, the interviewee explains how she feels as though curators have a responsibility to show national themes. Additionally, curators have a specific way in which they display individual pieces or collections in order to elicit certain feelings in individuals. Therefore, when displaying art that goes along with an important and timely theme, the way in which the visuals are curated, which involves facilitation or planning from the museum staff, can generate ideas that lead to discussion, unlike if the pieces were on display at random.

In addition to the layout of the exhibit, exhibition descriptions and labels are also crafted by curators in order to supplement visual representations and artists' ideas and intentions. Such descriptions are carefully written in order to highlight important details about the pieces. Patrons are able to be guided through the exhibit to gain something from each piece without an educator leading the group. The facilitation involved in the labels and descriptions works to complement the existing artistic themes. A museum educator describes an experience of an individual moving through a museum:

I think [an art museum] allows them to slow down and contemplate and actually think. I mean, with a world of like all of these visual resources and all of the screens that we're looking at all the time. I think a museum allows you to slow down, you know. Slow down and sit and think a bit, you know, and, you know, what do they say? We have 68 thousand thoughts that go through our brain in like a day. It's all what we choose to listen to. I think the museum allows for you to choose. I think it allows for you to start to think critically about our most recent theme, you know, social justice or, you know.

This example highlights the ability of the layout of an exhibit to shape a visitor's experience. The layout of an exhibition can get patrons to slow down and attend to themes. By placing pieces next to each other that provoke certain emotions and thought, they gain attention and therefore earn this slow down effect. In this way, curation facilitates valuable contemplation from visitors as they move through exhibitions.

Facilitation plays an essential role in the participation of museumgoers in civic discussion

and the integration of dialogue in the museum. Facilitation is seen in many forms within art museums, those of which held great impact in the eyes of interview participants include guided discussion, education design, and exhibit curation.

Environmental Appeal

The third and final theme that arose from interviews is the way in which the appealing environment of art museums contributes to increased civic conversation and institutional participation. In particular, the acknowledgement of societal issues, the atmosphere, and the physical layout were mentioned by interviewees as key qualities of the environment. Most art museums have the ability to be flexible when they attend to their mission, which allows museum staff to create an environment that acknowledges differences and makes others feel welcome. Additionally, the museum recognizes current events through the art that they acquire, demonstrating cultural and political importance. Finally, the museum can make physical changes that make the space more inviting for visitors. Together, these factors create opportunities for civic discussion in museums and increase visitor participation.

Art museums are able to expand discussion by attending to timely and important themes. In this first example, a lead educator of an academic museum explains neutrality and the mission of museums:

Museums are not neutral spaces. So in a way, everything we do, everything we install, reflects our values and at our museum. At [our museum], we very much want to engage in the questions of politics, and I don't mean specifically, for example, like our presidential election. I don't mean like that between, to, to put forward artists who are political activists. For example, we show a lot of work that feels politically-charged and feature artists who are working in that space trying to use their art to communicate about activists, issues that are important to them... All, all, much of what we do feels politically connected, not, not everything, of course... But a lot of the new installations, a lot of the contemporary works of art are pointing to questions of politics and questions of representation, questions of identity, questions of intersectionality, I mean, all sorts of things.

Museums are not entirely neutral spaces, as they must attend to various constituencies and the

area in which the museum is located. And yet, museums are constantly inviting the public in order to keep individuals engaged and returning to the space, the museums must attend to current events. By reflecting these themes within the art, museums are maintaining a certain level of trust and respect with the public. Because the museums are held to this standard, people may feel more comfortable discussing contentious issues in a space where the visual representation of the themes is neutral. Even though the spaces themselves are not neutral, the way in which they display politically charged exhibits invites all perspectives.

A museum curator from Florida explains how museums are able to keep up with the times and how this separates them from other institutions:

You know, it's a very serendipitous example, because again, [the show] was dealing with black creation and creativity in a moment where, right now, that's such like the pertinent, important, like a pertinent subject in our society, especially here in the US. So, and through that show then, even though that there's a lot of questions and struggles and challenges when it comes to social justice. At least from the museum's point of view, we're showing works that are going to address some of those concerns. So those are the ways that museums can really kind of act like catalysts for conversations and for reflections of the themes that are important in our times.

