



# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

WITH BETH BRODOVSKY

## SESSION 172

### HOW TO LIBERATE YOURSELF FROM LIMITED THINKING

WITH MONICA O. MONTGOMERY

**BETH:** Hello, this is Beth Brodovsky, and welcome to Driving Participation. Today I am on with Monica O. Montgomery, and Monica and I connected directly recently when she was a speaker at a conference. I was sitting there looking through the program, and I flipped to this page and I saw a picture and I thought, “Wait a minute. I know this girl,” and I realized that we’ve been connected through Twitter and through LinkedIn for years, but we’d never gotten a chance to speak directly. Monica is a cultural consultant and a graduate professor at both NYU and my alma mater, Pratt. I’m so excited to talk to her. We’ve been doing some more work in the cultural sector lately, and Monica is also the founding director of an organization called The Museum of Impact, and it’s really interesting and fascinating how it’s shaking up the world of museums with some fresh ideas and thinking. I wanted to bring Monica on today to talk about how you liberate yourself from the limited thinking that we tend to get stuck in when we’re doing things over and over again. Monica, thank you so much for joining me today.

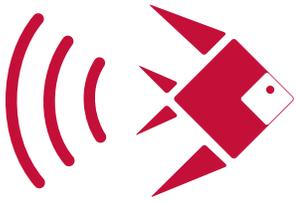
**MONICA:** Thank you for having me, Beth! I’m so excited to speak with you and your listeners.

**BETH:** I’m sure that many people probably who are listening have heard you and many of them also follow you, but you do some really interesting diverse things, but I really want to know how does a girl get into the museum culture like you did?

**MONICA:** Well, she puts her foot in a door where they give an inch, and then she takes a mile.

**BETH:** I love it!





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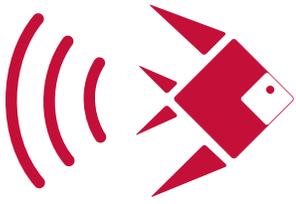
**MONICA:** It's so imperative that even just whatever you're doing, whatever you're aiming to do, that you have an agenda and that is advice that you won't hear often and elsewhere. People have a very negative connotation about the word "agenda," but it's really a series of goals and benchmarks and bucket lists for yourself. I was always interested in the cultural sector as a patron, as a former classroom teacher taking my students on field trips, but when I decided I am gonna start my own museum, the world's first mobile social justice museum, I realized that I needed to learn this sector and not by necessarily getting a degree in it, but by doing it, and that's when my journey begun.

**BETH:** That is so fascinating! I'm so excited that we're gonna get to talk about this because it really is a completely different look at museums, look at culture and a really different way to jump into anything. Especially I would think in the cultural arts. You know go through the process of traditional degrees. I think it's gonna be a really interesting journey and I think both paths are valid and valuable, depending on what you're looking to do. One of the favorite things I feel I heard was if you want to reach for something, reach for like 150 percent, and then you might get to 80 percent, but if you're thinking I'm probably only gonna get to 80 percent, chances are most people only get to about 40 percent. So I love your philosophy of shooting for the stars and just appreciating what happens on the journey.

**MONICA:** Definitely. I'm a very driven, ambitious and motivated person, but even beyond all that, I think we're here on this Earth to use our talents and express ourselves and we should have no regrets. Nothing left by the end of our lives, so I'm on that path as well.

**BETH:** Exactly. I completely agree. You do some different things. You're a teacher, you are a, I guess, a curator of space, but all of the different things that you do require people to come along for the ride. You can't create a museum and have nobody experiencing it. So in your world in this work that you do, in the spectrum of what you do, what does the word "participation" mean to you and how are you





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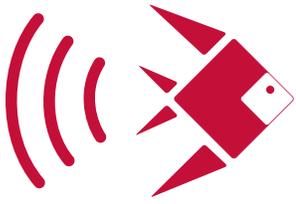
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trying to create it so that it helps you thrive and your organization thrive so that you can exist to do the things that are important?

