

# *OPENINGS*



1

(We Will) Open With You

2

Free Entry

5

A World of My Own

6

Best Practices for  
Museum Openings

8

On the Proper Form of the  
Museum Attendee

9

A Reluctant Gatekeeper

11

Falsies



# (WE WILL) OPEN WITH YOU

How does one enter?

How do you enter?

How do we become?

A public institution exists because the you exists. And both the institution and the you public take turns holding space for each other. Does the institution reflect or refract the you public, pushing and pulling. What happens when we the public step inside and become audience? Are we transformed or does the space become something else? Our bodies can't help but transform spaces. We assert our willingness to enter. I will meet you in the space in between. We do not have to abandon ourselves to enter. We will learn each other there. Right here. Welcome. What are you bringing in? What have you left behind? Were you welcomed before or did the invitation get lost in the mail? Pushing and pulling / Holding / Each other / In the open / To open.

An opening is neither the beginning or the end.

We open the art. The art they open us. The artist does not work in isolation as we were once told. The artist works of the world. Becoming from the word.

We are already looking at the art. And the art is always looking back.

The art does not come with rules. But we do, each of the you. Your own rules on top of the posted rules, with the open hours. When the doors open. In the open.

Some doors are nailed shut, but we have learned to use both sides of the hammer.

In the open.

Do we live here?

Do we work here?

Do we visit?

Do we die here?

Do we enter where?

You open us.

*Free Access to the said general Repository, and to the Collections therein contained, shall be given to all studious and curious persons.*<sup>1</sup>

With this phrase, the Parliament of Great Britain in 1753 formed the world's first national public museum. From its inception, the British Museum welcomed visitors without charge, as it does to this day.

Free entry: a warm invitation, a beckoning gesture. A whisper—*our home is your home*. A promise that a museum will be wide open to us. That we who visit will be ushered inside without reservation. That we will be at liberty to come and go as we are.

Yet, in the wording of the Parliamentary bill, this imagined reception at the British Museum's threshold is qualified. The charter grants free admission not to "all persons," but only to "all studious and curious persons." It therefore bids some of us to enter and leaves others outside. Who will be judged studious and curious, and deserving of access? And studious of *what*; curious of *what*? How will we portray ourselves as having these qualities before we are let inside?

## Free Entry

Julie Reiter

In her book *Museum Bodies*, the museological scholar Helen Rees Leahy unearths a

guide that teaches "the working man" how to posture himself as a studious and curious person at the British Museum. An 1832 article, published in *The Penny Magazine of The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*, comforts the reader by noting that the museum's officers will greet him no matter how homely his clothing, so long as he abides by the following:

1. Touch nothing.
2. Do not talk loud.
3. Be not obtrusive.

By obeying these "simple rules," the working man may present himself as having the requisite attributes to be present in the museum. Consequently, the article vows, the working man will garner "real knowledge" at the British Museum through the "*self-discipline of the body* as well as the mind" (Leahy's emphasis—I borrow her crescendo).<sup>2</sup>

It is not a matter of sleuthing out who does or does not have the right disposition, as *The Penny Magazine* indicates that the British Museum's offer of admittance is egalitarian. The specious presumption, however, is that we are all eager, or even able, to *perform* this character of the studious and curious person.

What made the British Museum radically public was its adoption of free admission, and its espousal that this institution would be for the people. Countless museums then

embraced this model with the notion that eliminating the cost barrier would encourage visitation. But visitors who enter freely do not always, do not *often*, feel free, inciting many to turn away from the public museums that professed to welcome them. It has become obvious in the centuries since the British Museum's foundation that the barrier to entry is not merely a value that can be quantified. The intangible sense that museums are not open to us—even when *calculably* open to us—is nonetheless palpable, nonetheless real.

Is the answer that museums must relax their policies that restrain us? As Jenna Marvin writes in her essay in this publication, our bodies when ungoverned by such boundaries can be hazardous to art. And moreover, a museum's overt rules are not the only ones that limit us. The British Museum did not, for example, publish *The Penny Magazine's* 1832 article. The press expressed those three rules—freethinking civilians that, in theory, represented the public's interests.

So, who is monitoring how we behave in a museum? Well, we are, too.

