MUSEUM ACTIVISM

EDITED BY
ROBERT R. JANES AND
RICHARD SANDELL

MUSEUM MEANINGS

MUSEUM ACTIVISM

Only a decade ago, the notion that museums, galleries and heritage organisations might engage in activist practice, with explicit intent to act upon inequalities, injustices and environmental crises, was met with scepticism and often derision. Seeking to purposefully bring about social change was viewed by many within and beyond the museum community as inappropriately political and antithetical to fundamental professional values. Today, although the idea remains controversial, the way we think about the roles and responsibilities of museums as knowledge-based, social institutions is changing. *Museum Activism* examines the increasing significance of this activist trend in thinking and practice.

At this crucial time in the evolution of museum thinking and practice, this ground-breaking volume brings together more than fifty contributors working across six continents to explore, analyse and critically reflect upon the museum's relationship to activism. Including contributions from practitioners, artists, activists and researchers, this wide-ranging examination of new and divergent expressions of the inherent power of museums as forces for good, and as activists in civil society, aims to encourage further experimentation and enrich the debate in this nascent and uncertain field of museum practice.

Museum Activism elucidates the largely untapped potential for museums as key intellectual and civic resources to address inequalities, injustice and environmental challenges. This makes the book essential reading for scholars and students of museum and heritage studies, gallery studies, arts and heritage management, and politics. It will be a source of inspiration to museum practitioners and museum leaders around the globe.

Robert R. Janes is a Visiting Fellow at the School of Museum Studies , University of Leicester, UK, Editor-in-Chief Emeritus of *Museum Management and Curatorship*, and the founder of the Coalition of Museums for Climate Justice. He has devoted his career to championing museums as important social institutions that can make a difference in the lives of individuals and their communities.

Richard Sandell is Professor of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, UK. His research and practice is concerned with the social roles and responsibilities of museums, galleries and heritage sites and, in particular, their capacity to shape the moral and political climate within which human rights are experienced.

Museum Meanings

Series Editors
Richard Sandell and Christina Kreps

Museums have undergone enormous changes in recent decades; an ongoing process of renewal and transformation bringing with it changes in priority, practice and role as well as new expectations, philosophies, imperatives and tensions that continue to attract attention from those working in, and drawing upon, wide ranging disciplines.

Museum Meanings presents new research that explores diverse aspects of the shifting social, cultural and political significance of museums and their agency beyond, as well as within, the cultural sphere. Interdisciplinary, cross-cultural and international perspectives and empirical investigation are brought to bear on the exploration of museums' relationships with their various publics (and analysis of the ways in which museums shape – and are shaped by – such interactions).

Theoretical perspectives might be drawn from anthropology, cultural studies, art and art history, learning and communication, media studies, architecture and design and material culture studies amongst others. Museums are understood very broadly – to include art galleries, historic sites and other cultural heritage institutions – as are their relationships with diverse constituencies.

The focus on the relationship of the museum to its publics shifts the emphasis from objects and collections and the study of museums as text, to studies grounded in the analysis of bodies and sites; identities and communities; ethics, moralities and politics.

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Museum Activism
Edited by Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell

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'Museums have woken from their slumber. Here is a clarion call to leave behind the "immorality of inaction" and confront a troubled world, a threatened planet, and threats to cultural diversity, equality and justice. This volume documents the extraordinary range of ways in which museum activism, as an integral and *necessary* part of contemporary museum practice, is at work in the 21st century. Janes and Sandell marshal an impressive line-up of authors across the globe who are using the "civic resource" of the museum to bring about environmental, social and political change. The book is a handbook for this urgent task. Read it and join the struggle!'

– Conal McCarthy, *Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand*

'Are museums shrines to the past, hubs of engagement for the present, or shapers of the future? Assembling dozens of contributions by leading and new voices in museum studies, *Museum Activism* targets the core values and principles guiding museum practice today with the aim of transforming the way we think about the social role of museums. This book offers a deep reflection on the limits and potential for museum activism at a time of deepening economic inequality and environmental collapse, a bold call for action for the international museum community, and a field guide to museum activism in practice. Slaying the zombie myth of institutional neutrality that excuses institutional complacency and inaction, it argues for a vision of the museum as an ally and agent of change. Activists around the world are calling on museums to leverage their cultural power to help shape the future for the common good. This book is an insider's guide to making it happen.'

– Beka Economopoulos, *Founding Director of The Natural History Museum,*
USA, a traveling museum and museum transformation project

'Janes and Sandell have assembled a powerful volume of essays that encourages museums to transform themselves from precious vaults into active agents of social justice. *Museum Activism* is a collective call for museums to become more mindful, moral, and courageous places of conscience. These timely essays challenge museums to become more aware of the toxic legacies and current devastation of colonialism, imperialism, xenophobia, homophobia, racism and sexism and to become unafraid in "addressing the big problems and the big questions" that confront us globally. This publication provides a needed wake-up call, a radical re-imagining of museums and a range of practical strategies for action!'

– Jennifer Scott, *Director and Chief Curator of*
Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, University of Illinois at Chicago, USA

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To those who continue to inspire, guide and assist us.

FRONTISPIECE Lyndal Osborne: Curtain of Life, 2016. Mixed media installation. Dimensions: 20 x 10 x 3 feet.
Photograph by Josh Palmer.

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COLOUR PLATES

15   Upon entering the National Center for Civil and Human Rights, visitors are
      greeted by this striking mural. Designed by Pentagram, the piece features graphic
      designs from human rights movements around the world and unites them
      through the rising open hand. It has become one of the central features of the
      Center with visitors interacting with it in a variety of ways including the
      movement #High5forCHR in which visitors photograph themselves giving the
      mural a high five

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CONTRIBUTORS

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Kevin Coffee is a Museologist and Archaeologist whose research explores the built culture and sub-altern lifeways that animate industrial societies. He has worked in the museum and cultural resources sectors for more than 30 years, including executive and program management positions with the American Museum of Natural History, Chicago Academy of Sciences, Liberty Science Center, and Oneida Community Mansion House.

Sarah A. Cole is currently the Vice President for Guest Experiences at the Adler Planetarium in Chicago, USA. Throughout her career she has actively sought to integrate strong principles of access and inclusion while working to dismantle institutionalized processes that prevent full participation of the community's members. She is a 2010 graduate in Museum Studies at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, an Adjunct Instructor at Kent State University, USA, and is the author of multiple articles on issues of museum social justice and inclusion practices.

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Dominique Fontaine is a Curator and Founding Director of aPOSteRIORI, a non-profit curatorial platform – researching, documenting, developing, producing and facilitating innovation in diverse contemporary art practices. Fontaine graduated in visual arts and arts administration from the University of Ottawa, Canada, and completed De Appel Curatorial Programme (Amsterdam). Since 2013, she has been contributing to *Of Africa*, a multi-disciplinary and multiplatform program, in collaboration with the ROM (Royal Ontario Museum). Her recent curatorial projects include *Here We Are Here: Black Canadian Contemporary*.

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Sharon Heal is the Director of the Museums Association, UK, a campaigning membership body that promotes the value of museums to society. She regularly comments on museums and cultural policy in the UK; speaks at conferences and events in the UK and internationally;

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Sandra L. Rodegher currently leads the Walton's Science Museums Initiative at Arizona State University, USA, which has reached over 100 museums in more than 30 countries. Previously, she helped form the Office of Diversity and Inclusion at Yale University, USA, and served as a consultant in senior leadership development, organizational change and diversity training. Her education includes a Masters in Industrial and Organizational Psychology, and a PhD in Sustainability. Her research focuses on the ethics and psychology of group dynamics on deliberative processes.

Richard Sandell is Professor of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, UK. A researcher-practitioner, his work explores how museums, galleries and heritage sites can shape the moral and political climate within which human rights are experienced and continually fought for. He is Series Editor, with Christina Kreps, of *Museum Meanings*. His publications include *Prejudice and Pride: LGBTQ heritage and its contemporary implications* (edited with Rachael Lennon and Matt Smith); *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights* (2017), *Re-Presenting Disability: activism and agency in the Museum* (edited with Jocelyn Dodd and Rosemarie Garland Thomson, 2010) and *Museums, Equality and Social Justice* (edited with Eithne Nightingale, 2012).

Paula Serafini is a Cultural Politics Scholar. Her work is concerned with the relationship between aesthetics and politics in environmental and social justice movements, art activism, and contemporary cultural production. Paula's recent publications include the monograph *Performance Action: The Politics of Art Activism* (Routledge 2018) and the co-edited volume *artWORK: Art, Labour and Activism* (2018). She is Research Associate at CAMEo Research Institute for Cultural and Media Economies, University of Leicester.

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PREFACE

Only a decade ago, the notion that museums, galleries and heritage organisations might engage in activist practice – marshalling and directing their unique resources with explicit intent to act upon inequalities, injustices and environmental crises – was met with widespread scepticism and often derision. Seeking to purposefully bring about change beyond the walls of the institution, through support for particular standpoints informed by moral, ethical and scientific rationales, was viewed by museum workers, sector leaders and external commentators alike as inappropriately political and partisan. Such work was thought to be beyond the remit of cultural institutions and antithetical to fundamental professional values. In short, a serious threat to public trust.

Today, the idea remains controversial but there are signs of what we hope will be an irreversible shift in the way we think about the role and responsibility of museums as knowledge-based, social institutions. There is increasing recognition that museums are not, and never have been, neutral. A growing body of research is revealing the powerful part museums play in engaging visitors in dialogue surrounding contemporary social issues, and in shaping the way we see, think about and act towards others and the world around us. This, in turn, is stimulating professional debate and experimental practice around the potential museums hold to bring about progressive change. Although relatively few institutions have taken this to what we would argue is its compelling conclusion – a recognition that museums not only have the *potential* to shape a more sustainable, equitable and fair world, but also an *obligation* to do so – these attitudes are also slowly changing.

We chose to produce *Museum Activism* at this crucial time. We have sought breadth, as well as depth, in relation to the issues that are explored herein, and we have purposefully included a rich mix of emerging as well as established writers, researchers, artists, activists and practitioners. Although we have brought together more than fifty contributors – exploring thinking and practice in six continents – the selection is inevitably and unapologetically partial and particular. For example, while several chapters importantly historicise museum activism, and acknowledge the deep roots of socially engaged and ethically-informed thinking that underpins and informs present day practice, our focus is on the future and is directed towards understanding the implications of the past for contemporary practice, as well as nurturing further experimentation.

Moreover, while some chapters are driven by a primary concern with concepts and principles, and others pursue their arguments through a grounded concern for the realities of daily museum work, we nevertheless resist a sharp divide between theory and practice. We start from the position that these are inextricably linked and mutually informing. In addition, we have selected contributions that support a suite of values to which we are deeply committed, and which have underpinned our own thinking and practice over several decades. These include striving for inclusive, non-hierarchical ways of working; a commitment to dismantling inequalities and advancing justice; respect for expertise derived from lived experience; support for human rights for all, and an acknowledgement of our collective responsibilities for environmental stewardship. Although we are committed to shaping a volume that resists orthodoxy and welcomes disruption, our adherence to the values noted above makes it clear why contributions from climate change deniers, for example, or opponents of equality for all, are not included here.

Following our opening chapter, in which we present our case for a turn towards more activist, critically engaged and purposeful museum thinking and practice, the chapters are divided into three parts. The first, *Nurturing activism*, features contributors who together illuminate what is needed to foster and support the kinds of museum work for which we argue. Contributors to the second part – *Activism in practice* – bring to life and critically reflect on attempts by museums to address wide-ranging social, environmental and political challenges in a range of vastly differing geo-political contexts. In the final part, *Assessing activism*, contributors reflect on the need for, and the impact of, activist museum initiatives. They highlight the numerous challenges encountered in pursuing museum activism and the strategies that can be deployed to navigate a way forward.

Our hope is that *Museum Activism* will foster reflection, as well as stimulate and inform new ways of thinking and working that will counteract and transcend the 'immorality of inaction'. This recognises that, whilst museum activism involves work that is undeniably challenging and risky, there is a growing and irresistible imperative to redefine the contemporary museum as an active agent in shaping the world around us and making it a better place for all.

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Leicester, United Kingdom and Canmore, Canada.

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1

POSTERITY HAS ARRIVED

The necessary emergence of museum activism

Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell

Introduction

The global museum community, a sleeping giant if ever there was one, is stirring from its slumber. It is a powerful community, indeed, but one whose latent power has been largely consumed by a preoccupation with education, entertainment and consumption. This preoccupation has rendered far too many museums somnambulant—content with 'sleep walking into the future' (Janes 2014: 7–8). Our ambition is to support ways to move beyond this avoidable destiny and explore new and divergent expressions of the museum's inherent power as a force for good. In doing so, we hope to encourage further experimentation and enrich the debate in this nascent and uncertain field of museum practice. We also wish to acknowledge and celebrate the global museum community's growing awareness of the world around them, and how this awareness is beginning to embrace the aspirations, challenges, horrors and misfortunes that mark human society everywhere.

We have chosen to describe this work as museum activism, in the sense of museum practice, shaped out of ethically-informed values, that is intended to bring about political, social and environmental change. The mindful museum (Janes 2010) is complementary, if not one and the same. The mindful museum cannot help but be activist, and the activist museum is grounded in mindfulness. Museum workers are fond of saying that they are taking care of their collections for posterity. We submit that posterity has arrived for the museum's mission, role, values and responsibilities—all of which require a radical rethinking in the early 21st century.

Museums have evolved through time, from the elite collections of imperial dominance, to educational institutions for the public, and now to the museum as 'mall' and appendage of consumer society (Gopnik cited in Janes 2009: 183–4).[1] Paradoxically, and despite their inherent conservatism, museums have existed for centuries, unlike the vast majority of business enterprises. Museums have always had some sort of 'adaptive intuition' to reinvent and transform themselves, however slowly and unconsciously. There is an important lesson in this historical trajectory—the ability of museums to learn and adapt as circumstances require. Socio-environmental conditions are changing rapidly and the museum as mall is the

latest chapter in this long trajectory. The museum as mall, although more audience-focused, embodies the dead end of materialism—over-merchandised and devoted to consumption and entertainment. It is the museum as mall that underlies our commitment to museum activism, as we believe that the relentless focus on money, consumption, and marketplace ideology continues to diminish the museum as a social institution and a key civic resource.

One toxic expression of this material fixation is the incessant talk of shortage in the museum world—be it money, staff, technology, or public support, and this self-limiting refrain continues. We reject this thinking, as perceived shortages of all kinds have become an overriding excuse for maintaining the status quo in museum practice. Museums already have a boundless capacity to act with intelligence and sensitivity—money is not required to do this. Museum workers also know intuitively that money is not the measure of their worth. It is prudent for museum practitioners to recognize that they are a privileged group, working in organizations whose purpose is their meaning (Handy 1994: 183). Everything that is required to fulfill the true potential of museums is here—now. There is nothing lacking.

A new story for the world and museums

No one would dispute that museums exist to tell stories—about people, communities and nations—but who is telling the story of the early 21st century? Corporations and governments are, but it is the story of ceaseless economic growth. Their rhetoric is agonizingly familiar and destructive, as author and activist, David Korten, clearly describes—consumption means happiness; economic inequality is unavoidable, and rampant environmental damage is regrettable (Korten 2014). Although this story is clearly corrupt and false, it is the predominant story in our public lives and it defines our common future. This story, however, is damaging human lives and destroying the planet upon which we depend.

Korten concludes that humanity needs a new story. Museums also need a new story. The museum community must move beyond the doomed economy of industrial growth to the recognition that the connection between individuals, communities, and the natural environment is the key to our collective well-being. It is incumbent upon all museums to help envision and create this new narrative in partnership with their communities, and then deliver this story using their unique skills and perspectives.

Before we glimpse the promise of a new story crafted by museums, it is necessary to comment on both the creative and destructive tensions that pervade the early 21st century, as it is here and now that all museums are living out their legacies, their aspirations and their frustrations. The here and now for museums is paradoxical—replete with opportunity and constraints; freedom and danger; clarity and chaos—contradictions born of external issues that push, pull and batter. These paradoxes are, in turn, accompanied by a host of internal, museum issues that hinder or diminish organizational courage, foresight and empathy (Janes 2013a).

Charles Handy, the Irish social philosopher, noted that paradoxes are like the weather—'something to be lived with, not solved, the worst aspects mitigated, the best enjoyed and used as clues to the way forward' (Handy 1994: 12–13). We contend that museum activism is a worthy means of managing these paradoxes in a turbulent and complex world. We also acknowledge that, while the use of museums to bring about change is by no means a new concept (Sandell 2002), activism is not a household word

among museum practitioners and academics, and generates responses ranging from raised eyebrows, to mild panic, to outright criticism (Sandell 2011).

To set the stage, we provide an overview of the complex mix of real-world challenges, opportunities, and professional constraints that frame the activist work described here. This environmental scan is admittedly selective and personal—what we see as important at this moment in time and the implications for contemporary museum work. We conclude with some thoughts on the meaning of activist museum work, with a view to broadening the understanding of what constitutes authentic museum work in these challenging times.

A troubled world

The litany of the world's ills grows daily. What follows is a glimpse of some of the most critical issues, including a catastrophic view of the future of our species. We would be remiss in ignoring this extreme view, as it is a valuable contrast to the widespread apathy, denial and self-interest in the West—a mindset that is blocking a collective commitment to addressing climate change, wealth inequality, gender inequality, species extinction, nuclear proliferation, and many other issues.

Scientists commit

Twenty-five years ago, the Union of Concerned Scientists and more than 1,700 independent scientists, including the majority of living Nobel laureates in the sciences, wrote the 1992 *World Scientists' Warning to Humanity* (Union of Concerned Scientists 1997). These scientists did not mince their words in issuing this warning:

> Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at serious risk the future that we wish for human society and the plant and animal kingdoms, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know. Fundamental changes are urgent if we are to avoid the collision our present course will bring about.

That was 25 years ago. In November of 2017, the number of concerned scientists had risen to 15,364 from 183 countries and they, too, expressed their views with striking clarity and certainty in the *World Scientists' Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice* (Ripple *et al.* 2017):

> On the twenty-fifth anniversary of their call, we look back at their warning and evaluate the human response by exploring available time-series data. Since 1992, with the exception of stabilizing the stratospheric ozone layer, humanity has failed to make sufficient progress in generally solving these foreseen environmental challenges, and alarmingly, most of them are getting far worse. Especially troubling is the current trajectory of potentially catastrophic climate change due to rising GHGs from burning fossil fuels, deforestation, and agricultural production—particularly from farming ruminants for meat consumption.

Of particular interest in the 'Second Notice' is what could be considered a call for activism, in that the authors note that 'most political leaders respond to pressure . . . and [that] lay citizens must insist that their governments take immediate action as a moral imperative to current and future generations of human and other life' (Ripple *et al.* 2017). These scientists call for a 'groundswell of organized grassroots efforts' to compel political leaders to do the right thing.

Equally as important, they call on all individuals to re-examine their behaviour to drastically limit population growth and consumption (fossil fuels and meat, in particular). This means discarding the magical belief that we can behave just as we always have, if we adopt renewable energy sources. We cannot, and it is essential that we reduce our energy use and consumption of raw materials. With unbridled consumption as the fundamental cause of rising greenhouse gas emissions, it is necessary to probe more deeply into climate change and disruption, including our collective denial of its calamitous consequences.

Climate change

We will not discuss the science of climate change here and how it is throwing our civilization into chaos—it is a dire emergency by any definition. Suffice it to say that levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere have now reached levels unmatched in the last four million years. The oceans are acidifying; coral reefs are bleaching; sea levels are rising, and extreme weather events and wildfires are now commonplace. We must reduce our carbon emissions by 80% by 2050 (many experts are arguing by 2030 (IPCC 2018)), to forestall the worst impacts of climate disruption. With a 97% scientific consensus on the human causes of climate change, why are we not confronting climate change with our collective will and resources? One explanation is that climate change is a taboo subject—not to be talked about with family, friends and colleagues.

In fact, the most important thing to do to bring about climate action is to talk about climate change and its solutions with colleagues, friends, families and communities (Klein 2013). In confronting climate change, there are two essential lessons to be learned from activists within the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) community. The first is the need to have conversations about subjects that some may find uncomfortable and the second is the need to focus on the *immorality of inaction*.

For example, the silences and distortions that have characterized the treatment of same sex desire and gender diversity across the global museum landscape have consequences and effects that powerfully impact LGBTQ lives, and help to create the conditions within which equality struggles are staged (Sandell 2017). It follows, therefore, that an unwillingness on the part of museums to acknowledge and purposefully address the causes and consequences of widespread discrimination for LGBTQ communities, is to be complicit in the practices that make this inhuman treatment permissible. The same logic applies to climate change denial and the victims of this denial—the people directly impacted by climate change and disruption.

Most of the world is living a massive lie about the impending catastrophe of climate change and it must not be avoided as a topic of discussion (Klein 2013). The inescapable truth—that our lives are inextricably linked with the natural world—inspires our belief that the global museum community must now take a stand on climate change. This is a moral imperative for museums, as climate change is no longer just about science or politics—it is also about social justice.

The catastrophic view

In addition to climate change and disruption with its current and projected consequences, we must also acknowledge the catastrophic view of the planet's future. Societal collapses have occurred repeatedly throughout human history, with no respect for how seemingly great the society was, be it ancient Egypt, the Roman Empire, or the Han Empire in China. In fact, 23 advanced civilizations have now collapsed (Motesharrei, Rivas and Kalnay 2014) because of two key factors—ecological strain and economic stratification (Nuwer 2017). Much is known about ecological strain, and a glimpse of its make-up was given earlier in the scientific warnings about the state of the planet—the depletion of water, soil, fisheries and forests—all now underlain by climate change and disruption.

The economic stratification factor is of particular interest, recognizing that museums are institutions of choice for societal elites. The growing disparity in wealth is a 21st century phenomenon and is nothing short of astounding. Half of the world's wealth is now in the hands of 1% of the population (Treanor 2015). Moreover, the top 10% of global income earners are responsible for almost as much total greenhouse gas emissions as the bottom 90% combined (Nuwer 2017). Herein lies the undeniable link between wealth inequality and climate disruption.

Inadvertently or not, many of the world's museums are agents or partners in the hoarding of wealth, while also indulging in excessive consumption as organizations—consumption being the handmaiden to disproportionate wealth. It seems that museums are unconsciously aiding and abetting the possibility of societal collapse from economic stratification. Although it is a simple matter of observing the relationships, this inference remains undiscussed, unknown or hidden among boards, management and staff in mainstream museums. Not surprisingly, museum activism has recently revealed both the fragility and consequences of excessive wealth in museum boardrooms (The Natural History Museum 2016, 2018). This is a harbinger of things to come.

The erosion of trust

One should not underestimate the importance of trust in human affairs—it is the social, economic and political glue that underlies and coheres social capital. Museums are civil society organizations (distinct from state, family and market) and both generate and contribute to the norms, networks, shared values and *trust* that constitute social capital. This social capital is transferred into the social sphere and holds society together by facilitating interconnectedness and long-term associations that are not self-interested or coerced (Janes 2007: 223). Trust is also directly connected to personal happiness and well-being, including social cohesion, friendship and caregiving.

The most serious outcome of the widespread use of social media is the ongoing erosion of trust in online interactions and beyond. These digital platforms, with their automated algorithms, can be easily and unscrupulously manipulated, as they lack the capacity to reliably check for conspiracies, lies, and fake users. The Pew Research Center (Rainie and Anderson 2017) studied the fate of online trust and concluded:

> Trust has not been having a good run in recent years, and there is considerable concern that people's uses of the internet are a major contributor to the problem. For starters, the internet was not designed with security protections or trust problems in mind.

This erosion of trust is also unfolding offline, and has affected most of society's major institutions, including government, multinational corporations, the news media, public schools, churches and banks. Museums, however, continue to be one of society's most trusted institutions worldwide, although the level of trust depends upon who is being consulted. For minority communities, such as First Nations, Inuit and Metis in Canada and people of colour in the UK (British Market Research Bureau Limited 1998), there is still a great deal of work to be done to forge the trust that characterizes mainstream society. Nonetheless, museums are the most trustworthy source of information in America—rated higher than local papers, nonprofits, researchers, the U.S. government, or academic researchers (American Alliance of Museums 2012).

With this unparalleled trust comes a profound choice for both mainstream and activist museums. They can continue their hectic search for popularity and conformity, or they can honour society's trust by critically assessing the role and meaning of museum work at this point in history. With the advent of activist museums, and all the unforeseen complexities, this trust cannot be taken for granted and will have to be earned. All thoughtful museums can provide their communities with the means of intellectual self-defence to move beyond the increasing dominance of corporations and the consumer society. Museums, as social institutions, have the opportunity and the *obligation* to question the way in which society is manipulated and governed. Activism also means resistance—the critical questioning and re-imagining of the status quo.

The unevenness of human rights

When the human rights movement emerged and gained momentum in the second half of the 20th century, its appeal for many lay in its potential for universal application—a flawed but nonetheless powerful way to tackle inequalities of all kinds (Donnelly 2003). Since then, the concept of human rights has become extraordinarily pervasive, evident not only in the expressions of support by numerous governments for supranational conventions and codes setting out a vision of rights for all, but also in the capacity to mobilize efforts by oppressed groups to tackle disadvantage and discrimination.

Despite the undeniable power and reach of human rights, it is important to recognize that all over the world struggles for respect, dignity and freedom from discrimination form part of the daily social, political and cultural life within which we all live. Museums are not to blame for this unevenness in the ability of all groups to secure and exercise their rights, but neither are they disconnected from it. Rather, museums play a significant, but largely unacknowledged and overlooked part, 'in shaping the social and political conditions within which human rights are negotiated, continually recast and disseminated, constrained or advanced' (Sandell 2017: 192). We submit that this brings forth a moral imperative for museums to reflect and act.

Museum challenges

Reflecting on the sobering discussion above, ranging from climate change to human rights, 'why' – as ecologist and professor William Rees has asked – 'are we not collectively alarmed, if not terrified, and committed to action?' (2017). Rees continues:

> If our best science suggests we are *en route* to systems collapse, why are collapse—and collapse avoidance—not the primary subjects of international political discourse? Why

is the world community not engaged in vigorous debate of available initiatives and trans-national institutional mechanisms that could help restore equilibrium to the relationship between humans and the rest of nature?

(ibid.)

The answer, of course, is complicated and entangled in science, human evolution, ideology, and human psychology, including fear, denial, and complacency. Rees, the ecological economist, provides a short answer. He wrote, 'To achieve sustainability, the world community must write a new cultural narrative that is explicitly designed for living on a finite planet, a narrative that overrides humanity's outdated, innate expansionist tendencies.' (Rees 2010: 13). Thus, we return to the need for a new story discussed earlier—a story that all museums are equipped and positioned to deliver.

If the possibility of systems collapse is real, or not, the world needs activist museums and activist practitioners to provide cultural frameworks to identify and challenge the myths and misperceptions that threaten all of us—such as the preposterous notion that continuous economic growth is the key to our well-being. Growth means consumption, and unbridled consumption is destroying the planet. We need a new kind of museum, a transitional and activist institution, to articulate and present the new narrative 'that overrides humanity's outdated, innate expansionist tendencies' (ibid.: 13). This, in turn, will require a new way of thinking about museum work—systems thinking. Systems thinking applied to museums is about 'interconnectedness and interdependence—collaborative organizational structure, shared authority, and strong community engagement' (Jung and Love 2017: xiii).

The new narrative for the 21st century will, of necessity, embrace many issues and many stories, including reducing wealth inequality, protecting Indigenous Peoples' rights, curbing population growth, eliminating the use of fossil fuels, reversing the loss of biodiversity, and eliminating wasteful consumption. Addressing these imperatives in a new narrative for the 21st century is feasible, using reason, science, and social justice to guide good decision making. Before the museum can evolve to a new level of meaning as an activist institution committed to individual and societal well-being, however, various internal challenges and habits of mind need to be addressed that continue to impede or diminish the museum as a key intellectual and civic resource. These challenges are discussed below.

Museums are one of the most complex organizations in contemporary society (Janes and Sandell 2007: 1–2). Consider that museum staff must often work with inadequate resources and, unlike the private sector, are typically unable to accumulate operating deficits to fund the research and development required to improve organizational effectiveness. At the same time, underpaid staff and volunteers must perform to high professional standards. Both executives and staff must answer to governing bodies which, more often than not, consist of individuals or governments with little experience and expertise in museum methods, theory and practice.

Museums must also provide meaning, value and enjoyment to a diverse range of publics within the context of changing societal values. In doing so, they must serve two unique communities—society's ancestors and those who are not yet born. Neither of these museum constituencies vote or consume, and thus have no visibility in commerce and politics—the dominant forces of contemporary society. To add further complexity, public funding continues to decline globally, while at the same time museums are compelled to foster organizational change and renewal to ensure sustainability. In short, museums exist in a world of often baffling complexity and do not have the luxury of a simple profit and loss statement.

These complexities are not static; they accumulate and grow over time, creating both visible and invisible pressures, risks, and challenges for museums. Left unattended, these complexities combine to create further constraints and unwanted consequences, often unseen or unacknowledged by even the most committed practitioner. Discernment, foresight and reflection fall victim to the evolving complexity, nonlinearity, uncertainty and paradox that mark all complex organizations (Peacock 2013: 239). What follows is an examination of some of these unattended complexities that are hindering the fulfillment of 21st century museums as a force for good.

The myth of neutrality

There is a widely held belief among museum boards and staff that they must protect their neutrality, lest they fall prey to bias, trendiness, and special interest groups (Janes 2009: 59). The meaning of neutrality has changed over the past decade, however, as museums have increased their reliance on corporate, foundation, and private funding, while appointing more and more business people to their governing boards. The unspoken argument is that museums cannot risk doing anything that might alienate government and private funders, real or potential. The simple truth is that corporations and the business community are themselves special interest groups, grounded in marketplace ideology and the political ideology that accompanies it (Janes 2015).

The inherent and inevitably political character of museums is increasingly acknowledged in research related to the narratives they construct and disseminate, as well as the part these narratives play in shaping our collective understanding of difference, fairness and equality. 'There is no neutral position and exhibition-makers face choices concerning the ways in which they develop narratives' (Sandell 2007: 195). Yet, despite this increasing understanding of the museum as both non-neutral and active in shaping the way we perceive, think and act, there remains a persistent anxiety among museum workers in how to negotiate the opportunities and challenges this capacity for influence presents. The current preoccupation with the so-called neutrality of museums negates a broader vision for museums and the opportunity for museums to achieve their true potential (Janes 2009; Sandell 2017).

Rethinking organizational mission, leadership, and design

As noted earlier, museums are highly complex organizations housing multiple professional allegiances, competing values and interests, and a daunting range of diverse activities. With this in mind, there are several, widespread characteristics of organizational culture in museums that require some thoughtful reassessment. These include the meaning of mission, the meaning of purpose, and the meaning of hierarchy. With respect to museum missions, the predominant focus is on 'what' a museum does and 'how' this is achieved (exhibitions, collections, public programs, etc.), with little or no attention paid to asking 'why' a museum does what it does (Phillips 2008). Asking 'why' will eventually reveal the purpose and meaning of the museum, yet this questioning and reflection are noticeably absent in most museum mission statements. The 'why' is about individual development, learning, and transformation, all of which are essential in rethinking the roles and responsibilities of museums—a critical necessity when considering the role of activist practice.

With respect to hierarchy and organizational design, museums have uncritically adopted the corporate hierarchy for organizational design, with the lone CEO or director at the top of a pyramid imbued with far too much authority and responsibility (Greenleaf 1977: 61–5). This concentration of power has significant liabilities, not only for the overworked and lonely CEO, but also for the degree of autonomy given to staff (Janes 2013a: 276–9). Top-down control has a direct limiting effect on the personal agency of staff—their capacity to take action in the world. Museum workers are as insightful and motivated by issues and aspirations as are any other human beings, yet they more often than not shy away from expressing their values and assuming their personal agency in the museum—likely for fear of losing their jobs or their friends. This fear is exaggerated, however, especially by those in authority. In fact, personal agency should be celebrated and nurtured as a vital organizational resource and a force for good. Hierarchy prevents this.

The idea that a single person or a small group of senior staff should be all powerful in an increasingly complex world is nonsensical, as effective leadership is less the property of a person than the property of a group (Farson 1996: 144). Alternative approaches to museum leadership are urgently required, with a much greater emphasis on shared authority. The intimate relationship between *how* work is done, and the nature and quality of *what* work is done, is not discussed in the museum world (Janes 2013a: 353). Failing to recognize and ponder this vital relationship is a major obstacle to creative museum management.

Acknowledging the relationship between how work is done, and what work is done, is essential in nurturing museum activism—if museums are to connect with urgent socio-environmental issues and provide community leadership. This will mean abandoning the favored museum approach of incrementalism (many small changes), and replacing this with more dramatic change. This can only be considered if and when there are substantial changes to museum organizational culture and design.

Moreover, we submit that museum activism not only requires a willingness on the part of museum workers to exercise moral leadership in support of ethical issues (Sandell 2007), but also an openness to collaborative and participatory ways of working that build relationships and strengthen networks well beyond the museum, thereby supporting broader efforts to bring about change. Asserting and defending a values-informed, ethical, institutional position, while at the same time being open to listening and genuinely working with others, lie at the heart of museum activism.

The edifice complex persists

This challenge to museum effectiveness persists and has been called various things—vanity architecture, conceit architecture, the 'edifice complex', or 'build it and they will come.'

Although there is an outward impression of progress, using architecture to increase profile, popularity, and earned revenues typically lacks any vigorous intellectual or creative resurgence within the museum itself. In fact, the opposite prevails, as these costly projects commonly divert attention away from a consideration of purpose, values, and the real requirements of long-term sustainability and authentic community involvement (Janes 2009: 108–10).

Irrespective of persistent revenue shortfalls, expensive programming investments, and insufficient donor support, museum directors and their boards continue to chase the new multi-million dollar addition or renovation. Cost overruns are a matter of record, with the

ensuing dismissal of staff to save money, the redirecting of operating budgets to deal with the shortfall, and the resulting long-term, operating deficits. A report from a US policy organization looked at more than 700 cultural building projects undertaken from 1994 to 2008 and concluded: 'There was significant overinvestment in bricks and mortar during the building boom—especially when coupled with the number of organizations we studied that experienced financial difficulties after completing a building project' (Davis 2016).

Equally as disturbing is the possible motivation behind many of these expansions and vanity buildings. A recent article suggests that they have less to do with the financial interests of the museum and more to do with the director's professional development (Scutari 2017). It was noted, 'that more and more museum directors have long-term visions not so much for their institutions but for their own careers.' This self-serving behaviour does not bode well for the future of museums.

Overall, the edifice complex spawns two issues that threaten the future of both mainstream and activist museums. One of these was discussed earlier—the unchallenged power and authority granted to most museum directors, especially those in large organizations, who have insufficient or no accountability to the museum staff, board, and the community. This liability is manageable, however, and can be addressed through new approaches to museum leadership that depart from the lone CEO model, as discussed earlier.

The second issue stems from the pervasive myth that growth of any kind—money, physical plant, visitors, etc.—is synonymous with success and achievement. Nothing could be more myopic or dangerous in the early 21st century. This issue is much more intractable than new leadership models, because the myth of unlimited growth pervades all of society and defines our common future, as noted earlier. In short, the production and consumption of goods and services, including buildings and renovations, requires energy, the extraction and processing of natural resources, and the generation of wastes. In computing the costs of museum expansions and vanity buildings, the accounting rules, seldom if ever, recognize the losses entailed when natural capital stocks are depleted (Green and Barkusky 2016).

Instead of celebrating growth and hoping that governments and scientists will figure out how to reduce consumption and greenhouse gas emissions before it is too late, it is incumbent on the museum community (notably in the Western world) to embrace a deliberate and orderly shift to a slow growth or no growth economy—designed to respect nature's limits. This is activism in word and deed, and all museums can no longer ignore this responsibility. To persist with the status quo of unlimited growth is to perpetuate the privileged position of the elitist museum, and encourage its descent into irrelevance and collapse.

More optimistically, progressive thinking is underway. Suzanne MacLeod (2017, 2018) is exploring a new approach to building museums—one which prioritizes people, relationships and social sustainability over iconic design and marketplace economics. She argues for building projects that are not driven by economic regeneration, tourism, or revenue per museum visitor, but rather by a commitment to designing museums that nurture creative, rich and meaningful experiences—founded on diversity, inclusion, democratic participation and fairness. MacLeod also notes that these alternative ways of developing museums remain exceptional.

Rethinking collections

Have museums become the inadvertent ambassadors of the unbridled consumption that is unravelling the biosphere? (Knell 2004; Keene 2005; Janes 2009: 92–3). In their

preoccupation with collections, have museums become the unwitting handmaidens to a value system that is now at odds with our survival as a species? With unlimited collections growth and declining resources for collections care, have museums lost their way? At a time of unprecedented socio-environmental challenges, are museums modelling the kind of behaviour that succeeding generations require of us (Janes 2018)?

Museums are the only social institution with a three-dimensional, cultural memory bank, representing the world's material diversity and adaptive intelligence. If seed banks are gene banks of biodiversity, then museums are tool, technology, history, and art banks—curating the most distinctive trait of our species—the ability to make tools and things of beauty (Janes 2009: 179). In this sense, museums are akin to the biological seed banks that store seeds as a source for planting, in case seed reserves elsewhere are destroyed. For mindful museums with a true sense of stewardship, one immediate challenge is to assess their collections to determine what is essential and valuable to save in advance of a low energy future and the cessation of unlimited economic growth.

The idea of museums as seed banks is a strong endorsement for their activist participation in defining a future divorced from economic growth—both as stewards and as disseminators of a historical consciousness in support of rethinking contemporary misperceptions. If historical consciousness can be defined 'as a form of resourcefulness in using historical data as "material" to make sense of our world,' then museums are the embodiment of that consciousness (V. Gosselin 2012, personal communications [email], 12 February). This is an obvious role for activist museums in a troubled world, as modernity has led to the loss of knowledge about sustainable-living practices that have guided our species for millennia. Museums will be a fundamental source of technological memory as solutions are sought for failed technology. The need to revisit this cumulative knowledge from the past is necessary now, as industrial technology becomes increasingly maladaptive.

All museums are key agents in fostering the societal transition from the doomed economy of industrial growth to the recognition that the connection between individuals, communities, and nature is essential to our collective well-being (Korten 2014). The museum's historical consciousness must be at play in the present by embracing community issues and aspirations that will help make sense of the challenges we face, not only in the approach to exhibitions and public programming, but also in the approach to collections. Every museum, irrespective of size and subject, can make this connection between the collections and knowledge they hold, and the issues and challenges that confront society now.

Governance and diversity

Directly related to nurturing activist museum practice is the need for new approaches to museum governance. Museum boards are now heavily populated with business people of all types (executives, lawyers, bankers, to name several), and this underlies the museum's distorted preoccupation with finances and the marketplace (Janes 2009: 94–120). There is also a magical belief in the museum world that business people possess unique knowledge and are superlative fundraisers. There is no doubt, however, that business literacy for boards and staff is essential to competent management, enhanced self-sufficiency, and organizational accountability.

Business literacy is about methods, however, not values. Values are enduring beliefs and guiding beacons about the purpose of the museum and how it will conduct itself, as well as how it will treat others. There is persistent confusion in many museums between business imperatives and values, as exemplified by the preoccupation with quantitative measures—based on more revenue, more collections and more visitors. Sensitivity to the environment, cohesion, inclusion, tolerance and decentralization are values, and have nothing to do with commercial dogma and business literacy.

A board dominated by any perspective, be it business, legal or political, is an obstacle to civic reach. Paul Vandeventer, a civic activist, has identified 'civic reach' as an essential skill for effective governance. In his words:

> Organizational sustainability depends on intimate local knowledge that can inform program direction, and on relationships that can connect programs to resources and communities. No matter how good an organization becomes at fundraising and governance, without civic reach it risks failure.
>
> *(Vandeventer 2011)*

A board member's prestige is obviously important and, in the case of business people, most often accrues to the position the individual holds. At the same time, however, an individual's local knowledge and network of community relationships are equally as important, irrespective of one's title or formal position. So are one's cultural background, life experience, values, and aspirations. In short, 'museums need deep civic roots to thrive' and local relationships are the soil in which these roots grow (ibid.). This idea of deep civic roots invites comparison with biodiversity in the natural world.

In short, museum governance must be rethought. Bernadette Lynch (2011), for example, has drawn attention to how participatory models in museums have positioned communities and minority groups not as equal partners, but as beneficiaries of the museum's generosity or largesse. Responding to these challenges, Dodd, Jones and Sandell (2017) have highlighted the need for practices that challenge the inequities in power that characterize many museum partnerships. They have experimented with the use of the 'trading zone' (Galison 1997), using museum collections to animate and inform public debate around deeply entrenched and often unacknowledged negative attitudes towards disability.

The trading zone—a concept borrowed from the realm of science and technology—refers to the creation of a setting and a process through which individuals with different forms of expertise and experience can come together to explore a particular issue or problem, and seek a resolution or a way forward in a collaborative, respectful and *equitable* way. The intent is to reset the imbalances in agency that have often beset museum collaborations. Crucially, the expertise derived from lived experience is as highly valued as the discipline-based, academic expertise that is typically used to interpret collections and shape narratives.

Museum governance must now be reframed to acknowledge the broader world in which museums prosper or decline. In the words of Davis Renz (2006), a nonprofit, scholar-practitioner:

> For the most critical and substantive of our community issues and problems, the single organization is no longer an appropriate match to the scale of these issues and

problems. We've found it increasingly essential to develop alliances and coalitions—extra organizational entities—to address the multi-faceted complexity of these critical needs and issues.

Biodiversity is the foundation of the myriad ecosystems that are essential to human life and well-being, and so are deep, broad, and diverse community relationships for competent organizational governance. The civic arena is where important decisions are made about individual and community needs, and our sense is that mainstream museums remain largely disconnected from this interaction. An informed and diverse governing authority embraces this interaction and is a prerequisite for activist practice. Yet, we note that this lack of diversity is widespread in the nonprofit world, not just among museums. The lack of diversity in the museum workforce also continues to be an intractable challenge throughout the Western world.

A survey of more than 1700 chief executives and board chairs at nonprofits in the US revealed that 90% of CEOs and board chairs were white, as were 84% of all board members. More than one in four boards (27%) was made up entirely of white members (Smith 2017). We take this lack of diversity to be a barometer for the Western museum community in general, and it has not gone unnoticed. Unveiling the first cultural plan for New York's five boroughs in July of 2017, Mayor Bill de Blasio announced that the city will link future funding for museums and arts groups to the diversity of their employees and board members (Pogrebin 2017). The implications for all museums that are dominated by white, male business executives are obvious. Inclusion and equity have moved beyond rhetoric, at least in New York, with disquieting implications for all museums that fail to connect their words and values with tangible actions.

Crisis

Our planet and our species are in crisis—a crisis with many manifestations (Bodhi 2015). We began this introduction with an overview of climate change, followed by a glimpse of the catastrophic collapse of our civilization due to ecological strain and economic stratification between the elite and everyone else. Apocalyptic scenarios aside, many manifestations of our current crisis are here and now. For example, there are currently 10 official wars and eight military conflicts in the world, and the United Nations is engaged in 15 peacekeeping missions (United Nations 2018). Hard fought advances in human rights are celebrated but often under attack again (Sandell 2017). In addition to the lack of trust engendered by digital technology, the world is suffering from a collective invasion of privacy by surveillant governments.

Political systems in the Western world are either broken or in serious disrepair. Governments routinely serve as handmaidens to corporate capitalism, and the corporate oligarchs continue to see economic growth as the key to our collective well-being. As noted earlier, this corrupt and false story is currently defining our common future. All public institutions have succumbed to this hyper-materialism, whether they be universities in the thrall of corporate sponsorships or museums judging their success by consumption—discarded temporary exhibitions, shop sales, and unlimited collections growth. There is clearly something amiss here, and we submit that all of these crises are inescapably linked to the presence or absence of values, ethics, and principles of behaviour in professional life.

Values

In creating a new story for humanity and for museums, we must return again to values—those essential and enduring beliefs about how we want to be treated, and how we treat others—in short, our judgement of what is important in life. This story begins long ago, with one observer (McKibben 2003: 15) noting that meaning in human life has been in decline for a very long time, almost since the beginning of Western civilization. This is in contrast to our hunting and gathering ancestors whose world and its inhabitants, be they plant, animal or mineral, were saturated with meaning. For centuries, Western society has looked on the same landscape and seen it as deaf and dumb, underpinning the nearly universal belief that nature exists to serve the interests of people—the cause of much of our collective meaninglessness (Janes and Conaty 2005: 3–4). It is here where values come into play; in this instance, the idea of interconnectedness. For museums, values are no longer the obligatory, management fluff suggested by planning consultants. They are fundamental to a museum's purpose and meaning, activist or not. Values are the foundation for individual and organizational agency—the willingness and capacity to take action in the world.

There are numerous values that will help museum workers take action in the world, and we suggest that humility, interconnectedness, openness, empathy and resilience are essential. Humility is particularly important, because it must be acknowledged that museums and their staff do not have all the answers and they cannot do everything by themselves. Knowing your community and knowing your environment are also imperative.

Articulating a set of organizational values is the essential first step in becoming reality-based (Kunstler 2005: 324). Becoming reality-based means to become more visionary, to become more involved in the broader world, and to embrace a sense of urgency—the need to see things as they *really* are, including what role museums can play in addressing contemporary issues. There is no formulaic approach in doing this—it is up to each practitioner and each museum to determine where they can contribute. The question is this—can museums finally subordinate themselves to concerns that are larger than their own?

Living in truth

Becoming reality-based is the prerequisite to living in truth about the role and potential of museums in contributing to the collective good. Living in this truth is challenging—it may set a museum and its staff apart from its peers, and result in criticism for advocating or acting on a particular issue. Living in this truth also provides a sense of purpose, however, and is an alternative to passively accepting external pressures, such as the imposition of marketplace ideology on museum practice. Living in truth about the world's issues and the museum's role is also a means of resisting manipulation by governments and corporatists invested in the status quo. If nothing else, living in this truth is an act of good faith—a sincere intention to be fair, open and honest, and to act on the museum's purpose and values. It affords the opportunity to be part of the solution.

Ethical obligations

The uncharted path from determining museum values, to becoming reality-based, to living the truth of that reality, leads inevitably to a consideration of ethical responsibilities. We

propose two key responsibilities as both a foundation and a guide for activist museum practice. These responsibilities are in addition to the core museum tasks of informal learning, scientific and humanities research, and maintaining collections as knowledge databanks. The first of these ethical responsibilities is public advocacy. This is not about lobbying for greater recognition and financial support of museums, but rather taking a stand on issues where the museum can add perspective, expertise, advice and assistance (Janes 2009; Sandell and Dodd 2010; Marstine 2011).

The suggestion that museums might seek to build public and political support for a particular vision of the good society is one that continues to alarm many of those that work in, and govern, museums—fearful that such a position brings with it a moralizing didacticism that closes down opportunities for understanding and debate (Sandell 2007, 2011). In contrast, we argue that taking a stand on contemporary issues, while often accompanied by numerous complex ethical dilemmas, is destined to become an increasingly central feature of 21st century museum practice. An advocacy policy in each museum would help to nurture and strengthen this broader vision, by delineating what issues are important and how the museum will respond when confronted with moral and civic challenges, such as climate change and the erosion of human rights (Simon 2016).

The second ethical responsibility for the activist museum and practitioner is insisting on the accountability of government and the private sector. It is clear that much greater accountability is required, as both governments and the private sector persist with actions, inaction and decisions that threaten the well-being of our species and the planet. The widespread government and corporate paralysis on climate change action is a case in point. Adopting these ethical responsibilities is no doubt a new order of business for most museums, but is essential in moving from reflection to action.

Advocate and serve

In considering the role of museums as active agents of cultural change, we suggest that there are three legitimate expectations of them as public institutions (Janes 2013d: 20):

1) to be open to influence and impact from outside interests;
2) to be responsive to citizens' interests and concerns; and
3) to be fully transparent in fulfilling these two expectations.

Considering these opportunities and challenges, it would be salutary for museum workers to suspend their professional and conventional opinions about what meaningful museum work *is* and, instead, consider what the work of museums *should be* in the early 21st century (Janes 2013b: 10). Culture is not about leisure, entertainment, and the overwhelming distractions of social media. Culture is about how we lead our lives (Worts 2008: 6). Culture is also about organizations and individuals thinking critically and assuming responsibility, as there are acute issues confronting our species that require concerted public involvement with the aid of intelligent social organizations like museums.

These aspirations represent a new order of business for museums, despite the inevitable dismay and frustration museum practitioners and boards may feel when they contrast these new initiatives with the demands of business as usual. There is a source of comfort, however, for those who recoil at the thought of museums rethinking their purpose with

activism in mind. This inspiration comes from the nonprofit world, where the responsibility to 'advocate and serve' has been identified as one of the most powerful practices of high-impact, nonprofit organizations. This finding was the result of several years of research on 12 of the most successful nonprofits in recent US history, including the Exploratorium—The Museum of Science, Art and Human Perception (Crutchfield and Grant 2008: 11).

This research revealed that these successful nonprofits started out providing excellent programs, but eventually realized that they could not achieve systemic change through service delivery alone. They added policy advocacy, along with providing services (ibid.: 21). The intersection of the two, a desire for social change coupled with new and better initiatives, is variously called social entrepreneurship, social enterprise, or social innovation—a concept that is beginning to take shape in the museum world, and is evident in the work of the UK's Happy Museum Project and the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (Janes 2013c). This is museum activism in word and deed.

This research also revealed that none of the traditional characteristics of excellent nonprofit management had anything to do with organizational effectiveness or impact (Crutchfield and Grant 2008: 14–9). The authors of the study had assumed that excellence consisted of time-tested practices in management, including marketing, strategic planning, and so forth. Surprisingly, they discovered that 'greatness has more to do with how nonprofits work outside the boundaries of their organizations than how they manage their own internal operations' (ibid.: 19). Recall the earlier discussion on governance and the necessity to reach out and collaborate.

Beyond the malls and the walls: museums for the 21st century

As noted earlier, museums have evolved through time, from the elite collections of imperial dominance, to educational institutions, to the museum as an appendage of consumer society (Gopnik cited in Janes 2009: 183–4). In thinking about the museum's next iteration, would it qualify as a paradigm shift? Thomas Kuhn, the philosopher of science, wrote that replacing a paradigm (a pattern, model or standard) is tantamount to a revolution (Kuhn 1962: 43–65). When enough anomalies have accumulated against a current paradigm, the scientific discipline is thrown into a state of crisis. During this crisis, new ideas are tried and eventually a new paradigm is formed, which gains its own followers. An intellectual clash then ensues between the followers of the new paradigm and the supporters of the old paradigm.

Museums have yet to qualify as revolutionary organizations, and there is far too much diversity and autonomy in the world's 55,000 museums to permit a unified, paradigmatic worldview underlying museum method and theory. Nonetheless, there is sufficient evidence in the global museum community that something unruly, not necessarily paradigmatic, is afoot—a foray into discomfort, disquiet, and the unknown. Various museums and their staffs are now exploring this new and unknown landscape—debating and acting upon social inequality, the marginalization of Indigenous Peoples, political injustice, and the causes of environmental destruction.

There are new initiatives underway that indicate the status quo is being rethought, reshaped and revitalized by museum workers. Although some of these initiatives are internally focused and some are best described as socially responsible museum work, all of them seek to harness the museum's unique resources towards more sustainable, fair, and just museums and societies (Sandell and Dodd 2010).

The big questions

Our central premise is that museums must move beyond their internal preoccupations and create visions and missions that address the big problems and the big questions. Questions such as *why* does your museum exist, *what* changes are you trying to effect, *what* solutions will you generate, and *what* are your non-negotiable values? In short, the museum must now become an institution of the commons—a resource belonging to and affecting the whole of a community. Canadian philosopher, John Ralston Saul (1995: 190) noted that we cannot ignore the fact that the Western world's, citizen-based democracy (the commons personified) is dependent upon participation, and to participate is to be permanently uncomfortable—emotionally, intellectually, spiritually. Museums will need to embrace this discomfort and uncertainty in order to become the authentic participants they are equipped to be, and to make good on their singular combination of historical consciousness, sense of place, and public accessibility.

It seems that the reluctance to move beyond the familiar has everything to do with the psychic discomfort it creates. Allowing this discomfort to limit the vision and purpose of museums at this point in history is tragic, however—perhaps spelling the decline or collapse of museums in a world concerned with an onslaught of dire issues. As Wendell Berry (2015: 15), the American poet/farmer, noted, 'If we are serious about these big problems, we have got to see that the solutions begin and end with *ourselves*.'

There is an unprecedented urgency in asking these big questions, as many of our most basic assumptions as citizens are no longer reliable. It is assumed that governments at all levels will respect scientific proof and democratic principles, be evidence-based, and respond to humanitarian and environmental concerns (Kramer 2017). The lack of national and international political leadership in addressing climate change, for example, clearly demonstrates that this assumption is no longer tenable. Had museums been more mindful of their unique attributes, they might well have served as distant early warning systems, as global, socio-environmental issues came into sight decades ago.

Many of the warning signs have now become crises. Museums may or may not be able to contribute to many of the global problems that need solving, but museums of all kinds are in a position to invent a new future for themselves and their communities, or at least help create an image of a desirable future—the essential first step in its realization. Museums are uniquely positioned to do so, with their mix of humanism, science, time-depth and societal respect (Janes 2013a: 13). Equally as important is that many people look to museums for inspiration and guidance.

The next stage in the evolution of museums must now be defined in alignment with this potential, grounded in museums providing substantive and sustained public benefit. We submit that there is a need for a new breed of museum workers and museums, grounded in the consciousness of the world around them, along with the need to work in a less museum-centred way. Paying attention to the world around them is the new foundation for museum sustainability. The challenge of sustainability for every museum—be it large or small; volunteer or paid—is to redefine the ultimate purpose and standards of museum work. Professionalism and the yearning for popularity must make room for a commitment to the durability and well-being of individuals, communities and the natural world (Berry 2000: 134).

The meaning of museum activism

With a variety of notable exceptions, the museum community is not responding to the world, be it climate change, species extinction, or social justice issues such as poverty and homelessness. Instead, there is a continuing preoccupation with attracting bigger audiences, along with a growing fascination with digital technology. Museums have their own distractions and internal agendas that preclude or discourage responding to the world. It also seems that museum practitioners are overly careful with their actions and speech. As crises mount, museums are alarmingly invisible—reluctant to disturb or assert. Raising museum voices in opposition to anything is traditionally out of character. Are museum workers and academics simply agreeable people who are not free or empowered enough to meet the global challenges? We suggest that they are not.

Activist museum practice explicitly challenges the immorality of inaction we highlighted earlier. It enables museum workers to be citizens and to assume agency, as well as responsibility for the consequences of their actions or inaction. For the sake of the biosphere and all the communities that museums purport to serve, it is time for the global museum community to speak as clearly and forcefully as its privileged position in society demands of it. This is admittedly not without risk. We know, as museum practitioners and academics, what we do, but most often we do not know what effects or results will ensue from what we do (Solnit 2016). We are again in the territory of complexity theory, where chaos, non-linearity, emergence, and the loss of control are paramount.

We must recognize that non-linearity is ever-present, meaning that the links between cause and effect are complex, distant in time and space, and difficult to detect. This means that the links between cause and effect are lost in the detail of what actually happens in between (Stacey 1992: 124). No one can foresee the future of any museum or control its journey to that future—especially with respect to museum activism. In the words of the Dalai Lama (in Kornfield 2010: 262):

> The problems we face today—violent conflicts, destruction of nature, poverty, hunger and so on—are mainly created by humans. They can be resolved—but only through human effort, understanding and the development of a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood. To do this, we need to cultivate a universal responsibility for one another and for the planet we share, based on a good heart and awareness.

There is a Buddhist teaching called the Six Perfections or *Paramitas* (Bercholz and Kohn 1993: 321), the fourth of which is concerned with 'courageous energy', or taking action to make the world a better place. Therein lies the meaning and value of museum activism.

Note

1 Our use of the word museum in this book is inclusive, and includes art galleries, science centres and heritage sites.

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PART I

Nurturing activism

Despite the rich diversity that characterises global museum thinking and practice, much of the last two centuries has been undeniably dominated by sustained efforts to separate museums from the messy realities and challenges of the real world they inhabit. For the most part, museums have viewed the numerous challenges that surround them—social, political and environmental—as largely unrelated to their work and lying beyond their remit.

The 1990s witnessed the emergence of museum scholarship (continuing to the present day) which challenged these distinctions, laying bare the inherently political character of museums and revealing the myriad ways in which they are entangled with the social, political and natural worlds around them. Debate began to grow surrounding the museum as an institution deeply implicated in politics, power and privilege, and the myth of museum neutrality and objectivity began to slowly unravel. At the same time, however, long-cherished corner-stones of museum practice—impartiality and objectivity—have proven to be remarkably resilient and resistant to change.

Over the past two decades, we have begun to see a shift—still nascent and uncertain—in the way we think about the museum. Museum roles and responsibilities are being questioned and reimagined, enabled by a steady but growing recognition amongst museum workers of the artifice, implausibility and untenability of institutional claims to neutrality. This recognition of the agency and untapped potential of museums as agents of change has brought with it an exciting, but still tentative, body of experimental practice, as well as a backlash from within and beyond the museum world. Although the chapters in this part emerge from different perspectives, ranging from the academy to the activist community, together they offer insights and reflections that help to address the uncertainties and challenges that constrain activist museum practice at this critical time in the evolution of museums as social institutions.

The authors of these chapters shed light upon the changes in thought and action that are necessary to embed activist practice more deeply in the method and theory of museum work. They also draw attention to what is required to equip those workers who are leading change in the field—change that requires challenging assumptions, adopting new ways of thinking and working, and embracing and defending ethical positions that generate conflict and dissensus both within and outside of the museum community.

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2

DETOXING AND DECOLONISING MUSEUMS

Sara Wajid and Rachael Minott

Museum Detox is a network of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) museum workers in the UK. It is both a professional network and a space for support, recovery and solidarity for workers who face systematic racism in their day-to-day working life. This is racism that deters many People of Colour from studying the courses needed to work in museums; racism that stops many People of Colour from being selected for museum jobs outside pro-diversity schemes; and it is racism that eventually pushes them out of this industry through continuous bouts of macro and micro aggression. This racism is evident in the language used to discuss race; it is enacted in the perpetuation of the concept of 'neutral history' when discussing the enslavement and the eradication of cultures and peoples across the world by the British; it is in the constant demand made to People of Colour to be grateful for things that their white counterparts are allowed to complain about.

In this chapter we write as members of Museum Detox who act as 'Insider Activists' in the face of this racism, working within a system to try and make it better. Like most museums workers, we are lovers of history and stories, of objects and people; believers in the power of museums as agents of change; houses of memory and knowledge.

Between October 2016 and January 2018 Sara Wajid, one of the founders of Museum Detox, took part in a leadership development programme entitled Change Makers (for BAME and disabled museum workers), in partnership with Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, England. The major outcome of the programme was the temporary exhibition: *The Past is Now: Birmingham and the British Empire*, a co-curated experiment in decolonising the story of the British Empire (Plate 1). Fellow Museum Detoxer, Rachael Minott, was recruited as the curatorial research lead for the project.In this chapter we draw on our experiences of working on *The Past is Now* and being members of the Museum Detox network to reflect on the challenges faced in active, anti-racism museum work, and will set this work in a larger context of anti-racism activism. Our aim is to provide an insight into the mechanism behind this work, and the importance of working with People of Colour, either as staff or as community members. The emphasis here is on *ethical* ways of working, without the expectation of obedience or gratitude but instead with space for People of Colour to exercise ownership over the stories told in public spaces, such as

museums, in a manner that creates meaningful change to a seemingly unchangeable system.

Becoming a state-sponsored activist

One cold winter evening, thirty of us sat in a circle in the front room of the Sir John Soane's Museum in central London to discuss the strange and unusual opportunity to become a state-sponsored museum activist. The gathering itself, like all Museum Detox meet-ups, was unique and special: nowhere else in the UK, possibly in the world, would you find thirty BAME museum professionals gathered in one room (less than 3% of the UK museum workforce are from BAME backgrounds according to Brook *et al.* 2018). The gatherings provide a collective release of tension; there is a hum in the air and a particular quality to the laughter. Simply by coming together we are, for that evening, transforming ourselves a little bit, reframing ourselves not as 'the only Black woman' in our department or 'the only Chinese curator' in our museum, not as one of the 'too few' but one of the 'many.' We are out.

We had come together to discuss the bold new leadership development programme from Arts Council England. 'Change Makers' aimed to redress the under-representation of BAME and disabled workers in arts leadership by developing twenty selected individuals through an extended senior level placement. There was another agenda too: the individual would be a change agent with a mandate to productively disrupt the host organisation to promote diversity and inclusion; in other words to be a full-time cultural activist on a payroll.

You might have expected a stampede. After all, the Museum Detox network had emerged because many of us felt isolated as Black workers in a too-white museum world. We wanted to challenge and change our sector from the inside and here was a programme made for the likes of us. Yet, there was a lot of suspicion and scepticism in the room that evening. Another diversity scheme? And how can one person be expected to spark institutional change like some sort of Black museum superhero? Would it be worth leaving and risking our hard-won positions in our current roles?

Something more subtle and unspoken was hanging in the air too. Most of us had been progressing diversity agendas in our museums for many years alongside, on top of, or through delivering our jobs. But as the network had evolved since 2014, we had come to recognise another way of doing things and a different source of power and moral authority. This power was not given to us by an employer, nor could it be taken away. This energy was created by us, by ourselves, through the solidarity of our collective efforts to address the challenge of simply being a non-white museum professional. It is a modest ambition: to look after ourselves a bit better. But there was a purity, urgency and simplicity to this original impulse to come together that was a gentle form of direct action, the basic unit of activism: a shift from waiting and trusting that 'those faceless mysterious higher-ups' in leadership roles would get round to dismantling the institutional racism in museums, to taking matters into our own hands.

Having tasted that, the idea of being a state-sponsored activist seemed a bit tame, a bit at odds with the 'by us, for us' guerrilla spirit of Museum Detox. It felt a bit indulgent and potentially toothless to be an officially sanctioned change maker. 'Detoxing' implies purging and cleansing of some of the tiresome emotional work of being non-white in museums. To then spend this carefully harboured energy on a highly-scrutinised project would entail bringing your 'whole self' into the game, to invest your professional reputation on an untested scheme. For many of us, it was important to maintain a distinction between our

professional selves and our Museum Detox selves; to use the network principally for personal resilience rather than to directly address the systematic problems within our individual institutions. The Museum Detox network offered a valuable space away from the slightly bruising professional world where we were overly racialised due to our rarity.

From detoxing to decolonising

The inception of Museum Detox in 2014 was explicitly self-centred; our perspective was deliberately inward-looking and self-supporting. Over the course of the last four years the gaze of the network has moved steadily outwards and become increasingly focused on the international project to decolonise museums. The journey from 'detoxing' to 'decolonising' did not occur in a vacuum but rather as part of a growing swell of action both within and beyond the museum sector. In the period between the Sir John Soane's Museum meeting in February 2016 and the opening of *The Past is Now* in October 2017, the United Kingdom voted in favour of Brexit; Donald Trump was elected President of the United States; and a steep rise in far-right nationalism was seen across Europe. In response, a political activism that had become dormant seemed to be regenerated. This activism centred on the racism, homophobia, and chauvinism in the rhetoric of these political worlds and included the Black Lives Matter campaign and the Rhodes Must Fall student-led campaign to remove statues venerating the imperialist and white supremacist, Cecil Rhodes.

During this period the Museum Detox steering committee members enrolled in the 'OrgBuilders programme' run by the campaigning organisation, the New Economics Foundation; a kind of 'activism school' which supports individuals to become more effective and to better understand the neoliberal context of their struggles. We experimented with a simple but effective People of Colour 'flashmob' at the Museum of London to raise our profile and make the whiteness of museum spaces visible with our bodies and we made links with the US based activist network, Museum Hue, which inspired us with their members' direct actions. The curators within the network came to recognise their particular influence and unique potential as change agents within their disciplines and formed a sub-committee with some collaborating across specialism and organisation to co-write papers on decolonising collections. The book *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race* by journalist Reni Eddo-Lodge (2017) inspired us and circulated around the network and discussions of white privilege and the work of decolonising curators such as Wayne Modest at Tropenmuseum in Holland were being led particularly by younger members. A new, more directly political, language was emerging within the group, one that Sara recognised from her mother's generation of 1980s anti-racist activists.

When Sara first entered the museum profession, around the bicentenary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, there had been exciting steps forward in the representation of Empire in British museums and a new generation of practitioners fluent in the cultural politics of display and co-curation were emerging. The most notable example of this practice in the UK was the *London, Sugar and Slavery* permanent gallery at the Museum of London Docklands. This gallery and the democratising co-curation methodology that shaped it, inspired our approach to *The Past is Now*. At the same time, we wanted to go further and dissolve the insider (coded 'white') and outsider (coded 'Black') model of knowledge production. We sought further inspiration from other experimental approaches to critiquing dominant and exclusionary museum narratives through a privileging of the perspective and lived experience

of marginalised voices, for example of disability activists.[1] Unfortunately in the meantime, the museum sector workforce had remained stubbornly unrepresentative and little progress had been made in the mainstream of the sector to dismantle institutionally racist cultures. By combining the Museum Detox network and the diverse workforce and strong tradition of co-curation at Birmingham Museums we aimed to imagine into existence an anti-racist museum context in which to conduct the decolonising experiment.

The past is now (so it's time to make change)

> 'Curatorial Activism' is a term I use to designate the practice of organizing art exhibitions with the principle aim of ensuring that certain constituencies of artists are no longer ghettoized or excluded from the master narratives of art. It is a practice that commits itself to counter-hegemonic initiatives that give voice to those who have been historically silenced or omitted altogether—and, as such, focuses almost exclusively on work produced by women, artists of color, non-Euro-Americans, and/or queer artists.
>
> *(Reilly 2017)*

Productively channelling activist thinking and practice, within the existing mechanism of a museum, was the true challenge of the Change Makers project. *The Past is Now: Birmingham and the British Empire*, can be thought of as an experiment in decolonising museum curation that aimed to blend radical critique by seasoned cultural activists with democratic museum practice by experienced museum professionals (Figures 2.1 and 2.2). Activists of different kinds were at the heart of the project. To tell the story of the British Empire in England, in a specific Birmingham context and from the perspective of the colonised and not the colonisers, required a strong partnership. Six women (Abeera Kamran, Aliyah Hasinah, Mariam Khan, Sara Myers, Shaheen Kasmani, and Sumaya Kassim) came together to collaborate with museum staff on the project. While the individuals formed a very diverse group they nevertheless shared some key characteristics which equipped them for such a project. These ambitious, highly-skilled and politically active women had been leading public debates about decolonising culture in Birmingham and had strong collective experience of campaigning and of cultural and creative work. For example, Sara Myers had led the successful 2014 national campaign to close the Barbican exhibition, *Exhibit B*, which depicted Black actors in chains and referenced 19th century 'human zoos.'

Each of the co-curators had previously felt disappointed by museums, and entered this process aware of the challenges of decolonising a museum and of curating a single exhibition about the vast topic of the British Empire. In some ways, most of them have ended the process feeling no more optimistic about the feasibility of decolonising museums but are empowered to discuss their engagement with museums in a more detailed and reflective way.[2] Sumaya Kassim wrote a beautiful and detailed reflection on the process in which she asks 'whether large British institutions like BMAG can and should promote "decolonial" thinking, or whether, in fact, they are so embedded in the history and power structures that decoloniality challenges, that they will only end up co-opting decoloniality.' She later concluded that:

> Decolonising is deeper than just being represented. When projects and institutions proclaim a commitment to 'diversity', 'inclusion' or 'decoloniality' we need to attend

FIGURE 2.1   William Gear, *Mau Mau*, 1953, displayed in *The Past is Now: Birmingham and the British Empire*, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.
© The Estate of William Gear.

> to these claims with a critical eye. Decoloniality is a complex set of ideas—it requires complex processes, space, money, and time, otherwise it runs the risk of becoming another buzzword, like 'diversity.'
>
> *(Kassim 2017)*

While Sumaya, alongside the other co-curators, showed a great deal of ownership and protectiveness over the final exhibition outcome, we must consider the complexity of their reflections on the process and the museum. In retrospect the exhibition must be viewed as

FIGURE 2.2   *The Past is Now: Birmingham and the British Empire*, at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

Photograph © Birmingham Museums Trust.

an interrogation of the question, '(how) can museums be decolonised'? It is important to note that the exhibition—the visible and public outcome of the process—is only a part of this ongoing inquiry for which no definitive answer has been found.

The method we applied in our attempt at decolonising included: trying to democratise the decision-making process; abdicating institutional control over the tone of voice we used in the interpretations; and acknowledging that museums are not neutral and have played a large part in the misrepresentation of cultures around the world for hundreds of years (Sandell 2007).

The process began with the curatorial staff of Birmingham Museum exploring the collections for which they held specialised knowledge, while interrogating this concept of decolonising the British Empire. They presented their outcomes to the co-curators who then crafted the stories to pursue in this context. The co-curators then considered the objects to go with the stories that were developing; wrote the panel texts; and decided on the graphic design and three-dimensional elements for the space. The internal museum team facilitated the sessions during which those decisions were made; took control of final object selections; wrote individual object labels and decided the gallery layout. The panel text interpretation was edited by the museum staff and content checked by specialist academics.

As a group, between June and September 2017, we selected the themes and stories we would tell in this space. These were: Eugenics and its links to Birmingham and the British Empire; Kenyan and Indian Independence; Joseph Chamberlain as Colonial Secretary (instead of his role as Birmingham mayor and the man responsible for the foundations of the museum); gun manufacturing in Birmingham and the links to the Triangular trade;

capitalist intentions for expanding the empire and the environmental impact of doing so; and, finally, representation of People of Colour in communal spaces of learning. This was in no way a simple process and the work was done over a number of sessions as well as a series of highly charged email exchanges. The decisions over who controlled what elements of the display were hard fought and negotiated and, in the end, as with all collaborative processes, everyone involved had to compromise and let go of parts of their individual vision.

The exhibition opened with the statement:

> Empire was a bloody business. Many people lost their lives or were traumatised in the creation and retention of the Empire, or in fighting to gain independence from British rule. Although it has officially ended, the Empire changed the way in which the modern world was constructed. Its legacy exists in structures, such as museums, schools and governments, and affects individual and national senses of identity today. Britain still has 14 overseas territories, including six in the Caribbean. Some argue that the United Kingdom itself is made up of colonised states ... We acknowledge that there is no neutral voice and so this complex story cannot be told neutrally.

Throughout the process the museum was asked difficult questions, many of which were aimed at entrenched institutional problems such as expecting emotional labour and cultural knowledge to be given to the museum in exchange for access to objects the participants did not feel museums had the right to own or control. They brought to light micro-aggressions, enacted daily in museum spaces, which act to slow down change. These mostly took the form of self-imposed limitations and policing of language for fear of offending an imagined, 'traditional visitor' who made up the 'existing core audience.' This led the museum team to ask whether we had internalised ideas of the traditional visitor as white, and whether we gave equal weight to offending the People of Colour who visited the museum or, more importantly, who did not visit.

It was revealed how some of the behaviours we viewed as safe and some of the ideas we had about creating safe spaces, replicated many of the tools of colonisation, in particular the paternalist, infantilising treatment by the museum of our collaborators. Many of the tensions which emerged, can be considered to be a result of the decision to display the outcomes of the project in the form of an exhibition in the museum's main galleries. The high visibilities of the experiment created high stake moments. On the one hand, the display provided our co-curators with a visible product of their effort; and created a point of reference from which to open up this discussion of whether or not it is possible to decolonise a museum, to a wider group of people. However, on the other hand, the high visibility of our thinking heightened anxieties on the part of museum staff around the need to maintain the museum's authority and trustworthiness in a way that encouraged a struggle for power that was reminiscent of the process of colonising being criticised.

Outsider Activists, Insider Activists and Allies

As BAME museum workers we found it difficult to reconcile both being culpable of perpetuating the museum's colonial structures (as employees) whilst, at the same time, explicitly critiquing them. Racial identities were mobilised during this project and seemed

to shift the power of authority being held with regards to the exhibition interpretation. A dichotomy soon emerged between the Insider Activists, and the Outsider Activists.

The 'Insiders' have been employed, interviewed and deemed appropriate by the institution to conduct paid work in line with their strategic aims. The 'Outsiders' may never have been officially sanctioned by the institution to influence its strategic direction and are not limited by, or necessarily invested in, the museum's existing strategic aims or the preservation of its corporate brand and reputation. In this model, as temporary workers recruited for this specific project as 'change agents,' we were the Insider Activists. Those in permanent employment by Birmingham museums might be read as Allies: supportive of the activist impulses, but without an official remit or mandate to deliver organisational change outside the project. The Outsider Activists in this scenario were primarily the co-curators but would also include the significant input of the wider network of Museum Detox museum workers throughout the process as well as key academics and thinkers who influenced the direction of the project and the wider activist networks of the co-curators.

These roles: Insiders, Outsiders and Allies, created a complex matrix of communication, power and authority with constantly shifting boundaries.

It is worth understanding the difference between the Insider and Outsider, to understand why both are needed to make change relevant to museum spaces. The Insider is privy to the bigger picture, the aims but also the limitations of the institution, the politics and the internal manoeuvres required to make changes. The Outsider is given a restrictive view of the realities of the institution and so cannot always know whether obstacles that arise are arbitrary restrictions or real ones based on resource or legal boundaries; as such, they push and make things uncomfortable as they find the limitations of their power.

Whilst the Insider Activist is more informed, the Outsider—by volunteering their time and bringing urgently needed expertise and knowledge lacking in white-led museums—holds the moral authority. In this way, the Outsider's activism has the potential to be loud, uncensored and unrelenting. Their dissatisfaction can be voiced and they can challenge any restrictions and boundaries, which may seem inherent or unavoidable or unnoticed by the institutionalised Insider. Power may be withheld from the Outsider—normally through removing channels of communication and utilising timelines and deadlines to fast track and bypass truly democratic decision-making. However they cannot be managed by the normal tools of control utilised by the institution; most obviously, their primary source of income is not at stake.

The Insider Activist can be managed as any other employee and they have much to lose. By enacting their activism, they put their current and future employment on the line. Balance is necessary for the Insider, and they must inch forward carefully if they hope to create any lasting change. Trying to create change brings the risk of upsetting co-workers who they often know personally, and whose effort in their workday (in an industry where the average worker is already putting in long hours) they recognise. Quality control is often taken on personally or forsaken, if products are below the standard required by the ideological demands of the project. Insider Activists must either compromise their ideologies or pour more of themselves into the work they believe in, or else foster support enough that everyone involved will push themselves beyond their limits.

The Insider must largely operate within their allotted position in the internal museum's hierarchy of decision-making and professional expertise. Their employment is based on the assumption that they will deliver an outcome, with measurable success and so they face the

pressure to fit within the standards established historically to mark success over failure. This often leads to either *actual* or *apparent* compromise, and tempering of the more dramatic changes to museum practice that arise. Every little change has been hard fought and defended and seems huge, because the effort of listening and balancing and moving forward has been mammoth. From the outside, these hard won battles can seem insignificant or unsatisfactory.

Thus the Insider's version of activism is more covert, quiet or shy. As an Insider Activist, one manages the power that comes with being an untouchable Outsider, while being subjected to the control mechanisms of operating within an institution (seemingly acting as the pinch point between the immovable object and the unstoppable force). Their role when working with Outsider Activists is largely as a translator and relationship manager; someone who takes creative energy and approaches and maps them against the internal procedures and restraints to try and deliver an outcome that suits as many people as possible, whilst advancing their own activist intentions.