**MONICA:** Sure. Well first let me just quickly define the spectrum of what I do. I am totally gonna earn this Wikipedia entry that one day will be written in my name! I am really advancing the canon and marking new spaces and new ways of conceiving art culture through the realms of social justice. I teach as a graduate professor. I've taught at Harvard and Johns Hopkins and currently NYU and Pratt courses around museums and social justice. I train and do executive coaching with leaders in art culture and education spaces who are trying really to increase their responsive leadership looking at diversity, inclusion, access, equality and equity. I also am writing. I've written chapters for books. I write articles. I'm in the process of writing my own book. I lead several organizations in different spaces and boards and then I curate and create space to the Museum of Impact. So all of that is part of building and advancing the canon that is the spectrum of my work. So your question. Participation. I really think the essence of participation is remixing a visitor experience. What do I mean by that? The word "remix." Everyone loves remix, whether it's music, whether it's food, whether it's a fusion of performances, styles, fashion. It's the remix. It's the essence of how do we take what exists, re-twist it, re-shape it, re-imagine it and re-present it so that visitors, audiences, communities, stakeholders, whatever you want to call the people you're engaging with can have a specially engaging experience. So participation, it involves co-curation and shared authority. It involves leveraging goodwill and understanding and asset mapping the folks you're working with, but it's really how can you mobilize and organize around an experience and remix what was into what could be.

**BETH:** That is so interesting and it's so funny. I've been hearing the word "co-create" a lot lately, too, and it's funny that I've been doing this podcast for three and a half years and these words "co-curation" and "co-creation" are just now popping up, which I wonder why. Why is it just now that people are starting to think about letting their communities in on the process of designing the





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experience?

**MONICA:** I think it's because it's either let your communities in and work with your communities or face extinction, right, so it's imperative that people have more options and multiplicity of areas that they can dedicate their time. What is time? Time is money. Time is value. Time is currency. So we really in essence at the end of the day, people in the arts and culture space want people's time and we want their engagement. If all of these other things exist from malls to golf courses to video games and beyond, how do we lure and engage and make an irresistible experience in arts and culture spaces for our visitors unless we let them set the tone and shake the conversation, then we're really not engaging the way we should and they will go elsewhere.

**BETH:** Right and the funny thing is when I first started this, I didn't have anything out there so people didn't know what I was talking about and when I would ask people "What does the word 'participation' mean to you?" the most common response that I got to that was, "What do you mean by participation?" and I would have to say, "No, no, no. What do you mean by participation?"

**MONICA:** A question for a question.

**BETH:** Exactly. It's really funny and to me, we've gotten to this point where we've been talking about the fact that for us participation means this idea of engagement in action and I started this whole program, this whole journey of understanding participation because people pretty much understand I'm attracting people and then they have things that they want them to do, but was seeing sort of the two extreme of things happening. Either people were dead focused on I'm gonna make people make a beeline between they show up and then they do the thing. They donate. They sign up. How can we use digital marketing to get people to take an action now and then on the flip side I was seeing the opposite thing of let's invest tons of time in social media and shoot for likes and then hope that eventually those likes are gonna start commenting





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and eventually those comments are gonna start clicking. I've since come to say to people that hope is like the most expensive form of marketing that you can do. I've been doing this to explore what different things do participation mean to each other and how can we start figuring out what this journey is between attraction and action. So in your world, it's required really breaking the rules and taking the structure and ripping it apart and thinking about it differently, but that's hard for people. What do you think? In your experience, what do you think leads to this idea of limited thinking and wanting to just pull out last year's plan and just do it over again?

**MONICA:** I think there is definitely a mentality of scarcity that exists in nonprofit sectors and other sectors that deal with audiences because at the core, many people are scared of truly engaging the people, being among the people and so they think well, if we did it last year, it will work again this year. Even if it doesn't work well we'll at least get the bare minimum result as opposed to the optimal results. How do we go from surviving in our organizations to thriving? I think limited thinking is informed by stagnant leadership. That means and let me be extremely clear that leadership that has been in power for awhile, and hasn't been considering the transformational aspect of everyone's ideas, calling people, bringing people to the room, whether it's the stakeholder, the audience or the staff member and asking them from the front lines what do you think? From where you're seated, how do you see things? So I think the limitation comes from leadership, the limitation comes from the mentality of scarcity and the limitation comes from people not really wanting to do the work, just wanting to come, subsist and exist again as opposed to thrive and be a rock star audience-engaging space.

