

# PLAYERS MATTER

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BUILDING INCLUSION IN THE ARTS

## Nina Simon

Thank you. It's really a surprise to be here. When I was a child I never thought I would be in the arts. When I was a child I had an entirely different dream, you see my dream and my hero when I was a child was this woman: this is Sally Ride, she was the first American woman in space, first lesbian in space as well, and when I was a child my dream was to be like Sally Ride, to work for NASA and to become part of the astronaut group in America.

I pursued that dream all the way through to university where I studied electrical engineering and math, and it was only when I got there that I started to wonder if this dream I'd had my whole life really belonged to me. You see I can still remember the first time I walked into a lecture in electrical engineering- there were about as many people as there are here today- and I got into my seat, I took out my brand new notebook and started to look around at the couple of hundred classmates around me. All of them were men.

See in my university, like most electrical engineering programmes then, like most electrical engineering programmes now, our programme was 1% women. I never met a woman faculty member, never met a woman graduate student – in fact, in all the time I worked in engineering I never met a woman engineer. I graduated in electrical engineers, I got that dream job at NASA and I left it just a few months later. On some level I felt like I didn't belong.

We've all had these experiences right? These moments where we've felt like we didn't belong. Where we've looked up and we've suddenly realised how few of *us* there were and how many of *them*. Maybe some of us are feeling that way today, here at this conference.

The feeling of not belonging is powerful. It's a feeling that led me to abandon a dream I'd had since I was a little girl. But that feeling also led me to adopt a new dream, the dream that brings me here to be with you today, the dream that we can create places, where all people can feel that they belong.

Over the last eight years I have been working on this dream through my position running a museum in Santa Cruz, California; the Museum of Art and History, or as we call it the MAH. Today it's a vibrant community centre for all walks of life in Santa Cruz County, but it was not that way when I came to become its new director in 2011. At the time we had two big problems; the first was money, we didn't have any. The day I walked in the door as new director we had \$16,000 in the bank and \$36,000 in unpaid bills and there was no magic cheque on the horizon. The board was talking about closing the doors of the museum. At the same time we had an even bigger problem, and that was a problem of relevance. There were more people who knew that this building used to be the county jail than knew that it was now a museum and it had been a museum at this point for almost 20 years.

And it was in the context of this dual crisis, in the context of a boardroom full of people talking about bankruptcy that they were asking questions. They were asking this question: how can we get new people into this museum? How can we get younger people here? How can we get people not just to visit but to join, to take part, to become members, to donate? I understood what they were asking, but on some level this question made me uncomfortable. I realised I heard a version of this question before, I had heard it when I was in university when people asked this question: how can we get more girls in here?

I think these are the wrong questions to ask. I think these questions lead to lazy and judgmental answers. In engineering people would say things like this: maybe girls just aren't cut out for this stuff. In museums, in culture, people would say things like this: maybe those people don't appreciate culture. People have said these things to my face for years. At the MAH we decided we were going to ask new questions. We were going to ask: what are we willing to change about ourselves to welcome new people here? What are we willing to change to help all kinds of people belong? And so we took these two questions and we used them to change our museum, to make it a place that felt welcoming to all kinds of people in our community (and just so you know, where I am in California, our community is about 35% Latinx- these are people from Latin America and Mexico- so you see our institution is a fully bilingual institution now).

We decided we would make the museum a welcoming gathering place, a social space, that instead of focusing just on reinforcing people's ideas of who belonged or what art is, that we would use the museum as a place to invite people to build bridges across differences, to connect with new cultures, with people of different ages, races, classes, backgrounds from them. Instead of being the kind of place where you might feel that you don't have enough money in your pocket, you're not white enough, you're not educated enough to belong, we decided we would be the kind of museum that would invite everybody to walk out feeling that they can make art and they can make history and this is a place to empower to you do so.