The Black Lives Matter Movement, which took place in the summer of 2020 dealt with African American rights and caused very emotionally-charged responses. Equal rights is a topic that is very pertinent in society and has only added to the polarization in America. Museums were expected to display art and exhibits advocating this issue as societal role models and trusted establishments. Without coming across with direct opinions, the museum can display work that allows patrons to reflect on these issues. In this sense, the museum was able to act as a catalyst for conversations surrounding racism and social justice during a time where there were few neutral spaces in which to discuss the topic.

Next, an artist describes some of his art that museums decided to acquire, and how this can reflect important subject matter:

I'm going to go back to my work again, or Picasso's work, or there was a young Jewish woman who painted, during the, during the Holocaust... I forget her name. But, I mean, she painted the Holocaust, the starving and dying. And I don't see an artist who has not done that. We even look at photography. We looked at when it happened and during the WPA. They were literally narrative, telling the story of people who are starving in various communities, whether that's white communities or black communities. And my work is — I'm really telling that story of my community.

Museums acquire work that they feel is important and move these exhibits in during times when it will be able to speak to the greater community. As stated by the artist in the example, art is created during times of struggle in order to illustrate and cope with these issues. By choosing to display these pieces in museums, the museum is attending to themes that are important to others and showing their support for diverse communities.

Museums possess a unique atmosphere in which individuals feel welcomed, activated, and excited to return. By showing work that reflects the museum's mission and representing diverse populations, the art museum can be an inviting space for the public. In this first example, a facilitator explains the types of individuals who enjoy the feeling of an art museum:

I think artists, haha. People who feel creative themselves, so they're excited to be inspired by other people's creativity in art.

Individuals come to the museum with a certain open mindedness and attitude that allows them to gain from their experience of the space. Museums are creative spaces that project a lot of energy, allowing patrons to contemplate the pieces and be inspired. Seeing exhibits and being engrossed in the atmosphere can make one feel excited about their own creative ideals and also make them feel more comfortable thinking about and speaking to important themes. To elaborate on this idea, an art coordinator speaks to the unique quality of an art museum:

The Met is truly the treasure of the United States of America.... And that it represents history and that it represents civilizations. And that it does so in the most extraordinarily encyclopedic way that is unparalleled in this country or the world... But the idea that each museum, the environment of the museum depends entirely on the mission of the museum... So, yes, museum

spaces are very special spaces because they are not, usually not beholding to anything else, but their mission. And their mission is to bring art to the public.

In this example, the art coordinator was almost at a loss of words to describe art museums. The atmosphere is unique, and the museum has an ability to uphold its mission by showing perspectives of various communities in a beautiful and informative way. Visitors recognize art museums as special for this reason, and these qualities are reflected in the participation of museumgoers with others around them. Next, a museum curator describes the effort of the museum in creating an environment that reflects the needs of the visitors:

Right, so you're talking about accessibility and I think one of the things we talk about a lot at the museum, and again, talking about these things and stating them as your values is not the same as actually people reading your values and really internalizing them. But it's very important to us that when students come into the museum and [the museum] is an international place... We want kids to come in and see themselves on the walls... How do you reinforce to them that their thoughts are relevant, your contributions matter, that we're listening to them and what is important to them and how do we ask? Like, so, in other words, in my space, I'm sorry, I'm rambling, but it just has become important to me. In my space, the visitor is the most important aspect of what we do, not the art. You got me.

Museums can show accessibility in what they choose to display and the way that the staff attends to the audience's needs. The curator in the example describes the museum's effort to make visitors feel welcome, included, and heard. A welcoming feeling — a feeling of inclusion and comfort — is noticeable in the atmosphere of art spaces, which further invites the public. Additionally, a space in which individuals see people like them displayed on the walls and feel like their contributions make a difference can give off the feeling of inclusion, being heard and appreciated. Patrons wish to return to places and participate in places which exude this feeling. The effort of art museums to make others feel this way does not go unnoticed, and adds to the desire to participate in its community.