Scholars like Leahy have argued that access to a museum is conditioned by our self-conditioning—a line of reasoning that William Hernandez draws in his essay in this volume. Many critiques interpret this phenomenon of self-monitoring as indicating that the museum is not only categorically disciplinarian, but also all-pervading and insidious. They view the peak expression of the museum's regulatory efforts as not management but *self-management*. The museum sinks its teeth into us, infecting us with a rabid self-supervisory that we pass onto others. The illness is asymptomatic: as this rational goes, we are not even aware that we have contracted this contagious pestilence that induces us to constrict our activities.

Whether or not we hear the logic of the menacing museum as sound, it is self-evident that we prompt ourselves to fit museum spaces. I sense the proof of this in my body. Regularly in museums, I find myself following dictates stated by the museum as well as imparted by the actions of visitors around me. I touch nothing—and even when an artist intends for me to handle an object, I hesitate and look around at others before I do. I talk inaudibly, solemnly, as if in a place of worship. I minimize my movements and stand an "appropriate" distance away, even when I am eager to examine a work closely. I signal that I am no threat, that I have due respect for an object.

I am not always conscious of falling into such poses. I am not often awake for my own recital. Yet bristling under my surface is a compulsion to stage myself in these ways. The catch is that even when my performance as the studious and curious museum visitor is magnificent, even when my obedience of explicit and implicit directives deserves a standing ovation, I do not feel that I have access. Conforming or not conforming to such behavioral patterns results in the same sense that museums are closed off. The door between out and in is a cement wall.



When we make ourselves specific to the museum site, we pretend that we are specific in actuality too. Whereas we who visit—and we who do not visit—are as variant in nature as the artworks and artifacts that reside inside institutions. We are not “one size fits all.” We are not, of course, a cohesive “we.” And we do not cohere within ourselves, either. We can be at once artists and museum staff and museum visitors and students; or we can be none of these. Must we shed our multifold skins when we cross a museum’s doorstep to slip into only one that fits too tightly?

General Sisters offers us a way forward through the museum threshold with *(We Will) Open With You*. The art collective invites us to think mindfully about our bodies in the museum space, to speak candidly about how we can make room for ourselves. General Sisters welcomes us to come together as we are. Not while representing a definite, circumscribed role—not as *the* museum visitor, or *the* museum worker, or *the* artist. Not as the studious and curious person. But as whomever, however. General Sisters beckons us to the Williams College Museum of Art to workshop how we can access this public institution at will, with the hope that we can revisit ourselves in other museums, too. With the hope that we can begin to chip away at cemented museum experiences.

Let’s accept General Sisters’ invitation. Let’s embolden ourselves to enter freely.



1. *The British Museum Act*, ratified on June 7, 1753 by the British Parliament
2. Helen Rees Leahy, *Museum Bodies: The Politics and Practices of Visiting and Viewing*, Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, 2016, 7–9.





# A WORLD OF MY OWN

In a city filled with people, the best company is your own solitude. It's what makes New York strangely delightful.

Every day, when I step outside, the world feels like it is shrinking. It slowly slides inside of me; first the street alleys, then the skyscrapers, and then the entire sky collapses. In public, I catch myself walking with shoulders hunched, always avoiding eye contact, afraid of the streets and strangers, and for some reason anxiously trying to make my way back to my room. There's something safe about sitting in my room, it is witness to my own desires and playful musings.

I make playful shadows, bodily contortions, from the light that enters from my window. I enjoy the touch of light, it illuminates me. I dance in front of the mirror during nights of insomnia. I speak out loud to myself, tell myself an affirmation or two. I sit at my desk and write journal pages of what feels like gibberish at times. Lately, I have been thinking of my room as an architectural enclosure of sorts, yet I find comfort here. Refuge from the panic of the world.

I try to find openings within myself that I cannot find in the outside world. A source of light, inner clarity, and a sense of purpose. There is something here, within me, in my room, behind these closed walls. An opening, a different dimension, a world of my own making.

# BEST PRACTICES FOR MUSEUM OPENINGS

Jake Gagne

“General Sisters will invite the museum to open itself.”<sup>1</sup>

I love this idea, but, on the other hand, I really have no clue what it means.

It seems like a question both topographical and tropological.