**BETH:** Yeah, it's so interesting that you would say it that way because in the sessions that we've done and obviously in our work, one of the things that is most reported, in fact I think it's the most reported when I ask people what is it that's working? How are you creating participation, and most people say leadership buy-in is the critical thing. I sort of cringe a little bit when I hear the word "buy-





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in” because it feels a little bit like you’re dragging them along, but I don’t think that’s what they mean. I think that they mean that the leadership is championing an idea and they’re excited about it and that they are lifting the whole organization forward, and in your work, what you’re seeing are like a leader that’s been in place for a long time sometimes isn’t always in that mind set. Is there any way to get to that point where leaders are excited and engaged and willing to shake things up? Have you seen anything that helps an organization that is not in transition with staff get to that mental place where they can be open to change?

**MONICA:** I usually think that change is sparked by a committed few individuals that then go and evangelize and kind of bring the gospel of change to the rest of the organization. So usually people that are doing progressive work in museum spaces at the very least tend to be front of the house staff, education staff, public program staff that come in and go tell the executives or administration staff or other people that it may not be as public-facing, hey, here’s what needs to happen because here’s what we’re seeing out on the floor or we’re seeing it in performance spaces or we’re seeing it in classrooms. So I think that having the allies of yourself, if you are a person of progress or looking to spark change in your organization and a few other committed individuals and mapping out the plan and then saying here’s how we’re going to bring this to each department and get their buy-in and last and hopefully not least, the leader should be signing off and congratulating people for being so self-directed and bringing change to the floor. I also wanted to mention really quick I really envision these five levels of progressively scaffolding participation or engagement opportunities. The way that I see it when I do consulting with clients and especially in community engagement work people say, “Oh we want folks to come to this event or petition this or have this outcome,” and my question is OK, how have you been engaging them thus far? Let’s do a basic needs assessment. What have you said to them if anything? But I think there are these ways that organizations can intersect with audiences to foster participation. The first most basic level is to inform, to kind of be a megaphone of sorts. We are announcing that ... and that’s very one way, very one-directional, but you know, it can be effective in different circles. The next





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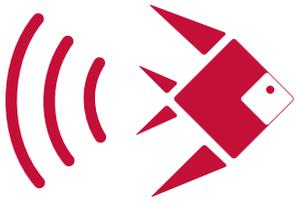
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is to consult. So how are we drawing out story, needs, wishes, from community, with community and kind of maybe bringing a facilitator to do that work. The third is to really meaningfully involve. So now we're going up the food ladder. We're at this medium point where we're not just announcing and we're not just soliciting story, we're involving you in our whole process and strategy that has participation woven into the DNA. I think the fourth level, we're getting close to the top, the level to heaven's gate. The fourth is collaboration, and so how can we not just inform, consult and involve, but really collaborate meaningfully, bringing everyone's assets to the table, seeing the value in everyone where no one person or organization is trying to lord over the other and seeing ways we can kind of crowd-source the brilliance. Fifth I think is the essence of co-creation, which we've spoken about. So informing, consulting, involving, collaborating and co-creating is what it looks like to move up those levels.

**BETH:** I've seen those things, too, and people that we talk to absolutely indicate things like all of that. Co-creation is a new one that's really starting to pop up. It's like the pinnacle of getting there, but collaboration comes up almost as much as leadership buy-in and getting people to become champions for your organization. So in the work that you've done, collaboration has been critical in so many ways and I'm sure that there are people that are listening that maybe have not heard of this idea of a mobile museum and specifically the work you're doing in Museum of Impact. Can you talk a little bit around the collaboration that it's taken for you to develop this idea and put it into practice?

