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FEATURES

Exhibiting the Grateful Dead

In 1996, the Huntington Beach Art Center hosted an exhibition entitled *Dead on the Wall: Grateful Dead and Deadhead Iconography From Thirty Years on the Bus*. Though the Center billed itself as a community arts and cultural space, its approach to exhibitions was as rigorous and creative as any good regional museum, which made this effort—one of the first in the fledgling venue’s history—especially noteworthy. The more than 100 artworks and artifacts on display traced the Grateful Dead phenomenon from the 1960s through the 1990s, but the curators’ focus was broad and incisive: along with iconic posters and recordings, the exhibition presented a wide range of fan art that formed the core of the show’s argument. “What interested me about this project, as a non-Deadhead, is that most of this artwork came not out of formal training but out of the social setting,” cocurator Tyler Stallings said. “It is an example of a true community-based art” (Pope 1996, F21).

Dead on the Wall was an ambitious survey and interpretation of the Grateful Dead phenomenon, and it made the point that the world that the Dead and the Deadheads made deserved a place in the nation’s cultural heritage institutions. It would be another fourteen years before a national museum would make the Dead the focus of a major exhibition,

but thoughtful critics and open-minded curators had long considered the Dead in those terms—at least as a theme, if not a subject. As early as 1967, the psychedelic poster art that blossomed in the Haight-Ashbury along with the Dead and their peers began to be featured in galleries and small-scale art exhibitions, putting the band—at least in name—on establishment walls. The Dead’s presence may have been more ghostly than prominent in those displays, but over the years, the band played cameo roles in exhibitions devoted to an array of topics and themes, from the 1960s to psychedelic music.

Yet it was not until 2010 that the band and the cultural phenomenon they sparked were the focus of a major museum exhibition. *The Grateful Dead: Now Playing at the New-York Historical Society* opened in March 2010, announced with an intimate concert given by Bob Weir and Phil Lesh at the Society’s imposing Central Park West building. The story of that exhibition is one of the four essays comprising this section, and it describes some of the unique challenges the Dead present for museum display, as well as the equally rich rewards.

That theme also informs two other articles here. In 2012, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum hosted *The Grateful Dead: The Long, Strange Trip*, which is the subject of rhetoric and communications scholar Susan Balter-Reitz’s interview with curator Howard Kramer. Their wide-ranging conversation frames the band’s achievement in the broader approach of the Museum, which encompasses a wide range of American vernacular music, not just rock. That macroscopic perspective encompasses a host of deeper, more narrow approaches to the band and its work, which is the focus of “‘Prophet on the Burning Shore’: Exhibiting the Grateful Dead Archive.” From 2011 to 2017, UC Santa Cruz hosted five exhibitions drawn from the Grateful Dead Archive, each of which showcased a major theme in the band’s history, work, and legacy, presenting more than a thousand artifacts and art works from the band’s archive and related collections. The interdisciplinary nature of the Archive’s exhibition program highlighted the ways that curatorial and critical issues informed and illuminated a range of issues in Grateful Dead studies, museum exhibition praxis, and archival theory.

Exhibitions are both arguments and narratives, as Balter-Reitz's exploration of Kramer's work demonstrates, and Jay Williams brings out the often uneasy tension between those goals in his essay, "Recuperating the Aura: The Dead on Display." Using Walter Benjamin's concept of aura, Williams provides a critical reading of two of the exhibitions discussed here by highlighting the problems the Dead pose for museal display, providing a theoretical basis for framing the Dead and their cultural significance through the artifacts they created and inspired.

These four articles outline the range of problems and possibilities in exhibiting the Dead, from curatorial to critical, theoretical to practical, and in a variety of different settings and environments, from local to national, academic to public, small to large. Public history and museal display always wrestle with the question of audience, and those settings also shaped the exhibitions discussed here, from the international appeal yet distinctive metropolitan character of the New-York Historical Society and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame to the more regional but academic character of a university campus. Each venue illuminated diverse aspects of the subject and the Archive; each offered a different perspective on both.

Less obvious was the role of the band's archive in these efforts. Exhibition was a central factor in the Dead's decision about a repository for their archive, so much so that they wrote it into the deed of gift. Not only did UCSC obligate itself to create a stand-alone, dedicated exhibition space, the band insisted that the Library cooperate with the New-York Historical Society and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum for their exhibitions, already in development. Though unusual for a bequest, the obligations to loan objects and offer expertise were organic extensions of the Archive's charge: the New-York Historical Society recognizes important figures in the city's arts and culture, just as the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame recognizes major figures in the history of rock; both mandates speak to the band's larger significance, as does the Archive's place in an academic setting.

