

# ISSA Proceedings 2002 - Arguments On Display: Conceptualizing The Museum As A Discursive Text



## *1. Introduction*

Museums recently have come to be seen as particularly important sites for the examination of cultural values and knowledge (e. g., Bal, 1996; Bennett, 1995; Haraway, 1989). Through display and commentary, museums depict certain truths about the artwork, history, or artifacts they house; yet, such truths always are incomplete. Museums purport to reveal facts about people and places, culture and experience, but their truths are bound by the specific values of the era in which the museum is founded, influenced by the selective choices made by the curators, and structured by the museum's architecture and design.

This paper builds upon recent inquiries in the fields of rhetorical and cultural studies into the communicative dimensions of museums by analyzing the discursive messages in a relatively new and different project: The Women's Museum in Dallas, Texas. This privately funded museum opened in 2000, and significantly is the first national endeavor to tell the story of women in the United States. Hence, its means of establishing arguments about women's activities, social roles, and cultural contributions are important to examine for what they reveal about how topics, themes, and events are articulated as significant in the public consciousness.

The rhetorical analysis in this paper focuses on describing and analyzing the communicative aspects of the museum. In essence, I conceptualize how the museum argues through visual and experiential means of presentation and interaction. The museum architecture, exhibits, and promotional materials are analyzed to reveal the patterns of language, imagery, and persuasive strategies embedded within them, especially as revealed by choices that include and exclude particular topics regarding women's experience and history. The methodology employed is developed from several critical models, including those used in

recent cultural studies critiques of museums (Bal, 1996; Bennett, 1995; Ferguson, 1996; McLean, 1999). The paper concludes with an evaluation of the social and political implications of the museum's messages.

## *2. What is a museum?*

In recent U.S. history, several museums have become sites of controversy. Of particular note are two incidents of public outcry in response to exhibits at the Smithsonian Institution, one about the Enola Gay warplane and the other a reinterpretation of art depicting the American west (Boyd, 1999; Dubin, 1999; Harris, 1999, Lubar, 1997; Yeingst & Burch, 1997). Both exhibits drew responses to what some segments of the audience perceived as anti-patriotic, revisionist, or liberal interpretations of the historical record. Such controversies indicate a deeper set of questions regarding the definition, purpose, and role of a museum. Two explanations can be gleaned from the literature of museum professionals and from that of critical and cultural studies. Both understandings of the museum are relevant to developing a critical analysis of the discursive dimensions of The Women's Museum and similar public institutions.

First, museums are defined philosophically in terms their essential characteristics and purposes, that is, what they are. Greenblatt (1991) captures the essence of the philosophical debates as the contrast between "resonance" and "wonder," the difference between emphasizing knowledge and relevance versus seeing a museum's purpose as stimulating in visitors a fundamental sense of awe. As Chambers (1999) astutely notes, museums can be understood as existing at the nexus of three dialectics, or competing poles, scholarly versus popular, research versus education, and elitism versus inclusiveness (151), which govern how its meaning is articulated in diverse and contradictory ways both from within and without. Some proponents argue that museums are timeless sanctuaries, or temples, versus the notion that they are community forums (Morrissey & Worts, 1998; Pittman, 1999; Roberts, 1997). Museums also are marked by conflict between their educational and entertainment functions such that clashes often arise among the curatorial, educational, and design staffs (Dubin, 1999; Harris, 1999; Noriega, 1999; Roberts, 1997; Weil, 1999). In turn, the goals of museum professionals frequently do not match the public's expectations, as is evidenced by controversies about particular exhibits.

Academic critics who define the museum from a rhetorical or cultural studies perspective perceive similar dialectical relationships, but they emphasize the

intellectual, social, or political function of the museum, or what it does. They conceive of the museum in a discursive model by reading the exhibits and architectural spaces as texts and describing their compositional and communicative elements. For example, Bal (1996) discusses the synecdochal and metaphorical strategies employed in different exhibits, while Roberts (1997) adopts a narrative framework for understanding how exhibits tell stories. Moreover, many critics adopt a semiotic model of analysis to describe how a museum exhibit can be conceived as a system of signs that evokes meanings. Eco's (1986) account of American tourist attractions and theme parks and the work of Baudrillard (1983) on simulacra and simulations are important representatives of this approach. Cultural critics also evaluate the impact of discursive elements in practice, moving beyond a descriptive framework to explore how museums function socially, politically, or ideologically as means of control or as loci of power. Bennett's (1996) essay about what he calls the "exhibitionary complex" is illustrative of arguments regarding how museums can be understood as sites of power and surveillance. Drawing upon the theories of Michel Foucault, Bennett argues that the museum's power is that of creating an "order of things" and a place for people within it as spectators and participants in the validation of the museum's authority (89). Similar to Bennett's (1996) argument, Ferguson (1996) analyzes what he refers to as "exhibitionary rhetorics," the symbolic tactics of control used by museums (183).