The physical arrangement and layout of art museums is also an important factor in creating active participation from museumgoers. There are different ways to make the gallery

spaces feel more open and active while less removed from the rest of the institution. First, a museum educator from Connecticut explains some of the layouts from her personal art museum visits:

Having spaces where people can sit, in almost like conversation clusters... [Many museums have] some spaces, whether it's a corridor or a lobby area where it isn't one bench where you — if someone's sitting in the middle, and is a stranger, no one else wants to like, crowd them. And this is pre COVID. But seating arrangements where strangers can sit physically comfortably but be near each other and overhear each other, and that there's a signal that you can talk here, it's okay. I think that helps to break the ice. Often in the gallery I see the dance of you're looking at something that I want to look at, but I don't want to get in your way... So I think the key thing is to create an environment where it signals you're not intruding on each other. You can be informal here.

Benches can create distance between individuals in art spaces, as a patron may not want to make a stranger feel crowded or uncomfortable. However, benches and gathering spaces within museums can make great spaces to share opinions about the art inside. This interviewee went on to explain that a good example of a bench that works well for interaction is one that is round — an individual or group of friends can sit comfortably in the middle of other groups that they may not know. Museumgoers can overhear conversations and be able to participate if they notice that others are in awe of the same pieces. To further this point, a an NH educator explains how an academic museum physically invites museumgoers inside the gallery:

So if you come in from the outside and come into the [museum] building, before you get into the gallery. We have this transitional atrium space where students hang out and naturally convene, have coffee, do their studies, do whatever it is they do. And then you can enter the spaces. The, the door into the museum is now clear glass. So we wanted to also, I mean, that is a barrier between inside and outside, right in the museum and everything out. But that is a more, felt like a more porous barrier, because you could see in. So, so that's another way of signaling that we're welcoming. We want you to be able to see into the space and imagine yourself in it. We want you to convene with your people in a casual, social way on just the outside.

Being able to see into the space from the outside can spark curiosity in visitors. A glass door can do the job of creating a more porous barrier — much like a window to the outside — that feels

inviting and interesting. A glass door can also allow individuals to picture themselves in the space, whereas otherwise, a new visitor may feel intimidated to walk inside an area with which they are not familiar. The feeling of welcomeness provided in this small change can make the difference in museums being able to reach a multitude of individuals.

Another way in which an art space makes audiences feel welcome is through the architecture and setup of the museum. This layout can create an active environment that challenges individuals' points of view. A curator from Florida explains how the architecture of her art museum lends itself to have people gather and converse:

Well, you know, I think that [the museum] is a great example of that because [it] is a museum in which its design and architecture has been very geared towards the physical. And what I mean by that is when the museum itself, when you walk in there, there's a constant confrontation. You see a lot of big windows that you can always see the outside. So the outside is constantly being brought into the museum space and into the gallery, very much trying to activate it, and create this very physical experience.

Different spaces prompt different types of experiences. In this example, the curator states that open windows, sights of the outdoors, and different styles of architecture all create an active environment and engaging experience. Additionally, sculptural art pieces on the outside of this museum added visual elements to the walk between different rooms in the museum. Along the way, visitors could be prompted to look at these pieces and speak to others around them. Having these different elements allows there to be something for everyone to take interest in and be encouraged to engage each other at all points during the visit.

The environmental elements of a museum, including the acknowledgement of societal issues, the atmosphere, and the physical outlay are three key factors in the engagement of visitors. Environmental qualities that create the feeling of welcomeness are essential to civic participation in terms of the inclusion of all audiences.