Tropological because of its ambiguous grammar: the verb *open* can function either transitively (with a direct object) or intransitively (without a direct object). *The museum opened at 10am today; I arrived at 10:15 and opened the front door.*

Opening implies a threshold between interior and exterior but says very little as to the specifics of that threshold. (Maybe this is the topographical question.) Once established, can an opening be crossed, and if so, are there limits on the direction or velocity of this motion? In crossing, do we go in, up, left, west, around, or follow some other choreography of progress? Do both sides breathe the same air?

Most importantly, who is opening whom? Is General Sisters’ “invitation” a euphemism for something more coercive? For there are many techniques of ‘opening,’ from the brutal to the blissful.

But in this case, the verb *open* has become reflexive, taking the pronoun *itself* as the direct object and jumbling the entire question of agency!

I love this problem, and I love General Sisters’ allusion to the register of the psychotherapeutic. I hope we can find the calmness to consider, however fleetingly, that the museum’s bad behaviors—its emotional opacity, its fantasies of mastery, its hostility to dialogue—might be learned and not inborn.

Perhaps the museum, intelligent and capable, recognized long ago that flawless performance and the suppression of certain negative or unpredictable emotions were “absolutely essential adaptation[s] during childhood” to secure parental love and negotiate the precipice of infantile dependency.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps whenever in childhood the museum spoke its truest feelings (*I doubt that what I am saying—what you have taught me to*

*say—is true, and I fear that whoever, whatever I hold is suffocated and changed, and that therefore I am bad*) its parents, supposedly enlightened, replied with verbal abuse or, worse, with silence, resedimenting archaic piles of violence.

Now, both grandiose and depressive—the twin excesses of any patient who suffers from what psychologist Alice Miller called “narcissistic disturbance”—the museum can only find its worth in restaging over and over the drama of its childhood.<sup>3</sup> Hence the overbearing cruelty with which the museum has often treated its human and inhuman captives.

Miller argues that adult patients can confront and overcome these early disturbances by entering psychoanalysis, where the flourishing (*not*, crucially, the mere uncovering) of a true self can take place with the mediation of an analyst. Often, she writes, “this first step into the open produces much anxiety” in the patient.<sup>4</sup>

But...this first step into *the open*. Now I am more confused.

Logically, I guess, an opening would lead into the open. But where is that?

*Is the open the air that touches my skin? Have I lived in the closed?*

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke once wrote,

*All other creatures look into the Open  
with their whole eyes. But our eyes,  
turned inward, are set all around it like snares,  
trapping its way out to freedom.  
[...]*

*Not for a single day, no, never have we had  
that pure space ahead of us, in which flowers  
endlessly open. It is always World  
and never Nowhere without No:  
that pure, unguarded space we breathe,  
always know, and never crave.*<sup>5</sup>

For Rilke, we can only look in elegiac sadness to the memory of that “first home,” where everything lay so still and close.<sup>6</sup> No glass cages or straining words. But even if it were ever reachable, I doubt the museum could survive that passage and the collapse of all exclusion; which of us could do without the constant, defensive construction and registration of objects?

But Miller, in her quite different context, has suggested that we *can* step into the open. However, she writes, “This is not a homecoming since this home had never before existed. It is the discovery of home.”<sup>7</sup>

This makes me think perhaps the open never exists beforehand, but only in the duration of opening, like approaching an asymptote. Sounding a threshold threading preservation and loss. Perhaps we can build a habit of approaching the open through acts of opening, hopefully.



1. [Wcma.williams.edu/we-will-open-with-you-general-sisters/](http://wcma.williams.edu/we-will-open-with-you-general-sisters/)
2. Alice Miller, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, trans. Ruth Ward (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 46
3. See Miller, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, 34–48.
4. Miller, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, 82
5. Rainer Maria Rilke, “Duino Elegies: The Eighth Elegy,” trans. A. Poulin, Jr., in *Duino Elegies and The Sonnets to Orpheus* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 55–60. Lines 1–4, 14–17.
6. Rilke, “Duino Elegies: The Eighth Elegy,” 57. Line 50.
7. Miller, 21.

# ON THE PROPER FORM OF THE MUSEUM ATENDEE

William Hernandez Luege

“Pórtarte bien.” Two words that my father used to tell me in a hushed, stern voice whenever I walked into a museum.