These philosophical changes changed the way we programme the museum but also changed the financial picture of the institution. When I came in 2011 we had a shaky budget of \$700,000 a year and 7 staff members and about 17,000 visitors, the majority of whom were retired white people and school children. Here's what it looks like for the year we just closed; we have grown to a budget of 3 million, we have 40 staff members and 148,000 visitors last year. And those visitors reflect the age diversity of the community, the income diversity of the community and racial diversity of the community as well. We changed our museum not by bringing in a new exhibit or changing the building but by changing our fundamental purpose and our orientation towards our community - by changing *ourselves* rather than asking somebody on the outside to change *themselves*.

Now I'm proud of this success, it's been amazing to experience, but it also raised some questions for us and for people like you, who would ask me to come share our story around the world and who would say, 'what's the story, what made this happen'? So

we went looking in our stories, for the pattern.

When we found it, it was so simple. We believe that our institution is successful because it is **of, by and for** our community. That means our team, our staff, our programming, our board are representative **of** the diversity of the community, our programmes are created and co-created **by** our community and that makes us a welcoming place **for** our community.

Let me give you a quick example of what it looks like in practice: we decided to create an exhibit that invited people to think about the things they collect – a classic thing for museums, to think about collections- but we didn't want people bringing in tractors and cups, so we said, what is something that everyone collects, that everyone could share in the museum? We decided every single person collects memories. So we took a room, we filled it floor to ceiling with open jars and we had an artist come in and make a mural on the wall, we got materials from the dump and donated and we invited people to bottle up memories. We had over 800 people bottle up their memories. Some were simple, some were sweet and some were serious. Let me share with you one of my favourites from this person who says:

I remember I was 5 and left at church in my best dress to be found by and hoped to be taken in by another family. I walked away in my lacy dress, remembering how to get home, walking the streets, my dress getting hot, my feet sore, until I found my parents at the corner store. They were unhappy!

This is a simple example of what this kind of practice looks like, where we have memories of our community, shared by diverse people in the community and creating this exhibit that really is for everyone; sharing stories that we could never curate, or select or gate-keep ourselves, but that when we open up for people to share themselves the diversity of stories, of memories, get connected.

So we saw this pattern at work in our institution but we also started seeing it at work around the world in other institutions involving their communities in more meaningful ways, so this past year we opened up this new movement, this space for 'OF/BY/FOR all', for organisations all over the world working on this. We created this website [ofbyforall.org](http://ofbyforall.org) where we started sharing tools and concrete practices you can use to change, to invite more people to belong.

So far we have had over 1500 people from over 40 countries participate, and this is one of the first, and simplest, tools I would recommend; it's a simple self-assessment you can use to get a sense right now of where your organisation shines and struggles when it comes to being **of, by and for** your community. I'll share a little data we have received from the 1500 people around the world, of whom five are from Ireland. I would love to see you better represented in this data.

But we are seeing a lot of consistency around the world. One of the first questions we ask in this assessment is this:

On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is 'strongly disagree' and 5 is 'strongly agree', how much do you agree with this statement?

*'Our organisation welcomes people of all backgrounds, ages and abilities'.*

The most common answer across 1500 people here is a 5. Most professionals strongly agree that our organisations welcome people of all backgrounds. But then the very next question we ask on the assessment is this:

How much do you agree with *this* statement?

*'Our participants, our audiences reflect the diversity of our community'.*

Here the most common answer across all those people around the world is a 2. Disagree.

How is this possible? How is it possible we are doing a great job welcoming people of all backgrounds but people of all backgrounds are not coming in the door? I believe it's possible because having the intention, having the policy to be welcoming is not enough. It happens through action. In how we invite people, not just to be audiences, but to be participants in the leadership and the creation of the work that we do.

So we have come to think about this in a very simple formula; if we want to be for all kinds of people we believe the most powerful way to do it is to be of and by them. This is our cheat sheet, (and by the way if my mother ever asks if she's using the engineering degree you can say you saw some math on the screen)!

