

“But where will this mania for entertainment end? What will people do when they get tired of television? When they get tired of movies? We already know the answer—they go into participatory activities: sports, theme parks, amusement rides, roller coasters. Structured fun, planned thrills. And what will they do when they tire of theme parks and planned thrills? Sooner or later, the artifice becomes too noticeable. They begin to realize that an amusement park is really a kind of jail, in which you pay to be an inmate. This artifice will drive them to seek authenticity. Authenticity will be the buzzword of the twenty-first century. And what is authentic? Anything that is not devised and structured to make a profit. Anything that is not controlled by corporations. Anything that exists for its own sake and assumes its own shape. But of course, nothing in the modern world is allowed to assume its own shape. The modern world is the corporate equivalent of a formal garden, where everything is planted and arranged for effect. Where nothing is untouched, where nothing is authentic.” Michael Crichton, (*Timeline*, 1999.)

Chasing Moby Dick in Plato's Cave

I've been misled— not by a white whale and not by shadows like the prisoners in Plato's cave, but by an institution. Initially excited by the chance to work within the Berkeley Art Museum, I found myself quickly disenchanted by the choices that had been made to address the prevailing need for audience engagement within museums. The gesture fell flat because it wasn't an authentic one; it was a reaction to cultural boredom.

The museum was gearing up for the 2015 launch of their new building and needed to begin investing in new audiences— among them the children of Generation-X. The museum needed to embody a goal of adapting to their regular visitors now having kids through providing entertainment. What do you do to keep them coming now that they have less free time? You create some component of free day care—in this case a Kids Club. Don't get me wrong— there is nothing wrong with the concept of “fun for the whole family,” but when it becomes a marketing scheme then you are no better than Disneyland.

David Wilson's *The Possible* mirrored this approach by essentially offering up free studio space to artists who would otherwise have to work to provide access to space and materials. My issue with this is that the space was exclusively segregated to artists of Wilson's choosing except for on Sundays. You could go and watch, but not participate during the other days of the week.

I do not blame the museum for using these models as I have seen similar approaches work before, but I think my problem with it is that it is becoming a model rather than a mission. Museums and artists are reacting to need rather than a desire to engage the viewer within the work. Art is no longer going anywhere if it is only a form of entertainment or leisure. Good participatory art asks questions and creates change by drawing its viewer into a dialogue that has the possibility to be political.

Art for art's sake is no longer a political action—it is leisure at its purest form and leisure is only political when you are stealing time from your employer. Artists are their own employers so if you are stealing time from yourself, what does that mean? I'm not sure myself as I have been chasing a white whale for the last three months inside of a cave—but I am sure that my experience within the museum was not an authentic one.