The obvious translation is “behave yourself.” The museum is presumed to be sacred space. It’s no surprise that I only remember my father forcefully whispering the same words to me in one other place: a church.

In Spanish the verb portar, the basis of my father’s command, implies more than behavior. It more literally equates to carrying oneself. Like lifting a heavy object bending from the knees, the body in a museum can have correct and incorrect form. As a child I had a propensity to run when I shouldn’t, particularly towards things that interested me. Furthermore, as I grew I also tended to forget the length of my arms: expanding my radius of potential damage. Art excited me, but my excitement came with great risk.

∞

Particularly for the art.

In order to combat my nature that would have surely toppled statues, impaled paintings, and worse, mortified my parents in public, my father, a lifelong athlete, set about creating positions for my body to take. Forms. Moving in a museum, I learned, would require technique.

*Correct Form 1: You will walk with your arms behind your back, your right wrist being gripped by your left hand. The right hand will make a fist. This will prevent you from running effectively. You can’t go as fast without pumping your arms. It also will mitigate the likelihood of knocking something over when turning around quickly. This form is best utilized with slow, intentional steps. You must observe your surroundings, and make sure you do not get in people’s way.*

*Correct Form 2: You will walk with your hands in your pockets. They must only be your pant pockets, because those of a jacket or hoodie will inevitably allow your elbows to relax, and relaxed elbows knock things over. This will also prevent you from running effectively. You can’t go as fast without pumping your arms. This form is again best utilized with slow, intentional steps. You must observe your surroundings, and make sure you do not get in people’s way.*

There was no official preference between the two, although I did notice that my father himself made a careful point of enacting form one with the utmost precision. Over years of museum attendance with my parents, I practiced and honed my forms the way a boxer learns their footwork. So it was that my body learned the sacredness of the museum. And that sacredness became real precisely because my body made it so. My body became a place of ideology, an unseen, ingrained rationale that told me I should be careful when I move in a museum, that I should be as controlled and contained as possible at all times. Since then I’ve grown up. I’ve become an art historian. I should now know better, and yet I don’t.

The minute I cross the doors of a museum I will shift into one of those two forms, without fail. When I’ve tried to conscientiously break these molds, to simply just be in a museum space, I grow deeply uncomfortable. My hands fidget. Where do they go? I begin to move around the space quicker without a bodily form that slows me down. A spiral of self awareness ensues that inevitably leads me to a gift shop where I can touch something. The only respite is either a return to those forms, or to annoy gift shop employees with my constant half-hearted attempt at purchasing something. Usually a hat. While I don’t blame my parents for something so small and trivial as how I walk into a museum (and, to their credit, I was an absolute cyclone of a child) I nevertheless find myself not only resigning to, but actively relishing in the habits my body takes in the museum space.

The way a baseball player will always step over the foul lines, or the way I feel more comfortable shooting a basketball with my right hand, or even the way I always put my left shoe on before my right one, my body has become the site of beliefs that my brains otherwise cannot express. My forms now allow me to enjoy museums, albeit in a very particular way, and as of yet I’m unsure what the alternative would be. Perhaps the museum is closer to a church than I am wanting to admit. Whether I wanted it to be or not, the museum is a house of ritual the moment I pass through its doors.

Despite the best efforts of docents, app designers, and architects to change museums on a personal, virtual, and physical level, I am skeptical that one day museum buildings might retrain my body; habits are far too encoded into the space they are performed in for that to happen. If there is to be hope for me to break those forms it must come from the art. With the right art the form of the museum itself might shift just enough to allow me some much sought after wiggle room. As of yet I’m unsure what such an art would look like. Despite my best intentions I am no artist, just a historian and a fan. But if I reflect upon what the conditions of such

an art might be, the only thing I am sure of is that it must make us all as uncomfortable in our own forms as I would feel running, spinning, climbing my way through a museum. Until then, me porto bien.