During the Change Makers project the Insider Activist would act as the middleman between the Outsider Activists and the Allies, at times straddling all three roles. It is an uncomfortable but, in many ways, productive place to work, requiring monitoring of behaviours, introspection and ongoing analysis of identity, subjectivity and power politics. The Internal Activist becomes a translator, defence lawyer, sociologist and grunt worker. We found the process of working in this role emotionally draining and, at times, challenging of our own deeply-held personal values. Advocating for what might be deemed radical action from the outside to those on the inside required a process of constant negotiation. To manage this, we leant heavily on Museum Detox members within and beyond Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. It is worth noting that the museum service has the most ethnically diverse museum workforce in the UK and that Birmingham has the largest young BAME population in Britain and this context was key to the success of the project. We needed to decompress, feel supported and understood while attempting this complex experiment. Detox meetings allowed us the space to expand our theoretical practice, without having to translate or negotiate. Being part of the network took the work we were doing to a level we could not have otherwise achieved if we were not able to present well-thought-out ideas, solutions and critiques. It served to create solidarity and shared knowledge of anti-racist museum practice amongst the BAME workers at Birmingham Museums, including those working beyond the exhibition.

The connections were not only limited to existing staff but previous staff members we connected with through Museum Detox, who were able to supplement the work we were doing with their institutional memory of work on Black history projects in the past, making us aware of collections, publications and previous displays which had laid the ground for *The Past is Now*. However, at times, this solidarity could feel exclusionary for white museum workers and Allies who did not have an equivalent space and support network.

Concluding thoughts

The exhibition, *The Past is Now*, which ran from 28 October 2017 to 24 June 2018, acted as a focus for debates in the UK and beyond about decolonising and democratising practices in museums. And yet, the activist work that produced it is not confined exclusively to the physical exhibition nor is the gallery the only highly visible space in which the thoughts

generated throughout the project have been articulated. In particular, it is important to recognise the role of the digital space in which conversations surrounding the project have taken place, very often amplifying and complicating the discussions which took place within the museum itself. Indeed, it is in the reactions to the display that we have very often found insights and inspiration which will move this experiment in decolonising forward.

The findings of our evaluation showed an overwhelmingly positive public response to the exhibition and we received an unprecedented amount of welcome attention from workers in the cultural sector, intrigued and inspired to see the outcome of our experiment. At the same time, we have also been subject to criticism and a backlash from constituencies who find the presentation of familiar histories of Empire told from unfamiliar perspectives, deeply uncomfortable. These included a review in *The Times* newspaper (2018) calling for a more 'balanced' perspective taking into account the 'positive' aspects of Empire.

We have found ourselves reflecting on the relative value of positive and negative responses; how should the museum weigh up the numerous 'magic moments' created by the exhibition against the comments expressing discomfort and offence? Each of the co-curators entered the gallery hours before it opened and took a moment to appreciate what having a space like this actually meant; some museum staff were moved to tears including the People of Colour in the front-of-house team who had been front and centre in many of the meetings that shaped the project and would grab us to discuss the exhibition content on every occasion.

We will end this chapter with just one of the 'magic moments' created by *The Past is Now*, one that, we feel, powerfully articulates the need for this sort of work.

It was an unseasonably hot spring day in Birmingham; a few visitors walked around the gallery taking in the *The Past is Now: Birmingham and the British Empire*. A small group of people were on a tour provided by one of the members of staff who had helped curate the display. The group were all Women of Colour. They had stopped in their tracks, looking up at the quote from Audre Lorde that appears on one of the exhibition's walls:

> The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.
>
> *(Lorde 2007 [1984]: 112)*

One of the women on the tour was a regular visitor; she put her hand on the shoulder of her companion and said: 'I had the exact same reaction the first time I came through here.' The other woman who, it transpired, had recently left the world of academia said, 'This gallery is important but I needed that moment to remind me that this is a safe space.' The small group sat down to discuss the importance of the quote, both in reassuring the visitors of colour that the space was self-aware, but also to challenge the museum to keep its promise to create a legacy based on this change.

As this group sat down to discuss their thoughts and feelings based on this display, a young Black man walked into the space. He was carrying a beautiful newborn baby as he walked around the display. The baby was too gorgeous – we had to approach him. He smiled and said, 'It's nice to see you in here.'

None of the group had met him before. He went on to explain that he had brought his baby son to see the Vanley Burke photographic display, which documented the

experience of Black British Culture in Birmingham from the 1960s, but he had found his way to *The Past is Now*. He explained how it made the museum relevant to him and how he needed to show these things to his baby. He asked, 'Why would I come if the stories weren't for me?' But, we explained, these stories are for all of us and this made him very happy.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 We looked, for example, at work by the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries, University of Leicester, which had experimented with the 'trading zone' as a model for the creation of new narratives of disability that have sought to bring together different forms of expertise—including that derived from lived experience—in a non-hierarchical way and with a shared goal of tackling prejudice and inequality. See Dodd *et al*. (2017) and Sandell (2018).
2 See, for example, Myers' comments in *The Voice* (2018).

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3

GROWING AN ACTIVIST MUSEUM PROFESSIONAL

Elizabeth Wood and Sarah A. Cole

Introduction

Few museum-studies students start their graduate work planning to become revolutionaries. It is not common to find students looking to change museum practices—but it is rare to find them wanting to change the world through their museum work. They don't expect to be trained in activist principles or learn about the art of community organizing. In practice, too, it is less common to find museum workers planning to make radical changes to the world. Many, even those who may easily see themselves as socially active, often fail to recognize or acknowledge the advocacy roles that they and their institutions can play within their own communities. As the challenge of relevancy to communities increases, and as the political climate further impacts the arts and humanities, there is an urgent need for activism and advocacy by museum professionals as part of their ethos of practice. This means that those in training programs and mentoring roles must sow the seeds of activism and nurture museum professionals prepared to act on behalf of social justice.

This chapter explores the perceived barriers that museum professionals face in enacting practices concerned with the betterment of society and, more specifically, the lives of their visitors. It describes the nuances of what is required to teach and learn activist museum professional practices, and relates the findings from two different studies that demonstrate the overlapping traits and approaches that museum professionals need to take as activists in their museums and communities. By situating this chapter in current practice and perceived barriers, the results from the second study (on students in training) demonstrates strategies that can be used in graduate programs to counteract the activist malaise in current museum practice.

Understanding an ethos of practice

Ethos, a concept that in its simplest definition constitutes character and ways of being (see for example Schon 1983; Macdonald 1995), is an underdeveloped and virtually non-existent consideration in most museum training programs, or in many of the fields that constitute various museum practices. Developing a sense of ethos requires reflection and

consideration of a practitioner's scholarly orientation (or disciplinary foundation), their ability to reflect on their practice, and their application and demonstration of those values as part of their leadership within the field. Understanding how this orientation plays out in the daily actions of museum practitioners can shed light on the further development of their activist orientation (and potential), and how that ethos will be reflected in their work.

In 1988, Gurian noted that 'there appears to be no urgency' ([1988] 2006: 74) driving museums to embrace the changes that would move them from their current place in society into that of a truly inclusive, supportive and vital part of civic life. Museums are made up of individual actors; this urgency and change needs to come from people. Each person working in a museum needs to see that their actions and decisions can contribute to change. As two practitioner-scholars who consider ourselves to be activists within museum practice, we have been investigating how museum staff can be more civically involved and embrace social change activism in museums (Wood 2009, 2013, 2017; Cole 2014). Having explored the role of children's museums in taking on issues of racism, prejudice and intolerance (Wood and Cole 2007), we noted that the realm of socially active museums tends to be limited to particular social causes (such as the District Six Museum, or Lower Eastside Tenement Museum), or identity-based museums, such as the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Experience. There are very few 'mainstream' museums that take on social change in this way.

In the two studies that follow, we sought to better understand the different approaches that museum professionals take toward activist work, and what it would take to develop those strategies within museum studies training programs. Museum professionals have long noted the perceived barriers to the institutional changes needed to move museums from their historical role as institutions concerned with the collection and care of historic objects, to institutions concerned with the lives of their visitors and their role in the betterment of society. Despite such institutional barriers, we believe that it is ultimately the role of the individual to bring about change (see for example Davis 2011; Janes 2016).

Barriers to social justice: real and imagined

The first study investigated the barriers museum professionals described, both real and imagined, that they felt were preventing them from embracing social justice and civic engagement efforts in their institutions. By focusing on children's museums in the United States, which have been historically involved in issues related to children and families, this study intentionally sought to draw parallels between museum workers' view of the needs of the community and barriers for advocacy. The research, while conducted in 2010, reflects how contemporary political climates and sensitivities may affect activities. At the time of the first study there was a less volatile political and cultural environment, and perhaps less overall urgency, but we noted that a decade earlier, around the time of the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001, many museums had taken on concerted efforts toward timely, socially conscious actions (Davis *et al.* 2003). Given what seems to be a cyclical nature of activism, this raises the question of what it takes to get the field to become more active in social issues that affect communities?

The first case study on perceived barriers included three museums and twelve museum staff. The staff participating in the interviews were primarily responsible for educational programming and community outreach. Multiple staff from each organization participated in an individual interview that included questions about their audience demographics, what

audiences they thought did not visit, their perceptions of the social issues affecting their community, and any conversations they may have had as a staff about the social needs of the community. These museums were selected specifically because of their location in urban centers and because they had received awards, for either programs or exhibitions, from the Association of Children's Museums.

Obstacles to action

Each of the museums we examined demonstrated concerted efforts toward community interaction and involvement. The study revealed that the major barriers to action were more individual, rather than institutional (although some institutional practices and cultures contributed to these barriers). These barriers included:

1) a lack of knowledge or understanding of the needs and situations of their local community;
2) a privileged worldview, which prevented staff from recognizing problems the museum could address; and
3) lack of a strong definition of social justice.

While some respondents' definitions skirted the edges of social justice (especially when asked about core underlying issues such as access, the right to vote and economic status), most lumped such social concerns in 'good citizen' ideas such as the value of multiculturalism or a globalized society.

Other issues raised by the respondents focused on prevailing causes most often related to external funding priorities or those 'in the news', such as childhood obesity, 'free-range' kids, and children with special needs. While these alternate concerns and 'hot button issues' reflect real needs in many communities, there is a fundamental difference between these topics and the deeper problems that social activism addresses. This failure to recognize and address the causes of underlying problems may be why many efforts in museums fall short.

While it may feel disheartening that the barriers were so individually based, there was a clear demonstration that personal ethos and museum mission played important roles in the approach that a museum worker took in defining his or her activist role. Where individuals saw a direct relationship of an issue related to their positions, they felt a greater ability to act. However, in the end, the results of the study showed that of those staff interviewed, most were less likely to have an activist perspective on their work in terms of social justice issues like access, authority, and representation. Rather, they were more disposed toward more cause-based issues prominent in the discourse, such as childhood obesity or working with children with disabilities. These approaches, while clearly valid in the lives of their audiences, did not move these professionals toward activism.

What follows are profiles of the institutions included in the study and the nature of the barriers described by the staff. The names of the museums are changed to protect their identities.[1]

Midwest Big Kids Museum

The Midwest Big Kids Museum has a significant economic and social presence in the local and regional community. The museum, located in a low-income section of a large

city in the Midwestern United States, brings tourist dollars to the tax rolls and generates a great deal of goodwill and press for the city. The majority of the staff we spoke to mentioned poverty as the biggest problem facing their community, with access to equitable education as another primary issue. Staff often referred to families as 'less fortunate' or 'poorer families' and used language like 'the neighborhood' to define this group as distinctly different from more affluent and primarily white, suburban audiences. Staff often mentioned a lack of connection between them and visitors from the nearby, low-income community.

One potential reason for the staff's lack of awareness of these larger community initiatives is that the Big Kids Museum focuses more on internal development of exhibitions and programming rather than on external outreach, despite the fact that the museum's mission focuses particularly on improving the lives of families. The museum does very little outreach programming; staff do not see the museum's external community work connected to their mission. Instead, the work of community outreach is itself marginalized and kept separate. As a result, museum staff focus their work inward, towards the existing visitation. This creates key barriers to action for the Big Kids Museum staff, including an overall lack of connection to the local community, a focus on 'bricks and mortar' exhibitions over programming, and a poor internal/external communication system that fails to share information about initiatives and programs with staff and community. There is a focus on 'feel good' initiatives, such as recycling and anti-bullying, over more difficult topics such as child welfare and poverty.

East Coast Urban Kids Museum

The East Coast Urban Kids Museum is a midsized children's museum in a metropolitan area in the northeastern United States. The museum has several well-funded initiatives and a history of dedication to access for all families. The museum self-reports that nearly one third of their visitors are admitted free, and offers several, nationally recognized programs for their community that have been replicated at other museums. Interviewees at this museum were eager and excited to talk about their community and their museum. Both of the staff members interviewed cited poverty as the number one issue affecting visitor families. Other issues raised included the popular causes such as childhood obesity, but these were related directly back to issues of poverty and access. The museum relies heavily on families interacting with each other and the importance of play. Much of this has taken place as parent education and community organizing around the value and importance of play as a learning experience.

There was a distinct difference in the staff's language about visitors at the East Coast Urban Kids Museum. Whereas Big Kids used the language of community as 'other', East Coast Urban staff were more likely to describe the community in distinct categories reflecting broader understanding of the range of racial, ethnic, socio-economic and language groups within their community. This museum has a strong level of transparency with its visitors and staff about its efforts on behalf of communities and social issues, and it was not difficult to find information on programming. This level of transparency comes from an institutional belief in providing access to low-income families, non-English speaking families and other under-represented audiences, combined with strong and consistent museum (and board) leadership for the past 15 years.

Western Kids Tourist City Museum

Finally, the Western Kids Tourist City Museum is a smaller children's museum in a large city with several major tourist attractions. The museum does not attract a large tourist audience and works on behalf of local residents. The staff self-reported that locally there was limited access to cultural and educational offerings, especially for children. This meant the institution had opportunities to build on the demand for services in an economically depressed neighborhood. Thus, socio-economic issues drove most of their conversations about the community. The staff saw economic struggles, including an underfunded education system, as the biggest issues facing families.

In our conversations, the Western Kids Tourist City Museum did not use language to describe the audience as 'other' that was seen at the Big Kids Museum, but neither did it refer to the community in the ways of the East Coast Urban Kids Museum. Rather, the Western Kids Tourist City Museum referenced its local community in very general terms, with only passing references to specifics such as ethnicity or age of audiences. As with the Big Kids Museum, there seemed to be less transparency for staff to learn more about local efforts to work with community members. Most, if not all, discussions and program planning around community engagement went through a single staff member.

Recognizing these challenges of institutional philosophy, or drive toward effecting change in local settings, it became clear that the staff member's sense of personal agency within their role, sense of purpose, and ethos might be a better predictor of museum professionals and activism. Creating that kind of change for individuals requires concerted efforts to build on both the knowledge and skills of activism.

Creating the capacity for engaged practice in new professionals

For those students entering the museum field, learning a community-based orientation to museum practice is critical to the success and continued relevance of museums. As the greater museum professional community strives to become more inclusive and build its educational reputation, 'general interest' museums can learn from studying the practices implemented by 'identity' museums. They incorporate the theories of critical pedagogy into their exhibitions, as well as in program design and development. Students who have a developed sense of museum-based, civic engagement will understand how to work with audiences, communities and publics toward greater levels of discourse and difference.

The second study outlines the results of a graduate-level course in critical museum education pedagogy embedded in a program that emphasizes civically engaged museum work.[2] After participation in the target course, students developed more in-depth responses to civic engagement practices. This depth of knowledge was evident through a comparative analysis of students' written responses before beginning and after completing the class. Their perspectives revealed:

- the understanding of power structures and multiple sources of 'truth' within museum knowledge representation;
- a heightened sense of collaboration and empathy for community constituents;
- a focus on the potential outcomes for social change, or improving the world; and
- inclusive views about the 'work' of the museum as one that is shared 'with' the community rather than 'for'.

Student reflections described below, captured before and after participation in the course, demonstrated an increased capacity to understand the cultural workings of a community, including an awareness of cultural challenges and socio-economic needs. Students articulated the importance of museum workers having a true interest and commitment to community needs and interests. Students also saw the role of a museum to be one of service to its community. Finally, the students recognized the construction and enactment of power in the museum setting (see for example Hooper-Greenhill 1999; Janes and Conaty 2005; Knell *et al.* 2007). These themes were also present with students in comparison groups (students in the program, but not in the course), but to a lesser degree and intensity. These findings suggest that, while the program's overall design and content communicates a consistent set of themes, the opportunity for more intense discussion on key topics, reflection and dialogue is critical for developing an activist ethos. Student names are changed to protect their identity.

Awareness of community context

Students who took this course were able to reflect on the capacity of a museum and museum professionals to understand the cultural workings of a community, including an awareness of cultural challenges and socio-economic needs, rather than as an abstraction. The in-depth course reflections demonstrated awareness of nuanced cultural differences that included student conceptions of the difference between community—the setting, context, 'neighborhood' of the museum—and the audience (the people who regularly patronize or visit the museum). Students were also able to provide a much finer demonstration of place-based aspects of communities and neighborhoods, including describing the people who make up different audiences.

For example, students were asked to define a museum's commitment to communities. Christina's response prior to the class shows an abstracted view of community context and commitment:

> Ideally, a museum would seek to meet a community's educational needs ... A museum committed to community would have programming and exhibits for the entire community, not just a subset.

At the conclusion of the class, Christina revealed a much more nuanced understanding of commitment:

> Museums should try to incorporate the community into every aspect of the museum process from helping to choose what is collected and exhibited, to co-curating exhibits, to creating educational programs and outreach events which *really* matter to the particular interests/concerns of the community. Museums should consider having a community board, just as they would have an executive board, which acts as the 'boss' of the museum, ensuring that museums stay true to community needs, not the latest trends. ... Museums need to learn to be sensitive to how they display cultural histories, avoiding the use of stereotypes, and offering revisionist histories if necessary. Museums can also show empathy for communities and audiences by being proactive about seeking needs in their audience and actively using museum resources to meet those needs.

'Being a/part': the role of personal involvement

As emerging museum professionals, students recognized the importance of having a true commitment to community needs and interests. Most notable was the distinction of acting both 'apart' from the organization by distancing themselves as an individual employee and becoming 'a part' of the community. This included key skills such as the ability to listen and show empathy. Other professional strategies focused on working beyond institutional expectations and being individually responsible and reliable for actions and interactions with the community. The students understood that personal commitment to action would greatly outshine their reliance on the museum as an entity or policy; they saw their sense of purpose in engaging with community as personal, rather than political or organizational.

Hillary's perspective at the start of the course reflected some of these ideas, although she was somewhat broad in her definition:

> A civic-minded museum professional applies the concerns and needs of the community to their work. This means thinking of ways to involve the community in public programs, exhibit design testing, and public/private school needs. Always staying current with the needs, issues, and trends of the community, adapting your style to the changing needs of the community.

At the close of the course, Hillary revised her description to define the ways which her personal agency and actions will play out:

> A civic-minded museum professional is people-minded and looks at their (*sic*) job from both the internal organization point of view and the community's perspective. They seek resources from not only co-workers but community organizers and other museum professionals. A civic-minded museum professional seeks to bring dialogue, social issues, and empowerment into their programs. They build exhibits and add label copy that might challenge the status quo and encourage visitors to discuss social issues.

The role of the museum in service to the community

A category related to personal involvement is the museum professional's approach in being of service to the community. The professional recognizes how the museum can support improvements to community situations and conditions and can offer resources through the museum's educational efforts. In this orientation to service there is a shift from authority to something more open-ended. For example, Alex, in defining strategies for museums to show empathy for communities and audiences, responded at the start of the course:

> Educate themselves and take an interest in the community. Be involved in the community outside the museum. ... By being active outside of the physical museum and considering issues that are important to the community when developing something in the museum.

At the conclusion of the course, he expanded his approach:

Let the community tell their story in the museum. Use the status of power to legitimize the community perspective (even though it shouldn't need legitimization). Be willing to rethink the idea of a museum to allow for 'non-traditional' activities that work for the betterment of the community. ... [Museums] can be considered a civic participant when they are able to collaborate w/other museums and cultural institutions and are able to see that the well-being of the community is of greater importance than the well-being of one particular institution. Empower through education that condones action.

Construction and enactment of power in the museum setting

From the course, students developed concepts of a museum professional as one who explores and interrogates issues of elitism vs. equality and challenges the perception of the museum as neutral ground. The neutrality debate, heightened by Janes (2009), is now very common place in both museum studies curricular discussions and in the larger professional discourse. Student conceptions incorporated elements of critical discourse and the communal generation of ideas and sharing knowledge, rather than an implicit recognition of museum as author. At the start of the course, Eileen took a thoughtful approach to the notion of community issues being part of a development process:

> A civic-minded museum professional always has their community in mind when designing a program, event, exhibit. They will think of ways to involve their community in planning or to better their community. Can an exhibit bring in needed revenue to the community? How can the museum work to revitalize the neighborhood? This person will go beyond thinking of what the board members and VP's want. Committed to not simply attracting attendance/members, but to engaging dialogue, thought, interaction.

However, on completing the course, her language shifted to acknowledge that simply thinking about the community may not be enough:

> Commitment is also 'with, not for.' Museums need to create dialogue with, and relationships with, their chosen community, so they know what the community wants and needs. This is commitment, rather than providing 'window dressing' programs the museum decides is necessary to show they are committed, when they aren't. ... By listening and getting to know [the community], not assuming that the museums know what's best or that all communities and audiences are alike. Putting into effect inclusive practices, integrating them into the whole museum, like with an ethnic group, rather than having one token 'exotic' exhibit that further 'others' them. Showing concern and understanding for them when needed.

Depth comes from exposure

Comparing the evidence between those students in the course and other students in the program demonstrates that sustained interaction with critical pedagogy concepts helped to develop and strengthen student conceptions of civic engagement. Two factors seem to have some effect on the *depth* of an individual student's capacity to enact civic engagement

practices: time in the program *and* target course participation. Students who had completed four or more courses in the program had a greater overall understanding of civic engagement practices at a general level than new students in the program. Following participation in the class, students demonstrated more in-depth, reflective responses with more nuanced and finely tuned definitions and examples. This suggests that, while the core curriculum is addressing the qualities of civically engaged museum professionals, those students who completed a course focused on critical pedagogy and community organizing principles were more prepared and capable to address community and civic needs in the museum setting.

Teaching activism: a framework for civic engagement in museum studies

Looking at these two studies of museum professionals—both in the field and in preparation—yields important insights on how civic engagement and activist orientations are personally developed ways of being, as well as strategies for approaching museum work. Through these studies it appears that how the individual conceptualizes their role or way of working is a better predictor of activism than an institutional philosophy. The activist orientation must be part of an individual's way of working. The nature of the graduate class suggests that such an orientation and development of this activist ethos can be taught and developed over time. It is clear that an activist stance is both appropriate for a graduate curriculum, and there is a strong need to develop strategies for museum workers to define and articulate their personal connections and roles in relation to the communities they serve.

By building on these competencies and merging existing research and documentation on civic engagement within the museum field (Hooper-Greenhill 1999; Weil 1999; Thelan 2001; Battistoni 2002; Hirzy 2002; Janes and Conaty 2005; Coxall 2006), we propose a framework for museum studies programs and departments to develop more activist approaches in museum work and training:

- **Develop a commitment to community**: Recognize and be able to define the underlying issues facing audiences, especially those of the immediate community; build personal commitment to address these issues through one's organizational role and action.
- **Adopt a civic-minded professional attitude**: Promote strategies that museum professionals can use to enhance audience participation, involvement, and civic engagement.
- **Develop empathy**: Acknowledge multiple 'truths', histories, ways of knowing, experiences.
- **Philanthropy**: Expand the role of the museum as a civic participant and contributor to community well-being.

For those students entering the museum field, a community-based orientation to museum practice must be understood as critical to the success and continued relevance of museums. Students who have a developed sense of civic engagement within the museum will understand how to better work with audiences, communities and publics toward greater levels of discourse and action to make a difference.

This framework is by no means complete and must be paired with constant exposure to the conditions and roots of community problems that can lead to change. While there are many examples of museums where activism is the driving force, there are far more where the idea of

change is still a seed of an idea. Building on the strategies that museum studies programs can develop, and nurturing those who are already in the field to become active, is possible. Grassroots efforts in the museum field continue to support and cultivate museum professionals who are passionate and committed to change. More mainstream museums are taking on the challenge and standing up to injustice. These are important strategies that will keep up the momentum—the more that new professionals see a clear pathway, the better. The more that those already in the field know they have allies, the better. The more we plant the seeds, the more likely we will have a strong and powerful approach to grow activist professionals in museums.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1 Cole conducted this case study of the attitudes and activities of children's-museum employees in responding to social justice issues in their communities. The study focused on key staff in both direct delivery and leadership or administrative roles in education, exhibitions, marketing, volunteer management, and community outreach at four urban children's museums from across the United States. Data collection included fifteen telephone interviews and written questionnaires from museum staff, as well as a review of publicly available literature and supporting documents about the museum's community activities (annual reports, press releases, websites). Written questions included background information on the institution's audience demographics, description of the social issues facing children and families in the museum's local area, conversations within the museum related to social issues and community, and the role of children's museums in addressing social justice within the community. In addition, the review included use of census and the Kids Count database of the Annie E. Case Foundation to accurately describe community characteristics and indicators of family well-being.
2 Elee Wood conducted the second case study to examine various civic engagement competencies that might serve as a framework for a museum studies program and to study students' formation of civic engagement concepts through a dedicated course focused on critical pedagogy in museums. Subjects included four groups: nine students in the target course in pre- and post-course written reflections; four new students in the program; five continuing students not in the target class; and three recent graduates. This sample of students provided a comparison for the target group and allowed for examination of the key concepts gained by all students in the program. As the museum studies program already has a strong emphasis on civic engagement, the purpose of the comparison was to determine the extent to which the existing curriculum supports the development of civically engaged, museum professionals.

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4

DIVIDING ISSUES AND MISSION-DRIVEN ACTIVISM

Museum responses to migration policies and the refugee crisis

Maria Vlachou

With the idea of museum neutrality being intensely challenged in recent years, and as more and more museums choose to have a more active role as agents of change and social justice, some new concerns are being voiced among museum professionals: when, how and in relation to which issues should museums get involved? In particular, what are the challenges posed by engaging with issues that divide opinion (held by our colleagues as well as our audiences) and how might these be addressed?

In recent years, one of the most divisive issues in many countries has been that of migration policies and the handling of the refugee crisis. In 2016 and 2017, amid growing polarisation in European societies and beyond, the outcome of several elections and referenda was determined by the way political candidates handled these issues and, in many places, resulted in the strengthening of anti-migration and anti-refugee populists. Within this context, museum professionals are questioning what their involvement should be. Museums define themselves as places of knowledge, encounter and dialogue; many claim to contribute towards social cohesion by fighting ignorance and promoting tolerance and respect, yet the contemporary political and social climate is testing the ways in which museum professionals are thinking about their roles, purposes and responsibilities.

In this chapter, I argue that acting for change and social justice is fundamental to the museum's mission; a task we should embrace rather than avoid, if we wish to be relevant to our 21st century audiences. I begin by questioning whether dealing with contemporary societal and political issues, such as migration and the refugee crisis, is something that concerns only those museums whose subject matter directly relates to these specific topics. I move on to explore activism in practice within the museum context and how it relates to the organisation's mission. I attempt to address some common concerns, such as the fear of alienating people and losing audiences and I seek to unpack and think critically about the ubiquitous call for museums to function as 'safe spaces.' I defend the creation of *empathetic*, rather than *safe* spaces, where people are invited to acknowledge the existence of a plurality of views, in the first place, and where these views may be discussed, respectfully and at a personal level so that we may negotiate our living together in society.

What has this got to do with us?

Migration is not a new phenomenon but, according to the United Nations, it is global in scale and growing 'in scope, complexity and impact' (United Nations 2018). A number of migration museums around the world—as well as museums with affinities to the subject of migration or which represent communities that sought refuge in the past, such as Jewish and Holocaust museums—have, quite naturally, been working on these themes for many years, through their exhibitions and other educational initiatives. Is this only an issue, then, for migration-related museums?

I wish to argue that, since all museums are part of contemporary life, they should actively look for connections between the objects they preserve for posterity and the social issues that are at the heart of public debate, as a means of fulfilling their mission and maintaining social relevance. Considering how divisive the issues of migration and the refugee crisis have been in many countries (and how political campaigns and political decisions have put them at the heart of their rhetoric), I have been heartened to see different types of museum exploring connections to migration and seeking to open up opportunities to reflect on this subject from different angles.

In October 2016, a science museum, the Tekniska Museet in Stockholm, opened *I'm alive—Mobile Technology, Life and Death*, reminding us that:

> . . . our daily use of smartphones to perform errands, communicate with friends or purely for the sake of enjoyment is something we almost take for granted. But for displaced people who are on the move away from a life of uncertainty in their homeland, a smartphone can be of much greater importance; [it] can represent a lifeline.
>
> *(cited in Cimoli and Vlachou 2016)*

In January 2017, responding to the presidential executive order that banned citizens from seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the US, the Museum of Modern Art in New York replaced some of the works on show with those made by artists coming from the seven countries, stating that it aimed, 'to affirm the ideals of welcome and freedom as vital to this Museum, as they are to the United States' (Farago 2017: 1). More museums and museum-related organisations followed suit, with written statements or other actions (Cimoli and Vlachou 2017), such as the Davies Museum at Wellesley College, removing from its walls all works made or given by an immigrant (Gilbert 2017).

On the other hand, a series of incidents have made it obvious that, even if museums choose not to interfere, reality catches up with them. Following the US presidential election, the Tenement Museum in New York—whose mission is to enhance the public's appreciation for the role immigration plays in shaping American identity—had to give its guides new training to help them deal with the increase in hostile remarks (JTA 2016). Zach Aaron, a Board Member, said that he took pride in the museum's history of celebrating the lives and cultures of immigrants. He also claimed, though, that this is 'an apolitical mission' (Aarons 2016). Can we pretend that immigration, the core of this museum's narrative, is an apolitical issue?

There are more cases that are helpful to consider here. In 2016, The New Americans Museum in San Diego and The Idaho Black History Museum in Boise both suffered vandalism, receiving messages such as 'Too much immigration! Go back to your country.

This one is ours!' Reflecting on these comments, their directors referred to 'those that now feel empowered and emboldened to speak very negative and very divisive messages' and considered the incidents 'indicative of the current state of affairs,' following a contentious and often racially charged presidential election (Vlachou 2016). In 2017, nooses were found on different occasions at the National Museum of African American History and Culture; acts of 'mainstream support for hate [not seen] in decades, not since the Civil Rights era 50 years ago' (Boissoneault 2017).

This is not only a US phenomenon, of course. Considering the case of Greece, one of the countries bearing the brunt of migrant and refugee arrivals in Europe, a 2016 exhibition on Greek 'refugee antiquities' at the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki provoked similar reactions. The visitors' comments book became a field for the exchange of strong arguments, with remarks such as 'How dare you compare your ancestors with this dirt that comes to our homeland. Those were Christian Orthodox. These are all Muslims,' as well as with deletions and smudges in the text of previous visitors' comments when someone disagreed.

Clearly, migration is an issue that many feel the need to discuss—more or less politely. Whilst, for some museums, the path to follow seems obvious and natural, others still feel uncertain about this, anxious to retain some form of neutral position even in the face of growing recognition that the decisions museums make every day regarding what to exhibit and which story to tell are inherently political and partial (Sandell 2007). At the same time, new concerns are emerging: Are museums expected to become activists? Are they supposed to serve political agendas? Shouldn't they be safe and welcoming spaces *for all*?

Mission-driven activism

Recent political events have placed increasing pressure on many museums to consider their role within certain political contexts. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many professionals are questioning whether museums should be socially purposeful agents of change and are asking if, as well as how, activist practices are consistent with their mission.

Chet Orloff, from the Museum of the City in Portland, asks whether museums should change their mission and become agents of social justice. He says that museums present public programmes that help their communities understand the contributions of immigrants and serve as conveners to bring together recent immigrants with established residents. Nevertheless, he believes that museums cannot afford to abandon their larger mission in order to become agents of change, as most of them already have subject–area obligations (art, science and so on) in addition to those of immigration and social justice (Orloff 2017).

Orloff suggests that, in order for museums to become agents of change and social justice, they need to either abandon their 'larger mission' or change it altogether. However, I would argue here that these roles are neither incompatible nor mutually exclusive. The pursuit of social justice is not a distraction but rather an inherent part of the museum's social role. If a museum seeks to build understanding of the contributions of immigrants to a locale and to enhance empathy and respect between different groups, surely this means that social change is fundamental to the museum's mission? And is this not the very essence of activism?

Of course 'activism' is a rather loaded expression, sometimes associated with vigorous, even violent, actions aiming to bring change. A quick look at Wikipedia, though, offers a wider context for what we aim to discuss here: 'Activism consists of efforts to promote,

impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to make improvements in society' (Wikipedia 2018).

This understanding of activism, as a desire to bring about positive improvements in society, relates closely to our understanding of the museum's central purpose. If we consider the action taken by MoMA, in response to the US travel ban, within the context of its mission statement, we find that the museum recognises,

> that modern and contemporary art transcend national boundaries; ... That it is essential to affirm the importance of contemporary art and artists if the Museum is to honor the ideals with which it was founded and to remain vital and engaged with the present.
>
> *(MoMA 2010: 1)*

Given its stated aims, could and should the museum have remained silent in the face of a discriminatory policy? Perhaps more importantly, what kind of message would it have sent to its Muslim as well as non-Muslim visitors, supporters and staff had it remained silent?

In France, in March 2017, the Musée de l'Homme in Paris opened its first temporary exhibition after its refurbishment, *Us and Them*, exploring the science of racism and prejudice. The museum states on its website that the exhibition, 'attempts to decipher why and how such phenomena occur in societies at a certain point in their history' (Musée de l'Homme 2017). The exhibition opened a month before the presidential election which resulted in 33.9% support for the far-right anti-immigration candidate, Marine Le Pen.

Another example makes evident the multiple ways that museum work could be affected by certain political decisions. Following the travel ban, the president and CEO of The Field Museum in Chicago, Richard Lariviere, expressed his concern and reaffirmed the museum's commitment to equality, tolerance and inclusion. He wrote:

> We value and welcome a diverse community in our halls and in our work around the globe. It is essential to what we do and crucial to our mission and success. In this time of uncertainty, I want to make clear the Museum will support any of our international or local Museum colleagues who might be affected by these rules or changes.
>
> *(cited in Cimoli and Vlachou 2017)*

In February 2017, The Field Museum took part in an international social media campaign, the #DayofFacts, where museums, libraries, archives, cultural institutions, science centres and other public sources of knowledge decided to fight 'alternative facts'. The organisers stated that:

> By not taking an overt political stand but simply sharing mission-related, objective, and relevant facts, we aimed to show the world that our institutions are still trusted sources for truth and knowledge.
>
> *(cited in Vlachou 2017b)*

Could and should museums have remained silent when their mission and 'core business' were under political assault?

Museums are part of every country's cultural and educational infrastructure. When also part of a democratic society, their role and responsibilities acquire a special dimension. Deborah Cullinan, CEO of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, believes in the need for civic engagement and defends that cultural organisations must be the ones to drive the cultural movement America needs to deliver democracy. She wrote:

> Arts and culture organizations of all shapes and sizes across the United States were created to nurture creativity and imagination, and remind us of our potential as human beings. And as such, these organizations have the power to drive the cultural movement we need to make [and] remake the systems that deliver our democracy—to drive a shift in the values, stories, and traditions to which we hold our institutions and ourselves accountable. [. . .] They must be platforms for cultivating public imagination; building thick and diverse networks; convening across differences and sectors; and incubating breakthrough ideas that stick, because they spring from communities that come together to embrace truth, honor diversity, and poetically pursue freedom.
>
> *(Cullinan 2017)*

In a democratic society, museums do not exist simply to produce knowledge, but also to put this knowledge to use. If museums are places of dialogue and encounter and if they honestly wish to promote tolerance and respect, then they have a clear role in promoting critical thinking, giving citizens the means to engage by making informed and reasoned decisions. Within this framework, there are certain ethical or moral positions that cannot be open to negotiation. Tony Butler, director of Derby Museums (UK), explains:

> We should promote human rights and be intolerant of racism, sexism and homo-phobia, and be protective of minority rights and the rule of law. All of these should be non-negotiable for museums and if we are not doing that, then we are failing.
>
> *(cited in Murphy 2017)*

This concern to promote rights and tackle prejudice constitutes a form of 'activist practice' (Sandell and Dodd 2010) and is what a growing number of museums are committing to (Sandell 2017). As Edward Linenthal states, 'Many museums now have at least a component of them that are activist—by that, I mean wanting to participate in a healthy civic culture and conversation' (cited in Gardenswartz 2017).

Do museums risk losing audiences?

Many museums, I suggest, have got their audiences accustomed to rather anodyne narratives. When some seek to promote critical thinking, dialogue, tolerance and respect, as well as to defend 'non-negotiable' values (Sandell 2017: 143), do they risk alienating parts of their audience who find their worldview challenged?

When MoMA took action to criticise the travel ban, the comments people made on the museum's Facebook page were revealing. A small minority criticised the museum: for being hypocritical; for using art that they had previously deemed unworthy of display in order to make a political statement; and for an endeavour not born of artistic value, but purely

political in its conception. The majority, however, took the opportunity to thank and congratulate the museum for showing the relevance of the arts; for standing up for those stripped of their freedom; and for countering fear and prejudice. Some also stated that they would become museum members or renew their membership as a result of the museum's initiative (Vlachou 2017a).

This may be an indication, but one lacking scientific basis. Colleen Dilenschneider, from IMPACTS Research & Development, provided the hard data which pointed to a great boost in reputation for MoMA. Through her research, she did not aim to suggest causality between the curatorial decision and reputational outcome but rather to understand a positive perceptual shift among the US public concerning MoMA. At the same time, she questioned:

> What else could have taken place in the same duration to cause the greatest increase in reputational equities in the last three years for MoMA? In my time working with IMPACTS and tracking metrics, I've not seen anything near a bump this big take place 'just 'cuz.'
>
> *(Dilenschneider 2017)*

She further explained:

> Assuming that the increase in reputational equities that MoMA has experienced is (at least in part) due to its recent curatorial decision and attendant press, we could have just as easily observed that perceptions remained consistent—or, even, that people disapproved of MoMA's position. These data point to a potential conclusion that may make some cultural organizations uncomfortable: Perhaps the market wants us to take a stand. More than that, the data may underscore something more fundamental for cultural organizations: Standing up for your mission matters.
>
> *(Dilenschneider 2017)*

A survey commissioned in 2017 by Museum Next in order to investigate the public perception of museums, protest and politics in the US, also provided some very relevant information. When asked whether museums should have something to say about social issues, 40.5% of respondents said 'Maybe' and 31% said 'No.' However, the number of people who felt that museums should have something to say on social issues changed depending on how much a person had interacted with a museum in the past 12 months. Among those who had not visited a museum in that time, just 21% stated that a museum should have something to say about social issues; this increased to 27% when someone had visited 1–2 times, 35% when someone had visited 3–4 times, 37% when someone had visited 5–6 times and 39.5% when someone had been to a museum more than 6 times in the previous 12 months. Visitors under the age of 30 were more likely to think that museums should speak up about social issues (38% said they believed museums should do this, while 42% answered 'Maybe'). Focusing still on the under 30s group, it is significant to note that 44% believe that a museum that speaks about social issues would be more relevant to them; 51% said that they would be more likely to visit a museum that took a stand and a further 20% said it might make them more likely to visit (Museum Next 2017).

It is, perhaps, relevant to note here that this survey used the phrase 'social issues,' avoiding the term 'political' which could have been interpreted rather differently, potentially as

'partisan.' Also, survey participants were asked whether they would be more likely to visit a museum that took a stand on issues that mattered to them. They were not asked whether they were likely to visit a museum that took a stand on issues that mattered to them, but which expressed an opinion on that issue that differed from their own. Would people feel so warmly about a museum where this was the case?

Being a 'safe place'

These days, as the argument for neutrality seems to be losing ground, some museum professionals are championing the idea of the museum as a 'safe place'; one where all people may feel welcome. In this context, it is important to question what, precisely, is meant by 'safe'? Does this mean that museums should avoid being places for the confrontation of different and opposing ideas and, more specifically, that they should not risk making some people feel threatened by articulating viewpoints (based on the museum's research and organisational values) regarding contested issues? Could this be exactly the reason why some people might choose to stay away?

Sean Kelley, from the Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site in Philadelphia, reflects on his changing understanding of the concept of a safe space:

> . . . it was becoming clear that this space wasn't safe for Americans who have experienced mass incarceration up close, within their communities. [. . .] Our audience has grown by more than 20% since we began addressing these complex and troubling aspects of American life. I once feared these subjects would suppress our attendance. I feared they would divide our Board of Directors and scare potential funders. I feared they'd harm staff morale, including my own. And I thought neutrality, whatever that meant, had to guide all of our programming decisions. I was wrong on every front.
>
> *(Kelley 2016)*

Kelley's reflections point to a key challenge for museums; when we try hard to avoid upsetting or confronting some visitors, do we risk making spaces that are not only less relevant but also unsafe for others? In a polarised world, it is impossible for museums to please everyone—to create narratives and take up standpoints with which everyone agrees. Rather, in order to become agents of change, museums must reaffirm their mission and principles rather than compromise them in a futile attempt to provide safe or comfortable spaces for all.

The US and French presidential elections, the Brexit referendum or the EU handling of the refugee crisis have made clear that our societies have become extremely polarised and our capacity to empathise has been eroded. We increasingly find ourselves in situations where we are reluctant to listen to someone with a different opinion; we often hold a conviction that our own beliefs are the only truth. In this context, some museums are beginning to understand what their role could be in promoting a much needed respectful dialogue, debate, and the free exchange of ideas (including the museum's own). Some are seeking to respond by aiming to position themselves as spaces where different views are welcome and open to discussion whilst, at the same time, making clear their underlying principles. For example, MoMA, New York states, 'we celebrate creativity, openness,

tolerance, and generosity. We aim to be inclusive places—both onsite and online—where diverse cultural, artistic, social, and political positions are welcome' (MoMa 2017). The Musée de l'Homme (2017) aims to provide scientific insights into racist behaviour and prejudice whilst, at the same time, reaffirming its identity 'as a place for debate, exchange and the transmission of knowledge.'

This is what we need museums to be in the 21st century; not safe, anodyne or comfortable but rather clear about their mission, the reason why they exist, and capable of creating the appropriate space for an honest dialogue; one that might help societies become more willing to listen, without fear and perhaps also with greater empathy.

The empathy tent

In their desire to function as agents of social change, museums cannot simply 'preach to the converted,' but must also engage people with different views. In this context, the creation of an empathetic space that may help people deal with the discomfort brought about by encountering opposing views might be an answer.

On 2 July 2017, the day when thousands marched in Los Angeles calling for the impeachment of President Trump, 'empathy tents' were seeking to facilitate discussions between impeachment marchers and Trump supporters with the help of a Berkeley College mediator. Perhaps this is how museums should envision the 'safe place' they are advocating for?

Empathy is our capacity to become aware of, understand and be sensitive towards the feelings, thoughts and experiences of other people, even when we do not share them. As the collective of thinkers and practitioners behind *The Empathetic Museum* (2018) argues:

> Just as an empathetic individual resonates with the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of another group or person, an empathetic museum is so connected with its community that it is keenly aware of its values, needs, and challenges.

For some, the idea that museums might take a stand on a contested topic is incompatible with creating a genuine space for dialogue and debate. I would argue, however, that the use of empathy skills might be the answer to this apparent paradox.

Museums can welcome the free exchange of ideas through respectful dialogue and, at the same time, articulate their own position, based on their research, as well as their principles and values. Museums must acknowledge that not everybody thinks and feels the same way about certain issues and seek to position themselves as a space where these issues may be discussed. This requires museums to clearly acknowledge differences in opinion and to resist arrogantly defending the righteousness of their own. It means that they will actively seek to involve and welcome to the debate people with opposing views. Finally, it means that they will also acknowledge their limits and will not attempt to venture into areas that are beyond their field of knowledge without involving other specialists.

Considering the specific question of migrants and refugees, museums can create spaces with the possibility of meeting 'the other,' seeing beyond labels and stereotypes. These encounters with real people can open up dialogue, tolerance and respect; they can create possibilities for realising that there are things that unite us as well as differences between us.

In these conversations, we may find that we have space to be more open and less defensive than we might otherwise be. We are giving our time and attention to something larger than ourselves. In that moment of connection with the wider world, we might find the generosity to consider the experiences, ideas, opinions and feelings of others a little more carefully.

(Baird 2017)

Taking a stand: beyond the comfortable truths

In 2016 and 2017, we saw numerous political campaigns across Europe and the US aimed at exploiting fear and ignorance through processes of othering. In the context of the migrant and refugee crisis, this kind of political exploitation has resulted in a radically negative transformation of our societies, with rising levels of hate speech and hate crimes.

Moments of crisis, such as this, require us to listen better and to do some self-reflection too. It becomes increasingly important for museums to be clear about who they are—to state what they stand for (through explicit expressions of mission and values)—and, importantly, to work in accordance with these statements.

Taking a stand in the museum field starts by creating the space for fertile dialogue. Museums are part of every country's cultural and educational infrastructure. By promoting knowledge, dialogue and critical thinking, they contribute to the education and engagement of politically aware and active citizens. In moments of political, social and moral crisis, the quality of our democracy depends on the active involvement of citizens. Museums may be places where one comes across and reflects on more than just the comfortable truths; places which acknowledge the existence of different views and where these views may be discussed and alternatives sought.

There are also occasions, though, where taking a stand requires museums to not only create spaces for dialogue but to actively participate, presenting and defending their own views and principles. Can this alienate some people? Perhaps, but maybe not as many as we might think. A growing number of museums are finding ways to take forward this work respectfully, with a sense of responsibility and democratic duty, and, also, with a sense of humour. They are actively participating in difficult discussions and finding ways to engage new and existing audiences and deepen their relationship with them.

No country can be said to have a perfect democracy, but the quality of democracy differs from place to place. Civic actions (or non-actions) are revealing of that quality and this includes the actions that museums take. It has been a great lesson watching some US museums act for social justice within their country's democratic system. Very often, when our investigation, or values, do not support a certain mainstream partisan campaign or the positions of a head of state, we choose to exercise a kind of self-censorship and look for refuge in neutrality, afraid of being seen as serving a political (partisan) agenda, upsetting a minister, losing funding or even our jobs.

Many museum professionals have also expressed concerns regarding the people who might feel unwelcome or even threatened by museums which take a stand. Museums must be equally concerned, though, with those people—members of ethnic and religious groups, minorities, journalists, academics, judges, intellectuals—who are being attacked and vilified by irresponsible politicians and media. If we are worried about the risk of alienating some people who do not wish to engage in dialogue with us, we should also be worried about the greater risk of offending and becoming irrelevant to many others through our silences

or complicity in the myth of neutrality (Janes 2015). Are we willing to look back in some years' time and say that we did not do whatever we could, as citizens and as museum professionals, in order to help build a more humane, open and tolerant society, 'the most perfect version of society that we can imagine together' (Cullinan 2017)?

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5

ACCESS AS ACTIVISM

Bringing the museum to the people

Catherine Kudlick and Edward M. Luby

Introduction

Many museums today strongly embrace their role as places of ethical collections stewardship, active centers of learning, and as fulcrums of community engagement. Yet, when it comes to serving, representing, and hiring people with disabilities, many institutions are not fulfilling their potential to demonstrate leadership in the fields of accessibility and inclusion. Museums' capacity to impact both the lives of people with disabilities and to support broader changes in the ways in which disability is perceived is significant and largely untapped. Not only can anyone join the ranks of disabled people at any time but, in the United States alone, roughly 20% of the population is considered disabled (United States Census 2012). We argue here—on ethical, political, cultural, and financial grounds—for museums to move beyond approaches that rely on a limited, narrow idea of access, one shaped largely by compliance with the law. Instead, we call for more ambitious approaches that demonstrate a commitment to accessibility in all areas of museum operations, from architecture and exhibit design to curating content and personnel practices. Put another way, we ask what happens when we imagine the museum as being a place *for* and *of* people with disabilities.

In this chapter, we reflect on the development of an exhibit entitled *Patient No More: People with Disabilities Securing Civil Rights* (Plate 2) that opened in 2015 in Berkeley, California, a city long-associated with activism, and especially disability activism. The 4,000 square-foot modular exhibit was on display at the Ed Roberts Campus (ERC n.d.), an architecturally-innovative building opened to much acclaim four and a half years earlier. It resulted from substantial fundraising efforts and several leading San Francisco Bay Area disability organizations pooling resources to create a space where they could be housed near one another, after decades of relative isolation. Named to honor one of the founding members of the independent living movement and champion of disability rights in the 1970s and 1980s, the ERC offers a gathering place for the contemporary disability community, a community whose history has been rarely portrayed in any museum. Based on our experience of producing an exhibit about disability history where—in all regards— people with disabilities were placed front and center, we believe museum interactions with

disabled people can be re-cast to benefit everyone. We suggest that the simple act of making access for all central to the exhibit development process can be considered activist, as it requires museums to embody, act upon and seek to build external support for progressive values. In doing so, it harnesses the unique resources of museums to both serve and change perceptions of people with disabilities.

How museums view disability

Numerous studies indicate that visitors with disabilities have been largely overlooked by traditional museums. For example, in a 2012 study, people with disabilities were found to make up less than 7% of all adults attending performing arts events or visiting art museums or galleries (NEA 2012; American Association of Museums 2016). At the same time, it is only in recent years and in a relatively small number of institutions that exhibit themes exploring the experiences, perspectives and contributions of people with disabilities have begun to appear. In the majority of museums, representations of people with disabilities are either absent, skewed or stereotypical (Sandell and Dodd 2010). Moreover, despite many existing resources and advice regarding best practices, the incorporation of basic access features remains woefully limited in the majority of institutions (Art Beyond Sight 2017; NEA 2017; Smithsonian 2018a).

While museums today are places of learning and education, only a handful build in accessibility for visitors with disabilities beyond basic compliance with the law. A few high-profile (and well-funded) organizations such as the Museum of Modern Art (2017) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2017) have been recognized for their educational programs that serve people with disabilities. And while initiatives aimed at improving access across all aspects of museum operations are finally creating more inclusive environments—for example at the Smithsonian Museums (2018b), Boston Science Museum (Reich 2012) or the Australian Museum (2018)—they are rare.

Beyond these few examples, the majority of museums still struggle to offer basic services for disabled visitors and view them as a small (and costly) niche that needs to be appeased rather than as a group whose needs—if met—might benefit all visitors. As Kleege (2013) emphasizes, in the context of art museums that offer touch tours,

> There needs to be an expectation that the blind people on the tour have something to contribute to cultural knowledge beyond gratitude for this gift of inclusion . . . touch tours for the blind can become more than just a novelty or second-best solution, but a way to enlarge everyone's experience of art.

Museums predominantly conceive of visitors with disabilities in narrow and limiting ways, as a group whose needs must be accommodated, an approach which underscores the cultural and pragmatic separation of disabled people from museums at every level. Many museums do not employ specialists with expertise in creating access and, where such posts do exist, they can sometimes have a bias towards what they insist on calling 'special needs' as opposed to viewing people with disabilities as patrons worth reaching. Put another way, nearly all efforts related to bringing disability into museums are done *for* disabled people rather than *by* disabled people in leadership positions. Moreover, in the context of exhibit planning, when disabled people are included at all, they may have little or no influence until the end of the process when the design of an exhibit is set and changes linked to access

appear as both expensive and unwelcome intrusions. While employees with lived experience of disability would help to facilitate a richer engagement with the idea of access for everyone at the outset of a project, the idea of integrating disabled curators, designers, educators into projects remains a distant dream (Kleege 2018).

Ultimately then, *Patient No More* sought to push approaches to museum-making beyond a narrow focus on legal compliance and service provision to consider disability as an opportunity for enriching the experience of visiting an exhibit for everyone. This entailed more than challenging museums to expand their mission statements to include disability diversity; it meant working in substantive ways with disabled communities to demonstrate how accessibility can be a radically inclusive, even subversive act.

By enfranchising and empowering disabled people, and by moving the exhibit development process outside the walls of the museum, *Patient No More* highlighted the limitations of traditional museums and, in the context of disability, the social inequalities built into the museum model itself were illuminated. At the same time, a pathway forward for a new, more activist museum was created: one that not only seeks to enlighten and engage, but that uses meticulously researched interpretation and innovative exhibit design to effect social change for people with disabilities.

Below, we briefly describe *Patient No More*, outline some challenges and opportunities, and analyze the exhibit experience to offer some conclusions about disability, activism, and museums today.

Patient No More conception and story

Patient No More began as an effort to put a small organization at San Francisco State University on the map. Named to honor scholar-activist Paul K. Longmore who died unexpectedly, the Institute on Disability was at a crossroads when the newly-hired director (Catherine Kudlick) came up with the idea of an audacious public history exhibit to promote the Institute's new aim of creating a society where everyone believes the world is better because of disabled people. Joined by a freelance curator/designer, the small team enjoyed a larger reach by building partnerships with faculty and students from departments across the university.

Opening on the 25th anniversary of the landmark Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the exhibit tells the story of how, in 1977, over one hundred people with disabilities and their allies occupied one of the most important government locations in California, San Francisco's Federal Building, for nearly a month. The protest, still the longest non-violent occupation of a federal building in United States history, helped pave the way for passing the ADA thirteen years later, and is a key but overlooked event, not just for disability rights but in American history more broadly.

This little known story of a major protest in San Francisco that changed US history is one whose telling gives people with disabilities a rare sense of pride. The extraordinary event began in 1973 when the US government had signed into law a Rehabilitation Act that included a clause—Section 504—that had passed without controversy: it was illegal for any federally-funded programs or facilities such as hospitals, schools, post offices, and government agencies to discriminate against disabled people. To take effect, the regulations, which detailed how the law would be implemented, required one final signature from a top government official. Understanding the implications, disability activists began pushing

through public legal channels as well as informally behind the scenes. After four years of being rebuffed by several administrations, activists finally snapped and on 5 April 1977, a diverse coalition of American people with disabilities and their allies protested at ten major federal buildings across the United States. In two places they managed to get inside and stay overnight but, in most cases, they were starved out.

In San Francisco, things were different. Local organizers had built relationships with a broad range of politicians and grassroots groups so that within hours over one hundred protesters—many who had never slept away from home before—entered San Francisco's Federal Building with only the clothes on their backs. Moved by the action, powerful groups like the Black Panther Party played a key role by bringing in hot meals for all the occupiers who included a disabled Party member and his care-attendant. Thanks to this support, ongoing protests outside, and savvy use of media, occupiers left the building triumphant on 30 April 1977, having secured the official signature that allowed the Section 504 anti-discrimination regulations to become an enforceable law. The camaraderie among such a wide range of protesters would fuel the creation of a national US disability rights movement.

For the *Patient No More* team, the untold story of such an important historical event provided a compelling local angle with far-reaching implications. It offered another perspective on better-known activists and organizations. It also asked everyday visitors to consider what it was like to live in such a 'city within a city' day after day, while opening up fascinating questions about why the protest succeeded, how the media responded, what protesters learned, and how it impacts today's world.

The story of the 504 Occupation also offered an unusual entrée into 'disability 101' for a population largely unaware that disabled people even have a history. Despite considerable progress in laws and scholarship over the past generation, most still understand disability exclusively in terms of physiology and biology. The title was a play on words to underscore new thinking: *Patient No More* pushed visitors to consider people with disabilities outside of medical settings while at the same time drawing attention to how long activists had waited to demand basic civil rights.

Challenges and opportunities

The team joked about defining 'audacity' as not being smart enough to turn back before it is too late. *Patient No More* faced challenges that would be familiar in many exhibit contexts: reaching a wide audience with text that was both clear and not too simple; choosing eye-catching photos that reflected diversity without resorting to stereotypes; and finding ways to make the exhibit three-dimensional and engaging, all with limited resources. When it came to disability, there was the nuts and bolts of meeting basic ADA regulations as well as educating a wider public unaware that it needed to be educated at all.

The team chose to display *Patient No More* at the Ed Roberts Campus (ERC), a private, cooperatively-owned community center that houses a number of rights organizations and disability service-providers. The space has been controversial; some community activists find it elitist, arguing that the millions of dollars donated to a building could have been put to better use by helping the vast majority of people with disabilities who live in poverty and lack basic services.

Still, there were real advantages, beginning with the fact that the owners of the centrally-located building offered the space to the Longmore Institute free of charge and visitors did not have to pay an admission fee, a barrier for many low-income disabled people at traditional museums. For its six-month run the exhibit helped to solidify a relationship between the building and the community by bringing in more people, which would have the unintended benefit of educating a broader public about the ERC's purpose and connections to history.

While portable and temporary, *Patient No More* was different from a touring exhibit because it was designed around the space of a unique building. The daunting, exciting canvas of the ERC designed by Leddy Maytum Stacy Architects shaped every decision. Located across the bay from San Francisco in Berkeley, the ERC opened in late 2010 as a building celebrated for its embrace of universal design and respected within the disability world as an outstanding example of physical access that activists had, for many years, been fighting for. Following the philosophy of 'build it in, don't bolt it on,' architects with and without disabilities had worked in partnership with local communities to anticipate the full array of different people with disabilities who would visit, from wheelchair riders to blind and deaf people to autistics to people who live with multiple disabilities such as blind wheelchair users. This included a giant central ramp where two wheelchair riders could ride side-by-side (Figure 5.1), different floor textures for easy visual and tactile orientation, natural light, a fountain to provide audible location cues, spacious restroom stalls, automatic doors, and more. It is located right above a busy rail station, which made it easily accessible on public transit.

As a non-traditional museum-like space, the ERC had both advantages and disadvantages. Certainly, it offered a different kind of experience, one where visitors—predominantly people with disabilities—came to the museum on their terms rather than arriving at a museum with the hope of being accommodated. Put another way, the location meant that *Patient No More* could reach publics that might otherwise feel excluded. Moreover, having

FIGURE 5.1 Large central ramp that easily fits two wheelchair riders side by side and that was integrated into the design of *Patient No More* in the lobby of the Ed Roberts Campus. Photograph by Fran Osborne.

the exhibit at the ERC presented the opportunity to educate everyone about a truly radical story—from disability service providers to the companies unrelated to disability rights housed there and the thousands of oblivious commuters who passed through each day.

Some built-in constraints also needed to be considered. The ERC has an open, fluid layout, numerous possible entrances and a limited number of electrical outlets. The need to easily move the exhibit in and out for the numerous public events regularly held in the space added yet another layer of complexity, and the Longmore Institute had limited funds. Meeting these fascinating challenges by building them into the process and design from the outset ultimately introduced opportunities to create a different kind of public history exhibit and even to introduce elements of playfulness for visitors.

In some ways, the team approached the task much like the enterprising disabled person faced with an environment designed with other body types in mind. We designed the exhibit to embrace the difficulties of the ERC, turning certain liabilities into assets. For example, the need to easily move the exhibit in and out led to creating kiosks with casters that made installation and storage relatively easy. The stations were clustered around the few power outlets, connected by 'power arches' to bring electricity to ones further away, an effective, if imperfect work-around that made moving the exhibit in and out much easier.

The team approached accessibility as an integral, prominent part of the design concept. For example, after speaking with Braille readers, our team understood that the raised dots would only be useful if they were always in the same location. (Most exhibit designers, if they even consider Braille, tend to think of it in visual rather than in spatial and tactile terms; too often they put Braille labels where they look best or where they will not 'get in the way.') The exhibit team turned this design challenge into a central feature that defined how elements would fit, anchored by a 'Braille rail' that was in the same central place on each exhibit panel. Each kiosk was planned so that the rail became a unifying design feature that helped organize the distribution of images and text above and below it. The Braille rail had a depth of approximately 15cm which is half a page of Braille text and meant that the resulting casing could hide the digital control unit and wires that powered video monitors.

One especially innovative and popular feature included adding additional Braille text to the rail that was not present in the printed exhibit text. This included asides to Braille readers and questions that they could ask to engage sighted visitors that would lead both to have a deeper appreciation of what was happening in certain photographs. Put another way, the Braille text was liberated from being a mere transcription of the printed text to become a device that challenged the inequities normally present in exhibition design and stimulated dialogue between visitors. This practice, we suggest, is a manifestation of the activist principles underlying the broader project and one that should inspire future experimentation.

A further design challenge was the building's multiple entrances. Attempting to transform this liability into an asset, the team worked diligently to develop a story told through themes rather than chronology. In theory, this meant that each visitor or group could begin at any point and approach the story in a way that made intuitive sense to them or even to make multiple passes to gain a new perspective each time, while accommodating a variety of non-linear learning styles. In practice, however, some visitors complained about the difficulty of following the story and often requested assistance from members of the building staff for orientation.

A spirit of accessibility and playfulness influenced the exhibit's interactive features. These included two stand-alone exhibit elements. One invited people to take selfies with a whiteboard where they wrote what makes them 'patient no more' today, while a parallel element featured a device which could record visitors' slogans if they wanted to express themselves through voice rather than writing. Everything posted on social media was captioned and audio described so everyone had access to what visitors wanted to say. These access features had the additional benefit of creating searchable metadata. Additionally, an old payphone (representing the challenges occupiers faced communicating in the pre-mobile world) had been gutted and re-wired to have different audio tracks of speeches and protest songs, all fluidly signed by an interpreter who specialized in poetry, adding yet another striking visual feature to the exhibit.

As a hotbed of disability rights and home of the 504 Occupation, the San Francisco Bay Area has high expectations when it comes to access and inclusion, to the point that these very terms have been called into question as being too vague (Hamraie 2016). The team built in accountability to many parts of the process, holding both formal 'charettes' with community members and informal conversations with people passing through the ERC. Faculty brought their students to the future exhibit site to listen as random visitors argued and debated various prototypes. In some cases, the attempts to create access conflicted with one another, such as the desire to reach blind visitors with embedded audio description, which created sensory overload for other visitors. Indeed, until hours before the exhibit opened, the team struggled with the issue of 'competing accommodations,' for example, when a wheelchair user asked about what she found to be the seemingly pointless countertops running through the entire exhibit, which prompted the addition of the words 'Braille rail' (in print and Braille) for each kiosk. While understanding that a disability utopia would never exist, and that it would be impossible to meet every access need, the team made every effort to strive for balance and to be transparent about the challenges and process.

To enhance access still further, the team came up with a pared-down 'traveling' exhibit and an online version of *Patient No More*. Both sought to bring the 504 story to people who because of distance, disability, or both could not travel to the Ed Roberts Campus in Berkeley. Both told the same story, and both built in multiple forms of access such as captioning, American Sign Language, Braille, and alt-tags for photographs.

Impact and legacy

A useful framework for thinking about the utility and impact of *Patient No More* is what Bryony Onciul calls the 'engagement zone.' In a study of museum efforts to interact, engage, and work with community groups, she builds on the work of James Clifford (1997) to define the engagement zone as:

> a physical and conceptual space in which participants interact. It is created when individuals from different groups enter into engagement and closed when those participants cease engaging ... They are semiprivate, semipublic spaces where on-stage and off-stage culture can be shared and discussed and knowledge can be interpreted and translated to enable understanding ...
>
> *(Onciul 2013: 84)*

Although Onciul analyzes community engagement explicitly in museums and cultural heritage sites that work with Indigenous groups in the context of collections, her work provides important insights for museum interactions with the disability community which, like Indigenous groups, has much internal diversity, a shared cultural experience, and concerns about if and how they are represented in museum collections and in exhibitions.

Onciul notes that 'power ebbs and flows' within engagement zones that are 'continually being claimed, negotiated, and exchanged,' and that 'conflict, compromise, and consensus can occur' (ibid.: 84). Furthermore, 'participants continually negotiate the rules of exchange,' and while expertise and hierarchy can be challenged within the zone, engagement zones enable the crossing of boundaries between 'insider' and 'outsider.' Finally, although power is fluid within engagement zones, structural inequalities influence interactions, especially in the case of Indigenous groups, which are heavily disadvantaged in society, according to multiple measures. And while museums hold the majority of power as cultural authorities and hosts to community groups, Indigenous groups have power and agency to negotiate what they want in interactions from museums because museums seek information held within the community.

Although not a perfect analogy, in part because of the legacy of colonialism that underpins interactions between museums and Indigenous groups, one of the main products of engagement zones that Onciul analyzes is jointly-produced exhibits. These exhibits shape representation and may signal community approval, Onciul argues, but much about their outcome depends on interactions within the engagement zone. If museum interactions with groups are poorly managed, for example, groups may perceive efforts as tokenistic. Moreover, if groups are not listened to, power is not shared, or advice is not heeded, engagement can be detrimental, with the resulting exhibitions possessing 'no more validity, integrity, or community approval than if the community had been excluded' (ibid.: 90).

During the run of *Patient No More*, the ERC had many features of an engagement zone described above. That members of the Longmore Institute team never considered trying to mount their exhibit in a traditional museum space is telling: such spaces were assumed to be off-limits to something that was marginal, small-scale, and rooted in a story that might seem too radical for a traditional venue. Put another way, because of how museums are understood today, the team naturally, if unknowingly, gravitated to creating an engagement zone of its own, one that was of, by, and for the communities it hoped to engage.

Moreover, because the Longmore Institute team was relatively new, was outside the world of formal museums, and had extensive connections within Bay Area disability communities, power relations were far more equal than would have been the case in a traditional museum. That said, the director and associate director at the Longmore Institute tried to remain mindful of the relative privileges they enjoyed compared with many of the 504 participants and visitors to the ERC who tended to be from poorer communities.

Patient No More succeeded in part because the Longmore Institute team members created a space outside the walls of a museum that was owned by the community, a place for sharing ideas, one where exhibit development could involve the diversity of people with disabilities. The team did not strive to accommodate people with disabilities as more traditional museums might wish to do, but instead to bring the messiness of the disability experience front and center. The exhibit development team was open and not limited by rules and convention, a fact that came through in everything from 1–1 conversations to community forums. Together the team members created a sense of purpose and

engagement that made it possible to raise hard questions and challenge orthodoxies that led to collective compromises.

New activisms for new museums

The experience of *Patient No More* was activist on a number of levels. Most immediately, it brought disability into the wider conversation about broadening content and visitors, while later raising questions about what a museum that truly served a major stakeholder group, people with disabilities, would look like. The subject of the 504 Occupation also solidified the connection between this underrepresented minority and the value of discovering an activist past for fighting internalized shame and external prejudice.

The potential impact is enormous. As Sandell and Dodd (2010: 3) argue, cultural representations about disability, which have been predominantly negative and damaging, have not only shaped 'public policy, approaches to education, employment and welfare [and] framed interactions between disabled and non-disabled people' but have also 'provided the justification for continuing forms of prejudice, discrimination and oppression.' Seen in this context, the activist principles in developing *Patient No More* meant increasing awareness among both disabled and non-disabled people about civil rights at a time when most think of disability as a purely medical issue rather than as one shaped by—and informing—politics, society, and culture.

At the same time, while recovering an activist past and creating opportunities for people with disabilities to shape their representation in a museum setting are critically important, the success of *Patient No More* also heralded the creation of what may be a new and more activist exhibition development process, one where museums place people with disabilities at the center. *Patient No More* offers museums a pathway for creating physical and conceptual spaces for people with disabilities to truly engage in the exhibition development process, so that essential contributions in content, design, interpretation and outreach can be made. Such contributions not only effect change for a wide range of people with disabilities who experience museum exhibits, but also address the social inequality they can face when visiting a museum. Ultimately, integrating the needs and perspectives of people with disabilities into processes of exhibition design produces more enriching exhibits for everyone.

As the one minority that anyone can join at any time, disability is both deeply individual and universal, not to mention overlapping with all forms of difference. This centrality of disability meant access would be part of the exhibit design process itself, that it would be 'built in rather than bolted on.' Such close attention to accessibility from the beginning and at every level challenges the very foundations of museum structures and practices.

More radical still, *Patient No More* and the ERC just might be pointing to a new kind of museum experience. The engagement zone brought new visitors into new spaces to introduce new ideas precisely because they set something up outside of places widely considered to be elite and off-limits. While it can be distressing for museums to realize that they are considered irrelevant, dismissive, and inflexible by some communities, it is important to note that the trusted institutions are also capable of great social change in relatively short periods of time.

Further, as suggested by the engagement zone, an experiment like *Patient No More* broke down barriers between insiders and outsiders. Expertise proved a fluid, context-based

concept as the exhibit team worked with new information often simply by sitting in the ERC space to engage with random visitors. At the same time, they sought out advice from people with deep lived experience of disability to determine their content and frame its presentation. To think of people with disabilities as experts, to compensate them for their expertise while approaching them as professionals throughout such a process is perhaps activism in its purest form.

Yet, the Longmore team did not simply bend to every desire of the communities they hoped to serve. Throughout the process of researching and developing the exhibit, numerous differences of opinion surfaced. Realizing that it would be impossible to accommodate everyone, the team did its best to model transparency as well as maintain quality and rigor in establishing a comprehensive historical foundation that integrated the concerns and political issues of a variety of people with disabilities. Thus, the meticulous archival research and fact-checking, as well as careful academic thinking that lay behind every image and every word, was bolstered by ongoing consultation and prototyping with a team of disabled people. For the museum world, this subtle form of activism suggests that political engagement need not undermine an organization's commitment to balance and integrity.

For the disability world, a high-quality exhibit that is accessible and thought-provoking combats a problem that has dogged disabled people for generations: being seen as second-class. When not celebrated as extraordinary and rare, the achievements of people with disabilities have often been minimized as either not of their doing or of inferior quality. A solidly-researched, well-told, beautiful exhibit like *Patient No More* actively battled such stereotypes, as many visitor responses made clear. In the context of disabled people's accomplishments, anything that promotes something that is rigorous, thoughtful, and setting high standards is subtle, paradigm-shifting activism.

Ultimately, we believe that the lessons from *Patient No More* can and should be applied to any exhibit. A more activist exhibition development process in museums recognizes that the nearly 1 in 5 people with disabilities expands to encompass an even larger portion of museum visitors when taking friends and family into account, not to mention potential donors who tend to be adults with age-related disabilities. This means reaching a large, perhaps untapped pool of new visitors through built-in forms of access that can expand the museum experience regardless of the topic. Perhaps most significantly, we suggest that seeing the museum as a place *for* and *of* people with disabilities can create experiences that are not only accessible for all, but also powerful settings for challenging deep-seated, negative perceptions.

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6

FOSSIL FUEL SPONSORSHIP AND THE CONTESTED MUSEUM

Agency, accountability and arts activism

Paula Serafini and Chris Garrard

The oil company BP (formerly British Petroleum) is one of Britain's most controversial sponsors of the arts, currently sponsoring cultural institutions such as the National Portrait Gallery, the Royal Opera House, the Royal Shakespeare Company and the British Museum. In May 2016, Art Not Oil, a coalition of campaign groups that opposes oil sponsorship of the arts, published a report (Art Not Oil 2016) exposing BP's influence over the institutions it sponsors, from its input into curatorial decision-making and event planning, to its role in managing anti-BP protests. The report also highlighted BP's sponsorship of exhibitions at the British Museum that have involved close collaboration with governments and embassies of countries such as Australia, Mexico and Egypt—all countries where BP has strategic business interests.

In addition to this report, which emerged from multiple information requests made to several BP-sponsored cultural institutions that are subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) during 2015–2016, the activist theatre troupe *BP or not BP?* held a series of performance protest actions at the British Museum targeting the museum's sponsorship by BP. The group, which is also part of Art Not Oil, had been staging actions at the British Museum since 2012, in order to protest a relationship that the group deemed unethical because of the sponsor's contribution to climate change and its impacts on the environment.[1] These protests have increasingly moved from a message focused upon fossil fuels, climate change and the ethics of the Museum's fundraising, to also incorporating issues of colonialism and human rights. These relate not only to BP's operations in the Global South, but also to the wider ethical stance of the Museum, in light of its imperial and colonial legacy, controversy around the ownership of its artefacts, and its position as a symbol of the status quo in contemporary Britain.

Considering the overlapping ethical concerns relating to BP's sponsorship and the British Museum's practices more broadly, this chapter combines an analysis of data gathered as a result of multiple FOIA requests to the British Museum with ethnographic research on the interventions carried out by campaigners targeting BP's sponsorship. It examines the relationships between the different parties involved in BP-sponsored exhibitions at the British Museum, from the institution's director to its sponsor, and from so-called source communities to the activists campaigning against BP.[2]

The issues of ethics and accountability are approached in relation to the business activity of fossil fuel companies, the structures and practices of the museum, and the creative interventions of *BP or not BP?* with the intention of moving beyond the obvious questions of ethics in corporate social responsibility and into a wider debate that includes the role and responsibility of cultural institutions and environmental activists in a time of climate and social crisis. We analyse how an acknowledgement of the complexities of the power relations between these actors has influenced the campaign against BP's sponsorship of the arts, shifting the narrative from a more targeted approach to one that is culturally situated and responds to concerns from other involved actors.

The British Museum's *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation* exhibition

It was during the British Museum's *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation* exhibition, taking place in 2015, that these complexities became most apparent, and where both the Museum and activists needed to exercise careful reflection upon their working processes. As part of BP's established five-year sponsorship of the British Museum's temporary exhibitions programme, the company had been assigned as the title sponsor of the *Indigenous Australia* exhibition, which would accordingly be referred to as 'The BP Exhibition.' In the Museum's words (The British Museum 2015), the exhibition explored 'the special relationship that Indigenous Australians have with land and sea' and presented a 'unique narrative exploring the complex history of Indigenous Australia from Captain Cook's landing in 1770 up to the present day.'[3] The event of the exhibition returned the spotlight to long-standing demands for the repatriation of objects to Aboriginal communities in Australia (Daley 2015). The exhibition also occurred at a time when BP was exploring oil drilling options in the Great Australian Bight.

Given the exhibition's direct sponsorship from BP, it represented a logical campaign target for the interventions of the activist theatre group *BP or not BP?* in terms of seeking to undermine the social legitimacy that BP derives from its association with the Museum which, in turn, contributes to the company's so-called 'social license to operate'—a tacit consent from the public and wider society to the company's business practices. However, in this case, BP also stood to gain from an association with a form of cultural diplomacy embodied in the Museum's recognition of Indigenous cultures, while the company itself possesses a problematic relationship with many Indigenous communities—the impacts of the extractive industries on Australian Aboriginal communities are well documented (Korff 2017). By extension, it would be necessary for activists to adopt an intersectional approach in developing an intervention which problematised the association of a company formerly known as *British* Petroleum and once part of the British state, with an exhibition which reflects upon the legacy of British colonialism.

BP or not BP?'s first performance intervention in response to the *Indigenous Australia* exhibition took place on 21 April 2015, coinciding with a private press preview of the exhibition that garnered significant media interest. Dressed in black and white striped shirts and eye masks, the performers portrayed a parody of a group of robbers, which symbolised the colonial legacy of theft and appropriation of Aboriginal peoples' objects, lands and resources (Plate 3). In addition to holding two Aboriginal flags, the performers unfurled a banner with the words 'Stolen Land, Stolen Culture, Stolen Climate', forging a connection between the ongoing struggle for Aboriginal land rights, campaigns for the repatriation of

Aboriginal peoples' artefacts from the British Museum, and how climate change is adversely impacting Indigenous Australians and Torres Strait Islanders. The group's wider public messaging also highlighted how companies such as BP are directly engaged in fossil fuel extraction from Indigenous peoples' lands and waters. On 19 July 2015, *BP or not BP?* once again took over the Great Court at the British Museum for their second performance intervention in relation to *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation*. This performance began with the re-enactment of an oil spill in the museum's Great Court. A mobile oil rig was brought into the museum and quickly assembled, and then two performers dressed in oil worker attire began drilling. As they drilled, a choir made drilling noises that became increasingly loud, until suddenly an 'explosion' occurred, and an oil spill made of shiny black fabric and paper resembling oil blobs took over the Great Court.