Critics also insist on placing the museum into its social and political context, for it is precisely here that they find its communicative and ideological power. According to Bennett (1996) the museum became the central mechanism through which the state could communicate an image of civility and intellectualism, particularly as it came to function as the showcase for colonial possessions and international power. Similarly, Haraway (1989) critiques the ideological messages regarding racial and cultural hierarchies typical of natural history museums. Mayo (1994) and Smith (1994) describe the patriarchal biases typical of museum representations of women. These studies clearly establish that the museum is a means through which power is wielded and a particular set of values is upheld.

In this analysis of The Women's Museum, Ferguson's (1996) description of exhibition rhetorics will be used as a springboard to create a critical framework for the study. He describes the "politics of representivity" wherein who is featured in museums and in what ways constitutes a "highly observable politics" at work (176). Primarily, museums control the visitor's sense of reality, normality,

and perceptions of the museum's authority through three strategies: nomination, hierarchy, and textuality (Ferguson, 1999, 183). Although his essay does not fill out these categories in detail, these terms provide heuristic points of entry for a discursive inquiry. First, I will use nomination to refer to the techniques used in the museum to render presences and absences. A critic must analyze how who and what is named and given voice exists in a tension with what is ex-nominated and therefore silenced or unseen. Second, I will use hierarchy to describe how museums confer order and structure onto exhibits and their contents. Here, the critic must note what aspects are given primacy, which are sublimated, and the narrative structures that confer causality and relationships. Third, I will use textuality as a category to reference the symbolic strategies employed in museum discourse to create meaning.

### *3. Inside The Women's Museum*

As a foundation for the discursive analysis of The Women's Museum, this section first will provide a brief description of the circumstances leading to its development and construction. Next, the rhetorical dimensions of the museum will be examined through the lens of the three critical concepts of nomination, hierarchy, and textuality. Knowledge about the specific vision of The Women's Museum as articulated by its founders at its inception is relevant to an understanding of the discursive tone, strategies, and contents of its exhibits and space.

The Women's Museum's beginnings are rooted in a coalition between what one observer referred to as "a cadre of A-type Texas women" (Dillon, 2001, 58) and a large corporation with very deep pockets. The project originated with the Foundation for Women's Resources, a national organization founded in 1973 to promote the welfare of women and girls (Stoeltje, 1999b, 3).

The group's president, Cathy Bonner, provides a mystical explanation for the concept that became The Women's Museum, claiming that the initial idea came to her in a dream early in 1996 (Hutcheson, 1998, 5f).

The result of a true vision or not, clearly the concept of a women's museum is a reaction to a perceived lack of spaces where women's history and experiences are featured. As Bonner argued in 1999, "There are over 8,000 museums in this country and less than 10 of them are focused on women. The National Park Service has over 2,000 historic sites and less than 10 focus on women's historic contributions" (Stoeltje, 1999a, 3).

In 1998, SBC Communications, the holding company for several U.S. telephone companies, announced that it would donate \$10 million to the project, a sum which provided almost half of the funds necessary for the museum's completion (Stoeltje, 1999a, 3) and was the largest corporate contribution in history to any women's organization, fund, or program in the U.S. ("Museum for Women," 1998, F8). Following SBC's donation, 300 individuals pledged \$5,000 contributions, a clear indicator that "America's silk-suited wealth" was indeed what Bonner called the museum's "stealth weapon" in its quick development from concept to reality (Trescott, 2000, C1).

The city of Dallas donated the building, a 1909 former coliseum located in its Fair Park area near the Cotton Bowl and other museums ("Presenting," 2000, 82).

A third major partner entered the enterprise in 1999 when at the groundbreaking ceremony Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Texas) announced that The Women's Museum would be one of 20 institutions allowed access to the Smithsonian Institution's 140 million artifacts ("Museum for Women," 1999, A12).