Discussion

Implications

This investigation of the research question, *how do art spaces act as “third places” and cultivate “everyday political talk”?* has identified three overarching elements, recognized by arts professionals, that create a space in which visitors are encouraged to participate in conversation and can lead to increased civic knowledge and participation. When combined, the visual representations of the art; opportunities for interaction or facilitation; and the environment and contextual qualities of the space help create an atmosphere that lends itself to discussion. The characteristics of a welcome and inviting atmosphere, a communal layout and neutrality are reflective of “third places.” Third places are separated from home and work environments and invite regular visitors with their pleasant nature (Oldenburg, 1999). Art museums also encourage everyday political talk by creating conversation and mutual understanding through a visual environment. Everyday political talk feels natural and often leads to genuine interest and action because of the nature of the discussion (Kim & Kim, 2008). The investigated themes highlight the similarities that draw audiences to museums and keep museumgoers involved in dialogue.

First, the visual representations of the art frame social issues for individuals and provide a tangible way to think through topics and express emotion, as well as act as a common language for all viewers. Additionally, museums are receptive and engaging through their visual and dynamic nature. Duncan (1989) states that museumgoers bring with them a willingness and desire to learn and grow as individuals through the different exhibits. The displays are constantly changing, and different pieces of art are able to speak to different individuals. Through the different visuals available to visitors, they are able to work through important societal themes. The visual themes and messages can be seen as objective and subjective experiences, which

visitors can share with one another. This combination of learning experiences allows for the further contemplation and understanding of the motifs within the art (McLean, 1999; Steelman et. al, 2018). Additionally, the art museum offers a place in which many different perspectives and cultures can come together and enjoy the same pieces and exhibits, as art speaks as a universal language to all viewers (Bodo et. al., 2009; Schorch, 2013).

Second, facilitation within art museums, in the forms of guided discussion, education design and exhibit curation, works in conjunction with the visual messages of the art to help guide visitors through important conversations. Oldenburg (1999) describes the interaction in third places as lively and engaging, much like the discussion in art museums. Art museum staff members are able to facilitate important and timely discussion naturally and engage various groups of people who relate to different artistic themes. When Kim and Kim (2008) describe everyday political talk, they describe it as being achieved in casual conversation and therefore naturally inspiring civic action within communities. The museum provides opportunities to spark these conversations without them seeming forced. When natural conversation and interest is sparked in individuals, it helps to maintain genuine interest in these issues, which can lead to future education and action (Eliasoph, 2000). Additionally, art museums help break down barriers between individuals through guided discussions and sharing personal stories that allows for the expansion of perspectives among individuals. This idea is a common thread through the discussion of everyday political talk, as the discourse is understood in a prescriptive manner and holds a collective purpose in society (Kim & Kim, 2008). Guiding individuals through discussion and curating exhibits to speak to different visitors helps to create communication among museumgoers on important societal issues.

Third, the environment of art museums include an atmosphere that helps make visitors feel welcome and have a desire to return. This idea of environment includes highlighting societal issues, the atmosphere, and the physical layout of the space. A welcoming atmosphere reflects Oldenburg's (1999) concept of third place, which feels relaxed and lively in nature and encourages people to visit voluntarily. The lively and welcoming quality of the museum creates a regular desire to return to the space, and actively participate while one is visiting. Additionally, museums are outside of the realms of home and work, and invite visitors to return due to their conforming and welcoming atmosphere. Third spaces are not owned by the individuals who visit, which allows for the nature of the conversation to be neutral and open to those who gather regularly, as communal spaces are able to elicit neutral and naturally occurring dialogue (Duncan, 1989; Oldenburg, 1999). This can be compared to the nature of a museum, where the institution attends to their specific mission, but the conversation within the space is able to be open for interpretation and invites varied perspectives. Art museums are able to showcase a variety of artists and artistic themes on the wall, inviting diversity and creating an environment in which all types of people feel accounted for and welcome.

The results of this present study suggest several areas for future theorizing about everyday political talk and the role of civic dialogue in art museums. The art museum professionals involved in this study understood three overarching elements that contribute to civic dialogue within art spaces. The visual nature of art, the facilitation in museums and galleries and the environment of art spaces all make concrete contributions to civic dialogue within these spaces. Further, this research presented findings that begin to explain the quality of conversation within these spaces. Dialogue within the museum can come in many forms and is not just seen in guided tours and in prompted discussion by museum educators. The elements

involved work in conjunction in the museum to promote conversation naturally in the space through visual stimuli and environmental appeal.