Following the oil spill, the oil workers approached the British Museum director, played by a performer seated on a chair nearby. As they tried to explain the consequences of the spill to the Museum director, a BP character approached and covered the director's eyes and ears, leaving the oil workers' concerns unheard. Following this, a number of characters entered the scene. A group of animals slowly walked towards the oil spill and became entrapped by the oil, and the BP character diverted the Museum director's sight from the scene. At one point, BP offered the Museum director a cup of tea filled with oil (Figure 6.1), which the director then drank, and oil dripped from her mouth. A climate scientist tried to give the director evidence of the need to keep current reserves of oil in the ground, but BP seduced the director by showering her with money.

The focus of the performance shifted when a colonial explorer entered the scene, carrying objects for the British Museum's collection. He opened a book—an official catalogue from the exhibition—and began to show the director 'all the wonderful artefacts' he had brought back from Australia, without consent from the owners. At this point, a performer playing the part of an enraged audience member interrupted their interaction. She confronted the colonial explorer and exposed some of the realities of colonialism in Australia, addressing the contradictions and severe problems with BP sponsoring the exhibition. Furthermore, she explained how the British Museum is exhibiting artefacts that have been stolen from Aboriginal peoples in Australia, who have been fighting for the return of those objects.

The performance was followed by speeches from members of *BP or not BP?* who expanded upon the ideas that the performance aimed to convey, the sharing of stories about climate change, and the reading aloud of statements by representatives of Aboriginal communities and activists such as Tony Birch, who were consulted during the process of developing the performance. In addition, the banner created for the first intervention, 'Stolen Land, Stolen Culture, Stolen Climate', was unfurled, and the general public was then invited to sign it with solidarity messages, as it would later be sent to activists in Australia.

This performance raises a number of issues linked to the ethics of activism, and to the politics of introducing the perspectives of frontline communities into protest actions, particularly Indigenous communities and those in the Global South at the forefront of struggles over land, environment and culture. Given that *BP or not BP?* is a group of predominantly white, middle class British activists based in the UK, these issues were particularly relevant. In the past few years, *BP or not BP?* has increased its engagement with frontline communities who have been impacted by BP's activity in different parts of the world, both in terms of consultation and the co-development of actions, and through

FIGURE 6.1   Members of *BP or not BP?* perform as BP and the British Museum director during the BP exhibition, *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation*.
Photograph by Hugh Warwick.

solidarity work with groups affected by BP, the oil industry, and climate change. But there are a number of challenges that arise with this pursuit.

First, frontline community voices are not homogenous. Different people and communities from the same area might have very contrasting views on a conflict, with differing demands and approaches to the same issue. In the case of the *Indigenous Australia* exhibition, for instance, Aboriginal Australian artists and curators had been involved in the planning of

the exhibition. This meant that *BP or not BP?*'s solidarity work with particular individuals, groups and communities in Australia, who were fighting for the repatriation of objects and against extractive projects, could potentially interfere with the creative work and cultural diplomacy of other Aboriginal communities who were actively liaising with the British Museum.

Second, there is the important question of how to bring the voices and perspectives of frontline communities into a contested, cultural space that is physically removed from some of the key issues at stake. How can activists and campaigners make those perspectives present and visible without allowing their own decisions on logistical and aesthetic issues to dictate the representation of others? In the case of the above-mentioned performance, different members of *BP or not BP?* read quotes written by activists and community leaders in Australia. Other options discussed during the action planning process included presenting these quotes with the use of images, or even just text on placards. In performances of this nature, activists are always conditioned by factors such as the physical aspects of the space (e.g. poor acoustics), a restricted budget, the inability to bring in elaborate props, and other logistical issues that go beyond political and artistic objectives. However, it is still important to consider that, much like the curatorial choices of a museum, any decisions made around the presentation and representation of frontline communities, be these intentional or a result of material conditions, will affect how those voices are received by the public in that space and beyond (taking into account the representation of these actions in the press and on social media also).

The third issue in relation to working with frontline communities, and contributing to the visibility of their stories, is that of constructing collective narratives. While they often incorporate issues of colonialism, workers' rights, and museum practice into their performances, *BP or not BP?*'s primary objective is to end BP's sponsorship of the British Museum. When working with frontline communities, however, the interests of these communities are often not BP's sponsorship deal specifically, but rather environmental impacts, the destruction of livelihoods, and human rights violations, to name a few. The tough question that emerges for *BP or not BP?* but applies to campaign groups more broadly is, therefore: how far are we able to digress from our own central narrative to incorporate other people's struggles and priorities, without compromising our specific goals?

On previous occasions, *BP or not BP?* was identified by its opposition to BP's sponsorship. However, in the context of the *Indigenous Australia* exhibition, the members of *BP or not BP?* took up a new position which was simultaneously in opposition to, and in parallel with, the Museum—both were actors in a relative position of power seeking to establish relationships with Aboriginal communities on a basis of trust and mutual benefit. It is important to recognise that, while both the Museum and the activists might, on some level, have 'good' motives, both sought to open channels of dialogue with motives that were predetermined. The key question, when there is an attempt to establish a genuine relationship of trust, is whether those motives are made clear for an informed judgment to be made by the recipients, in this case Aboriginal communities in Australia, as to whether collaborative working will be of mutual benefit.

The Museums Association, the professional membership body for museums and galleries in the UK, notes in its Code of Ethics that museums are placed in 'an important position of trust in relation to ... source communities' and 'must make sound ethical judgments in all areas of work in order to maintain this trust' (Museums Association 2015: 2). Of significance here is

how different forms of knowledge were exchanged and contrasting forms of dialogue and consultation took place between different parties. Those parties bear certain ethical responsibilities in relation to one another, in some cases formally by agreed policies or codes of ethics which are to be enforced, and in others informally, by adhering to certain principles such as those of anti-oppression or decolonisation.

Ethical accountability and the Freedom of Information Act

Alongside the interventions of *BP or not BP?* members of the Art Not Oil coalition made a series of requests to the British Museum under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 which, in the UK, provides public access to certain information recorded and held by public authorities. Communications between BP and the Museum, and other documents related to BP's involvement in the exhibition, were requested with the intention of investigating the underlying motivations of the sponsor, as well as to understand whether BP had sought to influence the Museum in any way that would privilege its interests over those of so-called source communities.[4]

The Museum disclosed various pieces of information under the Freedom of Information Act concerning the *Indigenous Australia* exhibition which, when taken as a whole, suggested a contrast between its sensitivity to the needs of source communities and to those of its corporate sponsors. In one email (dated 24 July 2014) from a member of staff at the British Museum, sent to whom appears to be BP's Head of Arts & Culture, it is emphasised that the Museum's consultation process with Aboriginal communities was 'the cornerstone of the whole project and [the exhibition] would not have been thinkable had it not been a major part of the process'. In this case, the knowledge of Aboriginal peoples was given due emphasis alongside the ownership of the narratives around that knowledge. However, within the same email it was highlighted to BP that it might still be possible to additionally sponsor the exhibition when it tours to the National Museum of Australia.

The significance of this statement is apparent when placed in a broader context. At the time, BP intended to drill exploratory oil wells in the Great Australian Bight and those plans were subsequently challenged by an elder of the Mirning people, Bunna Lawrie, alongside members of the wider environmental movement. Had plans for sponsoring the second display of the exhibition gone ahead, BP's submission of a drilling plan to the Australian National Offshore Petroleum Safety and Environmental Management Authority would have been bookended by the two exhibitions. While BP did not ultimately sponsor the second leg of the exhibition, its interest speaks to its wider motivations for sponsoring the project as a whole.

The Museum's willingness to assist BP when its plans were in the public domain suggests that it accepts that corporate sponsorship in general involves, to some extent, a tacit support for the sponsor's strategic business interests. This was also reflected in the slides of a marketing presentation on the exhibition that were disclosed as part of the FOIA request, where the introductory slide listed promoting 'the ongoing relationship between BP and the museum' as the primary marketing objective.

As part of its FOIA requests to the Museum, Art Not Oil inquired whether those Aboriginal communities consulted during the planning stage of the exhibition were informed that BP would be the sponsor. In response, the Museum confirmed that the majority had not been informed and consent was only sought from those whose objects

would appear on promotional materials, as the Museum's consultative process with communities had been completed prior to the sponsorship being confirmed. A separate email, also disclosed under the Freedom of Information Act, revealed BP's approval being sought for the purchase of a painting from the Spinifex community, as the sponsor's funds were to be reallocated from their original purpose of commissioning a new piece to purchasing existing artwork. This highlighted a clear hierarchy of interests, with the Museum's consultation with source communities on BP sponsorship below its consultation with BP on matters related to the exhibition.

The British Museum also disclosed a document prepared in advance of the exhibition's press launch which specified pre-scripted answers to journalists' questions. It included answers to be given by curators and apparently the Museum's then director, Neil MacGregor (although his name is redacted in the document), as well as a representative of BP. Among the anticipated questions were several that directly addressed ethical concerns relating to BP sponsorship: 'Surely it is unethical for an oil company to sponsor the arts?' and 'How do you justify taking money from an organisation that has caused an environmental and social disaster of this magnitude?' (seemingly referring to BP's Gulf of Mexico oil spill). The proposed answers to these questions and several others do not comment upon the ethical concerns raised, but instead emphasise BP's financial contribution to the museum and other cultural institutions. This unifying of messaging again suggests a tacit acceptance of the sponsor's strategic business interests over and above addressing any ethical concerns that might be raised about BP's sponsorship in a public forum (Holtaway 2015).

The museum as a contested space

Museums have long been understood to be 'both an institution of the state (representative) and of the public (of the people). With this also comes an assumption that the museum is a public space for the public, of the public' (Barrett 2011: 6). It follows that 'as important institutions of the public sphere, museums need to engage in complex negotiations with funding bodies, interest groups, benefactors and their profession if they are to be effective and relevant' (ibid.: 43). These relationships need to be framed within the context of a responsible and ethical museum practice that is accountable to the public it serves.

The field of museum ethics is centred on the idea of consensus among professionals with regard to what is ethical in museum practice. However, the idea of professional consensus, argue Marstine, Bauer and Haines, 'lacks the theoretical engagement, dynamism, and diversity to deal substantively with the complex and shifting terrain that museums face today' (2013: xvii). This raises the question of who should be involved in defining what is ethical in museum practice. Given the position of museums as public institutions, and as physical and discursive spaces in the public sphere (Barrett 2011), museums are ultimately accountable to their publics. Accountability to the UK public is indeed intrinsic to the idea of public museums and galleries in the UK, as they rely largely on public funds.

It is also necessary to expand on the idea of the public in museums. In this chapter, we refer to two specific groups within the larger arena of publics connected to the British Museum: anti-oil sponsorship activists in the UK and source communities in Australia—a subset of which were actively involved in struggles over the repatriation of objects and/or environmental issues. Far from the idea of the 'general visitor', these two groups are

particularly invested in the implications of the Museum's adherence (or lack of adherence) to certain ethical standards.

The FOIA represents both a formal expression of a public institution's accountability to its public(s) and a means by which an institution's adherence to laws, protocols or ethical standards can be tested. As Marilyn Strathern notes in *The Tyranny of Transparency*, '[i]n sum, commitment to transparency is overtly commitment to putting an organisation to the test' (2000: 70). However, while in principle anyone, regardless of nationality, can make a request under the FOIA, the awareness of the Act and its workings offered Art Not Oil the ability to test the relationship between the museum and its source communities in a way that was not readily available to the communities themselves. A line of accountability theoretically flows from the museum to source communities but, in this case, it was activists based in the UK who were in the privileged position of being able to test the integrity of that relationship.

It is worth noting that while the FOIA provides access to recorded information in principle, it allows institutions such as the British Museum to withhold information if they do not deem it to be within the public interest, or it falls within the scope of certain exemptions as set out in the FOIA. The Museum's decision to withhold information can be challenged and potentially overturned, but only through a process of internal review (undertaken by the museum itself), and then by a complaint made to an independent Information Commissioner (whose ruling can ultimately be challenged at a legal tribunal). In reality, a request may result in a protracted bureaucratic process that can diffuse attempts to enforce accountability. Paradoxically, it is often not 'the public' but the Museum that assesses what is in the public's interest. Consequently, any information disclosed by the Museum needs to be subjected to an interpretative process by the recipients to (re)construct intelligible narratives around that recorded information's original purpose. This process of generating a second-order description naturally involves its own ethical obligations if the ultimate goal is to scrutinise the ethical behaviour of others.

Marstine argues that '[i]n museum studies, transparency or openness is often cited as a characteristic of best practice but has been little studied' (2013: 3). She adds that transparency is 'a social justice issue, based on access to information' (ibid.: 4). It is not just about numbers on a website; it is also about processes. The FOIA requests examined in this chapter serve to illustrate how a mechanism meant to ensure transparency and accountability of public institutions is, in fact, intrinsically connected to the Museum's own stance on ethical matters, such as oil sponsorship and the consultation of source communities. The fact that the museum is able to withhold information based on what they deem to be in the public's interest or not, demonstrates that the mechanism is indeed circular, and that transparency is relative, not absolute. This issue calls attention to the fact that there are two intertwined layers of museum practice that should be subject to a code of ethics: internal processes and external ones (namely, interactions with source communities and stakeholders). To maintain an ethical practice, there needs to be 'alignment' between these processes (ibid.: 18).

The information secured by Art Not Oil is arguably located at the intersection of issues of consent and accountability. Given the impacts of resource extraction on Australia's Indigenous peoples, but also Britain's colonial legacy of stealing land and resources from these Indigenous peoples, it is advisable for an institution with such strong symbolic ties to that legacy to proactively avoid the perpetuation of colonial attitudes and behaviours, by

exercising 'the moral agency of museums' (ibid.: 8). While the Museum's endorsement of BP's business activity can be debated, its circumventing of ethical concerns about the company—as evidenced by the exhibition's pre-scripted press launch—allows a form of commodification of the exhibition's content to take place. The knowledge and objects of the Aboriginal communities represented in the exhibition arguably undergo two layers of interpretation: first, through the museum's own curatorial process and, second, although not exclusively, through the lens of subsequent marketing narratives. This second stage allows the possibility of unintended reframing and co-option in line with the needs of a corporate sponsor.

While BP's direct intervention in the content of the exhibition might have been limited, it is the company's association with the exhibition's value as a platform for cultural diplomacy that is of commercial benefit here, as it is this that sustains the public perception of BP as being in sympathy with so-called progressive values. While the FOIA disclosures offer a means for scrutinising the authenticity of such an association, it is the creative activism of *BP or not BP?* that has the capacity to posit an alternative narrative around BP's brand identity.

Conclusion: the shifting practice of the activist

The case of the BP sponsored exhibition *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation* became a turning point in the practice of *BP or not BP?* as the nuances of the connections between different actors and their positionalities led to necessary reflections on issues of ethics, power and accountability. This brought about a shift in the group's processes and approach, including experimentation with new, creative forms that allow new channels for communicating narratives that are complex and non-linear. One of these new approaches was a 'rebel exhibition', which *BP or not BP?* unveiled at the British Museum on 4 April 2016— the first day of work for the British Museum's new director, Hartwig Fischer.

The exhibition was titled *A History of BP in 10 Objects*, mirroring the Museum's landmark exhibition *A History of the World in 100 Objects*. It brought together a wide range of artefacts from countries across the world where BP is currently operating, as well as from locations where the consequences of BP and other major fossil fuel companies' operations are being felt (in the form of extreme weather, for example). Artefacts also made reference to BP's involvement in human rights violations and backing of repressive regimes. The objects included images of frontline community leaders opposing BP's activities, an embroidered textile made by London-based social justice groups and groups working in solidarity with Latin American communities, and a bottle of crude oil from the Gulf of Mexico spill collected by people directly affected by the spill in the US.

The format of the exhibition allowed *BP or not BP?* to frame multiple perspectives and complex narratives in a new way. In contrast to theatrical performances, the artefacts on display and their accompanying texts allowed visitors to navigate the space and build a narrative at their own pace, piecing together the stories and facts shared by people and communities from across the world. The texts and objects, sent directly by frontline and affected communities themselves, were curated to jointly tell a story about BP: a (partial) story of the company's human and environmental impact. In its unsanctioned and pop-up form, the exhibition was not only an act of protest against BP, but also 'a commentary on the role of the exhibition as a medium, and a performative subversion of the format into a political act that challenges the museum, as well as its sponsor' (Serafini 2018: 121).

The *Indigenous Australia* performances and the *History of BP in 10 objects* exhibition show how the *BP or not BP?*'s campaign evolved from a linear approach to a more nuanced one that incorporates issues of colonialism and human rights into the group's core narrative. Nonetheless, new approaches and techniques in the presentation and representation of narratives still bring about a series of challenges and issues to consider. Curating is, after all, a discursive medium (Smith 2015), as well as a narrative space (Groys 2013: 44). While presenting artefacts and words from frontline communities, those objects and the stories they tell are still being framed by activists in the way these are exhibited (e.g. choice of venue), and through the selection of certain objects and the inevitable exclusion of others. In a sense, both activist exhibitions and activist performances face the same issues that the British Museum faces in its curating.

The positionality and privilege of UK-based groups like *BP or not BP?* entail a degree of power and agency in relation to source and frontline communities that cannot be erased and should, in fact, be acknowledged. The issue at stake, and the most important step forward, is to make use of that privileged position in relation to the Museum and the sponsor to amplify frontline voices in the most unmediated way possible. Creating and curating narratives must become an ethical exercise in solidarity, as well as a strategic tool for exerting pressure on institutions and their need to be accountable.

Notes

1 We are writing this chapter from the dual perspective of activist performers and researchers. Serafini's research focuses on the relationship between aesthetics and politics in cultural production, media and social justice and environmental activism, and Garrard's research focuses on the aesthetics of art and activism, and ethical issues relating to fundraising in the arts. We are also both members of *BP or not BP?* and of the wider Art Not Oil Coalition.
2 We use the term 'source communities' here to refer to the provenance of artefacts as this is the common term employed by museum professionals and scholars, but we note that this term should be problematised as the relationships between museums and communities whose objects are on display varies greatly. While some artefacts enter museum collections through consensual donations, whole collections of artefacts in Western museums have been stolen through violent means. The term 'source community' has in recent years been challenged by Indigenous communities because of its extractive connotations. For more on the relationship between source communities and museums see Peers and Brown's *Museums and Source Communities* (2003).
3 See the press release for the exhibition here: www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/news_and_press/press_releases/2015/indigenous_australia.aspx
4 Full details of the materials disclosed under the Freedom of Information Act and a link to the original sources are included in Art Not Oil's report, 'BP's Cultural Sponsorship: A Corrupting Influence' (see Art Not Oil 2016).

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7

THE ACTIVIST ROLE OF MUSEUM STAFF

Victoria Hollows

In our continuing consideration of how museums respond to issues of social inequality, the potential of the museum as an instrument for activism must include a greater understanding of the role of the institution's human agents. In their daily practice, museum staff are encountering and acting on a myriad of choices as the people who collectively animate the construct of the museum. They, in turn, are also part of a wider social network, and so the implications here are enormously complex.

People, and their individual human connections with museum constructs are, for better or worse, constantly changing the world 'one relationship at a time' (Silverman 2010: 109). This notion of relational practice and the consideration of staff within a network system has been a central theme in my research exploring the impact of museums' approaches to social justice. My research responds, in particular, to the museum-centric perspectives that characterise much of the literature and which position the role of museums' social justice practice as exclusively outward-facing; as something that needs to be done 'out there' rather than 'in here.'

The focus of the research grew out of my professional experience as a museum practitioner working for Glasgow Museums, an organisation with a long history of commitment to social justice. The experiences for staff working on a range of challenging programmes raised a number of questions about how we understand the role of, and impact on, individuals in our efforts to advance social justice. As people positioned 'inside' the construct of a museum, yet who are also *of* the community and therefore simultaneously both inside and outside the institution, how might we consciously consider staff—that is, ourselves—as part of the wider social network, workers yet also community participants?

This chapter, therefore, seeks to expand the dialogue on activist practice by focusing on the role of museum staff as community members within the institution, and the influence of their individual values on the work of the museum. It draws from my larger study on trust in the museum, which explored the synergies and differences in organisational, staff group and individual values. Whilst there are important interdependencies between all three, the emphasis on individual values presented in this chapter offers a particular consideration of the uniqueness of human responses to engage with social justice-oriented practices that are usually articulated in organisational terms. I will begin with a brief introduction to the

research; consider common value sets and the model of critical community practice, before discussing some of the research findings that help us consider the activist role of individual museum staff.

An initial survey of UK museum staff[1] revealed that individuals' associations with values are perceived differently for self, role and organisation. Further in-depth qualitative research with case study organisations explored these values through the lived experiences of practitioners working in museum and social enterprise organisations that articulated a commitment to social justice. I worked across these different sectors to reflect a wider system of people actively supporting social justice and because, in contrast to museums, people working within the social enterprise sector identified a much closer alignment of their own values with that of their organisation.

The fieldwork demonstrated how the quality of alignment between organisational, staff group and individual values could generate positive or negative impacts on authenticity and, ultimately, trust. Authenticity in this context is defined as the philosophical basis on which people are consciously aware of, and faithful to, their internal values and life positions. Values are a way of understanding common ground in the principles of how people engage socially. A large amount of existing survey material (Schwartz 1994) identifies ten common value sets motivating actions and behaviours of human beings that can be divided into extrinsic values (self-oriented, status and wealth concerns) and intrinsic values (care for others, the environment, and concern for social justice). The qualitative survey revealed that people working for museums associated closely with intrinsic values, but often perceived their museum organisations to have more connection with extrinsic concerns.

Critical community practice and critical consciousness

As values and the concept of trust are uniquely characterised by individuals, and as individuals ultimately (in)form the organisation, do we sufficiently reflect how these interpretations shape the activist role of museum staff to facilitate change? The model of critical community practice (Butcher *et al.* 2007) offers a particularly useful framework to consider this question. Critical community practice embraces a whole system, collective approach to addressing social justice. It is concerned with active citizenship, democratic participation in decision-making, institutional change, and values such as emancipation, social justice and empowerment. It supports the belief that everyone in an organisation expressing its work in a social justice frame is a critical community practitioner, regardless of position within the structure. In other words, in thinking about activism and the ability to create change, every member of staff is an agent with the choice to activate their potential contribution. Central to critical community practice is 'critical consciousness,' a notion reflecting a belief that practitioners must 'conceptualise their value commitments' and that, in so doing, they should consider what assumptions they hold about the nature of human beings that will inevitably inform their practice (ibid.: 12–3) and thus fulfil or limit their potential to generate change.

Instances of where these types of assumptions were considered by staff were observed through the fieldwork, demonstrating that positive changes can be achieved, and enhanced, when we have a self-awareness of our agency and take a personal responsibility to our value fit in the workplace. Value fit is a choice that individuals make, or at least have the capacity to make, but is contingent on being *critically conscious* of our values to effectively direct our

actions. Self-awareness of one's own values and fit with the organisation, the value system operating across the team and the impetus to act on these symbols of authenticity, are vital to critical community practice.

Throughout the research, museum staff who demonstrated critical consciousness shared key similarities in their approach to practice, characterised as: preferencing values over skills; identifying their personal fit with their organisation's values; and recognising a personal responsibility to that value fit, whilst acknowledging that agendas for change can create a clash between organisational and individual values. By taking ownership of value fit and agency, we have the opportunity to generate affective trust (characterised by mutual care and benevolence) and shared values for action, both within our organisations and beyond them. However, there can be structural and psychological barriers to this capability.

Self-awareness is key to critical consciousness and authenticity, to act and be faithful to our internal values and life positions. Creating self-value alignment can be considered an act of personal agency and activism in terms of *being* who you are and living by your values. Throughout the research, museum interviewees suggested that, in some organisations reorienting towards a stronger social justice focus, some curatorial staff were at risk of disconnection from the emergence of perceived 'new' organisational values, caused by the differences in what people feel is important in museum work. This suggested that a commitment to goals such as generating community benefit and tackling inequality clashes with perceptions of the 'traditional core' of museum work—the care and display of collections. As one staff member put it, 'it's difficult isn't it, when you abstract aims and objectives [at an organisational] vision level, for people to see themselves in it . . . Where am I in that picture, where do I fit into it?'. The fieldwork presented clear differences between people *actively, physically experiencing* concrete change in their work or role (whether imposed by a restructure and/or self-led) and those who were only aware of change in the abstract, through a new organisational vision, for instance, but who were not directly experiencing or contributing to what that vision stood for.

A curator who had been obliged to adapt his role as part of a restructure to deliver a new organisational vision provided a particular example. He described his practice now as being directly shaped by feedback from participants and that he had been transformed 'at a whole life level' through this experience by working in a way that was unexpected but which provided a better fit with his personal values. Yet he reflected: 'change for most other people has been awful [because of a financially driven restructure] but not necessarily transformational of itself,' suggesting that the type of change is a defining factor in the potential to realise the new. His reflections suggest a process of values recognition, moving from the position of 'expert' to find an intrinsic sense of worth as his work became meaningful to him through an expanded practice in a way that explicitly links to, and has helped him to recognise, his own social values. However, he also shared a concern that his 'expanded practice' is perceived by peers elsewhere in the sector as 'doing a bad job,' suggesting that many museum cultures still prioritise academic, discipline-based approaches over valuing other forms of expertise.

Do we fully consider the meaning making capacity of staff in ways that fall outside of academically framed expertise and knowledge? Recognising our own power and agency supports the system and therefore other people. A lack of recognition of our own or others' strengths, capacities and abilities is a form of 'knowledge as waste,'[2] reflecting current debates in museum practice about 'other' knowledge (for example, that held within

communities), and its significance for social justice work. The idea of the circular economy (Ellen MacArthur Foundation n.d.) which promotes circular systems where there is no 'waste' (Senge 2006) resonates with the discussion on social justice in museums by describing the 'real world' as fundamentally non-linear and complex. If we believe that change can come from anywhere, we are *participants* not *controllers*. In a systems analogy, the state of the parts depends on the state of the whole (Senge 1990) so multiple perspectives, failures as well as achievements, conflict as well as consensus, are all contributory factors in how we may internally dissolve the 'margins and core' of traditional museum structures.

Organisational change and value alignment

A focus on traditional, scholarly research has been a strong feature of curatorial expertise in many museums and museum interviewees acknowledged that, where there are service-wide shifts towards a greater emphasis on community engagement, museums still value and need curators. A commitment to social justice is not about letting go of or devaluing curatorial practice; rather, it is about repositioning its status in the activity, in a team of participants actively making choices to maximise and democratise community involvement. In the words of one museum interviewee, it translates as a 'moral commitment to people' through 'purposeful curation.' However, the change in approach impacts on an individual's values by challenging existing ideas about their professional role, since critical community practice calls for an understanding of the 'deeply ingrained assumptions, generalisations, or even pictures and images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action' (ibid.: 8).

From the interviewees who worked for social enterprise organisations, one described her experience of repositioning herself for a better personal value fit. Following a secondment opportunity, she actively chose to leave a 35-year career with the civil service to work for a social enterprise organisation on a short-term contract. She embraced the uncertain. It was more important to have a good value fit with the organisation than to maintain job security. In terms of her personal values, her work at the social enterprise related closely to other aspects of her life: 'I don't see a boundary, I think it all kind of comes together.' Similarly, one of her colleagues commented: 'Where I work. . . I want it to be linked to who I am, so your work is part of your sense of self, and being, and identity.'

Yet amongst some museum staff, there was a stronger sense of a separation between personal and work identities. One interviewee stated:

> I think when you're working in the museum, and I felt this quite strongly before [the museum's new social justice-focused vision], you almost left your personality at the door . . . what you hold as your political values were kind of. . . You came to work and you did your job and they were separate things. And I think that's really a mistake.

Museum restructuring processes can intentionally destabilise existing (social, academic) power structures through change, and people may either be empowered or obliged to think differently. For many museum respondents, the shift to welcome the *emotional* as well as the *technical* through an activist agenda has been liberating. A museum manager described seeing people working through change, sometimes in new roles, which led them to question, for example, how they do research and who benefits from the work they do. Such questioning

helped people move to an understanding of their own personal values and the importance of these for their own identity. By contrast, she describes others who retained a role/status identity and who 'absolutely see themselves as the experts', where they perceive 'the expertise of someone who works in community' as less valid. Just as we share a responsibility to enable everyone to have the opportunity to contribute to change, individuals also have a responsibility to find a role that is a good fit for them. Ultimately, through their own self-awareness, individuals who remain uncomfortable with an organisation's new direction may need to change organisation in order to achieve alignment with their own values.

Experiencing change may, therefore, be the opportunity for individuals to alter their position to fit their values that perhaps they had not been fully conscious or aware of before. Individuals may find this type of shift to be powerful once they have the awareness and experience of deeper human values and their meaning *in action*, enabling them to consciously inform their choices and actions in light of that awareness. Person by person, these individual changes will initiate a larger structural and social system change. To create this kind of dynamic shift, the activist role of museum staff was described through the fieldwork as that of a 'change enabler': people whose individual values are strongly in alignment with concepts of social justice and who were shifting perceptions of where power lies in the organisation and in wider society. As a museum interviewee reflected:

> When you're looking at really big cultural change it doesn't really happen from the top down, it needs to be everybody getting involved... It's about sharing authority and decision making, right from the outset... [We were] talking about 'who are the enablers?' and that it's not the people sat round this table even, it's how we can spread that information out and it's people who are really passionate about working in that way.

There is evidence from the fieldwork of this networked approach in action in museums where, over the course of specific projects, more people within the wider organisation became supportive of the new philosophy and values and became excited by them. At an evaluation meeting, one staff member noted:

> We were seeing supervisors from front of house, [site] supervisors ... curators ... lots of other people who aren't directly involved in that community engagement team ... looking at changing their practice to be more inclusive ... And interestingly, the better quotes ... for the evaluations and the kinds of things they focused on, were from those people.

What this describes is the role of individuals whose values are aligning with the organisation's social purpose and how that role is significant in terms of addressing the wider system. As well as people within the museum foregrounding alternative values and ways of being because of their direct experience of change, interviewees offered many examples of change being supported by people coming into the sector from other backgrounds, indicating how individuals carry their values with them into different scenarios during the course of their life. In fact, interviewees describe actively seeking different perspectives and input from other sectors which can be understood as a form of activism in itself.

I suggest therefore that it is the responsibility of the individual not the organisation, to ensure that the value sets at the core of their lifetime portfolio are a good fit with the

workplace or the role they inhabit at any given time. Emphasising personal agency through this type of responsibility reinforces why critical consciousness is so important. It is people who make things happen, through choices informed by their values and beliefs. Museums are simply made up of individual people and processes devised by these people. *We* make it happen, together; not others.

Working collectively

In seeking alignment between individual and organisational values the issue of diversity cannot be ignored, particularly given the widely acknowledged weakness in the museum sector of its typically non-diverse workforce. If an organisation is clear on the values it is working with, and how it seeks to translate these *in action*, then the museum sector has the opportunity to address its lack of diversity (understood here in terms of knowledge, life experiences and perspectives) and dismantle the barriers that have limited opportunities for some groups to participate by focusing not on technical skills and traditional notions of expertise but rather on values.

Sharing the same values that are social justice-oriented is not about finding 'people like me,' but instead about identifying people who care about similar ideas beyond themselves. It is not about *being the same*. Rather, it is about focusing on the way of doing things and a shared commitment to practices that are democratic, unfolding, inclusive, participatory and contested. Even though interviewees in my research who worked for social enterprise organisations demonstrated very strong alignment of individual values with those of their employer, it was also evident that they differed from each other in many other respects and that they valued, respected and nurtured those differences through working towards shared aims.

Adaptation to different perspectives, knowledge, politics and personalities is therefore both possible and welcome. It may be challenging, but in critical community practice, the ability to 'dialogue well' means it is a natural process for joint learning to collectively build, or rebuild and reimagine, social structures (Butcher *et al.* 2007). By developing critical community practice and learning from others, museums can engage with a wider range of voices and views to reframe the institution in a form of co-production, thereby replacing limited, repetitive internal processes. In doing so, people can generate deep, affective trust, known to support high performance, thereby increasing the ability to achieve their social aims.

Whether from within museums or outside the field, change enablers are examples of people working for social justice as a primary personal and professional investment. The emphasis on the personal as well as the professional investment was reflected in some interviewees' expressing their wish only to stay as long as their work is of use to the organisation's social purpose, believing this purpose to be the most important thing (beyond self, beyond the professional role, beyond the museum). They describe their work as 'doing something you believe in' and being able to build affective trust with others because of a shared recognition that their endeavours are not about their, or the museum's, self-interest. Instead, the organisation, the museum, is a vehicle to do something for the benefit of other people; a further horizon.

Many staff interviewed from the social enterprise sector described their motivation to work for their organisation as driven by the desire to literally 'change the world.' My observation from the fieldwork is that this form of words should not be dismissed as a sweeping statement, a cliché or a form of extreme arrogance. Rather, it is a genuine

reflection of the belief that individuals have the capacity as activists to use their own agency, to be a conduit for change that will benefit other people and that this change, if multiplied through a virtuous circle of activity, has the capacity to make a substantive difference in the world. For me, there is a bravery to talk unapologetically in this way. I also consider it a strong trust marker that this belief and motivation is expressed so openly, and repeated throughout their organisations.

To what extent might the value alignments found within social enterprise organisations be fostered within museums, supporting collective efforts to benefit society as a form of social justice? Although many museums, deeply rooted in practices associated with hierarchies of expertise, experience significant challenges in rethinking their ways of working, the stimulation of personal agency in individual practitioners is a form of activism in itself, whether it happens intentionally or otherwise. The value alignment of individuals, within teams and organisations, offers the scope for collective, supported action.

Activism is usually understood as a form of action undertaken to challenge the status quo. It can take place in everyday conversations and routine daily activities, for example through choosing to buy local produce out of ethical, environmental, or fair trade concerns. Activism doesn't necessarily mean conflict or protest; it can be on a small as well as a large scale. It does not have to be conducted by someone who identifies themselves as 'an activist,' or who holds a particular position in society or within an organisational structure. Activism doesn't belong to 'other' people; we all have agency and therefore we all have the capacity to make change. Recognising and owning our agency is the first step towards making change; then it is about what we do and *how*, and equally what we don't do.

Agency and power

Agency is a form of power and my research revealed contradictions in the ways that people viewed this and understood the relationship between formal governing structures and control processes and their own agency. Those actively working to deliver or support change in practice were often bypassing formal structures and hierarchies to achieve change more quickly. Here, the use of personal agency to subvert dominant, institutional power structures can be understood as a form of activism, although it was not always conceived as such.

Hierarchies are usually understood as structures where power is held by the few, at the top. Perceptions of power are subjective and contingent on social, political and economic frames. Perceptions of where power *lies* has implications for understanding the role and impact of personal and professional values. Power is an important element in critical community practice as it is conceived as the way communities can bring about change through their own actions. In the model presented by Butcher *et al.* (2007), the authors consider power in two ways: 'power-over'—a form of dominance and oppression—and 'power-with'—the ability to find common ground through dialogue, even where there is a conflict of interest and/or values.

Throughout the study, power was a recurrent theme. Interviewees within social enterprise organisations tended to understand power as shared or dispersed (power-with), and they expressed comfort with the idea that shared power does not negate or confuse role responsibilities or decision-making processes. Museum respondents demonstrated a similar understanding of power as distributed, but in a rather different way. Their responses pointed towards an evolving community-based practice that demanded an active means of 'interpreting the hierarchy.' By aligning values to effect change, museum respondents were

navigating both vertical and horizontal power structures, through which a network of voices and skills, irrespective of structural position or pay grades, could be accessed and empowered.

Development of systems thinking in this way, and an attitude of shared and devolved leadership, links central elements of learning organisation theory with critical community practice. Systems thinking is also based on trusting other people's knowledge, wherever it is located, so contribution is not restricted by job role or position. Museum staff also identified the importance of staying active and reflective in an evolving change process to maintain adherence to a 'power-with' model; that is, to have an awareness of their own agency whilst remaining conscious of the wider network dynamics and the importance of respecting other people's expertise.

Thus, staff in both social enterprise organisations and museums demonstrated critical consciousness in how power was acknowledged as an individual capacity and affected by individual choice in terms of how it is professionally and personally invested. Power can therefore be understood as the *way* people work (the 'how'), like an energy, rather than deriving from their position within a structure. We all have power; it's what we choose to do, how we use ourselves (our agency) to consider and create opportunities for action, including the ability to empower other people. However, the findings from my research also raised questions as to whether individuals are fully cognisant of their ability to make these choices.

In particular, I suggest that, in larger museums, those situated lower down a hierarchical structure, such as front-of-house staff, may find it harder to recognise and activate their personal agency and, in fact, may often be inadequately supported to do so. If this is indeed the case, not only are we maintaining a 'power-over' scenario, we are discounting a significant part of our staff community in practice. The implications of a hierarchical structure for particular staff groups became apparent through an emerging awareness in the fieldwork of 'the people you don't see in meetings' as one museum worker described front-of-house staff and other staff groups not present or part of formal decision-making practices. Hierarchical structures and associated processes typically excluded these groups from what one interviewee described as the 'thinking life of museums.'

In Figures 7.1 and 7.2, the artist Rachel Duckhouse (2015) presents different interpretations of connections individual front-of-house staff have across the wider organisational structure and, I would argue, representations of different expressions of individual personal agency within the same system. These are just two images from a series titled *Systems Breakdown*, illustrating a conversation and drawing project with staff based in the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow. During her time at the Gallery as associate artist,[3] Duckhouse mapped the complex relationships between individuals and the wider organisation and 'became aware of patterns, relationships, connections, disconnections, motivations, hierarchies, agendas, preoccupations and passions that shaped each individual's perception of the institution and how it related to wider environmental and social issues inside and outside its walls.'

The striking differences between these two examples offer an insight into what might equally be interpreted as forms of activism, personal agency, self-preservation, or knowledge waste. Duckhouse says of her work, 'it become clear that their perception of the institution . . . as a whole system was not a singular one' (ibid.). The images can also be read as a visualisation of power as energy, simultaneously demonstrating how people uniquely characterise their lived experiences. There may be a number of reasons for these differences, for example the
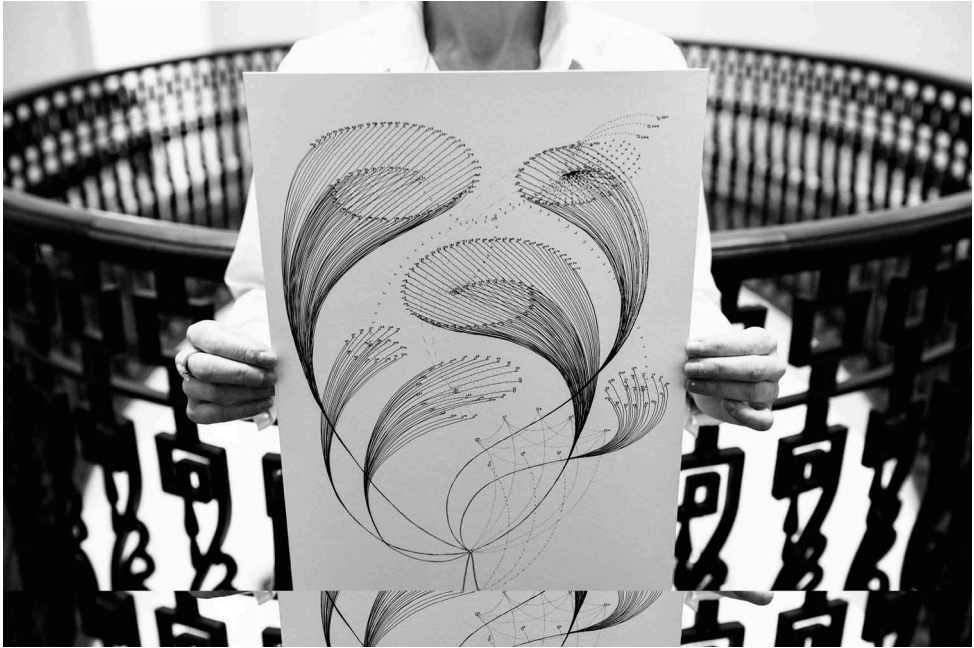
FIGURE 7.1 Rachel Duckhouse, *Gallery Assistant ii*, 2015.
Photograph by Caro Weiss.
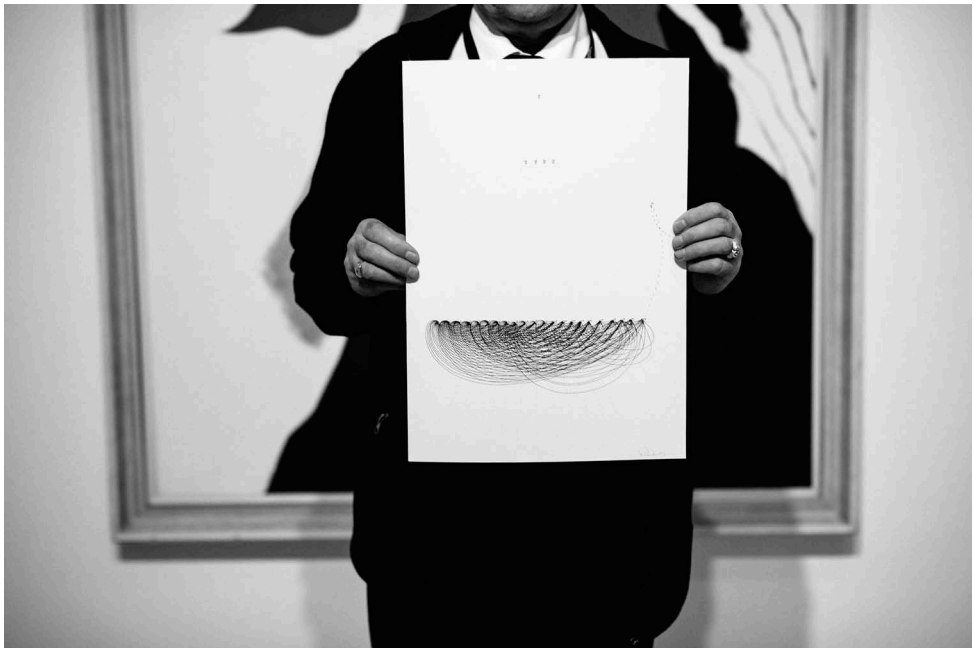
FIGURE 7.2 Rachel Duckhouse, *Gallery Assistant iii*, 2015.
Photograph by Caro Weiss.

individuals' personal values position, the levels of their capacity to engage, their self-awareness of both, or the levels of trust they enjoy with others in the system.

In any job, human interaction is important, wherever people are located within the organisational structure. As critical community practice suggests, there should be no expectation of universally agreed views and modes of participation but rather a commitment to ensure that the opportunity to participate exists and that obstructions to participation are minimised (Butcher *et al.* 2007). If we are not engaging with all parts of the system—for example by neglecting front-of-house staff—we are marginalising people, their contribution and our potential to collectively make change happen. This is why I have been interested in systems thinking, a management discipline that evolves an understanding of the linkages and interactions between components that comprise the entirety of a defined system[4] (Tate 2009). The following quotation suggests the potential to consider the power of our activist role as a form of energy if we actively engage the whole of any given system (MSS Research 2016):

> Social existence represents a huge reservoir of energy, either in motion or capable of movement. When that social energy is focused by human intention to acquire a direction, it becomes social force. When social force is organised, it becomes social power.

This suggests a dynamic force that exists through our human relationships. Organisational size and structure are not necessarily the defining elements of a museum's activist potential. Instead, the research participants in my study demonstrated that activism should be understood in terms of *how* individuals work with these characteristics. For example, activism might be nurtured by creating horizontal structures around a vertical hierarchy, enabling everyone to contribute *across* the system, harnessing their personal agency, their power to effect change. Nurturing this type of shared and devolved leadership connects critical community practice with systems thinking by developing trust in other people's knowledge, wherever it is located, so that contribution is not restricted by, or limited to, particular job roles or positions. I believe it offers significant scope as a means of understanding the activist role of individual museum staff within complex organisational structures, and how we can more closely align values across the system.

Whilst the larger study I carried out on trust sought to understand how values interact across the system at organisational, staff group and individual levels, undoubtedly concepts of trust and the values that underpin them are uniquely characterised by individuals. Senge (1990: 69) emphasises the importance in organisational management of 'moving from seeing parts to seeing wholes, from seeing people as helpless reactors to seeing them as active participants in shaping their reality, from reacting to the present to creating the future.' As much as Senge's description could be used to describe social justice practice 'out there,' so it can equally be used to consider the role of individual staff in the shaping of the museum's work, characteristics, and future direction.

By rethinking museums' social justice practice in relation to staff as a community, changes can be achieved through a personal responsibility to value fit and personal agency, self-leadership, and understanding that power sits with everyone. How we choose to act in the workplace, and take ownership of our responsibilities, drives trust and shared values for action. It takes critical consciousness for individuals to change their perceptions of how they relate their values to their employment, the contribution they

make, giving to the whole, working with others. The level of value alignment reflects the degree of trust in operation, and vice versa. By considering the influence of individual values, which represent far more than a staff member's job title or work programme, we will open ourselves to a better understanding of our individual responsibility to fit our own values with those of the museum, and our ability to focus more purposefully on activist practice.

Notes

1 The quantitative survey was conducted to investigate the hypothesis that museums are potentially operating in cultures where there is a lack of alignment between organisational role and individual value fit. It was distributed via email to sector-specific networks and organisations expressing a social justice approach to their work.
2 This idea of 'knowledge as waste' echoes the framing of 'food as waste' in the notion of the circular economy (Ellen MacArthur Foundation n.d.).
3 Duckhouse was associate artist 2014–2015. The Gallery offers opportunities for artists to work with the organisation over a 2-year period where there is identified synergy in supporting, challenging and investigating the practice of both museum and artist. Photographs by Caro Weiss, available at www. caroweiss.photography/.
4 System here is defined as an interconnecting network, a positive engagement between all agents, ensuring connection, commitment, and action through joint participation, learning and reflection, rather than a negative term sometimes used to imply a form of control through a mechanised structure.

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8

FROM THE GROUND UP

Grassroots social justice activism in American museums

Laura-Edythe S. Coleman and Porchia Moore

Introduction

In the United States, the term 'social justice' is often synonymous with, or associated with, the Civil Rights Movement, women's rights movements, Indigenous peoples or First Nations rights movements or, in more contemporary times, the Black Lives Matter movement (Cook and Halpin 2010). Increasingly, in American museums, we see the term 'social justice' used as a call to action for systemic change and transformation in museum practice; most specifically as it relates to issues of diversity, equity, access, and inclusion (Paquet-Kinsley and Wittman 2016). As a result, American museums are poised at a junction: arriving at a destination where museums are replete with the possibilities of changing the landscape of American culture and society, or remaining institutions whose values fail to mirror the equity and access that our 21st-century audiences demand (Greenberg, Ng and Ware 2017).

For many American museum professionals, adopting a social justice work ethos means creating an entirely new set of educational and personal road maps for social justice and inclusion. For example, these activists (ibid.: 142–143, emphasis in original) state that:

> As practitioners, we take this responsibility seriously—museums should not just be institutions of social value, but systems of social justice. For us, this responsibility entails creating museum education experiences that are meaningful and relevant to *all* visitors, not only those who benefit from white supremacy and other forms of privilege.

As the American public increasingly calls on museums to assist in navigating social justice, other public institutions, most notably American libraries, are partnering with their communities in the fight against social injustices (Mehra, Rioux and Albright 2007, 2009; Pateman and Vincent 2010; Morrone 2014; Bales 2017). As American museum professionals grow into a new social justice role, they discover that this new role does not always have a clear path or even a designated workspace (Kranich 2000). In short, American museum professionals have taken upon themselves to operate as social justice advocates, often doing so with limited or no official funding and little emotional support from their institutions.

At the outset, we contend that it is important for readers to consider our understanding of the term 'grassroots.' The term 'grassroots' originated in American social and political traditions of the early 20th century and is defined as 'the ordinary people in a society or an organization, especially a political party' (Cambridge English Dictionary 2017). We are utilizing the historical connotations for the term grassroots, in particular, the notion that new social and political movements in America are thought of as being created, from the ground, or grassroots, up (Della Porta and Diani 2006). By their very nature, grassroots movements find new ways to push against normative ideologies (ibid.). In this way, the type of activism that we are addressing describes how museum professionals (often without the greatest power or privilege within their museum hierarchies) use both personal and collaborative energies to speak out and work against museum practices that oppress marginalized communities.

We have divided this chapter into two broad categories. In part one, voices from the field, we aim to present the viewpoints of American grassroots museum practitioners, researchers and individuals entrenched in the front lines of social justice advocacy: people who advance museums, visitors, and museum professionals in the exploration of social justice advocacy. As such, grassroots activist voices from the Incluseum, Museum Workers Speak, Museums Respond to Ferguson #MRTF, Visitors of Color, Museum Hue, and Empathetic Museum constitute the ongoing conversations concerning diversity, inclusion, and the ever-elusive equity for all Americans. Drawing on these diverse grassroots voices, we explore the notion of 'activism' for museum professionals.

In part two, we present a multi-layered call to the museum professional community: first, the promotion of self-reflective practices for individual museum professionals in all positions; second, an emphasis on self-examination and evaluation techniques for museums and institutions and third, the expansion of museum studies curriculum (both degreed and continuing education) to equip individual museum professionals with stronger examples of social justice endeavors through museums (worldwide), as well as through pathways for emerging museum professionals and students to articulate their professional activism through shared social justice goals. Last, we make the case for significant integration of grassroots efforts into existing museum professional organizations to fulfil a social justice advocacy mission in natural alignment with the overarching goals of the 21st century museum. Overall, we seek to propel the role of museums in society and challenge our colleagues in the museum profession to become activists. We are committed to a culture that creates positive social change and, in a non-traditional grassroots format, we work without an office.

Part 1: voices from the field

In the United States, there is a growing mosaic of progressive museum activists and, while the brevity of this chapter does not permit us to present an exhaustive analysis of all the activist museum voices, we endeavor to introduce this growing corpus with a representative sample (Message 2014). Although many voices permeate the museum blogosphere at the time of this writing (2017), this was not always the case (ibid.). Early activist voices in America appeared in the art museum world, with the rise of the Guerrilla Girls circa 1985 (see Guerrilla Girls 2017). This group of 'feminist activist artists' have appeared throughout the world, focusing most recently on their activism within the United States (ibid.). Since their genesis, Guerrilla Girls have donned gorilla masks to obscure their identity, and empowered by their anonymity, have tackled numerous contentious issues in the art museum landscape.

Although the Guerrilla Girls are not strictly an American phenomenon, their work is of particular interest due to the nearly seamless transition the Guerrilla Girls made from pre–web 2.0 to digital, leveraging the social media outlet of Twitter with currently 17,000 plus followers (Ryzik 2015). We do not suggest that these are the only grassroots, museum practitioner voices pre–web 2.0, yet, few such movements extended beyond their local territory to become nationally and internationally recognized as did the Guerrilla Girls (ibid.).

Nina Simon (2006), museum professional, and activist, has leveraged web 2.0 tools since 2006. Her noteworthy works include *The Participatory Museum* (2010) and *The Art of Relevance* (2016). Her works transcend the digital blogosphere, and the most notable aspect of Simon's work is her consistent modeling of activist behavior by demonstrating both traditional in-person and digital engagement techniques. In particular, she risked professional disdain by speaking hard truths—even about her work:

> Going 2.0 isn't just a design decision. It's a trust decision. All museum endeavors require a certain element of trust in visitors—that they will take their role seriously and respectfully. But the integration of 2.0 requires 'radical trust' in visitors' abilities to create and judge, not just receive, museum content. When you design for *the we*, you must trust visitors to use the exhibits as they see fit—not as you do.
>
> *(Simon 2007: 272, emphasis added)*

More recently, online grassroots museum professional voices have risen, in part, as a response to the civil turmoil unfurling in the United States (Moore, Paquet-Kinsley and Wittman 2014; Montgomery 2016). For example, during the unrest associated with the police brutality in Ferguson, Missouri, a group of museum activists co-authored a statement calling for museums to respond and prompted the field to ask: Should our institutions respond to injustice? Dr. Aleia Brown and Adrianne Russell then started monthly Twitter chats initiating compelling dialogue about the role of museums in the 21st century, and advocating for the inclusion of a social justice lens in contemporary museum work (Moore, Paquet-Kinsley and Wittman 2014).

The numerous examples of grassroots activism that we highlight here (Figure 8.1) arose directly from an amalgamation of events that occurred during an offsite *rogue session* organized by Dr. Alyssa Greenberg at the 2015 American Alliance of Museums (AAM) conference (Greenberg and Pelaez 2015). Many of the participants and new ideas from this *rogue session* would later be known as Museum Workers Speak (see Museum Workers Speak 2015). During AAM, grassroots activists Rose Paquet Kinsley, Margaret Middleton, and Porchia Moore spoke on the issues of equity and inclusion in museums; introducing social justice ethos, new dialogues, and terminology to the broader museum field (American Alliance of Museums 2015). These important conversations coincidentally occurred at the same time as the Baltimore civic unrest (Dance 2015). Museum activism has continued to grow, aided by advances in personal technology and in the wake of social events over the past five years, 2012–2017 (Bonilla and Rosa 2015).

Paquet-Kinsley and Wittman founded the Incluseum (2012), as a project based in Seattle, Washington, that advances new ways of being a museum through critical discourse, community building and collaborative practice related to inclusion in museums. Beginning with the success of the Incluseum, the voices of relatively unknown museum professionals became amplified through the democracy of online conversation.

GRASSROOTS | GROWTH

2016

MASS Action
3-year Program "**Museum as Site for Social Action**"
Sponsored by the Minneapolis Institute of Art

Museums & Race
Collaborative UnConference

Gender Equity in Museums
Blog by Anne Ackerson, Joan Baldwin, Jessica Frey

2015

Museum Workers Speak
AAM 2015 "Rogue Session" and Twitter
Conversation

Visitors of Color
Tumblr Conversation Started by Porchia Moore &
nikhil trivedi

Brown Girls Museum Blog
Blog and Support Group by Amanda Figueroa &
Ravon Ruffin

2014

#MuseumsRespondToFerguson
Twitter Conversation Started by Aleia Brown

Anti-Oppression Manifesto
MCN Ignite Talk by nihil trivedi

Empathetic Museum
Blog by Gretchen Jennings

2013

Museum of Impact
Mobile Museum of Activism Found by
Monica Montgomery

Museopunks
Podcast by Jeffrey Inscho & Suse Anderson

2012

Incluseum
Collaborative Blog Platform Founded by
Rose Paquet-Kinsley & Alethia Wittman

2006

The Participatory Museum
Nina Simon Propels Museum Activism to
the Forefront with the Museum2.0 Blog

American Museum Professionals Have leveraged the democratic nature of the web, their voices growing dramatically in number throughout the last several years.

1985

Guerrilla Girls
A 30-Year Old Movement, Spanning pre-web2.0
to Present Day

FIGURE 8.1   Grassroots Growth.

Following the inception of the Incluseum, more American museum professionals entered into the democratic dialogue developing online. Conversations that would have passed merely as ephemeral conference debates now sparked hashtags and continued discourse in blogs, forums, tweets, and podcasts. In 2013, Porchia Moore gave a talk at the Museum Computer Network Conference advocating for new critical ideologies and grassroots museum activism (Moore 2014). In her essay, *The Danger of the D Word*, Moore explained how museums could utilize Critical Race Theory as a mechanism for creating institutional change (ibid.). Also, in 2013, Monica Montgomery, a former pre-school teacher, founded the Museum of Impact to highlight community activism. As the events of civil unrest unfolded in the United States, Montgomery decided that 'the grim reality of extralegal killings of black Americans and the #BlackLivesMatter movement seemed to demand a museum with a social justice outlook' (Montgomery 2017).

Originally born of Montgomery's tweets, the Museum of Impact (MOI) is the 'first mobile social justice museum, inspiring action at the intersection of art, activism, self, and society' (ibid.). As a mobile museum unfettered by the traditional brick and mortar gallery walls, the MOI has the unique capability to move as needed throughout the United States:

> Museum of Impact travels the country creatively activating spaces, fusing conscious content, art, and history to inspire action and build power. As a grassroots, progressive museum, we create pop-up experiential voyages into the heart of social movements; encouraging visitors to participate and leave their own mark, as they transform from bystanders to Upstanders.
>
> *(ibid.)*

The year 2013 also marked the year that Museopunks hit the podcast airwaves as a 'podcast for the progressive museum … with a focus on emergent, boundary-pushing work, and ideas' (Anderson and Inscho 2013). Although the Museopunks podcast is 'progressive,' it is a product of the American Alliance of Museums 'AAM Labs.' Museopunks features grassroots voices, but with the backing of the American Alliance of Museums and, in this way, it is unlike the majority of the voices presented in this chapter (ibid.).

In the years following 2013, new voices emerged in online formats such as Lightning Talks, Pecha Kuchas, Forums, Twitter, and the personal blogs of museum consultants (please see Figure 8.1, Grassroots Growth). It is important to note that these activist voices belong to individuals, and these persons have become the architects of the American activist movement in museums. American museum practitioners who are involved in social justice movements do so on their own time, and often to the disdain of their employers (Greenberg and Pelaez 2015). In general, American museums lack paid positions explicitly described as social justice advocacy roles. The US situation is not unique and, at the time of writing, the authors know of no paid social justice advocacy positions within museums anywhere. The individuals listed in Table 8.1, Architects of Activism in American Museums, are not employed to be social justice advocates (with the exception of the MOI)—advocacy is often their second or third, unpaid job. nikhil trivedi summarized his own life as an American museum professional engaged in social justice, as follows:

> I live two lives. At the Art Institute of Chicago for 10 years I've been surrounded by technical innovators … Outside of work, I'm surrounded by innovators of a different sort—grassroots community organizers, queer activists, radical philanthropists, prison

TABLE 8.1 Architects of activism in American museums

Grassroots Name/ Movement	Architect of Activism	Individual's Day Job
Incluseum	Alethia Wittman Rose Paquet-Kinsley	Independent Curator & Museum Consultant Doctoral Student
Anti-Oppression Manifesto	nikhil trivedi	Web Developer (museum based)
Museum of Impact	Monica Montgomery	Museum Anarchist & Consultant
Margaret Middleton	Margaret Middleton	Museum Consultant & Exhibition Designer
Empathetic Museum	Gretchen Jennings	Museum Consultant & Author
BrownGirlsMuseumBlog	Amanda Figueroa Ravon Ruffin	Doctoral Student Museum Consultant & Creative
#MuseumWorkersSpeak		Dr. Alyssa Greenberg & Consortium of museum workers
Museums & Race: Transformation and Justice	The Museum Group, Dr. Porchia Moore, Gretchen Jennings and consortium of museum activists	Counter-conference event hosted by a consortium of American museum bloggers and social justice advocates
Museums Respond to Ferguson	Dr. Aleia Brown, Adrianne Russell	Visiting Curator of African and African American History and Culture, Museum Evangelist
Visitors of Color Project	nikhil trivedi, Dr. Porchia Moore	Web Developer, Museum activist/Project managers
Museums Are Not Neutral	LaTanya Autry Mike Murawski	Independent Curator & Cultural Organizer Director of Education & Public Programs for the Portland Art Museum

abolitionists, rape victim advocates, healers and artists, all who look at the world through an anti-oppression lens.

(trivedi 2015)

Despite the distinctly digital format of these voices, many of these architects of activism speak out at American museum professional conferences. nikhil trivedi, for example, delivered his 'Anti-Oppression Manifesto' to the Museum Computer Network (MCN) in 2015 (ibid.). At the 2015 Annual Conference of the American Alliance of Museums, a group of museum professionals launched a rogue session Twitter event #MuseumWorkersSpeak (Museum Workers Speak 2015). This event was remarkably different from the traditional conference sessions offered by the AAM, as the participants noted their divergence from mainstream museum discussions as follows:

In contrast to the dominance of museum leaders' voices in the discourse of social justice in museums, this conversation is facilitated by a diverse team of emerging

museum professionals who are uniquely aware of the challenges presented by working in this field, particular barriers to entry and advancement rooted in race and class.

(ibid.)

American museum professionals attending the 2016 AAM conference also had the opportunity to engage in *Museums & Race: Transformation and Justice*, a product of grassroots activism efforts (Moore 2016). During *Museums & Race*, grassroots voices from The Visitors of Color project, Brown Girls Museum Blog, and The Empathetic Museum provided day-long conversations, workshops, and interactives (ibid.). These discussions centered on how museums might employ social justice ideologies to create both spaces for underrepresented groups and inform new 21st-century museum practice.

Part 2: multi-layered call to the museum field

First, we wish to promote self-reflective practices for museum professionals in all positions. We agree with museum scholars, such as Weil and Anderson, that the museum of the 21st century is evolving from one that is collections-driven to one that is more community-centered (Vergo 1989; Weil 1999, 2002, 2004; Anderson 2004; Jacobsen 2014). We find that this change in American museums promotes a desire to re-envision museums as institutions that address the more nuanced, complex needs of 21st-century visitors. In turn, American museum professionals must embark on a series of self-reflective practices, such as mindfulness and self-care (Janes 2010; Weisberg 2017).

We also argue that there exists in the museum profession a difference between institutional and individual social justice advocacy, and that both museums and museum professionals must acknowledge these separate forms of advocacy. Rose Paquet-Kinsley (cited in Coleman 2016) echoes this sentiment, 'I don't think an institution can do much to change that (systemic oppression) on its own—it takes all of us shifting our own consciousness to work towards greater change.'

Second, we emphasize self-examination techniques for museums and institutions. In an era in which museum professionals increasingly separate themselves from their institutional identity, grassroots museum professionals are developing new ways to help their institutions. For example, in 2014, museum consultant Margaret Middleton (2014) delivered their Family Inclusive Language Chart for Museums. This chart called for museums, as institutions, to rethink the way they addressed families (Middleton 2014; Middleton, Paquet-Kinsly and Wittman 2016). Middleton is not alone in calling for museums to reconsider themselves as institutions. LaTanya Autry and Mike Murawski, for example, have powerfully captured a key challenge to museums today in their 'Museums Are Not Neutral' movement, helping practitioners to publicly confront the myth of museum neutrality (Coleman 2018).

Gretchen Jennings (2015a, 2015b), founder of the Empathetic Museum, has also developed a transformative tool for museums: 'The Museum Maturity Model.' Jennings (2015b) refers to her model as a 'metric for institutional transformation,' and the model contains a checklist for museums to self-reflect upon their 'civic vision' and 'institutional body language.' The Museum Maturity Model is a framework that museum professionals can navigate to discover if their museum is 'Regressive,' 'Emergent,' 'Planned,' or 'Proactive' in their development as an institution (ibid.). The work of Middleton and Jennings in grassroots activism reflects the work of Robert Janes in that, 'unlike individuals,

museums are obviously incapable of mindful meditation as organizations, but asking the question "why" is a workable alternative for enhancing organizational consciousness and mindfulness' (Janes 2010: 329).

A starting point for American museums is to reevaluate their institutional employment practices as a place to begin transformative reflection. The rogue session #MuseumWorkersSpeak started the 'conversation, to counteract the silence/taboo around discussing labor in museums, and to examine how working conditions impact diversity in museum staffs' (Museum Workers Speak 2015). The resolutions of this rogue session summarized the discussion like this, 'We believe that only once museums recognize and resolve their internal inequalities can they truly begin to act as agents of social change (ibid.).

Beyond internal employment issues, museums are increasingly called upon by grassroots museum professionals to recognize their role, as institutions, in systemic oppression. For nikhil trivedi (2015), museums must be willing to be 'vulnerable enough to hear how we (museums) oppress others in spite of our intentions.' In 2016, American museum professionals met to form *Museums & Race*, consisting of individuals 'who are interested in effecting radical change in our field' (Moore 2016). *Museums & Race*, as a grassroots movement, included an inherent understanding of the role of museums in systemic oppression: to underscore and identify how different oppressions and institutional practices, while not intentional, were primarily responsible for maintaining the *status quo*, preferring practices that reinforced exclusion rather than inclusion (ibid.).

Grassroots advocacy attempts have also been made to amplify the voices of marginalized museum visitors. The Visitors of Color project echoes the remarks of former First Lady Michelle Obama, at the opening of the Whitney Museum. Mrs. Obama (2015) stated:

> You see, there are so many kids in this country who look at places like museums and concert halls and other cultural centers and they think to themselves, well, that's not a place for me, for someone who looks like me, for someone who comes from my neighborhood.

The former First Lady's remarks sparked a backlash of news features and articles, fueling fiery museum professional discussions both online and in-person (Incluseum 2015).

Third, we must expand museum studies programs to equip individual museum professionals. In order to amplify the professional practice of social justice advocacy, there must be an accompanying expansion of American museum studies programs. In particular, we propose to equip individual museum professionals through enhanced graduate education in social justice. The adoption of social justice advocacy roles has been criticized by some in the museum professional community. The argument is made, and rightly so, that American museum professionals feel ill-equipped to adopt the role of advocates: 'Agents of change—true, lasting change—require skills that most museum staff do not possess and weren't trained to practice' (Orloff 2017: 36). These individuals crave social justice examples, relevant literature, practitioner toolkits, and practical strategies. In brief, museum professionals want to know how they can be social justice advocates in their jobs with or without institutional support. It is essential to note that they can receive guidance from the graduate education system.

The suggested expansion (and creation) of a social justice advocacy role for American museums is not without its critics, such as Chet Orloff, manager of the Pamplin International

Collection of Art and History in Portland, Oregon. Orloff (ibid.: 36) considers the adoption of social justice advocacy as 'risky business that that may win some short-term gains but results in the diminution of other vital services they [museums] provide their communities.' The transformative, grassroots movement into higher education is not to be deterred, however and, at the time of writing, a new museum journal is underway in Chicago. The MUSE program, or Master of Arts in Museum and Exhibition Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago, has developed a new museum journal focused on social justice—*FWD: Museums* (2016). This academic publication 'strives to create a space for challenging, critiquing, and imagining alternative modes of thinking and production within and outside of museums' (ibid.). At a time when most museum professional articles are addressing the daily activities of museum work (labels, collections management, exhibition design, funding, etc.), *FWD: Museums* provides a powerful, yet scholarly voice, to museum professional dialogue.

Not finding sufficient practitioner tools for museums and social justice advocacy, one particular group, the Museum as Site for Social Action (MASS Action) initiative, attempted to create educational tools for museum professionals (Minneapolis Institute of Art 2016). This three-year initiative to promote social justice advocacy has resulted in a deliverable: a practitioner toolkit with an eye towards both the principles of inclusion and social justice.

If American museum studies programs are to be expanded, careful consideration must be made concerning the components of such education. Universities contemplating this expansion must ask several fundamental questions: What should we include in a social justice advocacy course/program for museum professionals? What are the exemplars of successful social justice endeavors worldwide (not simply US based)? What pathways can our program provide for junior museum professionals to articulate their social justice goals? How can we create communities of social justice practice for museum professionals? How can we provide a social justice experience—a practical project-based course for our students and emerging museum professionals to implement social justice training and goals? We realize that the promotion of such programs, especially new graduate studies, will take several years for universities to prepare. Despite the time required, the creation of social justice programs for museums is integral to equipping American museum professionals for their expanding role in museums.

As a starting point for a new American museum studies program in social justice advocacy, we suggest a close examination of the University of Leicester's new graduate program in 'Socially Engaged Practice in Museums and Galleries' (University of Leicester 2016). Although Leicester's program of study is UK based, it 'draws on broader global shifts in practice' (ibid.). There is a rare example of an American graduate museum studies program focused on social justice advocacy: The University of San Francisco's (USF) Master of Arts (MA) in Museum Studies. The 'USF's MA in Museum Studies program focuses on social justice and curatorial practice ... Students integrate and apply knowledge from a variety of disciplines to analyze global issues that affect museums—from equality and diversity to access and human rights' (University of San Francisco College of Arts & Sciences Master of Arts 2015).

The expansion of American graduate museum studies programs should also include the creation and support of professional communities of practice. We hope that students will continue to band together, in a grassroots fashion, as Amanda Figueroa and Ravon Ruffin did to create Brown Girls Museum Blog—BGMB (Figueroa and Ruffin 2015). Figueroa and Ruffin, not finding an existing community of practice, crafted their own 'online platform and

consulting agency, created with the objective to promote the visibility of people of color in museums, and to support emerging professionals in the humanities' (ibid.). American museum studies programs should support the creation of grassroots groups such as BGMB encourage students to band together, and provide pathways for junior museum professionals to enter this dialogue.

Our fourth call to action offers an appraisal of the current relevance of 'traditional' museum professional organizations, such as The American Alliance of Museums (AAM), for social justice advocacy in the United States. The American Alliance of Museums is the largest American museum professional community (American Alliance of Museums, n.d.a). Despite the fact that more than 400,000 individuals work in American museums, the AAM has only recently addressed social justice advocacy roles of museum professionals, and largely at the urging of the activist work documented here (American Alliance of Museums 2014). We suggest that a significant starting point for the AAM would be the crafting of professional guidelines for social justice advocacy.

It is important to note that while the AAM accredits museums, it does not certify museum professionals (American Alliance of Museums, n.d.c) Any proposed AAM guidelines for social justice advocacy would need to explain the role of museums and the accompanying role of museum professionals in social justice advocacy. Although the AAM has attempted to address social justice advocacy, it has done so only peripherally, through the promotion of their 2016–2020 Strategic Plan (American Alliance of Museums 2016).

We find several issues in the AAM plan. First, the individuals who framed the AAM's strategic plan are predominantly privileged persons (those who can name the problem but will not directly benefit from the solution). Second, the AAM's strategic plan should do more to remove the professional stigma attached to social justice advocacy. In the United States, the Guerrilla Girls (2017) still don masks and obscure their identities. The American Alliance of Museums can go beyond the current strategic plan and promote social justice advocacy by honoring those who operate in activist modalities. The AAM has awards for 'excellence in label writing,' and 'excellence in an exhibition' (American Alliance of Museums, n.d.b). We argue that AAM should also recognize 'excellence in social justice advocacy,' and 'excellence in community engagement,' to name two possible awards. The current AAM awards do not reflect the changing roles of museum professionals and museums in our society. We respectfully propose that the AAM expand their recognition of excellence in American museum professionals by acknowledging the importance of social advocacy.

Conclusion

Within the context of museums in the United States, we have seen that much of the recent activist movements in this country have been acts of passion designed to respond to gaps in equity, access, inclusion, and to center social justice values in museum practice. In fact, we maintain that this growing grassroots activism is in opposition to the museum community's allegiance to supposed neutrality (Janes 2009; Murawski 2017a, 2017b). The shared values and ethics in each of the examples of museum activism highlighted in this chapter speak to a collective desire to procure not only different institutional structures and operations, but also to secure and supply new tools and ideologies to create a better future for museums and Americans.

While much of the activism presented in this chapter originated or is played out within digital platforms, the goal of this grassroots activism is to champion meaningful social

change. These activist voices represent new ideas, perspectives, and pathways for 21st-century museum method, theory, and practice. In conclusion, we echo the sentiments of Alethia Wittman of the Incluseum, 'I think there's a lot of work to be done in the US and it's definitely rooted in a uniquely US relationship with race and power and privilege' (Coleman 2016). We believe that the unique challenges of US history demand an equally unique solution: a *grassroots* movement.

Acknowledgments

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9

SPECTACULAR DEFIANCE

Julie McNamara

> We must leave evidence. Evidence that we were here, that we existed, that we survived and loved and ached. Evidence of the wholeness we never felt and the immense sense of fullness we gave to each other ... Evidence for each other that there are other ways to live—past survival; past isolation.
>
> (Mingus 2010)

My father loved collecting evidence. He had a vivid imagination and a fine sense of the ridiculous. He collected his own teeth, carefully archiving his desperate decayed tombstones. An emotionally volatile man from a displaced Irish family, he was riddled with insecurities, tutored at his mother's cold knee. I inherited those teeth along with instructions to act accordingly when research into DNA and cryonics could be improved. Perhaps I share my father's existential anxieties? I still have those teeth in the freezer, evidence of a life long gone, just in case. Greta Minto, my maternal grandmother and saviour of my early years, collected biscuit tins. She taught me story telling from her tins, filled to the brim with faded yellow photographs; hoarded as evidence, her trading stamps for pain. She would recount untold family horrors attached to each and every snap, yet somehow in the re-telling something new would always emerge. I learned the art of excavating the truth early.

Unravelling whose version of the truth we are permitted to tell sits at the heart of most of my creative explorations and, I suggest, that same question sits at the root of many ethical dilemmas facing museums today.

A museum is rich in potential for social activism, through work by artists who play with disruption and provocative re-enactment, because it provides both a *staging ground* with considerable gravitas, and a *sourcebook*, with a rich seam of remarkable stories buried inside the archives or on public display. I have witnessed and taken part in some extraordinary moments of creative innovation inside museum walls, as an artist and an activist. That feels like quite an achievement for the working-class offspring of somebody who would never have considered entering the local Lady Lever Art Gallery in Liverpool, for the shame of her shoes, the wrong coat on, the stifling air of exclusion from those grand buildings. In this

chapter, I will discuss some of my favourite artists and activists who celebrate difference with spectacular defiance and who have made a considerable impact, agitating and activating museum audiences to look again and reconsider their position as witnesses to skewed stories with missing voices in collections presented as 'our' heritage.

My passion for museums as fertile ground for story telling emerged at 11 years of age. I had been identified as a child with challenging behaviour. Disruptive in class and incapable of sitting still, I was packed off with sketch pad and pencils to the Lady Lever Art Gallery, a Liverpool Museum opposite our school. I spent the afternoon mesmerised by a statue of Kuan Yin, Goddess of Mercy and the embodiment of compassion; a two-spirit, masculine female deity, who I immediately claimed as my own. Beneath the brightly glazed statue it read: 'She who sits and waits.' So, that's what I did. Some thread of me is still in there with Kuan Yin, still waiting, although these days it is perhaps more ethical, inclusive and truthful ways of curating that I am waiting for.

The cultural filters I bring to this chapter are of significance so it is important to state them from the outset. I'm a masculine woman, a Lesbian, an Irish republican and a disabled mental health system survivor. You can call me a mad woman made good. I've done my time in locked in spaces and spend much of my life challenging the debilitating force of social stigma attached to these particular characteristics of my identity. I live with White privilege in one of the most cosmopolitan, multi-cultural cities in the world and, most importantly, I am an activist working with social justice at the heart of everything I do.

I create performance as activism, challenging social inequality wherever I find it.

Most of my work has emerged from the Disability Arts movement. As Artistic Director at Vital Xposure theatre company, I work with an access aesthetic, which has evolved from the myriad of perceptions and life experiences of disabled and deaf people with whom I work. Access tools that ensure people with sensory and physical impairments can actively engage with work in public theatres are, too often, added as an afterthought. Vital Xposure produces theatre that ensures access is interwoven into the core of the work, embedded at the heart of the creative process, from the sketchbook to the stage, from planning to production. Atypical artists with atypical bodies and minds bring an exciting and crucial cultural shift to theatre making and, when permitted, unique voices in response to museum collections.

Over the last 30 years museums have been engaging new audiences with voices previously eclipsed in their collections, addressing provocations that lay bare questions around whose heritage is given priority, how collections are presented, and with potentially explosive questions around how museum collections have been obtained. Public perception has shifted considerably, with museums increasingly recognised as dynamic places for reflecting on the present as well as the past. Similarly, within the museum profession, there has been a slow but growing appreciation of the part that museums play in shaping collective values and the ways in which differences are viewed and valued (Sandell 2017).