From its inception the museum was conceived as neither archival nor artifact based. Instead, its full title announced its forward-looking mission; officially, it is named "The Women's Museum: An Institute for the Future." The second part of the name refers to its focus on helping young women learn technology via a computer laboratory and classes held there. Yet the title also bespeaks its contemporary design, popular culture content, and high tech focus. The affiliation with the Smithsonian allows the museum the flexibility to include artifacts in its exhibits, but the vision of the founders indicated that they wanted to create something that would transcend usual practices. As Bonner stated, "We knew it had to be an experience. If you walked through the door and it didn't knock your socks off, it wasn't worth doing" (Dillon, 2000b, 31). When the museum opened in September 2000, visitors were greeted with a 70,000 square-foot, multiple level exhibit space, built almost entirely with private funds. Bonner's statement on its opening day regarding the museum's purpose is a fitting place to begin a discursive analysis of it: "Museums are ritual places where we present what we value" (Teicher, 2000, 13).

An interpretation of The Women's Museum via the concepts of nomination, hierarchy, and textuality reveals that it values the avoidance of controversy, contemporary events and personalities, and a utopian vision of the future.

### *3.1. Nomination*

The nomination practices evident in The Women's Museum can be understood through the analysis of opposite pairings of rhetorical terms that delineate to which aspects of women's history and experience it grants presence and voice. At the center of these pairings is the fundamental dialectic between victimage and celebration. Statements made by founder Bonner and by the museum's executive director Candace O'Keefe clearly articulate the inclusionary and exclusionary boundaries of its vision and practices. In a description of the development of the museum's contents, Bonner stated, "We decided early on we would not be victim oriented. We tell the stories of inspiration" (Teicher, 2000, 13). Similarly, O'Keefe summarized the sense of the museum by drawing a telling contrast: "This is a 'Wow the woman!' place, not a 'Woe, the woman' place" (Trescott, 2000, C1). The distinction drawn here between focusing on oppression versus highlighting achievement echoes the fundamental tension that marks inquiry in women's studies. Analysts differ regarding whether women's history should be conceived in terms of discrimination, exclusion, and exploitation or celebration, strength, and productivity. This distinction has been described as two stages in the development of research in women's history, with the inquiry into oppression preceding the examination of women's separate sphere (Banner, 1994); I argue that, more importantly, they must be understood as inherently interrelated phenomena. In embracing only the conception of celebration, The Women's Museum gains a specific set of rhetorical advantages, yet with very significant political implications.

The museum's celebratory focus reveals a second implied distinction that determines its nomination practices, the rejection of aspects potentially perceived as "feminist" in favor of embracing things "female." The exhibits emphasize the "women's sphere" with an emphasis on personal experience, a separate and different female realm that produces different cultural products in fields such as art, music, and literature, and achievements in public, but not traditionally political, activities such as sports and entertainment. Hence, the museum avoids content that could be perceived as feminism often is perceived, as negative, critical, biased, and anti-male. What a visitor experiences instead is an almost unrelenting depiction of celebration that virtually is devoid of controversy - unless one looks very carefully and closely to find it.

Some of the most interactive and entertaining exhibits in the museum provide good illustrations of the preference assigned to celebrating women's achievements, especially in popular culture. For example, an exhibit called

"Funny Women" allows visitors to sit in a rather postmodern theatre space where four high-definition televisions are embedded into a wall at skewed angles and different heights. Here, they watch a ten-minute videotape of excerpts from television situation comedies, recorded stand-up routines, and comedy-variety shows featuring several female comics, from 1950s legends Lucille Ball and Martha Raye to newer faces such as Paula Poundstone and Victoria Jackson. The inclusion of popular culture references within a museum space has the potential to challenge social and political notions of what is significant in a culture, but as Hughes (1997) notes in her discussion of the public reaction to the placement of the chairs from the studio set of the 1970s television show *All in the Family* in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, "Without the context of history, displays of popular culture artifacts risk becoming mere attractions. The larger framework gives artifacts greater meaning and allows more compelling interpretations" (172). In the "Funny Women" exhibit, some clues are provided to a larger context of resistance in the quotations interspersed among the clips, such as Bette Midler's statement that "I've realized that the key to comedy is about freedom." But the exhibit as a whole remains largely mute on the broader context wherein humor is a strategy of opposition used by women throughout the centuries and in many contexts besides that of popular entertainment.