In addition to the quality of the conversation in these spaces, this research suggests that the richness of the civic discussion comes, in part, from the diversity within the space. Many of the art museum professionals described a desire to “show all types of people on the walls.” The effort of art spaces to promote diversity as well as acknowledge societal and timely subject matter projects an atmosphere of inclusion and acknowledgement. Discussion in these spaces follows suit, as individuals tend to seek this atmosphere and feel more comfortable opening themselves to the subject matter. The quality of the conversation and the reason for the conversation to occur were both key findings in this research.

Future Directions

Although this study begins to close some of the gaps in the research, future art museum studies are necessary to investigate the impact of dialogue within third spaces. An increased amount of investigation into everyday political talk as well as the quality of conversation within third spaces will help to build upon the foundation of this study. Investigation needs to be done in more museums and gallery spaces, conducting interviews with professionals, collecting visitor insight and making observations at institutional events. Additionally, the use of academic and non-academic museums in research needs to be examined, taking into consideration the mission of both types of museums and how this affects conversation. The natural arrival at important dialogue needs to be emphasized, therefore, using multiple types of art museums with different missions, constituencies and locations would be useful in figuring out how these implications affect visitor experiences in terms of independent dialogue and reflection within the space. The

continuation of this research is important to those within communication and art contexts, as well as those who wish to expand their perspective beyond the realm of home and work.

Limitations

This study was designed and conducted in the midst of a global pandemic. Therefore, the data collection method needed to reflect COVID-19 guidelines and limit face-to-face contact. Additionally, it would have been insightful to visit art museums in order to explore the practices in place. Visiting art museums would have allowed for there to be observation and notetaking regarding the exhibits, the museumgoer interaction, the facilitated dialogues and guided tours, as well as the layout of different galleries. Observing guided tours and gallery discussion could have been particularly helpful in terms of comprehending civic participation during art museum events and discussions. Additionally, this study only collected input from 11 individuals and could be expanded much further in order to provide a more robust sampling. Investigating this in a wider range of states and communities would also be ideal. Moreover, future research ought to explore museum patrons' perspective, which was difficult to access during a global pandemic.

Conclusion

Third places are spaces that do not have an owner, which allows them to be spaces in which people feel comfortable sharing ideas and expanding perspectives (Oldenburg, 1999). In particular, the museum and art spaces do this job well, as their visual nature lends itself to visitors engaging on a multisensory level with different themes (Steelman et. al., 2018). The more closely exhibits can be curated for the audience, the more likely visitors will take a personal interest and have their visit lead to some level of civic engagement (Eliasoph, 2000). This civic engagement can come in many forms, and feels successful when multiple parties are able to expand their everyday perspectives. Therefore, the prevalence of third spaces are

necessary in creating a society in which people are civically engaged and breaking down singular perspectives (Kim & Kim, 2008). These spaces exist in many areas and on various platforms, so access, in this regard, is not a problem. However, the importance of third spaces must be emphasized.

Visual art, the facilitation, and the environment of a museum all play essential roles in guiding the quality of the conversation, which dictates civic participation within museums. The visual nature of art has the ability to break down themes and frame discussion about important subject matter to make it less intimidating and accessible to more people. Facilitation in museums comes in the forms of art museum staff leading guided discussion, creating educational events and curating different exhibits in order to further explore the messages in the art and help audiences reflect. The environment of the museum possesses a welcoming atmosphere, attends to current events and creates opportunities for conversation and interaction by making physical changes to the space.