The idea of the museum as a neutral space is increasingly revealed as a myth (Sandell 2007; Janes 2015). The monuments we have inherited from our colonial past were never intended to be neutral. Museums designed to present an aura of the glory of our imperialist past are, at last, commissioning artists as activists inside their buildings to respond to their collections. Some have taken considerable risks in presenting new conversations with artists on the political periphery, artists who have made a significant cultural shift with their message.

First up I would like to look at the UK's infamous urban hero, variously described as an art terrorist and political commentator, whose fabulous works began in the grime of city streets, dilapidated civic buildings and contested public spaces: Banksy.

Banksy versus Bristol Museum

It was an absolute joy to wander inside the walls of Bristol Museum and come across a classic marble statue of David sporting a black leather harness minus its strap-on, drawing your attention to his flaccid penis and the curve of his body, surrendered for our gaze and now prepared for a very public servicing. I had never before come across aspects of Lesbian, Gay or Queer life reflected back at me in the context of the museum milieu, certainly not outside Amsterdam's Venustempel sex museum.

Amid tight secrecy in 2009, Bristol Museum and Art Gallery hosted a sensational event curated and created by Banksy, the city's notoriously elusive graffiti artist and activist. This was a brave curatorial decision indeed. 'We ran a bit of a risk,' said Bristol Museum's then Director Kate Brindley, 'but … we're a gallery that wants to work with contemporary artists—he's our home-grown hero' (Brindley 2009). As it turned out, that shrewd gamble on behalf of the museum and gallery paid off.

Banksy versus Bristol Museum was a phenomenal success; sheer weight of visitor numbers bears out how spectacularly Banksy's exhibition animated public interest in the museum. It worked in favour of both the artist/activist and the museum host. Even critics, who had previously complained about museums hosting an artist known for illegal graffiti, grudgingly agreed it had been a great success.

Banksy's provocative exhibition reached into every spare inch of the museum's revered spaces with an audacious mix of class rage, complex symbols of vegetarian protest and insolent humour, puncturing the pretensions of the elite. In an ante room off the main hall, mounted amidst the great masters, there was a sprayed canvas image of an apron-clad middle aged woman tenderly adjusting a punk-haired youth's battle gear for street protests. It is the positioning of Banksy's anarchic image that titillates of course, but it is the detail in that gesture, fixed in aerosol paint, as she leans into him, that truly touched me. I don't recall my own mother ever checking my dress code before I hit the streets to march with the Anti-Nazi League although, to be fair, we were all ordered to wear clean underwear daily in case we got run over. Banksy's exhibition was a triumph of the politics of the oppressed crawling all over the gallery collections, quite literally in some cases. In the same room, I was thrilled with the explosive energy of an erratic line splashed across the floor, recklessly tracing its way across several museum exhibits announcing: 'This is where I draw the line.'

Every which way you turned, there was a bold statement challenging ideas of entitlement. And irony of ironies, the Bristol 'bad boy turned hero' was paid to land his punches; handsomely commissioned to install it all inside one of the country's landmark museums. As Banksy does not believe in copyright, we the public were invited to wander freely taking pictures or recordings on mobile phones. I have no idea how much it costs to remove his graffiti from public places but Banksy's irreverent middle finger, paid for via public funding, offers a precious moment of victory for artists and activists shaking up museum spaces. I have no doubt it took some considerable negotiation between all protagonists on board, but this eureka moment in contemporary curation must be one of the best examples of the museum as staging ground for social commentary I have yet experienced. As Banksy himself stated,

I've stuck some of my own paintings up in a museum. Only this time they're going to let them stay up for the whole summer ... Some of the fake historical relics I've inserted among Bristol's permanent collection should be entertaining—you can't tell what's truth and what's fiction.

(Banksy, cited in Januszczak 2009)

Referring to some of his work as 'fake historical relics' further emphasises the bias in the curatorial voices behind museum collections and casts still more doubt over the validity and reliability of the truths we are being presented with. That takes me back to Greta Minto's stories—just whose truth is it anyway?

Lisa Reihana and the *Pathway of Women*

Back in 2004 I had the good fortune to work in New Zealand with Dr Bernie de Lord, at the Mental Health Foundation. My endless gratitude goes to her for introducing me to the exquisite work of Lisa Reihana, whose deeply intuitive and passionately political creative thinking has had the most profound effect on me, inspiring my own performance as activism. Reihana's work spans moving image, digital art, sculptural form and live art and pushes the boundaries of gender, power, cultural piracy and colonisation. As a digital artist, she is ahead of her time.

Not often positioned as an activist, she is one of the most successful creative provocateurs I have encountered. Her voice as an artist has been crucial in engaging public debates around the marginalisation of Maori communities in New Zealand. The socio-political impact of her work has been far reaching, with a constant influx of visitors to Te Papa, New Zealand's national museum, and increasingly in galleries across the world.

Te ara a Hine is the pathway that welcomes visitors to the Marae or communal meeting space in Maori culture. Reihana's *Digital Marae*, as part of *The Pathway of Women* leading to the entrance to the Marae at Te Papa Museum, must surely have caused a stir when it was first unveiled. The Marae is a sacred space for community rites and rituals, usually built and carved by Maori men, and the pathway to the entrance filled with art created by a woman represents a hugely significant cultural shift. Reihana carves her way with extraordinary digital photography (Plate 4); with devastatingly powerful images of Mahuwika, the Fire goddess, and HineNui Tepo, first woman. Added to the political impact of her feminist aesthetic on the traditional Maori community and the wider public is her inclusion of *Takataapui* (gender fluid) images gently emerging in the walkway to the spiritual home with her theme: *Mai i te aroha, ko te aroha* ('From love comes love').

That strikes me as a highly radical statement. Museums are not usually hailed as spaces espousing love or celebrating gender non-conforming humans we have spent so much energy identifying, labelling and marginalising. But Te Papa was conceived as a unique museum, designed to reimagine New Zealand's bi-cultural nation and acknowledge Maori people as the original custodians of the land known by Maori people as Aotearoa.

In 2008, I received Research and Development funding from DaDa (Deaf and Disability Arts) Festival Liverpool, the year the city was elected European Capital of Culture. My response was *Crossings*, a piece exploring the ongoing impact of the slave

trade alongside the tyranny of the systematic oppression of women. I wanted to make work that spoke truthfully of the city's economic strength, with its origins built on the backs of enslaved people. Liverpool grew into one of the most powerful commercial ports in the world as a key stop off in the Middle passage; a thriving port where millions of African people seized for plantation labour were processed through its docks. Perhaps less acknowledged is the white cargo from Ireland with several thousand women, some as young as 12, seized to become broodmares to populate the new world (Craig 2013).

Deeply immersed in collecting evidence, I became some self-appointed rescuer, gathering stories from museum collections and archives to populate the world of that play; Nzingah's story was reimagined from the story of the *Zong*; Liverpool's ship of shame recorded in the International Slavery Museum on Albert dock; Katherine Heggarty's story was gleaned from the hauls and walls of Te Papa and Petone Settlers Museums in New Zealand. The Mandinka Griot I came across in the British Museum and a contemporary story was gleaned from a young woman from Merseyside, working hard to leave gang life behind her.

I had been searching for a striking image of an old woman to project onto our ship's sails and spill across the audience, when Lisa Reihana's work stopped me in my tracks. I was bowled over by a series of portraits she had installed en route to the Marae in Te Papa. Reihana gave me permission to use her portrait of HineNui Tepo featured in her *Digital Marae* in the *Pathway of Women*.

When I approached Lisa Reihana to request permission to use her work, she gave me a humbling education on culturally appropriate protocols. My request first went to the elders of the *iwi* and then to HineNui herself. They quite rightly wanted to know where this image was going to travel, where the projections would be displayed and just what the story of this play, re-imagining three women haunting a marooned ferry boat, was all about. In a nutshell, *Crossings* is a story about sexual slavery, with three generations of women colliding in multiple temporalities; it is a story of forced migration and cultural piracy with the life of an unborn child at stake. Reihana read the script together with the elders of the NgaPuhi, who blessed its journey into the world, crossing from Te Papa to the Treasure House Theatre in Liverpool's World Museum and on to its final staging at the Grand Opera House, Belfast. And so, the steady gaze of HineNui travelled with us, a visual reminder of the voice of conscience; watching over the proceedings from the ship's sails and holding the audience.

That blessing was the greatest gift I could have received at a time when I was faltering. The play toured for twelve months and it gave me enormous satisfaction to bring the production back to Liverpool, making a very public statement about the city's history built on slavery; sowing the seeds of change inside the hallowed halls of Empire through the political dimensions of performance as activism.

Aidan Shingler

Sometimes a chance conversation can lead to remarkable insights. In the late nineties, I was working as Artistic Director of London Disability Arts Forum. We were curating an exhibition of Aidan Shingler's *Only Smarties Have the Answer*, a unique collection of work challenging the psychiatric system, and I was in conversation with the artist himself.

Shingler resists all labels foisted upon him and chooses to identify as a Reality Tester. He describes his hugely perceptive ways of seeing the world, through the lens of what doctors have labelled schizophrenia as 'an extraordinary shift in consciousness . . . exquisite sensitivity, an acute psychic perceptiveness that changed the way in which I apprehend reality. . .' (Shingler in Emerson and Clarke 2002).

Prior to our conversation, it had never occurred to me that any shifts in my own perceptions of the world, distorted by experiences inside the psychiatric system, could have valid meaning, so I have pursued Shingler's work as an activist and an artist for many years. He sets out to redress the negative representations of people with altered states of consciousness; people perceived as mentally ill and disavowed as some form of contamination. He challenges the ways in which we oust undesirable humans from our social groupings, having marked them with stigma and discredited them as flawed. This process of disowning and stigmatising has profound implications since, as sociologist Erving Goffman has succinctly commented, 'a person with a stigma is not quite human' (1963: 5). Shingler has devoted his life to re-connecting us with our shared humanity, rigorously challenging the stigma attached to people labelled within the psychiatric system.

His provocations in museums and galleries have had a considerable impact on contemporary thinking in psychiatry and ruffled more than a few feathers in the pharmaceutical industry. In *Only Smarties Have the Answer*, Shingler's introduction to his body of work began when he arrived in a white coat engaging with the audience and offering orange Smarties decanted from their tubes into small white containers. I watched the impact of this simple gesture, which caused a mixture of delight and consternation. What are people more afraid of I wondered, the possibility of consuming psychotropic medication liberally foisted upon mental health users for the most spurious reasons or the possibility of human interaction with somebody who has been inside the psychiatric system?

Along the length of one wall in the gallery, I was enthralled by a meticulously referenced series of white bow ties framed in white casing. Each tie had been carefully crafted from surgical dressing and pinned with a red-topped needle replicating droplets of blood. Beneath each tie was the name of a psychiatrist and the drug that they so generously prescribed, alongside the pharmaceutical company they were connected to. It was a provocative statement referencing the impact of the drugs industry on the so-called 'recovery led' services. On the end wall of the gallery was mounted a circular clock with precisely placed capsules of psychotropic medication at each hourly interval. Beneath, it simply read: 'Medication time.'

Eve Ensler (2013: ix) describes an activist as:

> . . . someone who cannot help but fight for something. That person is not usually motivated by a need for power or money or fame, but in fact is driven slightly mad by some injustice, some cruelty, some unfairness, so much so that he or she is compelled by some internal moral engine to act to make it better.

Ensler could be talking about Aidan Shingler here. He has fought against injustice his entire life, experiencing social inequity as a very visceral pain that drives him to agitate the source. His work explores the spiritual and creative aspects of schizophrenia, and the way people so labelled are treated within the psychiatric system. As an artist and activist, he has the capacity to move us from some of the grim realities of life to the

expansive skies above us, from the mundane to the visionary potential of altered states of consciousness.

Pullen's Giant

In July 2017, Vital Xposure received funds to create an outdoor event for Liberty festival in London's Olympic Park—a modern heritage site developed around the stadium built for 2012's Olympics. This was our moment to revitalise one of the greatest works of James Henry Pullen, a phenomenal construction built in the 1870s and currently on exhibition at Langdon Down Museum of Learning Disability in London (Plate 5). Our mission was to create a replica of Pullen's Giant, an enormous wooden puppet designed and built entirely by Pullen, a man committed to an asylum for idiots for 66 years.

I had fallen in love with his 14-foot Giant, encountered during my research when, in 2015, I was commissioned for an ambitious project—*Exceptional and Extraordinary: Unruly Bodies and Minds in the Medical Museum*—initiated by the University of Leicester's Research Centre for Museums and Galleries, led by Jocelyn Dodd and Richard Sandell. The aim of the project was to work with museum collections, stories and expertise, 'to stimulate public and professional debate around an increasingly important and contested social issue—our individual and societal attitudes towards disabled people and the ways we think about, respond to, and treat people with physical and mental differences' (RCMG 2017). I had the privilege of exploring the collections of five of the eight medical museums involved in the research, driven by the question, 'why are some lives more highly valued than others?' (ibid.).

James Henry Pullen is, arguably, a contentious example amongst the activists in the context in which I am writing, not least because he has been dead for a hundred years. As a patient incarcerated in Royal Earlswood Asylum, he was never the author of his own life experiences. What little evidence remaining available to us has been recorded by doctors interrogating his intelligence and nursing attendants writing in the context of Pullen's medical records during an era when assumptions around intelligence were just beginning to be investigated.

With some considerable poetic licence, I am taking the dubious ethical position of re-imagining the life experiences and articulating the intentions of a man who was denied a voice in his own lifetime. Some might suggest that this is a valid part of the process of re-visioning the skewed stories we often come across in museum collections, with their incomplete histories and missing facts. I am simply acknowledging my discomfort as somebody whose own story has all too often been re-told through the lens of the medical profession, for here was a man who had been committed from the age of 15, labelled as an 'idiot' until his death in 1916. Much has been written in his medical records about Pullen's mood swings, his eccentricities, his rages that interrupted the smooth running of asylum life. Very little, however, is documented about how Pullen represented himself. Most poignant amongst the collection held at Langdon Down Museum is a short poem to his grandfather, written around 1850 and concealed in the mouth of an exquisitely carved moon, one eye brightly painted, the other a detailed image of the asylum itself:

> Oh this moon in cloudy smoky rain
> See moon cry want grandfather
> Shine the moon and keep cloud away
> Bright the eye to see Earlswood Asylum

There is no doubt that Pullen was a brilliant carver, carpenter and self-taught mechanical engineer. The man was an exceptional artist and, I am asserting here from the evidence I have interrogated, he was also an activist. Whilst acknowledging the audacity of imagining Pullen's experiences through my own cultural filters, I am also working from evidence in the archives and on display at Langdon Down Museum, situated in the grounds of the former Normansfield Asylum. The poem offers us the only self-penned evidence of Pullen's inner world and reveals quite a different person to the one represented in his medical records and archives collected from Earlswood Asylum. He was the subject of a range of medical investigations and labelled in a variety of ways, first as an 'idiot savant' and latterly, during Queen Victoria's reign, he came to be known in the Royal House amongst dignitaries and patrons of the asylum, as 'The Genius of Earlswood.'

Pullen was born in Dalston, London in 1835 and swiftly identified as a child with a communication disorder. He spoke few words and showed signs of deafness. Although he was later found to be intelligent, his medical records describe him as presenting with difficult behaviour. I would like to suggest here that incarcerating somebody with whom you clearly have a difficulty communicating will, indeed, evoke difficult behaviour.

Pullen was already creating intricate carvings in ivory when he entered asylum life. He was then taught basic skills in the hospital's carpentry shop. His skills surpassed those of his tutor and it was not long before his superb craftsmanship brought him to the attention of the Royal family, carving ivory artefacts for the Prince of Wales, the future King Edward VIII, later progressing to magnificent wooden replicas of Queen Victoria's fleet. Two wonderful examples of his wooden models remain on display at Langdon Down Museum: SS Great Eastern and the Princess Alexandra.

Two extraordinary acts mark Pullen out as a man with a mission. The first, his construction of a guillotine with which, it is alleged, he attempted to do away with an objectionable staff nurse who he experienced as a bully. The contraption, mounted over the entrance to Pullen's workshop, was intended for the nurse but the mechanism on the guillotine failed and the nurse was spared. We have learned a great deal about Pullen's skills since creating a replica of his work and given the complexities of his designs and rigorous investigations, I would suggest that the guillotine was intended as a warning. Pullen had made his message clear and that staff member never entered his workshop again. The second and equally effective active intervention disrupting protocols inside the asylum, was Pullen's construction and manipulation of his wooden puppet, known as Pullen's Giant. To this day it remains on display at the Langdon Down Museum, on the grounds of the former Normansfield Asylum, a wonderful specimen and perhaps my favourite of all the objects I examined in detail in the course of my investigations.

It states in Pullen's records that he thought of the giant as his guardian. Descriptions of Pullen's activities with the giant suggest that he sought refuge inside it, most notably on summer fete days when visitors were invited into the grounds to watch the lunatics make lively. He would climb inside the puppet through a door at the rear and roar at the gathering crowds through two horns or cornets he had fashioned himself, like early versions of a megaphone. He operated the puppet from inside with a unique system of pulleys and levers. His giant could blink, open and close his mouth, flap his ears and move his arms. Pullen had also engineered a circular track at the base of the head with ball bearings which he had moulded himself, so that the entire head could swivel 360 degrees, which must have made quite an impact on the crowds.

There are particularly negative tropes around disability throughout our recorded histories as human beings and these are powerfully manifest in many museums, especially those with medical collections. Our views and responses may have changed over time, according to the prevailing economic state of our cultural contexts, but the over-whelming idea of a disabled life being inferior and 'unworthy of life' persists. Riva Lehrer, portrait artist and activist working at the heart of the Disabled People's Move-ment, has worked extensively inside museums challenging the negative messages regard-ing the disabled body. As she comments:

> . . . all bodies are exquisite, as they flow between all possible forms of what it is to be human . . . Most people would never notice that a disability could be the direct cause of strength and health; yet this is the magical thing about bodies—they respond to the unexpected with their own forms of poetic genius.
>
> *(Lehrer 2017)*

We can only surmise what life was like incarcerated inside Earlswood Asylum, with its strict protocols, containing and controlling the feeble inhabitants in an asylum built for 400 inhabitants. We do know that Pullen was allowed little freedoms in exchange for his extraordinary carvings. He was permitted to take his meals with the staff and was escorted on several occasions to a local tavern where 'he became enamoured of a woman from the local town' who worked as a barmaid. It is recorded that he requested permission to marry her although any lunatics, idiots or feeble minded people coming under the Idiocy and Mental Deficiency legislation of the time were prevented from marrying. Pullen was, of course, refused permission. The staff procured an Admiral's uniform to mollify Pullen, who was informed that Queen Victoria had intervened and requested his services at the head of her fleet, but Admirals were not allowed to marry. He was offered the uniform if 'he should forget his request to marry.' He wore the uniform almost daily for the remaining years of his life. There are no records of what became of the woman concerned.

Fast forward 147 years to Liberty festival of Disability Arts, 15 July 2017, London. The revival of Pullen's Giant for Admiral Pullen's Parade was a culmination of 2 years' research and a collaboration between Tony Mason, puppet maker with Emergency Exit Arts, Vital Xposure and Access All Areas. We recruited a cast of three actors with learning disabilities, a crowd of onlookers with placards produced from workshops created on site, and took to the pathways reclaiming the park with Pullen's Giant roaring for 'Freedom' as he led us out into the public park. Our audiences, enthused by the story behind the creation of Pullen's Giant, waved their placards with abandon, shouting: 'Nothing about Us without Us,' 'Equal Rights for All' and chanting loudly: 'No Ifs, No Buts, March with Us Against the Cuts!'

There is something deeply satisfying in having given Pullen a chance to speak all these years later, when the crowds are still gathering at Liberty festivals to watch the lunatics make lively. Admiral Pullen's Parade was presented in Summer 2017, in the context of one of the most oppressive governments in contemporary British politics being challenged by the United Nations for its failures in upholding the human rights of disabled people (Butler 2017). The Parade provided a moment where a collective of people, previously unknown to each other, gathered together to absorb a story with fresh insights; a story that moved

and provoked them to join a public protest, to take up placards expressing rage at the growing social inequity we are living with.

I have often been asked why I choose to make work that is driven by social justice, why I make ethical theatre or performance that is socially engaged. It is because performance in public spaces has the capacity to provoke change, to activate and animate audiences through the shared visceral reaction of a community of people, all affected by one story.

Like theatre, museums have a critical role to play in shaping the moral trends and political opinions of the societies in which we live. Let's applaud the Museum then, as a repository for human stories, a site ideally suited for activism, offering inspiration for artists and activists to reimagine and animate extraordinary collections. Radical new voices from a wide cultural spectrum that truly reflect contemporary society are attracting diverse new audiences to museums, crucially addressing the distorted narratives that support many collections on display, drawing on evidence with new ways of seeing and fleshing out partial histories to present ethically engaged and socially purposeful narratives for the public.

What new lessons might we learn from the voices still clamouring to speak to us from the shadows of the collectors' cabinets? What if we heard from Banksy's apron-clad middle-aged woman and asked her to present her own collection of artefacts depicting life in working class Bristol? Imagine her voice stamped with authoritative energy inside the museum walls. What if Reihana's Takatapui gender fluid beings spoke to us from the walls of her *Digital Marae*? Imagine the impact on young and old LGBTIQ visitors to the museum halls? What if Aidan Shingler's work was allowed an international audience and the voices from locked-in spaces so disavowed in our societies were taken seriously? Imagine how his work would affect people who have survived the challenges of mental health issues or supported family members to do so.

It will take a great tidal force to reverse the image of the museum as an oppressive monument to a colonial past, and acknowledge the museum as a central contributor to building a just and equitable society, but there are enough energetic activists and artists up for the challenge. Let's do it.

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10

'I'M GONNA DO SOMETHING'

Moving beyond talk in the museum

Bernadette Lynch

One day recently, in the bare and uninspiring location of an East London adult education centre (now threatened by government spending cuts), I came across a group of headscarf-wearing Muslim women squeezed into the centre's small staff lunchroom. This group of women, whom I had met before and found to be quiet and shy, were talking excitedly in their various languages while gathered around a staff member's open laptop computer.

I enquired from this staff member what was going on and she showed me what was on the screen. It was a BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) television news interview with some of the women that were now present in this small room. They had just that morning been interviewed—rather aggressively, it appeared—as 'mothers', about their response to the radicalisation of young Muslims. The interviewer's clear suggestion was that the women should somehow carry the responsibility for de-radicalising their young, and that they were responsible for young Muslims potentially being radicalised in the first place.

Rather than being offended (as I was on their behalf), the women were plainly excited to have been asked their views on anything! They discussed and debated among themselves the questions that had been posed to them in the interview, sharing some of these views in their halting English—something the aggressive interviewer had plainly not given them time to do earlier. Their enthusiasm spilled over into the beginnings of the 'creative' session that followed in an adjoining classroom. This series of workshops were hosted by a major museum in collaboration with this adult learning centre, as part of the museum's time-limited, 'outreach' project with women from Islamic communities.

The session began (as I had witnessed in the previous weeks) with the museum staff member taking charge and introducing the 'creative learning' agenda. On this particular afternoon, as the museum staff member spoke, the women once again fell back into their usual quiet and subdued 'passive learner' roles. This was the end of their opportunity, or apparent desire, to share their opinions on what had occurred earlier that day. Suddenly, there was no room for their opinions.

Yet, the museum presented this programme, as do many others, as an example of 'outreach-as-active agency', simply based upon the fact that it targets marginalised communities and offers them 'participation' in museum-led programmes. I have written extensively

elsewhere a critique of museum participation in this form, in which the participants are seen as passive beneficiaries rather than active agents (Lynch and Alberti 2010; Lynch 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c).

In this chapter, I am interested in a growing awareness of the need to 'do something', to take action; a notion that is captured so well by Patti Smith in the lyrics of her song 'Don't Say Nothing' (1997) from which the title of this chapter is taken. I am interested in a deeper level of democratic engagement, as we witness museums increasingly adopting the notion of 'social activism' in response to the clear warnings outlined so well, for instance, by Robert R. Janes, in his book *Museums in a Troubled World: Renewal, Irrelevance or Collapse* (2009). I am interested in the growing rhetoric of 'activist practice' (Sandell and Dodd 2010) in museums. My question with regard to the latter is, whose activism? Or, what might have occurred if the Muslim women at the adult learning centre that day had been encouraged by the Museum to express their voice and their opinions? What does a museum actually mean when it shifts to an 'activist practice' in relation to people like these women?

Pity porn or activism for change?

> Activism is the rent I pay for living on this planet.
>
> (Alice Walker)[1]

In the past few years, there has been growing talk about a social justice, activist, rights-based approach in museums.[2] Yet, what exactly this consists of remains unclear. We have museums committing to action for social change, but as Nora Landkammer of the Europe-wide Traces research project[3] notes for museums, 'social change sounds good so long as you don't say what the change is about'.[4] Landkammer suggests that it may be more useful for museums to publicly focus, instead, upon social justice through fostering a rights-based practice.

If we borrow from reflections on rights-based practice in an international development context (Nyamu-Musembi and Cornwall 2004), a rights-based approach must be inter-rogated for the extent to which it enables those whose lives are affected the most to articulate their priorities and to make change happen. Thus, a rights-based approach might be described as empowering people to know, claim and activate their rights, and increasing the ability and accountability of individuals and institutions who are responsible for respecting, protecting and fulfilling rights. It is also about clearly articulating those rights.

In line with this, there are some emerging rights-based practices and rights-based museums within the museum community that aim to go further in what might be considered the museum's moral responsibility to help others take up their own agency in making change happen. These are museums that aim to assist people in campaigning for change with a very specific political focus—for example, how the UK deals with the dramatic growth in homelessness. The UK's new Museum of Homelessness (a museum project not yet with a home of its own), launched 'State of the Nation' in spring 2017 at the Tate Modern (Figure 10.1), a year-long creative exploration into the homelessness crisis that presently grips the UK. This campaign (for this is what it is) aims to shine a light on the realities of homelessness today. It is actively pushing for change, while the activism it promotes is that of people themselves taking up that fight—those who are now, or were in the past, homeless (Museum of Homelessness 2017).

FIGURE 10.1   David Tovey, *A Soldier's Story* at State of the Nation, January 2018.
Photograph by Anthony Luvera.

Avoiding what they pointedly call 'pity porn', their focus is on change in public perception (prejudice towards the homeless), as well as policy change through lobbying government and, where necessary, agitation and disruption. As they put it, 'we bring together volunteers and community members to research the history of homelessness, discuss and present stories, objects and art to help people understand each other better' (ibid.). The project notes that the initial feedback from those involved in their 'State of the Nation' programmes has been powerful, because 'people feel acknowledged' (ibid.).

Performative or operational activism in the museum

It is important to differentiate between the museum's activist image (for example, an exhibition on refugees or climate change) and its efforts to support others in developing their own activism for actual change. The latter is something with which not all museums are comfortable. Tara Bell is an artist/researcher who recently worked on a series of projects with Glasgow's Riverside Museum, aimed at increasing the agency of local people. These are people from communities that have faced long-term discrimination and consequently harbour a great deal of mistrust towards institutions, including museums, where they are poorly, if at all, represented.

Bell notes that museums can be effective in representing un-represented groups, but they have a great deal of difficulty in entering into an 'active, precise criticism of either local or national government' (Bell 2017). She asks if this means that only institutions 'whose livelihood is not dependent on local or national funding are the ones best able to enter into

activist partnerships with communities'. As one museum staff member (who preferred to remain anonymous) stated, 'I want to do stuff that is more radical than museums can handle'.

Yet, museums increasingly add the word 'activist' to their repertoire of social engagement goals. What does this mean? Alistair Hudson, Director of MIMA (the UK's Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art) importantly notes, 'we need to differentiate between performative activism and operational activism—a lot of the problem with contemporary art [for example] is that it only allows it to be the former' (Hudson 2017).[5] Hudson expresses anxiety about exhibitions which are always performative—a 'show'. The concern here is when the museum's 'activism' becomes just for 'show', in contrast to actually working in collaboration with people to *do* something.

Under Hudson's direction, all of MIMA's exhibitions have been influenced by his commitment to the idea of 'the useful museum' (inspired by international Arte Util movement that he co-founded).[6] MIMA has begun by responding to local issues by directly addressing local urgencies—for example, the infamous 'red doors' in Middlesbrough.[7] These include workshops with people who are seeking asylum in the Middlesbrough area (particularly single mothers and their pre-school children) to deal with some of the issues they face, from racism to perceptions around the 'refugee crisis'. The gallery's projects give a platform to these concerns, and feature collaborative works that have, for example, included a co-produced children's book that challenges stereotypes associated with migration using the words of local children themselves.

One of Hudson's other strategies for MIMA is to try to make the institution's operational side visible—to use exhibitions as an introduction to ideas and processes, rather than an end in themselves. In this way, local people are invited to represent themselves and contribute their own views and ideas and to exercise influence—a part of participation that museums all too often leave out. Hudson puts it this way, 'as working-class culture has collapsed, the support mechanisms have gone... The museum offers itself as a function for people to construct a story to build their lives around' (Hudson 2017). He maintains that there is an underestimation of the useful role institutions like museums could have in a community in this way.

Hudson's new vision for MIMA is very much based on establishing strong local partnerships with grassroots organisations, local authorities, development agencies and locally-based industries, situating the museum as a partner in local planning, regeneration, employment (traineeships) and social enterprise based upon full public participation, debate and co-production. He sees the museum as both a catalyst and an agent of social change.

There are other museums emerging that have embedded themselves in this ethical rights-based activist practice. Let's ask this question again, this time in Berlin, of the current, high-profile Multaqa Project.[8] Berlin's National Museum of Islamic Art's long-established, Syrian Heritage Archive project was the reason the Museum initiated this live-interpretation/museum tour programme—building upon existing international links with these communities and recruiting new migrants to offer guided tours led by Syrian and Iraqi refugees. Other national museums then came on board as well.[9] Based on the idea of fostering a transcultural narrative, the museums found guides through their existing networks.[10]

The guides themselves choose the objects on display which they wish to highlight for their tours. Following training provided by the collaborating museums, tours started in

December 2015, with the intention of creating dialogue in the museums. To date, more than 6500 visitors have taken part in a Multaqa tour with more than 670 guided tours. The project has received huge media coverage nationally and internationally, as the focus has been to work with largely Muslim migrant communities, while tension continues to grow between these and 'host' communities.

Yet, when interviewed regarding the purpose of the project, the Multaqa coordinators (some of them refugees) questioned whether the state support for the project is based on the fact that it was seen as a cultural integration/assimilation process—'a small part of a "drip-drip" integration process', as they put it (Multaqa Project Coordinators 2017),[11] and as reflected in the nature of its government funding. This is particularly pertinent as all the guides are centrally trained by the museum service, ensuring a continuous corporate message. Nonetheless, the project coordinators add that, for the most part, those migrants involved in giving tours are pleased that the museums appreciate their history—the history of their country of origin and its culture. They also add that there is a feeling that the museum is a 'safe space', noting, 'We have a lot of freedom … we can discuss anything, including breaking taboos'. They also note, 'if you're brave enough!' (ibid.).

The Multaqa guides add that 'the reality of civic discourse is difficult' in this context, observing that more time is needed for reflection in such a dialogical process between the guides and the public involved in the museum tours (so far, many of the tours are aimed at other refugees). They wonder also if they are limiting the stories to people's own cultural backgrounds, thereby perpetuating cultural stereotyping. They added that having tours by refugees simply for other refugees, risks keeping people 'in their bubble' (ibid.). They then tried organising workshops for refugees and non-refugees to address these problems. In addition, as many of the refugees who attended were male (recruited from language schools) they decided to hold workshops for women.

The Multaqa project works closely with social workers (who are working with the refugees) in order to recruit refugee audiences for the museum tours but say that their 'dream is to motivate people [refugees] directly', without mediation, noting that sometimes the social workers are employed by private companies. 'We don't want to lose the personal connection by depending upon mediators', they add (ibid.). The guides have formed a strong network between themselves and they note that not all the guides have the same aims. Similarly, the project itself is at a point of redefining its aims. There is an interest in 'breaking up the very white museum structure'. They want to also broaden the scope of the project to include other refugees such as Iranians, Eritreans and Afghanis, noting that, 'Syrians and Iraqis are the preferred refugees'. They mention that there already exists resentment among the refugees at what's seen as preferential treatment. They ask, 'How can you possibly discriminate between refugees?' (ibid.). Their hope is to also break through another language barrier to those who don't speak English or German. On the occasion of the city's annual World Refugee Day (20 June 2017), Multaqa offered free guided tours in German to all Berliners. In this way, they say they hoped to thank all those who make a valuable contribution to emergency accommodation, dormitories, language schools and fugitive organisations every day, and to draw attention to their project.

The Multaqa project, an award-winning and much-watched programme, is a brave attempt by a network of national museums to address a high-profile local, national and international issue—the lack of communication between recent migrants and 'host' communities. It is aimed at using collections to open up dialogue and understanding between

refugees and local communities. While breaking new ground, the project is still in the early stages of expanding on this promise and realising the museum's eventual aim of integrating the Multaqa approach in terms of intercultural, and potentially conflicting perspectives, throughout the interpretation of the museums' collections. It is undeniably a good start. As to the earlier question, is it aimed at increasing people's agency, or simply raising the 'rights-based' image of the museum? The answer is possibly both.

Museums memorialising activist movements of the past

> The revolting past was given a makeover and moved to the silence of the museum.
>
> *(Grindon 2014)*

Museums have often collaborated with the concealment or sterilisation of the history of past protest. Yet, more and more museums have recently taken to acknowledging previous social/environmental movements, or at least putting on display this previously under-acknowledged area of social history; perhaps underestimating its potential impact. The writer, Rebecca Solnit (2016a, 2016b), referring to her book, *Hope in the Dark*, put it this way:

> We have a seldom-told, seldom-remembered history of victories and transformations that can give us confidence that, yes, we can change the world because we have many times before. You row forward looking back, and telling this history is part of helping people navigate toward the future. We need a litany, a rosary, a sutra, a mantra, a war chant of our victories.
>
> *(Solnit 2016b)*

Most remarkable in this regard is the impressive 25-year-old Glasgow Women's Library, which has now gained museum status because of its collections/archives and ground-breaking collaborative programmes, exhibitions and organisational processes. It is a fine example of activist protest, right back to its founding and on through its current practices. The Women's Library came out of a campaign to promote equality, diversity and inclusion for women. As one of the Library's founders and its Lifelong Learning and Creative Development Manager, Adele Patrick, puts it, the Library has always empha-sised the necessity to learn from past activism and resistance to discrimination. Patrick notes 'You only have to have a little glimpse of something—a legacy—to want to act' (Patrick 2017).

The Library's archives contain records of a host of past and present campaigns: anti-nuclear, anti-racist, and anti-sectarian. Patrick emphasises the importance of making the record of social/political movements available to provide inspiration for action and change. Yet, the Library is also firmly rooted in the present, and has not shied away from facing up to the most difficult of subject matter with contemporary resonance, such as sectarianism. The project, *Mixing The Colours: Women Speaking About Sectarianism*, tackled continuing sectarian conflict in the city head on.[12] Patrick adds, 'We need to create an environment where people can openly share their points of view, and we can point to the collections that show how women have been involved in leading these debates' (Patrick 2017). The

commitment to encouraging women to conduct their own research into women's struggles, battles and victories of the past and present is central to the Library's work.

Research as activism: a uniquely museum-based form of effective activism

Museums involved in upskilling people as researchers is a continuous theme running throughout the best of the 'activist' museum programmes cited in this paper, so that people can make use of the knowledge they uncover, both inside and outside the museum (see for example, Liverpool Museums Archives Activism project).[13] Through bringing together these uncovered, past histories with people's own lived experience, and informed by networking and open debate, the museum becomes a useful vehicle for individual and collective activism. This is powerful and, as we will see in the example of the Danish Welfare Museum, it can change public policy and almost certainly change people's lives.

Let us consider this notion of research as a right and a bedrock of activism in the rights-based museum. Arjun Appadurai, a social-cultural sociologist recognised as a major theorist in globalisation studies, argues that the ability to conduct research on one's social surround should be considered a basic human right (Appadurai 2006; cited in Cammarota and Fine 2010: vii). By the 'right to research', Appadurai means, 'the right to the tools through which any citizen can systematically increase that stock of knowledge which they consider most vital to their survival as human beings and to their claims as citizens' (Appadurai 2006: 168). Appadurai points out that full citizenship today demands the ability to make 'strategic' and 'continuous' inquiries on a range of issues—race, riots, labour market shifts, migration, prisons, and environment among them (ibid.: 168).

In *Revolutionizing Education*, educational theorists Julio Cammarota and Michelle Fine (2010) asserted the right to research as a fundamental right for all young people around the globe. In particular, they note the use of participatory action research (PAR)—research that is conducted 'with' or 'by', as opposed to 'on', youth about the issues they feel are most important in their lives. Frank Fischer, a politics and global affairs specialist, similarly proposes that participatory research be brought into mainstream policy analysis by examining examples of 'action research' and working with what he calls 'communities of inquirers' (Fischer 2000). He suggests that, 'rather than providing technical answers designed to resolve or close off political discussion regarding pressing social or political problems, the task is to assist citizens in their efforts to examine their own interests and to make their own decisions' (ibid.: 171).

As mentioned earlier, Tara Bell with Glasgow's Riverside Museum worked with a group of retired women workers in Glasgow's industrial working-class district of Govan. The work included helping them research and revive their own hidden history of activist protest (this team called itself 'The Strong Women of Clydesdale'), and leading guided walks in Glasgow for younger women to understand this legacy of women's industrial protest.[14] Bell describes this work as:

> . . . increasing agency and representation, but also, importantly, *upskilling*—on all sides. It includes upskilling the community members as researchers/curators as well as the upskilling the museum staff, so that, for example, the museum learns that, as she puts it, 'you cannot co-curate that which you have already decided'.
>
> *(Bell 2017)*

People's open access to research methodologies is precisely what the Danish Welfare Museum (Svendborg, Denmark) is attempting to establish, in a way that is not only liberating through informing and inspiring activism, but also by actively changing the Museum itself. At this remarkable Museum, active research is a tool that, in turn, promotes and facilitates change. Most importantly, the activism is led by people themselves, using *research* that the Museum has traditionally monopolised. The Museum collaborates with people who are, or have been, stigmatised and excluded, as well as having experienced social vulnerability, lack of understanding, and personal downturns. Museum Director, Sarah Smed, says, 'the power is with people as the researchers' (Smed 2017).

Central to their success is the rehabilitating effect that sharing and debating their personal history, thoughts and reflections, in the context of the Museum, has for the participants. As one care-survivor and participant described it to Smed, 'It has been therapeutic, because we have had so many in-depth talks and discussions, which has been both redeeming and thoughtful'.[15]

The manager of a local care home for homeless people described to Smed the effect of the partnership programmes with the Museum and some of their residents in this way, 'The experience of being heard, seen and taken seriously as a human being can seem trite, but the importance of this for socially vulnerable citizens simply cannot be stressed enough'.[16]

The Museum's research project *Welfare Stories from the Edge of Society* embodies a desire to establish a new kind of social history with a focus on social justice through a close collaboration with care leavers. The broad definition of a care leaver, as described by the UK's Care Leavers Association, is 'Any adult who spent time in care as a child, i.e. under the age of 18. Such care could be in foster care, residential care—mainly children's homes —or other arrangements outside the immediate or extended family'.[17] Engaged in research-ing *Welfare Stories* at the Danish Welfare Museum, the adult care leavers have the opportunity for the first time to research their own 'journeys' through access to government records made available through the Museum. This makes it possible for care leavers to read, comment, reply, and reflect on their child record—an emotionally powerful experience.[18]

Most importantly, as the adult care leavers read their own child records for the first time in the States' archives, they often become frustrated—not able to recognise or identify with the child described. Some speak of their wish to negotiate the records' wording and to challenge the narrative and concepts of 'truth'. As Smed (2017) puts it, 'It seems that starting dialogues in the past creates respectful debates in the present, where difficult personal issues can be shared, discussed and understood'. The understanding of the child records also has consequences for the way the history of institutionalised childhood is presented by the Museum, and the ways in which museums, with other partners, can assist adult care leavers in their efforts to make sense of their past.

The poignant perspectives of those sometimes-vulnerable people, engaged in the participatory research programmes within the Museum's collections, frequently include participants' comments on how thought-provoking it is for them to encounter the aspects (and objects) of the welfare system of the past—helping them to realise how little has changed.

Through *Hidden Denmark Stories*, the Museum focuses on social change with the active participation of alternative 'experts' researching the Museum's archival collections. In this case, the expert researchers are care leavers researching past histories of others in care, and making connections with their own, more recent experiences. Thus, the parallels that the

participants discover in the Museum's collections and archives through conducting their own research into the experience of other individuals in care, now and in the past, continue to add to their understanding of the past while empowering their own lives in the present.[19]

Two further examples of the Museum's many participatory initiatives, *Memory Mondays* and *Panel of Experience*, continue to demonstrate the potential of actively co-producing the history of the institutionalised. The Museum also focuses on training for social workers, mental health workers, teachers and local authorities through role play reversals and facilitating active interaction with care leavers. The Museum also works with other marginalised sectors, for example, collaborating with homeless groups who have taken the lead in contemporary collecting and creating exhibitions based on their own experiences. In this way, the Museum strives to use its position to facilitate processes of social sustainability, agency and social justice.

Reflective practice: breaking through relations between museums and people

The welfare economist, Amartya Sen (2009: 19) defines a capability as 'the power to do something' and examines how ideas of justice relate to ideas of power, capability and democracy This 'power to do something' can be fundamentally understood as the power that people can exercise in helping civil society institutions translate their democratic rhetoric into workable practice—to collaboratively reach, as Sen puts it, a 'reasoned diagnosis' for what is to be done (ibid.: 4–5). A process of shared, open and participatory critical appraisal clearly demonstrates that the only way activism can be meaningful, and therefore effective in museums, is through a commitment to ongoing, collaborative and reflective practice. In this way, individuals can develop their capabilities while becoming activated.

The Glasgow Women's Library extends its activism to critically reflect on its own governance, so that their commitment to equality and diversity is reflected in the way the Library is governed. The Library works with a large and diverse number of local women volunteers, some of whom go on to become more involved in the Library's governance. The Board includes women from different backgrounds, with a recent emphasis on encouraging younger women to get involved through a series of innovative programmes of awareness-raising and engagement. The Library staff mentor women and encourage them to join the Board. To ensure there is clear communication and no dominant voices, teams have been set up across all areas of the Library's many areas of activity. These teams include volunteers, staff and Board members (while also pulling in people from outside). The brief is simple—to 'address stuck areas'.

The Danish Welfare Museum and Glasgow Women's Library are highly reflective, self-aware organisations, where reflection and inclusive activism are fundamental elements of their vision and mission—their organisational 'DNA'. They are moving notions of 'activism' away from mere 'performativism' and practising it throughout their organisations—behind the scenes as well as on display.

Museums offering hope *and* action

In the end, who benefits from the museum's activism? For the museum to simply assume the activist role on behalf of people is to potentially and inadvertently deprive people of the

chance to make change happen. So-called 'activist museums' may simply serve, if we borrow from the writer and activist Arundhati Roy, to:

> ... defuse political anger and dole out as aid or benevolence what people ought to have by right. They alter the public psyche. They turn people into dependent victims and blunt political resistance ... They have become the arbitrators, the interpreters, the facilitators.
>
> *(Roy 2014)*

While the museum simply highlights current issues, it is not the same as a commitment to activism embedded within a rights-based practice that shares a commitment to facilitating people's right to express themselves and act towards social change—and therefore hope.

The museum's role now must be to create an environment of *hope* and *action*, while continuously reflecting upon its own role that may, inadvertently and periodically, be getting in the way. The museum may then have a hope of helping to harness collective power for change. This is an activist role for which, as this paper shows, some museums are leading the way and beginning to help people to effectively mobilise.

In his recent book, *Age of Anger*, Pankaj Mishra (2017) ends his blistering declamation with the all-too-convincing warning of a global pandemic of powerlessness and rage. Action is urgent and imperative if it is not already too late. Museums have little choice but to respond—now. Such mobilisation means helping people, as political philosopher Celikates (2016: 14) puts it, to act:

> ... as citizens, in many cases (most evidently, in the case of undocumented migrants and refugees) without being recognized as citizens by the state. In these ways they are reclaiming the political capacities of citizens that the state (or some other actor that acts in a state-like fashion) denies them or grants them only partially.

This is why activism matters more than ever in the museum—not performative, but real operational, collaborative, change-making activism—to collectively learn from past struggles and, above all, combat rage and despair. In the words of Patti Smith at the beginning of this chapter, to 'do something'.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 A quote by Alice Walker from the film poster for *Alice Walker: Beauty in Truth* (2013), a documentary film directed by Pratibha Parmar.

2 See for example, the Social Justice Alliance for Museums (http://sjam.org/). See also Sandell and Nightingale (2012); Sandell (2017).

3 Traces is a three-year project (March 2016–February 2019) that brings together artists, ethnographers, heritage agencies and other stakeholders from nine EU countries (www.traces.polimi.it/.).

4 Nora Landkammer is Department Head at the Institute for Art Education at Zurich's University of the Arts. She is also work-package leader for Education and Stakeholder Involvement in the Traces Research Project. Her project is promoting what it calls, an 'open research atmosphere'. See TRACES: Transmitting Contentious Cultural Heritage with the Arts (www.traces.polimi.it/.).

5 See also Hudson's (2016) article on art museums and social justice.

6 www.arte-util.org/about/activities/.

7 Note Middlesbrough's asylum seekers' 'red doors' controversy: http://uk.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-britain/red-doors-mark-out-asylum-seekers-houses-in-english-town-idUKKCN0UY0R0.

8 See here for more information on Berlin's Multaqa Project: www.unite4heritage.org/en/news/multaka-refugees-provide-guided-tours-Berlin.

9 The museums involved in the project include: Museum of Islamic Art in the Pergamon Museum; Asian Museum in the Pergamon Museum; Museum of Byzantine Art /Sculpture Collection in the Bode Museum, and the German Historical Museum.

10 The Multaqa guides are paid for their tours.

11 Multaqa Project coordinators, in an interview with the author for this paper, Berlin, Summer, 2017.

12 See http://womenslibrary.org.uk/discover-our-projects/mixing-the-colours/.

13 See The Sankofa Project: https://blog.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/2016/11/activism-and-archives/.

14 For more information on their projects, see: www.doorsopendays.org.uk/places/glasgow/walk-strong-women-of-clydeside-protests-and-suffragettes/.

15 Richardt Aamand quoted by Sarah Smed (2017).

16 Gitte K. Jacobsen, quoted by Sarah Smed (2017).

17 See UK Care Leavers Association: http://www.careleavers.com/who-we-are/what-is-a-care-leaver-2/.

18 Welfare Stories is the Welfare Museum's research project and is a collaboration with Southern Danish University and DaWS—the Danish Center for Welfare Studies. The project is funded by the Velux Foundation.

19 The Museum's 'Hidden Danmarkshistorier'. Available online: www.skjultedanmarkshistorier.dk/.

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11

FEMINISM AND THE POLITICS OF FRIENDSHIP IN THE ACTIVIST MUSEUM

Viv Golding

Groundings: affect and activist museums in Kurdistan, Northern Iraq

Jacques Derrida (1997: 1) opens *The Politics of Friendship* with an 'almost impossible' declaration: 'Oh my friends, there is no friend.' Derrida is thinking about who speaks and who listens in social space, which he locates within wider political, historical and legal framings. This chapter draws on Derrida to examine how encounters and engagements with 'Otherness' in the museum can promote affinity, feelings of being-at-home, optimistically pointing to the real democracy 'yet-to-come.' The chapter explores the true and perfect friendship that illuminates, that gives visibility in museums and other social spaces. Such friendship is not satisfied with what is; rather it is concerned with impending responsibility, a promise, opening up a future being-together beyond nationalism, patriotisms, or ethnocentrisms (ibid.: 236–7). It is an ideal that resonates in the work of feminist creative writers and theorists including: Sara Ahmed (2000, 2004), Judith Butler (2009), and my own dear friend and museum activist colleague of more than thirty years, Professor Joan Anim-Addo (2008).

The feminist theory informing this chapter and my own museum practice is not separatist but argues that issues—notably of gender, race, class and sexual identity—intertwine. This demands men and women fight shoulder-to-shoulder against sexism, just as Black and white people together challenge racism. It is injustice in the social sphere, the museum and the wider world, that a feminist lens illuminates. The standpoint feminist theory—activist feminism—I employ in the museum pays attention to that which is excluded or ignored. Activist feminism underscores the taken-for-granted 'knowledges' that have thrived on consensus about who speaks and who listens. It listens actively, taking account of and seeking out her-stories, not just the histories written by those with authority, too often economically privileged white men. As the Nigerian proverb, modified by the Grenadian poet Merle Collins (1995: 63), tells us: 'Until the lioness speaks her stories, tales of hunting, will always be told by the hunter.'

Affect is central to my understanding of activist feminism and the politics of friendship in the museum: referencing biology and the physical body, our tears and laughter, as well as our emotion and feeling states of mind (Golding 2013). Affect is embodied

meaning making that, in the context of the museum, could be understood as what Sara Ahmed terms 'ongoingness,' our relationships with objects and others over time (2004). Affect, then, denotes how things and people in the world are brought closer to our minds through complex entanglements. In other words, affect is concerned with knowledge(s) as embodied. This notion of embodiment breaks down the binary thought that divides—us/them, nature/culture, man/woman, theory/practice—in a movement from distance to proximity, whereby the strange can become familiar and the familiar strange. In the affective museum, imaginative activity is vital to forging 'relation' and building true friendships, which are always located within a socio-political realm, where we come to know the 'other-within' in ways that determine our collective and individual humanity (Golding 2013). Relation is deeper than engagement; it takes time and effort, inside and outside of the museum.

Thomas Dixon's (2014) research network reinforces the opaque edges between the individual and the collective, kinship and friendship that are inherent in relation theory and which impact my museum practice locally in the UK and globally, for example in museum networks such as ICME (the International Council of Museums of Ethnography), a group that I chair (2013–2019). Dixon connects friendship with kin and notes 'friend' as one kinship term since at least the 16th century when social networks were limited, unlike today when virtual Facebook 'friends' can number several hundred or even thousand. My ICME friends, for example, number 1500 at our Facebook website but the question arises to what extent, if at all, these Facebook friends count as true friends, with whom we share values and political engagement, or mere acquaintances?

At the time of writing our ICME family is fracturing over the statement of its global mission and ethos, which was expanded in 2016 to highlight human rights and social justice in museum work. Deeply divided views on what contemporary museums of ethnography are and should aspire to be leads the current governing board to wonder if the ICME membership exceeds the maximum number of friendships or meaningful relationships— around 150—that, according to Robin Dunbar (2010), a human brain can maintain. Dunbar also notes the circles of intimacy within this number and cites our closest group of about three to five and perhaps up to thirty or so really good friends or family members who support us in times of trouble and with whom we choose to share joyful moments of celebration.

This concludes my outline of key ideas underpinning this chapter: of friendship and kinship, affect, and activist feminism. Now I want to illuminate these notions with reference to three case studies in Kurdistan Northern Iraq: the Genocide Museum and Memorial Monument, Amna Sura Ka the Prison Museum and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. These sites, whose responses to political oppression and resistance are extraordinary and exemplary, will be employed to examine more precisely what constitutes close feminist friendships and how our actions connect to politics in the activist museum.

Activist museum practice in Kurdistan

I have been visiting Kurdistan Northern Iraq and building links with colleagues since 2011. My first visit was made with a Kurdish heritage PhD student Karzan, now Dr, Karim. We maintain contact with Kurdish cultural workers, who are research colleagues and also

friends, through telephone and email. This field of affective research in Iraq today, a form of passionate enquiry that is value-laden and utopian, has taken me by surprise.

In 2003, I protested with friends in central Leicester against the war in Iraq. It was only after visiting the country, keeping company with warm-hearted Kurdish peoples, that geographical distance and political divides were bridged. In close proximity with Kurds, the value of the 2003 war in breaking the serious human rights abuses under the Ba'ath rule of Saddam Hussein (1968–2003) became clear. Saddam's regime subjected Kurdish people to extreme oppression. They were forbidden to speak their language, to wear their national costumes, to have any sense of themselves as a people with histories and traditions distinct from those of the ruling government. More than oppression, evidence suggests Saddam subjected the Kurds to genocide.

The modern Genocide Museum and Memorial Monument, built in September 2003 by the autonomous government of Iraqi Kurdistan and which towers over the outskirts of the farming town Hallabja near the border with Iran, commemorates one terrible atrocity. On 16 March 1988, Saddam ordered army planes to drop mustard gas and the deadly nerve agent Sarin on Hallabja. This attack killed around 5000 men, women and children, injured another 10,000, and left many suffering from respiratory illnesses, physical injuries, cancer and other diseases. The base of the single-storey museum structure is covered in white orbs representing the chemical bombs. Above the curved roof a 100-foot tower soars, with white spires resembling hands reaching up and grasping at an object. Inside, the names of the dead are inscribed in white on the black marble walls of a circular hall, with one name in red, marking Zimnaco Saleh who was lost as a baby and thought to be dead, but found on 7 December 2009 in Iran where he was taken to safety. In the main museum interpretation is literal. Giant photographs show the bodies of victims and detailed, life-size diorama depict the aftermath of the gas attacks. Life-sized mannequins represent the dead in agonised positions alongside realistic bomb casings at scenes of the genocide.

Aras Abid Akram and Sarkel G. H. Hamakhan, Directors, are among the few survivors of the attack. They travel internationally explaining the purpose of the activist site and the agenda to prevent future atrocities. At Hallabja they organise a running programme of events for surviving local people to deal with the psychological aftermath of genocide, notably the annual gathering at the nearby grave site and monument to remember those family members murdered in the attack. They also direct the work of local people, survivors, who act as tour guides to the museum.

Akram and Hamakhan are men of inclusive vision and excellent leadership. Leadership and a collaborative ethos are critical to the politics of friendship and the activist museum, which is exemplified by Ako Ghareb Maroof, Artist-Director of Amna Sura Ka, or the Red Museum. This name derives from the blood of more than 1000 people, incarcerated and killed at the site when it operated as a high-security prison under the Ba'ath regime. First Lady of Iraq, Mrs. Hero Tallibani, supported the initial transformation of the prison into a museum and its current work. Amna Sura Ka aims to show foreign visitors and Kurdish citizens what happened during the time of persecution. Bullet scars remaining on the external walls remind us and future generations of the Kurdish resistance to oppression as well as the crimes against humanity that were committed inside. These historical wounds serve as visual testament to the battles, struggles and heroism of the Kurdish people that echo inside the building complex.

Visitors enter the museum through armed security gates and see the museum buildings surrounded by gardens. In the gardens, our Kurdish friends recall imprisonment; words choke in mouths and tears well up in all our eyes. Karzan, now Dr Karim, was here at eight years old with his family and the bitter memories of his brother Sherko being hanged, and of women's skin being burnt with cigarettes, clearly remain vivid. Yet this haven of greenery facilitates healing discussion and shared silences. Walking and talking together we hear birdsong as we engage in the activist embodied practice of critically reflecting on difficult pasts and planning equitable futures in the present.

Embodied dialogical exchange or conversations in activist museum spaces move our intellects, our feelings and our whole being in future time. These conversations are not idle chitchat but mutually respectful exchanges during collaborative research where we struggle; to break down hierarchies, such as teacher/student; as well as with conveying to each our thoughts and feelings in our own different languages (Golding 2016). Discussion across cultures and languages involves comparing differences and equivalences, slowly mapping a terrain where comparisons, not assimilations, are possible. We are not translating into the primary 'master language' but translating back and forth, sharing and learning together.

For such fruitful conversational exchanges to occur we need to make the institution a shared feminist 'homespace,' where minds, bodies and feelings are welcome and embodied knowledge(s) can be progressed (ibid.: 58–9). The activist museum public space is relational and social. Relation bridges distance and the performative power of language makes sharing with others possible. Iraqi museum homespaces foreground cosmopolitan imaginations; locations for engaging conceptually with fellow travellers, in dwelling spaces where we offer hospitality and welcome 'others' into an expanded social body. Here we make new alliances and change ourselves, rather than attempt to assimilate others into our sameness (Ahmed 2004: 119). Walking and talking at Amna Sura Ka we make an affective reorientation which involves 'towardness' or 'awayness' in relation to objects in the cultural sphere that is always political (ibid.). Turning away from the buildings towards the gardeners tending plants in the green spaces helps alleviate our unease, the fear of what might confront us within the complex.

The entrance corridor works powerfully with the museum media of light. As we turn to look up at the ceiling gleaming with 4500 lights, each one representing a village destroyed by Saddam, we remember persecution and loss, but also the power of resistance and reconstruction. The walls stretching from floor to ceiling are covered with 1082 pieces of broken mirror, each piece symbolising one of the people killed at the site. Mirrors reflect light and our fragmented reflections. The idea is to help connect visitors to those who perished, and facilitate personal pondering, on loss, the fragmentation of the self and the possibility of rebuilding a sense of wholeness.

Walking on we pass cells telling horror stories of prisoners' suffering and torture. The most brutal acts were perpetrated here and are represented in realistic white plaster sculptures. Prisoners are shown chained to staircases, being subjected to electric shocks, whipped by guards. One sculpture represents Nadia who was imprisoned because she married a dissenter. Nadia gave birth in the 10 by 14 foot cell, squashed together with other families, women and children prisoners, all subjected to the horror of rape by the guards. She is shown pregnant with a child clinging to her and looks sadly away from us into the distance.

How can a museum represent such inhumanity? Amna Sura Ka attempts this task through ghostly white graphic figures and, more simply, through almost empty cells. The gloomy cells, holding just a few blankets and bowls of food laid down as if for animals, are most shocking for our visiting groups, pointing to 'unspeakable things unspoken' that Toni Morrison references in relation to the terrible transatlantic slave trade (Golding 2016: 59). Here, I argue, productive connections between feminist thought and oppressed peoples the world over can be made in the activist museum, providing the specific local context is clear. In Amna Sura Ka, Iraq, it is the life of the Kurdish subject that becomes the centre of relation and integral to shared knowledge, while the gardens act as a welcome sanctuary following the largely harrowing experiences inside, which permits some healing dialogue between friends and colleagues. Politics is foregrounded in relation and friendship here as my third case study clarifies with reference to gifts.

Politics, friendship and the pain of terrible gifts

The idea of the gift has illuminated my recent research into politics and friendship in Iraq. In gift giving and receiving, as Marcel Mauss (2002 [1950]) observes, we cement relationships which, in the context of contemporary academic research and ethics procedures, can become problematic. Research partners over time may become friends. Our friends are not distant objects of study, pure chemicals, mixed in test tubes, but fellow humans with whom we share ideas. Friends spend time together, sharing political thoughts often over the gift of food. I have sat with Kurdish colleagues, in Sulimaniah, northern Iraq, notably my dear friend Amira Ibrahim, who works at the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

Ibrahim lived as a Peshmerga in the mountains during Saddam's rule. 'Peshmerga' is a difficult word to translate. Literally it means 'to face death' but in a way that the fighter chooses to die free rather than live enslaved. Ibrahim worked alongside her doctor husband, helping to take care of the Peshmerga families for six years, fighting for freedom and suffering extreme hardship, in relation, with them. Her first baby was born in the deep snows of winter and after 11 days she sent the boy to her mother in Suli city where she thought he would be safe, but never knowing for sure if he was.

As part of her contemporary collecting work today, Ibrahim gathers video testimonies from Peshmerga families, with whom she maintains close relations, since securing liberty. Working collaboratively with her community she has edited a number of books, such as *Gifts from Prison* (Ibrahim 2014), where each page shows a freedom fighter's photograph and the gifts he made for his family during incarceration at sites such as Amna Sura Ka. Peshmerga families have kept their gifts, some 700 in total, as memorials and entrusted them to Ibrahim and her colleagues for safekeeping at the PUK. Saddam called these objects 'Christmas Gifts' as he usually condemned prisoners to death at the end of the year, and then sent their human remains and belongings to their families, as macabre gifts.

Roger Simon's (2006) idea of the 'terrible gift' informs my understanding of Ibrahim's activism here. For Simon, collections such as Holocaust survivor testimonies and diaries from brutal periods of history when the state sponsored violence and genocide, signify a necessity to 'gift' the historical terror experienced, for those left behind and the 'yet to be' that concerns Derrida. These are terrible gifts since as I look and help archive the material culture from histories in prison I accept an inheritance and the concurrent responsibility demanded—reciprocity—to act in the political present. In other words, accepting the

terrible gift, I transfer its title to my 'name' and agree to work today for social justice and equality in the future, which calls for attention and concern beyond empathy (ibid.: 194). At the PUK the terrible gift demands an ethical commitment to building a future for 'us' from a planetary perspective, through international collaboration between cultural institutions in both Iraq and Leicester.

Ibrahim speaks of the women who told her their gift objects were 'worthless,' perhaps since they are made not from prestigious materials—gold, oil paint and so on—but from bits and pieces ready to hand in the prison, such as the matchsticks that make mirror frames. Prisoners crocheted small bags, to eke the last fragments of family gifts of soap, in efforts to keep clean. They used felt tip pens to draw cars that were desired, but never to be acquired by the activists executed in prison.

I agree with Ibrahim's contention that these simple objects are both precious and terrible gifts. For those who listen carefully, strong voices resound—retelling—with a difference. The prisoners grasp moments of hope, when the 'not yet' impresses upon us in the present, such that we must act, politically, to make it our future. Their gifts can be seen as political acts of 'rewriting' or reimagining histories and futures, by those whose humanity has only recently been acknowledged, as Anim-Addo (2008) observes with reference to transatlantic enslavement. I would argue that the prisoners' gifts can be understood as a form of writing or 'counterwriting,' to use Mina Karavanta's (2013) term, from the colonised; a discursive decolonisation whereby the enslaved refuses to be stripped of humanity even in the most dehumanising conditions (ibid.: 251). Counterwriting unsettles the formal *a-priori* to connect past, present and future in new, more positive, ways. It will be helpful to examine in some detail how the voices of the oppressed counterwrite, in text and image, the historical present in their gifts.

For example, some gifts are made from fragments of the prisoner's clothing, which may have traces of blood following a severe beating. These cloths have been embroidered showing scenes of life before imprisonment, such as pastoral scenes with animals and the richness of the land Kurdish people cultivated (Figure 11.1). Pastoral landscapes, so calm and peaceful, offer no trace of the horrors to come for the freedom fighters. Some gifts counterwrite present social time, dreams of life with a beloved drinking under a shady tree, so important to this region where temperatures reach more than 40 degrees in summertime. Other gifts inscribing religious and political beliefs, with passages from the Koran or the hammer and sickle of communist Russia, can also be read as counterwriting the confines of the prison.

Family trees with the names of family members were popular gifts on birthdays. These may show a simple list of family names, men and women, living and dead inscribed on either side of the tree trunk. Prisoners use Kurdish or Western script with capital letters and the different coloured bright threads used for each name give emphasis, vibrancy and life to the work. These pieces are authored and dated with the prison name.

Goran Randi's tree has a complex iconography. We see a snake coiled up towards a birds-nest with a chick inside at an uppermost branch. One bird looks down to the chick while another flies off to the right. The names 'NAJMA, NADREN, KARZAN, MAREWAN, RAFEK' are written on the right side of the trunk and 'KARDO' is on the left above a lion who looks backwards and up at an eagle swooping towards him from the top left. In the bottom left, the artist has written in Kurdish that translates as: 'This picture is a gift for my little brother Karwan. Keep it as a memento of your brother, Goran, in prison, 10/1/1986.' Ibrahim's research suggests the prisoners represent themselves as living beings

FIGURE 11.1   Remembering a Kurdish Landscape in prison.
Photograph courtesy of Ameera Ibrahim, Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Iraq.

outside of the jail, as a brave lion looking back to look forward here. Families also observe Saddam depicted on these textiles, appearing as the eagle about to clutch the lion prisoner prey on Goran's work.

On Ako Bakiv Fara's gift, the prisoner is a bird flying into the picture from the top right above a brightly flaming candle. The bird is bringing a letter, a message of love in Kurdish script that translates as the word 'Mother' embroidered in the middle of the cloth above a yellow, red and pink butterfly. On the top left an eye looks boldly at us and on the bottom left there is an unfinished image and a needle with dark red threads wrapped around. This work in progress is so poignant, powerfully pointing to the young life, cut short.

Nabaz Mohammad Ahmed's gift shows a prisoner's large eyes with lashes and eyebrows at the top of the cloth (Plate 6). Kurdish inscriptions include the names that translate as Soran in the left eye and Suran in the right. Each eye sheds three bitter tears, for the family he may never see again. In each tear from the left eye names in Kurdish script translate as Bah, Kasal, Bechal and from the right Othman, Nashmil, Saman. Kameran, Syamand, Chra and Kakan are written in the middle of the cloth where the nose would be and there is a message, embroidered on the bottom of this gift, that translates as: 'This gift is for my little and most valuable sister Nasmil Khan, 21.03.1986.'

Many tears have been shed over these gifts. But they are also sources of pride and joy. Ibrahim remembers a Peshmerga woman speaking with light in her eyes, telling how, each day, she kisses her beaded purse and recalls her brave son before setting off for market. Interestingly

the materials of these small gifts; beads, threads and so on, bring to mind woman's art, traditionally devalued in comparison with the huge oil paintings of the West. The makers break gender stereotypes as the First Nations artists of the American plains did. It also seems fitting that they are employed in everyday tasks, while telling moving stories of resistance.

On occasion, such as Martyrs Day, Ibrahim is able to display the collection and invite the families of the prisoners to attend a private viewing. A video of the exhibition, *Roads to Freedom*, shows each prisoner has his photograph on display with a candle in front of it. Visitors to the private view move through the exhibition and pause. The exhibition prompts bodily affect and internal feelings or emotional states. We see the emotion of a visitor, her physical tears, a face crumpled and a body recoiling in abjection. This woman has just seen her son's artwork (Figure 11.2).

Sitting together with my friend, looking at the video, coming close to the art work, we are witnesses, in an 'ethical communication' with the text. Ahmed (2000: 157) describes this as 'a certain way of holding distance and proximity together' where 'one gets close enough ... to be touched by that which cannot be simply got across.' In such communication I am moved by what does not belong to me, nor to Ibrahim who is the custodian, and it is this affective connection that I want to unpack next.

In contact with objects, feelings 'about' them emerge and this 'aboutness' holds associations that are 'sticky' with blockages and constraints (Ahmed 2004: 91). Pain is uppermost at the PUK. Elaine Scarry (1985: 5) observes its unrepresentability as a bodily trauma that resists or even 'shatters' language and communication. Pain presses upon me and gets inside me (ibid.: 15). Pain then surfaces in relationship to others, who bear witness to the suffering, and authenticate its existence. The ethics of responding to such pain in the

FIGURE 11.2 A mother's tears.
Photograph courtesy of Ameera Ibrahim, Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Iraq.

activist museum involves being open to being affected by that which I cannot know or feel. I respond to another's pain, as I hold her objects and hands; I approach some fellow feeling and the ethical demand is then to decide, together, how to act. For example, if Ibrahim asks me to support Martyrs Day in Leicester with banners celebrating the Kurdish proverb, *Kem biji, kel biji* or ('Live, with heads held high') or write letters to the Minister of Culture in Iraq on our collaborative work, I do.

Our ethical task in witnessing vitally includes *being with*—what Elina Valovirta terms wit(h) nessing—to remember how the other came to be wounded and to break the negative hold of the wound by bringing it into the realm of political action (Valovirta 2013). This requires a different kind of remembrance, whereby the past lives in the wounds that remain open in the present through 'insideness,' which is an effect of intimacy, involving the process of being affected and shaped by others (Ahmed 2004: 160). Wit(h)nessing in Iraq, helpfully shapes our future actions in activist museum practice. Wit(h)ness describes a form of empathy that begins with caring for others and questioning together taken-for-granted historical truths (ibid.: 200).

In other words, we proceed from a disconnected and incommensurable time-space at a distance from our everyday comfort zones. Here we have no common language for coming to present understandings and so 'a dialogue must take place' (Ahmed 2004: 180). Wit(h) ness does not end in dialogue, but opens new pathways between men and women, permitting us to act together in the emancipatory struggle towards more democratic futures, more ethically grounded knowledge and meanings, beyond essentialisms and stereotypes, across and through difference. In short, I argue that it is through feminist attachments— friendships—that we can develop respectful conversations or dialogue and strategies for participative witnessing.

The dialogical method within feminist activism at the museum frontiers is characterised by building a new location between proximity and distance, where visitors are close to and, at the same time, far from the complex object(s)—the terrible gifts—of collaborative study. This dialogue is ongoing. It permits multiple responses and engagement on multiple planes, with lenses to zoom in and out of the different historical, social and cultural experiences, to avoid 'stranger fetishism' (Ahmed 2000: 3) where objects are removed from context to an abstract zone of pure research. As a witness with Ibrahim, I grieve for 'specific lives' that I feel have been injured and lost (Butler 2009: 1). Grieving for these others keeps their impressions alive in the face of their death and challenges what Butler describes as the 'radical inequality' characterising the difference between lives that are 'grievable and ungrievable' (ibid.). In short, we engage in a collaborative and ongoing struggle for egalitarianism in an interdependent world, employing affective meaning making as a feminist tool of engagement.

This work calls for imagination and a new poetics of relation. While imagination cannot oppose oppression, Ibrahim's collection of gifts shows it sustains prisoners who withstand in body and spirit. Imagination changes mentalities and the strength of the terrible gift is transformative; it can open imagination and the self to future possibilities. Specifically, for me, imaginative engagement in the affective community of Kurdistan impels new alliances and challenges old hierarchies, notably in remembering as a vital element of exchange.

To conclude, this chapter outlines a planetary vision of Our World where histories of colonial oppression can be opened and new lines of inquiry, beyond those inherited proximities, might arise. Optimistically, I argue that with respectful dialogue, sensory

action and collaborative political attention we may progress intercultural understanding and human rights. In the activist museum, such work employs an affective feminist lens to expand the notion of what a museum is and what it might do.

The chapter highlights the power of the object, which I would call art, as affecting not just the woman who weeps today for her executed son, but all who attentively listen to the son's creative enunciation of his plight. Every day, as Ibrahim told me, she 'dwells in a tragedy, spending many days crying over these things,' and when I joined her, I became part of this. She said to me: 'Now you are in the tragedy with us.' Looking at these objects, holding them in my hands. Crying with Ibrahim over them. I receive a 'terrible gift' to use Simon's term and I write here today taking action as a recipient of this gift.

I have never before seen such amazingly powerful objects and would suggest a high-quality display outside of Iraq, ideally in a prestigious national museum, would honour the Iraqi communities. Taking points from outside of our comfort zones in the Western world would also expand the potential of activist museum practice. The objects must be very well displayed, bestowing their makers and their families with the respect they so richly deserve.

My hope is that Kurdish museums might continue to work together with local communities, as the museums I have discussed here do, and as the Peshmerga did in times of oppression. Who knows what the future holds but I end my chapter with a wish, that Kurdistan—this country where 'every stone has a story to tell' according to local proverb—and Kurdish people, flourish.

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PART II

Activism in practice

The chapters in this section reveal the tremendous diversity in this emergent field of practice, highlighting the many ways in which museum workers are instigating or aligning with broader efforts to bring about environmental, social and political change. The contributors to this section point to the capacity for values-led thinking and practice to transform the way we think about and work in (and with) museums of all kinds. They also challenge the notion that activism is a specialist museum activity, confined to those organisations with explicitly moral or ethical mandates, or with collections and narratives linked to specific themes and histories.

Although these chapters explore how museums are tackling a broad range of topics, themes and issues, we have been selective in identifying contributors that demonstrate a commitment to what we view as *progressive* activism. Museums can just as easily be co-opted into actions that oppress and marginalise; they can also be complicit in practices that damage, as well as protect our planet, and which erode rather than enrich human relationships. While we acknowledge that actions and intentions cannot always be easily seen as either good or bad, moral or immoral, we have nevertheless chosen to focus on museum activism that seeks to bring about change founded on progressive values: on ideals such as equality and social justice; respect for the natural world, and a concern for our shared futures.

As the work explored here amply demonstrates, activist practice within the museum world is far from straightforward; there are no road maps or tried and tested strategies. Although many initiatives have generated controversies or brought forth hitherto unfamiliar challenges, these chapters provide insights and reflections that, we hope, will both stimulate and enrich further experimentation in the field. The reader will note that museum activists are also introspective, and the critical self-reflection found in these chapters is of great value in strengthening activist practice.

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12

MEMORY EXERCISES

Activism, symbolic reparation, and non-repetition in Colombia's National Museum of Memory[1]

Cristina Lleras, Michael Andrés Forero Parra, Lina María Díaz and Jennifer Carter

Coming to terms with armed conflict: the exercise of memory in Colombia

The armed conflict that has occurred within Colombia during the last six decades has entailed several dynamics and involved many actors (multiple left-wing guerrillas, paramilitary groups, and state forces).[2] This conflict has stemmed from major social and political factors that today remain largely unresolved, including land dispossession, a weak and precarious democracy, narco-trafficking, and the absence or insufficient presence of the State in marginalized zones of the country. It has affected most of the national territory; however, the violence it has occasioned has been more intense in the countryside and most of its victims have been non-combatant civilians (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2016). These factors notwithstanding, there have been numerous attempts—both failed and successful—to reach peace agreements with several different left-wing guerrillas throughout the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. After a decade of extreme violence (1995–2005), Colombia's paramilitary groups have been demobilized and the country has taken a number of measures to both concretely and symbolically bring about renewed social cohesion. Since a historic Peace Agreement was signed in 2016 with the oldest guerrilla on the continent—Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), or in English, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—a national dialogue about peace and social cohesion seems to be gaining momentum.

Yet, despite these advances towards the end of armed conflict, Colombia is still far from achieving its goal to construct peace. This is owing not only to the fact that there are still guerrillas and criminal organizations that have gained control over areas previously under dispute by FARC and paramilitary organizations, but also because society at large is sceptical about the transitional process now underway. The implementation of the socio-political changes needed to construct peace is extremely slow, and has not yet reached the areas where the impact of the armed conflict has had its greatest toll.

It is estimated that around 8 million people have been victims of the armed conflict to date, and have consequently been affected by forced displacement, exile, massacres, selective killings, forced disappearance, kidnappings, extrajudicial executions, illicit recruitment, anti-personnel mines, sexual violence, torture and ill-treatment. However, the exact number of victims is

impossible to know owing to the prolonged duration of this ongoing conflict and to the concealment strategies employed by armed actors. Within this particular context, these extreme numbers and the excessive cruelty deployed by various perpetrators have sadly become a daily reality in Colombian society, while deeper questions as to the overall effects of the prolonged violence on Colombian society and its capacity to react against and object to it, have yet to be addressed in a public and sustained manner. These effects must be examined more thoroughly; several national and local initiatives have attempted to do this, the new National Museum of Memory (Figure 12.1) in Colombia's capital Bogotá, significantly among them.

In terms of attributing responsibilities of violations of human rights to specific groups, though we may name armed actors (several guerrillas, different paramilitary groups, military forces, police), the long duration and effects of armed conflict in Colombia have only been possible because of the participation of civil actors as well, including public officials, business-men, politicians, frontmen—amongst others—who have benefited economically, politically and socially from war. Responsibilities are not the same for all actors, but it is clear that this armed conflict was made possible because of the actions—or inactions, as the case may be—of many Colombians as well as other international powers. Though the conflict has defined the Colombian nation for three generations at least, its particular complexity makes it difficult to discuss in the context of how to address the past, let alone in the context of a museum that has chosen to address this past through the lens of human rights.

