Artiflection

Public History Consulting

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The Museum of Everything

In a quiet moment, taking a break from mulling over Superstorm Sandy's devastation, this was sent to me by a curatorial colleague from New York City. As a historian, I'll admit that I often find the art world to be rather mysterious. I'm especially intrigued by the way in which art critics and collectors seem to periodically discover "democracy." When curators exhibit art by "self-taught" artists, they often do so with great fanfare and a sense of astonishment, as if they have truly uncovered the next best thing.

The Museum of Everything's creators feature a mini-manifesto on their home page:

In tiny crevices and under dusty beds, there lies a secret creativity by the unknowns of society. Unexpected, delicate, profound, this democratic work has inspired the world's greatest artists and creative minds.

The Museum of Everything, estd 2009

Is this creativity special simply because it is "secret" and needs established art-critics to unearth it and expose it to the dazzling light of fame and recognition? Reading a little bit deeper into the Museum of Everything's endeavor, I know that my gut reaction is over-harsh. The project is doing good work by promoting works by people with disabilities and those who lack privilege or connections.

Perhaps what I find so problematic about the tendency of art critics to infuse "subaltern" art with elevated meaning, is that I see the same thing in the discipline of public history. We well-educated public historians have a tendency to get excited about "contextualizing" the stories of "everyday" people within a "larger" historical context. We may find individual stories intriguing, but they are more meaningful in aggregate. That is why true collaboration is challenging. I suppose the key in all of these encounters is to know yourself. If you know what makes you tick and gets you excited, you can recognize when you are telling the stories you want to tell vs. those that your partners may want to tell. Merging your approaches, you can create something new and interesting together.