**MONICA:** Surely. So Museum of Impact is a mobile social justice museum. That means that we pop up in spaces that we're invited to and sometimes spaces that we scout out where the people are, where the critical masses are. That might be a church or a park, a library or a school, a community center or a street corner and sometimes mainstream museums will invite us because they want the social justice flavor. The social justice layer is important because many people are doing pop-up art installations and other sorts of exhibits, but we want everything that we do to harken back to the need and the urgency for change-making in a variety





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of ways, whether it's looking at local, hyper-local or global issues, whether we look at change makers that exist in a contemporary frame work or from history, but definitely having the audience in the spirit of participation feel like they have an avenue to action. They're learning about the issues and then they're able to take a stance and make change in their own ways on these issues. So when we do pop ups, we've done 30 to date, about 9,000 people roughly and all these really different, really amazing topics that we've explored. Some of them are very tough topics, very emotional, but you can see from the audience response and participation there's a hunger to talk about and exploring contextualized meaningful things. Feminism, election cycle, the environment and the water protectors, Black Lives Matter, sexual assault and Me Too. You name it, if it's happening in the news, if it's in the cultural consciousness, we're gonna tackle it and when we think about how we're doing that work, it comes and successfully collaborates with partners on the ground being the host organization that other nonprofits and charitable organizations can reach out to and seeing how we can create an emotionally resonant experience that meets the needs of the community with sustainability, with intention, with flexibility baked in.

**BETH:** One of the things I think is so interesting about what you do is you take on these tough and these difficult issues, but rather than doing it as a fireside chat or a town hall, you take a completely different interactive sometimes crazy idea approach to that. What led you to taking that kind of approach and also how did you get people, other people to buy in and say, "Yes, we want to collaborate on executing it this way"?

**MONICA:** Certainly. Well, I think there is definitely a void and a space of opportunity for people that want to create interactives around current events. That's something you don't see much of. Museums are starting to move in that direction, and I'm one of the people pushing them in that way and championing for that, but I think there's a lot of hesitance and reticence around even admitting that anything is even wrong in society at all, but we don't just take the stance of something is wrong, something needs to change. This is terrible. We try to





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have this pro-social, aspirational approach, saying something needs to change. Let's examine it, explore it and then think how we can change it. We do this with babies, adults and senior citizens, people of all ages, really asking them what efforts to change have you already made? Let's brew up and cook up some ideas of what we can do, and let's have all of these things that are going to challenge us and make us think in the way of interactive to get us to the point of being what we call up standers as opposed to bystanders or change makers. I think it takes a bit of riskiness. It takes a bit of crazy. It takes ingenuity and whimsy to have this approach.

**BETH:** Right. So that's a really good question. Not everybody would define themselves as "I'm somebody with a little ingenuity and whimsy." If you're somebody who has that, "I've got that spark, but I don't know how to move forward," or maybe you're somebody that's seen like, "We just do the same thing all the time. I would love to do something different or innovative, but I don't know how to start." What would you suggest to listeners that are excited by some of the ideas and direction that you're taking about how they could cultivate thinking this way?

**MONICA:** Sure. I think number one they have to identify the issue. So if they want to approach a current event or social justice issue, what is the issue it is. Sometimes when I go to clients and we do our first meeting and they say, "Hey, we want to have a social justice experience at our school," and I'm like "Great, which issues did you want to tackle?" and they say "all of them" and I say, "How amazing, and Rome wasn't built in a day, and these issues certainly took decades of inequity and systemic issues to proliferate, so we need to narrow down to at least four." And then I actually present. I have a list of social justice disputes that I've pulled from the news and current events and what has been trending and say, "OK, which of these 20, pick four of those," and it's really hard. It's really hard, but once they're able to drill down, like recently this weekend we did a festival, which is one of the events that we travel, and they chose the LGBTQ AI experience. We chose Black Lives Matter. We chose the water protecting the environment and





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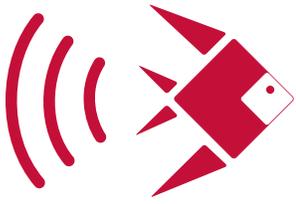
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we chose immigration and the travel ban. Once they did that, then we can really create something meaningful. So the people that want to do this in their space, drill down on an issue, observe and survey the landscape to see who is doing work and then think what could we actually do to get people moving and not just sitting on a panel and talking or having endless debates and discussions. How can people move? How can people use their five senses? What could be the outcome of that? I think there is beauty there and certainly I'm open to collaborating with anyone that wants to, so feel free to email me.