But seriously indigenous and disability communities talk about this idea 'nothing about us without us', and this is fundamentally what we are talking about; that when people are represented, when they are creators and owners of the practice, then they will feel welcome to be participants.

I want to share with you a couple of examples of what this looks like from around the world. I want to start by going to Australia, next time you are in Brisbane, Australia, do yourself a favour and go visit the state library of Queensland. It's one of the most beautiful libraries I have ever seen and I was lucky enough to be there just after it opened in 2009, brand new, very contemporary, white, open plan, gleaming and I was there as part of a group of librarian designers like myself and aboriginal indigenous people, to design one piece of the library they had not yet been able to open, an 'indigenous knowledge centre'. In Queensland there is a big population of aboriginal people and these librarians said they wanted to make this library a welcoming place for all people in their community to take part and that includes aboriginals.

So they knew they wanted the library to be for their aboriginal community, but didn't know what it meant. So they were smart. They said okay, we're going to start by putting together a community advisory group of aboriginal people, so that we have

programme ideas being led by those people. So I was lucky enough to be in the room at one of these first meetings, where we had librarians, designers, architects and aboriginal elders to talk about what could happen here. So the first thing that happens is the indigenous elders say 'for us sharing knowledge doesn't primarily happen through books - it happens through music and dance, it's inter-generational and it has to be colourful, it can't be so white and sterile like a hospital'.

You could see the librarians looking around their brand new, gleaming, white space with new eyes. Then the indigenous elders said 'the most important way we share knowledge is around a fire'. I don't know how many librarians you know, but this was a moment of truth. They have to decide 'were we for real when we said we wanted to make this library welcoming for aboriginal people or were we secretly hoping they would walk through the doors of the gleaming white library and thank us for the privilege of doing so'?

To their great credit they were for real and they took one of those white gleaming spaces and they created a colourful, warm space that invited intergenerational families for music and dance and even more impressively, they identified a space outdoors where they built this fire pit, so that groups like this World Indigenous Youth Congress could meet at the library to share knowledge and build community, which is exactly what the library is all about.

Now these are facility changes which are important, but what's more important is what the library has done since then, almost ten years ago. Today if you go visit the state library you will find that for the first time they have hired librarians who are aboriginal and while they are doing all kinds of programming in that space- everything from digital curation, to archives, to art creation - almost all of their programmes are led or co-created by aboriginal people, and by continuing to be of and by this community, they have truly made it a welcoming institution for the people they desired to serve.

I want to dive into the **by** side of this, because we often importantly and rightly focus on the **of** side, but at least for us at the MAH, the **by** side was the place we were able to get started. I mentioned a big growth in our attendance and diversity of attendance over a seven year period, but in some ways this growth masks an even bigger change that happened over that time, and that was in the number of partners we worked with.

So when I came to the museum we were working with 50 partners a year to co-create exhibitions and programmes - today that number is about annually 2,000. So another way to look at these numbers is this; to achieve about a nine times growth in attendance, we had to have about a 40 times growth in partners we worked with, because we find that when we engage with partners, they're owners of their programming, they are feeling empowered as artists, culture makers, historians in the space and they are also trusted connectors in their own communities enabling them to feel like the space could be welcoming for them.

As an art museum we work with artists but also with all kinds of partners who might not be traditional museum partners. This is a group of home birth midwives in the mountains near where we live who have been sharing birth stories in the museum; this is a Polynesian biker club that got involved when we were doing a surf history project talking about connections across the ocean. We work with many partners in one-off basis for single events, but we also work with partners in deep ways throughout the year. This is a group called C3, the creative community committee, a group of 40 to 100 people who come together for two years on a particular theme. This was the theme of cultural bridging and bridging specific racial divides in the community between indigenous Latinx and white people. I look at this picture and I see advocates, I see activists, I see farmers, technologists, all kinds of people in our community who are in turn connected to different specific communities and are able to bring that knowledge and those networks and that understanding into our discussion of where we should be going. These partners drive what we do and have driven our ability to reach so many new people as well.