This chapter will analyse the planning process of the National Museum of Memory (NMM) to be built in Bogotá, an institution intended to participate in processes of social and symbolic reparation through its representation of Colombia's armed conflict. In addition to describing the coming into being of this important museum, we will consider

FIGURE 12.1 Aerial view rendering of Colombia's National Museum of Memory.
Architects: Pacheco Estudio de Arquitectura & Estudio Entresitio.
Photograph by Poliedro Estudio.

its work through the lens of the multiple forms of activism the Museum incorporates throughout its architecture, exhibitions and general programme. Activism is invoked here as a means to meaningfully involve society as a whole in a national conversation about Colombia's violent past and present, and it is precisely this distinct approach and role of the NMM as a polyvalent space of dialogue, confrontation and debate that, we argue, is central to a people's more nuanced understanding of itself and its past.

The NMM strongly believes that a narrative of the past is insufficient if it does not lead its people (as a society) to—at the very least—question the ways in which the war and the violation of human rights have been justified by the numerous actors involved and, very often, by people who have not directly participated in conflict. Ultimately, we contend that activism not only has to lead to a wide conversation about society's role in the conflict, it should also invite people to take action on peace building via their behaviour.

The creation of the National Museum of Memory: a site for collective memory and symbolic reparation

In 2011, the Colombian Government passed the historic *Law 1448, Law for Victims and Restitution of Land*. This Law intends to provide care, assistance and, most importantly, comprehensive reparations (restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction, and guarantees of non-repetition) to the people who have suffered violations of human rights since 1985. With this Law, historical memory was recognized as an essential element of symbolic reparation, and the Colombian State was given the duty to protect this memory. Toward this end, in 2011, the National Center for Historical Memory (NCHM) was founded with the main objectives of collecting materials and documents related to grave violations of human rights, advancing research in relation to armed conflict, and creating a museum 'destined to achieve the strengthening of the collective memory regarding Colombia's recent history of violence' (Congress of the Republic of Colombia 2011: 68; Bello 2016: 17). The Center thus oversees the Human Rights Archive, the National Museum of Memory, a research team, and the collection of testimonies from demobilized paramilitaries (Congress of the Republic of Colombia 2011: 66–8).

The enactment of *Law 1448* of 2011 was an important moment for the victims since they were finally recognized as such by the Colombian government (ibid.: 9–10). This ground-breaking recognition was preceded by social movements advocating for the mobilization of memory, justice and truth which were led by various community groups, NGOs and human rights organizations around the country. This mobilization laid the foundations for the work of the Center and reinforced the centrality of the victims' voices in the historical reconstruction process. It also further recognized the work of these same organizations whose mobilization of memory constituted important forms of activism.

In addition to *Law 1448*, the government initiated peace talks with the FARC in September 2012, leading to the rudiments of a peace accord. The Peace Agreement signed between the government and the FARC on 24 November 2016, significantly ratified the importance and existence of the NMM. It also determined that a Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition should be constituted. Point 5 of this Agreement mentions that the Museum should take into account the final conclusions of this Commission in its programming (Government of the Republic of Colombia and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia 2016: 136).

Since 2012, the NCHM has worked on the creation, design, and construction of the NMM (Figure 12.2, Plate 7). The Law defines the Museum as a measure of symbolic reparation for the victims of armed conflict. According to this Law, symbolic reparation aims to restore the dignity of victims and public acceptance of wrongdoings, the preservation of historical memory, the reconstruction of the social fabric of the victimized communities, and the revelation and circulation of truth as a guarantee of non-repetition as well as a measure for the satisfaction of the victims (Congress of the Republic of Colombia 2011: 68).

When defined as a measure of reparation for the victims, the NMM must give centrality to them, guaranteeing their participation in the conception and operation of the project as well as offering them an experience as a visiting public that both recognizes and dignifies them. Yet as a contribution to the duty of memory of the State, the Museum must also become a public arena that welcomes and enhances the diversity of memories that exist about the conflict in the country. One of the main concerns the NCHM staff has is whether and how the Museum can properly respond to all of these expectations.

Activating memories: multivocality in the NMM

Research conducted by the NCHM has contributed to the development of the NMM´s content and its ongoing work with victims, including the trust and partnerships established

FIGURE 12.2 Indigenous site cleansing ritual performed at the National Museum of Memory construction site on 9 April 2016, National Day of Remembrance in Memory of Victims.
Photograph by César Romero.

with victims' groups throughout the country. Aiming to address their immediate needs, the Museum first concentrated its efforts on responding to requests for support by community groups to develop different types of artistic and cultural memory practices. In its first two years, the Museum's team focused almost exclusively on these requests, which provided an important opportunity for promoting relationships between different social organizations and territories throughout the country and the Museum.

With the large number of victims, two particular dilemmas related to their participation have arisen. First, it is unfeasible to undertake a process in which all are consulted and can feel represented and included. A second challenge is that victims in Colombia are not a homogeneous collective. They belong to a range of social, political and ethnic groups with different worldviews and aspirations, all of which require distinct forms of address and representation with regards to the past, the present and the future.

Diversity is also reflected in the range of victims' organizations that have different interests and demands, which result from factors such as the forms of violence suffered, the armed actors responsible for victimization, and the political sectors or population groups affected—largely peasants and impoverished groups, women and children, political opposition and dissidents (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2016). This diversity raises the possibility that the multiple demands and expectations about the Museum may become contradictory and impossible to reconcile because, through the different groups, different visions of conflict and oppositional political positions become apparent. The Museum will fulfil its mandate if it manages to become a space for the expression of such contradictions and not necessarily of consensus among them.

Museums in general have grappled with the issue of how to reconcile and represent different perspectives of their nation's past. In recent years, many have challenged traditional historiographic approaches by diversifying sources to include information provided by experts, amateur historians, citizens and individuals, victims and their families, marginalized and minority communities, such as in the case of the Museum of Free Derry in Northern Ireland, which tells the story of the city's largely working class civil rights struggle in the late 1960s and early 1970s from the perspective of those directly involved. Still others, in the interest of exposing hidden histories previously excluded from the registers of official State historiography, have sought to nuance official accounts of the past through the inclusion of untold or difficult histories, like the newly revamped Canadian History Hall at the Canadian Museum of History in its frank portrayal of government sponsored Residential Schools for Indigenous Peoples of Canada. In the specific instance of national museums, whilst other countries' 'difficult histories' might sometimes present a more clear-cut narrative that allows for moral lessons to be drawn, it is clear to the NMM that the armed conflict in Colombia cannot be so easily divided into perpetrators and victims, evil and good, and nor should it be.

Relating conflict at the NMM: reparation through remembrance

The NMM intends to both *represent* armed conflict in Colombia and *generate* ideas about what this conflict's impact has been on Colombian society. One of the main messages the Museum seeks to communicate to visitors through its exhibits and programmes is *nothing justifies the violation of human rights* (Figure 12.3). This premise applies not only to events that have taken place in recent history but also to future violence or to violence that might not necessarily be the outcome of armed conflict. In that sense, the Museum will refer to the past knowing that

the repercussions of decades of armed conflict and violence will not end with the demobilization of left wing guerrillas or right-wing paramilitaries.

What can the Museum do for a society that created the very foundations that have allowed such a war to develop and escalate? How can this museum present elements needed to understand the complexity of armed conflict—a conflict which has not ended—and, at the same time, become a space for reconciliation? Reconciliation here is understood not as the possibility of societal consensus but rather as that of living together in disagreement and without the elimination of the Other. The journalist Edurne Portela has discussed the problems of 'reconciliation' in regards to the Basque Country, where a dispute over how the discourse of the past is constructed is currently taking place, notably after the end of ETA (Basque Homeland and Liberty) violence. In her arguments, she cites Castells who observes that, after violence, historical accounts must respond to popular demands that seek a comfortable truth—a vision that soothes rather than makes us question (Castells cited in Portela 2016: 30). But in order to *know* about armed conflict, we need to acknowledge the complexity of the past rather than try to simplify it. For instance, following Portela (2016), if perpetrators are merely represented as monsters or fanatics, then it becomes difficult for other members of society to find the ground with which to identify with these people and thereby begin the type of conversation that will lead to reparation.

It is clear that, in order to ethically comply with victims' rights, the Museum has to include the voices of those directly affected. But societal change cannot occur by only 'repairing' victims. How can the victims address the conditions under which violence was conducted? No other institution in Colombia has, by mandate—as well as by the

FIGURE 12.3 *Volver la mirada* travelling exhibition, a display focused on children and war. Photograph by Laura Cerón.

fundamental function that a museum can play in society—the potential to create a space where members of society can reflect as a whole on how conflict has deeply affected solidarity and the country's social fabric throughout years of armed conflict.

Furthermore, the concept of non-repetition, as defined by *Law 1448*, refers to the non-repetition of grave violations of human rights in Colombian society. It is achieved by a number of means, namely by promoting a social pedagogy that upholds values for reconciliation, publicly articulating the truth about the events that have taken place during armed conflict, developing a pedagogy of human rights and international humanitarian rights, developing national campaigns for the prevention and rejection of violence against women and children, demobilizing and dismantling armed groups outside the law, and by the application of sanctions to those held responsible (Congress of the Republic of Colombia 2011: 66–7). Non-repetition cannot be the sole aim of the Museum, nor can it be achieved merely through the measures taken for the reparation of victims. This is where activism plays a leading role. What should activism do in the Museum? It should lead us to understand the ways in which members of society as a whole have been implicated (to greatly different degrees) in the violation of rights that have occurred in Colombia, and contribute to a wide range of actions that these same members of society can take in order to promote changes in the use of language, behaviour and interactions that legitimize violence.

Pedagogical possibilities for exhibitions at the NMM: body, land and water

Exhibitions have often represented forms of societal violence as a deterrent to perpetuating further abuse, but exhibiting violence and its impact is not, in itself, sufficient for bringing about social and political transformations. 'Redemptive remembrance' is the term used by Roger Simon (2014) who discusses the potential for the pedagogical use of images featuring violence inflicted upon a certain group of people. He refers to the hope that the images of a violent past, properly contextualized, will act as a prophylactic and prevent the repetition of such violence, both through the instantiation of moral norms and improved civic codes, as well as by enabling a better understanding of difference and encouraging an individual commitment to actions taken in the name of personal and social improvement (Simon 2014: 155).

The notion of redemptive remembrance is one way of understanding the role of several exhibitions curated in Latin America at the recommendation of various Truth Commissions. For instance, the Peruvian exhibition *Yuyanapaq: Para Recordar* ('Yuyanapaq: To Remember') is described in its multimedia presentation as a means to inform and communicate the history of the last decades that should never be repeated (IDEHPUCP 2015). Seeking to denounce acts of violence while also making the victims of this violence visible, the exhibition uses photographs while also including a timeline that historicizes the conflict's main events. The purpose of *Yuyanapaq: Para Recordar* is not to explain or to search for deeper meanings in terms of the legacies of armed conflict. In the way that it confers to the photographs the denunciation of violence, it is similar to the *Basta ya!* exhibition (loosely translated, 'Enough!'), curated by the NCHM in 2013. Still other exhibitions such as *¿Por qué estamos como estamos?* ('Why we are how we are?') in Guatemala, as well as the permanent exhibition at the Lugar de la Memoria, la Tolerancia y la Inclusión

Social in Lima, Perú, are built around larger themes that deal specifically with the structural causes of violence.

Previous attempts at exhibiting images of Colombia's violent past have not stopped violence from occurring. We can trace a pedagogical use of images of horror at least to 1962 with the publication of the book, *La Violencia en Colombia*, which aimed to instruct against the particular cruelty of the violence used against many Colombians in the mid–20th century. Yet violence persisted, and redemptive remembrance is therefore incomplete if the social and political context in which the traumatizing past is exhibited does not also include the possibility for societal transformation. Therefore, a pedagogical perspective is intrinsic to any curatorial work at the NMM because it seeks to elaborate the exhibition as a transformative experience in itself.

Exhibitions that address traumatizing pasts can have one of several outcomes: in some instances, they can have a paralyzing effect or produce indifference within those who view them, while in others, they can enhance engagement by catalyzing viewers' compulsion to act on behalf of others. Along those lines, and inspired by Simon's theorizing (2014), by thinking of the Museum experience as one that produces change, the NMM staff might elaborate an exhibition sequence as follows: 1) provide experiences that invite visitors to engage both cognitively and affectively with the material presented; 2) provide occasions for visitors to engage in conversation with others: educators, acquaintances and strangers; and finally, 3) compel visitors not only to converse but to 'do' with others in the exhibition space. This sequence aims to contribute to fostering solidarity and the reconstruction of the social fabric of Colombian society. Andrea Witcomb (2015) has described similar intentions under the concept 'pedagogy of feeling,' which considers ways in which reflection can be instigated by affective encounters in exhibitions and how an ethics of care might be developed between those who see themselves as different. Eliciting meaningful ways in which understanding Colombia's past becomes important in the present and for guiding future actions, is paramount. Following Simon, by learning about the past, the Museum aims to 'provoke a form of witness that might substantially alter the continued existence of what is witnessed' (Simon 2014: 33).

Although the Museum's staff has already developed exhibitions and programmes off site (the Museum has yet to be built), the narrative for the future building is still under development. In order to evaluate and build a testing ground for this narrative, Museum staff created the first comprehensive travelling exhibition in 2018. This exhibition aims to convey three messages that focus on structural problems in Colombian society: 1) how processes of stigmatization lead to dehumanization practices; 2) how human, cultural and environmental damages are not justifiable; and 3) how armed conflict in Colombia has only been possible owing to the participation and complicity of large sectors of civil society. The exhibition will articulate these messages through recourse to three main themes: body, water and land. Though it can never pretend to present a comprehensive account of Colombia's armed conflict, the exhibition asks important questions to open up a national dialogue which may well be continued in the Museum's permanent exhibition: What has war done to the body, land and water? What have body, land and water done in war? How can these themes be used to narrate war?

The form of the 2018 exhibition is a result of the need to think through activism as a mechanism for eliciting transformative visitor experiences. This activism relies on an understanding of human rights and its discourses, one that the Museum seeks to articulate

in relation to the lives of the people who have been affected by armed conflict but who have also resisted. This facet of the exhibition—taking up individual and collective memory —constitutes the first of three layers within the overall narrative. It addresses the experience of war, and it might be the most visible because it affects particular individuals and communities, but it does not provide us with the underlying logic or dynamics in order to understand armed conflict. Therefore, a second historical layer includes information on the scaffolding of armed conflict—which is usually difficult to see—and provides us with information to increase general knowledge. The third layer, which takes up forms of activism, seeks explicitly to transform, to question, to disrupt, to look at ways in which members of a society with different degrees of responsibility think and act. Activism in this sense assumes a wide variety of actions, from grassroots initiatives to political interventions.

Two other aims of the exhibition should be mentioned here: one concerns the message that the history of war is also comprised of the history of resistance, and the other, that violence in armed conflict is intrinsically related to other forms of violence, such as those inflicted on the basis of gender, ethnic, and racial differences.

Activism through architecture

Is it possible to consider the design practices that produce museum architecture (Jones and MacLeod 2016) as a form of activism? What roles can space play in repairing and restoring human dignity? As a human rights museum, the NMM has the opportunity to profoundly redefine the significance of public space in Colombia. Understanding the Museum as a place where new concepts of citizenship will be (co-)developed is helpful, as this approach recognizes the potential of museums (and public space more broadly) to facilitate communal gatherings and dialogue that seek to challenge normative social policies and issues that have been reinforced by armed conflict.

The architects of the winning design of a public architectural competition conceived the Museum foremost as a public space which anybody (independent of their origin, race, sexuality, religion, political ideology, class, education, victimhood, or age) can access and where people can engage with one another. The exterior environment has been conceptualized as a space of encounter where both 'official' museum activities and 'unofficial' actions may take place and where people (even if they are not Museum visitors) can spend time. The ground floor is open, thereby creating a permeable structure, and connects to neighbouring buildings. Playing on transparency, glazing will cover some enclosed commercial spaces located on the Museum's ground level, as well as the entrance, lobby and other meeting places. Although the idea of reclaiming public space is central to the architectural preoccupations of this building, certain (currently unresolved) considerations pose almost immediate obstacles to the effectiveness of these aspirations. What will be the micro-politics of use of this 'free' space? What kind of commercial spaces (café and restaurant) will be in the Museum, and how might these spaces attract (or conversely, restrict) potential visitors through the attendant hiring policies, ethical food practices and the physical access they provide? What security measures will be appropriate for this public space?

The jury found that the winning design responded best to the concerns raised during a participatory process carried out by the NCHM over two years prior to the launch of the international architectural competition. It was during that crucial stage that community opinions regarding the purpose of the Museum were translated by museum professionals

into spatial needs. The competition rules provide a sense of the expectations that architects faced as they endeavoured to give tangible form to the NMM:

> [It will evoke] absence, damage, and devastation, as well as heroism, courage, and generosity ... The museum will provide elements and activities so Colombians can discuss the causes, actors, historical milestones, relations and factors that have produced, preserved and degraded war ... the museum will not only have exhibit spaces, but also spaces to enquire, research, create, reflect and raise awareness.
>
> *(Bello 2015: 18)*

Consequently, the Museum was envisioned as a place for grieving, a setting for encounter and deliberation, a site for research, pedagogy and reflection, and a stage for creation and artistic and cultural expression. It is worth noting that the NCHM decided to house the Human Rights Archive under the same building (not unlike the Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos in Santiago, Chile, which similarly houses an archive and documentation centre), rendering the Museum also an important site for consulting and gathering information.

The museum design process sought to draw on what MacLeod (2017) refers to as 'mutual knowledge' through a social and participatory approach that involved a series of design committees where different knowledge and expertise have been shared and explored by architects, the Museum's team, members of the NCHM, and external professionals. By the end of 2017, twenty sessions had occurred: some were strictly technical, and addressed the functionality of archives, storage and building installations, whereas others concentrated on memory initiatives, places of mourning, and various aspects like circulation routes for baby carriages and wheelchairs, (gendered) aesthetics regarding materials and textures, safety for women and children, and bathrooms for all genders. It is worth noting that the NCHM has made enormous efforts to consider the needs and experiences of diverse groups in developing each of its activities, taking into account multiple voices, perspectives and the demands of diverse populations, including people with disabilities, elderly people and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex populations.

How does architectural design support the mission of the NMM? How can design processes redefine ways of thinking and thereby restore social fabric? One analogy might be the traditional use of human scales in architecture as a way of imposing normative standards in public buildings. Architectural students learn to measure a space in terms of the human body, yet it is a very particular body type that has been naturalized over centuries: a man, probably cisgender, of approximately 1.80m, in other words, a body of an average European height. However, architects very often forget other, different bodies: those that are unfamiliar or atypical are often disregarded in design processes. As a human rights museum that intends to promote dialogue, reparation, encounter, and expression, architectural space plays a key role in subverting misconceptions, transforming perspectives, and encouraging social positive change. In this sense, designing a museum (or any building) should encourage sensitivity to the needs of others.

The design of the NMM, like museums and galleries more generally, is embedded in a complex socio-political setting. Although the Museum has resulted from a legal mandate and its establishment reinforced by the 2016 Peace Agreement, only in 2017 did it receive the financial approval for its construction. The building's construction is now scheduled to begin in 2019 a period coinciding with a transitional justice process: the implementation of the

Commission for Truth Clarification, Coexistence and Non-Repetition. It is also important to note that the Museum's construction also coincides with a political leadership change at the level of national government (Congress and presidential elections), which may seriously jeopardize the project's future.

Conclusion

The recent signing of a historic Peace Agreement by the Colombian government and FARC in November 2016 and the subsequent laying down of arms by demobilized guerrillas has largely put an end to the six decades of armed conflict that have deeply destabilized Colombian society. One might think that a new era has begun. Yet years of distrust and violence have indelibly marked the Colombian territory and divided its peoples over the sustainability (or not) of the peace process.

As the Museum inaugurates its first comprehensive exhibition (off site) and work on the building's construction process is set to begin, the country faces a polarization of political forces that aims to divide Colombia, yet again, into left-wing and right-wing ideologies. The political campaign in 2018 was largely built upon the support or destruction of the Peace Agreement with the FARC. In a larger context, the discussion over Peace will be oversimplified between those who, on the one hand, support transitional justice mechanisms and the societal reintegration of ex-combatants, truth-telling about the participation of all actors in armed conflict as well as real and deep change in the areas mostly affected by conflict and, on the other, those who endorse the continuous militarization of the State and the obstruction of the transitional truth and justice system.

In this divided context, creating a new and just society to overcome a past in which war was a constant and human lives seemingly expendable, is no simple task. If the political discussion is centred solely on the wrongdoings of the FARC and does not also incorporate other civil actors, it will be a major challenge for the Museum to involve visitors in the kind of transformational experience it wishes to create by calling on members of society who think of themselves as disengaged from conflict to deeply reflect upon their own behaviours. On the other hand, activism in the Museum might be a powerful tool that is not reduced to electoral politics, but can play a major role in generating the kinds of conversations about human rights that the institution seeks to elicit.

Throughout a complex landscape of 'invisible yet very real borders' (Ybarra Zavala 2017: 1) established by armed actors in place of the State, many cultural memory projects—ranging from grassroots and community-based initiatives to civic and national institutions—have sought to face Colombia's past and its legacy of violence by implementing practices to both optimistically and realistically reimagine the country's future. The voice of the victims (which in this new political context risks being instrumentalized by the State), has to be loudly heard. They can speak about the effects (and many times, the causes) of war and they can teach Colombian society about the transformations and changes needed.

Working to reconcile the past with the present and future through its ongoing museological planning, museum architecture, and community-based programming, the National Museum of Memory is amplifying the voices of victims to actively participate in the reconstruction and transformation of Colombian society and, to do so, it must ask difficult questions of both Colombians and itself. What has marked and distinguished the NMM in this endeavour is the courage of its convictions to consider—like the National Center for

Historical Memory which oversees it—a 'reconciliation or reencounter that . . . cannot be based on distorting, concealing, or forgetting the facts, but only by clarifying them' (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2016: 22). In other words, the National Museum of Memory *can* and *must* be built upon the non-consensual memories and 'different truths'—in the words of photographer Alvaro Ybarra Zavala (2017)—that are emerging as Colombians share their experiences of the armed conflict and the country itself begins a new chapter in its history. Facilitating a dialogue that understands memory as a form of social reparation is not only the work of the NMM, it is a project that must take root across the Colombian territory, such that exposing the complexities of the past becomes the ground on which change is born.

Research, analysis, innovation, community work, deep reflection, courage and social conscience are the very foundations upon which a new national museum of memory for Colombia is being imagined—one that aims not only to honour the victims of this violence, but also to explicate the structural and societal mechanisms that made decades of sustained violence—and the victims this violence produced—a daily reality. The NMM is attempting to transform societal relations that are an integral part of peace building by enabling dialogic encounters, through a pedagogy of activism and multivocality. Yet ultimately, it's how the Colombian people use this museum that will ensure that the memory exercises it proposes through a combination of its exhibitions, programming and architecture will have their intended effect. That the Museum will be successful in its endeavour to instil an ethics of care, to recall Witcomb (2015), and a pedagogy of witnessing, in the words of Simon (2014), is paramount to the call to action that this museum proposes: to overcome indifference and societal division, and restore dignity and humanity to all.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 In 2018, the Museum changed its name from Museo Nacional de la Memoria to Museo de Memoria Histórica de Colombia (Museum of Historical Memory of Colombia). At the time of writing, the Museum was known as the National Museum of Memory of Colombia and this is the title used throughout the chapter.
2 Throughout the present text, we will use the terms 'war' and 'internal armed conflict' when referring to the different manifestations of the armed confrontation that has occurred in Colombia since 1958 between guerrillas, paramilitary, and government forces. We use these terms, and not 'civil war', because civilians have been the main target of the violence in Colombia. Although on multiple occasions civilians have been involved in the confrontations, they have been coerced into doing so by the ongoing acts of violence perpetrated against them by the armed groups that have raided their territories and daily life.

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13

AUTO AGENTS

Inclusive curatorship and its political potential

Jade French

Central to bringing about social change is the museum's capacity to operate as a space for dialogue and exchange. It follows, therefore, that making space for new, previously unheard, voices in museums has the potential to operate as a force for activism. The project described in this chapter explores the inclusion of new voices and perspectives in the museum via inclusive curatorship, a facilitated approach that enables a diverse body of people to be curators. Curating is often considered an exclusive job for the privileged few. However, by supporting people not typically viewed as potential curators to express themselves through exhibition-making, the curatorial process can be opened up, dialogue between communities can be facilitated and the resulting exchange can be mediated within the public realm.

This chapter explores an example of inclusive curatorship with learning disabled people. Whilst there has been a proliferation of work over the past 15 years by learning disabled artists in the performing and visual arts (Fox and MacPherson 2015), curation has only rarely been explored by this group, and then principally in history museums rather than art galleries (Open University 2008; Museum of Liverpool 2014; Access All Areas 2017). This gap in practice led me to develop *Art as Advocacy*, a research project at the University of Leeds. Using an action-research approach, the project explored curatorial practice by learning disabled artists and examined how curating could be an effective form of self-advocacy and collective political expression for this group (Plate 8). As learning disabled people remain a group with relatively less access to public platforms through which to share their experiences, this chapter explores curating as a means of disability activism, one which exploits the potential for curatorial practices to communicate the opinions, desires and concerns of learning disabled people to new audiences.

Importantly, *Art as Advocacy* is underpinned by collaborating with two organisations: Halton Speak Out and Bluecoat. Halton Speak Out is a learning disability self-advocacy group formed in 2001. The group's slogan—'the right to have a life'—reflects how the organisation continues to address inequalities faced by learning disabled people through a range of projects including person-centred life plans, peer advocacy and consultation with local authority providers of services. The second organisation, Bluecoat, is a contemporary arts centre in Liverpool, England, which houses four galleries, a community of artists, and a large participation programme. Since 2008 this programme has included *Blue Room*, a

weekly inclusive arts project specifically for learning disabled artists. From these organisations' memberships I recruited five learning disabled people who applied to take on the role of a curator; Hannah Bellass and Leah Jones from Halton Speak Out, and Tony Carroll, Diana Disley and Eddie Rauer from Bluecoat's *Blue Room*. By strategically recruiting the curators from both organisations, I brought together knowledge and skills in self-advocacy into dialogue with knowledge and skills in artistic expression. Once the research team was in place, myself plus two support workers met the curators weekly at Bluecoat over the course of a year to curate an exhibition.

The result was *Auto Agents*, a visual arts exhibition which was displayed at Bluecoat from 26 November 2016 to 15 January 2017, and went on to show at The Brindley in Halton between 4 March and 15 April 2017. The exhibition featured two new commissions by Liverpool-based artists, James Harper (Figure 13.1) and Mark Simmonds, made in close collaboration with the curators, alongside existing work by London-based artist, Alaena Turner. Importantly, both the participatory process of curating and the exhibition theme came together to address an issue that is at the heart of advancing the rights of learning disabled people: autonomy. This theme—expressed in the words of the curators as, 'what it means to be independent by making your own decisions'—emerged from the group's collective observations and research, all of which highlighted ongoing and ubiquitous concerns around the lack of autonomy many learning disabled people experience in their lives. In addition to developing the exhibition's theme and selecting and commissioning the artwork, the curators also planned the installation, designed accessible interpretation for audiences and programmed a series of engagement events.

When embarking on this project I was interested to know what the practice of curating could reveal about the practice of self-advocacy and what might result from bringing them together. What emerged through the curation of *Auto Agents* were numerous questions around the meaning of autonomy and how these played out in relation to the individual versus the collective, author versus observer, and 'real life' versus art. But rather than attempting to advocate for one view over another, we wanted to explore how these polarities can sit in relationship to each other, sometimes in tension together. In this chapter I trace the exhibition's central theme of autonomy in relation to the two seemingly disparate sites of self-advocacy and curatorship. I explore autonomy as a contested idea and then demonstrate how this complexity played out and became visible during the curation of *Auto Agents*.

To illuminate these complexities, this chapter is anchored by two 'scenes.' These scenes are real exchanges that took place during the project and their inclusion offers a rich descriptive account of how I elicited meaning from particular interactions with my collaborators. By including the artists' and curators' literal voices in the scenes, I also intend to reveal the relational ways of working that underpin inclusive curatorship (Roets, Goodley and Van Hove 2007).

Scene 1: but we chose him?

In the following scene, the commissioned artist James Harper and the curators are gathered around a table at Bluecoat. It is the second workshop with James and the curators are discussing the plans for his arts commission. This brief interchange between the artist and curators cuts to the heart of the key concept within this project: autonomy.

FIGURE 13.1   James Harper, *Meet at the Tree*, 2016, commissioned for *Auto Agents* at Bluecoat. Photograph by Jade French.

TONY: Lights would be good. Like, moving lights. . . [interrupted]

DIANA: Yeah, lights!

TONY [CONTINUED]: . . .like a disco.

JAMES [HESITANT]: Oh right. . . um. . . well. . . [interrupted]

EDDIE: That does sounds good.

JAMES [CONTINUED]: Well, I don't think lights were a part of my original pitch if you remember? My work looks at movement.

EDDIE: Oh right.

     [The room goes quiet and everyone looks at James]

JAMES: It's an interesting idea, it's just I've never really worked with lights.

DIANA: Awww he doesn't know, never mind.

JAMES: I mean, I could find out but . . . I'm just not sure it will look right, it's not really my style.

EDDIE: Lights would get people's attention.

JAMES: . . . yeah. . . um.

JADE: Maybe we should leave the idea of lights with James and give him time to think about it. Let's refocus and chat about the fabrics James has brought in to show you?

DIANA [TO JADE]: But we like lights and we chose him?

The room was tense and, at that moment, I had no response. Whilst Diana was the only one to explicitly voice her confusion surrounding the project's authorial boundaries—more specifically, who was in control of the commission—she certainly was not alone with her concerns. After all, the curators had worked hard for five months to develop an exhibition theme, secure funding and network with artists. In their daily lives, the curators have many elements of autonomy restricted and controlled by others. In light of these experiences, they identified the right to autonomy as the exhibition's key theme. However, when in a position to grant or restrict the autonomy of the artist they were working with, there was a disconnection between their experiences of autonomy and that of others. In this way, the concept of autonomy was not only explored through the exhibition's theme and content, but also through the curatorial processes that shaped the exhibition itself.

A history of silence

To understand the importance of autonomy for the curators, we must first understand the histories of learning disabled people. For many years, learning disabled people lived in the shadow of others. They were abused, mistreated, frequently ignored and often separated from their families and communities to be placed into institutions (Digby and Wright 1996). Whilst many learning disabled people explored ways to speak up for themselves and developed means to resist measures and routines prescribed to them during this period of institutionalisation, the more formalised self-advocacy movement only developed in the late 20th century. The emergence of this movement is intimately related to policy developments—such as the closing down of specialist institutions and the moving of learning disabled into the community—as well as key advances in the broader disability rights movements which redefined learning disabled people as citizens with rights, rather than victims (Williams and Shoultz 1982). Self-advocacy can be most simply understood as speaking or acting for yourself, including the 'skills an individual uses to effectively communicate, convey, negotiate, or assert his or her own interests, desires, needs, and rights' (Van Reusen *et al.* 2002: 1). In the UK, self-advocacy proliferated following the publication in 2001 of *Valuing People: A New Strategy for Learning Disability for the 21st Century*, the first government report responding specifically to learning disabled people in 30 years. *Valuing People* highlighted the importance of personalisation in achieving better lives for people with disabilities (Department of Health 2001), a concept through which everyone who receives support, whether provided by statutory services or funded by themselves, would be 'empowered to shape their own life through increased choice and control over the shape of that support' (SCIE 2008: 4).

There is no doubt that the personalisation agenda made strides in promoting autonomy, enabling many learning disabled people to adopt a lifestyle of their choosing (Barnes 2004). This was widely discussed by the curators when developing their exhibition theme of

autonomy and independence. The right to autonomy was felt by the curators to be a central concern they shared as learning disabled people, and one they wanted to engage the public with through their exhibition. During one workshop we decided to make some artwork in response to the idea of autonomy as a way to explore its meaning. A key part in facilitating learning disabled people to curate was devising a range of hands-on activities like this to support the curators in their exploration of complex concepts and ideas. For learning disabled people, 'making sense has a lot to do with making' (Streeck 1996: 383) and, as a researcher and a facilitator, it was vital for me to recognise the importance of rooting exploration in 'doing.'

During this activity most of the curators created artworks celebrating examples of their autonomy. However, one of the curators, Eddie, took a different approach. His artwork instead depicted a time in his life where he felt he had no choice or control. In his younger days, Eddie spent many years in day services and he created an image which portrayed himself 'trapped' in this system. In the centre of a black box, is a simple white line drawing of himself which seems to peer out of the darkness. Surrounding this is a black frame labelled 'day service,' which perhaps represents a building. Around the edges of the image are handwritten words in different colours which read; 'claustrophobic,' 'frustration,' 'a box,' 'unsociable,' 'sad,' 'not individual,' 'trapped,' 'bored,' 'the same' and the list goes on.

Eddie believes his life was transformed through personalisation, which opened up new opportunities such as accessing programmes like the ones he joined at Bluecoat. Although personalisation undoubtedly enabled many learning disabled people like Eddie to live more autonomously, the concepts underpinning the broader self-advocacy movement; 'autonomy,' 'independence,' 'self-determination' and 'personhood' are problematic (Burton and Kagan 2006; Graham 2010). Some argue that these are unattainable concepts, both practically and philosophically (Shakespeare 2000; Leshota 2015), and both practitioners and researchers have, instead, drawn attention to the interdependency of all people, claiming 'interconnectedness, kinship and relationality' are the 'defining features of what it means to be human' (Leshota 2015: 4). Work within disability studies that problematises autonomy has also acknowledged the importance of interdependence in resisting binary definitions (McRuer 2006). Here, there are no 'dependent' or 'independent' persons but a diverse range of body and minds that exist as a series of complex relations (Memmi 1984).

To further explore this issue of interdependency, disability scholars (Goodley *et al.* 2014) have examined logics of individualism, relationality and interdependency through the theories of the posthuman condition, primarily theorised in Rosi Braidotti's seminal text *The Posthuman* (2013). According to Goodley *et al.* (2014: 5), like poststructuralists and postmodernists before her, Braidotti is clear: 'the idealisation of the unitary, rational, independent, dislocated, solitary, able-bodied human subject has been revealed as a fiction'. The self, subject, person, citizen or human is now firmly 'interconnected in an ever growing whirlpool of capital, technology and communication' (ibid.). Here, Braidotti describes the need for 'critical distance from humanist individualism' (2013: 39) and stresses the importance of 'radical relationality, non-unitary identities and multiple allegiances' (ibid.: 144).

No curator is an island

Debates surrounding autonomy can also be traced through a completely different set of sites, literatures and networks in relation to curatorship. Many decades ago the role of

curator conjured up images of a singular figure in a museum's basement; tending, caring, and cataloguing collections and artefacts attentively. This is reflected in the etymology of the word 'curator', which has its origins in the Latin 'cura,' meaning 'care,' and in the Late Middle English 'curate' as one who has 'a cure or charge.' Whilst this mode of curation still exists, the role has greatly expanded and evolved.

These changes in the curator's role began during the mid-19th century. As the group art exhibition format flourished, the curator became a figure of knowledge who could draw together artists via master narratives. The curator became a gatekeeper, responsible for 'upholding divisions between art and artefact, "high" and "low", practitioner and spectator' (Ault 2007: 38). Various scholars have argued that this traditional mode of curatorship became a standardised, homogenised, institutionalised and object-dominated methodology; the dynamics and activities of which paralleled the art market (Vidokle 2010). This type of curatorial practice 'worked within' the institution. The curator's actions functioned to uphold certain ideologies, systems, values or hierarchies which are not made apparent to audiences (De Lara 2015). The result is a distance and marked distinction between audience and curator. In the 1960s the curator's prominent role was cemented. Conceptual art, where the ideas involved in the work take precedence over traditional aesthetic, technical and material concerns, paved the way for bolder custodial scenarios described as 'curatorial expression' (Ventzislavov 2014: 87). This is exemplified in the work of curators Harald Szeemann and Lucy Lippard who undertook ground-breaking curatorial projects which were similar to the work of some conceptual artists at the time. As the themed exhibition format boomed, the curator's autonomy grew and they began to be criticised for superseding the work of artists through the reinforcement of their own authorial claims 'that render artists and artworks merely actors and props for illustrating curatorial concepts' (Vidokle 2010). Implicit here is the idea of autonomy as a zero-sum game; an economic theory that states one person's gain must be equivalent to another's loss. In other words, as curators gained autonomy the artists' autonomy was diminished.

But the increase of new biennials and other large international exhibitions in the 1990s provided new sites where curatorial and artistic practices converged, blurring the distinction between artist and curator (O'Neill 2012). Curating became an expanded methodology; emancipating the role of the curator from previous notions of 'divine power' (Robbins 2005: 150) and authorship by opening the possibilities of curatorial action. This approach to curating is relational, offering new possibilities of multilateral thinking across disciplines and fields and sites of practice, inviting dialogue across and between 'without any need for any singular author' (De Lara 2015: 5). Crucially, here autonomy is not seen as a zero-sum game but as distributed and shared. This shift away from a singular authorial voice in curating was further supported by increasing interest during the 1990s and 2000s with participatory and relational art practices and other forms of audience-orientated art (Bourriaud 2002). This reimagining of curatorship is famously advocated by 'super-curator' Hans Ulrich Obrist. Obrist claims that to curate in this sense is: 'to refuse static arrangements and permanent alignments and instead to enable conversations and relations' (2014: 25). How might these debates surrounding autonomy in curatorship and in disability rights inform our understanding of the political potential of inclusive gallery and museum practices?

Auto Agent Bob to the rescue

As the above discussion has shown, whilst autonomy remains a key concern for learning disabled people who have historically been denied control over their lives, the concept is being increasingly questioned and rethought by disability studies scholars, with new models of interdependency now emerging. Equally, we have seen how exhibitions are increasingly conceived not as the work of a lone individual 'genius' curator but as configured and negotiated through a matrix of complex interdependent relationships and networks. However as Scene 1 illustrated, this negotiation is far from straightforward, especially when curatorial practices aim to empower learning disabled people.

It was at this point in the project that self-advocacy practices began informing the group's curatorial practice. Since the mid-1980s in the UK, those involved in self-advocacy have been concerned with the relationship between self-advocates and those who are 'advising' or 'supporting' them. Today, in the field of services for learning disabled people, advocacy support workers (who are predominantly not learning disabled) tend to be employed by learning disabled directors or trustees and non-learning disabled staff still remain key in the delivery of the work. A key challenge facing self-advocacy support workers is how they can support self-advocates to run successful organisations, without 'taking over.' With their own jobs often on the line, how do self-advocacy supporters enable good decision-making without wielding their power? When does 'support' veer into 'over/protection', or even 'control'? In short, what does ethical self-advocacy support look like and how can it be practised? (Chapman and Tilley 2013: 528).

Following the dispute over autonomy in Scene 1, in subsequent workshops I supported the curators to think more closely about the relationship between artists and curators as much was at stake. To support the curators to self-define their roles I suggested we make something (or someone) we described as an 'Auto Agent,' who the curators affectionately named Auto Agent Bob. To create Auto Agent Bob I asked the curators to make a large outline of a person who was divided in half down the middle; one half to represent the artist and the other half the curators (Figure 13.2). I printed out labels for the curators which described tasks in making an exhibition such as 'choosing artists,' 'getting money' and 'making the artwork.' I then asked the curators to think of where each label should go on Auto Agent Bob; the artist's side or curator's side? Everyone grabbed a label and in less than thirty seconds, and not to my surprise, the curator's half of Auto Agent Bob was full whilst the artist side of Auto Agent Bob was bare. In other words, the curators clearly felt like all decisions in the exhibition were theirs to make. Slowly we went through each label and looked at the task from the perspective of artists. Out of this process of reflection some shared tasks emerged, one of which was interpretation. Through the Auto Agent Bob activity, the curators were able to see that curating was much more complex than they initially thought. Some tasks were shared and the activity supported the curators to appreciate this complexity for themselves. Once shared responsibility was identified, we worked on developing solutions for everyone to have a voice in the tasks and decisions ahead.

Scene 2: it's fate! It's that… that funny word again

Uniquely, *Auto Agents* is predominantly a text-free exhibition, reflecting the ways in which the curators differently read, write and communicate. Where text was used, the curator's
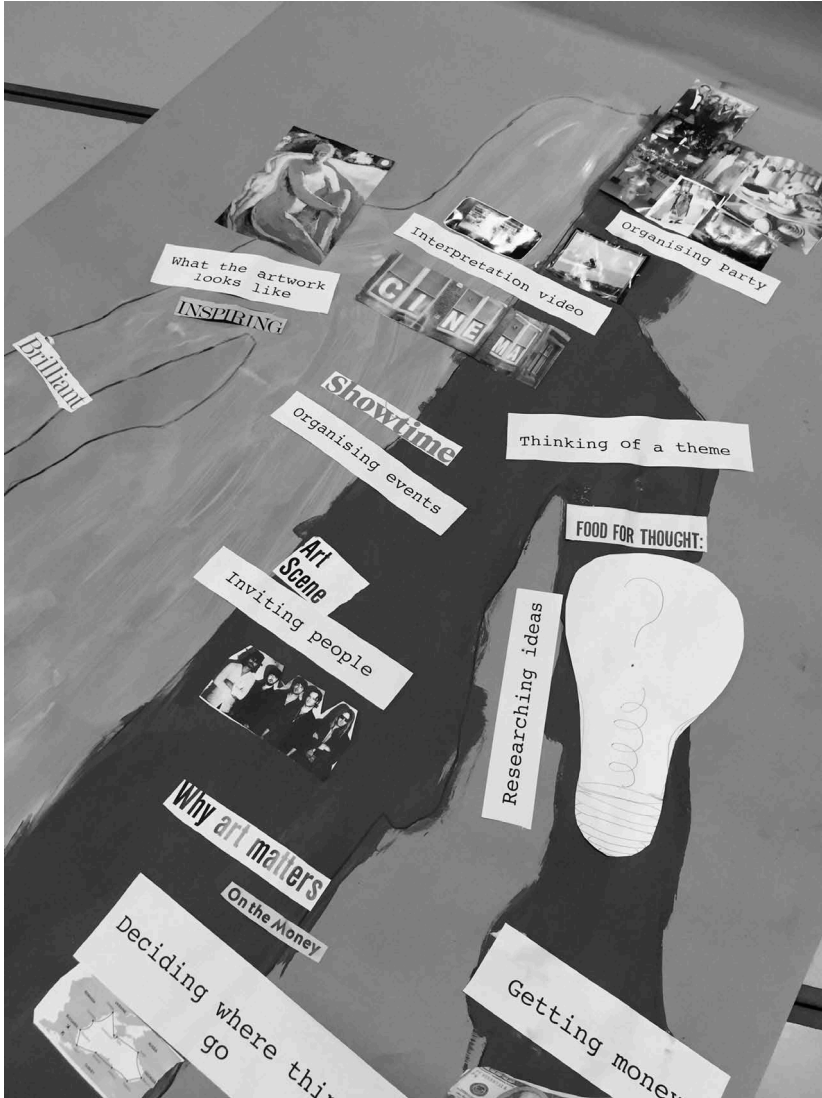
FIGURE 13.2 *Auto Agent Bob*: a participatory arts activity exploring the authorial boundaries of the artist and curator, 2016.
Photograph by Jade French.

approach was clearly informed by self-advocacy traditions. The exhibition's title, for example, actually began life as *Autonomous Agents*.

During a group collaging activity, support worker Donna made an interesting find in one of the magazines we used to search for material and shared it with the group. The following scene depicts the ensuing conversation about language and autonomy.

DONNA: [Laughs] Guess what I've found.
DIANA: What, what?

DONNA: That word Jade was talking about before.

EDDIE: What's that?

DONNA: Remember that funny word Jade was talking about before? Autonomy? Look what was in my magazine!

> [Donna shows the group a cut out of a title 'Autonomous Agents', taken from an article about robots].

EDDIE: Oh yeah! Look at that!

DIANA: Oh my god!

ABI: That's so cool!

EDDIE: [Sings] It's meant to be!

LEAH: It's fate! We need to put that in the 'yes' pile.

HANNAH: [Claps and laughs]

LEAH: I think it's a good exhibition name. Autot-y-nomis agents, or however you say it.

DIANA: Yeah I like that one, thingy agents.

I could see an unforeseen issue emerging; the curators had difficulty reading, writing and pronouncing 'autonomous' and some members refused to say it all together. I asked the curators, 'Is it a good idea to call your exhibition something we struggle saying?'. For me it was clear that they understood the meaning of the word 'autonomous,' there were simply difficulties in pronouncing it which was causing some awkwardness. In self-advocacy contexts simplifying both spoken and written language through 'plain language, the use of keywords, short words and sentences' is a prime way to promote access for learning disabled people (Godsell and Scarborough 2006: 64). 'If you find it a mouthful, then we could just shorten it?' I suggested, 'How about Auto Agents?' This approach supported the curators to use the valuable and complex idea of autonomy in their exhibition on their own terms. The arts, however, have appeared reluctant to embrace the same approach to using accessible language and have been accused of disguising information in overly complicated, specialist art languages, sometimes referred to as 'artspeak' (Rule and Levine 2012).

The curators of *Auto Agents* thought long and hard about the inclusion of text in their own exhibition and decided it was an opportunity to 'do it their own way.' Rather than traditional labels, text panels and lengthy artist statements and hand–outs, *Auto Agents* instead featured a single short video filmed collaboratively between themselves and the artists. The video is just under three minutes long and begins with the curators introducing themselves and the starting point for the exhibition; their own lives and experiences. 'We, the curators, all have something in common,' Leah's voice-over explains on the video. 'We have different kinds of independence and different levels of support. We wanted the artists to think about these things, and what's interesting is, everyone made something which involves action' (French 2016). Although the concept of autonomy is highly politicised for learning disabled people, through their work with the curators the artists in *Auto Agents* interpreted that concept and made it their own. The video also includes short segments made by each artist filmed throughout the curatorial process, providing a window into the collaborative approaches to creating the exhibition.

The methodology used to develop interpretation for *Auto Agents* illuminates the participatory and relational potential of curating. For me, it also exemplifies the potential for the process of curating to be politicised and activist in intent. The non-existence of text in *Auto Agents* challenges the norms of the gallery domain and activates change within the

institution itself through providing new inclusive ways of working. The group chose to use their capacity as curators to orientate audiences to their ways of understanding art which, the curators emphatically expressed, is not through text. This disruption of the status quo could also be viewed in light of philosopher Jacque Rancière's (2001) writing on politics. He describes politics as what occurs when the dominant social order is disrupted, rather than simply the exercise of power by bureaucracies. In this context, the exclusion of text disrupts the 'dominant order' within the institution opening up new possibilities of ways to 'know' about art. But this was not entirely straightforward. As curator Diana explains, 'People might think we aren't using text because we can't do it, instead of saying, here's a new way and it's good.' By excluding text, the curators drew attention to their limitations and status as learning disabled people, but at the same time, they foregrounded an important quality for activism: the ability to view and imagine the world differently through forging new relations.

This approach to interpretation also enabled visitors to experience a more relational engagement with the artwork as meaning was not mediated via text inaccessible to many people. For example, the curators led 'drawing tours.' Instead of leading visitors on a traditional exhibition tour, with the expectation of the curators verbally explaining their exhibition and works within it, they instead asked visitors to sketch the work and explain to the curators what it meant to them. James' large draped hessian sculpture was intended to reference the artist's personal experiences of community but, on a drawing tour, self-advocates convened around the piece and discussed concepts of restriction, of concealment and even drew parallels with the burlap sack used by Joseph Merrick (known as the 'Elephant Man') to conceal his condition. On a different tour, local councillors and disability health professionals saw the draped hessian as a different type of concealment, not of the individual, but of the dampening of ideas and practices. Feelings of restriction resonated in a different sense and from a different perspective, drawing the artwork into new meaning.

Conclusion

Art as Advocacy presented an opportunity for an intervention; to investigate how approaches used in self-advocacy could be carried over into curatorship in an effort to make curatorial decision making more explicit and tangible for everyone. In self-advocacy, these approaches recognise that autonomy in life is, in fact, enabled through collective support and action. In this research, I found that autonomy and collectivity are equally useful for curators in making explicit the intricate linkages that enable complex collaborations at galleries and museums.

An inclusive and relational approach to curating also proposes an active experience. *Auto Agents* became a site for social interactions and exchanges. These engagements highlight the possibilities for curatorial practice as an alternative realm of knowledge production through its ability to establish multiple connections between people, disciplines and counterpoints. For learning disabled curators, this becomes politically potent as the ability to bring about change in their own lives requires the engagement of diverse fields. Claire Bishop asserts that 'at a certain point, art has to hand [responsibility] over to other institutions if social change is to be achieved: it is not enough to keep producing activist art' (2011). *Auto Agents* brought together learning disabled people and

their support networks; learning disability professionals; self-advocacy groups; local authority workers and local councillors; artists, artist studios and artwork fabricators; programming, curation, front of house, press, marketing and engagement staff from Bluecoat; external press and social media; academics and students from the University of Leeds and, of course, the exhibition visitors. Through this collision of people, disciplines, institutions and viewpoints, new networks were forged, new conversations took place, and ultimately new meanings were generated. Ultimately, by enabling learning disabled people to communicate their ideas and experiences to the public through curating, a new site for activism emerged. Moreover, this process highlighted the potential for curating as an experimental activity, able to lend support towards a political cause through making both lived experiences and politically-engaged methodologies visible though artistic imagination.

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14

MUSEUMS AS PUBLIC FORUMS FOR 21ST CENTURY SOCIETIES

A perspective from the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe

Njabulo Chipangura and Happinos Marufu

Introduction

This chapter considers Mutare Museum's activism in engaging with contemporary issues affecting its immediate community. Mutare Museum is one of the five regional museums and the eastern branch of National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ), a government institution mandated to safeguard the cultural heritage of the country. In recent years, the museum has initiated public engagement programmes aimed at addressing social, cultural and economic challenges facing the community. In this chapter, we will explore how the museum has sought to reposition itself in light of this newly emerging role, actively engaging multiple communities using exhibitions that seek to stimulate public dialogue and debate. We show how the museum has sought to undo the legacies of colonialism, transforming itself from a space of didactic authority to one of democratised encounter.

Although a range of contemporary and sensitive topics have been explored in recent years—from witchcraft to road traffic accidents—we focus in this chapter on the Diamond Mining Exhibition which was mounted in the temporary gallery at Mutare Museum and officially opened to the public in May 2012 as a way to explore how the organisation has embraced social activism. The exhibition traced the discovery of alluvial diamonds in the Chiadzwa area in 2006 and the sequencing of events that culminated in unprecedented invasion of the area by thousands of illegal panners. As this illegal mining grew as a topical issue, we brought it into our gallery spaces stimulating debate on the sensitive subject as well as facilitating public discussions on the impacts of mining on surrounding communities and the nation at large.

Undoing colonial legacies

NMMZ is an institution established under the National Museums and Monuments Act whose legal mandate is to safeguard the cultural heritage of the country. It manages the cultural heritage of Zimbabwe through its five administrative regions, each of which has different areas of specialisation.

Looking back, the history of the Mutare Museum (formerly Umtali Museum) is inextricably interwoven with that of the Umtali Society (Broadley 1966). The Umtali Society came into being as a committee of the Southern Rhodesia Hunters and Game Preservation Association in October 1953. This society was established for the purpose of inaugurating and fostering interest in the establishment of a museum in Umtali (now Mutare City). The society accumulated and displayed the first collections of historical and natural objects in January 1956 which persuaded the municipality to provide a temporary home for the museum (ibid.). It was only in November 1957 that the Umtali Municipality granted the association some space in an old hostel, allowing them to exhibit on a semi-permanent basis (ibid.). By mid-1958, about 500 people were visiting the museum each month but the museum had no funds for further development which led them to approach the trustees of National Museums and Monuments of Rhodesia to take over. Sir Edgar Whitehead officially opened the museum in November 1958 having secured grants from the government and Umtali Municipality. Captain E. F. Boultbee was then appointed Honorary Curator of the Umtali Museum on 1 September 1959 (ibid.).

The trustees realised that the existing building was unsuitable for a museum and, with the help of the Umtali Museum Society, it raised funds for a new museum building. The new building was officially opened by Sir Alfred Beit on 13 September 1964. When it opened its doors to the public, the museum had displays in antiquities, transport, botany and geology. Later on, additional displays of ethnographic and archaeological objects were added in the Beit Gallery.

As this brief history illustrates, the formation of Mutare Museum (and many other museums throughout Africa) is closely linked with colonialism (Arinze 1998). These museums were formed as a result of colonial encounters; they share a common history in terms of their development, emerging in the 20th century as a by-product of colonialism and European imperialism. Bvocho (2013) argues that, in most cases, they were created in specific socio-political contexts that sought to denigrate the local populace, diminish self-confidence and to reduce pride in their past achievements. Similarly, we argue that the stagnant exhibitions displayed at the Mutare Museum were biased towards colonialism; ignoring many aspects of an independent Zimbabwe and thus were sorely in need of redevelopment. Murambiwa (1999) argues that between 1965 and 1979 there were deliberate attempts to use museums to undermine African culture while at the same time highlighting the positive impact of colonisation. Thus, for many years museums in Zimbabwe have been perceived as by-products of colonialism, whose main thrust has been to showcase the superiority of the European culture and justification of 'civilisation' through imperialism, evangelism, cultural negation and bombardment. As a result, museum practices have been wholly detached from the people whose culture is presented in the exhibitions.

Steps towards a new museology

Museums in Zimbabwe, and perhaps in many other African nations, have been deeply entrenched in the traditional mould of the museum, as defined and maintained by the International Council of Museums (ICOM). For decades, they have been regarded as public institutions whose mandate is acquisition, conservation, research and presentation of heritage resources for education, study and enjoyment (ICOM 2007). The adoption of

this definition has, arguably, contributed to a degree of homogeneity amongst museum institutions in Africa and has also tended to constrain, rather than encourage, efforts to engage with and respond to the shifting demands of 21st century societies. In Zimbabwe for example, where all five national museums are by-products of colonialism, each has struggled with its static and outdated exhibitions to find ways to capture the public imagination through a dynamic engagement with contemporary issues and problems of the day.

The Mutare Museum is the eastern branch of NMMZ situated in eastern Zimbabwe and is the national collector of transport objects and antiquities. The other museums in the country are: the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences (Harare) which specialises in human sciences; the Natural History Museum (Bulawayo) which specialises in natural sciences; the Military Museum (Gweru) which specialises in militaria, aviation and mining; and the Great Zimbabwe Museum (Masvingo) which specialises in archaeology and heritage management.

In this chapter, our discussion focuses on active strategies that are redefining the role of museums in Zimbabwe by specifically looking at what the Mutare Museum has achieved to date. We argue that museum practice in Zimbabwe is no longer constrained by a preoccupation with the internal demands of collections but increasingly shaped by an outward facing focus and a growing concern for the needs of the communities it serves (Weil 2003). With a new vision founded on social activism and by undertaking socially engaged activities that have a direct bearing on communities' aspirations, the Mutare Museum is transforming itself into a space for multiple voices and perspectives by curating stories as well as objects.

The development of polysemic exhibitions featuring multiple voices has allowed the museum to embrace community narratives that were previously suppressed by a reliance on curatorial expertise. Moreover, working with different groups has enabled the museum to address the deeply entrenched view of many communities of the institution as an elitist urban space that powerfully contributes to social exclusion. According to Watson (2007: 29):

> social exclusion is both about individuals being excluded from society and thus from relevant communities, and also about groups that find themselves isolated and excluded from a range of opportunities and benefits that accrue to most people living in society.

In our case, most communities felt marginalised and many were deeply aggrieved by the fact that some of the ethnographic objects with which they had strong connections, were displayed in the museum devoid of their social context and meaning (Chipangura and Chiripanhura 2017).

Whilst Zimbabwean museum thinking and practice was undoubtedly shaped by colonialism, the diamond mining exhibition we explore in more detail below provided an opportunity to address the exclusion that many communities felt. In formulating this exhibition, we aimed to find ways for the museum to 'impact positively on the lives of disadvantaged or marginalised . . . communities' (Sandell 2002: 4). There has been a paradigm shift where museums are now making attempts, not only to address their colonial outlook but to take up new museological practices which seek to increase relevance through public engagement, participation and more inclusive forms of representation. According to Watson (2007: 13), 'if we understand "old museology" to be characterised by an emphasis on the professional collection, documentation and interpretation of objects, then "new museology" is community

focused with the emphasis on community needs.' This view is reflected in the new vision statement of NMMZ which states that the organisation seeks 'to guarantee a secure future for Zimbabwe's heritage that engages people and enriches lives and communities.' Although this new vision is still in its infancy, there are increasing examples of projects where our local museums are now functioning as public forums in tackling economic and socio-political issues affecting both rural and urban communities.

Tackling contemporary issues

Addressing controversial topics in history museums is something relatively new in Zimbabwe where, like other post-colonial nations, we are challenging centralised, state-led heritage management initiatives and unifying narratives that have tended to exclude communities' own needs and versions of the past. For this reason, instead of perceiving the museum as a static, monolithic institution at the centre of power, we are beginning to read it as a multi-vocal institution attempting to come to grips with the effects of the colonial encounter (Witcomb 2007). Subsequently, museums are becoming increasingly relevant with communities starting to identify them with their own history, identity and sense of belonging (Watson 2007). In light of this, working with communities in the making of exhibitions is presenting opportunities for a shared engagement with multiple voices incorporated into the final narrative. Gradually practices that once defined museums by their relationship to objects—with curators regarded as authorised 'keepers'—are coming under scrutiny. Increasingly the museum is now redefined as an open public space that addresses topical issues within community settings in which the role of the curator is conceived as *facilitator* rather than a figure of *excluding authority* (Witcomb 2007).

Over time, societal demands have changed radically as a result of numerous socio-cultural forces and the influences of globalisation to the extent that the traditional museum model has become increasingly outdated. NMMZ can be viewed as an example of an organisation undergoing radical transformation to become a 21st century museum in terms of its service, advocacy, practice and management. NMMZ has begun to disband traditional practices by engaging local communities in topical issues such as poverty eradication, climate change and environmental degradation, national economy and unity. NMMZ is supported in the implementation of this process of change by the existence of people-oriented legislations. Zimbabwe adopted a national constitution in 2013 which formally promotes multiculturalism, community empowerment, community engagement and development. At the same time, the organisation is currently revising the colonial National Museums and Monuments Act of 1972 and aligning it with our national constitution as well as the values and ethos of the people. This context has given NMMZ an impetus to restructure its operations and public service programmes to increase its relevance by explicitly addressing contemporary issues.

The following section explores in detail how we used the exhibition on illegal diamond mining to create a public forum, encourage dialogue, and in the process used the museum as an agent for effecting social change.

Diamond mining in Chiadzwa: embracing advocacy in museum displays

The discovery of surface diamonds in Chiadzwa around 2006 triggered a massive invasion of the area by illegal panners also known, in local parlance, as *makorokoza/magweja*. The

alluvial diamond fields are in the municipal ward of Chiadzwa, about 80 miles southwest of the city of Mutare in the Manicaland Province. Between 2006 and 2007, illegal diamond mining in the area continued unabated with the local community also joining the enterprise. In the midst of the confusion, a British company called African Consolidated Resources (ACR) was given an exclusive prospecting order to mine diamonds on a designated portion of land by the government. At the same time, the government did not reign in the illegal miners. ACR was only instructed to fence off its claim and let the illegal miners continue to mine on the other end of the expansive diamond field. The decision to allow illegal miners to continue was a deliberate ploy and political gimmick by the government in the face of anticipated general elections in 2008. With unemployment sky rocketing in the country and estimated at over 96% at the time, unrestricted mining provided the government with an easy election campaigning mantra. Subsequently, illegal mining continued in the area up until soon after the re-election of the ruling party in November of 2008 (Chipangura 2017). At the same time, ACR's license was revoked by the government and this coincided with the chasing away from the diamond mining field of illegal miners. The government then moved in to set up mining franchises with five companies—namely, Marange Resources, Canadile, Mbada Diamonds, Anjin and the Diamond Mining Company. Against this backdrop, we conceived the idea of doing an exhibition on diamond mining at Mutare Museum in 2012 because, four years after illegal mining was outlawed to pave the way for the establishment of formal mines, the displaced communities were still aggrieved by a number of failed promises.

Our approach in shaping the exhibition drew on principles of social activism and advocacy. We decided to explore the story in its full length: from the discovery of the diamonds in the illegal phase to the cordoning off of the area and the setting up of the so called 'formal mines' which resulted in the displacement of communities that had lived around the area for more than 75 years. Therefore, the exhibition chronicled the history of diamond mining in Chiadzwa with a view to giving the public an in-depth understanding of events that triggered the discovery and subsequent invasion of one of the biggest diamond mining fields in Sub Saharan Africa by illegal miners between 2006 and 2008. The exhibition—which opened with the title *Diamonds: the Wealth Beneath Our Feet*— became a means through which the museum could move away from its role as authoritative educator towards becoming a facilitator of dialogue and debate as well as an actor in defining and upholding human rights.

Methodology and conceptual approaches

The data that we used during the diamond mining exhibition was obtained through desktop surveys, ethnographic interviews, participant observations and pictorial analysis. In developing the exhibition, we realised the potential for using the museum to validate community claims to resources. Since the discovery of surface diamonds in Chiadzwa in 2006, there have been print and electronic media reports on the invasion of mining fields by illegal miners. We carried out a desktop study to understand the different reports on illegal mining in Chiadzwa relying on *The Manica Post*, a weekly newspaper that specifically covers news coming out of the Manicaland Province. We also collected various rudimentary tools that were used by the *makorokozas* (illegal miners) for display. These included; chisels, picks, hammers and shovels. This approach was complemented by ethnographic

interviews which we carried out with community members who had been involved in the illegal mining of the diamonds. The interviewed community members were able to give us detailed information on how the tools were used and how they wanted the social, as well as technical, stories associated with them to be represented in the exhibition. Thus, the textual meaning of the objects was interpreted together with human agency to elicit an understanding of how they were made, acquired, used, and discarded by the *makorokozas* (Dobres and Robb 2000).

Villagers who were displaced by the advent of formalised mining were relocated at Arda Transau, a government farm in Odzi located 75 km north-west of their original homesteads. To capture information on the contentious issue of relocations and the cultural destruction it caused we carried out ethnographic interviews. In collecting this data, we adopted a cosmopolitan approach (Mason 2013) to purposefully capture diverse experiences and different views. This approach also democratised knowledge production in the making of this exhibition allowing shared authority between the displaced villagers and ourselves as the curators. By using this approach, we were informed by Meskell (2009: 3) who argues that archaeologists no longer have the licence to tell people their past or adjudicate upon the correct way of protecting or using heritage. It has been argued that, upon the attainment of political independence in Zimbabwe, the Indigenous population expected an about-turn in the ways in which their ethnographic collections were being presented in museums (Chipangura 2014). Debates focused on when they would be accorded respect, whether they would be consulted and involved in setting up museum displays (Ucko 1994). In light of these debates, the research design of the diamond exhibition was framed with a view to giving the villagers a voice in the displays without too much curatorial intervention. In our case, curatorial perspectives were balanced with the concerns of the villagers thereby allowing displays to reflect shared views.

Installation of the exhibition

After gathering the data from these sources, we organised material around key themes which were presented on large upright boards featuring text panels, images and captions. In addition to these, a multimedia display told the stories of the local villagers who were relocated from the diamond field to Arda Transau Farm. We divided the exhibition into six themes:

- In *The Illegal Mining Phase (2006–2008)*, photographs and maps laid out the historical background of the Chiadzwa diamond fields and their invasion by illegal miners. Diamond mining in Chiadzwa began in 2006 when local villagers discovered the deposits, setting off a diamond rush. By 2008, close to 10,000 people, mostly unemployed youths from across Zimbabwe, had descended on the mining fields (Chimonyo, Mungure and Scott 2010). This period was popularly known as *bvupfuwe*, referring to the open and free mining for all without any restrictions by law enforcement agents. At the time, because the illegal miners were not aware of the true value of the diamonds, there was a barter trade in which they exchanged the precious stones for commodity items such as sugar, cooking oil, mealie meal (a local staple), and rice. In November 2008, four months after the government re-elections, a police action code-named *Operation Hakudzokwi* (No Return) was launched to stop the mining.

- In the second section, *Formal Diamond Mining in Chiadzwa (2009 to Present Day)*, text and images explored the start of a new era. With the end of illegal mining the government moved in to establish formal mines to harness the diamonds. This panel depicted the formal mining technologies and was designed to give the public an overview of the mining after the area was cleaned up.
- The third section, *Legal trade in Diamonds in Zimbabwe*, highlighted the economic benefits that Zimbabwe could potentially accrue because of the formalisation of diamond mining in Chiadzwa. The revenue that would be generated from the selling of the diamonds was presented as the perfect opportunity to stabilise an ailing economy. Zimbabwe was ranked the seventh biggest diamond-producing nation in the world, according to the global rankings after the formal takeover (Mushanawani 2008).
- The fourth section was a multimedia presentation with moving stories by villagers who were relocated from their homesteads in Chiadzwa to Arda Transau Farm in Odzi. We used audio and video narratives of the villagers, beamed through a projected wall display, to give visitors a chance to relate to the whole sequence of events, from the invasions to the formalisation of mining and relocation of villagers. We purposefully used this technique to frame and reinforce identity and belief, and convey the socio-cultural values of the relocated villagers, derived from their sense of place at the diamond mining area before they were moved to Arda Farm. Each family was given a core house with four rooms; by the time of the ethnographic research for the exhibition, at least 1300 families had been relocated. Importantly, their personal stories, rich with emotion, powerfully narrated the challenges they had experienced and appealed to the government for them to intervene with financial compensations, jobs in the new mines, infrastructural development and to relocate the graves of relatives left behind in the diamond mining fields. In this way, the exhibition became a platform for the local villagers to campaign for their rights that were being ignored by the mining companies.
- In the fifth section, *Illegal Mining still Continues*, we brought together stories of illegal miners who were still finding their way into the diamond mining fields. Through these narratives we revealed the growth of a phenomenon called *sindalos*—derived from the word 'syndicate' in which the illegal miners team up with security guards to steal ore from the fields. Once they get the ore, it is transported and processed far away from the fields and the loot obtained is equally shared among members of the syndicate. Syndicates vary in size, but most interlocutors indicated that a normal size ranges from 5–10 persons. However, apart from the syndicates, another group of illegal miners calling themselves *snippers* also preys around the mining field by gaining entry through unmanned points. The conversations recorded and presented in the exhibition showed that even when the snippers were caught by the security details they would simply pay off a bribe to be released together with their ore. This part of the exhibition managed to bring to the fore the problem of massive unemployment in the country considered by the interlocutors as the reason behind the syndicate and snipper phenomenon.
- The sixth section, *Missing 15 Billion from Diamond Mining—A Rhetoric or a Reality?*, was added after the exhibition had opened following reports in both print and electronic media that the country had lost revenue of up to 15 billion United States Dollars through organised diamond smuggling. The former president of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe addressing a gathering during a National Heroes Day commemoration in

August 2016 stated that 15 billion dollars' worth of potential revenue from Chiadzwa had not been accounted for by the mining companies. His statement was followed by a public outcry by citizens who wanted to know how such a large amount of money had vanished whilst the country was reeling under a serious economic meltdown. There were demonstrations in the capital city, Harare, led by civic groups demanding an explanation by the government for the missing diamond revenue. We decided to extend the story line of our exhibition by incorporating multiple views of citizens on this issue using their protests as a platform to collect information.

Visitors to the museum often asked about the 'missing 15 billion' and what was being done to make the mining companies accountable. Responding to public outrage, the government issued a statement that the '15 billion talk' by the then president was a mere political cliché and untrue. In the additional story line on the missing 15 billion we included interviews gathered around the city with general views expressed by most residents that diamond mining in Chiadzwa had not benefited the locals at all. Views expressed overwhelmingly painted the conviction that mining companies were looting diamonds. Infrastructural facilities in the area including connecting roads were still full of pot holes in spite of the massive resource base that the area possessed. Similarly, the villagers we had interviewed who were resettled at Arda Transau also complained that the houses they got from the Chinese mining company, Anjin, were cracking and posing danger to their lives. Despite having been given a plethora of promises by the mining companies when they were relocated, the villagers were still living in abject poverty.

It is also interesting to note that after Robert Mugabe was ousted from power in November 2017 through a popular military intervention, the new government set up a parliamentary portfolio committee on Mines and Energy to look into the issue of the missing 15 billion. The portfolio, chaired by Honourable Temba Mliswa, is probing the issue with an aim of instituting criminal investigation procedures on a number of high ranking former government officials who were involved in the looting. This is a noble process and one which, we feel, reflects the ethical and activist position we adopted in shaping our exhibition.

Other impacts of the exhibition

Judging by the visits that were recorded during the run of the exhibition it is safe to conclude that it managed to open up and inform a public dialogue on diamond mining activities in Chiadzwa. Apart from school children who frequented the museum to see the exhibition because of its educational value (since it closely interrogated some of the key themes in their history and geography syllabi), other visitors came from stakeholders such as civic organisations, mining companies, local authorities, government departments as well as the villagers whose stories were being represented. In developing this exhibition, we felt that we had embraced what Karp and Kratz (2015: 281) call the 'interrogative museum,' which purposefully moves away from 'exhibitions that seem to deliver a lecture [which] might be declarative, indicative, or even imperative in mood—to a more dialogue-based sense of asking a series of questions.' By addressing contentious issues that surrounded the mining of diamonds and the losing of cultural and land rights by villagers who used to stay close to the mining fields, the exhibition generated interest amongst diverse stakeholders and, as a result, the issue of compensation began to gain increasing public attention.

Eventually, out of the calls that emerged from this exhibition, the villagers were financially compensated by the government and the mining companies, and the idea of Community Share Ownership Trusts (CSOTs) began to emerge. During the research phase of the exhibition, most villagers we interviewed expressed their frustration with the new mining companies that were benefitting from their ancestral mineral resources and failing to reinvest in the area. This issue was captured in the exhibition under the multimedia section and again the dialogue that was stimulated by its inclusion in the exhibition encouraged the government to consider establishing these Trusts. As a result, the Marange–Zimunya CSOT was formed by the government and the five mining companies each ceded $10,000 US towards community development projects.

An ongoing transformation

In this chapter, we have charted a process of transformation in the Mutare Museum which has seen a move away from museum practices borne out of colonialism. Our newly emerging ways of working are polysemic in that we have sought to create a public platform for multiple voices previously stifled in the museum's practices. More significantly, as our discussion of the diamond mining exhibition has helped to illustrate, the museum's philosophy can increasingly be viewed as activist. We have argued that by exploring contentious issues that are of the utmost importance to our communities, the Museum can become a centre of public and civic debate and engagement. This exhibition was able to bring out the injustices that villagers who were relocated from Chiadzwa were facing and, as a result, civic organisations started lobbying for the compensation of the displaced villagers. In this way the Mutare Museum is slowly becoming a site where topical issues are examined through a participatory manner that allows for multiple voices to be heard and, in doing so, play a role in identifying and delivering solutions to the challenges facing our communities.

Acknowledgements

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15

MUSEUMS IN THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY

Steve Lyons and Kai Bosworth

Introduction

The effects of climate change currently include not only extreme weather events, sea-level rise, melting glaciers, floods, and droughts, but also refugee crises, public health emergencies, military conflict, eco-cities for the super-rich, and reckless experiments in geo-engineering. As sociologist Christian Parenti (2011) reminds us, the social and natural impacts of climate change are not distributed evenly but are felt most severely by communities already impacted by histories of racism, colonialism, and poverty—the communities least responsible for producing greenhouse gases. The global inequalities deepened by climate change are altering the very makeup of the communities that museums are entrusted to serve.

In the face of climate emergency, many in the museum sector are asking what it means to be relevant to these communities today. Some museum workers are calling for greater inclusivity and accessibility, and for more sustained engagement with marginalized communities. Museums are diversifying their understanding of audience and expanding their tactics for political advocacy. Too often, however, the concepts of relevance, inclusivity, diversity, and participation lead museums to reinforce their claims to authoritative neutrality (Janes 2009: 59), diverting those of us working in museums from the deeper existential question that we ought to be asking: *What is the role and responsibility of the museum in a time of climate crisis?* The problem is not whether or not our institutions are relevant, but for whom and to what end.

This chapter argues that, in order for museums to matter in a time of climate crisis, they must first reject the claim to political neutrality that structures and limits their transformative social power. After briefly unpacking the discourse on relevance in museums and examining the dominant assumptions and justifications that lead to passivity and inaction, we will offer a divergent perspective on museum relevance, turning to recent initiatives organized by The Natural History Museum (of which we are representatives) to make our case. The Natural History Museum was founded by the activist art collective Not An Alternative in 2014 as both a mobile museum and an activist organization. Working with artists, scientists, environmental justice advocates, Native Nations,[1] and museum professionals, The Natural History Museum organizes exhibitions and public programs that re-interpret nature from

the perspective of environmental justice, connecting grassroots social movements to historical and contemporary political conflicts that are buried in many museums. These projects connect movements to museums and museums to movements, fostering a growing coalition of museum workers, activist scientists, and front-line communities in order to lay the foundation for what we term the *museum for the commons*.

Museums, like libraries and universities, are protectors of the knowledge commons, the vast resource of shared knowledge that is collectively created and sustained for the benefit of all. As social resources, museums can, and should, play an important role in educating the public about the unpredictable and overlapping effects of climate change on the earth's ecological and social systems. The Natural History Museum demonstrates how they can also function as infrastructural supports for grassroots activist mobilization, champions of science for the common good, and advocates for an equitable, sustainable, and just future. In the climate emergency, museum relevance should be linked to the struggle to secure the common good.

The limits of neutrality

Museums have always adapted themselves to the volatile social, economic, geopolitical, and environmental conditions in which they are enmeshed. Since the late 1960s, social unrest galvanized by the growing civil rights and Red Power movements have impelled many US museums to address the racist assumptions underpinning their curatorial and collecting practices (Cahan 2016). More recently, the climate crisis has provoked science and natural history museums to challenge their close relations to corporate funding from the fossil fuel industry. In 2016, both Tate Galleries in London and the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York parted ways with longstanding fossil fuel industry partners in the face of massive grassroots pressure. The AMNH joined the California Academy of Sciences (San Francisco, California), Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania), the Field Museum (Chicago, Illinois), and the Australian Academy of Science (Canberra, Australia), among others, by announcing its commitment to divest from fossil fuels. The Carnegie Museum of Natural History (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) has dedicated its first major in-house exhibition in four decades to the topic of the Anthropocene, the new geologic epoch that marks the global reach and geologic extent of anthropogenic impacts on earth systems.

Emergencies put into question the relevance of museums that are already locked into five or ten-year plans. They also provide openings for political engagement and opportunities to repurpose museums as activist institutions—as politicized agents in struggle. Emergencies do not merely force museums to take stands on important social and political issues. They also undo the innocence of political neutrality as it is claimed by most museums.

As Robert Janes notes, contemporary museums widely adhere to 'authoritative neutrality': they identify themselves as ideologically neutral spaces for balanced representation and reasoned debate, maintaining that they must preserve their neutrality 'lest they fall prey to bias, trendiness and special interest groups' (Janes 2009: 59). They locate themselves on the sidelines of crisis, often justifying their passivity by claiming that they do not have the resources or knowledge to address new or controversial issues. This argument, or rather excuse, becomes increasingly tenuous as we face the globally-threatening emergency represented by runaway climate change. Historian Howard Zinn's famous argument that 'You can't be neutral on

a moving train' (Zinn 1994) is apropos. As the extraction economy drives species toward mass extinction and endangers human and non-human communities alike, the passivity of many contemporary museums toward the world's biggest polluters is equivalent to consent. The question of the climate emergency forces us to consider the shifting backdrop for museum practice. What new demands does the climate emergency place on institutions? How can museums rise to the challenge of this emergency, and whose interests should they serve?