**BETH:** So you've had, you've done at least 30 of these different things. This is different. It's a different approach. A lot of times even for the partners that you're working with it's a different approach, what's working to attract people to say, "Yes, I want to show up and participate in this event"?

**MONICA:** Well, again I think there's a void and there's a hunger. So audiences, everyday people, they're looking for where in society is it safe? Is it welcome? Is it acceptable to express themselves around what's happening in the world? So often we do this in our homes, our churches, hair salons, but it's all talking. It's talking in echo chambers and talking in endless discussions. Where can we take action or at least think together on what the action is to take. So at Museum of Impact we really create this experience that lets people do. We talk about what are the issues and then we talk about who is doing that work. We have obstacle courses. We have letter-writing stations. We have other things where we encourage other people to actually stand on a soap box and say their piece. You know how people say, "I'm gonna get off my soap box." No, get on your soap box. Tell us why you're mad. Tell us what's hurting you. Tell us how you're feeling. We have performances of all sources. We have opportunities for people to record oral histories about the ways that they've intersected with movements and the fears and the challenges and the joys that they had. There's all these different things they can do to express themselves and people are hungry for those kinds of opportunities. So we have no problem with participation. We're literally like beating people back because so many people want to jump in and be hands on





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with change making.

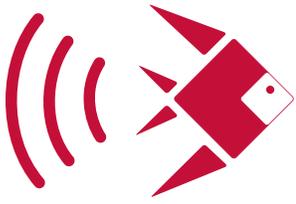
**BETH:** Wow! It's such a reason why I wanted to have you on here because everything you do is about participation.

**MONICA:** Yes, it is, and people come in the hundreds and sometimes the thousands. We did a pop-up a year and a half ago at the Brooklyn Museum during their first Saturday public program. First Saturdays last about four hours in the night. They have many different things happening. Anyone who has ever been to the Brooklyn Museum knows their huge encyclopedic things happening on all floors. They invited Museum of Impact to do a pop-up during Black History Month interpreting the black radical tradition. They gave us the Beaux-Arts Court, 12,000 square foot space. We packed that space out with art and feedback walls and activities and facilitators and things people could touch and do and learn and a pop-up archive and 3,000 people came through in three hours. That's a thousand per hour! Never in my life would I have expected that that would be the outcome, but seeing the way that people reacted and hearing the feedback that this was great, they've never seen anything like it, they want more of it, it inspires me to keep doing this work and knowing that the world needs it.

**BETH:** That's a great question. The outcome. So you've got outcomes that happen during it. You're seeing expressions change and like light bulbs come on and people show up. It must be amazing and energetic to see all of that happening in the space but once it's done, afterwards what kind of things are different?

**MONICA:** So I think that's the part that we are working through, how to evaluate our impact, my favorite word, long term. So we've been able to hear back from people. We always invite people to fill out surveys and kind of right in the moment kind of tell us how they're feeling, what they're planning to change with the whole avenues to action as an actual activity. There's a flow chart that says, "Do I care about such and such?" Click yes, click no. It kind of takes you to the bottom of here are things that you can do and we have this for adults and kids,





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but it would be great to get some funding, right and some capacity support to do a longitudinal study of how people's actions and perceptions have changed after these experiences and that's a goal we're working towards.

**BETH:** Interesting. The museums that you've partnered with, thing like the Brooklyn Museum, have they, what's their reaction to the experience?