The nation is incredibly polarized and continues to be separated by prevalent social issues. However, this analysis suggests that an increased effort to foster civic discussion in community gathering places such as art museums could lead to more educated, civically grounded individuals. By choosing to attend art museum exhibitions, patrons are placing themselves in situations where they are faced with political and civic themes. A level of willingness, in regard to conversation and reflection, comes with these visits — art museums are active environments that create self-reflection and visitor participation. Some barriers are going to be broken down when placing oneself in the midst of these social issues or choosing to attend an art exhibit that highlights these issues. Creating situations in which art museum visits are

made accessible, different generations and cultural groups are able to be exposed to these themes, and, subsequently, civic dialogue.

This analysis can be used to inform ways forward in art museums and in civic discussion. The analysis suggests that a combination of all three practices of civic engagement in museums can create opportunities for successful civic engagement. Museums can create more opportunities for all types of individuals to learn about these important topics. Therefore, visual art, facilitation and environmental factors could be used to create fun and engaging ways to invite more civic participation into the museums. Additionally, an increased effort can be made to assure that people of all backgrounds and perspectives are “seeing themselves on the walls.” An effort must be made to get more individuals into the museum in order to use these practices successfully and promote more civic conversation.

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Appendix: Interview Guide - Civic Conversations in Art Spaces

Hi [name], I appreciate you talking with me today and volunteering to be a part of my research. I am a senior communication major and art minor at UNH, and this study is my undergraduate Honors Thesis. It is under the direction of Lydia Reinig, Ph.D., my thesis advisor.

I am interested in how art spaces cultivate civic dialogue, what the quality of conversation is like in these spaces and how art may ease one's ability to speak openly. It will be very valuable to hear from someone like yourself who can speak about their experience within art spaces. I would encourage you to be detailed in your responses.

The interview should last about 45-60 minutes. I would like to record so that I can go back and transcribe our conversation later. It will be helpful to have a written copy of the conversation for the research. In the case that you do not want to be recorded, I will take detailed notes during the interview. Are you okay with me recording our conversation?

Know that you can stop the interview at any time without consequence and please do not hesitate to ask me any questions. Again, I will be taking notes for my own reference which will help me keep organized and remember any points I may want to follow up on. I might ask you to repeat something or give me an example. I might also restate what you said to summarize. I am only trying to make sure I capture what you mean.

When I asked you to participate, I sent you an informed consent form and asked you to review it. I'd like to share it with you again. [walk them through the consent form].

Once again, your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Do you have any questions? Again, thank you for helping me with my research.

Verbal Informed Consent: Finally, do you acknowledge that you understand your participation and willingness to volunteer for the study?

Interview Questions:

1. Rapport Building: What sparked interest in pursuing your career? How have you been connected to art spaces/ museums throughout your life? What is your current connection to art spaces?
2. Qualities of Art Spaces: What is the atmosphere of a museum/ art space like? How do you think art connects individuals? How does the physical orientation of a museum bring people together?
3. Characteristics of Patrons: What sorts of audiences are drawn to museums/ art spaces? Are there “regulars?” Do you provide ways for community members to stay in touch with/ connected to the museum?
4. Qualities of Social Interaction in Art Spaces: How do you see people interacting with one another in an art space? Do you see patrons engaging in conversations about artistic themes that resonated? If so, what is the nature of these conversations?
5. Connection Between Art and Social Issues: How do pieces or exhibits allow patrons to explore themes within larger society? How does art represent civic/ political themes?
6. Conversations About Social Issues in Art Spaces:
 - a. Do you see art catalyzing conversations around civic/ political themes? If so, how?
 - b. How does art create alternative openings to have these conversations?
 - c. Does art help ease the discussion of important/ difficult subject matter? If so, how?
 - d. What is the emphasis being put around having public conversations within the context of the museum/ art space?
 - e. What sorts of initiatives and events are held at your art space to engage with the public? What is the structure and format?
 - f. How do the exhibits invite visitors to explore these themes on their own?
7. Would you be willing to forward some information about this study to colleagues doing similar work and who would potentially participate in an interview?

Thank you again for helping me further my research. I appreciate your time and your thoughtful answers. I will be following up with your suggested connection(s). Is it okay to state that you directed me to them? If you have any questions please be sure to send them to me at my school email, agm1018@wildcats.unh.edu. Have a good day!