## A RELUCTANT GATEKEEPER

Jenna Marvin

The din of enthusiastic voices trickles through the museum, beckoning to the people who venture through its doors. A buffet of food and drinks is situated in the center of an art-lined room with white walls and high ceilings. The art objects hung on the walls are barely visible. Throngs of people congregating in small groups obstruct the view. The carpeted floor tries and fails to absorb the sound of laughter and excitement exuded by the crowd. A few people circulate the room with drinks, food, and cocktail napkins in hand. After all, the art is what they supposedly came to see. Some make their way around the room in circles, counterclockwise or clockwise, taking in the art in an orderly fashion. Others zigzag erratically from point to point. A few are alone, but most are in the company of friends. They gesture and point to the works, discuss what they like and what they do not before moving on to the next piece. Others become distracted, recognizing someone across the room and rushing to greet them; their viewing circuit temporarily interrupted. They embrace; perhaps they haven't seen each other in months. These people may stand in the center of the gallery and talk for a long time; maybe they don't resume their turn about the room. They leave together in search of a quieter place to catch up. In the meantime, more people have arrived to fraternize in their place. They disperse throughout the gallery with their beverages and slices of cheese balanced on a small napkin, realizing too late that they have no free hand with which to eat, the most common peril of an art opening. They settle for awkwardly balancing their drinks and food in the crooks of their arms or handing their full cups to their compatriots, the lips of their glasses barely managing to contain the liquid contents.

My shoulders have crept upwards—they unconsciously tensed up as I typed this. I sit back and shake out my wrists. Instincts are hard to unlearn. For years I was a gallery gatekeeper, an attendant, dressed in black against crisp white walls underneath sterile fluorescent lights. Gallery visitors

filed in at the instructed time to inspect the art on the walls with discriminating eyes. My senses tingled when someone approached a work of art with a full glass of wine: the liquid sloshing around precariously near the rim of the plastic cup, threatening to splash onto the shiny surface of the oil painting mere inches away.

All other thoughts dissolve when you hear the gallery doors open. The dry, chill atmosphere inside creates a slight swoosh as it meets the muggy, city air. The sound is inaudible to others, but not to you. It serves as a dog whistle, silently tearing you away from whatever you are doing to covertly glance at the door. Some visitors are known quantities: you remember who to keep an eye on. But it is the unrecognizable visitor that causes a gallery attendant immense stress. Are they unknown because they are “unimportant” or because they are someone whose face you have forgotten? We, the gallery gatekeepers, are a plucky and dedicated species, but not infallible, though they take great pains to conceal it. To a casual observer we seem at ease; in our element in this space filled with people that look like us. That is the gatekeeper's greatest asset. They look like a duck, swim like a duck, but at the end of the night, they clean up the gallery, lock the doors, and take the subway one and half hours home, only to be the first person to return to the gallery to turn on the coffeemaker the next morning.

I have attended many openings, but I have never been able to shake the anxiety and constant vigilance that accompanies crowds of people and art occupying the same space. Even as a museum or gallery visitor, I cannot help but look up when the door opens or flinch when someone strides a little too closely to a work of art. The surprising truth is, however, that I do not want to banish all of these knee-jerk reactions. People *do* spill wine on art, and all it takes is one misplaced step for someone to accidentally barrel into a sculpture. It is in vogue in the art world to scoff at these stiff and unyielding gallery attendants who monitor visitors, but how do museums care for their collections without them? Perhaps unlearning is not the goal, but reconciling. How do we graciously welcome people to experience the art on museum walls without unnecessarily policing behavior? How do we protect and preserve art objects while also acting as stewards to our collection? How can we allow people to flow freely through these spaces without keeping mental tabs on who is now entering the room and who has yet to arrive? But most importantly, can we retain the genuine conviviality of an art opening while protecting both the works themselves and the right for any visitor, known or unknown, to stop in, sip a chardonnay, and spend a few minutes with art?





# FALSIES

## 1

There is a disjuncture between the medium of exhibition catalogues and the medium of exhibitions themselves. The process of cataloguing means transforming one thing into another: image into text, object into photograph, room into page, exhibition into book. In this process, every transformation is invariably partial. Book-form will always fail to capture exhibition-form. Worse: it will actively distort it. Language has a tendency to nudge and coerce, remolding experiential data into its own patterns, aligning it with its own goals. This is an issue that haunts all writing about art and art-places. However, it is also perhaps the secret dream of the catalogue: a fantasy of totalization and control. The catalogue knows it will outlive the exhibition and thereby consume it.