Another exhibit celebrating women's contributions to popular culture is the Poetry and Music Listening Room, part an area of the museum devoted to "Thought & Expression." The main placard in the area reads: "Creativity can spark the power of the individual, energize a generation, and change the course of social events. Through their passionate expressions in art, literature, and music women have fostered a unique vision of both the world around us and the future ahead of us." Inside the listening room itself, one encounters a touch screen that allows the visitor to choose a selection to be played from among groupings of three women's names that are presented; for example, one choice offered is among music performers Bonnie Raitt, Ella Fitzgerald, and Patti LaBelle, while another presents writers Dorothy Parker, Maya Angelou, and Gertrude Stein. When a name is touched, the screen presents a brief biographical description of that woman, and then the selection is played. The listening room has wonderful acoustics, so the experience of hearing the song or poem is quite enjoyable. However, what again is lacking is the larger context for this listening experience: Why were these particular women chosen? How has their contribution influenced others? What are the groupings meant to represent? The visitor comes away with

little more than an acknowledgement of each woman's existence and perhaps a reminder of her biggest hit recording or most popular poem.

The exhibit featuring women in sports further illustrates the inclusion and exclusion patterns in the museum that uphold a notion of public performance while avoiding partisan or overtly political topics. Here the viewer is greeted with a large video screen upon which images of women participating in a variety of sports are projected. To the immediate right of the screen the wall is covered with approximately 18" x 18" sized full-color photographs of women athletes arranged in a blocked fashion. No labels or titles identifying the individual athletes are used in the video or on the wall of photographs. The sensory effect of the display is quite powerful as one can be struck by the strength and beauty of the images. However, because they are not identified and historicized the exhibit also renders these women anonymous and therefore silent. Accompanying the screen and wall of photos are three stands containing booklets in which particular athletes and their performance statistics can be located; no other text or narrative is provided to place the images or the athletes' achievements in context. Absent are any number of controversies, documentation of discrimination cases, and accounts of the struggles women often had to undertake to participate in many of the sports depicted. The overall effect is to reinforce the achievement rather than document the circumstances.

Compounding the emphasis on personalities and popular achievements is the absence of equivalent exhibits featuring women's history in other public realms such as elective politics, journalism, public protest and agitation, public address, law, or military service. Aspects of all of these areas are dispersed into other exhibits: For example, one can locate birth control advocate Margaret Sanger and politician Barbara Jordan in the "Unforgettable Women" cases, and after careful inspection the suffragists can be discovered in the Organized Movements case somewhere among Mothers Against Drunk Driving's pamphlets and the opponents of the Equal Rights Amendment's buttons and bumper stickers. Other references to events or milestones can be found on the women's history timeline or embedded among the elements of the visually busy "It's Amazing" area that addresses gender stereotypes and myths. However, the inequity of presentation quite loudly communicates that the museum values topics and personalities that safely depict a women's sphere absent of any political ramifications.

In all, the museum's emphasis on the celebratory allows it to avoid controversy



and offense, thus broadening the potential appeal of its contents but dulling their impact. Designers seem to have wanted to forestall the kind of reaction that Mayo (1994) claims successfully squelched attempts to designate locations related to women as national historical sites: they “in general had been characterized as ‘the three L’s’ – leftist, labor, or lesbian” (59). Rather, by fitting well within a post-feminist politics and a postmodern landscape that assumes the future is open and resistance strategies are a matter for the archives, The Women’s Museum’s focus upon achievement and popular, contemporary personalities is inoffensive, engaging, and entertaining. However, the almost complete silencing of the perspective of oppression and negativity rejects what historian Banner (1994) calls “a venerable women’s studies notion that patriarchy is an unvarying substructure that privileges men and that has existed across time and cultures” (44). Exhibits that simply present a female sphere without attending to the oppressive structures that necessitated, motivated, or structured women’s experiences and actions renders their history into an unproblematic series of individual, colorful, but ultimately disconnected performances.

### *3.2. Hierarchy*

A hierarchical critique must examine the dimensions of the discourse that structure the contents into a sequence and order, such as the architectural details and the placement of exhibits. Critics need to chart what Burke (1950/1969) refers to as the rhetorical relationship between the container and the thing contained. According to Sirefman (1999), “by virtue of being within the public realm, museum architecture is laden with social, political, and moral issues” (297). Moreover, the path visitors are instructed to follow as they move among the exhibits provides significant clues as to what is valued and devalued. As Bal (1996) argues, “the walking tour in the museum [is] a narrative that must be taken seriously as a meaning-making event” (212). In The Women’s Museum, the hierarchical elements clearly reinforce its nomination practices in articulating that admiration of contemporary achievements is more significant than knowledge of the past.

