Visitors are impatient for deeper experiences with art and ideas

Richard Koszalek

Museums must lead the cultural dialogue

For several centuries, museums have assumed a central role as the bastions and purveyors of the highest level of visual creation and its associated intellectual inquiry. Clearly they are regarded in this way by the public, as the all-familiar statistics attest: in the US alone, for example, museums not only continue to proliferate in these straitened economic times but draw ever-growing audiences of all ages. Yet it is equally apparent that audiences are rapidly changing, and are increasingly impatient to have a deeper experience with the works on view and the ideas, issues, and world views they represent.

Time and again, at events such as the summit Art & Patronage: the Middle East in London last month, on museum websites, and politically charged activities surrounding recent exhibitions in the US, one detects a rising hunger for engagement with artists and their work, as well as a growing frustration with the relatively simplistic intellectual offerings that are usually provided. While one would never devalue the standard fare of artist talks, tours, labels, brochures and audio guides, a new and far higher level of educational content is now critical if museums are to retain their integrity, credibility and, most importantly, relevance in today’s complex world.

By assuming the responsibility to redefine their relationship with their audiences — and, hence, redefine the meaning of museum education — institutions de facto will assume cultural leadership. Undertaking this responsibility requires a new institutional balance: retaining the museum-as-refuge and site of contemplative tranquility while also underscoring the deeper relevance of the works on view to the issues of their respective times.

An example of this balanced vision would be to take the extraordinary exhibition of Leonardo da Vinci’s works now at London’s National Gallery (until 5 February), and to explore even more deeply the artist’s insatiable curiosity about the new intellectual forces rolling during his lifetime and the ways this manifested itself in his contributions to medicine, science, philosophy, medicine and technology.

The Leonardo exhibition provides a metaphor for institutions, including the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC. As a contemporary museum, we are involved with creative practitioners who are deeply engaged with the forces shaping our changing times. Our responsibility, therefore, is not only to show the links between artists’ ideas and works as these reflect (albeit in some cases very subtly) the times we live in, but to demystify how artists are in effect, the alchemists of the future.

Artists challenge the status quo every day. They believe in what the writer Pico Iyer describes as the “power of the long sentence” to take us to new places, rather than the quick, insubstantial twit of everyday life. This is what museums must serve, by reaching for the most far-ranging dialogue with both the work and the audiences increasingly eager to fully understand it.

To paint a more positive picture, one gladly acknowledges the many new ideas for an elevated intellectual experience that are emerging at museums and other cultural institutions. At the Hirshhorn, for example, we are creating the public spaces — lobbies, the central atrium, and surrounding plaza — with content-rich activities throughout the year. These spaces will be transformed from innocuous environments whose sole purpose has been for passing through to the galleries and other spaces to sites that have a vital educational purpose.

In 2013, for instance, the museum will open a 15-storey inflatable “anti-auditorium,” or Seasonal Inflatable Structure, which will house educational and artistic events and be a hub of a global, interactive online conversation. For two months every year, thinkers in all disciplines will engage with such critical issues as new meanings of international cultural diplomacy, the effects of open-source technology on art and cultural institutions, and the relationship of artistic to other modes of intellectual inquiry.

Every year, a thematic exhibition, such as “Damage Control: Art and Deconstruction” (2013), will be explored in depth over several days with thinkers representing many disciplines. Most importantly, these programmes will allow the larger public to engage in substantial dialogue that will further inform their understanding of the art on view, other exhibitions, and the role of the museum as an educational and cultural pace-setter.

By mounting this effort in the nation’s capital, a city with more than 500 think-tanks (but none dealing exclusively with art and cultural issues) and a deep foreign presence representing multiple cultures, we believe the Hirshhorn can make a larger commitment to its audience and to the future of art-making and the level of respect that it is accorded in shaping our future society. The writer is the director of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.