**MONICA:** They're very happy. We usually get invited back year after year. We did something at the Portland Museum this May, a festival that had about 800 people come the door and it was the day after there was the tragic killings on the trains in Portland, so the space became almost a memorial of sorts and the place to hold feelings and grieving and we had plenty of tissue boxes and offering free hugs, not that that's going to heal everything and solve everything, but folks wanted a place to come and feel and express and grieve and cry and laugh and be together and we held space for that and they invited us back this year to do more of the same. Hopefully no tragic circumstances will occur, but I've realized there's no place in society, there's no space that people can go and express those feelings. We are there and whenever we pop up we're trying to create that space for the masses.

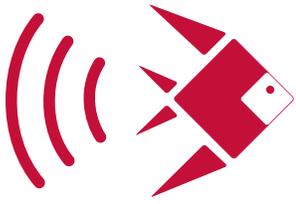
**BETH:** It's so interesting. It brings up a lot of like what can a museum be today.

**MONICA:** Well, you know I have ideas on that! So many!

**BETH:** So talk a little bit about that. When it comes to that word "museum," it brings up a lot of times this stodgy formal dusty atmosphere. What can an experience of culture look like in the future?

**MONICA:** An experience of culture can be a catalyst. It can be a safe and a brave space. Can be something where you come and you leave transformed. I think it's about gathering people, not just around objects and collections, but around ideas and allowing them to converse and meet and be this active visible player in civic life. How can a museum as the American Alliance Museum has said on their





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website, how can a museum be a trusted incubator of change? That's what I'm on the path towards and that's what I think every museum and every culture pace should inspire and aspire to be.

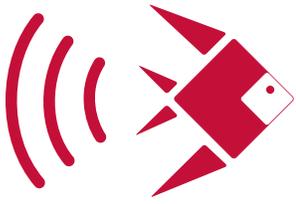
**BETH:** If people are listening and they think, "Wow, this would be transformational in our world," whether you're a museum or whether you're completely different, whether you're a school or an association, what Monica is really talking about is how do you get people touch, tasting and feeling things, like literally Feeling with a capital F, that you're moving through things as opposed to just sitting and witnessing things.

**MONICA:** Yes. I think that it's about meaning making and participation and if we have to boil it down to like a two-word meaning making. Not just push this button, pull this lever, but how do you make meaning so the experience stays in the hearts, minds and memory of our audiences? If you're an organization of any stripe that wants to make meaning in your space, then we are the ones to call. Please reach out to us at [MuseumOfImpact.org](http://MuseumOfImpact.org), M-u-s-e-u-m-O-f-I-m-p-a-c-t.org. Look through our website. You can email me personally. TheFounderInfo@MuseumOfImpact.org and find us on all our social media channels at MuseumOfImpact. Also follow me personally [@Monica\\_Muses](https://twitter.com/Monica_Muses), M-o-n-i-c-a\_Muses, M-u-s-e-s because I'm musing about many things.

**BETH:** Monica, if someone wanted to get started with this on their own in their organization, what would you say would be a great first step for someone to take?

**MONICA:** Sure. There is a fun little guide book friends at the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History have produced and it's all about things like how to start a pop up museum with what you have on hand. <http://popupmuseum.org/> It's a free downloadable resource, and I know they're working towards open sourcing more. They're definitely champions in this arena and it kind of tells you like how to bring people together. How to frame it. Who to invite. How to go beyond your circle





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of comfort to different community partners and stakeholders you may not have considered and how really everyone can bring an object from their life and have a story around that and make the experience around that, but even if you don't want to commit to making a whole exhibit, I think just being abreast of social issues that are happening locally and globally and trying to think how can we go from a place of sorrow to strength. How can you find an avenue to action and taking some action. At the end of the day, museum or not, I just want people to be change makers. I want people to be upstanders, and I think there's a variety of ways we can stand up and speak up and act up and do that work.

**BETH:** Excellent! Monica, thank you so much for your time. This was so insightful to me and I'm sure of tremendous value to everybody in our community. Thanks for joining me; and everyone, we'll see you next time.

**MONICA:** Thanks!