Several other institutions tapped the Archive's treasures for exhibitions. Each offered chances to collaborate with other museums in different parts of the country and reach different audiences; each offered a different perspective on the Grateful Dead phenomenon and the Archive that docu-

ments it. The New-York Historical Society exhibition used regionalism as a lens for viewing the Dead, employing a microcosm-within-macrocosm approach that used New York City as an entrée to the entire phenomenon. It was also the first exhibition to be mounted from the Archive after it transitioned from the band. Though comprehensive in scope, *The Grateful Dead: Now Playing at the New-York Historical Society* also made the point that the Dead phenomenon was also resolutely local, a theme that informed a much smaller exhibition mounted at the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History in 2015. Called *Dear Jerry*, the exhibition featured a range of items from the Archive along with materials from other local collectors, focused around the iconic figure of Jerry Garcia. The timing of this exhibition coincided with the band's fiftieth anniversary, which the remaining members commemorated with a series of concerts in Santa Clara and Chicago in late June and early July 2015. In Chicago, the performances took place at Soldier Field, which prompted the nearby Field Museum to hold its own exhibition.

The Field exhibition offered a chance to participate in the public celebration of the Dead's fiftieth anniversary, connecting the Archive to the concerts. Those performances were a retrospective in their own right, layered in the complex history that defined the band and imbued its legacy—both of which were reified in and by the Archive. Although the exhibition was challenging, logistically—it came together in a matter of weeks—it made the point that the Archive was central to the Dead's legacy, and a vital part of the continuing national conversation about the band and its significance. Despite the demanding timeline, the exhibition came off well, with staffers delighted at the positive reception. Even skeptics came away pleased, with one senior conservator noting, “one of the things [the Field] can do better than most other places is weave threads of unlooked-for connections between things, no matter how dissimilar they appear at first glance.” Once installed, he could see how the exhibition—and its subject—not only merited a place in the Field, but even more, he saw how “invisible threads now ran from Jerry's guitar to a hundred other items and people scattered around the building” (Pitman 2015).

That reaction speaks to the larger context for exhibitions on the Grateful Dead. As a rock band, the Dead vie with the Beatles, the Rolling

Stones, and Pink Floyd as a subject for museum display, but they also present challenges that go beyond that status. As Phil Lesh once observed, “Grateful Dead is more than music, but it has always been *fundamentally* music” (1985, 7). This section addresses that complexity, highlighting the Dead’s highly idiosyncratic rise to fame in a career that defied industry norms and expectations. That resolute independence and willful anti-establishment stance can be easy to lose sight of, especially in the light of the band’s later success and continuing transition into the mainstream, a tangled process that museum display both furthers and reflects. The Grateful Dead’s improbable path from the countercultural bohemia of the Haight-Ashbury in the 1960s to the mainstream success of a Top Five stadium draw in the 1990s represents a quintessential American story, but telling it in an exhibition invokes fundamental issues in curation and display. These articles provide a set of case studies for how curators and institutions confront the challenges of presenting complex subcultural phenomena, but the lessons of these efforts offer insights for other scholars as well. The transition of the Grateful Dead phenomenon from San Francisco to subculture, from counterculture to mainstream, and from public history to the academy, are all part of the ongoing work required to understand this remarkably durable sociomusical phenomenon, now entering its sixth decade. While the Dead have not been the subject of the kind of internationally acclaimed exhibitions that bands such as the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and Pink Floyd have enjoyed, the Dead have been more widely exhibited by more curators in more settings than any other band, and they have sustained a far greater range of exhibition approaches and critical treatments.

Reflecting on the Huntington Beach Art Center exhibition, the *Los Angeles Times* art critic mused about her frustration with a group of Deadheads she had traveled with, annoyed by their affection for the music and appreciation for its surrounding phenomenon. The exhibition changed her mind, and she ended her admiring review with an apology to her erstwhile traveling companions: “I didn’t realize how potent a universe you inhabit” (Curtis 1996). More than twenty years later, that universe continues to attract visitors and immigrants, a process that is part of the larger engines of acculturation and assimilation that have slowly embraced the

Dead as a vital and valid part of American culture. The exhibitions of the Grateful Dead Archive are milestones marking that journey, as the essays in this section show.

N.G.M.

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