Examining the history of the museum’s location and the architectural vision that shaped it provides some initial points of inquiry. The 1909 building was the first coliseum in the city of Dallas, used for cattle auctions and shows during the daytime and for operas and music performances at night. In 1936 as part of statewide centennial celebrations it was renovated in an art deco style, including the addition of its signature statue of a woman rising from a cactus at the entry,

and rededicated by Houston philanthropist Jesse H. Jones to the “spirit of Texas women” (Stoeltje, 1999b, 3). Until its transformation into The Women’s Museum, the space had been used mostly as a city storage facility and had fallen into an extreme state of disrepair. Architect Wendy Evans Joseph carefully restored the stucco exterior and the statue, and left the interior open so that upon entry the visitor sees the entire three-story space at once. Joseph states, “I didn’t want a complete break between inside and outside. I wanted a dialogue and a feeling of continuity between old and new, like Paris’ Musee d’Orsay” (Dillon, 2000a, 36). Unfortunately, the placement of the exhibits creates a disjunction that belies this sense of continuity and produces a very different effect.

The museum’s top to bottom, past to present flow reproduces many of the ideological effects of the “exhibitionary complex” described by Bennett (1996). He argues that one of the key disciplinary technologies that developed in the 19th century museum was the “progressivist taxonomy” whereby exhibitions “located their preferred audiences at the very pinnacle of the exhibitionary order of things they constructed” (104). The rhetoric of the exhibition translated the idea of progress into a utopian statement about a future that promised an “imminent dissipation of social tensions” (Bennett, 1996, 104). For the 19th century exhibition of technology or anthropology, this progressivist taxonomy placed the privileged classes at the pinnacle of a hierarchy of nations or diverse racial groups as those who naturally would lead the way to the utopian state. In its 21st century form evidenced by The Women’s Museum, the rhetoric of progress is presented as a utopia already attained: visitors are positioned as the recipients of a future free from the need for any politics of difference or resistance.

The direction of the walking path and the specific placement of the exhibits within the building reveal how this utopian message is articulated. In many respects The Women’s Museum architecture echoes that of the Smithsonian’s Holocaust Museum, for which architect Joseph also was the senior designer (Dillon, 2001, 58). Both use a strategy wherein a visitor begins at the top level and works down to the lowest. As Sirefman (1999) argues, the Holocaust Museum is an example of the appropriate use of a didactic style that “architecturally manipulates the visitor’s journey, enforcing the gravity of particular historical events” (313). In that museum, visitors eventually are led to a four-story Hall of Witness where they silently can contemplate what they have learned about the horrors of the past. In The Women’s Museum, the path from above to below moves the visitor to contemplate only the ease of the future that lies ahead for her, not the lessons of

past struggles.

The walking tour and exhibit placement convey a primary value to the things contemporary, while literally locating the past in the shadows, corners, and stairwells. Upon entry the visitor stands in the large open space called "The SBC Gathering" and encounters two of the museum's signature elements: the Electronic Quilt and the Bank of America Grand Stairway and Wall of Words. The Electronic Quilt is a 35-foot tall display on which the blocks comprising the "quilt" are thirty different video screens that flash images of faces, the museum's logo, and artifacts like political buttons. The faces morph from one to another: Gloria Steinem might dissolve into Amelia Earhart into Mary Kay Ash. This display is a clever harkening to the tradition of women's quilt making as a form of expression, but specifically avoids any value judgments regarding its juxtapositions. The message is that the women depicted and the activities they represent are of equal significance, whether in protest, adventure, entertainment, or the cosmetics business. The Grand Stairway continues this blurring of distinctions, leading visitors up along a curved wall on which are displayed quotations from famous women, again co-mingling political figures with entertainers.