Relevance—to what end?

Today, many in the museum sector feel an overarching imperative to be relevant. Although museums continue to be as popular and trusted as ever (American Alliance of Museums 2015), curators, exhibition designers, programming staff, and marketers wish to ensure that they provoke fascination and excitement, not boredom or distrust. In her popular book *The Art of Relevance*, Nina Simon (2016) argues that museums must create relevance rather than simply assuming that it already exists. Simon contends that by considering how, and to whom, museums can become relevant, museum professionals can create exhibitions that are meaningful to different, new, and changing audiences. Centralizing the question of relevance in museum practice can help institutions facilitate new relationships with people of color and other communities that remain underserved and underrepresented, consequently increasing the diversity of museum audiences and broadening their bases of popular support (ibid.).

Finally, Simon argues that a strategy based on relevance promises to help demonstrate the success of exhibitions to donors, sponsors, and other potential funders. By promoting increasingly inclusive, responsive, and participatory museum practices, the emerging discourse on relevance promises to modernize museums—to push them beyond the authoritative neutrality and passivity underlying traditional museum practices. Relevance has become one of the dominant frameworks for understanding the transformative potential of museums today.

It is undeniable that museums should strive to be relevant to the constituencies they are entrusted to serve. However, when limited to the aims of broadening audiences and producing participatory points of entry for all people, the idea of relevance can become problematic and disempowering for institutions, particularly in the polarized political climate of the US. In the wake of the election of President Donald Trump, some advocates felt that museums needed to become more relevant to 'politically diverse' audiences. Noting the overwhelming prevalence of Democrats and liberals working in US museums, the Center for the Future of Museum's post-election blog entry explored the extent of the museum sector's claims to inclusivity:

> If museums have a mandate for our staff to reflect our communities, shouldn't that encompass political outlook as well? And if we don't encompass political diversity, with all the perspectives about values, priorities and policy that go with that very important form of self-identification, doesn't that leave us vulnerable to being out of step with a huge segment of the public we, as nonprofits, have pledged to serve?
>
> *(Merritt 2016)*

The visitor-centered approach to relevance invoked above can lead to damaging consequences for museums. Case in point: One of the primary arguments made by the Houston

Museum of Natural Sciences (HMNS, Houston, Texas) for not addressing the issue of anthropogenic climate change was that the institution's relationship with its visitors could be jeopardized if it even implicitly criticized the fossil fuel industry. As Carolyn Sumners, Director of Astronomy and the Physical Sciences at HMNS stated, 'We don't need people to come in here and reject us' (Kuchment 2014).

The HMNS made the choice to react to its visitors; to format its exhibitions based on the pre-existing values and beliefs presumed to be shared by its audience. The institution's decision does not account for the truth that for many Houston residents, the fossil fuel industry is a perpetrator of environmental racism. In this instance, the motivation to be inclusive and visitor-focused has come at the cost of the museum's relevance and leadership as an institution for popular science education, as well as its relevance to the working-class communities of Houston—largely composed of people of color who live near fossil fuel refineries and bear the brunt of their health impacts. The demand for museums to be relevant to the greatest number of people can ultimately reinforce the widely-held position that they must extract themselves from political debate.

Contrary to the thesis that taking positions on contested social and political issues will turn visitors away and destroy public trust in museums, evidence suggests that museum visitors prefer museums that take official positions on pressing contemporary issues. According to a November 2016 *MuseumNext* survey of 1000 museumgoers, those who visit museums most often think that museums should take positions on social issues. More revealing, 33% of respondents felt that addressing social issues would make museums *more* relevant to their lives and that they would be *more* likely to visit such museums. Respondents under the age of 30 felt even more strongly that political advocacy would increase the relevance of museums to their lives (MuseumNext 2017).

Discussions about museum relevance tend to focus on how museums can be deemed relevant to their visitors, but not how museums can be relevant participants in the world. We argue that, faced with the catastrophic impacts of climate change, the relevance of a museum should be gauged by its ability to participate in the processes of social change necessary for planetary survival. In this sense, relevance may, and in many cases should, involve participation and co-production by communities on the frontlines of the climate emergency. But participation or co-production is only relevant when it leaves participants in a better position to protect their communities, defend habitats, or collectively mobilize for environmental justice.

Many museums clearly value our common resources. They engage in sustainability initiatives, educate patrons about the natural world and, as noted above, some have even divested from fossil fuel sponsors. These actions present tangible first steps that any endowed institution can take. They are most important not only for their potential impacts on the fossil fuel economy, but also for their symbolic value: they demonstrate the museum's official commitment to working toward a future beyond fossil fuels. Initiatives to 'green the museum' allow institutions to draw a line between themselves and the fossil fuel industry, suggesting concrete ways that museums can take the side of the commons.

By the commons, we mean the various aspects of planetary nature that we rely on in order to survive, such as air, water, and a habitable earth. But the commons also includes the wealth of knowledge institutionalized in public places like museums. The commons does not belong to any individual or corporation, but to all of us. Within our political economy, the commons has been enclosed. Nature is rendered as a resource to be extracted for profit and its death is

memorialized as a foregone conclusion, as natural history. Taking the side of the commons means taking a stand against the system which enables this plunder. It also means being clear that the roots of the ongoing climate emergency lie in the privatization of the commons.

An abundance of research confirms that climate change impacts such as weather-related disasters, water- and mosquito-borne disease, and long-term drought are disproportionately affecting the global poor. Both historically and in the present, wealthy consumers and corporations in the Global North bear the vast portion of responsibility for producing greenhouse gases and sustaining structural inequality (IPCC 2014: 6). However, when the topic of climate change is taken up by museums of science and natural history, many struggle to articulate this dynamic of inequality and responsibility, either by locating the cause and solution of global environmental problems in individual consumer choice and habit, or by choosing to focus on the correlation between climate change and global population growth. Such frameworks obscure the political and economic forces that contribute to environmental destruction, consequently smoothing out the massive inequalities in both responsibility and impact (Peña 2012). By suggesting that 'the roots of this crisis are linked to overpopulation and, by extension, the Global South,' museums indirectly blame the poor for global environmental degradation (Rutherford 2011: 32).

Museums should acknowledge that the products of a mere 100 companies are responsible for 71% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions (CDP Worldwide 2016) and that these same companies have an overwhelming influence on the environmental choices available to us all. Museums that take the side of the commons express this inconvenient truth. By shedding light on the precise political stakes of the current crisis, museums can empower visitors to move beyond the politically disabling feelings of guilt and helplessness, and toward the challenge of mobilizing resistance. By siding *with* the commons, museums also show themselves to be *part* of the commons—as simultaneously belonging to, and advocating for, the commons.

The Natural History Museum: a museum for the commons

All museums can be vital resources for communities around the world that are seeking environmental and climate justice—healthy environments for all people and ecosystems regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, citizenship status, or class position. Not only do museums, and especially science and natural history museums, define the history and meaning of the natural world, but, they are also tasked with 'foster[ing] an informed appreciation of the rich and diverse world we have inherited . . . [and] preserv[ing] that inheritance for posterity' (American Alliance of Museums 1991). Some interpret this to mean that the museum is a mausoleum, a repository for bygone and disappearing objects, cultures, and peoples. By contrast, The Natural History Museum was founded on the hypothesis that museums of science and natural history can shape history in the present by revitalizing their public mandate, but only if they reject the claim of authoritative neutrality that constrains their ability to work in the interest of the commons.

As we have argued elsewhere, the claim to authoritative neutrality shields museums from the implications of the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) Code of Ethics, which includes investigating, exploring, and documenting the natural world and the impacts that particular social systems make on it (Lyons and Economopoulos 2015). Neutrality prevents museums from seeing (let alone acting upon) their transformative social power. In the face of the climate emergency, the claim to neutrality made by many large-scale science

institutions should be regarded only as an alibi for inaction. As the overwhelming majority of climate science predicts, without bold and immediate action from all sectors of society, there will be no livable future, let alone a future for museums. The only museum of the future will be one that champions the common good. The Natural History Museum was designed to model such a museum—a museum that functions both as an advocate and as infrastructure for environmental struggle.

Our experiment in the museum sector began as an earnest attempt to put the idea of authoritative neutrality into crisis, to make it appear as untenable as it actually is by exposing the entanglement of some of the largest natural history museums in the US with powerful representatives of the fossil fuel industry. What did it mean for David H. Koch—co-owner of Koch Industries, among the leading polluters in the US and a major funder of climate science disinformation to the tune of US$79 million (Greenpeace 2015)—to occupy a board position at the American Museum of Natural History and the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, two of the country's leading and most treasured science institutions? Our earliest work forced this question into the popular media to open up a broader set of issues about the role and responsibility of museums at a time of climate crisis.

Arguing that climate change deniers and fossil fuel industry executives had no business occupying leadership positions at science institutions, The Natural History Museum joined forces with top scientists and museum visitors to call on museums to cut all ties to fossil fuel interests. Our gamble was that there were activists already working within museums fighting for such changes, and that by applying pressure from the outside we could supply evidence of popular support for these unknown allies.

Following an open letter signed by dozens of the world's top scientists, a petition signed by more than 500,000 members of the public, countless press articles, and an exhibition at the 2015 American Alliance of Museum Convention in Atlanta (Plate 9), David Koch quietly walked away from the board of trustees at the AMNH, where he had been a member for the previous twenty-three years. This was a partial and largely symbolic victory; it told us that there was support for our campaigns inside the museum sector. Since that time, at least eight major science or natural history museums have publicly cut ties to fossil fuel interests by divesting their financial portfolios from fossil fuel investments, removing a sponsor, or by implementing ethical funding policies (Bagley 2015). The restructuring or reform of museum governance will not magically and immediately transform museums into activist institutions. It can, however, remove a barrier to action, producing necessary conditions from which to model a positive alternative.

The more we investigated the US museum sector, the more we found allies working in museums who wanted to do more than police their boards of trustees. Indeed, many museum workers saw the potential of their institutions to participate in, and add value to, the burgeoning climate and environmental justice movements. This became particularly acute during the 2016 movement to block construction of the final section of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), which became the focal point for climate justice and Native sovereignty struggles in North America. Among the injustices produced in the name of securing a petroleum pipeline was the desecration of sacred burial grounds and cultural features by DAPL construction crews on 3 September 2016. This was only one expression of the pervasive disregard for the health, culture, and history of Native Nations by both Energy Transfer Partners, the company responsible for constructing DAPL, and the North Dakota Historic Preservation Office, which denied any wrongdoing on the part of Energy

Transfer Partners. This was despite the outcry of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers working on the ground at Standing Rock.

Having discovered the efficacy of the open letter as an activist tactic, The Natural History Museum organized a public letter addressed to President Obama, the US Department of Justice, Department of the Interior, and the Army Corps of Engineers, denouncing the destruction of ancient burial sites, places of prayer, and other cultural artifacts sacred to the Lakota and Dakota people (The Natural History Museum 2016). Signed by 1281 archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, and museum workers, including fifty executive directors of museums and institutions of archaeology or anthropology (including the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., the Field Museum, and the AMNH), the letter represented an unprecedented act of collective advocacy from the museum community.

This was recognized as an 'amazing act of solidarity' by Sacred Stone Camp (2016), a cultural camp on the frontline of the blockade, as well as referenced as an important element of building alliances and unity behind Native historic preservation and consultation rights by Jon Eagle, Sr., Tribal Historic Preservation Officer for the Standing Rock Sioux tribe (Eagle 2016). The letter also indicated a cultural shift for museum leaders. Many of them recognized the urgency of leveraging their influence and expertise to support those working hardest to fight the corporations most responsible for anthropogenic climate change.

In a statement issued in response to the desecration of cultural resources by Energy Transfer Partners, AAM President and CEO, Laura Lott, declared:

> These actions are an affront to the beliefs outlined in the Alliance's strategic plan and an offense against the shared cultural heritage of the Lakota Nations and all people. The American museum community is committed to working openly and productively with Indigenous people for the protection, preservation, and repatriation of culturally sensitive items and property.
>
> *(Lott 2016)*

Museum leaders are increasingly recognizing that their codes of ethics and mission statements indicate a moral responsibility to not simply represent history and artifacts from Native Nations, but also to stand against the offensive destruction of sacred cultural sites.

The Koch campaign and the solidarity letter point toward one prospect for the activist museum: the museum-as-advocate, standing in solidarity with frontline communities and leveraging cultural legitimacy to hold political representatives accountable for both their actions and inaction. If the Koch campaign was understood as a strike *against* the petro-capitalist interests that embed themselves within our museums, the Standing Rock solidarity letter envisions a museum that is *for* environmental justice. Museums can fortify themselves from the immediate impacts of climate change, but they also can, and should, use their privileged position and their resources to amplify and legitimize the struggles of frontline groups.

Beyond advocacy

Museums of science and natural history already have the resources they need to be powerful and influential advocates for grassroots activism. They have communications departments, massive email lists, popular social media accounts, and loyal audiences. Many museums have physical resources, including exhibition spaces, auditoriums, and atriums, as well as dedicated

education, exhibitions, and development departments that can be coordinated and leveraged to support ongoing movements and campaigns in sustained and substantial ways. Museums also have objects and collections whose meaning can be activated by placing them in the context of the truth of climate change.

These resources can provide infrastructure for the commons. Museums can sign open letters, endorse movements and campaigns, and form broad coalitions within and beyond the museum sector. They can host community meetings and operate as meeting spaces for activists, organize training sessions and consultations, stage prop-building workshops before demonstrations, and host panel discussions and film screenings on pressing contemporary issues with thought-leaders in environmental justice and science for the common good. Activist museums can also dedicate space for collaborative, rapid-response exhibitions on contemporary environmental issues, offering movement organizers and activists platforms to not only represent, but also to legitimize their struggles for broad and diverse publics.

Such gestures of solidarity would require museums to cede some control over how their resources are used. At a bare minimum, each of the above-mentioned initiatives would require museum staff to facilitate open channels of communication between the museum and social movement organizers, which demands a level of committed outreach that many museums are already seeking in the interest of improving community engagement. Exhibitions and public programs need not be passive forms of activism or static monuments to social movements. They can be understood as opportunities for trust-building and co-production that, once released into the world, catalyze more committed and effective engagement.

Over the past two years, The Natural History Museum has built an infrastructure for collaboration with scientists, environmental justice groups, and museum workers on exhibitions and public programs, with the aim of instigating collective action on pressing concerns for both museums and the communities they serve. Working in collaboration with Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services (T.E.J.A.S.), a Houston-based environmental justice organization dedicated to promoting environmental protection in the state of Texas, The Natural History Museum co-produced *Mining the HMNS* (2016), a multifaceted project investigating Houston's fossil fuel ecosystem (Figure 15.1). We produced an exhibition at Project Row Houses (an experimental cultural institution in the city's Third Ward), co-hosted monthly 'Toxic Tours' of East Houston's petrochemical plants and refineries, built an exhibition amplifying the voices and stories of the low-income, predominantly Latinx and African-American fence-line communities situated along the Houston Ship Channel, and conducted air quality monitoring tests at sites across the city.

This project was designed to draw public and media attention to environmental injustices that T.E.J.A.S. has been exposing for the past decade. We used our resources and growing media infrastructure to both amplify T.E.J.A.S.'s struggles and communicate them to the public in novel and engaging ways. The precondition of this project was that our interests were aligned with, and supportive of, our collaborator's needs and, that through our collaboration, we could leave T.E.J.A.S. in a stronger position than when we initiated the project.

In 2017, The Natural History Museum began developing a sustained collaboration with the Lummi Nation, whose ancestral homelands are near Bellingham, Washington. Our collaboration grew out of the recognition that our Standing Rock solidarity letter required deeper engagement with both the efforts of Native Nations to defend the land and water and the

FIGURE 15.1 The Natural History Museum, *Mining the HMNS: An Investigation by The Natural History Museum*, Project Row Houses, Houston, TX, 2016. The eponymous exhibition interrogated the symbiotic relationship between the Houston Museum of Natural Sciences and its corporate sponsors. The exhibition analyzed key narratives and displays in the Houston museum, highlighting the voices and stories that were excluded—those of the low-income Latinx fence-line communities along the Houston Ship Channel.

Photograph courtesy of Not An Alternative/The Natural History Museum.

historical role played by museums in representing objects (including human remains) often taken without permission from Indigenous peoples from around the planet. After weeks spent learning from the Lummi Nation in the Pacific Northwest, we began to develop a collaborative exhibition and programming project related to the Lummi Nation's Totem Pole Journey.

Kwel Hoy': We Draw the Line is a multi-year initiative centered on a series of totem poles carved by Jewell James and the Lummi Nation House of Tears Carvers, which have traveled to communities threatened by fossil fuel expansion projects throughout North America since 2013. The Natural History Museum and the Lummi Nation are now traveling one of these totem poles to natural history museums around the country, linking them in a chain of solidarity with Native Nations and other frontline communities. The accompanying exhibition introduces visitors to the values and concerns guiding the Lummi and other Native Nations that are taking a leading role in grassroots movements to protect our water and earth for future generations. As we wrote in our exhibition pamphlet:

> Indigenous Peoples of the Pacific Northwest can be viewed in dioramas at our nation's major natural history museums, their daily life depicted through such artifacts

as carved spoons and boxes and hunting and fishing tools. But they are also living tribes that today are fighting fossil fuel expansion projects and preparing for rising sea levels. Imagine if museums were providing the context, research-based visionary narratives, immersive experiences, and opportunities for audience identification and engagement with the struggles of communities on the front lines of ecological crisis?

By facilitating a relationship between the Lummi Nation's innovative campaign and museums around the country, our goal is to deepen the historical significance of the Lummi Nation's fight for sovereignty and to provide financial and organizational assistance for the Totem Pole Journey—goals that bring the museum outside of its traditional borders and into contact with social and political movements. We want to challenge other museums to gain further relevance to the growing, Native-led movement for climate and environmental justice. In these recent and ongoing projects, we are deploying the resources and skills developed by The Natural History Museum—both its physical and media infrastructure—to test new modes of community engagement that can help mobilize collective action in response to the challenge of the climate emergency.

Moral propaganda

The Natural History Museum enacts a version of what Don Hughes, Vice President of Exhibitions at the Monterey Bay Aquarium, has called 'moral propaganda': it seeks to 'design space, and to present content, that moves people in a specific social/political direction' (Oakland Museum of California 2014: 21). Increasingly, we believe that museums can rise to this challenge by developing the vision of a world where the topic of climate change does not only invoke images of death and destruction, but also the courage of environmental justice communities working to protect the commons we all rely upon.

The natural history museum of the future will be both an advocate and an infrastructure for the commons. It will provide a lever for supporting environmental justice for all, as well as an institutional foundation for activism. It will draw lessons from the past and underscore the relevance of these lessons for the unfolding histories of the present. It will connect its collections to events happening beyond the museum's walls. It will not simply represent communities, but it will engage them and their concerns. Only then will the museum be relevant to the wider world. When museums stand with communities fighting fossil fuel expansion, host migrants displaced by sea level rise, or provide sanctuary for the politically marginalized, they demonstrate the necessity of responding to what science tells us, aligning themselves with truth.

We envision a future where museums can join with other institutions of the commons—libraries, national parks, hospitals, public spaces, and so on—in order to generate the collective power necessary to struggle against the interests of the fossil fuel industry in the name of the commons. Their exhibitions will present positions on natural *and* social issues representing the positions of the communities bearing the brunt of the impact of climate change. The public trust in the museum will be based not on its supposed neutrality, but on its responsibility to the commons.

Some aspects of global climate change are already written into the future. We are now confronting sea level rise, species migration, and changing temperature and precipitation averages, with cascading effects on social and ecological systems. How we respond to

these events is as open as ever. Museums help to shape the values, knowledge, and capacities of people to do so. Along with other institutions of the commons, museums have the opportunity and responsibility to join together in solidarity to ensure a livable and survivable world.

Acknowledgements

Note

1 Throughout this chapter, we use the language of Native Nations rather than Indigenous peoples, First Nations, Native peoples, Native Americans, Tribes, or American Indians. While each of these terms is complicated by its specific political and governmental context, our collaborations with specific individuals and groups has led us to believe that when it is not possible to refer to specific names, 'Native Nations' is the most appropriate broad concept for referring to the multiple, overlapping, and variously recognized sovereign nations that exist within the territorial borders of the United States and Canada. We use 'Indigenous peoples' sparingly and only to refer to a broader, global position.

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16

ACTIVISM, OBJECTS AND DIALOGUES

Re-engaging African collections at the Royal Ontario Museum

Silvia Forni, Julie Crooks and Dominique Fontaine

Historical activism and current concerns

Fanon's (1963) observations on decolonization as a historical process, although made a half century ago, speak powerfully to the experiences and issues surrounding the Royal Ontario Museum's treatment of African collections that we explore in this chapter:

> Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder. But it cannot come as a result of magical practices, nor of a natural shock, nor of a friendly understanding. Decolonization, as we know, is a historical process: that is to say it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content.
>
> *(1963: 36)*

The history of the African collection at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) is one that will always be informed by the conflictual 'contact zone' surrounding the 1989 exhibition *Into the Heart of Africa* (Pratt 1992: 6–7; Clifford 1997). The contestation and the problematic response of the institution to the issues raised by the protesters generated a long-term rift between the members of the African Canadian community of the Greater Toronto Area and the ROM.[1] In this chapter, we consider some of the concerns raised in this historical protest as the starting point for *Of Africa*, a project developed between 2014 and 2018 as an attempt to redress lingering tensions through concrete and sustained museological intervention. Drawing on Fanon's insights into decolonization processes, we position our thinking and curatorial practice as self-consciously engaging with the institutional history of the ROM and the political nature of exhibitions.

We see the *Of Africa* initiative as an active and mindful attempt not only to provide new and politically informed content, but also to affect institutional and structural change through long-term critical intervention. While the public presentation of the project conformed, by and large, to current museological practice, the methodologies used to

produce the *Of Africa* exhibitions and programs reflected a critical consciousness informed by decolonial awareness and intent shaped by current political sensitivity and cognizance of the ROM's institutional past.

The events that unfolded on the steps of the ROM in 1989 have been acknowledged by community leaders and scholars as an important instance of activist protest sparked by a problematic exhibition. The demands that the protesters presented to the institution, although grounded in the specificities of the cultural and political climate of Toronto, also manifested 'mounting frustration' which echoed those that inspired the contestations of other exhibitions in mainstream cultural institutions in the US (Cahan 2016).[2] The protest, led by a group of young activists who self-identified as the Coalition for the Truth about Africa (CFTA), was positioned as a political battle against the systemic racism of Canadian institutions of which the ROM was but one instance.[3]

The Toronto of the late 1980s was rife with racial and political tensions.[4] Activist groups, artists, and community organizers were up in arms against the systemic racism of the so-called Canadian multicultural society. By reacting to the protesters' demands with a reiteration of the museum's authoritative voice (Cannizzo 1991; Cuyler Young 1993), the ROM did not publicly acknowledge or respond to the critical issues raised by the protesters of *Into the Heart of Africa*, and ultimately failed to engage in a productive and potentially transformative dialogue. While many things have changed in the almost three decades between this historical activist protest and the project in which we are currently involved, the political issues that emerged in that historical context continue to be both relevant and inspirational for the curatorial and institutional intervention that we have been carrying out over the last four years.

Shifting patterns and sharing authority

Despite the public rigidity displayed by the ROM, the 1989 events did have an impact on institutional practices. Soon after these events and, in line with the third demand presented by the protesters, the museum mandated that consultation with source community representatives become an integral part of the development of cultural exhibitions. The year after the closure of *Into the Heart of Africa*, the exhibition staff and curators consulted extensively with the Toronto Caribbean community on the presentation of *Caribbean Celebrations*, a program that included two exhibitions and a series of programs focused on Carnival. Alongside *Caribbean Festival Arts*, an exhibition generated by the St Louis Art Museum, the ROM hired curator Hazel Da Breo to develop *Toronto Mas* (featuring costumes from the 1990 Toronto Caribana festival).

A group of advisors (composed mainly of members of the Black Business and Professional Association, journalists, and educators) was engaged early on in the production of these exhibitions and had the chance to comment on objects and texts, as well as shape the presentation of the topic. The advisors engaged in this consultation demanded that the ROM issue an apology for the previous exhibition. While this was done in a press release issued in June 1991, the ROM's statement that the museum was regretful 'for any offence unintentionally caused to members of the African American community and to other groups of individuals' was not received as a strong enough acknowledgement of responsibility by the community who were alienated from the institution.

In 1994, on the occasion of the Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association in Toronto, the ROM engaged three African scholars to reflect on some of the most significant sections of the collection and made the catalogue records of the entire African Collection available to the scholars gathered for the conference. A selection of works was displayed in the exhibition *Artifacts of History: African Collections in the Royal Ontario Museum* and remained on view for three years thereafter.

Since then, the ROM initiated or developed numerous small and larger projects in collaboration with different community partners.[5] Yet, despite these initiatives, which intensified after the hiring of a curator dedicated to the African collections in 2008, large segments of the African Canadian community continued to see the museum as the fundamentally unwelcoming institution that they experienced decades earlier. Indeed, while the staff could perceive a significant shift in curatorial practice, increasingly grounded in extensive consultation and shared authority with community groups (rather than based solely on the curator's authoritative voice), this shift was not necessarily made visible or effectively communicated to the public. In addition, despite internal transformations, the Museum remained a predominantly White institution, whose organizational structures continued to be shaped by parameters of 'excellence' defined by elitist, middle class criteria that exclude those objects, ideas, and visitors that do not fit into a Eurocentric definition of good taste (Bourdieu and Darbel 1997).

Indeed, twenty years after the contestation of the *Into the Heart of Africa* exhibition, very few Black people had been appointed to the Board of Directors or held leadership positions within the institution. While the ROM was certainly not alone in this situation, which has become a strong concern and point of action for several North American museum associations only recently,[6] the status quo seemed at odds with the museum's 2012 rebranding as an 'indispensable resource connecting people to their world and to one another.'

In the second decade of the 21st century, under the leadership of Janet Carding, the ROM's strategic vision was one of strong community engagement. Yet, it was still difficult for the institution to address head-on its lack of connection with the African Canadian community. While the institution had made important steps in responding to the activists' demands made in 1989, many still felt that the ROM had never properly apologized or taken concrete action to change its governance structure and culture and approach the community in a more collaborative way. An important step in this direction was taken in 2013, when independent curators, Julie Crooks and Dominique Fontaine, started collaborating with ROM curator, Silvia Forni, to develop a multiplatform project called *Of Africa*. This project would take concrete steps in proposing nuanced exhibitions and programs on Africa and its diaspora, while at the same time challenging the institutional status quo in potentially productive ways.

In planning exhibitions based on a critical rethinking of artworks and their institutional positioning, the *Of Africa* curatorial team sought to productively disrupt and interrupt overarching institutional narratives. Such disruptions were intended as opportunities for generative short-circuits, where different galleries and spaces would be temporarily 'interrupted' with African or diasporic displays, in order to convey the complexity of the histories and relationships that were the basis of the collection formation. This methodology also provided an important point of departure to rethink the role and function of an African ethnographic collection in a 21st century, encyclopedic museum.

Embracing process: critical thinking and institutional transformation

A multiplicity of voices has been the guiding principle of the multiplatform project *Of Africa*. In conceptualizing this project, our curatorial strategy and methodology has been guided by dialogues. Between 2013 and 2017, we have managed to redefine ways of collaborating between ROM and representatives of the different Black Indigenous, Caribbean, and African Diasporic communities of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). As such, we have created a framework whereby each component of the project was developed in consultation with individuals that would contribute different perspectives to the discussion. An advisory committee made up of scholars, curators, and artists were invited at the beginning of the process to serve as a sounding board in refining the themes of the *Of Africa* project.

Over the course of the project, the dialogical ethos was a constant. As curators, we were mindful that we had to establish a methodology that would enable us to undo by doing—undoing ways of collaborating that did not sustain an effective relation with the members of the Black and Caribbean communities and engaging in a series of activities that would position the institution as a museum in action. These activities—symposia, community workshops and conversations, film and video series, keynote lectures, exhibitions—served as a strategy for the ROM to revisit its past in relation to exhibiting Africa, and as a means of exploring new ways to engage the public by presenting a more nuanced knowledge and understanding of Africa's past and present. In addition, we also decided to focus explicitly on historical and contemporary issues pertaining to the Black diaspora as a way of highlighting the integral role of people of African descent in Canadian history.

In 2014, we launched a call for a site-specific, artistic intervention at the ROM. The invitation was to artists of African heritage to submit a proposal for an original artwork to be featured in the Wilson Canadian Heritage Exhibition Room, in the Sigmund Samuel Gallery of Canada. The aim was to enhance the ROM's representation of African Canadian history and to explore the persistent historical absence of people of African descent in the Canadian consciousness. As such, the invitation was to reposition Blackness in the Canadian narrative through a creative engagement with the ROM's Canadian Gallery. The winning proposal *Worn: Shaping Black Feminine Identity* by artist Karin Jones exemplified our actions to effect change (Figure 16.1). The work was the first contemporary art installation presented as part of the *Of Africa* project. Jones's beautifully crafted piece, a Victorian mourning dress made of synthetic hair, evoked the complexity of African identity when shaped by forces such as imperial rule, slavery, and alienation.

Karin Jones's artist statement (displayed in the gallery) encapsulated our objectives to tackle, challenge, and provide a broader context for the understanding of African Canadians' experience in Canadian society in relation to the mostly White and culturally British artworks on display in the Sigmund Samuel Gallery of Canada:

> For me, the Victorian mourning dress is a symbol of sadness, 'high' culture, the British Empire, and the constraints of feminine beauty norms. Here, I have made one out of African 'hair'—actually a synthetic material created specifically for use in African-style braiding techniques. The work underlines African hairstyles as a craft as refined as any decorative art produced in Europe; it alludes to the invisible labour of the thousands of Africans who contributed to the wealth of the British Empire; and it references the story

FIGURE 16.1   *Worn: Shaping Black Feminine Identity* featured a site specific installation by artist Karin Jones. It was on view at the Royal Ontario Museum in the Wilson Canadian Heritage Exhibition Room from 31 January to 1 November 2015.
Photograph by Brian Boyle.

of Sarah Baartman, an African woman whose silhouette helped shape 19th Century European fashion. The dress rises from a bed of cotton bolls and African hair bolls, a mythic figure born of the cross-cultural forces of colonialism, commerce, and slavery. I wear my African-Canadian identity much as a Victorian woman would have worn this type of dress: proudly, but also uncomfortably, shaped but also constrained by it.

The curatorial methodology of the *Of Africa* project helped in creating new spaces for exchange that considered audiences as a critical part of the process. *Worn: Shaping Black Feminine Identity* was a small exhibition complemented by frequent public programs, both in the form of lectures and conversations held in the gallery, in the presence of the artwork that brought visitors to the museum that had never set foot in the Sigmund Samuel Gallery of Canada. The ripple effects of this powerful installation went beyond the positive reception of the museum audience and reinforced the idea that museum spaces could become places of conversation, sharing, and exchange, as people from different communities engaged personally, and often quite strongly, with the artwork. This way of working aimed to maximize the potential of each exhibition or stand-alone program and was central to all the initiatives carried out since 2014. The strongly participatory experience of *Worn: Shaping Black Feminine Identity* became the stepping stone for the production of a larger exhibition featuring nine contemporary Black Canadian artists—developed as the final act of the *Of Africa* project.

During the summer of 2017, we engaged in broad public consultations to define the title of this exhibition. *Here We Are Here: Black Canadian Contemporary Art* was a title chosen because of its multidimensional character. Drawn from one of the installations in the exhibition by artist, Sylvia Hamilton, it evoked the long history of Black presence in Canada while claiming a contemporary space of engagement and reflection. We also conducted in-depth conversations with the featured artists and our advisors to ensure that we avoided oversimplifying the narratives when writing labels and wall texts. While the exhibition will be shaped mainly by the poetic and political messages of the artworks selected, we are also planning a publication that will enable us to make more transparent the process that brought it to life. In this process, the curatorial vision was grounded in common reflections developed in workshops with the invited artists, as well as in longer and shorter-term dialogues with scholars and cultural critics.

While dialogical processes are not new in museological practice, the *Of Africa* project has embedded this value-based concept in the exhibition and public program development and production in a way that is developing community, rather than being used as a temporary *ad hoc* consultation device. In a similar way, while ideas of national diversity and contested histories have been emerging in many exhibitions in Canadian museums in the last decade, and as part of the Canada 150 cultural celebrations in particular, the ROM's contemporary Black Canadian art exhibition will be the first of its kind in a large mainstream institution.[7] This, by itself, is most meaningful considering the history of this specific institution.

Of Africa as an exercise in decolonizing the ROM

Reflecting on the ways in which *Of Africa* helped to catalyze the ROM's approach to its collection *vis-à-vis* Africa and the diaspora, it is tempting to be optimistic. There is no doubt that the initiative made significant strides to reclaim and reposition Africa and the diaspora at the ROM, as a way of moving forward from the 1989 *Into the Heart of Africa* debacle. *Of Africa*'s aim was to problematize not only the content of exhibitions, but also to question how the museum's hierarchical structure had been used in the past to preserve scholarly and institutional authority in relation to the African collection and the ways in which it would be displayed (Butler 2016: 232).

By offering a multi-year program of events and a collaborative approach with the sustained involvement of external, independent curators, the ROM took concrete action to cultivate the trust and engagement with a range of constituents from Toronto's Black, Caribbean, and African communities. *Of Africa* attempted to not only repair the fraught relationships of the past, but also to spearhead renewed conversations in the present between community stakeholders and the institution. Our hope is that this will not constitute an isolated initiative, but that museum practices related to Africa and its diaspora will hereafter always be reflective and collaborative enterprises informed by, and concerned with, the long-term process of decolonization.

Of Africa was positioned as an intervention within the ROM. We hoped to bring to the fore not only institutional change and accountability for the errors of the past, but also to address the concerns related to ongoing museum practices concerning the Black diasporic communities. In essence, the ROM's administration was asked to consider strategies to decolonize their approach in relation to imparting knowledge around Africa's representation. Fanon's words at the opening of this chapter are prescient: the act of decolonization is a process (at times protracted in the case of the ROM) that begins with an acknowledgement and understanding of historical contexts. The primary decolonial gesture for

museums, such as the ROM, is to question the myths related to modernity, or what Santiago Castro-Gómez describes as the 'hubris of the zero-point' (1995: 23), whereby:

> ... the co-existence of diverse ways of producing and transmitting knowledge is eliminated because now all forms of human knowledge are ordered on an epistemological scale from the traditional to the modern, from barbarism to civilization, from the community to the individual, from the orient to the occident.
>
> *(Castro-Gómez 2007: 433)*

These deeper theoretical questions were at the core of the symposium we organized in 2014 titled, *Of Africa: Histories, Collections & Reflections*. This event marked the inauguration of the project and was intended as a first step in the strategy towards the ROM's decolonization. The symposium was conceived as a way of opening-up further institutional dialogue by acknowledging the past, and to think of concrete ways to 'affect or change' the habits of 'thinking and seeing' Africa and the diaspora. The conversations between current and former activists of the Coalition for the Truth about Africa (CFTA), senior museum administrators, and concerned members of the public exposed the dissonance related to truly confronting colonial discursive practices from an institutional perspective.

We are suggesting that, although the political formation of colonialism had officially come to an end, within institutions such as the ROM, colonialist logic continued to inform structures and practices in subtle and deeply rooted ways well into the 21st century. This was writ large in the case of the curatorial vision and institutional support for *Into the Heart of Africa*. To an extent, however, one can trace the contours of progress over the last twenty-seven years. As mentioned earlier, the institution made recurrent, yet not always effective attempts, both through curation and programming, to address the tensions and fissures which were the residual effects stemming from that exhibition.

The long-term, social and political fallout experienced by the ROM is linked to the events of 1989 and has presented a multiplicity of challenges that have also affected our more recent work. While there was incredible support and goodwill for *Of Africa* and its ultimate success, the memory of *Into the Heart of Africa* was still present in the minds of those in important positions within the Black and Caribbean communities. Added to these misgivings was the global political climate with the rise of divisive populist politics, heightened incidents of state violence toward people of colour, and growing societal inequality. Museums must navigate and confront these exigencies when considering more collaborative approaches to representation. While the ROM has acknowledged the need for such efforts, we are also aware that lingering negativity cannot be so quickly dispelled. This is why the notion of haunting is both relevant and essential to any discussion about decolonizing practice, the ROM, and *Of Africa*.

Referring to *Into the Heart of Africa*, Shelley Butler (2016: 231) writes, 'the exhibition haunts the ROM and is remembered by a generation of African and Caribbean Canadians and politically engaged citizens.' However, haunting as a theoretical framework is also essential to the strategies of *Of Africa*—particularly in relation to the development of the contemporary art exhibition that marks the closure of the project. In Black studies, the discourse of *hauntology* is related to the ways in which haunting, specters, and ghosts have been used to examine the constant presence of the past, namely the trans-Atlantic slave trade and ways in which that trauma continues to 'haunt' the present (McDougall 2016: 50).

As Dionne Brand (2001: 29) notes, 'You are constantly overwhelmed by the persistence of the spectre of captivity.' Hauntology brings to the forefront the residues of slavery, the violence of colonialism, and the effects of racism, both overt and systemic. These ever-present historical events form a ghostly presence haunting Black diasporic experience. The deeply visceral reaction to *Into the Heart of Africa* by the predominately Caribbean members of the Coalition for the Truth About Africa was, in large measure, informed by their status as marginalized people in a settler-colonial nation state.

The haunting trope is also applicable to the ROM's position within Toronto and the global museological world. The exhibition and its aftermath became a cautionary tale on how museums navigate and manage (or not) the complex terrain of representation. The continued distrust of the institution by some members of the Black and Caribbean communities constitutes a haunting. Haunting involves memory work. It forms the basis of the protracted and continuing journey towards healing which continues to be a work in progress after twenty-seven years.[8] Thus, as Eva Tuck suggests, 'Haunting lies precisely in its refusal to stop ... this refusal to stop is its own form of resolving ... Haunting aims to wrong the wrongs' (Tuck and Rhee 2016: 642).

The final chapter of the *Of Africa* project is also concerned with the concept of haunting, which is inextricably bound with the process of decolonization as it relates to the contemporary art exhibition slated to open in January of 2018. *Here We Are Here: Black Canadian Contemporary Art* will place Black Canadian history in the spotlight by inviting nine contemporary Black Canadian artists to create works that focus on issues of racial and historical identity.[9] This exhibition seeks to challenge a persistent national historic narrative, within the discourse of multiculturalism, which reduces the Black Canadian experience to one of perpetual newcomer or immigrant from former commonwealth countries. Though the exhibition will not present any alternative strong narratives or solutions, it strives to introduce a sense of doubt, a moment of reflection, and a space to pause in the otherwise still quite factual and authoritative galleries of the Royal Ontario Museum (Figure 16.2).

History, memory, presence, past, and representation form the core of all the works that will be exhibited. The past haunts the present with a formidable presence. Here, the haunting acts as a specter of 'mattering'; bringing to the fore the 'absented presence' of four-hundred years of Black history in Canada through a contemporary lens and myriad artistic practices. With this exhibition we hope to accelerate the process of decolonization at the ROM. Decolonization necessarily involves an interruption of the ways in which knowledge is produced, disseminated, and displayed about Africa and the diaspora at the ROM. It also means that persistent and biased behaviours, policies, and systems must be eradicated to further enact the decolonization of the museum. We are very conscious that this process is far from being completed.

While *Of Africa* has been instrumental in fostering this process of decolonization, both commitment and institutional will must also be present. It is important that the Museum recognizes the ghosts and specters related to colonial-settler histories and their continued effects, while sustaining an active dialogue with communities and committing to telling stories that give a voice to those historically excluded from museum narratives. We are hopeful that this will be the case.

FIGURE 16.2 *Lesley* still image from three channel video installation *Suck Teeth Composition* by Michèle Pearson Clarke (After Rashaad Newsome), 2017, one of the nine artworks included in the exhibition *Here We Are Here: Black Canadian Contemporary Art*.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 The contestation of *Into the Heart of Africa* has been the subject of many scholarly reflections from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Some of the more extensive analyses may be found in (Ames 1991; Cannizzo 1991; Crean 1991; Philip 1991; Schildkrout 1991; Mackey 1995; Riegel 1995; Clifford 1997; Butler 2007; Forni 2017).

2 The Coalition for the Truth About Africa presented the museum with a list of five demands: 1) that the exhibition be dismantled; 2) admit that it was racist and apologize for this; 3) undertake to

get approval from the Black community on the form and content of future exhibitions about Africa or Black people; 4) hire more Black consultants and staff; and 5) include Black people on the board of directors (see also Butler 2007:90).

3   While the members of the Coalition for the Truth about Africa were mostly young people of African descent who had immigrated to Canada from the Caribbean, their concerns were shared by a large portion of the Black community of the Greater Toronto Area.

4   Racial profiling and police violence were at the time becoming a growing concern for the community. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw an increase in murders of young Black men, which sparked vocal activist protests (Burns 1989).

5   Among the most significant collaborative projects on African and African diasporic themes developed since 1994 were: *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Freedom* created by Parks Canada in partnership with the ROM and the Ontario Black History Society (2002); the consultation permanent display *Gallery of Africa: Themes and Collections* (2013–2007); *Beads of Life: Eastern and Southern African Adornment* (2005) exhibited at the Canadian Museum of Civilization; *stitching Community: African Canadian Quilts from Southern Ontario* (2009) developed with the Buxton Historic Site and Museum; *Positioned as Desired (*2010) curated by Kenneth Montague of Wedge Curatorial Projects; *Toronto's carnival: Festival Photographs from 1967 to Today* (2011) presented by Scotiabank Caribbean Carnival and curated by BAND; *Carnival from Emancipation to Celebration* (2012); and *Of Africa* (2014–2018) co-curated by Julie Crooks, Dominique Fontaine and Silvia Forni.

6   In July 2015, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, in partnership with the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) and the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), published an extensive survey highlighting the staggering lack of diversity among museum professionals. The Strategic Plan launched in 2016 by the American Alliance of Museums positioned *Diversity, Equity, Accessibility and Inclusion* as one of its strategic objectives (www.aam-us.org/about-us/what-we-do/resources-on-diversity-equity-accessibility-inclusion). In the same year, the Association of Art Museum Curators established a Diversity Task Force aimed at developing concrete initiatives to support young people from diverse backgrounds in their museological career.

7   There are a number of important predecessors to *Here We Are Here*, which were mostly developed in university art galleries or contemporary art exhibition spaces. From the pioneering work *Africville: A Spirit that Lives On* at the Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, Halifax in 1989, to *The Creation … of the African-Canadian Odyssey: Nkiru Nzegwu* at the Power Plant in 1992, to more recent examples such as *Positioned as Desired* curated by Kenneth Montague as an intervention in the Sigmund Samuel Gallery of Canada at the ROM in 2010, *28 Days: Reimagining Black History Month*, curated by Pamela Edmonds and Sally Frater at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery of the University of Toronto in 2012 or *NEW-FOUND-LANDS* curated by Pamela Edmonds and Bushra Junaid at the Eastern Edge Gallery of St. John's in 2016. It is also meaningful to acknowledge the considerable critical awakening displayed in many institutions during Canada Sesquicentennial year in 2017. Many Black Canadian artists were included in the AGO's *Every. Now. Then.* exhibition in 2017. *Here We Are Here* builds upon these insights and curatorial efforts, positioning cutting edge and provocative contemporary works at the core of the museum.

8   A significant and publicly acknowledged step forward was the official apology by the ROM to the Coalition for the Truth about Africa (CFTA) on 9 November 2016. Josh Basseches, Director and CEO of the ROM, Mark Engstrom, Deputy Director of Collection and Research, and several senior managers and representatives of the Board of Trustees were present at the event. The text of the apology had been negotiated and agreed upon by the museum and representatives of the CFTA and was officially accepted. While this is acknowledged by both parties as a significant stepping stone, it also marks the beginning of a renewed push for change that needs to be sustained in the future.

9   The nine artists featured in this exhibition were Sandra Brewster, Michèle Pearson Clarke, Chantal Gibson, Sylvia D. Hamilton, Bushra Junaid, Charmaine Lurch, Esmaa Mohamoud, Dawit L. Petros and Gordon Shadrach.

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17

MUSEOLOGICAL ACTIVISM AND CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP

Collecting the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement

Selina Ho and Vivian Ting

Introduction

The Umbrella Movement Visual Archives and Research Collective was formed by an advocacy group of citizens during the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement in 2014.[1] With an aim to preserve, document, and research the disobedient objects of the movement, the Collective succeeded in building a collection not only to represent their political claims, but also to practice their cultural citizenship in making a democratic society. This chapter provides a reflexive account of the experiences of the Collective members involved in putting this collection together. Setting out to explore their organization, collecting criteria, and approach, and the challenges of collecting the objects from the occupied sites, we portray the Collective as a civic project for pursuing cultural citizenship in support of a democratic society.

This chapter is divided into three parts. In the first part, the notion of cultural citizenship offers a perspective for us to examine the civil-led museological activism. Inspired by Aihwa Ong's view of cultural citizenship as a self-making process, we recognize the Collective's practices as a cultural citizen-making process, at both the organizational and collection levels. In the second part, we focus on the organizational process of the Collective, and how the subjects related themselves to the group reality of the movement. We highlight that the Collection project and its outcomes emerged through a democratic participatory and empowering process of 'becoming' cultural citizens. In the third part, to explicate the museological approaches of the Collective, we explore the material dimension of the Collection by examining the group's collecting principles and the 'things' they collected from the occupied sites.

Finally, we conclude with a reflection on the public life of the collective subjects and materials. Overall, the collecting project was able to nurture the civic consciousness of team members by opening up a new cultural space for citizen-making and normalizing it in a participatory and democratic sense. During the process of collecting, the members were committed to researching the objects and the social fabrication in understanding the complexities of the Umbrella Movement. Their plan for extending the public life of the 'disobedient' materials has highlighted issues of contemporary collecting and raised new possibilities for museum practices.

Museological activism and cultural citizenship

Since the mid-20th century, museological activism has become an important subject in the West. A body of significant literature puts forward the museum's social role in supporting activist challenges to injustices and racism (Janes and Conaty 2005; Golding 2009; Janes 2009, 2013; Golding and Modest 2013), abuses of human rights around the world (Sandell 2007, 2012), and debates about 'hot' topics such as homosexuality, sexuality, terrorism, drugs, and climate change (Cameron and Kelly 2010). 'Curatorial activism' has been added to the agenda for curators to take up their 'ethical responsibility' (Reilly 2011) and engage in representing the history of social movements that characterized national cultures and universal values (Message 2014). In her historical account of the early museological activism of the National Museum of American History in representing the African American civil-rights movements, Kylie Message (2014: 1) defines curatorial activism as the 'attempts by individuals to engage with, represent and often contribute to social and political protest and reform movements' that primarily takes the form of collecting and curating the ephemera and 'artefacts' of activist work.

The above studies ground the agency of the museum and curators in both governmental and non-governmental cultural settings, for supporting social or political activism to strengthen a viable democratic society. Nevertheless, it is difficult to address this discourse in a society where citizens are still fighting for political democracy, and where public culture is manifested in a confrontational relationship between the state and civil society. This chapter hopes to fill in this gap by offering a case to demonstrate how museological activism can be realized by the civil society even in a changing and precarious political context, and how it can inform a new kind of contemporary museological practice that can expand the claims of 'citizenship' into the cultural sphere.

Since the concept of citizenship has been extended from legal and political parameters to the cultural sphere, two basic perspectives are enlisted for studies of cultural citizenship. The first is concerned with the protection offered by cultural rights and the opportunities to participate as actively engaged citizens. This perspective tends to explore the approaches used by democratic states in cultural policy or institutional mechanisms for realizing cultural citizenship. For example, the policy arrangement for improving citizens' civic consciousness or cultural competence (Mercer 2002; Wang 2013). Second, cultural citizenship is concerned with the struggles of citizens to claim their place and voice in the public sphere (the nation) or use cultural expression in claiming public rights and recognition in relationship to other citizens (Rosaldo 1997).

The second perspective that views cultural citizenship as a site of contestation, negotiation, and struggle over cultural meaning is doubtlessly more relevant to the political–cultural context of Hong Kong.[2] In the city, cultural rights have never been considered by the government as part of the policy agenda, even though the provisions of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights have remained in force since 1997. Instead, Hong Kong witnessed an increasingly instrumental use of culture by both the neo-liberal economic system and by the government and, at the same time, provocative civil-led protesters stood for their cultural rights (e.g. the government's demolition of the Queen Pier in 2007).

The focus in this chapter is on the civil struggle for cultural citizenship and the use of museological activism to achieve it. The notion of cultural citizenship offers a theoretical perspective to examine the practice of the Collective. According to Aihwa Ong (1996: 738), becoming a citizen depends on how one is constituted as a subject, exercising or

submitting to power relations. One must develop an attitude of self-making in shifting fields of power that include the nation-state and the wider world. Ong (1996) discussed how different non-white immigrants negotiate the lines of difference established by state agencies and groups in civil society. They are bounded by oppositional racial ideology and an assessment of cultural competence determined by their human capital and consumer power, with an increasing dependence on their positions in the global economy. She concluded that cultural citizenship is a process of self-making and being-made in relation to nation states and transnational processes.

Nevertheless, instead of dealing with racial, social, and cultural difference or ethno-politics, the citizen-making of the Collective dealt with an undemocratic polity that upholds unequal political participation. The Collective used museological practices to represent their claims and strengthen the meaning of 'citizenship' in the cultural domain. In addition, the key members submitted themselves to a web of power linked with both the civil society and the state. We will explore this process by drawing from semi-structured interviews with the key members, and textual and visual analyses of their collecting statements and internal documents.

The umbrella archive collective: a subject-making process of cultural citizenship

This part examines how the Collective organized and assigned curatorial roles to themselves to become active participants in the social movement. The Collective was initiated by actors, operationalized with a decentralized, peer-to-peer method, and then deliberated in participatory and community-based, democratic ways. In 2014, the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement began, principally driving the demand for rescinding the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress's decision that reneged on its promise of universal suffrage in the election of the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region in 2017. During the protest, more than 100,000 Hong Kong citizens, students, and members of widely-ranging social classes took to the streets.

Major roads in the Admiralty, Causeway Bay, and Mong Kok, were occupied by protesters for seventy-nine days. Protestors expressed themselves through their words, drawings, sketches, new media technologies, and installations during their time on the street. In particular, the activity of 'self-archiving'[3] emerged among the artists, and law and cultural professionals with different proclamations.[4] Among these, the Umbrella Movement Visual Archives and Research Collective was the most organized.

Sampson Wong was a PhD student in Urban Studies and Geography at the University of Manchester when the movement broke out in 2014. He had a strong interest in collecting political objects. In the same year, during his interview for a magazine with a curator of the exhibition *Disobedient Objects* at the Victoria and Albert Museum (London, UK), he had learned about the self-archiving practices of social activists in other countries. After returning to Hong Kong, he wondered if a volunteering team could be set up to document the movement. In early October, he posed a question on his Facebook page asking citizens if it would be possible to set up a central organization for archiving the movement.

Due to many positive replies, he called for a meeting in the occupied area on 7 October 2014. On that day, around 50 or 60 citizens turned up for the meeting and they discussed how to form an archive team. About twenty to thirty citizens from diverse social backgrounds

officially joined the team. They included artists, students, archivists, gallerists, writers, practitioners from art auctions and art-related professions, and other white-collar workers. They brought to the team a variety of knowledge and expertise, including personnel, communication, technology, documentation, visual mapping, curating, logistics, and cultural management.

The team established their aims: 1) to preserve the artifacts and items that were considered relevant and important to the movement and prevent them from being damaged and confiscated during the clearing operation conducted by the police; and 2) to systematically document and research the movement by relating the materials to their environment and redefining the occupied space with a new function in an imaginative way. As stated in their work document, 'the project is NOT about art, but protest and citizen expressions in contentious politics.' It 'strives to establish a civil-led, bottom-up archive in accordance with ethics and guidelines of the counterparts in other countries' (Umbrella Movement Visual Archives and Research Collective 2014).

Considering itself as part of the imagined community in the movement, the archive assumed a social function in the occupied areas like other teams, such as the first-aid team, the legal-aid team, or the cleaning team. They set up an on-site booth to accommodate a service team to explain their work to the public and to keep the tools for dismantling objects. In the course of its organization, Sampson Wong played a key role in designing the archive, while Clarisse Yeung, an art administrator, was a key person overseeing logistical matters. To organize themselves, using a spatial approach, they divided the occupied sites into fourteen zones: ten in Admiralty, two in Causeway Bay, and two in Mong Kok. Each zone had one leader and approximately two to ten volunteers. The leaders were responsible for coordinating the zone members. They briefed the volunteers about the ethical issues and the conditions under which they could take the objects. The major task of each zone group was to identify what 'things' were in each zone, document how they evolved every day, and find out who created or owned the objects.

Each zone group kept its records in an inventory and discussed and selected which items were important. The discussions were conducted on a 'peer-to-peer' basis, where the leader and the zone members are equally privileged and can freely argue for supporting the collection of a certain item or not. The zone members then wrote down the reasons for preserving the items to make it clear to the group members which items should be collected. As the Collective initially intended, the zone-based, decentralized organization enabled the members to intensify their involvement and engage in the process in a democratic, participatory way. The process was aligned with cultural sociologist Nick Stevenson's view (2016: 403) of cultural citizenship that is aimed at an educative and communications-based society—one that prioritizes the possibility of human rights, democracy, and social justice, and requires a commons where people can meet, interact, and exchange different ideas and perspectives.

As part of his reflections on the project, Wong noted:

> the archive has made the occupiers more aware of what is happening in the process of the movement. They considered it as a method of participating and engaging in the occupying movement and self-identified themselves as participants even with no professionals to endorse or assign their roles.
>
> *(Sampson Wong, personal communication, 4 May 2017)*

Clarisse was a participant of this kind. She felt powerless after the incident of 28 September (the day marking the beginning of the civil disobedience campaign). In the occupied sites, she helped by providing bottles of water, and producing banners and posters. As she recalled those days, 'I did not know how to orient myself, though I visited the sites every day. I was not sure what I could do that would be useful to the movement.' She attempted to find any role that would be useful to the movement, until she was online and called by the 'archive' (Clarisse Yeung, personal communication, 27 February 2017).

Tobias Leung, a post-secondary, IT student, was a committed volunteer. He joined the movement because he disagreed with the Congress's decision. He had always lived in the occupied areas and one day he noticed an advertisement calling for archival volunteers. At the time, he thought he would have to take a 'job' in the movement, such as taking care of materials and resources. He was finally allocated to a zone called 'AD08,' located near the iconic areas of 'Lennon Wall' and the 'Civil Square.' This area was where he stayed during the occupy movement. His main job was to mark the 'things' in the zone and trace their condition and special locations. He also found out the names of the creators and their contact numbers for identifying the original meaning of the works. He said that it was not difficult for him to trace this information as the occupiers lived in a kind of community and they were very helpful, passing along his questions by word-of-mouth (Tobias Leung, personal communication, 12 May 2017). This was the key mode of communication that enabled the members to engage in face-to-face exchanges of ideas and information, and to advance their documentation work.

Collecting the movement and its social relationship

The first challenges faced by the Collective were how to understand the profusion of things that were made in the midst of the Umbrella Movement, and then outlining the scope of collecting for the purpose of documenting the complexity of the pro-democracy campaign. At first glance, the notion of the 'disobedient object' might be useful in collecting things that enable ordinary people to 'exert counterpower'—to bring about social change (Flood and Grindon 2014: 11). Nevertheless, local protestors, unlike activists from other social struggles, were less likely to design DIY (do it yourself) objects for fighting against police violence. The typical disobedient objects, such as banners, posters, and murals, were not used as 'propaganda means' to communicate their political demands to a wider public (Wong 2017).

In fact, the Collective found that the objects were multifaceted and might not fall into established categories like propaganda tools, public art, or communal amenities such as recycling areas or medical care facilities. For instance, the patched canopy, made from broken umbrellas used against the pepper spray and tear gas, could be considered as an installation work simply because it was created by a group of art students (Plate 10). It was also a functional object that provided shelter for the protestors and was a memorial for the event of 28 September 2014 when the police fired tear gas and pepper spray at the defenceless marchers.

On the other hand, the media and local cultural professionals, amazed by the diverse objects, referred to these objects as 'occupying art' that embodied the citizens' values through different media, and brought new possibilities to the public space (Ho 2014; Wong 2017). Considering the objects as art highlights their formal qualities and approaches,

but neglects how the objects interacted with a wide range of people and became a focus that fostered civil participation. The Admiralty Study Corner is a telling example of how such classifications failed to examine civil practices within the protest sites (Figure 17.1).

Self-organized, the area was equipped with furniture made from discarded materials, as well as stationery and lighting facilities donated by anonymous parties (Cheung 2016). It was not the installation structures, but the process of making them that reveals how different people participated in the campaign. The study corner became a social object that enabled people with different skills, knowledge, and resources (i.e., woodwork, teaching, and facility management) to serve others, and create a learning environment at the protest site. It embodied different forms of civic engagement and nurtured people to be participatory cultural citizens.

To capture the social dynamics of the Umbrella Movement, the Collective defied any neat classification of objects or a specific disciplinary framework. Instead, the Collective developed collecting criteria by seeking advice from local cultural professionals, overseas curators, and activists who had experience in collecting social movements or organizing public discussions on-site. Consequently, they decided to focus on 'imaginative tools' that applied 'vernacular creativity' to reimagine how the public spaces could be used collectively, and to foster co-creation, collaboration, and sharing within the protest communities (Umbrella Movement Visual Archives and Research Collective 2014).

That is, they set out to collect subversive signs and objects, collective expressions, and functional constructions that transformed the occupied sites into communal areas—places of art making and defensive structures—along with visual data and ethnographic notes from team members. Interviews were also conducted with people who had been involved in the making of the objects. The Collective's approach suggested that an object, rather than being

FIGURE 17.1   Organically formed, the Admiralty Study Corner became a social object that invited activists to participate in its process of making and helped created a sense of community among the activists.

Photograph by Selina Ho.

a passive presence to which people attach personal and cultural significance, has material properties that take on an 'active' role in shaping the actions and emotions of people during the movement. In return, people are empowered to make changes to the objects and the public space. In other words, the team tried to address materiality and the experiences of people in relation to the objects which, in turn, highlighted the values of civil participation in the hope of shaping a better Hong Kong. Collecting is therefore a means of social intervention, where the activists decide to make their voices heard in the local history.

In any case, it is no less problematic that an object installed at a protest site was meant to make a statement or serve the community; its social life would be truncated when the Collective decided to take it out of context and freeze it in time. In particular, some may even consider that an object fulfils its role when it is destroyed by the police during confrontations. Collecting is then a deliberate act that transforms an ephemeral object into a timeless representation, to reiterate what the people fought for in the Umbrella Movement. Who can decide to change the roles and meanings of an object? Why would an object forfeit its present meaning for a future that may not be interested in a civil disobedience campaign? It was this fear of being forgotten that motivated the activists to document this social movement.

To address these concerns, the Collective developed a set of collecting protocols that requested its volunteers to obtain approval from the maker(s), or nearby communities (in cases when the maker could not be identified), and take action immediately prior to police clearance (Tobias Leung, personal communication, 12 May 2017). A social movement, however, is always spontaneous, in flux, and multi-vocal, which makes it difficult to cope with its capricious nature, let alone to predict the time to begin collecting. The 'Democracy Bridge' offers a further illustration of the difficulties arising from such collecting processes.

Why was the rough-and-ready staircase named 'Democracy Bridge'? Some said it echoed the demand for universal suffrage, while others said that its location was close to the booth of the Democratic Party, a local pro-democracy political organization which was formed in 1994, and the name helped to identify its location at the vast protest site at Admiralty. According to Mr. Chan, the initiator of this construction project, the mixed-media structure was built to facilitate safe passage at the site. Without it, activists would have had to climb over the curb across the Central Divide to join the gatherings at the government headquarters (Young 2016).

The bridge might have been less than sophisticated, but Mr. Chan was humorous enough to add the label: 'Please tread on 689' on the landing. '689' was a euphemism for C. Y. Leung, the then-chief executive of Hong Kong. The number referred to the number of votes he received when he was elected by a 1200-person election committee. By appealing to the people's emotional sentiment, the label was a clever reminder for people to watch their step. The Democracy Bridge was considered an 'imaginative tool' that used found materials, such as plastic bottles, wooden boards, and iron sticks, and a simple structure to provide a crucial facility for the activists' community.

Interestingly, the staircase itself had gone through different phases of evolution: from a simple-cardboard structure to the mixed-media construction and, finally, handrails and signage were added. Because of its frequent use, this temporary structure required Mr. Chan to inspect it daily, and maintenance was regularly needed. By focusing on the process of making and fixing, the bridge created a teaching and learning platform for Mr. Chan to engage with more people to do the woodwork together. This further inspired others to

build facilities of all kinds to accommodate the daily needs at the protest sites. In short, the objects and facilities created a social network that enabled civic values to be embodied. The objects and facilities embodied the dynamic process of how protest communities can be formed and projected a strong sense of cultural citizenship.

For the Collective, collecting can be considered an ethnographic approach to understanding the objects and their social relationships. Collecting the Democracy Bridge and the experiences of Mr. Chan—a retired businessman in his late-60s who was keen to contribute to the Umbrella Movement—was crucial. As Mr. Chan proudly stated, he wanted to set an example to encourage his peers to be more vocal about political issues and to help bring about changes to the city (Apple Daily 2014). His experiences demonstrate the wide spectrum of the local population that was involved in the pro-democracy campaign, and highlights the voice of the elderly, a relatively underrepresented group that might be more inclined to support the establishment.

The Collective was keen to include the staircase in its collection. Considering that it was part of the basic infrastructure of the site, the team dismantled the construction during the last days of the movement, and hand-built another similar structure for replacement. This decision was criticized, especially by the more militant wing of activists who argued that collecting was a waste of time, and the team should focus on fighting for their political cause more vigorously. The collecting process brought up different views on the activists' action, and how to achieve political demands in a social movement.

In terms of collecting contemporary objects that relate to political controversies, some questions remain unanswered: Why was it necessary to collect physical objects, instead of merely documenting the objects and their stories (for instance, the Democracy Bridge and the stories of the construction team including those of Mr Chan, the senior initiator)? In order to have a better understanding about what happened, would it be possible to collect different communities' responses to the collection? How would future generations make sense of an object (or certain parts of it) when its stories may be difficult to verify?

Conclusion: the public life of the collection and the role of the activists

The movement finally ended without any sign of resolution and the occupied sites were finally cleared by the police. Before the clearance of the site at Admiralty on 11 December 2017, however, the protesters had a few days to retreat. As the members recounted, the collecting process was hectic and messy. It was difficult to follow the inventory and 'escort' the identified items through the precarious political situation. Nevertheless, they succeeded in compiling a basic inventory of the collection and extending its public life with limited resources.

For example, *Hereafter: Objects from the Umbrella Movement* was launched in two art spaces: Wooferten and the Foo Tak Building during the fall of 2015, to reflect on what the Umbrella Movement meant to Hong Kong. Recently, the Collective arranged for the posters and banners to be kept by the library of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and discussions have been ongoing about handing over the stewardship of the objects to public museums (Sampson Wong, personal communication, 4 May 2017).[5] By seeking political and cultural access to key institutions in the public realm, the Collective tried to facilitate greater access to the collection. Aspiring to be community archivists, they restrained from interpreting the objects, but encouraged future research and public discussions to understand the pro-democracy campaign and to help shape the future of Hong Kong.

Key members of the Collective continue to participate in social movements in different ways. Sampson Wong was active in creating artwork, curating exhibitions, and lecturing and writing on the topic of 'The Umbrella Movement and the Arts.' In his essay entitled *On the Umbrella Movement and visual arts: From the occupied areas to the art field and the social world*, Wong (2015: 233) wrote, 'I have directly involved myself in the migration from the occupied areas to the art field and the social world, which was the field of production of the artistic and political issues.'

Like many others, Clarisse experienced post-movement trauma. Yet, she was able to rebound and make use of the interpersonal network she had built through the Collective to support her candidacy in a political election. She is now a district councillor. To her, the movement presented an ideal model of community, where people would help one another, share, communicate, and negotiate matters (Clarisse Yeung, personal communication, 27 February 2017).

Tobias said that he was feeling so lost because such a neighbourhood life no longer existed. Yet, he managed to join a new youth political party and serve as the secretary. Because of his political affiliation, he was actively involved in developing community projects (Tobias Leung, personal communication, 12 May 2017).

The cultural activists tended to demonstrate the citizen-making process in which the making of 'cultural citizenship [is] one that involves cultural empowerment, namely the capacity to participate effectively, creatively, and successfully within a national culture' (Turner 2001: 12). However, in this case, the citizenship was not directed to the site of national recognition, but instead referred to an ongoing, contested, and negotiated process where the cultural activists make themselves into the active subjects of a particular state.

Drawing from the museological approach of collecting contemporary objects, the Collective considered collecting as a means of documenting the social movement that was at risk of being wiped out by collective amnesia. In line with institutional collecting by their contemporaries, the Collective's approach raised questions, such as who should be involved in the collecting process, and how to develop collecting criteria in relation to specific research questions about what is happening in the society.

To a certain extent, the Collective's participatory approach reminds museum professionals that contemporary collecting is not only about the objects and living experiences, but also about engaging contemporary society to reflect on what they would like to pass to future generations, and who they are in relation to the bigger community. In other words, the collecting process is as important as the collection, in creating a platform on which different communities can share, communicate, and negotiate the meaning of objects. The process itself can nurture a sense of cultural citizenship about civil values, community participation, and social responsibilities.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 This is the official name of the collective. As shown in the name, the collective defined their roles as 'archivists' and 'researchers', and their primary work included documenting and researching visual materials and objects of the Umbrella Movement. Accordingly, they collected posters, banners, and objects (both two-dimensional and three-dimensional) which carried symbolic imageries of the movement, and collected primary source records of these materials, such as the owner(s)/producer(s), physical place they are located, and the social functions they play. Thus, 'archivists' and 'archives' are used throughout this chapter in corresponding to the identity of the collective and their work.

2 Hong Kong was formerly a colony of the British Empire. It is located on the eastern side of the Pearl River estuary in East Asia, and south of the mainland Chinese province of Guangdong. The territory was returned to China under the framework of the Sino-British Joint Declaration, signed between the United Kingdom and China in 1984 and marked by the transfer of sovereignty of Hong Kong in 1997. Since then, it became a special administrative region of the People's Republic of China, under the ruling principles of 'One Country, Two Systems', and the constitutional framework of 'Basic Law.'

3 'Self-archiving' refers to the act of (the author's) depositing a free copy of documents online that can be harvested into a global virtual archive for providing open access to it (Harnad 2001).

4 For example, lawyer and legislator, Ng Ngoi-yee Margaret called for the formation of an archive for preserving the history of the occupying movement (Next Magazine 2014). In addition, an artist, Kacey Wong and other initiators formed the *Umbrella Movement Art Preservation* group on Facebook to document the photos of the objects of the movement, with an aim of preserving the art that occurred in the sites.

5 The discussions between the activists and various public institutions are still in progress. The government museums are reluctant to collect these objects because of organizational neutrality and some university museums expressed an initial interest but they were concerned about storage.

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PLATE 1 *The Past is Now: Birmingham and the British Empire* exhibition at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Museums Trust.

PLATE 2 Opening Day of the exhibit, *Patient No More*, at the Ed Roberts Campus, a hub of disability rights groups in Berkeley, California.

Photograph by Hannah Anderson.

PLATE 3 Members of *BP or not BP?* hold theatrical intervention at the press launch of the British Museum's BP exhibition, *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation*.
Photograph by Amy Scaife.

PLATE 4 Lisa Reihana, *Hinenuitepo*, (from *Mai i te aroha, ko te aroha − 'From love comes love'*), 2005.
Photograph courtesy of Lisa Reihana.

PLATE 5 Julie McNamara with *Pullen's Giant*, Langdon Down Museum of Learning Disability. Photograph by Christian Sinibaldi.

PLATE 6 Nabaz Mohammad Ahmed's gift of tears from prison. Photograph by Viv Golding.

PLATE 7 *Danza por la Paz*, an artistic performance on the construction site of the future National Museum of Memory of Colombia.
Photograph by César Romero.

PLATE 8 Curators of *Auto Agents* undertaking research at Niamh O'Malley's exhibition *Glasshouse* at Bluecoat, 2015.
Photograph by Jade French.

PLATE 9 The Natural History Museum, *Will the Story of the 6th Mass Extinction Ever Include the Role of its Sponsors?* American Alliance of Museums Annual Convention, Atlanta, GA, 2015. This diorama depicted the David H. Koch Dinosaur Wing at the American Museum of Natural History in New York several hundred years into a dystopian future.
Photograph courtesy of Not An Alternative/The Natural History Museum.

PLATE 10 On 28 September 2014, police fired tear gas and pepper spray at the protestors who could only use umbrellas to defend themselves. The patched canopy, made from the broken umbrellas, could be considered as a monument to the event and also a functional object that offered shelter to the activists who occupied the government headquarter at Admiralty.
Photograph by Wong Ka Wing.

PLATE 11 A refugee from Oasis Cardiff interpreting the Refugee House to visitors. Photograph courtesy of © Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales.
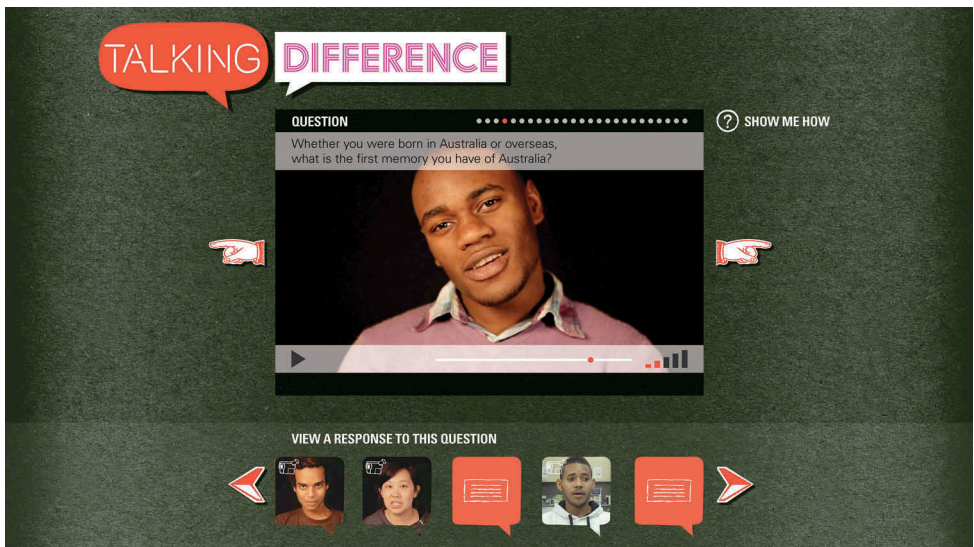
PLATE 12 *Talking Difference* studio screen interface. Image courtesy of Museums Victoria. Photography: Singing Bowl Media.

PLATE 13 Litunet traditional hamlet, Ryfylke Museum.
 Photograph by Jarle Lunde.

PLATE 14 International café at Ryfylke Museum.
 Photograph by Jarle Lunde.

PLATE 15 Upon entering the National Center for Civil and Human Rights, visitors are greeted by this striking mural. Designed by Pentagram, the piece features graphic designs from human rights movements around the world and unites them through the rising open hand. It has become one of the central features of the Center with visitors interacting with it in a variety of ways including the movement #High5forCHR in which visitors photograph themselves giving the mural a high five.

Photograph by Jennifer Bergevin.

18

MUSEUMS IN THE AGE OF INTOLERANCE

Sharon Heal

Museum activism in context

On 14 June 2017 Grenfell Tower, a block of high-rise public housing in west London, United Kingdom (UK) caught fire with tragic consequences. The public response was one of shock, distress and anger. These emotions were quickly channelled into community activism, both to help survivors and to protest against the slow and inept response of the authorities. How did museums in London react? The Museum of Homelessness was quick off the mark with a blog entitled *Enough is Enough*, exposing the reality of poor quality public housing, the impact of social cleansing, and the failure of housing policy in the UK (Turtle 2017).

Tate Modern, the UK's national collection of international, modern and contemporary art in London, reacted in a different way, by displaying images created by the artist Khadija Saye, who lost her life in the fire along with her mother and at least 80 other residents of the block (O'Connor 2017; Sullivan 2017). Saye, who had earlier that year exhibited at the Venice Biennale's Diaspora Pavilion, was also a member of the learning team at London Transport Museum and part of the Museum Detox, a network for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) museum professionals. These two responses typify the way museums have, sometimes tentatively, dipped their toes into activism in the UK.

Examples of museum activism have varied, covering a range of issues, from climate change to the refugee crisis, and have manifested in a variety of practices, from individual activism, to activist networks and institutional activism. This chapter aims to explore whether museums have been able to reimagine their venues as spaces where the critical issues of our time can be discussed and explored, and if museums can facilitate and stimulate action from communities and play a role in changing attitudes.

It is often easier for museums and galleries to let artists take up the mantle of activism in order to challenge injustice. From the street artist Banksy's dystopian reimagining of the collections of Bristol Museum in 2009 in *Banksy versus Bristol Museum*, to Jeremy Deller's *English Magic* at the William Morris Gallery in 2014, which aimed to provoke questions about the society we live in, museums have often provided a platform for artists to challenge audiences to rethink contemporary events (Sawyer 2009; William Morris Gallery 2014).

The Museum of Homelessness's response to the Grenfell Tower tragedy, which included taking part in and collecting placards from the Justice for Grenfell demonstrations, signifies a different approach that is rooted in its emphasis on being a socially active and inclusive organisation. Matt Turtle, co-founder of the Museum of Homelessness, was interviewed for this chapter and said, 'Our museum is designed to promote and encourage action and change.'

Defining activism

The term activism is disputed and open to interpretation. In order to provide context for this chapter, I conducted a series of interviews with 14 museum workers selected to represent a range of institutions across the UK (see Appendix). Interviewees were asked if they were activists and how they would define museum activism, including how museum activism manifests itself. In answer to the first question, the responses were divided between those that identified as activists and those that were more cautious about the term. Sara Wajid, Head of Interpretation at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery and founder of Museum Detox, is happy to describe herself as a cultural activist. For her it means mobilising what she terms 'shy activists' on the issue of BAME underrepresentation in the workforce and audiences, and 'harnessing that energy towards making interventions, shifts, change and challenge within institutions.'

Tehmina Goskar, a consultant curator and heritage interpreter based in Cornwall, also defines herself as an activist seeking change in the organisations that she works with. She noted, 'It's a spirit of wanting to influence good change in other people and organisations.' For some museum activists, the practice builds on their roots and upbringing. Adele Patrick, the Lifelong Learning and Creative Development Manager at Glasgow Women's Library, grew up in the industrial heartland of South Yorkshire during the Conservative government led by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. She said activism is a fundamental part of her character: 'Now I feel that museums can be a vehicle for my activism. I feel that it's something that I can discuss with my colleagues and more widely in the sector.'

Others have come to activism more recently. Sacha Coward, Community Participation Producer at Royal Museums Greenwich, said he previously had a fixed view of what activism meant:

> I presumed it meant placards and marches and anger. The stuff that I've been doing I hadn't immediately labelled as activism. But in terms of being someone who tries to make positive change and work with people to make things happen, if it's that, then yes, I definitely am an activist.

