

# Cultural Memory Making for the TikTok Generation

## CULTURAL COMPASS

Explore the forefront of creativity with AGB Creative's **Cultural Compass** a thought-provoking series that delves into the evolving role of creative experiences in our lives.

***Cultural institutions like museums, galleries and libraries are grappling with fundamental questions as hyperinflation grips the attention economy.***

Museums - encompassing galleries, libraries, natural history collections and more besides – are crucial bridges between past and future. They are, at their core, engaged in the creation and dissemination of memory. They preserve and honour the foundations of human endeavour and conduct cultural conversations using evolving languages to tell stories to future generations.

But what is the evolving language that connects collections and exhibits to the republic of the present and addresses the diversity of its citizens? How do you create memory and meaning in a fragmented, kaleidoscopic world where every interaction is mediated through complex technologies beyond the imagining of our grandparents?

Across the world, museum audiences skew old, white, and female. Some programmers, curators and art administrators play it safe by sticking to traditional approaches and overlooking the younger, more diverse demographic. And, while this may be commercially prudent in the short term, this amounts to a decision to manage decline - both in visitor numbers over time and the broad social relevance of major cultural institutions.

But with the examination of those important questions of role, relevance and responsibilities, there is an emerging appetite to innovate and explore new forms of storytelling. Excitingly, many cultural institutions around the world are undertaking a process of reimagining; looking to digital technology to both enhance existing collections as well as create entirely new exhibitions and experiences.

We know that some people visit museums and galleries for solitude and respite, others seek connection and challenge and a vast array of motivations in between. In building exhibits and experiences, curators must offer multiple categories of experience to distinct audience segments and provide entry points to the overall story they are telling to cater for disparate interests and preferences.

Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok operate in intervals of seven to thirty seconds. To audiences who receive information in this way, purely static exhibitions are not just old-fashioned, they are arcane.

Curatorial storytelling must be anchored to both the desires of today's audiences and the nuances of the exhibited collections while avoiding the sparkling emptiness of marketing disconnected from substance.

Maintaining a balance between curatorial purism and new models of storytelling is crucial. Placing historically significant objects behind glass next to explanatory plaques may alienate some audiences. Yet the aspect of purism that is concerned with fidelity to the work, and its world, is vital.

But there have been far too many hasty attempts to bolt on a spectacular "presentation layer" of immersive projections that bait social media algorithms and the popular audiences behind them. And, while these might reach commercial goals in the short term, over time they may also build a reputation for cynical showiness.

Another opportunity for cultural institutions is to maximise the creative and strategic potential of technology enabled art forms as a core component of successful modern curation.

**The tendency, particularly in art museums, to quarantine interactive practice to "modern experimental" showings denies curators powerful tools that create resonant memories in today's audiences who are highly attuned to multichannel interactive communication**

In creating the *Beauty Rich and Rare* exhibition for the National Library of Australia, and later the Smithsonian in Washington DC, specialist botanic curators and highly skilled technologists worked collaboratively for a unified curatorial vision.

They crafted immense, vibrant projections that conjured in audiences the same otherworldly wonder that 19<sup>th</sup> Century botanists felt encountering new and strange plant life in the great southern lands.

Building productive, equal, and mutually enriching partnerships like this between the curatorial class and technology arts practitioners connects each with new audiences as they amplify one another's appeal.

Forward-thinking cultural institutions are recognising that memory-making experiences begin long before a patron enters the premises, continue long after they exit through the gift shop, and capture people who never physically attend the exhibit. Catering to younger and more diverse audiences' desires for mediated memory-making can expand the impact of physical exhibits into virtual spaces on social media.

Leaders in cultural institutions are well equipped to overcome the myriad challenges they face. The mission of creating memory and supporting wellbeing is one that institutions have embraced since their founding. Their leaders are expert storytellers with commanding grasp of nuance and strong connections to practitioners and innovators across old and new media.

While the mission may seem more complex and daunting in the shadow of COVID, it has never been more important than it is today. The potential for creative memory-making this moment presents is an unmatched opportunity for cultural leaders.

**AGB**