## 2

Written text is inherently directional. Turning over the first page of a book, we are fully aware that wherever we are “going” – that is, wherever we want the book to take us – can only be reached by moving in accordance with a prescribed set of rules. A protocol. Namely: the reader must always travel left to right, top to bottom, and front to back. These are the cardinal directions of reading, and, even in cases where the narrative content loops or meanders, they remain its solid foundation and, ultimately, its motor. Of course, these dictates cannot hope to control our movements through the text completely. Reading is always a highly idiosyncratic process, and backtracking, skipping ahead and flipping between pages all represent fertile means of unsystematic literary travel. Nonetheless, it is clear that reading has a structural disposition towards linear forward movement. Even those readers who defy this convention, flitting around the text at will, tend to recognize that they are usually moving in the interstices of a pre-established flow or progression.

## 3

Exhibitions occur in museum space, which, although seemingly well-ordered, maintains a reasonable amount of the shoddiness and chaos that clings to real space. Museum architecture, wall text, and gallery attendants all do their best to route the viewer along a specific path. And yet, the existence of these mechanisms in real space and time tends to limit their possible effectiveness. There is a lived-ness to the exhibition which ensures that it always avoids total systematization. Indeed, its potential directions and pathways are exponential. The validity-claims of one pathway over another are mostly negligible.

## 4

In most cases, exhibition catalogues exist in order to buttress and reaffirm the exhibition’s intended movements, its *ideal* choreography. The catalogue presents and expands upon the paths we should have taken, the information we should have gleaned, and the order in which we should have gleaned it. The progression from first page to last, building chapter upon chapter and line upon line, restates our journey from entrance to exit in its ideal form: as a frictionless unfolding of information. Moreover, the catalogue restates this journey for perpetuity. It is a freezing mechanism, in which the exhibition’s fleeting existence is dried, flattened, and preserved between pages: perfect forever.

## 5

The exhibition catalogue for the 1947 Surrealist exhibition featured, on its cover, a large latex breast. A “falsie.” In order to read the catalogue’s content, readers were forced into an uncomfortable position: to skim pages with one’s right hand, one had to cup the latex breast in one’s left.







## GENERAL SISTERS

Founded 2009, North Braddock, PA

Dana Bishop-Root, b. 1981; Ginger Brooks Takahashi, b. 1977

General Sisters is an art collective in the process of opening General Sisters, General Store, a site for the “exchange of goods, nourishment, and perspectives” located in North Braddock, Pennsylvania. Stocked with affordable food and ingredients, General Sisters makes eating, sharing, and gathering available to neighbors within walking distance. General Sisters turns routine transactions into possibilities for exchange that recognize the environmental and economic realities of its clients. General Sisters feeds the community literally and figuratively by confronting the racial and economic injustices evident in the food system and neighborhood, and working actively to change them.

Dana Bishop-Root has worked and lived in North Braddock for ten years, is a member of Transformazium, and works at the Braddock Carnegie Library. Her work grows alongside local systems of communication, exchange, and resource distribution.

Ginger Brooks Takahashi is a socially enraged artist, gardener, and educator. An active collaborator with other artists, she is a founding member of LTTR and MOBILIVRE/BOOKMOBILE project.



Published to accompany the artist project *(We Will) Open With You: General Sisters* at the Williams College Museum of Art. September 6–9, 2018.

Edited by Jake Gagne and Ewan Wallace  
Designed by William Hernandez Luege.  
Project Managed by Julie Reiter

*(We Will) Open With You* was curated by the following students in the Contemporary Curatorial Workshop of the Williams Graduate Program in the History of Art:

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William Hernandez Luege  
Jenna Marvin  
Lucas Matheson  
Julie Reiter  
Eve Rosekind  
Ewan Wallace  
Rachel Wilson  
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It was made possible by generous funding from the Williams College Museum of Art and the Graduate Program in Art History at Williams College and The Clark Art Institute.

Our thanks for their invaluable contributions to: Lisa Dorin, Interim Director, Williams College Museum of Art; Victoria Brooks, Curator, Time-Based Visual Art, Curtis R. Priem Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center; Adi Nachman, Exhibitions and Program Manager, Williams College Museum of Art; Pallavi Sen, Assistant Professor of Art, Williams College; Mano Sundaresan, Williams College Class of 2019; and Audrey Koh, Williams College Class of 2021.

THE CONVERSATIONS WILL CONTINUE  
THROUGH SPRING 2019