On the assessment we see this is one of the biggest differences between what's happening at the MAH and around the world, and we ask this question: roughly what percentage of your public programmes are co-created by community partners? And for us it's about 90%, almost everything we do we co-create with a partner. But we're seeing around the world that the most common answer to this is 0-10%. Many of us come from a perspective that we are privileged to be the ones to make the thing, to make the exhibit, to make the children's art programme, the production. I know how that feels, I started as an exhibit designer when I came into museums; but I've learned there is so much more power when instead of holding the ability to make the thing we share and create platforms and make space for others to do so in our space and in our communities.

Now, in general I feel like all of this that we're talking about today is something that we can choose to do or not. We can choose whether and where and how far we're going to go, but I would suggest to you that there is one situation in which you cannot just choose and that's if you want to or if you're working with marginalised or oppressed people. Because I believe that if you don't operate in an **of** and **by** representation framework, you are contributing further to oppression.

And I learned this very powerfully through a project we did a couple of years ago called 'Lost Childhoods'. It was an exhibition we created with foster youth in our communities, children in care, 18- 25 year olds transitioning out of government support and into adulthood, but without the kind of adult support that many of us have been lucky enough to enjoy. So we knew from the beginning that this exhibition had to centre youth or else we would be continuing to perpetuate the kind of stereotypes and stories, the kind of small labels on that small corner that are so typical.

So we started out by reaching out to partners, people we knew, working with foster youth and then we said, 'who else should we be talking to'? They introduced us to these people and to these people and by the time we had the first C3 meeting of this

group, we had 100 people in the room, the majority of whom were children in care. These youth and advocates and artists worked together over six months to co-create an exhibition; youth partnered with artists to co-create new commissioned work; youth helped design and build the space; youth helped develop and lead on all of the programme development around the exhibition, and in the end we had an exhibition that became our most successful exhibition ever in terms of attendance. We thought it was going to be niche, a downer, we did not know if people were going to like it, and what we found was that it was the most powerful exhibition we had done, not just in terms of the emotional content, but in terms of the attraction for all kinds of people to get involved.

The exhibition shared powerful stories and objects from youth and from children in care. You can see here just one small object, that purple teddy bear up on the top - you can see him in the black and white photo behind this girl- it's very typical, in the American foster youth care system for siblings to be separated and this teddy bear belonged to a young woman who had been separated from her siblings. Her older sister had given her this teddy bear and it was the only connection she had to her sibling for years during the time when they were separated, didn't know where each other were and had to hope and pray that a judge somewhere would allow them to meet up once a year to see each other. So there were objects and stories like this in here, objects and stories of pain and struggle, but also of resilience through crisis and challenge. There were artworks created by youth, and maybe the most important part of the exhibition was this 'take action' centre, this wall full of business cards like the one you see here, where visitors could take up a single action that you could do to help a foster youth in our community. We thought it was too heavy a lift to ask people to consider becoming foster parents themselves, so we worked with youth and advocates to create this group of little things that you could do and on the back of every one of these cards is a specific contact information for a person who you could contact to do this thing. We had no idea if they were going to work, but they flew off the wall and we found that not only were there hundreds of birthday cakes and clothes donated, youth got jobs, youth got housing, and our county told us they had never had so many adults in any time period sign up to consider becoming foster parents themselves.

Youth led this project, we paid them all of the time for their participation, whether they were coming to a meeting or whether they were leading a programme or tour, as this young man is here in this picture. We were thoughtful about how it was appropriate to pay them and that meant we paid same day in cash, which is not the accounting approach that our museum typically took, but it was an approach that was appropriate and proper for this group to be successful, to be well compensated for their work.

I learned so much from the youth involved in this project and really it was the origin of this movement, this OF/BY/ FOR all movement and the work that I am doing today. And I want to close just by sharing this perspective from one of the youth involved in the project. This is Jess; they say when you work with community you should never have favourites and you shouldn't, but I do and Jess is one of my favourite youths



working on this project, and we invited Jess to speak at the opening member's preview of the exhibition. You know what this is like, you have all of your donors, the politicians, everybody who has contributed in a room and the very first person to come up to the stage was Jess, and I wasn't sure what she was going to say, I want to share her words with you here.