Some interviewees were more cautious about the term, in part because they classified 'real activists' as those that were dedicating extensive time, resources and commitment to their cause. Michael McHugh, Assistant Outreach Officer at Tyne & Wear Archives and Museums, said he wouldn't describe himself as an activist:

> People might project that onto me, given some of the work I do but, relatively speaking, I do not think I am. An activist is someone that sacrifices a lot in order to try and change things, broadly in society, in their life and for or with others.

What does museum activism mean in practice? In some instances, it is about creating change in the 'core business' of the museum—in collecting practice, programming, interpretation and audience development. It can lead to exposing hidden histories, collecting to reflect contemporary concerns, or campaigning for a more diverse workforce. Often activism is rooted in the methodology of participatory practice—of listening to, and working with, communities to reflect and effect change on the issues that matter to them. For some institutions, it is about providing a civic space for discussion and debate. Regardless of how activism manifests itself, there is broad consensus that, in the museum sphere, it is about making a positive difference in society.

From engagement to activism?

Initially, however, museum activism can seem contradictory—an oxymoron. How can hierarchical and conservative institutions such as museums be a forum for activism? There has been an increase in inclusive and community-focused practice in museums in the UK over the past decade, with many institutions explicitly setting goals around social impact and undertaking co-production and other forms of socially engaged practice. The Museums Association (MA) in the UK has championed this work through its *Museums Change Lives* campaign, which supports museums to develop their role as socially purposeful organisations and promotes the positive role that museums can play in society.

David Fleming, the Director of National Museums Liverpool and president of the MA, writes in the introduction to *Museums Change Lives* (Fleming 2017) that, as society faces issues such as poverty, inequality, intolerance and discrimination, museums can help people understand, debate, and challenge these concerns. He notes that, 'They can also enhance everyone's life chances by breaking down barriers to access and inclusion. Museums are doing this through active public participation, engaging with diverse communities, and sharing collections and knowledge in ways that are transforming lives.'

For many who work in, and with, museums, there is a link between an increase in socially engaged practice and activism. Sandell and Dodd (2010) describe the emergence of what has been described as 'activist practice' that works to engender progressive ways of thinking about disability, for example. Victoria Rogers, Museum Manager at the Cardiff Story, traces the relationship between the development of social history in museums, when the voice of the working class and women and children was recognised and represented in museums for the first time, through to participation and co-production. According to Rogers:

> That sort of practice has become embedded across the sector, so it is making me think, what next? Is activism the next logical step? Should museums be activists? Or should they be impartial and reflective of society? If you were in 1930s Germany, are you the museum that society wants or the museum that society needs?

It is worth noting both the limitations and the potential of museums as sites for activism. Several interviewees said that in the museum context 'radical is relative' and whilst people who work in museums might not be adopting traditional forms of activism, they are trying to make a difference. David Gelsthorpe, Curator of Earth Science Collections at the Manchester Museum, said that the decision to organise an exhibition to get visitors to think about climate change was the first small step towards activism: 'To be honest we probably chose climate

change because it's less contentious than migration for example. I think now that we've built our confidence up we are moving into some of the more contentious areas.'

Heledd Fychan, Head of Policy and Public Affairs at Amgueddfa Cymru (National Museum Wales), said the institution has changed direction in terms of its approach to societal issues, and staff are challenging themselves to think about the way issues are interpreted, the campaigns that they get involved in, and how they might support community activism. She explained:

> The Cardiff Without Culture campaign that many of our staff members got involved in wasn't just because of cuts to our budgets but thinking about the wider impact of cuts on the arts and society. So, it has gone beyond the immediate issue to thinking about wider society and the freedom of people to express themselves creatively; I think we have a role to play in allowing people to stand up for themselves.

Activating collections

For many people working in museums, activism starts with collections. Contemporary collecting that reflects some of the pressing issues in society, such as the refugee crisis, can enable museum staff to reach out to community groups to facilitate wider conversations and debate. Tim Desmond, Chief Executive of the National Justice Museum in Nottingham, noted that their mission is to 'inspire and empower people to take action for social justice through learning about human rights movements, past and present.' He believes the point of museums is social activism. Over the past few years, the museum has held exhibitions on the American Civil Rights Movement and the Irish rebel and human rights campaigner, Roger Casement. Desmond said the choice of topics was deliberate, 'We use the museum as a platform to lobby for change and we use the collection as the authority to do that.'

For Sacha Coward from Royal Museums Greenwich, collections are also a way to get the wider staff on board:

> The most interesting activism that I see is when the museum, the collection and the people connect with the cause. So, when we do LGBTQ[1] History Month and Pride we try to go back to maritime history and naval history and see if we can get the naval curator on board who might not connect otherwise.

Collections can also be a route map for activists and offer hope: you can be an activist for years, but it can be decades before change happens and the effort pays off. Adele Patrick argued that collections such as the one at Glasgow Women's Library are an ideal starting point to inspire new generations of activists. She noted: 'There is an amnesia and loss of collective memory of activism and hope lies in the recollection of the success of the past.' Nat Edwards, former Director of the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum and museum consultant, agreed that collections can be the trigger. The Museum uses its collection and Burns' writing to promote messages of humanism, equality and democratic rights. Edwards noted:

> We had a programme at the time of the Scottish Independence Referendum on issues such as whether prisoners should have the right to vote and we linked that to Burns

and his stance on political representation and that was all a form of activism—trying to engage the public in wider issues.

Dan Vo, the founder of LGBTQ tours at the Victoria and Albert Museum, said activism for him is a form of storytelling. The tours are volunteer-led and aim to provide a different take on the museum's collections. He explained:

> We come in to provide the stories that would be otherwise hidden and that is the form of activism that I am comfortable with—quiet presence—we're there as a gentle reminder that the museum is an open space, a safe space and that if you come there, we are there as a presence and LGBTQ people know that they are accepted, celebrated and welcomed at the museum.

Why now?

External change and context are drivers for activism in the sector. The UK government's austerity agenda, the spike in hate crimes after the European Union (EU) referendum, the anti-Trump demonstrations after the US presidential elections, and the refugee crisis were all referenced as motivations for activism. Heledd Fychan from Amgueddfa Cymru (National Museum Wales) said the external context influences her activism: 'As the cuts have become deeper and as society has changed around us we can't be complacent. We aren't a neutral space and an element of activism has to come in to everything that you do these days.' Victoria Rogers from Cardiff Story echoed this: 'More recently the world has shifted into something I don't really like so it has made me more active, from going on marches to going online.'

Concerns about 'fake news' and 'alternative facts' mean that public trust in the media and politicians is at an all-time low, although trust in museums remains high, which means they are well-placed to host debate and discussion and to facilitate change. A new intake of museum workers that are comfortable with social media channels, and identifying with single issue campaigns, may also account for an increase in activism. Sacha Coward said the new generation coming into the workforce are bringing fresh ideas with them. He noted, 'They believe their opinions count for something. And even if you're not part of that generation, that energy is being brought into the museum.'

What form does museum activism take?

Activism in museums has several different guises that can often be overlapping or evolve from one form into the next. Some individual activists have deliberately chosen museums as a platform for change to further their cause, and they understand that museums themselves need to change. They are, to quote one activist: 'interested in the business of changing museums.' For Sara Wajid from Museum Detox, it is about trying to undo institutionally reinforced inequalities for the workforce and audiences: 'I think I've got access to a special thing, so my activism will get a better return on investment if I direct it to a sector that very few other people have access to.' She argues that people on the inside of museums are better equipped to start dismantling the class privilege, inequality and colonial narratives of those institutions.

Case study: Museum of Homelessness

There is also what some have described as 'core museum activism' where museums themselves become agents of social change. The Museum of Homelessness falls into that category. This museum was founded in 2016 with the following objectives: to create individual change by promoting inclusion and opportunities for people who have experienced homelessness; to inspire institutional change by encouraging museums to be more inclusive; to promote social change to combat stereotypes of homeless people, and to inspire people to take action.

Matt Turtle, a co-founder of the Museum, describes its role as community building. Its first major event, *State of the Nation*, was a weekend of debate and discussion at Tate Modern that attracted 1800 people (Figure 18.1). It was a showcase for the Museum and its new way of working. Turtle explained, 'We were able to work with lots of people who volunteered on the project whether they donated objects or were actors or were just lugging things around.' He also noted that the event allowed the Museum to include and give a platform to artists and activists outside the mainstream in a high-profile institution such as Tate, as well as raising awareness of homelessness with the public.

Activating communities

For some activists, institutional change is often not enough and many also want to work with communities to facilitate change on the issues that matter to them. Esme Ward, Head of Learning and Engagement at the Whitworth and Manchester Museum, said museum

FIGURE 18.1   Museum of Homelessness object storytelling at Tate Exchange. Photograph by Neil Raja.

activism should be about a broader civic conversation, and working towards social change with communities. She noted:

> I have become interested in museums as convening spaces and social spaces, and where activism comes in it's about museums understanding their role as mobilising spaces so that they don't just bring people together, they bring people together to make change.

In the six years since Cardiff Story opened, it has been co-curating and co-creating with its community. Rogers described it as building relationships that are mutually beneficial:

> The next logical step is being more proactive in their struggles and challenges. Obviously, there are degrees to how much we can be involved but over the past few years we've taken part in Pride Cymru, worked with refugees and new communities, and been a collection point for donations during the refugee crises.

She warned, however, of the danger of preaching to the converted, 'We have to speak to people who feel and think differently to us.' For many activists, it is about change within institutions and in society. Tehmina Goskar from Cornwall said that museums can highlight community issues and that museum workers can also be activists within institutions to 'make sure difficult issues bubble to the surface and come out into the open.'

Building networks

Museum activism is seldom limited to an individual or a single institution. Activists tend to gravitate to each other and new networks have sprung up in the UK, often with an ambition to create change at their heart. When change cannot happen within a museum, people link up outside of institutions through networks and coalitions. Often networks that have begun as self-support groups have developed a wider role.

Museum Detox was set up by Sara Wajid to bring BAME museum staff together for support and peer inspiration. Wajid said it wasn't formed as an activist group, but the network has created a space for people who feel strongly about race, representation and decolonising museums. She added that activism has 'naturally materialised' through the group, including a flash mob organised at the Museum of London to highlight a lack of diversity in audiences and the workforce. According to Wajid it was a logical development for the network:

> It mobilised people and they started seeing themselves as activists. That was a turning point for the network because it meant that people could see the possibilities and that we weren't just looking after ourselves and getting nicer jobs and having a drink and doing some networking.

Becki Morris is a founder of the Disability Cooperative Network which aims to share knowledge about disability, break down barriers, and promote and embed inclusive practice in museums. The University of Leicester's School of Museum Studies has long championed ground-breaking work in this area, most recently through its *Exceptional and Extraordinary*

programme working with disability rights activists and performers to examine attitudes to disability using medical collections. Morris said there is still a long way to go in terms of disability and museums, and she wants to instill confidence in museums to work with disability groups and share hidden histories and campaign for change. She noted that, 'One of the key elements of the network is that it's not just one person or one organisation; people are not on their own, they have got back-up and support.'

At Royal Museums Greenwich, a network that was originally convened as a support group for LGBTQ staff and a forum to talk about hidden histories in the museum, developed an intervention of museum workers at the London Pride march. Coward said that Pride is an opportunity to let the public know that museums are inclusive places that tell diverse stories: 'Pride is very political because we are actively saying that museums are queer. The day feels like a party, but the meaning is so much more.'

Social media

The use of social media in the sector is a relatively new phenomenon and one that some museum activists have seized upon; it is proving to be a good vehicle for activism. Many interviewees cited Twitter, in particular, as a platform, an enabler, and a way to have conversations and make connections beyond institutional and national boundaries. Tehmina Goskar runs #museumhour on Twitter, which provides a forum for debate every Monday evening at 20:00 UK time.

Topics range from the practical to the more challenging, including an online discussion after the Grenfell Tower fire and the Manchester terrorist attack about whether museums can help people deal with grief. She said the open nature of Twitter allows people to say what they think in a non-judgmental forum and often helps people to sort through difficult issues. Goskar noted, 'Social media has helped enormously and there's a cross fertilisation that you get with non-museum people which means you get different views.'

Barriers to activism

As new platforms, networks and alliances are being formed, what are the obstacles preventing more of this type of work in museums? The museum sector is traditionally risk-averse as noted by Sandell (2012), and the very act of creating and caring for collections lends itself to a conservative culture that is not conducive to change. In addition, the concept of neutrality that prevails in the minds of many museum workers, despite evidence and argument to the contrary, undermines the idea of museums as a platform for activism. As Janes (2015: 3) has argued: 'complacency, the absence of continuous learning and the weight of tradition are persistent factors in the inability or unwillingness to rethink the meaning of neutrality and its implications for the role and responsibilities of museums in contemporary society.' For museum workers to engender change they must first recognise that their institutions are not neutral or divorced from society.

Activism is also perceived to be a difficult area of work and one in which museum workers lack the necessary skills. Esme Ward from Manchester said, 'It's hard work and it takes a long time and you have to develop the skills to build relationships with people in order to explore issues which are often quite tricky.' She added that it takes

time and resources and requires that we ask difficult questions of ourselves and our collections: 'You have to be ready to respond and maybe make some changes. It's scary; it requires a shift.'

The question of resources is also a factor. Cuts to the funding and staffing of museums have forced them to re-examine what they do. Matt Turtle from the Museum of Homelessness argued that funders need to be more flexible:

> There needs to be a shift in how funders operate. Funders often have an idea of how museums work but if you are working in museum activism and co-producing with groups of people that might be marginalised then it is difficult to pre-determine everything.

What works

Despite the barriers, many people are committed to activist work in museums and have thought hard about how to maximise and sustain success (Sandell 2002; Janes 2009; Sandell and Dodd 2010: 3; Sandell 2012: 195; Message 2014). A good starting point is clear organisational purpose and values and committed leadership. Tim Desmond, Chief Executive of the National Justice Museum in Nottingham, noted that leadership is critical, 'The more influence we can have in getting activists on boards and in the leadership of organisations, the more we can effect change.' Attitude certainly goes a long way and several interviewees mentioned drive, determination and passion as being critical success factors.

Creating institutional buy-in

Convincing others in your organisation is also crucial, if the activism is to spread beyond a small group of committed individuals. Sacha Coward from Royal Museums Greenwich welcomed the fact that there's a growing band of museum activists and added, 'The powerful thing is when those people who work in museums, because they are passionate about collections, also feel like they are able to be part of it.'

Heledd Fychan from National Museum Wales agrees you have to bring other people alongside. She noted, 'There's no point being an activist by yourself—you have to get buy-in from colleagues and trustees.' Governance is also a critical consideration. Adele Patrick from Glasgow Women's Library has been looking at the way it involves young women in governance and stated:

> We are trying to create a board that is not just passive and full of nice people but a board that reflects our commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion and that is risk-taking. We have provided mentoring and coaching for young women that has enabled them to join our board so we get their different perspectives at a governance level.

Celebrating the success along the way can also help boost determination to carry on. Becki Morris of the Disability Cooperative Network said a strategy, funding, getting the key people on board, embedding change, and influencing the policy makers all count towards success, but that you also need to celebrate the quick wins and the small victories. She observed, 'because on the days when you think, I just need a glass of wine, those small victories will take you forward.'

Values and integrity

Remembering why museums or individuals might want to make change is vital. Change can be extremely difficult for individuals and institutions and strong values, self-care, support and integrity are needed. Matt Turtle from the Museum of Homelessness said that activism takes dedication and that you need to be in it for the long-term and, that if museums are moving into an activist territory, they must put people first and maintain the integrity of relationships. He noted, 'Sometimes it's not the normal nine to five; it's a different way of working. See it as a community rather than an institution and balance that with organisational aims and objectives.'

Case study: Newcastle protest

In January 2017, a demonstration took place in Newcastle upon Tyne in response to the US President, Donald Trump, and his administration's executive order banning travel from certain countries. The Discovery Museum, part of Tyne & Wear Archives and Museums, responded by organising a display that gave visitors a chance to react to the question: 'Who is welcome in Tyneside?' The display took the form of a simple graphic panel, with facts and provocations. It repeated the message from the Destination Tyneside permanent gallery in the museum—that the area has always benefitted from migration and that Newcastle is a diverse city that welcomes people from all backgrounds, cultures, religions and ethnicities.

The day after the demonstration Michael McHugh, Assistant Outreach Officer at Tyne & Wear Archives and Museums suggested that the museum should respond, and a call was put out for people to donate banners and placards. McHugh indicated that he wanted to 'make visitors aware of what was happening in the city and where we stand.' The display posed two questions: 'what do you think, and who is welcome in Newcastle?' The questions and statements were repeated on social media via #NewcastleProtest. McHugh said he didn't want the museum to take a partisan stance, but to reflect its mission and values. He added:

> Its impact was pretty interesting both positive and negative. For me what was good about it and the reason it was a success was that it meant we were not sitting on the fence, we were stating what we believe in more explicit terms.

The time is now

We live in fast-changing and turbulent times. Global events have combined with demographic and technological shifts that are impacting our communities and wider society. In the UK, the result of the EU referendum has proved divisive and has provoked splits in communities. Museums cannot stand in isolation from these events. Some museums have been able to repurpose their venues as spaces for debate to explore contemporary concerns. Many museum workers are facilitating conversations with the communities that they work in and are playing a role in fostering debate and campaigning for change. Groups of individuals are forming networks around common causes and thinking about how they might collectively make change.

Whilst this work still represents a minority of museum practice, there is heightened awareness of activism in the museum sector and an appetite to find out and do more. The

movement towards a more inclusive, socially purposeful type of museum in the UK has begun. Museum activism is both a product and instrument of this movement; it is an idea whose time has come.

Acknowledgements

Appendix

As part of the research for this chapter the author interviewed 14 museum professionals from a range of institutions across the UK. They were asked the following questions to explore the current state of museum activism in the UK from an individual and institutional perspective. All interviewees commented in a personal capacity and the job titles reflect those at time of the interviews.

Interview questions

1. Are you an activist and how does that manifest itself?
2. How would you define museum activism?
3. Has there been an increase in museum activism over the past couple of years?
4. If there has been an increase what are the factors behind that?
5. Can museum collections and spaces be used to promote human rights, challenge discrimination and champion fairness and equality?
6. What are the obstacles to this type of work?
7. What are the critical factors for success?
8. Will there be an increase in museum activism over the next few years?

Interviewees

Interviewees include: Sacha Coward, Community Participation Producer, Royal Museums Greenwich, London; Tim Desmond, Chief Executive, National Justice Museum, Nottingham; Nat Edwards, Museum Consultant; Heledd Fychan, Head of Policy and Public Affairs, Amgueddfa Cymru—National Museum Wales, Cardiff; David Gelsthorpe, Curator, Earth Science Collections, Manchester Museum; Tehmina Goskar, Consultant Curator and Heritage Interpreter; Michael McHugh, Assistant Outreach officer, Tyne & Wear Archives and Museums, Newcastle; Becki Morris, Founder, Disability Cooperative Network; Adele Patrick, Lifelong Learning and Creative Development Manager, Glasgow Women's Library; Victoria Rogers, Museum Manager, Cardiff Story; Matt Turtle, Co-founder, Museum of Homelessness; Dan Vo, Founder, LGBTQ tours, Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Sara Wajid, Founder, Museum Detox; Esme Ward, Head of Learning and Engagement, Whitworth Art Gallery and Manchester Museum.

Note

1 Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer.

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19

ACTIVIST PRACTICE THROUGH NETWORKS

A case study in museum connections

Mercy McCann

Introduction

Many of the most pressing issues at the forefront of society are complicated and connected. Perhaps this is obvious but, increasingly, those who work to address these challenges, such as eradicating poverty, increasing access to education, providing healthcare, or addressing climate change, are defining them as complex and interrelated processes, not fixed states (Newman and McClean 2007: 171). Additionally, globalisation and diversification have changed the ways individuals and groups interact. They have connected diverse communities and created larger discussions around social expectations and responsibilities with regard to both citizens and governments (Anderson 2012: 216).

Calls for expanded rights and equality come increasingly from, and include, social and political voices of different genders, races, religious creeds, sexual orientations, and disabilities (Nightingale and Sandell 2012: 2). An awareness of how these issues are interconnected and dependent on a variety of factors makes it clear that simple answers are not sufficient to create lasting change. Approaches to defining and solving these issues must come from, and include organisations from different industries and sectors, all of which 'bring unique and essential assets to the work of social change' (Mirvis and Worley 2013: 22).

Cultural organisations such as museums, galleries, science centres, and heritage sites are part of these interconnected systems and a number of practitioners and academics have discussed museums with regard to a social framework, including socially engaged practice, the public value of museums, the role of museums in civic life, and the potential for museums to address contentious debates (Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Silverman 2009; Gurian 2010; Janes 2010, 2015; Sandell and Dodd 2010; Sandell 2017). Discussions around museum relevance and social impact have also included the idea of museums as members of networks or systems which are linked through objects, images, and information (Heyman 1997: 26). Robert Janes talks about the 'cluster concept' and imagines the 'ecology' of museums which he defines as 'the broad web of societal relationships' that are essential to museum relevancy and survival (Janes 2010: 333). Sobral discusses museums as 'part of a web of organizations that create the life of communities' (2005: 123).

Most recently, Jung and Love have looked at museums through the lens of 'systems thinking,' the concept that the world is 'a complex, interdependent, and open web of things, people, and relationships that reside within the larger social, cultural, and natural environment that is continually in a state of flux' (Jung and Love 2017: 3). The premise behind connecting museums with systems thinking is that, 'museums will be better off when they operate as open, dynamic, and learning systems as a whole, as opposed to closed, stagnant, and status quo systems that are compartmentalized and hierarchical' (ibid.). This paper aims to further explore museums as members of these systems or networks, both in terms of what they contribute and their positioning as a network member.

For the purpose of this chapter, networks are understood as a means through which organisations connect with others in order to exchange and build resources, knowledge, and influence. The concept of organisations as members of broader networks has been applied to business, government, civil society, and combinations thereof. Academics and practitioners alike have explored various arrangements and types of networks in an attempt to understand how organisations accomplish objectives they would not be able to achieve independently.

Key components of the network concept, as used in the case study below examining the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Leadership Division programmes, are the enduring affiliations and connections between organisations created by 'commonalities and complementarities' (Porter 1998: 4). 'Commonalities' are held in common between organisations and can be in the form of goals, interests, values, or mutual connections. 'Complementarities' are elements that are unique to each organisation, but which balance and strengthen the capacities of the other network members. The connection of these commonalities and complementarities then allow network members to achieve goals and expand their impact in ways they would not be able to do on their own.

A network perspective can begin to describe how organisations adapt to increasing competition and complex social challenges (Worley and Mirvis 2013). Looking at a museum as part of a network changes the lens through which we define the organisation. Objects and specific histories are valuable and unique, but a network lens shifts the focus to the museum's capacities and relationships. Increasingly, museums themselves are reaching out to other organisations and groups to create a 'community of practice,' but recognising museums as part of a system requires both a willingness on the part of museums to engage with contemporary and often contentious issues, and an awareness of museums' unique abilities to contribute to both the cultural sector, of which museums are a part, and society more broadly (Bienkowski 2013). How, then, do museums work within these broader networks and how does that work deepen our understanding of museums' impacts on social initiatives and activist practice (Sandell and Dodd 2010)?

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: a case study

The case study in this chapter comes from a larger body of dissertation research conducted at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington DC. The study specifically focused on the museum's Leadership Division programmes within the Levine Institute for Holocaust Education, and aimed to understand the opportunities and challenges that arise when a museum situates itself as an active agent within a larger system of socially engaged practice.

The Leadership Division programmes are for leaders and professionals, including military, law enforcement, judiciary, and students, whom the museum has identified as having power and responsibility in upholding and protecting the values of a democratic society. The museum connects the history housed in the museum with contemporary values and challenges to address issues such as the roles and responsibilities of citizens in a democratic society, the appropriate uses of power and authority, and the tensions between individual rights and public safety.

This chapter examines two of these programmes to illustrate how the museum becomes embedded in a socially engaged network and how its place in that network evolves. The first is the Law Enforcement and Society (LEAS) programme, run by the museum and in conjunction with the Anti-Defamation League (ADL)—a civil rights organisation. The second programme is the Mass Atrocity Education Workshop (MAEW), a weekend workshop for US military academy professors operated by Civic and Defense Initiatives (CDI)—the museum branch focused on military programmes. This is a partnership with the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York.

Examining the museum's roles in these programmes, and the networks in which the USHMM sits as a result of its participation, is an opportunity to understand the museum's content and message in relation to other groups and larger social movements. The programmes help identify how the flow of information, power, and resources allow for museums, such as the USHMM, to develop capacities, reach new audiences, and participate in innovative approaches to complex issues. Assessing these programmes also deepens the understanding of the history in the museum, as well as how the museum's content and resources can be put to use for social change.

Developing a network perspective

The Law Enforcement and Society (LEAS) programme at the USHMM provides an example of the commonalities and complementarities, mentioned above, that allow partners in a network to pursue common goals in key strategic areas which might otherwise be beyond the reach of the individual organisations. LEAS started in 1999 in partnership with the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and the Washington Metropolitan Police Department, and has since expanded in scope to include programmes for the US Secret Service, FBI, National Security Administration Police, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and Customs and Border Protection officers. Each training session is five hours and includes a guided tour of the museum's permanent exhibition, and a discussion led by a museum facilitator around the role of police in Nazi Germany using photos, primary documents, and case studies (Figure 19.1). Last, there is an examination of the role of police in contemporary American society led by the ADL.

A number of themes are highlighted throughout the LEAS sessions. The first is the role of police in a democratic society and the relationship between police and communities. This was a central impetus for initiating the programme, which began after the ADL invited the Washington DC Metropolitan Police Chief, Charles Ramsey, to visit the USHMM. Ramsey recognised the potential of the story presented in the permanent exhibition to address what he saw as a growing divide between police and community, as well as to address the complicated but crucial relationship between law enforcement and the public. He felt police were increasingly becoming enforcers instead of partners in the communities in which they operated. Ramsey was also interested in the role German police played in the social decline that led to World War II and the Holocaust, and he felt there were lessons there for police in contemporary American society.

FIGURE 19.1 *Deportation from Würzburg*, 25 April 1942. A police officer stands guard as Jews are led through Würzburg to the train station. This image is used in the Law Enforcement and Society (LEAS) programme to demonstrate the progressive complicity of law enforcement in Nazi Germany and the path to the Holocaust.

Photograph courtesy of the United States Holocaust Museum.

The second theme is one of the values, both personal and professional, behind action and inaction. The museum facilitator presents a series of archival images to illustrate the role of law enforcement in Nazi Germany. These images are analysed by the police officers through the perspective of law enforcement professionals. During this analysis, it becomes clear that 'what' law enforcement officers did in Nazi Germany did not change dramatically. Throughout the images, which span the length of Nazi rule, police are keeping the peace, patrolling their beat, performing search and seizures, providing security, etc. But the 'why' behind their actions changes dramatically as the police become more complicit in carrying out state-sponsored atrocities. This difference between 'what' and 'why' is a key message from the museum's portion of the programme and a result of approaching the subject through both historical records and professional expertise.

The last theme discussed here is the issue of choice. Law enforcement officers in Nazi Germany did have choices when it came to participating in the events presented and discussed in the exhibition and programme. Whether an individual liked those options or not was another story, but there were always choices. This message, that the motivations for complicity and inaction are often ordinary and removed from an awareness of larger social consequences, seemed to be the most troubling to participants and often sparked reflections.

These observations around underlying values and choice connect with discussions around contemporary issues in police–community relations. The ADL portion of the programme links the historical perspective to a contemporary one, exploring the challenges and concerns of police and citizens in contemporary society. The ADL portion also examines how individual, professional, and personal values might line up in the service of a profession like the police.

The ability of the museum to reveal the complexity and enrich the understanding of both history and contemporary roles and responsibilities, and to show the many layers that can be found in actions and decisions, is part of what makes a museum a powerful source of new understanding (Sandell 2017: 151). In both programme observations and staff interviews, the museum's perceived ability to address difficult subjects came back to the experience offered at the museum and the direct connection between the present and the past through objects and stories. Several of the staff saw the museum as unique in its ability to move beyond 'just taking information in and then trying to process it' (Museum Staff 2 2015). Instead, the museum tries to find the opportunities in interpretation and to offer experiential moments of contact with the history. The museum is 'not a bunch of artefacts with a story, it's a story and the artefacts help tell it' (ibid.).

Complements and commonalities

The LEAS programme demonstrates the complements and commonalities that develop a network. The USHMM, law enforcement, and the ADL are founded on, and prioritise, the same democratic values. Serving and protecting a democratic society is a key part of law enforcement's mandate, as well as a theme that runs throughout the museum's exploration of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. Similarly, the ADL is founded on the values of democracy and is able to further explore the contemporary relationships between law enforcement and communities based on their work as a civil rights organisation. Although the ways in which the three organisations embody these democratic values are different, the overlap links them together.

If this intersection of mission and values is one of the 'commonalities' that provides a basis for the network to emerge, expertise is one of the 'complementarities' that sustains that network once formed. At the conception of this programme, Chief Ramsey identified the museum as a potential network member because of its ability to contribute specialised skills and knowledge to the issue of community relationships, a subject that was more complex than his organisation could approach on its own. The museum is able to provide resources, including historical perspectives, educational expertise, and community connections, to which the police department might not otherwise have access. The ADL builds on the questions of roles and responsibilities introduced by the museum by exploring the give and take between public safety and individual freedoms. Each partner is able to deepen and expand the expertise of the others.

In this way, the training received at the USHMM differs from, but also complements, the professional training received elsewhere. Similar to law enforcement, the other partners in the Leadership Division programmes, such as the military academies and judiciary, are largely occupied by operational concerns and instruction. The museum provides a means for these partners to include training around abstract conceptions, such as motivation, by opening debates into deeper values and encouraging critical thinking. This training is in

addition to the practical instruction in professional skills, such as military field manoeuvres, which these groups already receive.

These moments of questioning are what the museum calls 'disequilibrium' (or the 'oh shit moment', as one staff member labelled it), and establishes the museum as a source of consideration and reflection (Museum Staff 4 2015). Attempts such as these to examine the 'bigger picture' and the long-term, strategic implications of actions and decisions are at the core of the Leadership programmes, and emerged as one of the distinctive contributions the USHMM makes to the network. Such discussions shift the museum's focus from specific actions to the ways in which the museum contributes to a broader system of social change and civic engagement, and to a focus on process instead of endpoints.

A final example from LEAS demonstrates this perspective shift towards the museum's role in a network and the deeper implications of actions and relationships. The way in which the recent rise in tensions between police and African American communities in the United States was reflected in a number of LEAS programmes provides an example of an innovative approach to a contemporary issue, as well as the ability to see larger trends by connecting different perspectives. Building on discussions of the roles and responsibilities of police in Nazi Germany, police in several observed programmes expressed pressure and concern around their roles as public officials today, and the ways they carry out their responsibilities in a changing racial, social, and political environment.

Instead of addressing concerns in terms of 'who did what,' the museum approached the issue through an exploration of the kinds of relationships that exist between police and the communities they serve, how those relationships have changed, and who is responsible to whom. The USHMM, specifically the LEAS programme, thus became a place where the escalation of conflicts on the street can be situated in a larger context. In this case, the issue becomes an entry point for examining the foundational values, roles, and responsibilities of police in society more broadly.

In this scenario, the museum provided a new context for an ongoing discussion, but the example also introduces the museum's ability to recognise shifts in the network and to build innovative approaches through connections. Indeed, research has shown that organisations in networks have the ability to perceive the need for innovation earlier than those that are not (Bussmann, Schweighofer and Panz 2014: 23). This is largely because of the opportunities for information and resource exchanges, as well as contact with new ideas, goals, and metrics of success. From this perspective, the museum is becoming more strategically embedded in the network created around achieving the positive social change both the museum and its partners are working towards. This shifting position is discussed below.

From periphery to centre

Throughout the case study it became clear that, as the programmes developed and expanded, the museum moved from a peripheral position in the network to a more central one. In addition to soliciting the perspectives of others or facilitating discussion, the management and programme staff in the Levine Institute became increasingly proactive in emphasising its organisational values in its relationships and programmes. The Leadership Division programmes also took on leading roles in relation to interactions with other network members and became central to introducing new ideas and perspectives.

The Mass Atrocity Education Workshop (MAEW) demonstrates this shift by illustrating the museum's fundamental role in conceiving of and producing a session around a pressing issue—in this case mass atrocity response and prevention. The MAEW took place at the USHMM in September of 2015 and was attended by professors from several military academies. The museum and the West Point Academy's Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies (CHGS) brought together specialists from a wide range of sectors, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), government departments, academia, and culture—all of whom address mass atrocity from different angles. The programme's goal was to create a space for interdisciplinary perspectives to build understanding of the causes, impacts, and possible prevention tactics around mass atrocities. The workshop content and format were based on the belief that an interdisciplinary approach to common issues can have powerful and innovative outcomes.

The workshop's interdisciplinary approach unfolded on several levels. First, the workshop participants were professors from a range of United States military academies, including the United States Military Academy at West Point, the United States Coast Guard Academy, the United States Air Force Academy, and the United States Naval Academy. The professors also came from a range of disciplines, including economics, history, international relations, mathematics, and comparative politics, and all of them address mass atrocity in their courses. The MAEW provided a unique opportunity for these professors to share resources and perspectives on a subject of mutual interest and concern. Even though the participants were all from military academies, they were separated geographically and departmentally and, as a result, opportunities to directly discuss and share resources were rare. This workshop created a space for them to connect with other departments and organisations and explore a shared topic from different perspectives.

Second, the interdisciplinary nature of the workshop involved other invited presenters, including officials from different government agencies, such as the State Department, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of Defense, and visitors from outside organisations including Amnesty International and Strategy for Humanity, as well as members of several museum departments such as archives, curatorial, and the Center for the Prevention of Genocide (the branch of the museum concerned with contemporary genocide response and policy). The weekend concluded with a talk by Margaret Meisner, a Holocaust survivor and museum volunteer.

Many of these organisations, while aware of each other and their work, often do not realise the potential benefits of connecting or have the inclination to join and share resources, even on a topic like atrocity prevention that touches them all. In this instance, the museum, together with the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, was able to leverage its unique history, expertise, and relationships to create an occasion to bring them together. The results were striking, such as when Amnesty International shared strategies about data as a tool to predict and prevent mass atrocities to a room full of military academy professors in a museum. This combination of expertise and experience, and the new understandings that emerged from it, would not be possible without a network to unite the various actors. In this case, the museum was central in defining that network and identifying actors who shared complementary interests, skills, and approaches to the subject.

Here we see the museum moving towards a position where it is able to build the network through goals and connections, as well as strengthen relationships between other

actors. The Levine Institute (specifically the branch for Civic and Defense Initiatives which focuses on military partners) has worked with CHGS to create a structure that empowers partners and participants to create the services and resources they will use themselves, and the museum works closely with the MAEW participants to develop goals and outcomes. This is not just a case of resources or knowledge exchange, but the development of new knowledge and content.

Power to convene

The museum's ability to connect with various groups, as demonstrated in both LEAS and the MAEW, takes on additional importance as the museum becomes more central in the network. As the museum develops relationships with other network members, it also develops the ability to pull together a range of other actors who can support and assist initiatives beyond the reach of individual organisations. To describe this ability to connect others, I have adopted a term used both within the USHMM and the US Federal Government—the museum's 'power to convene'.

The museum's capacity to link with a wide range of actors on common subjects and values, as well as the expertise and mission espoused by the museum, give the museum a certain authority to connect actors that may not initially seem related and may not otherwise be in contact. This existing detachment may not necessarily be because of diverging interests, but may simply be because immediate networks do not overlap. Ultimately, the museum becomes both central to the network, and crucial in initiatives to address complex issues, by illuminating underutilised links and recognising potential where others might not.

Reimagining activist practice

These examples demonstrate some of the ways museums can contribute to holistic solutions for contemporary social issues by situating themselves in broader networks of socially engaged organisations. Providing historical and social perspectives, challenging established ways of operating and behaving, and connecting groups and organisations around shared values are all valuable contributions. These relationships benefit the museum by providing a better understanding of its own social and cultural roles, as well as additional resources, knowledge, and perspectives. Beyond the museum, society as a whole benefits from connecting unalike groups and bridging differences. Individuals who connect with others, particularly diverse and different groups:

> develop or maintain character traits that are good for the rest of society. Joiners become more tolerant, less cynical, and more empathetic to the misfortunes of others. When people lack connections to others, they are unable to test the veracity of their own views, whether in the give-and-take of casual conversation or in more formal deliberation. Without such an opportunity, people are more likely to be swayed by their worst impulses.
>
> *(Putnam 2000: 288–9)*

Society benefits from an engaged and active citizenry, and civic organisations like museums have an important role to play in creating that engagement.

Establishing the museum as this active network agent can be problematic, however, as it runs up against the established idea of the 'neutral museum'. Even in the USHMM, which is clear on its stance on human rights, tolerance, and justice, there were internal debates about the nature of neutrality and whether the museum could or should remain neutral. This seems to be a trend in the larger museum sector with museums holding on to what Janes calls a 'magical belief in neutrality', a misplaced sense that authority is linked to perceived neutrality and museums must remain neutral or fall victim to bias or special interest groups (Janes 2015: 3). It also seems to be a trend that museums frown upon the use of terms 'activist' or 'advocacy' in relation to their work (Sandell 2017: 9). This concept of neutrality, however, is both morally and practically untenable as museums address challenges of relevancy and face new responsibilities in contemporary society (Janes 2015: 3). This case study provides an additional means with which to examine and challenge what is ultimately the 'myth of neutrality' (Janes 2009: 59).

The USHMM has taken a stance on the issues of human rights and the roles and responsibilities necessary for promoting and protecting justice and equality. It encourages visitors to 'reflect on their own responsibilities as citizens of a democracy', warning against the dangers of complicity and inaction when it comes to protecting equality and freedoms (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum n.d.). While the USHMM's mission to memorialise, educate, and encourage reflection are not prescriptive or didactic, they are at odds with neutrality. In fact, I would argue that this is a case in which neutrality, or not taking a position 'risks complicity with forces of domination and oppression' (Sandell 2017: 161). Yet, despite the opportunities to break the link between museums and neutrality, both in this case and elsewhere, there is a hesitancy to do so (ibid.: 9). Perhaps this case study can provide new ways to reimagine what museum advocacy or 'activist practice' might look like.

One way in which this case study helps build an understanding of activist practice is by identifying the museum as a convener, as discussed earlier. This is not only in terms of connecting outside perspectives or hosting dialogue, which are valuable, but also in actively connecting resources, information, and relationships around the priorities and values that foster positive change. If creating links between groups is important for stronger societies, a museum's capacity to identify and promote connections helps define them as active and influential organisations. Thus, the museum's active involvement in bringing together unalike actors and connecting various parties can itself be a form of activist practice. Similarly, focusing in on the museum as a member of a system embeds activist practice in relationships and relevancy, and shifts attention to building connections. Activist practice is then framed as a process of building pathways for exchanging and challenging ideas and perceptions.

The second concept of activist practice to emerge in this study was the idea of the museum as a barometer. As demonstrated earlier, the museum's ability to connect with a wide range of seemingly unalike groups around common themes uniquely positions the museum to understand broader trends and attitudes. For example, the concerns within police and law enforcement organisations around growing tensions in society provided the museum with a deeper understanding of the ways in which groups in society, especially those tasked with protecting rights, were evolving and connecting with communities. As

the museum becomes more central in the network, its ability to identify and appreciate the values and concerns of those organisations with which it is connected grows. It can then alert the network to engage with those issues that are most pressing. This capacity to perceive social shifts is crucial to understanding how the museum and its partners can adapt, connect, and build stronger societies.

Finally, the importance of transparency in actions and a clear mission were strong themes throughout the fieldwork, raising advocacy beyond specific acts to the level of values and rights. Activist practice does not equate to reactionary, hasty or rash actions or statements, but looks for the connections between events and values and how to build understanding across diverse experiences. The museum is not accusatory or prescriptive, but challenges the frameworks within which groups and individuals interact by emphasising values and responsibilities clearly established from the outset of the museum's relationships with partners.

By establishing clear links to mission and transparently sharing its values and vision, the museum is still able to create the 'safe space' that is so often spoken of as synonymous with neutrality. This research, however, demonstrates the difference between the two. Creating an open and tolerant place for different perspectives lies in addressing contemporary issues from a clear viewpoint, not avoiding those issues by claiming neutrality.

Conclusion: links between centrality and advocacy

Throughout this chapter, I have positioned the museum as active in a network, whether in terms of setting goals, building programmes, identifying partners, or establishing relationships. This active approach has coincided with the emergence of a central role for the museum, as demonstrated through the concepts of convening and acting as a barometer. The question now emerges as to whether activist practice and network centrality are connected and, if so, how?

While it is beyond the purview of this case study to determine if there is a causal effect between activist practice and a central network role, it is safe to say that they are complementary. As organisations become more central in their network they gain more influence, as well as more awareness of the 'situation, problems and priorities of other network members', and in the process become more valuable as contributors and resources for other members (Thorelli 1986: 41). Identifying a network and becoming embedded in it can only make a museum more valuable to those around it, as well as more dynamic in addressing the issues connected to its values.

As one USHMM staff member said, it takes a mature conception of self to develop a network (Museum Staff 4 2015). It requires that each organisation looks closely at its strengths, weaknesses, and core values, and understands where it will be stronger with input from other organisations (Bussmann, Schweighofer and Panz 2014: 7). A greater understanding of a museum's links with those around it, and its capacities in relation to a broader system, makes a museum more relevant and impactful—for its own benefit and for the benefit of society as a whole. Given the unique capacity of museums to connect, it follows that museums have an ability and responsibility to fulfil not only their interests, but also the interests of those with whom they are linked and purport to serve.

Acknowledgements

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WHOSE MEMORIES FOR WHICH FUTURE?

Favela museums and the struggle for social justice in Brazil

Marcelo Lages Murta

Introduction

The latest United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Recommendation concerning museums and collections has a special section dedicated to the 'Social Role' of museums (UNESCO 2015). The museum is understood to be public space aimed at nurturing the social cohesion for building citizenship.[1] The process of adopting this recommendation was initiated in Brazil, which fostered debates and technical work for its implementation.[2] In this sense, the document has clear connections with Brazilian public policies in the last fifteen years, strictly linked to Latin-American contemporary museums.

The principle that 'a museology that is not life-oriented is not worthy' (MINOM 2017), or that 'a museology that doesn't serve life doesn't serve anything,' advocated by Professor Mario Chagas (2017b) and several Latin-American and Portuguese scholars,[3] reflects the movements undertaken and shared amongst a great number of Brazilian museum stake-holders, activists and social movements during the first decade of the 21st century. This principle fosters the notion of a museum connected with the idea of *biophilia* (Chagas 2015), focused on life, as opposed to the *necrophilia*, or 'love to death,'[4] which is present in static, antique objects within traditional, colonial collections of the 19th century, or in 'robotized paraphernalia.' By robotized paraphernalia I mean the excess use of technology without explanatory content or descriptions—sometimes useless and sometimes only useful as entertainment and leisure in 'new imperial museums' (Moutinho 2014: 8, 2016: 3).[5]

The idea of a museum focused on the problems of everyday life and anchored in the present is not new. It comes from the reconceptualization that happened during the 1960s and 1970s. These two decades were fruitful, shaped by the struggles of a range of movements, such as the civil rights in the United States, the Hippie Movement, the Feminist Movement, civil unrest in Europe (such as the 1968 student unrest in France), antiracist struggles and decolonization. The museums marched alongside these movements, serving humanity and envisioning prospects for a better life. They challenged traditional museums and sought to encourage 'active participants in meeting today's challenges,' with a precept that 'the museum serves man if, in fact, it concerns itself directly with the man of today and tomorrow' (Kinard 1971: 151).

In 1972, scientists, academics and technicians from a broad range of disciplines met in Santiago de Chile to debate the role of museums in society. These discussions were new and focused on Latin American problems—fostering initiatives from these countries and targeting specific social problems. The declaration that came out of this meeting—the Declaration of Santiago—reflects the turmoil of the 1970s, and was echoed in the 1980s and 1990s in community museums in Latin-America, including the Mexican National Program in Community Museums (Camarena, Morales and Valeriano 1994; Méndez Lugo 2008) and the Magüta Museum—the first Indigenous museum in Brazil, linked to the *Ticuna* peoples' rights for land demarcation (Abreu 2012).

From the New Museology of the 1970s and 1980s, the way was outlined to a 'Social Museology', as a movement (MINOM—International Movement for a New Museology), as a philosophy (principles of awareness, participation and social change), and as a school of thought under the 'Sociomuseology' (Moutinho 2016: 1–3).[6] In Brazil, a specific department under the Brazilian Institute of Museums (IBRAM)—the Department of Museum Processes (DPMUS)—has among its responsibilities the development of policies and guidelines for Social Museology in Brazil.[7]

In 2007, representatives from 22 Ibero-American countries[8] met in the Brazilian state of Bahia for the First Ibero-American Museums Meeting. They set up a charter linking the museum sector to social issues, using references from the Declaration of Santiago. Taking advantage of the wave of left wing parties in several countries, a public policy orientation for museums, based on social and community issues, was established for Ibero-America in the Declaration of Salvador.[9] Nevertheless, Latin America still suffers from social problems, violence and social gaps identified since the 1970s, aggravated by worldwide intolerance, as evidenced by the emergence of racist groups, religious extremists, sexism and extreme right ideology.

In 2007, the same spirit of the 1970s was reassumed in the Declaration of Salvador. In recent years, however, frustration with the left-wing period of the 2000s has given plentiful ground for extreme right-wing movements and ideologies to take over the political and cultural environment in Brazil. Several examples in 2017 illustrate this countrywide intolerance. In Porto Alegre, an art exhibition concerning LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) issues named 'Queer Museum,' was cancelled after demonstrations by the *Movimento Brasil Livre* (MBL—Free Brazil Movement—an extreme right-wing movement). Evangelist and neo-Pentecostal city councillors organized demonstrations in Belo Horizonte to cancel an art exhibition of the artist Pedro Moraleida concerning sex and religion. In Judiaí, São Paulo, the play *Evangelho Segundo Jesus, rainha do céu* ('The Gospel According to Jesus, Queen of Heaven') was cancelled, and demonstrations against the play were organized in other cities.

After a claim from a group of State Congressmen in the State of Mato Grosso do Sul, the judiciary police confiscated a painting in the Contemporary Art Museum of Campo Grande (MARCO), stating that it could be inciting pedophilia. The Congressmen argued that the exhibition was an offense to 'family, good manners and moral.' Violent acts against Afro-Brazilian religions are quite common in Rio de Janeiro and Bahia, with the destruction of religious symbols, such as statues of saints, led by evangelist groups. These extreme right-wing ideologies also reached the universities—for example, in demonstrations of Christians and right-wing groups against the presence of Judith Butler, a philosopher and activist, at an academic event at the University of São Paulo (USP) in November of 2017. Judith Butler was also harmed in demonstrations at the airport of São Paulo before leaving Brazil.[10]

Museums, as social and activist institutions, cannot be isolated from these political issues. When museums, their professionals, the communities and stakeholders engage with social activism and advocate for change, they can find ways of solving contemporary problems. Museums should 'act upon inequalities,' nurturing a belief in their 'constitutive, generative character,' and in 'their capacity to shape as well as reflect social and political relations, and to positively impact lived experiences of those who experience discrimination and prejudice'—all of which contribute towards more fair and just societies (Sandell and Nightingale 2012: 3).

With this background, my aim in this chapter is to discuss the ways various community museums in Brazil practise social museology. Five museums located in *favelas* (slums and informal settlements) in two cities—Belo Horizonte and Rio de Janeiro—are presented here. Economic development made visible the gentrification and speculation in these urban areas, with modernization revealing a perverse side when it comes to the lives of people and their communities. This modernization process, based on 'urban modernization projects,' forced the removal of poor people to slums and peripheries. Recently, this became even more problematic when 12 cities arranged to host big events, such as the *Fédération Internationale de Football Association* (FIFA—International Federation of Association Football) World Cup of Soccer in 2014, and the 2016 Summer Olympics.[11] Many changes were visible in the biggest cities—impacting families and their houses, as well as small businesses and stores—all of whom were removed for the sake of huge infrastructure projects and stadium constructions. All this led to the widening of the social gap in a country already known for its inequality and social injustice.

Public policies and social museology in Brazil

Over the last two decades, Brazil has witnessed a boom in new museums. Data from IBRAM reveal that in 2017 Brazil had more than 3700 institutions. Most of these museums are small institutions and some of them—such as the cases presented in this chapter—have a special social role in their communities as centres that coordinate cultural, social and political issues. Although the distribution of these museums is countrywide, the majority are to be found in the south and southeast regions.[12] As public policies for culture took their time to take effect, so did the spread of these new museums.

Until the last decade, cultural policies in Brazil were considered either 'absent, authoritarian or unstable' (Rubim 2008: 185). Authoritarian because of the military dictatorship (from the 1960s to the 1980s), and absent and unstable due to the lack of support for the cultural field during the neoliberal wave of the 1990s. In this last period, the government provided tax exemptions for cultural investments to big companies—mostly from the banking, media and commodities sectors. This indirect public support could mean a 100% tax exemption or refund to the companies.

In 2003, this pattern of absence, authoritarianism and instability changed after the election of a left-wing coalition to the federal government. This government established several commissions and committees with direct elections for the definition of national cultural policies. Representatives were elected from all the regions of Brazil and from several sectors, such as theatre, cultural heritage, music, visual arts, design, literature, circus, dance and fashion, as well as representatives from varying social stratum and minorities, such as Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous peoples—an approach that encompassed the cultural

diversity of the country. The elected representatives established constant meetings to deliberate over the national public policies for culture.

One of the national policies was called 'Culture Spots' and was part of the 'Living Culture' program. These 'culture spots' could be anything to do with the arts and culture— i.e. theatre, music and dance groups, art co-ops and cultural centres—and were set up with co-management agreements between the State and citizens. The basis for the implementation was that culture spots were not *for* the people, in a vertical flow, but rather *belonged* to the people in a horizontal way (Turino 2010: 64). Rather than financing huge projects and building costly physical structures for arts and culture, the idea was to spread small investments throughout the country, thereby empowering local group leaders for the implementation. Until 2010, more than 2500 'Culture Spots' were installed in more than 1100 Brazilian cities (almost 20% of the municipalities in the country), enhancing the cultural diversity with shared management between the State and civil society.

In 2009, the Brazilian Institute of Museums (IBRAM) was created to manage national policies for museums.[13] The new institute designed the *Memory Spots* program to manage specific 'Spots' designed for museums and social memory, with specific budget and plans of action managed by IBRAM. Memory is seen as a dynamic concept—a live body of social interactions based on the needs and interests of involved groups. The range of activities, including exhibitions, workshops, fairs, promoted through this program set the communities as the centre, as main protagonists, and museums as platforms where active participation enhances the quality of life, strengthening the social cohesion, promoting tourism and local economy, while also contributing to reducing social inequalities and violence. After numerous *favelas* received support, it was clear that the beneficiaries now had the necessary courage to defend their rights to memory and to the city, as well as fighting for their human rights.

The *Memory Spots* program was based on an arrangement between local development— namely the recognition and use of local community resources—and memory. A partnership was established including the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Justice and the Ibero-American States Organization (OEI). In 2009, the *Memory Spots* program seized the opportunity and proposed a joint initiative with the National Public Security with Citizenship Program (PRONASCI), part of the MJ. In 2009, a committee selected twelve projects of social memory in peripheral areas of metropolitan centres for analysis.[14] The criteria were the combination of high levels of violence and low human development indices (HDI).

The hypothesis was that fostering community museums in problematic social contexts, some of them in *favelas*, could directly or indirectly boost local development. Although it is difficult to measure the quantitative impact and assess the direct results of the community museums, they have been serving as cultural and social centres—involving inhabitants in developing community-based projects, such as exhibitions, educational programmes, debates on solutions to local problems, and arts festivals and fairs. In this sense, these first initiatives have become icons for Brazilian community museums. Subsequently, several public calls were established to finance community museums around the country, spreading the *Memory Spots* program.

Since 2009, community museums have started to spread throughout the country, as exemplified by the cities of Belo Horizonte and Rio de Janeiro. Rio is famous for its 'Carioca Landscape between the Mountain and the Sea' and is also a World Heritage Site recognized by UNESCO[15] in 2012. It is also a city with enormous wealth inequality and violence based on rival gangs, militias,[16] improper strategies from police, misguided public policies and corrupt

activities. Belo Horizonte, with its 'Pampulha Modern Ensemble,' is also a World Heritage Site in 2016[17] and is another case of inequality and gentrification. Instead of celebrating their designations as World Heritage Sites, both Rio de Janeiro and Belo Horizonte should be researching their social, economic and cultural issues. The aim is to connect cities and citizens' needs with State decisions. These examples represent the challenges existing in contemporary Brazil; problems that are not new, but which need innovative ideas to give people a hopeful glimpse of the future in times of uncertainty and pessimism.

Rio de Janeiro: resistance movements in three museums

In May of 2006, Brazilian press announced the inauguration of the first *favela* museum in Brazil, 'Cultural Spot Museu da Maré' (Abreu and Chagas 2007: 131). The journalists, familiar with museums as sumptuous structures, were fascinated by the changes noted in this 'new' framework: the embracing of historically excluded groups in this new community-based museum. It was not the first museum in a *favela*, but it was unique in being a joint effort involving civil society, NGOs and government, through a specific program for developing local initiatives—something unusual in the history of public policies in Brazil.

'Maré' is a cluster of housing complexes, neighbourhoods and *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro with around 130,000 inhabitants.[18] From the 16th to the beginning of the 20th century, it hosted the Inhaúma Harbour. Due to the growth of the city and its urban development, the port disappeared and the region received landfills for urbanization and traffic projects. Many migrants and people (mainly poor populations), who were evicted from central areas because of refurbishment projects, speculation and gentrification, moved to Maré. The museum opened in 2006 and affirms its main interest as 'not the preservationist action, but the social life of the Maré inhabitants and the communication processes inside and outside the *favela*' (ibid.: 133).

The museum was housed in an abandoned shipyard and given a free 10-year lease. Its main exhibition was designed using 12 themes occupying 12 spaces in the museum: Water, Housing, Migration, Resistance, Labour, Party, Fair, Faith, Daily life, Childhood, Fear and Future. Each of these themes refers to the local history: photographs showing the transformations in the region, children playing around the old stilt houses, models of the boats used by fishermen and the most symbolic object present in the museum: a *palafita*—a stilt house.

The *palafita* is understood metaphorically as 'the housing time with its long legs stuck in the water time' (ibid.: 141), referring to traditional dwelling styles. The museum's communication processes encompass a broad vision connected to distant events and places. In this sense, the *palafita* are not just the stilt houses that bring forward a local memory of poverty, but are also connected to other housing types, like the houses of north and northeast Brazil (the *Sertão)*, the Amazon houses and the stilt houses from southeast Asia.

In 2014, ahead of the FIFA World Cup and the Olympics, the security forces of the Brazilian State, including the local police, the Special Police Operations Force and the Brazilian Marine Corps, occupied the Maré region, as well as a lot of other suburbs, and installed a 'peacekeeping police unit'—the UPP.[19] This was a way of making the neighbourhood safer, in order to be part of other governmental programs and to be more attractive to investors, as well as to establish the main zones of the city as 'safe zones.' In this context, the company that owns the museum buildings asked that it be vacated, as the 10-year, free-lease

term had finished. A national campaign of protest was initiated with demonstrations all over the country. With the words 'O Museu da Maré resiste!' ('The Maré Museum stands!'), these actions demonstrated how important the museum was to the region, which was traditionally excluded from State funding for culture, heritage and arts.

The mobilization was successful and involved several entities, such as IBRAM, the Ministry of Culture, the State Secretariat of Tourism, universities, activists, social movements, other museums and citizens throughout the country. Some of the activists and social movements were directly engaged in the museum's activities. The networks and social media made possible the articulation with other groups around the country, which had similar demands—social and racial struggles, occupations against gentrification, living rights, etc. The campaign was a success and the museum maintained its activities there.

Another significant initiative was launched at Vila Autódromo, a Rio suburb, in May 2016. After the announcements in 2007 and 2009 that Rio would be hosting both the World Cup and the Olympic Games, a huge process of eviction and refurbishment was initiated all over the city. The Museu das Remoções ('Museum of Evictions') was inaugurated following the idea that 'through the cracks of the hegemonic project of the Olympic City, the memory from Vila Autódromo is alive and is not removable' (Bogado 2017: 24). After workshops about popular memory, a territorial intervention was established in the neighbourhood: seven sculptures were erected in the area of the demolished houses, using the rubble. The Museu das Remoções itself represents a strategy in the struggle for housing rights, 'bringing forward the local social memory and denouncing the violent process of house evictions' (ibid.: 14).

The third case is located in the hills between an intersection of the wealthy neighbourhoods of Ipanema and Copacabana, in Rio. The Museu de Favela (MUF) is a territorial museum with large participation by the residents. The inhabitants offer a guided tour of 20 houses in the *favela* decorated with murals (Figure 20.1). These murals, painted by a local artist called Acme, illustrate the life of the people of the neighbourhood. Acme and his team of graffiti artists aim to transform the *favela* into an open-air museum, with people from the community aligned to share their stories in the murals. In this sense, the personal stories and interpretations about the city are expressed differently from the official discourse of traditional museums, which commonly treat these community's histories as apart from the city. The MUF focuses on a first-person perspective, bringing social cohesion to the community.

Currently, these community-based museums are confronting specific cuts in public funding. The fiscal crisis in the State of Rio de Janeiro became evident when salaries for civil servants started to be paid in arrears. Even so, the museums resist, based on local initiatives and the 'desire for memory' in every community. These experiences show how the museum is used as a space for promoting the cultural diversity, as well as the rights to memory, to heritage, and to the city. Fostering such community-based museums help people see (or imagine) the city as a symbol for the pursuit of a future with social justice, as opposed to more hegemonic processes.

Belo Horizonte: social gaps and a planned city

The city of Belo Horizonte, capital of the State of Minas Gerais, was founded in 1897. It was designed as a planned city following a Cartesian grid of streets intersected diagonally by large avenues and with wide squares. The districts were settled in a sectored and hierarchical way,

FIGURE 20.1   Community Museums Graffiti in Rio.
Image courtesy of Erica Abreu.

with zones for public administration buildings, commerce and residential areas. The model of the city was coordinated by a Constructors Commission and based on 19th century projects and urban reforms, such as those in Paris, Washington, and La Plata in Argentina.

In the 1940s, several modernist interventions took place in the city, noticeably in the 'Pampulha Modern Ensemble,'[20] which was recently recognized as a World Heritage site by UNESCO. The main architect, Oscar Nienmeyer, was influenced by Le Corbusier, and also designed Brasilia, the new Brazilian capital inaugurated in 1960. Nonetheless, the pattern of organization based on a Cartesian grid, with a central developed area that provides most of public services, had adverse results that affected the development of the whole city. The poor areas became poorer and lacking in public services, while informal settlements and slums expanded. This inequality gained visibility, as the populations historically excluded from these development models—Black people, ex-slaves and immigrants—flocked to these regions. They could not afford to live in central neighbourhoods and were not included in the 'modern city,' as they were not rich enough to settle there.

After more than one century of unequal modernization projects, essentially in the main areas of the city, the distribution of wealth is still lacking. This is clearly revealed in the urban landscape, despite the fact that Belo Horizonte has one of the highest development indexes in the country.[21] With a population of around 2.5 million, more than 450,000 people live today in *favelas* and informal settlements (Motta 2016: 149).

Taquaril is one of these neighbourhoods that surround the planned part of the city. With a population exceeding 30,000[22] inhabitants, it is an area with a lack of cultural services and buildings. In 2010, the Museu do Taquaril was launched as one of the first *Memory Spots*. It was a planned institution based on previous meetings and workshops, involving technicians from IBRAM, OEI and community leaders. The project was established to engage memory as a citizenship tool for local development. A local committee was organized for the management of the museum and all members of this committee were residents of the neighbourhood.

One of the main exhibitions, prepared by the community, was installed in three stages: *Aqui eu vivi* ('I Lived Here'), *Fotos que contam histórias* ('Pictures that Tell Stories') and *Memória viva* ('Live Memory'). It worked as an open invitation to receive the people who want to tell their stories, thereby creating participatory inventories with the residents producing the exhibition. The stories of immigrants and their historical struggles for housing rights are the main point. Memories, photos and statements are exposed in the streets, bringing the voices of those who were traditionally excluded from the official museums and memory spaces (Silva and Silva 2013: 6; Avelar 2015: 87).

The second example, Muquifu ('Museum of Urban *Quilombos* and *Favelas*') (Figure 20.2), is not part of the *Memory Spots* program. The museum is in a *favela* called 'Morro do Papagaio,' which has a population of around 16,000 people and is surrounded by upper-middle class neighbourhoods (Pereira 2012: 86). The experience started by using examples from other museums such as MUF and Museu da Maré. Father Mauro, a Catholic priest, coordinates the museum and supports its projects, engaging in local problems and issues faced by local inhabitants. The museum adopts a bottom-up approach in its curatorial processes and seeks to set all the exhibitions as a first-person, active narrative. In this sense, it maintains a 'listening sphere' open to the diverse voices from the inhabitants, and all the exhibitions are selected based on their demands and wishes.

Two of the exhibitions presented by the museum tackle a contemporary problem faced by Brazilians—the work force. Numerous women who live in Morro do Papagaio work as housekeepers in upper- and middle-class homes. Even today, some middle-class apartments are built with small rooms called 'the housekeeper's room' (small rooms with a minimal standard of living). The exhibition *Doméstica, da escravidão à extinção* ('Domestics, from Slavery to Extinction') reproduced one of these rooms, with the support of the women from the surrounding neighbourhoods who donated all the objects for the exhibition. The walls of the room display statements from these women, and the room can be changed every day as new objects and statements are left. The exhibition connects the history of slavery in Brazil with the history of the current housekeepers, who did not have their labour rights recognized until a couple of decades ago.

Pedro Pedreiro ('Pedro the Construction Worker') deals with workers from the construction sector who live in Morro do Papagaio. As the museum is still under construction, one unfinished room became an exhibition. The dynamic of the workers' daily labour is displayed in an exhibition in a real construction site, exhibited alongside clothing, safety equipment and building materials. A critical discourse about the lack of labour safety standards (common in this sector) is shown in part of the exhibition, and an audio-visual installation shows the working routine of these men.

Currently, the visual artist, Cleiton Gos, is painting the walls inside the museum, including the chapel and the kitchen. He is trying to bring representative women figures of the community to be 'enthroned' or immortalized in the museum. These so-called 'new muses'

FIGURE 20.2 Main exhibition hall of Muquifu Museum in Belo Horizonte. Photograph by Erica Abreu.

are ladies who had a seminal role in the local history. They are being depicted in biblical scenes in a vivid syncretism, with diverse interpretations and creations based on the religious texts. In one of the scenes, for example, the first local woman to receive a PhD is painted among church doctors and elders in a Jewish Temple, all of them men as was usual in these sacred spaces. The idea of the muses is reinterpreted on the walls of this museum. Taking the idea of the *Musaeum* (Institution of the Muses), with the museum as the temple of muses, it reshapes our understanding to its core—from the arts and science muses, to local ladies strictly connected to the community´s history.

Conclusions: targeting contemporary problems through social memory

A significant portion of the Brazilian population inhabits *favelas*. Just the city of Rio de Janeiro alone has about 1,700,000 people, or 22% of its population, living in these communities.[23] One of the main reasons for this are the actions of the State, which has fostered development focused on the main areas of the cities—downtowns, wealthier neighbourhoods and areas under gentrification. This same process had the support of the real estate and building sectors that led to evictions in strategic areas, pushing the poorer population to the suburbs and increasing the cities' social inequality, including wealth inequality, uneven or no access to public services, and reduced possibilities to prosper. This was especially noticeable during the preparations in Belo Horizonte and Rio for the big events mentioned earlier—the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics. This rapid and aggressive changeover of entire communities destroys symbolic cultural and social references, erasing part of the local history.

The emergence of museums inside *favelas* and poorer areas, traditionally with a lack of public services, has symbolic meaning in Brazil. The unequal urbanization in big cities throughout the country is also revealed in its public policies. Historically excluded from the decision-making centres, the *favelas* were also excluded from what used to be called 'the city.' The actions of the State have strengthened this stigma, as the State's operations are police actions aimed at gangs and militias, rather than the provision of public services. The community-based museums, or museums practicing social museology, reflect this instability, but also the diversity that permits citizens to take advantage of the museum's function as a social institution. In this sense, these experiences and these museums try to solve contemporary problems, and foster awareness, participation and social change.

The museums discussed in this chapter demonstrate how they serve to overcome the negative stigmas that mark these communities and assist in retrieving self-esteem through actions which focus on the individuals' stories and the possibilities of seeing themselves as actors in the city, not just as passive subjects. These museums are effective ways of amplifying community voices in the struggle for their rights, some with the assistance of the State, others inspired by other actions. In this sense, the museum which 'serves life', or is 'life-oriented' (MINOM 2017), must be a place where:

> neighbours are encouraged to meet and talk; call attention to urgent problems; inspire people to do the best they can; sponsor programmes in the performing and visual arts; and participate in the development of a variety of interests from alcoholism and local archaeology to ornithology and urban planning.
>
> *(Kinard 1971: 156)*

It is not about ignoring the violence and other problems present in these communities, as discussed above, but about taking these problems as incentives for solving local issues, fostering local initiatives, and seeking future perspectives.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 The social aspects are visible in several parts of the document, mainly the paragraphs 16 to 18 in section III—'Issues for museums in society'.
2 The Brazilian Government requested the studies for the adoption of a new normative document, accepted in UNESCO 36th session (2012). The preparatory conferences and technical works had the financial support of Brazil. www.unesco.org.
3 The idea that 'a Museology that doesn't serve life doesn't serve anything', or that 'a museology that is not life-oriented is not worthy' (MINOM 2017) is discussed, disseminated and applied by several authors such as Mario Chagas, Mario Moutinho and Pedro Pereira Leite. Although it is not compiled in one specific document, it can be found in speeches and classes as the Louvre School course (Chagas 2017a), interviews (Chagas 2017b), speeches (Leite 2017) and in the latest MINOM charter (2017).
4 Mario de Souza Chagas mentioned these ideas based on Erich Fromm's book *The Heart of Man* and the syndromes of *biophilia* and *necrophilia* (Chagas 2015).
5 Moutinho defines new imperial museums as 'museums of multimedia spectacles,' based on creative industries where 'the forms and the brightness of technological solutions overlap contents,' e.g. architectonic projects such as the Museum of Tomorrow (Rio de Janeiro), Guggenheim Bilbao, Louvre (Kuwait) and thematic leisure parks.
6 Sociomuseology is an area of the Social Sciences with a theoretical scope, with research focuses on the articulation of museology with other knowledge areas. The multidisciplinary approach of Sociomuseology aims at the recognition of museology as a resource or a tool for sustainable development, based on social and economic inclusion. The process is similar to the Public Sociology as Michael Burawoy proposed. I believe that deeper articulation between these two areas of social sciences will be of great relevance in the coming years, to understand the contemporary complexity of museology' (Moutinho 2016). In Portugal the Lusófona University has had a specific research focus on 'Sociomuseology' since 1993, with a regular publication of essays. In Brazil, it can be found at the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA) and the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (Unirio).
7 Law 11.906/2009—Creation of the Brazilian Institute of Museums; *Portaria* (decree) 315, 6 September 2017—Institutionalization of the Memory Spots Program. Documents available in www.museus.gov.br (IBRAM website) and in www.imprensaoficial.com.br (Official Press web-site). Accessed on 23 November 2017.
8 Ibero-America here refers to Portugal, Spain, Andorra and 19 ex-Portuguese and Spanish colonies: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela. The Ibero-American States Organization (OEI) was launched in 1949 as an intergovernmental office. Since 1991, these countries have organized Ibero-American summits to shape common policies for several sectors, including education, science and culture.
9 Declaration of the City of Salvador (Ibermuseus 2007).
10 The presidential election of the extreme right-wing candidate Jair Bolsonaro in 2018 is a key outcome of this process. His candidature had the support of evangelists and other conservative groups, as well as neoliberals and some sections of the military.

11 For the 2016 Olympics, six cities hosted the event: Belo Horizonte, Brasília, Manaus, Salvador, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. The 2014 FIFA World Cup also included Cuiabá, Curitiba, Fortaleza, Manaus, Natal, Porto Alegre and Recife.

12 Information from the National Network on Museums Identification, which updates data for the National Register of Museums. Data available on the website: http://museus.cultura.gov.br/.

13 Law 11.906/2009.

14 Belém, Belo Horizonte, Brasilia, Curitiba, Fortaleza, Maceió, Porto Alegre, Recife, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, São Paulo and Vitória (OEI and IBRAM 2016).

15 Decision 36 COM 8B.42—UNESCO World Heritage Committee: 'Inscribes Rio de Janeiro, Carioca Landscapes between the Mountain and the Sea, Brazil, on the World Heritage List' (Saint-Petersburg, 2012).

16 With the lack of public services and reliable local policing, various neighbourhoods have become very violent in large Brazilian cities, especially in Rio. This has led to local militias, which act as illegal guarantors or providers of general services like gas, water, cable TV, loans, real estate, as well as gambling and local police—sometimes disputing territories and coming into conflict with drug trafficking gangs. These services are sustained by bribes paid by businessmen and inhabitants. It is based on an authoritative system maintained by threats and there are several documented cases of burned-out buildings and murders of those who refused to pay the bribes. Most of these militias are formed within the formal police itself, in a parallel, complex and corrupt way, linking the military police with politicians and forged investigations. The recent murder of the city councillor Marielle Franco, in Rio de Janeiro, highlights this concern. She was part of former commissions that condemned corruption in politics and public security and was also investigating the violent military intervention in Rio and the connections between militias and politicians. One week before concluding this chapter, the Maré Museum announced the installation of a specific exhibition with objects from her office, concerning her history and her activism.

17 Decision 40 COM 8B.33—UNESCO World Heritage Committee: 'Inscribes the Pampulha Modern Ensemble, Brazil, on the World Heritage List as a cultural landscape' (2016).

18 Rio de Janeiro Municipality: http://portalgeo.rio.rj.gov.br/bairroscariocas/index_bairro.htm.

19 The UPP (*Unidades de Polícia Pacificadora*) is a project of deploying community police units and installing special stations to contend with militias and trafficking gangs to set 'safe zones.' Most UPPs began with violent military occupations, which gained authority in local daily management. Demonstrations are organized against these occupations. The militarization is associated with an increase in the people arrested. According to official reports, 44% of the prison population is based on provisional sentences. In just three years (2011 to 2014), the prison population increased by 32% (Humans Rights Commission of Rio de Janeiro Parliament).

20 http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1493 Accessed on 19 October 2017.

21 HDI 0,810—UNDP report for Brazilian municipalities, 2010.

22 2010 census from the Brazilian Institute of Statistics. www.ibge.gov.br These data consider the population of surrounding areas.

23 Data from demographic census held in 2010. Information available at: www.ibge.gov.br. Accessed 31 January 2018.

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21

FROM VISION TO ACTION

The journey towards activism at St Fagans National Museum of History

Sioned Hughes and Elen Phillips

Introduction

St Fagans National Museum of History, on the outskirts of Cardiff in south east Wales, is a unique resource.[1] Home to Wales' national collections of history and archaeology, the museum holds in one place an indoor gallery and learning complex, over 40 relocated historic buildings, archaeological constructs, and a collections centre—all enclosed within 100 acres of formal gardens and parkland. With over 600,000 visitors a year and a free-entry policy, St Fagans is Wales' most popular heritage attraction, and its largest provider of learning outside the classroom.[2]

In 2012, the museum embarked on a transformational £30 million redevelopment project (Amgueddfa Cymru—National Museum Wales 2017). Billed as the *Making History* project, this led to a complete redesign of its galleries, resulting in new exhibition spaces and improved learning facilities. Completed in late 2018, the project embodied more than bricks and mortar; it propelled the museum on a journey towards becoming an active and activist organisation—one that aspires to be at the core of national discourse in Wales. Participation became the underlying principle of the project; a desire to work collaboratively (Simon 2010) to create history *with* rather than *for* the people of Wales. In the planning phase, over 200 external organisations were consulted on all aspects of the redevelopment, and eight participatory fora—representing a range of public and third sector organisations—informed and co-created gallery content.

In this chapter, we will trace the redevelopment and activist aspirations of St Fagans through a series of case studies, each showing the museum's shift in ambition and practice over time. This change in approach will be placed within the context of a devolved Wales—a small country growing in self-confidence on the one hand, but with huge problems of social deprivation on the other. To conclude, we will consider whether long-term change in policy and practice at the museum can lead to the development of greater community agency at the heart of its work.

The political landscape in Wales

The St Fagans redevelopment project—and the museum's journey to activism—coincided with, and directly resulted from, a period of increased political focus on tackling social inequalities in Wales, in part as a response to government austerity measures that marked significant reductions in public funding. In 2013, the Welsh Government commissioned Baroness Kay Andrews to recommend ways in which cultural and heritage organisations could work together to break down barriers to participation and reduce poverty (Welsh Government 2014). Two years later, a key piece of legislation was passed that continues to radically shape the public sector in Wales. The *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015* seeks to improve the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales (Welsh Government 2015a). Public bodies listed in the Act, including the museum, are required to map their organisational objectives against those enshrined in the legislation.[3] The ambition is that Wales becomes a leader not just within the UK, but globally, in developing museums as centres for social action. The *Well-being Act* is the first legislation anywhere in the world to include a direct reference to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. According to Nikhil Seth, Director of the UN's Division for Sustainable Development:

> The *Wales Future Generations Act* [sic] captures the spirit and essence of two decades of United Nations work in the area of sustainable development and serves as a model for other regions and countries ... We hope that what Wales is doing today the world will do tomorrow. Action, more than words, is the hope for our current and future generations.
>
> *(Welsh Government 2015b)*

Revisiting founding principles

The creation of St Fagans in 1948 was viewed as a symbolic achievement in the post–war reconstruction of Wales. In many ways, the museum's shift towards an activist agenda is traceable back to this period, and the values and vision of its first curator, Iorwerth C. Peate (Figure 21.1). A Welsh nationalist, life-long pacifist and poet, Peate worked for National Museum Wales from 1927 until his retirement in 1971. Under his direction, the Welsh Folk Museum (as St Fagans was then known) took its inspiration from Skansen open-air museum in Sweden, and espoused the 'salvage ethnography' approach to collecting. Peate set-out his blueprint for St Fagans in a pamphlet published in 1948. In it he declared—in words strikingly similar to the language of the *Well-being Act*—that folk museums should 'provide a strong foundation and a healthy environment for the future of their people' (Peate 1948: 13). They ought to be living community-centres, not repositories 'for the dry bones of a dead culture' (ibid.: 35).

Peate's resolve to develop a folk museum for Wales stemmed from a long-established anxiety among Welsh nationalists about the internal colonising force of industrialisation, and its impact on Welsh-speaking communities (Williams 1977). Prominent nationalists of the inter-war years advocated 'the fashioning of rural, agricultural Wales as the cornerstone of the nation' (Bohata 2004: 81). Set against this backdrop, Peate wanted to preserve and invigorate a culture he perceived to be under threat. St Fagans' very existence, therefore,

FIGURE 21.1 Iorwerth Peate, first curator of St Fagans, wearing a Cymdeithas yr Iaith (Welsh Language Society) pin badge.
© Amgueddfa Cymru—National Museum Wales.

was a political statement and, as *de facto* director, Peate was anything but a non-partisan, neutral observer. He was an active member of Plaid Cymru (the Welsh nationalist party) and Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg (the Welsh Language Society) throughout his time at the helm of the museum. He would attend rallies and meetings and write opinion pieces and letters to the press on a range of political and cultural issues. He made no distinction between his professional and private personas—his activism informed his curatorial practice, and his status as the head of a national institution brought kudos to the campaigns and issues he championed.