Additional aspects of the hierarchical ordering structured by the walking path emerge when the visitor explores the second level. The initial exhibits encountered are the "Milestones in Women's History" and "Unforgettable Women" displays. The first is an undulating wall of facts and names that begins at the year 1500 and follows a timeline to the present. The other is a set of thirteen cases displaying artifacts and quotations representing notable women. These exhibits are grouped thematically, placing three women - sometimes oddly juxtaposed - in the same case. For example, under the title "Record Breakers" one finds adventurer Amelia Earhart, athlete Babe Didrickson Zaharias and attorney Sarah Weddington. These exhibits are the most traditionally historical in the museum, but are placed in a covered hallway area and are relatively dark and uninteresting compared to what lies ahead in the circulation path. Turning a corner brings the visitor directly out into the open, brightly lit main space of the museum and provides immediate access to some of the most interactive and entertaining exhibits, an architectural message telling them that it is desirable to leave the boring, stuffy past behind as quickly as possible.

The featured exhibits on the remainder of the second floor work to reinforce the message that only a brief homage is due to historical context in defining what is significant regarding women. The visitor now can sample from among the "Funny Women" exhibit, the poetry and music booth, or the "Words that Changed Our

Lives" display. The latter is a set of three touch screens where when visitors can select a term – such as slavery, sexism, motherhood, virtue, or racism – they are presented with the names of three women and a brief quotation from each. Selection of "suffrage" brings up the choice of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Sojourner Truth, while "feminism" presents Kate Millet, Susan Faludi, and Betty Friedan. Another touch of the screen sends the words up an electronic post that extends far above the visitor. The technological wizardry here is spectacular, but the words are devoid of context and relation. The effect dazzles, but the exhibit conveys little sense of each woman's historical significance, let alone any knowledge of the concrete circumstances in which her words emerged.

Two additional placements illustrate the hierarchy that privileges the celebration of achievement over contemplation of the past. From the second level the visitor exits into a stairwell containing a comparatively small and traditional display called "In the Spirit" that addresses women's contributions to religion and spiritual life. Unlabelled black and white portraits are suspended from overhead, and at the top of the stairwell is a small board that briefly identifies eighteen women and their writings or achievements. Accompanying the narrative display is a small, dark case containing some artifacts and objects. By contrast, upon leaving the staircase and entering the first level the visitor immediately sees the large video screen and the colorful sports display. The lighting and placement priorities also dramatically are illustrated by the large case juxtaposed to the right of the sports area. Here the visitor finds the "Organized Movements" exhibit that houses memorabilia and artifacts from a wide variety of social protest and public advocacy campaigns. The materials are not ordered chronologically, nor are political campaigns distinguished from social reform. Situated adjacent to the bright multiple colors of the sports exhibit to the left and the brilliant blues and greens of the medicine and health area to its right, the movements exhibit literally is consigned to a dark corner.

The last exhibit perhaps best exemplifies the rhetorical implications of the museum's depiction of oppression as an archive best suited for the shadows. After placing the past in its architectural attic, the museum's walking tour ends in a small auditorium where visitors are shown a seven-minute film called "The Next Thing." Accompanied by images of people of diverse ages and ethnicities, a female voice states: "For your convenience the next exhibit is open 24 hours and features life size displays in no particular order. We have a name for this exhibit:

we call it the future.” The film portrays this future as an open space full of possibility, and the visitor herself as a work in progress. While the sentiment here is admirable, the depiction exemplifies the progressivist rhetorical strategy by placing the visitor in a utopia free of worry.

### *3.3 Textuality*

Museums also communicate at the symbolic and textual level. Specific language and image choices convey a museum’s message in powerful ways, revealing the values and relationships it seeks to promote. As Ferguson (1996) argues, a museum’s exhibits comprise strategic systems of representation (178). While a full description of the textual strategies employed by The Women’s Museum is beyond the scope of this analysis, the interpretation of some significant discursive choices and juxtapositions can further reveal the values it espouses and the rhetorical tensions in its discourse.

First, the museum’s utopian focus ironically is challenged by its own logo, the “Spirit of the Centennial” statue at its entrance. Standing 16 feet tall, the statue depicts a nude woman grasping the thorny branches of a cactus. Proponents of the museum interpret it as a positive symbol, reading it as a depiction of the female rising from the thorns. Founder Bonner suggested that “it represents all women’s struggle for recognition” (Frisinger, 2000, E4), while at the groundbreaking ceremony Hillary Rodham Clinton said the image “somehow sums up a woman’s life to me. There will be a lot of stories of lots of women who may have stepped on a few or had a few thrust at them, but came right out and kept going time and time again” (Hutcheson, 1998, 5F). Yet, what such interpretations deflect is a reading of the statue within the meanings of the nude female from the tradition of high art. As Berger (1972) argues, ways of seeing the female developed wherein the nude signifies woman as object, or as a container for patriarchal notions of nature contemplated or civilization redeemed. These embedded meanings of the nude provide an alternative reading to the woman and cactus statue as a sign of activity; rather, the piece serves as a reminder that the decontextualization of women’s experience found in the museum is connected to a legacy of objectifying women rather than locating them as active subjects.