Here's what Jess said:

If you've already met me, you likely know that I am friendly, loyal, hard-working and fiercely protective of my community. Keeping this in mind I hope you all will understand what I mean when I say that my original intention when joining this group of over 100 foster youth, artists and advocates that contributed to this piece was not to make art. I originally joined because I had seen many cases of organisations attempt to represent and support foster youth, LGBT+ youth, youth of colour, youth with disabilities, homeless youth and again and again I saw youth being side-lined, being spoken over, being patronised and tokenised and left out from the very projects meant for them.

As a proud and protective person I was ready to stop that shit before it even started! To put it simply, I joined this exhibition project expecting the MAH to fuck up and that I would have to call them on it.

I am happy and relieved to say I never had the need to. From day one foster youth were brought to the forefront of every idea, every art piece, the set-up of the exhibit, everything. As if to rub in my face how wrong my original assumption was, the MAH has included art pieces from foster youth in this exhibit and this exhibit is curated by foster youth. To put it simply 'Lost Childhood' is an exhibit by, of, from and for foster youth, you all are just lucky enough to enjoy it.

[APPLAUSE]

So I think you can see why I'm so drawn to this work, why I believe it's powerful and I hope that you too feel that this is the kind of work that you would like to pivot towards doing as well. I want to leave you before we go into questions with two ways to potentially get started if you're interested in taking this approach.

The first is try the self-assessment; if you get bored later, if you don't want to listen to the Q & A with me, feel free to go to [ofbyforall.org](https://ofbyforall.org) and in just about 7 minutes you will be able to take the assessment and get a confidential report with a sense of where you are right now. This self-assessment is one of a few free tools we are offering to anybody anywhere and we're also then working with organisations that are committed to this work in a longer term change network of organisations that want to make these changes. I would love to be involving some organisations from Ireland in this movement as it grows.

But the second thing I will offer is more conceptual; it's a strategy we use in how we think about management and leadership at our organisation. It came from a person I really respect named Beck Tench, a researcher and change-maker mostly in the library space. Beck was hired years ago by an organisation where Beck was told your job here is to 'change the culture of this organisation'. Your job is to take risks and if you don't fail you are not doing your job right. Sounds exciting, right? But also terrifying. And Beck very quickly understood that to be a successful risk-taker she needed somebody else - in her case her boss - to be a space-maker for her. To give her not just the desk, not just the title, but the permission, the support, the space to take these kinds of risks.

Now Beck had a great boss named Troy and he made the space for her and she was able to take successive risks at her organisation. But then she started to realise 'I was told my job is to change the culture and I'm not going to change the culture just by myself taking successive risks'. She realised the greatest way to change the culture is to in turn become a space maker for others to take risks, to take on creative pursuits and make things happen.

We share this set of slides with every new staff member who comes to work at the MAH and the reason we do so is because we say: we love that you are here because you are a risk-taker, because you are motivated to make something creative happen in our community, and we want to make space for you to do that, but we'll also tell that you that you will be most successful here if you use that space to make space for others, for staff members for interns for volunteers and most of all for community members to themselves share their creative ability, to themselves share their talent.

So I invite you as you think about all the very specific things we might talk about today, that you might do to pivot towards being of, by and for your community, that you think about where your own self and your own ego comes into it as well. For years I identified as a risk taker, that's where I got my pleasure, in making the thing, in fighting to make my own space. But in the last few years I have come to feel that the most powerful work I can do as an activist is to make space for others. And particularly to make space for those for whom so little space has been afforded historically by us and our institutions. And so I invite to you join me in making the arts places and spaces that are truly of, by and for all and to do so with as much joy and as much satisfaction as we have taken in our own risks and our own creative practice here to date. Thank you.