Second, the presence of corporate sponsor identifiers accompanying the texts of most exhibits signifies a crucial economic intersection that determines the museum’s particular nomination and hierarchical strategies. Museums must compete for public audiences in a time when amusement parks and multimedia attractions are becoming increasingly sophisticated (Harris, 1999; McLean, 1999;

Noriega, 1999; Pittman, 1999; Roberts, 1997; Weil, 1999). This pressure to garner consumer dollars coincident with a shrinking source of government funds leads to the circumstance where there is breakdown of distinctions between museums and other sites of entertainment (Noriega, 1999); consequently, they depend upon corporate sponsorship with increasing frequency (McLean, 1999). Cultural critics denounce this “Disneyfication” of the museum, and argue that corporate entanglements inherently influence exhibit contents (Dubin, 1999). Significantly, Mayo (1994) argues that it is not an accident that as corporate funding increases the amount of political and feminist content in museums decreases. In *The Women’s Museum*, the exhibits with even a small amount of political content – the *Organized Movements* and the *Words that Changed Our Lives* displays – have no corporate sponsors.

Third, the language chosen to describe exhibits reveals a museum’s values. The “It’s Amazing” exhibit in particular exposes how linguistic depictions direct the attention toward specific meanings while deflecting others (Burke, 1966). First, the title of the exhibit invites a reaction of disbelief and implies that the contents address circumstances no longer in existence. The placard at the entry to the maze reinforces this interpretation: “Truth is sometimes stranger than fiction. That’s definitely the case with America’s more outrageous attempts to explain the differences between men and women. Take a journey through the bizarre, entertaining – but absolutely true – aspects of folklore, legends, and stereotypes about gender.” By labeling the contents as “folklore, legends, and stereotypes” the museum invokes powerful meanings attached to these terms that associate them with the opposite of truth. Hence, the language connotes that incredulity is the proper response, and that the contents should be treated as curious relics of what people believed in a time now past. Though the maze actually contains descriptions of gender role definitions still very much in practice, the terminological screen works against the visitor seeing their contemporary manifestations.

#### *4. Conclusion*

This analysis of the discursive practices of *The Women’s Museum* reveals that it extols the virtues of women in a largely apolitical way, placing them as recipients of a utopian future free of struggle. The nomination strategies that characterize the exhibit contents celebrate contemporary achievements, especially those in popular entertainment, but avoid controversial topics and personalities, particularly those that could be construed as feminist. The hierarchy of values

reinforced through architecture and exhibit placement clearly places the contemporary personalities as the featured actors, while location and lighting strategies diminish the interest and impact of past achievements. The museum's walking tour deposits visitors into a future where anything is possible, ignorant of any need to look to the past for lessons and guidance. Finally, the textual strategies work to further underscore these values through symbolic articulations that deny contradictions and unite corporate sponsorship with exhibit contents.

These discursive meanings create an understanding of women's history and experience that is narrow and limited. Importantly, critics describe museums as "modern ritual settings in which visitors enact complex and often deep psychic dramas about identity" (Duncan, 1993, 192) and as "potent force[s] in the forging of self-consciousness" (Kaplan, 1994, 1). Historical museums discursively can figure the visitor's sense of identity in regard to its contents in several ways that correspond to the forms Kenneth Burke (1945/1960) describes as the four master tropes. A metaphoric construction might lead visitors to see similarities and correspondences between their experiences and the articulated past. A synecdochic construction might demonstrate to the visitor how she is part of a greater whole, or, how certain historical events or persons represent a larger context. Even an ironic figuration might lead a visitor to question what she knows by constructing new relationships that invoke fresh patterns of awareness through, a perspective by incongruity. However, in The Women's Museum, women's identity is articulated in a metonymic relationship in regard to the exhibit contents. The complexity of women's experience is reduced to the simple celebration of the most easily accessible and least offensive parts. Consequently, the identities construed in the visitor's encounter with the museum's exhibits are limited and uncomplicated. Though on the surface The Women's Museum appears inclusive and diverse, its discursive strategies reveal meanings constrained by their cheerfulness and limited by their caution.

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