Although, in many respects, Peate's vision still provides a touchstone against which the move towards activist practice at the museum is measured, the Wales of today is very different to the Wales in which St Fagans was first imagined. Critics have branded Peate's approach to museology as atrophied and hackneyed (Dicks 2003). To his detractors, he perpetuated an outmoded, blinkered version of Welsh history based on a

myth-laden, pre-industrial past. As recently as 2007, Gaynor Kavanagh delivered an institutional critique of the museum for its collective airbrushing of difficult histories:

> The traditional Welsh kitchen was also home to traditional Welsh abuse, poverty, hunger and illiteracy ... [I]t can be argued that the traditional Welsh anything is in fact a fantasy of grand proportions. The term 'traditional' is a euphemism for denial ... [The National Museum] clings to a singular narrative that fails to resonate, that deals with cliché rather than experiences. It never becomes compelling because it gets no further than a neat and anodyne fantasy. Better to stay silent and say nothing, than to remember and speak in ways that depart from established practices, the practices of tradition, the practices of denial; the things that hurt.
>
> *(2007: 48, 56)*

In response, Eurwyn Wiliam—then Deputy-Director General of National Museum Wales—questioned the extent to which any other national museum in Britain had fully grappled with these issues, but conceded that 'the challenge Kavanagh has given the Museum is a real one and one that it must address' (Wiliam 2007: 218–19).

The journey to activism: *Refugee House*

Refugee House (2012) was a project that sought to challenge these long-held critical attitudes towards the museum. This experimental exhibition, delivered in the lead-up to the redevelopment project, was co-designed in partnership with Oasis Cardiff (a charity that helps refugees and asylum seekers to integrate into their local community) and Newport's Young Asylum Seekers Support Service (Plate 11).

The project was participatory in approach and was developed to be a social experience, designed to create opportunities for discussion and debate. In response to St Fagans' historic buildings, the project participants developed the idea of the house as a narrative, in effect using space as a 'structuring principle and point of reference for narrative action' (Georga-kopoulou and Fina 2015: 9). Working with an artist and set-designer, they explored this concept in a series of workshops, culminating in the recreation of a refugee house interior in a temporary exhibition space at St Fagans.

The *Refugee House* was typical of the temporary housing provided for refugees and asylum seekers in Wales. A bedroom shared between two people of different religious and cultural backgrounds highlighted issues around personal space and privacy. Tupperware in the kitchen showed how difficult it was to share a fridge and keep different foods apart. With little or no English, all junk mail was kept as something that could relate to someone's Home Office case. Throughout the *Refugee House*, the community explored the line between grubby and worn—keen to show the reality of their living conditions, but anxious not to be labelled as 'dirty' or 'unclean', or to perpetuate negative stereotypes that, some have argued, link dirt with particular racial and ethnic groups (Cox 2011).

Visitors were invited to sit on the sofa and watch footage of community members talking about their lives. They took the citizenship test at the kitchen table—the majority failed. Community members 'lived' in the space and engaged visitors and staff in some challenging conversations about myths and stereotypes. The hallway notice board was filled with visitor comments and became a participatory display in itself. Some of the respondents showed an

increased awareness of the housing issues faced by asylum seekers and refugees, with many noting that the exhibition had made them question their preconceptions and to think differently:

> Saddened that we think it's ok to treat people like this. It's one thing to choose to live here like this (e.g. as students) another to force people to live like this.
>
> Fantastic way to stimulate discussion on what it means to be an asylum seeker, especially as you can talk to the people themselves.
>
> Interesting to see the lifestyle of refugees. Challenges my previous perceptions.
>
> I am concerned, distressed and feel guilty, that I can't personally help! An eye opener to reality!

However, some respondents expressed no empathy at all, mistaking economic migrants for refugees and asylum seekers, while others were blatantly Islamophobic. In some instances, negative and racist comments were counter-argued and moderated by others, generating a dialogue between visitors that others have observed in comments books and walls (Macdonald 2005):

> Many of our fellow countrymen are forced to live like this as well! I'm sure refugees should be grateful for refuge.
>
> It is terrible as we don't help our young Welsh people enough, but we fund refugees.
>
> Amazed + disappointed that economic migrants live in better conditions than many of our own children + they get all from taxes.
>
> Comment below—please read the panel in the yellow area. These are not economic migrants, but political asylum seekers. There's a big difference!
>
> Disappointed that the National Museum should be pandering to a minority in this way! Fact: there are more Muslims in the UK than there are Welsh. If they all moved to Wales we'd have Sharia Law + this museum would be cleared to make way for a mosque. Get your priorities right + promote Wales instead!
>
> I'd sooner have Sharia law than your small-minded hatred. Try thinking of others for once!

Refugee House was indicative of the museum's small-scale, fragmented approach to activist practice at the time. The summative evaluation of the overall gallery space, conducted in the same year, revealed that the majority of its co-curated elements were driven by the museum's needs, rather than those of the participants. The study found that participants worked as consultants, not partners in projects, making their contribution, as Bernadette Lynch would argue, 'empowerment-lite' (2011: 20). *Refugee House* was a statement of activist intent, but not established practice across the organisation.

Active partnerships: Mencap Cymru

Nurturing active partnerships and moving away from 'empowerment-lite' engagement became a key objective of the *Making History* redevelopment project. Building on the strong relationships developed with members of our participatory fora, a number of projects emerged that were indicative of a more active approach to partnership work—one example being a collaboration with the learning disability charity, Mencap Cymru, on the *Hidden Now Heard* project.

Hidden Now Heard was a three year (2015–2017) Heritage Lottery-funded oral history project that captured the untold and often painful living memories of patients, their relatives, and staff from six former long-stay hospitals in Wales, most of which had closed by 2006. The *Mental Deficiency Act* of 1913 called on local authorities to establish long-stay hospitals for people with both mental health conditions and learning disabilities. Dubbed 'colonies' for the 'mentally defective' (McCrae and Nolan 2016: 61), many of those who were admitted were misdiagnosed and became isolated from society. Under the campaign headline 'The Longest Waiting List,' Mencap Cymru played a lead role in the closure of these long-stay institutions in Wales.

Early in the project development, we worked closely with Mencap Cymru to train their staff in the ethics and techniques of collecting oral testimony, and to develop accessible consent and copyright forms. Prospective interviewees were given the option of being recorded on video or audio, in the location of their choice, with full control over how the recording would be used post-interview. The project generated 97 oral history recordings with 85 individuals—all deposited in the archive at St Fagans—and six temporary exhibitions in regional museums across Wales.

On completing the project, Sara Pickard (2017) reflected on the challenges she faced as a fieldworker with a learning disability:

> We felt that having someone like myself as part of the interview would help us get the best interview possible. In some cases, me being there has helped our interviews. I think by having a person with a learning disability present it can help put people at ease, not just the former patients but the support staff because we have shared experiences as people with a learning disability.
>
> One man used the word 'mongolism' in my company. At first I found this shocking, but on reflection he had only worked in a hospital for three years in the sixties and never again worked with learning disabilities. He was simply using the term he used in everyday conversation. This is why history is important, something as simple as the words we use can tell us how far we have come, and how far there is to go.
>
> Our concern has always been the best oral history interview possible, and as long as people have negative perceptions or old fashioned ways of seeing me this will always be a consideration. We want the full story, not the story people think I can handle. I assumed all the stories would be negative or sad, but they weren't. I was surprised to hear that patients got married, and that sexual relationships for those who were capable, were accepted as a thing that happened and be supported, not something that should be denied.

As part of the project evaluation, Mencap Cymru conceded that the testimony collected had fundamentally challenged the charity's perception of past and present care practices:

> Our beliefs around long-stay hospitals were too narrow—although there was awfulness, friendships and feeling of belonging to communities existed too... We've had an insight into continuous levels of control that people with learning disabilities endure... As providers, we need to be strong enough to say 'we've got it wrong.'
>
> *(Rhys 2016: 3)*

The museum has further developed this project model as a framework for working with other community groups. St Fagans is now an oral history training hub and repository for

organisations that are actively collecting the histories of their service users. Sustained relation-ships have formed with many organisations across Wales, and the histories of hard to reach, often vulnerable communities, are making their way into the national oral history archive.

Repurposing historic buildings: Oakdale Workmen's Institute

The historic buildings at St Fagans have become staging grounds for this participatory, activist approach. A project delivered in 2017–2018 to re-interpret Oakdale Workmen's Institute[4] aimed to revitalise and repurpose the space as a dementia-friendly building that celebrates its history and its original source community. The project supported key areas of the *Well-being Act*, and the Welsh Government's Healthy and Active strategy (Welsh Government 2016).

For the first time, the museum challenged its default interpretation model of presenting historic buildings in the context of architectural typologies and static interior settings. A century since it was built by the coal community of Oakdale, the re-interpretation has reframed it as an institute for the 21st century by returning to its original purpose—a place for learning, community, culture and well-being. Previously, the building had poor physical accessibility, no interpretation to support people's understanding of its original purpose, and barriers to keep visitors out of two of its rooms.

The demand for dementia-friendly resources in Wales is significant, with a growing body of evidence showing that museums are uniquely placed to contribute to supporting health and social care providers in this respect (Dodd and Jones 2014). Over 45,000 have a diagnosis of dementia in Wales, and this figure is expected to increase by 31% by 2021 (Southern 2015); but this estimate hides the true impact on families and carers. People living with the condition may have problems with memory, reasoning, perception and communication. Each case is individual and the type of support a person requires will depend on the type of dementia they have.

In partnership with Cardiff University, the museum worked with a group of people with early-onset dementia from Ystrach Mynach, south east Wales, and Solace—a carers support service within the Cardiff & Vale University Health Board—to develop a user-led evalua-tion of the Institute. In a series of workshops, the balance of keeping the authenticity of the building with the needs of people living with dementia was explored. The project was driven by a desire among the participants to destigmatise the condition and to 'improve things for future generations':

> We do as much as we can. It's important that we give our opinion. It's not the end... We can do a lot for as long as possible... It's nothing to be afraid of. It's not contagious.
>
> *(Participant living with early-onset dementia)*

With consent from the participants, the workshops were filmed, and comments and ideas recorded. The responses resonated with a 'fourth moment' in dementia matters (Bartlett and O'Connor 2010), one in which people living with the condition are increasingly calling for a form of citizenship which 'involves justice, recognition of social positions and the upholding of personhood, rights and a fluid degree of responsibility for shaping events at a personal and societal level' (ibid.: 37):

> It's more than a tick–box exercise; it's also a philosophical statement of the way you want the business to run. We don't expect you to change the complete culture of your organisation, but what we do expect you to do is to be able to respond to difficulties when they occur. It's the little subtle things sometimes that people miss out on. And it's only by usage, it's only by people, with whatever disabilities you're aiming for come and use it, use your facility, that you actually get that bit. And the more people need to come, the better for you, better for your staff, better for your organisation. And at the end of the day, it will be better for us.
>
> *(Participant with early-onset dementia)*

The collaboration focused on making positive changes to people's experience of the Institute. Participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of keeping the historic character of the building, while supporting greater physical and cognitive accessibility where possible:

> Just being here is of benefit. . . It's like an old shoe—very comfortable. . . That's why, somehow, you have to do this without losing the character, feel, of the building.
>
> *(Carer of participant living with dementia)*

All agreed that the museum should challenge the traditional 'don't touch' approach as it can cause offence and upset to someone living with dementia:

> When you reach what you think is a nice comfortable plateau, where everything's going to be the same, but things don't stay the same, they do change quite quickly and you need to be ready to take on board those changes quickly, you know. And don't be too surprised if, as you quite rightly say, somebody sits down, they won't know they're sitting in a place that they shouldn't be sitting. As far as they're concerned it's a seat, they're tired, they sit down. It's logical, you know. . . People like touching things as well you see, don't they. There's the tactile feel of things, of touching things, which people like. And the last thing you want is someone to say, 'No, no, no, don't touch that,' you know.
>
> *(Carer of participant living with dementia)*

The potential to reframe St Fagans' 40 historic buildings as engaging spaces for people living with dementia and their carers is considerable. This pilot project revealed a number of issues around understandings of authenticity and different perceptions of materiality that demand further consideration.

Organisational change

Since 2012, the museum has worked intensely with the Paul Hamlyn Foundation (PHF)[5] to bring about significant organisational change that has shifted participatory practices—and the values that underpin such practices—from the margins to the core of its work. Between January 2012 and December 2015, the museum was a partner in PHF's *Our Museums* initiative. The programme focused on working collaboratively with third sector organisa-tions to create a diverse community of volunteers at the museum, with opportunities tailored to *their* needs, not those of the museum (Bienkowski 2016). Building on the success of this project, at the time of writing, we are working with the PHF to extend community

agency at St Fagans by opening up the collections and diversifying the stories they tell. Taking our steer from the museum's Diversity Forum (one of the eight established as part of the *Making History* project), we are working intensively with one community at a time to increase the representativeness of the collections. The Diversity Forum has identified ways in which the museum needs to change to become a more effective and relevant staging ground for different groups with wide-ranging agendas. Feedback from its members indicated that a 'broad-brush' approach to community partnerships diluted the focus and limited the impact of our work. Although it is acknowledged that we have taken steps towards diversifying our public programming, temporary exhibitions and volunteer base, the same cannot be said for the material culture collections—both in terms of their significance, and those who engage and work with them.

The first phase of the project is focused on co-collecting with the Black communities of Wales, whose histories are mostly represented in the collections by colonial and ethnographic artefacts. By re-visiting existing collections with community members, we are re-thinking their meaning and significance, capturing new, multi-layered and diverse perspectives directly onto our documentation system. Together, we aim to build clear models and methodologies for diversifying, sharing authority and increasing a sense of ownership of the collections that can be replicated and adapted across all National Museum Wales sites.

Conclusion

Can St Fagans' vision of becoming an activist museum be realised? It certainly has the ambition, and post-redevelopment, the platform to do so. David Anderson, Director General of National Museum Wales, recently rededicated the museum to the radical principles of its early founders, and committed to seriously addressing Iorwerth Peate's vision of St Fagans as a mirror held up to Wales, in which the nation can see truths about itself.

And the truths are difficult and real. Levels of poverty in Wales are still among the highest in Europe. Child poverty is the highest in the UK. The unemployment rate for 16–25 year olds in Wales is over 20%, again above the UK average (AC-NMW 2015). There is an opportunity, Anderson believes, to create a distinctively Welsh model for museums that responds to the truth of this inequality—one that is rooted in social justice and deep cultural democracy.

In a recent opinion piece for the Bevan Foundation, he refers to the 'onslaught from neo-liberalism' as a 'machine for making poverty' that 'thrives on injustice and inequality' (Anderson 2015: 13). He frames museums as 'anchor institutions' that are needed now, more than at any other period in living memory, as centres for self-education. In a period of accelerated social, political and global change, the challenge for St Fagans now is to be an 'anchor institution' for Wales.

Notes

1 St Fagans is a constituent museum of Amgueddfa Cymru—National Museum Wales (AC-NMW). AC-NMW's portfolio of sites also includes: National Museum Cardiff; Big Pit: National Coal Museum; National Wool Museum; National Roman Legion Museum; National Slate Museum; National Waterfront Museum; and the National Collections Centre.

2 In September 1997, Wales voted in favour of devolution. The *Government of Wales Act 1998* led to the establishment of the National Assembly of Wales in 1999. On 1 April 2001, the newly devolved Welsh Government introduced a policy of free entry to all National Museum Wales sites.

3 The Act has seven enshrined well-being goals: A prosperous Wales; A resilient Wales; A healthier Wales; A more equal Wales; A Wales of cohesive communities; A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language; A globally responsible Wales.

4 Oakdale Workmen's Institute was moved from the village of Oakdale, south east Wales, in 1989 and rebuilt at the Museum.

5 The Paul Hamlyn Foundation is one of the largest independent grant-making foundations in the UK, funding projects focusing on the arts, young people, education and learning, and migration.

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22

INSIDE OUT/OUTSIDE IN

Museums and communities activating change

Moya McFadzean, Liza Dale-Hallett, Tatiana Mauri and Kimberley Moulton

Introduction

Over the last ten years, Museums Victoria in Melbourne has been investing in research, collections, exhibitions and programs that seek genuine and lasting social impact. This chapter will reflect on four projects which are taking diverse community engagement methodologies, activist agendas, interpretive devices and qualitative data analysis to illuminate social inequities and contribute to changing attitudes, behaviours and power dichotomies in the community. These examples will highlight the ongoing evolution of both social historical and community engagement practices that are participatory and collaborative, and which seek to explore different models of co-research and co-production.

Notions of change are at the core of our discussion—who and what is being changed and how is change achieved. Activism requires the museum to be open to acting as both *change agent* and *change recipient*: that is, to effect community and societal change, a museum must also be open to change within the institution.

The thematic foci of our case studies are as varied as their approaches and outcomes: personal identity and the impact of prejudice and racism on social cohesion; the voices and expert knowledge of south-eastern Australian First Peoples representing their histories and living cultures; mapping, for the first time, the diverse, innovative and vital role of women in Australian agriculture; and virtual community dialogues about cultural difference, displacement, isolation, racism and disadvantage. They all sit on a spectrum of engagement and participation, they all work within an articulated community engagement framework, deploying a variety of co-production models. Our practice reflects an ambition, articulated by Katy Bunning *et al.* (2015: 5) to move 'beyond the rhetoric of "shared authority" or "co-production"' to achieve genuine community participation, and subsequently, more meaningful audience engagement with what is produced.

Invisible Farmer: a template for change

> . . . we are creating living history. This Heritage Project with Museum Victoria is the first time that the museum has ever attempted something like this, and to my knowledge it is one of the few things in a museum that I have ever seen, which hasn't had to die to be recognised, and I find that very refreshing.
>
> *(Ann Jarvis, Inaugural member of the Women on Farms Heritage Group, Kergunyah, quoted in Harvey, Forge and Dale-Hallett 2003)*

The *Invisible Farmer* project is a multi-tiered and multi-faceted change-making project, involving a nation-wide partnership between rural communities, academics, government and cultural organisations. It is the largest ever study of Australian women on the land and aims to combine personal narratives and academic research to map the diverse, innovative and vital role of women in Australian agriculture (Figure 22.1). Led by Museums Victoria, the project is drawing on a longstanding relationship with women farmers and using museological methods to create a template for change.

Since the late 1980s Australian farm women have led the world in seeking to address the lack of acknowledgement and participation of women in decision-making forums. 1994 was a significant year of firsts for these women; hosting the first ever international conference of women in agriculture in Melbourne, and successfully lobbying the Australian Law Reform Commission to legally recognise women as 'farmers' for the first time in Australian history.

FIGURE 22.1 Janet Taylor and Ann Jarvis at Women on Farms Gathering, Yarram, 2003. Photograph courtesy of Museums Victoria.

This ground swell of activism became known as the Australian Rural Women's Movement. Museums Victoria was part of this movement and worked closely with a number of remarkable women to document and display the untold and undervalued stories of women in agriculture. Yet, 25 years later, they continue to be underrepresented in positions of rural leadership and decision-making, and their contributions undervalued and over-shadowed by the predominantly masculinist narrative of rural Australia.

Invisible Farmer continues the ground-breaking campaign started and led by Australian farm women. This project aspires to redefine 'farmer' and to empower farm women to share their experiences, and to take up their agency as significant contributors to rural enterprises and communities. It also aims to create new histories of rural Australia; reveal the hidden stories of women on the land; stimulate public discussions about contemporary issues facing rural Australia and its future; and develop significant public collections that will enable far-reaching outcomes in research, industry and public policy (Invisible Farmer 2017).

There are three key strategies in *Invisible Farmer*'s template for change: stories, education and community engagement, and museum practice.

Writing and sharing personal stories is powerful and transformative. It can reveal and challenge our unconscious bias and give women the courage to stand up, identify and value themselves. One woman who was interviewed for the project acknowledged that she had been involved in farming for over 38 years, but when it was suggested that she could then claim the right to identify herself as a 'farmer'—she struggled! Self-identifying as a 'farmer' is a significantly radical act by women who have been systematically excluded and ignored from the dominant narrative and systems of power. As Margaret Alston has observed, 'discourses of agriculture and rurality are framed around a male standpoint with women mere shadows of outraged silence' (2003: 165).

Museums Victoria works with its partners to help generate community-created content. People across Australia are invited to contribute stories about women on the land through the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC 2017) and the project website. These stories are shared and amplified on social media platforms. The active use of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram has built a strong following for the project and has proven to be a dynamic and powerful tool for community engagement, dialogue, active participation and co-creation.

Education and community engagement is the second key change-making strategy. The education program, *Untold—Stories of the Land*, is designed to address two issues impacting rural communities. One is the reticence of some women to share their stories. The other is the need to attract and retain young people in rural communities and industries, especially to inspire young girls to see a future for themselves in farming. This education program enlists primary and secondary students as citizen researchers in the *Invisible Farmer* project; it is designed to encourage female farmers to share their stories, and to create outcomes of benefit to the local community.

This program, developed by Museums Victoria, sits comfortably across all curriculum areas—including science, maths, history, English, and geography. It can be run at a class level or involve the whole school. The program is available online and includes training videos and live streaming between students and farm women, researchers and curators from across Australia. Each class and school determines what types of outcomes it will create and how they will share it with their communities, including pop-up exhibitions, online digital stories, local newspaper articles, art and theatrical productions.

The third change-making strategy goes to the heart of museum methods. The *Invisible Farmer* project is enlisting the help of key history and museum stakeholders in rewriting the histories held

in local, regional and state museums. This process will involve creating new collections, improving documentation, asking new questions and exhibiting their untold stories of women on the land.

Museums Victoria, like most other museums in Australia, has been complicit in the invisibility of women farmers in our public histories and collections. Museums Victoria has the largest and most significant collection of agriculture in Australia, yet its focus on technological interpretation has hidden the histories of women on the land. A team of volunteers and student interns are reviewing the rural collections of Museums Victoria to uncover and increase access to these hidden stories. This entails a systematic review of metadata, and editing catalogue subject terms and object names.

In 1993 the Women on Farms Gathering at Tallangatta featured a 'speaking stick' to help women find their voice. Whoever held the 'speaking stick' had the right to speak and be heard (Museums Victoria 2002). The *Invisible Farmer* project is using museum methods to invite women to hold this 'speaking stick' again and to stand up and claim their place in the past, present and future of their rural enterprises and communities. Their stories are central to this template for change—the simple act of sharing these stories will challenge, explode, and extend our understandings and value of farming in our lives. The challenge for the rest of Australia is whether, this time, we are prepared to listen and change the Australian rural narrative.

Identity: yours, mine, ours: measuring affective impact

Museum exhibitions with an activist charter attempt to challenge visitors to open themselves to attitudinal and behavioural change. This is a form of change which the museum hopes to bring about through visitor-exhibition encounters which it then hopes has a positive impact out in the community. As sites of what Richard Sandell has termed 'moral activism,' museums can bravely grasp the opportunity to 'not simply reflect and reinforce the consensus but actively seek to build public and political support for more progressive human rights values' (2012: 212). One of the challenges for museums with this kind of activism is whether the desired change in people's behaviours can be both positive and lasting. This case study will demonstrate that it can be, and that a museum's social impact can be measured.

In 2011 the exhibition, *Identity: yours, mine, ours*, opened at Museums Victoria's Immigration Museum in Melbourne. The exhibition signalled a significant shift in the Museum's strategic direction that would see its long-term exhibitions go beyond historical and contemporary migration narratives to explore the impact of migration on Australian society today. The exhibition explores themes relating to personal identity, belonging and difference in contemporary Australia. Its core aims are to provide a dynamic participatory environment that encourages reflection, challenges assumptions and compels visitors to think about ways they might affect positive attitudinal change in their everyday lives. The central interpretive methodologies are personal storytelling and immersive interactive experiences, which aim to engender empathetic responses from visitors through personal connection. It is these methodologies which have been qualitatively measured for their social impact.

An Australian Research Council study (Walton *et al.* 2016) used the *Identity* exhibition to test the public role of museums in countering racism and promoting positive attitudes and acceptance of diversity by focusing on secondary school students and their teachers in Melbourne. A total of 98 students in seven schools participated in the project. A pre–post study design was used to examine the effects of the exhibition on students and assess any changes over time, including surveys (completed prior to the visit, then two weeks and

three months after the visit), narrative interviews, focus groups and video diaries. While the modest amount of quantitative data made statistical analysis difficult, the qualitative data proved to be powerful and revealing.

This qualitative data demonstrated the affective power of personal stories and immersive museum experiences, with physical interactions in the exhibition providing a way by which students could connect to people exhibiting social, cultural and biological similarities and differences. In this way, the exhibition content became more than just a series of stories, objects, images and factual information but was enlivened by the interaction between students' emotions and perspectives, with multimedia presentations bringing individual storytellers to life. One student reflected after visiting the exhibition:

> [I]t wasn't just like an overview of what people go through it was a specific person talking to you about what had happened to them and it just made it a whole lot more real when you could see their face and you could . . . hear their voice . . . it still felt like a one-on-one experience with them . . .
>
> *(Walton* et al. *2016: 129)*

The presentation of practical everyday content which focuses on the voices and perspectives of a wide range of ordinary people, provided a vehicle through which students could begin to challenge their thinking and even become more aware of how they interact with people from diverse backgrounds. The immersive and interpersonal interpretive methodology is critical to engendering this impact, whether through stories presented through videos, audio handsets, interactive multimedia opportunities or human scale projection.

The exhibition features a large multi-touch table which challenges visitors' first impressions of others. Visitors can ask prescribed questions relating to visible identifiers, revealing some surprises and challenges to assumptions visitors might have. One student's response to interacting with the table's content was to reflect:

> Sometimes I kind of get offended when people ask . . . are you from Africa or are you from Bangladesh or . . . when they don't even know us . . . like the assumption is too quick . . . going through that room [with the touchscreens] . . . I feel like humans are not books, you can't just see, like you can't just add up one and one is two, it's not like that. You shouldn't define people just by the way they look.
>
> *(Walton* et al. *2016: 43)*

Another central exhibition element is an immersive interactive experience which enables visitors to witness an act of everyday prejudice on a Melbourne tram. Visitors can then choose to review the scene through the eyes of the victim, the perpetrator and two bystanders in order to hear their inner thoughts, provoking visitors to reflect on their own place in this narrative and what they might say or do in a similar situation. This immersive experience has proven a powerful provocation for students, with one reflecting:

> You know about racism and stuff before you went to [the exhibition] but then . . . especially with the [tram simulation] . . . I watched all of them [different perspectives] and I'm like okay, you could see . . . everyone's opinion and what they

were thinking or how they were feeling. So it was . . . like you go deeper into the situation. So instead of just seeing . . .

<div align="right">(Walton et al. 2016: 112)</div>

Crucial to engaging with visitors in *Identity* is the pedagogy of 'affect' or feeling. Visitors are invited to consider issues of belonging, prejudice, diversity and difference not just through reading, seeing and listening but through feeling. The ARC report found that the *Identity* exhibition, by providing an affective interactive approach to engaging with racism and experiences of identity and belonging, was able to engender a more reflective and deeper understanding of these issues. While knowledge acquisition is important, it is not enough to simply *learn about* racial, ethnic and cultural diversity and acknowledge that 'we are all different.' The study found that the creation of opportunities for students to make personal connections served to disrupt these public policy narratives of multiculturalism by helping students to think more deeply about what experiences of belonging and not belonging actually mean and what they feel like. In her analysis of the *Identity* exhibition and the role of 'affect', Andrea Witcomb observes that such deep engagement opportunities for visitors result in 'a deeply affective, sensorial form of experience which is palpable while also belonging to the poetic rather than the realist or positivist realm' (2013: 267).

The multi-modal experiences used in the *Identity* exhibition facilitated this more reflexive and empathetic understanding of racism and diversity that simply reading about these contemporary issues could not evoke. By understanding the importance of the embodied experience in museums and the critical role of affective learning, museums can stimulate visitors' ethical and political imaginations and make tangible alterations to their attitudes and behaviours.

First Peoples: community experts and cultural authority

More and more people are supporting Aboriginal culture rather than erasing it . . . It's not about me as an individual, it's not about my family or brothers and sisters or cousins, it's about the next five generations. They're the ones who will be coming in looking at these objects and might say, wow, our great-great-grandparents did this. We're doing stuff that 30 or 40 years ago wasn't even envisaged.

<div align="right">(Len Tregonning cited in Museums Victoria 2013)</div>

In 2000 Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre at Melbourne Museum opened, a dynamic space celebrating the living Aboriginal culture of Victoria and the South East. In 2009 the redevelopment of this space was initiated as a response to the Koorie (Aboriginal people of Victoria and lower New South Wales) community's call for an exhibition where the diversity of identity and culture would be properly explored; where the multifaceted temporalities and narratives of Ancestral belongings (or artefacts as commonly referred to) would be not just defined by their past but awakened by continuing living history and cultural connections; and a space where knowledge of community would be positioned as the expert and celebrated.

In 2013, the redeveloped space, *First Peoples*, opened at Bunjilaka, an exhibition which shares the history and living culture of the Victorian Koorie community and highlights the diversity of First Peoples culture across Australia. *First Peoples* completely re-shaped exhibition development for Museums Victoria and had impact across the sector, creating deeper collaborative and meaningful relationships with the Victorian Koorie community, and shifting methodologies with a focus on a Koorie-led and de-colonial curatorial approach to development. This revised way of working shifted the emphasis away from the authoritative museum voice to the facilitation of a space where community voices came to the fore. The Victorian Koorie community and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities share culture through their expert knowledge systems alongside the Ancestral belongings held in Museums Victoria collections.

Having Koorie people to advocate for and work on the redevelopment project was vital to its success; this success not only defined by an increase in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities visiting the museum and larger visitation overall, but national and international museum exhibition awards. The relationship between museums and First Peoples of Australia has not always been one of trust, with the history of the collecting of cultural material and ancestral remains resulting in an 'othering' through the Western lens which has severely oppressed the community. The paternalistic approach to the representation and management of First Peoples culture has slowly been changing and continues to shift; however, without First Peoples in the museum and in exhibition development roles, this self-determination within institutions cannot be achieved.

There were many change agents on the project and the Victorian Koorie Community was its central nucleus. The direct action from the beginning and throughout the project was led by Boon Wurrung Traditional Owner and Bunjilaka Manager (2003–2015), Caroline Martin. A team of contracted Koorie and non-Koorie curators and researchers, led by Worimi woman Genevieve Grieves alongside senior curators Amanda Reynolds and Rosemary Wrench, worked together to share their knowledge and experience, thereby facilitating a space where previous Western systems of presenting First Peoples culture could be re-shaped through a new framework of community expert knowledge and voice.

The framework of continuity, connection and diversity is woven through the four sections of *First Peoples* exhibition highlighting the living Aboriginal culture of Victoria (south-eastern Australia). The welcome area of the exhibition, *Wominjeka*, invites visitors to the thirty eight different nations of Victoria. In *Generations* visitors can listen to people from across Victoria share stories through video and photography. In *Many Nations* the diverse cultures of Australia are spectacularly displayed, accompanied for the first time by digital labels connecting each of the nearly 500 items with the people that made and used them. *Our Story* chronicles the histories and cultures of Victoria's First Peoples, from Creation to the present day, before and after the arrival of Europeans.

Crucially, the expertise used to shape the exhibition emerged from the *First Peoples* Yulendj (knowledge) Group that was formed to guide its development over a two-year period and form a deep connection between the museum and its communities. For the museum, this constituted a process of co-curation that went far beyond consultation. Facilitated by Gunditjmara Keerray Woorroong artist, Vicki Couzens, Yulendj had 16 respected community members and Elders from across Victoria who are cultural authorities and generously shared their knowledge and continue to be important associates of Museums Victoria.

The cross-disciplinary collaboration with Yulendj provided space for alternative voices, knowledges and for cultural ways of being to be expressed freely. It established a reciprocal relationship of exchange between museum and community. Maori First Nations scholar, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, in discussing this significance of Indigenous approaches in the institution states:

> Coming to know the past has been part of the critical pedagogy of decolonisation. To hold alternative histories is to hold alternative knowledges. The pedagogical implication of this access to alternative knowledges is that they can form the basis of alternative ways of doing things.
>
> *(Tuhiwai Smith 1999: 37)*

Museums are as much about the past as they are the future. The legacy of the non-Indigenous hegemony that has dominated the space in the decision-making of the representation of First Peoples culture is still present. Because of this, respecting and working with First Peoples' knowledge systems and First Peoples' curatorial vision is seen as a form of activism within the museum. In the future this collaborative and integrated approach to knowledge creation will no longer be theorised and debated within the context of activism but as something that simply cannot be missing from any Australian cultural or arts space, particularly any institution that holds the responsibility of our Ancestral belongings and stories. First Peoples' culture and autonomy should be integral to everything museums and the arts do.

A de-colonial curatorial approach creates the foundations for an Indigenised museum space and the 'alternative ways of doing things' (ibid.) is central to the critical thinking on what de-colonisation means when working within the institution. Métis artist and academic David Garneau observes:

> De-colonial theory may make sense in places that have actually shed their colonisers but in New Zealand, Australia, Canada and the USA what is done in the name of de-colonisation and reconciliation is not premised on the restoration of native land or sovereignty, these words and activities are smokescreens concealing the machinery of assimilation. Reconciliation is an effort to make settlers more comfortable with their inherited crimes and privileges.
>
> *(Garneau 2016)*

The *First Peoples* exhibition at Bunjilaka is an example of a response to the call by Yamatji curator, Stephan Gilchrist, for institutional spaces created 'for indigenous people and not only of indigenous people' (Gilchrist 2014: 55). This was realised by the advocacy of Aboriginal people within the organisation and with the expertise of the Yulendj group creating a space by Koorie people and community working alongside non-Indigenous peers. This mode of exhibition development is making space for the real experts of Indigenous culture, law and history—the First Peoples of Australia—to enable the rest of the world to connect, listen and learn on First Peoples' own terms.

Talking Difference: from facilitator to observer

Our final example, *Talking Difference*, is a project which operates primarily beyond the museum walls. Developed and facilitated by the museum, the project then gained a life of its own out in the communities beyond. Change occurs through self-reflection and experience-sharing and creates a ripple effect that has ongoing impacts beyond the museum's influence and authority. The museum must be emboldened to set a change mechanism in motion and then let it go.

Museums that are good at listening, collaborating, empowering and creating achieve results that are long lasting and provide a means to significant societal change. A commitment to genuine engagement, if done well, can shift the museum to a place less visible. This is not to diminish the role of the museum in change-making, but rather to shift it from a place of *guidance* to one of *observation*. In this way, museum projects can continue to thrive within the community. This supports the principle of community owning the work or practice and this 'owning' can be the difference between real change and notional change, success or failure.

Talking Difference is a multifaceted, multimedia project that utilises technology to facilitate virtual conversations about racism, discrimination, social inclusion, social exclusion, health, diversity, culture and multiculturalism (Plate 12). The project commenced in 2009 and is now a self-sustained program within Museums Victoria's Education and Community Program Department (Immigration Museum 2010). State Government funding from VicHealth was received in 2009 and then again in 2012 ensuring the long term expansion of the project both within communities and in schools. The project encourages conversations about similar issues that are addressed in the Immigration Museum's *Identity: yours, mine, ours* exhibition which challenges issues of racism and discrimination.

The portable studio, the centre piece of the program, began touring both metropolitan and regional Victoria in 2010. The early tours partnered with the library networks which proved to be reflective of the broader community and thus a perfect environment for the studio interactive. The broad demographic using the space meant that a large cross-section of opinions were canvassed. This, in turn, produced a constructive virtual dialogue amongst participants. This trend continued throughout subsequent tours both in the city and regional centres. To the question, 'Have you ever been racist towards. . .?', one participant responded:

> Yes. Lots of times. I remember standing outside a pub in Wodonga and my friends started jeering at the man who owned the Chinese restaurant. I asked my boyfriend later why he did it and he said that 'they come here and they get a car and a house and the dole.' I was angry but did nothing at the time. I still remember how the guy looked, and I feel bad. By the way, this was 30 years ago! People still say the same things now and it's still not true.
>
> *(Janie, female, aged 49)*

Adaptability within a structured environment, in this case the studio, allowed for ongoing evolution of project objectives. Embedding this flexibility into the project from inception created a space that could be owned not only by those who contributed to its development but by all who participated in the ongoing conversation. This notion of content development

ownership and community-facilitated virtual conversation about racism, social inclusion and diversity, underpinned the success of the project and its ability to become a tool for activism at a local or grassroots level.

The Museum's commitment to its charter of reflecting the community in which it serves, allowed for a new way of thinking about public programming and its potential for social change across society. A deliberate cross-pollination of conversations collected throughout residencies, using the studio as the interface, allowed for a refinement of ideas and themes. An interrogation of data and content provided the next iteration and direction for discussions and sometimes debate. These themes and discussions emerged whilst maintaining the foundation premise of promoting diversity and challenging racism using art-based practice and methodology. As this continued to occur throughout residencies, the Museum slowly became less of a facilitator and more of an observer.

Moving from facilitator to observer makes overt the question of ownership. Museums Victoria as a public organisation is charged with providing access to not only collections, objects and research but experiences that challenge, teach, delight and endure. Its physical spaces are manipulated to accommodate this paradigm. Beyond the museum walls, outreach programs provide an opportunity for those unable to visit, to engage with its collections and resources.

This type of engagement relies heavily on the Museum's reputation for providing authentic, reliable and trusted experiences beyond its traditional spaces. As part of a globalised society, museums are challenged to continue to remain relevant and current. Access to museum spaces and experiences is no longer enough, with people looking to cultural organisations to provide answers to questions of social significance. Entering a space of multi-modal media provides a new mechanism for engagement, one that is owned more by the participant than the facilitator. This community ownership allows for a type of activism organically formed rather than organised and planned.

The experience, as it moves from owner to owner, begins to take on new elements. What emerge are threads or strands pointing to multiple journeys, experiences, opinions and perceptions. Participants actively engaging in a conversation created and fed by other members of their community, begin to look for an extended experience. This is visible through the use of social media with online platforms continuing the conversation beyond the studio experience. It is at this point that the Museum fades into the shadows completely. Although there is a sense that something of significance has transpired, identifying how and when this has occurred or exposing the nature of the extended dialogue becomes challenging.

The studio content provides a base from which participants can explore issues of social significance as it is seen and experienced, through dialogues which are personal (individuals engaging through social media) or collective (through libraries, schools and community hubs). This iterative program is an example of how moving beyond the museum's influence and authority into a community-driven space, that evolves and responds to changes as it occurs, can have sustained success.

Conclusions

These four projects have examined a variety of change scenarios through community participation in our museum. *Identity: yours, mine, ours* facilitates attitudinal change amongst

visitors which occurs within the Museum's physical environment, whereby the museum has an explicit, visible presence and ongoing activist role. *Talking Difference* enables community conversations beyond the museum walls with a program developed and facilitated by the Museum which then gains a life of its own out in communities. *The Invisible Farmer* is provoking change within families, communities and the nation—as well as the museum itself—whereby engagement, documentation and facilitation starts with a call for deeply personal identity transformations. *First Peoples* has demanded change via a revolutionary project methodology that required the Museum to be open to change from within. Here the community is activist and it is the museum that is changed through listening, engagement and genuine reciprocity.

These projects all represent a call to action by the museum and the community. Community engagement and affective learning experiences need to imbue all layers of the museum's operations and these projects are examples of how activist practices can be achieved through a sustained process of deep listening. Change is an ongoing process and the challenge is to embed these engagement principles and practices into everything we do. For Museums Victoria, this remains an ongoing challenge to be constantly worked at, in order for these engagement practices to become not exceptional, but everyday.

One approach we have developed is the creation of an internal Museums Victoria Community Engagement Reference Committee, which brings together people from across the organisation to deliver change and charge the Museum with its ongoing commitment to be responsive, meaningful and relevant. The committee has developed a community engagement handbook for staff and external agencies, worked with the Human Resources department to develop a training module for museum staff and captured and disseminated innovative case studies.

Social change agendas take institutional courage, an acknowledgement that museums can both lead and respond to contemporary issues and public debate. Our experience shows that this sometimes requires a recognition of the expertise within museums, to understand the complexities of social issues, pursue nuanced interpretations and develop the appropriate responsive programming in collaboration with communities. At other times, we have found that the museum needs to step back, and empower communities to identify and give voice and space to issues of public import.

Measuring the short and long-term impact on communities of what museums create and co-create is critical to developing a body of evidence which demonstrates to the public and private sectors the tangible effect of socially engaged projects. This requires longitudinal observation and a willingness to invest and place trust in community engagement methodologies which might appear to have no immediate, tangible rewards for the museum. The venues receiving outreach programs can be enlisted to undertake audience research, to share the responsibility for demonstrating social impact, thereby broadening the stakeholder pool.

This long-term investment is critical to genuine community engagement practice. It is not just about creating community relationships but maintaining them; it is not just about installing a permanent exhibition but continuing to evolve the content and respond to current changing issues and ideas. It means acknowledging that process can be as important as outcome and that co-creation and engagement methodologies inevitably lead to more powerful, transformative outcomes for both participants and the museum. Projects such as those featured here demonstrate the value, for community and the museum itself, in embracing change—both within the museum and without. The enormous potential is

there, to act as both leader and responder to social issues. The call to action, certainly for our museum, is to be brave, invest in long-term community relationships and engagement practices, and embed them in all our activities.

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23

QUIET IS THE NEW LOUD?

On activism, museums and changing the world

Åshild Andrea Brekke

'Activism', the Oxford Dictionary explains, is 'the policy or action of using vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change.'[1] The word brings to mind protest marches, distribution of leaflets, sit-ins and even hunger strikes. It is not, however, mentioned in the same breath as museums, vigorous or otherwise. Yet museums, being institutions which are very much part of the fabric of society, are in a position of non-neutrality, and consequently, in a position of power. The very nature of their work, selecting which objects to collect and whose memories to preserve—or not, deciding whose stories will be told—or not, and not least, defining which voices are worthy of being heard in the great human choir of history speaks of a great deal of power, albeit never explicitly. It is therefore not unreasonable to expect museums to be held morally accountable as institutions: with great power comes great responsibility (Hein 2011: 118; see also Jimerson 2009: 219–20).

Even so, many museums seem to operate on the assumption that they are neutral and objective and, consequently, unable or unwilling to risk their professional integrity by becoming socially engaged (Brekke 2018; see also Janes 1995). Moreover, objectivity and neutrality are often mistakenly conflated as synonyms,[2] which tends to cloud the issue even more. Making the case for museums as active societal agents, Richard Sandell argues that museums *must* consider and accept their own position of non-neutrality: there is no such thing as a neutral position. As part of society, museums are 'undeniably implicated in the dynamics of (in)equality and the power relations between different groups through their role in constructing and disseminating dominant social narratives' (Sandell 2002: 8; see also Douglas 1987; Janes 2009, 2015; Jimerson 2009; Hein 2011; Sandell 2017). Although the entire complexity of the objectivity/neutrality issue lies beyond the scope of this article, I would nonetheless argue that it is possible for museums to engage in advocacy and activism on social issues without compromising professional standards of transparency, fairness, impartiality and integrity. I would further argue that museum activism that is undertaken with relative quietness; that is less vigorous and outspoken than other forms of action, can nevertheless be tremendously powerful.[3]

'We are not social workers' is a common response from museums whenever challenged about their role in society. Although the majority of Norwegian museums currently see

themselves as traditional keepers and collectors of objects, there are some noteworthy exceptions to the rule—museums which seem to have succeeded in embracing and sustaining a socially engaged practice.

The Ryfylke Museum is one relevant example of non-traditional, courageous and quietly activist museum work. Focusing on this particular case, the following discussion explores in some detail factors which have an impact on museum practice in general, and a socially engaged practice in particular. The case builds on my PhD research into museum practice and drivers for organisational change in a Norwegian context, and draws on relevant research from the UK, the US and Canada, ranging from such diverse fields as philosophy, social economics and museum studies.

The Ryfylke Museum

The Ryfylke Museum is a regional museum of cultural history situated on the southwest coast of Norway in a rural area with approximately 30,000 inhabitants, and its collections and buildings are spread across eight municipalities (Plate 13). In 2015, the museum was visited by over 21,000 people. Allowing for this to represent mainly local visitors, it is nonetheless an astonishingly high number of visitors to a museum in a relatively remote location. The museum currently employs around 21 permanent staff, and approximately 33 part-time or seasonal staff throughout the year (The Ryfylke Museum 2015). The Ryfylke Museum is an independent trust, whose trustees are nominated by the municipalities, county authorities, volunteer associations and museum staff. The museum is jointly funded by the Ministry of Culture, the county of Rogaland and several local municipalities, as well as through project funding, gifts and donations, ticket sales and events.

The museum has a long history of engaging actively with their local community, with a particular focus on the inclusion of refugees, migrants, asylum-seekers and other newcomers to the area. Due to its long-term commitment over the years, the museum enjoys an unusually high degree of trust and respect in the community, invaluable assets which it now capitalises on in its project called *Children in the Multicultural Rural District* (henceforth referred to as the *Children* project). The museum has over the past few years noticed a relatively high level of conflict around local cases of child welfare intervention. These conflicts appear to be both a result *of*, and a reason *for*, a distinct lack of trust between immigrants and the local child welfare services. Equipped with their local knowledge and reputation for being trustworthy, the museum is currently conducting a series of in-depth interviews with the different parties concerned to attempt to discover the underlying dynamics of the conflicts. Through the project, the museum aims to better understand conditions for children growing up in a multicultural local community and create conditions for dialogue, advocacy and public debate, and hopefully enabling the community to break the cycle of distrust (Høibo 2017; Opheim 2017).

The first of its kind, the project is breaking new museum ground and will conceivably provide knowledge, insight and experience which will encourage other museums to step up to the plate and become more socially engaged. Nonetheless, despite it being a courageous undertaking potentially fraught with a range of practical and ethical pitfalls and challenges, the Ryfylke Museum is willing to put to the test their trust capital accumulated over the years. How then has this museum arrived at building such a solid

and consistent platform for engaging actively with their communities? Research suggests that how a museum goes about its business mostly comes down to two things: the *idea* the museum has of itself, i.e. what it *is* and, more importantly, what it could and should be, and *the way it organises itself* around this idea (Brekke 2018; see also Ginsburgh and Mairesse 1997; Fleming 2012). The following discussion will examine some of the ideological and organisational factors that seem crucial to the development of a socially engaged museum practice.

The idea: the museum as a common ground

The Ryfylke Museum website states its vision to be 'an inclusive meeting place for knowledge and experiences' and its mission to offer knowledge and experience, as well as 'contribute to a constructive and progressive development of this local rural region of Ryfylke'.[4] Interestingly, the statement differs from most other museum mission statements (Brekke 2018) in that it signals an *active engagement* with its community instead of focusing primarily on what it has to offer: the museum clearly sees itself as a part of the local community. This is further emphasised in its strategic documents: for the museum, being an inclusive meeting place and dialogue institution in the local community is deemed to be as important as the more traditional role of being keepers of collective memory and stewards of collections (The Ryfylke Museum 2015).

Furthermore, the strategy and governance documents of the museum appear to be grounded in its organisational practice. When asked about his view on the societal role of museums, former director Roy Høibo describes how his personal friendship with a museum director from Northern Ireland led him to discover how a museum could become a 'common ground' for creating and maintaining dialogue across religious, cultural and political divides. He realised that his own museum could be used in the same way when the local community in Ryfylke experienced a massive influx of refugees from the Balkan war in the 1990s. Being a firm believer in the museum as a powerful dialogue institution, Høibo (2017) explains that this means the museum needs to actively engage with the world around it:

> We [the museum] are a part of society, and must in a way make ourselves available. We cannot be one of those distant fortresses that refuses to engage. We have to make ourselves known if we are to expect others to make themselves known to us.

In the years that followed the Balkan refugee situation, the museum steadily developed and strengthened their role as a local common ground, notably through their International Café (Plate 14) where locals and newcomers to the village would meet regularly at the museum for a bite to eat, a chat, or a topical presentation or lecture. As Høibo (2017) notes, 'one of our strengths is that we know our local community really well, which means that we have the background knowledge which is necessary for us to understand what we are doing'. Hence, there appears to be congruence between the former director's view of what role a museum should and could play in society, and the strategy documents on which the museum's organisation is based—a view and a practice which is currently shared and continued by the present director. How then has this idea been converted into practice?

The organisation: the museum as a place for passion and activist practice

One interesting organisational element which tallies directly with Ryfylke Museum's vision as an inclusive place concerns recruitment. In their strategic plans and annual reports to the Ministry of Culture, the museum states that one of four main goals for their work is diversity. Their staff profiles, both permanent and seasonal, reflect their commitment to diversity.

Moreover, the museum appears to attract museum professionals who are interested in activist practice. The project coordinator for the ongoing *Children* project, curator Anette Opheim (2017), recalls how she found the Ryfylke Museum a particularly attractive place to work when she first decided to apply for a job there in 2012:

> I'd noticed that the museum did active diversity and inclusion work, and that was one of the main reasons I wanted to work here. I remember seeing their work with the International Café described on their website, and me thinking 'wow, what kind of museum in a small village does that sort of thing?'. It was brilliant.

A historian by trade with a professed interest in marginalised and vulnerable groups, Opheim was also engaged in activist work outside her job and hence found that the organisational culture and structure at the Ryfylke Museum enabled her to align her professional and personal motivation and values. This seems consistent with previous research as well as with findings in my own research. For a museum to succeed in embracing a socially engaged practice over time, there needs to be congruence between the institution's motivations and values and those of the individual museum professional, as well as an organisational culture and structure conducive to such an alignment (Brekke 2018; see also Sandell 2002; Janes 2009; Lynch 2011; Fleming 2012; see also Janes 2016 on the concept of personal agency in museums). Indeed, as most people who come into museum work do so not for reasons of salary or status, but because they are deeply passionate about their subject (Kavanagh 1994: 8), it is tempting to see this passion as a potential resource that can be harnessed and developed to make museums more relevant and important to their local communities. Passionate staff members make for passionate museums. As Opheim put it, 'it is exactly this [activist] attitude which makes [the Ryfylke Museum] an attractive place to work!' (2017).

Trust, risk and the value of naïvety

Furthermore, there needs to be an organisational culture enabling the individual to develop and experiment with activist practice: there needs to be room for failure. In the case of the Ryfylke Museum, this courage to fail seems to be embedded in the organisational culture, based on a willingness to reach out and make yourself known, and risking revealing your ignorance. As the former director notes:

> I think you need to be a little bit naïve. There is so much we don't know! And even though we've been doing this kind of work for a long time, there is still so very much we don't know. But I think that if you're honest and decent and admit to your own ignorance, you'll be ok.
>
> *(Høibo 2017)*

He goes on to explain that when working on one of the exhibitions about being a refugee with the newcomers from the Balkans in the 90's, the museum spent many hours just listening to the refugees' stories: 'they wanted to explain what it was like and when we took the time to listen, we spent a great many evenings just listening'.

Moreover, the fact that Høibo took the trouble to visit Bosnia in 1998 also weighed heavily with the refugees when it came down to trusting the museum. Their subsequent feedback revealed that they perceived the museum's commitment as serious and real. In one sense, one may say that the notions of 'risk' and 'trust' are tightly interwoven. As Svendsen and Svendsen (2016: 17) note:

> When we trust it is always at the risk of an economic, social or emotional cost; however, we hope that the other person will live up to our trust and are therefore inclined to give the other person 'credit' in the broadest sense of the word (from Latin *credere*, to trust).

When asked to reflect on the notion of risk, Høibo explains his view that 'if the museum is to have a meaningful role, we need to engage with the processes that happen on the ground. And see if we can document and explain and interpret...' (2017). According to Opheim, being aware of potential risks and still having the courage to fail has been fundamental in the design of the ongoing *Children* project, a project which to all intents and purposes requires a solid trust capital from the outset and will depend on maintaining a delicate balance throughout.

Hence the Ryfylke Museum's attitude to museum practice appears to be grounded in a willingness to take the risk necessary to gain trust, without necessarily controlling either the process or the outcome. This is reminiscent of what Lynch and Alberti call 'radical trust':

> In practising radical trust, the museum may control neither the product nor the process. The former—if there is one—will be genuinely co-produced, representing the shared authority of a new story that may then have a knock-on effect in the rest of the museum. *But the process itself is the key issue*, and it may not be outcome oriented at all. Consensus is not the aim; rather, projects may generate 'dissensus'—multiple and contested perspectives that invite participants and visitors into further dialogue.
>
> *(2010: 15, emphasis added)*

The art of building trust: a cost-benefit venture

The Ryfylke Museum's trust-building practice is arguably underpinned by two different perceptions of risk. The first concerns the museum's recognition of itself as part of a larger historical and societal context, with the power and responsibility which ensue. Being an institution wielding power to exclude implies that it also has the power to include. Unwilling to risk being an exclusive social agent, the Ryfylke Museum has actively chosen the latter position:

> The national, national romantic or rural romantic ideas[5] that have underpinned the establishment and development of museums can easily lead to the cultivation of static conceptions about our own rural districts and our nation, which create a distance to

others and exclude them from the community. On the other hand, if we are able to see museums as participants in a process where collections, knowledge and capabilities should serve to develop tolerance and cultural competence, museums can become important contributors to a dynamic development of a rural community with a broader horizon and greater resources for a positive future.

(Høibo 2016: 84)

The second notion of risk which the museum grapples with concerns the more immediate and mundane, but no less challenging, relations to the local community in Ryfylke. When asked about the reactions of the local community regarding the very hands-on museum response to the refugee situation in the 1990s, Høibo (2017) explains that:

It's clear that we live in a community with strong farming traditions . . . and views on what a museum ought to be is of course strongly influenced by these open-air farm hamlets which constitute the basis for the museum collection. So obviously some thought what we were doing as a museum was distinctly odd and didn't understand. So we have probably lost some, but we've also gained a lot of new friends, so on balance, I'd say we're on the plus side.

Clearly, the Ryfylke Museum's socially engaged museum practice is built on many years of consistent risk-taking and trust building with the local community. It is precisely this local trust capital the museum now draws on in their work on the *Children* project. The project stems from the museum's desire to make a positive contribution towards resolving the current conflict between immigrants and the local child welfare authorities. Positioned in the heart of a small community and armed with its trust capital and a profound and personal knowledge of local conditions, the museum endeavours to build bridges and create a common ground for dialogue and mutual understanding and respect across cultural divides and contested issues. In short, the museum is putting its vision into practice.

By interviewing the various stakeholders about the issue of children's welfare and their upbringing, the museum hopes to gain insight into, and documentation of different notions of childhood. The underlying reasoning is that such knowledge of culturally specific views of children may foster a greater understanding of the contested issues which, in turn, may pave the way for building trust and facilitate future dialogue between the local government and immigrants. If all goes according to plan, the project will result in a comprehensive report, a series of dialogue meetings and potentially an exhibition at the museum. The project coordinator is aware of the delicate balancing act such an undertaking requires of the museum. She describes the rationale, risk and ethical dilemmas involved thus:

I am of the opinion that if a university could have carried out this project, then so can we. But the reason many do not dare, I think, is that we are so very close to our fellow village inhabitants. Whereas a university can do research in a small village and subsequently leave, returning to their university and then only researchers will read the report, we are much closer to the people in question, and permanently so.

(Opheim 2017)

For Opheim, the greatest risk in this particular project is not potentially losing the reputation of the museum, rather it is losing the trust of the immigrants which would, as both she and Høibo stress, 'be utterly tragic'. Moreover, the museum is aware of the risk of becoming an element of exclusion instead of contributing to the positive development and improvement of a difficult conflict in the local community. It is a balancing act which Høibo admits is not easy, and he sees the need for spending time on developing relations of trust before expecting results from the practical fieldwork. He fully acknowledges the potential risk of failure, all the while believing that the trust capital already accumulated by the museum makes them better qualified than many others to undertake a project such as the *Children* project (Høibo 2016: 85).

Yet, despite the potential risks, challenges and pitfalls connected to this local conflict, the museum is committed to carrying out the project, thus continuing their long-standing social engagement. As Høibo notes, it is not about taking sides, it is about gaining insight and knowledge to be able to create conditions for dialogue: 'how else can we hope to understand if we are not present and engaged?' (2017). Hence, risk-taking is pitched as a self-evident and necessary component of Ryfylke Museum's general practice, which in turn strengthens their position as a relevant institution to the public. As Nightingale and Mahal (2012: 36) point out:

> A museum or gallery that is responsive, creative and not afraid of risk-taking; that listens to those at the margins to determine priorities; enlists support and reviews where it is going, is one which is moving towards becoming a more diverse, inclusive and equitable museum.

Museums as social trust-builders: a greater value in a larger context

I would argue that the Ryfylke Museum has succeeded in aligning personal motivations and ethos with organisational culture and institutional practice over time, thus building a solid foundation for amplifying their impact based on professional integrity and ethical awareness. The museum is punching above its weight, making itself relevant to a much more diverse group of people than those primarily interested in local agrarian history.

Local impact aside, however, I would further argue that the Ryfylke Museum's localised practice and impact can be viewed in a much wider context. International research has shown that *social trust*, i.e. 'trust in strangers you have never met before' (Svendsen 2014: 13) appears to play a significant role in maintaining well-balanced, peaceful and economically healthy societies. Measuring social trust as 'the percentage of the population that answers yes when asked whether they think you can trust most other people', it turns out that Scandinavian countries consistently score in the high end of the scale. This, in turn, reflects that the risk of being cheated is seen as small—a fact which Svendsen argues encourages informal cooperation (Svendsen 2014: 17–8). In other words, trust is cheap and effective.

With the contested issues of the Ryfylke Museum in mind, it is reasonable to assume that there may be an inherent conflict between the potentially low level of social trust people carry with them from their home countries, and the exceptionally high level found in the Scandinavian countries. Most Norwegians, for example, trust government services, such as Child Welfare, implicitly. Even so, research shows that high levels of social trust are not permanent, and that maintaining social trust at levels which are consistently beneficial to society requires sustained efforts at both government level and at the level of civil society

(Svendsen 2014). Consequently, civil society institutions in general, and museums in particular can arguably contribute to increasing and maintaining a healthy level of social trust by providing safe spaces for dialogue and dissensus (Svendsen and Svendsen 2016; see also Janes and Conaty 2005; Lynch and Alberti 2010).

Concluding remarks: trust-building as activism

As the preceding paragraphs have shown, there are several factors at play which influence a museum's practice. The case of the Ryfylke Museum identifies three main factors within institutions which inform their professional practice in the longer term (see also Brekke 2018):

- The personal values/ethos of the individual museum professional
- The museum's perception of its societal role
- The organisational values/ethos, structure and culture

In the case of the Ryfylke Museum, there is, and has been for a number of years, a clear alignment between these three factors. Both the former and the present director believe in the museum as an actively engaged member of the local community and have organised their museum practice accordingly. As retired director Høibo noted when asked why the museum is actively and consistently engaged in the inclusion of refugees and immigrants arriving in the village:

> In an attempt to define our societal role we have thought that *this is a challenge which concerns us*, and that the role we have developed through almost 20 years can be a foundation on which to build.
>
> *(2016: 85, emphasis added)*

This brings the discussion to the point where *ideology* and *organisation* intersect. As can be seen through the prism of the Ryfylke Museum, being a socially engaged museum is not only contingent on factors which shape its organisational culture, structure and practice. It is also dependent on how the different agents and stakeholders perceive the role of the institution itself, and whether it can, and should, function as an arena for taking active social responsibility and engaging with society. Or, whether its societal value and role are primarily limited to collection and care of objects on behalf of society. In the case of Ryfylke Museum these two elements are currently aligned: firstly, the idea that the museum can and should make a difference and secondly, the organisational make-up which fosters a scope and culture for activism and social engagement. In other words, the Ryfylke Museum has succeeded in creating organisational resonance around the idea of the museum's responsibility for taking on an active societal role, thus creating an amplification which enables sustained and embedded practice.

　　I would argue that museum activism comes in many forms, some of which appear to be less vigorous and vociferous than others. Even the more soft-spoken forms of activism, however, require courage, grit and integrity and can be no less effective in the quest to create social change. This case from the Norwegian context is a sterling example of engaged museum professionals quietly changing the world, one museum at a time. Thus quiet can become very loud indeed.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 Definition from Oxford Dictionaries (www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/activism).
2 For a more comprehensive discussion of the issue objectivity vs. neutrality, see Brekke (2018).
3 The title of my chapter borrows from the title of the debut album, *Quiet is the New Loud*, by Norwegian indie pop duo, Kings of Convenience, released on 6 March 2001.
4 From the Ryfylke Museum website (http://ryfylkemuseet.no/en/om/ accessed 25 April 2017).
5 There are three distinct types of ideas which are central to the development and self-image of Norwegian museums: *national* (*nasjonal*), representing museums as part of the nation-building instruments of the fledgling Norwegian nation from its independence in 1814 and onwards; *national romantic* (*nasjonalromantisk*), denoting the intellectual movement of the Norwegian nation-building era around 1850 and onwards, and *rural romantic* (*bonderomantisk*), referring to peasant culture as a major component in the Norwegian national identity.

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24

HERITAGE AND QUEER ACTIVISM

Sean Curran

Just a five-minute walk from Hackney Central Station, East London, on the curve of road where Homerton High Street meets Lower Clapton Road, sits the problem child of the National Trust, the largest conservation charity in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Never did the oldest house in Hackney feel so unwanted by its new guardians than when architectural talent scout and acid-tongued diarist, James Lees-Milne, visited in 1946, eight years after the Trust acquired its awkward charge. He referred to the house as a 'wretched one' that was 'no more important than hundreds of other Georgian houses still left in slum areas' (Lees-Milne 1984: 35). Finding only the carved wooden linenfold panels in a ground floor room to be of any worth, Lees-Milne found the experience 'terribly depressing and longed to hurry away' (ibid.: 35).

Sutton House still manages to divide opinion—to upset as well as delight—some 70 years later. One disgruntled visitor remarked on the online travel review site, TripAdvisor, in 2013:

> If your community centre turned out to be a Tudor building, that would be a delightful surprise. But if the National Trust property you've crossed London to see turns out to be a community centre that happens to be housed in a Tudor building, that's something of a disappointment.

In many ways, while barbed in its intent, the reviewer captures much of the charm of Sutton House. It is, indeed, a Tudor house that is also viewed by many as a centre for the community. This chapter attempts to trace the reasons behind this apparent 'identity crisis' and explores how the history of the house—both distant and recent—has shaped it as both a microcosm of Hackney's history, and as a pioneer for the National Trust in the way that it thinks about its relationship and responsibilities to local, diverse communities. As such, Sutton House has established a framework for collaborating with members of marginalised communities to platform and celebrate alternatives to mainstream historic narratives, providing an antidote to top-down histories usually favoured in institutions like the Trust.

Sutton House's identity crisis is no new thing, as implied by its eclectic nomenclature. It has previously been known as Bryk Place, Ivy House, Picton House and Milward House amongst others. Its most recent change in name happened in 2014, when it became known as Sutton House and Breaker's Yard, following the design and build of a community garden inspired by the former car breaker's yard that occupied the space from the 1970s. Sutton House itself is a misnomer, assigned on the belief that founder of the Charterhouse Hospital and School, Thomas Sutton, had lived here, though later research revealed that he actually lived next door in a since-demolished adjoining house. It seems fitting for such an unusual building to retain a misremembered name.

Built in 1535 by Ralph Sadleir, the modest H-plan Tudor house was notable for the rare use of red brick, a building material more commonly reserved for the likes of Hampton Court Palace, the building of which had begun 20 years previous to Sadleir's Bryk Place. 16th-century Hackney was a quiet, clean-aired village escape from the bustle of the city, favoured by many courtiers and London merchants. Sadleir served Henry VIII as Secretary of State, Privy Councillor and Ambassador to Scotland. He was arrested along with Thomas Cromwell for treason, but was later released and dissociated himself from Cromwell. It was through Cromwell that Sadleir had met his wife Ellen, who served in his household as a laundress.

Sadleir sold the house to wealthy wool merchant, John Machell, in 1550 and a long and chequered line of residents followed over the next 450 years. Court records dating June 1551 included a brewhouse, barns, stables, gardens and a dovecote (Woodward 1994: 80) as part of the large footprint of Bryk Place, which shrank considerably as Hackney evolved from rural retreat to urban sprawl.

In 1895 the two halves of the building, which had been divided into two houses in the mid-18th century, were reunited as one after being purchased by the Church of St John at Hackney. Rechristened as St John's Church Institute, the house served as a recreational club for 'men of all classes.' The East Cellar was converted into a chapel in 1914. In spite of the addition, the Institute remained a largely secular and social space—arguably Sutton House's first foray into being a community space—with a billiard table as centrepiece in the Great Chamber, and rooms on the top floor rented for a low fee to members. The 'Tute,' as it was locally known, moved on in the late 1930s, unable to afford the vital repairs the building needed. The house was acquired by the National Trust with the proceeds from a bequest following a letter of public appeal to *The Times* in December 1936 (Wright 2009: 55).

Not a financial priority for the Trust, the building was home to a number of voluntary organisations during and after the war, and was later leased to a variety of organisations as office space, including latterly the Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staff Trade Union (ASTMS). The grand Linenfold Parlour became the rather ostentatious office of the General Secretary, Clive Jenkins. Throughout the 30 years that Sutton House was leased to the ASTMS, only rudimentary repairs and maintenance were carried out on the building.

1982 was a difficult year for the Old House on the Corner. The new year began with a bang as a stolen car crashed into the front boundary wall, causing considerable damage. The bad luck continued as the ASTMS left Sutton House, leaving it empty to decay and gather dust. After slipping on a moss-covered flagstone local former Church Institute member, Stan Piesse, began an angry correspondence with the National Trust, whom he held responsible for allowing the house to fall into such ill repair. This led to him becoming a useful local contact for the National Trust, and a leading figure head in what became the *Save Sutton House* movement (Figure 24.1).
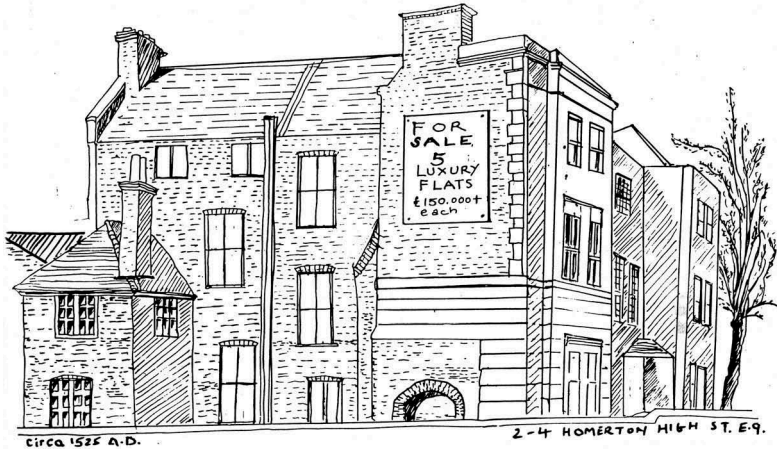
FIGURE 24.1 *Save Sutton House* Campaign poster.
© Save Sutton House Campaign 1987, used with kind permission of Sutton House.

The Blue House

Stan Piesse received a letter from the workers at the adjoining car breaker's yard in 1985, that confirmed what many locals had observed. Squatters had moved in to Sutton House. They announced their arrival, and intentions, with a letter to nearby residents, which read: 'Hello! As you've probably noticed, something is happening at Sutton House—several of us have moved in and are hoping to convert it into a kind of community centre.'

The squatters renamed Sutton House the 'Blue House.' The decor when they arrived was a far cry from the ornately painted wooden panels of the 1500s, instead the walls were painted an institutional green ('post-war emulsion'), with 'functional striplighting' (Wright 2009: 52).

The squatters opened up a café, held gigs in the Wenlock Barn, a large performance space added to the building around the turn of the 20th century, and led arts and crafts workshops from the house. Their aim was to provide a space, particularly for the local unemployed, to learn and develop skills in dressmaking, leatherwork, painting and drawing.

Save Sutton House

Later in the year, the remaining squatters were issued an eviction order by the National Trust. They were given six weeks to vacate the building. The Trust advertised the building in the *Estates Gazette* in 1985. When the eviction notice was served, a spokesperson from the Trust claimed there was already a tenant in mind (Velody 1985).

The tenant was property developer, Martin Village, who outlined proposals to create five luxury maisonette flats. The proposals were received favourably by Hackney Council who, having already explored the idea of turning the house into a museum, decided that taking on the burden themselves was unfeasible and unaffordable (*Hackney Gazette* 1987). Under the proposals, there would be nominal access for the public who, after being granted permission from all of the tenants, would be able to view the few remaining historical spaces. The Trust hoped to encourage a meeting between developers and campaigners to forge a compromise around the issue of limited public access. *Save Sutton House* campaign chair, Mike Gray (1987), voiced concerns in a letter to the *Hackney Gazette* in August of 1987 that such hurdles to access would 'discourage' it all together.

The squatters' attempts to make the house a community space helped to generate debate and raise awareness amongst local people, and kick-start direct community action against the National Trust's proposals. Furious by the lack of public consultation, a group of local volunteers formed the *Save Sutton House* campaign, they held a protest at Hackney Town Hall presenting 1000 signatures against the proposals (*East London Advertiser* 1987) and won backing from local MP, Brian Sedgemore.

The first open day of Sutton House took place on 13 December 1987 and, although advertised only locally, over 900 people turned up for a glance at the interior of the much publicised building (Woodward 1994: 78).

After a three-year battle, and in a manoeuvre no doubt intended to avoid further public embarrassment surrounding the controversial sale, the National Trust finally backed the *Save Sutton House* campaign. The building's future was secured. The first phase of the restoration cost £90,000 and was funded by the National Trust with grants from English Heritage. On 24 September 1989 there was a special open day, including an exhibition about bricks, a demonstration of brick-laying techniques and music hall style entertainment. Entrance was just 50p (*Hackney Gazette* 1989). Architect Richard Griffiths, a recent arrival in the borough, assisted with the campaign, and later drew up plans for a restoration programme. Reaching completion in 1994, the restoration process cost a total of £2.1m. Bereft of its own indigenous collections due to its fragmented ownership and care, the house was filled mostly with reproduction furniture, and much of the house remains intentionally robust

and tactile, with hinged panels in many of the rooms allowing visitors the opportunity to view the original Tudor brick work beneath.

A Strategy and Business Plan report dated June 1989 outlines the intended plans for the house to be a community facility, to be used as a museum, for education, culture and community activities and states that it should be 'high quality, smart, calm, informative, accessible and welcoming' (Prometheus Limited 1989). Sutton House officially opened its doors to the public in 1994, almost 50 years after the Trust acquired it, and has since become a leader in the National Trust for its community engagement, and education work. When the house finally opened, it was for just two days a week and, in an unprecedented approach, was jointly managed by local residents and the National Trust.

Octavia Hill and the National Trust

For many today, the National Trust is synonymous with grand historic country houses and grounds. The National Trust was formally constituted under the Companies Act on 12 January 1895. Originally conceived as a body 'to act as a corporation for the holding of lands of natural beauty and sites and houses of historic interest to be preserved for the nation's use and enjoyment' (Littlejohn 1997: 14), its remit was initially to preserve areas of open spaces, or 'open-air sitting rooms for the poor' (ibid.: 57). In its first ten years, the Trust had only acquired 10 historic buildings: the first of which was Alfriston Clergy House, a 14th-century thatched house in Sussex. The Trust later acquired a small country house in Somerset in 1907, and began restoration work, but it was not until 1920 that they were able to find a tenant willing to complete the restoration. The experience deterred the Trust from acquiring any further houses for many years (ibid.: 57).

Merlin Waterson, former National Trust Regional Director in East Anglia, stated that the Trust was founded due to the 'shared sense of loss' (1997: 260) of founders—Octavia Hill, Robert Hunter and Hardwicke Rawnsley—at having witnessed the disappearance of a number of great historic houses due to the cost of death duties and inheritance taxes. In the early 1900s, many country houses were pulled down. This 'wholesale architectural carnage' (ibid.: 175) saw a coming together of conservatives and radicals, those who saw the country house as a symbol of the past, and of particular cultural values, and those who fought for social change. It soon became clear that, in order for the Trust to support historic houses, both occupied and unoccupied, they needed to take advantage of their potential for generating income. In July 1937 came the beginning of the Country Houses Scheme, which allowed owners to gift or bequeath their homes to the National Trust. This was widely seen as an initiative that was advantageous, both to the families who might otherwise have lost their homes, and to the general public, who would have access to many of these for the first time.

Arguably, the perception today of the National Trust's purpose is, in part, due to the influence of James Lees-Milne, who had been so dismissive of Sutton House in 1946. His unabashed right-wing politics were jarringly at odds with the values of the Trust's founders. Cultural historian Patrick Wright claims Lees-Milne favoured a 'civilised barbarism which values buildings over people' (1987). His influence over the Trust for the near 40 years he worked for them, undoubtedly shaped the impression many have of the institution. His disdain for Sutton House as a building of historic importance would arguably also be at odds

with the founding ethos of the Trust, especially with the values of the Trust's matriarch, Octavia Hill.

In her 1875 book, *Homes of the London Poor* (1883), Octavia Hill contends that the primary concern for the poor is space, and that they have nowhere to go to escape their own deficit of domestic space. While a house is something that is earned, she argues, access to common land to share with neighbours should be a right regardless of income. She also emphasises that such spaces should require little effort to get to, in other words, they should be local, and should require no expense. She also effortlessly challenges some of the more precious approaches to conservation and access. Grass, she noted, should be trodden on, it will grow back.

Between them, perhaps Lees-Milne and Octavia Hill, both key figures in the National Trust, neatly sum up the tensions that so often mould debates around public history. Is the purpose of preservation to douse in formaldehyde a privileged and nostalgic projection of national identity? Or to save beautiful and interesting places for all to enjoy? What is the priority? Buildings and things, or people?

While Hill's primary concern was with green spaces, it is hard to think of another property in the Trust's plump portfolio of buildings that more thoroughly embodies her values than Sutton House.

Working with the community

Two recent initiatives undertaken by staff at the house have shown how successful collaboration with the local community can be, and how enriching more unconventional modes of interpreting the past can be.

A game-changing moment for Sutton House was the Breaker's Yard project, managed by current House and Gardens Manager, Christopher Cleeve. The car breaker's yard on the adjoining land to the west of the house was still functional until the turn of the millennium. The Trust did not acquire the land until the mid-2000s, and work began in 2011 to transform a contaminated plot of land into a community garden.

The funding of £283,000, which came from a variety of community and parkland awards and National Trust supporters, was won due to the six weeks of consultation with some of Sutton House's established community groups, family learning volunteers, visitors and local schools. Landscape garden designer, Daniel Lobb, won the design competition with his contemporary take on a car breaker's yard and transformed the plot into an interactive and playful space. Kids can play in a sand pit peppered with giant tyres, an old Routemaster bus has become a greenhouse, toy cars are bolted to the rusting gate that looks out onto Homerton High Street. The centrepiece is a double-decker caravan known as the Grange, with an unexpected interior that is a pastiche of a historic house, with a grand staircase and a chandelier. Launching in August 2014, this collaborative effort, that put the needs of the local community first, went on to win Best Community Garden and Judges' Choice at the 2017 Society of Garden Designers awards, with special commendation for presenting a garden that was not only beautiful and functional, but also *peopled*.

A further recent initiative that reflects the unique spirit and community-focused ethos of Sutton House was a project that marked the 30th anniversary of the squatters living in Sutton House. In 2015, a project led by Assistant Custodian Lauren Sweeney, saw the transformation of a second floor room previously used as an exhibition space, into a

recreated squatter's bedroom. When architect Richard Griffiths was planning the restoration, he petitioned the Trust to preserve much of the graffiti that the squatters had produced to adorn some of the walls of the house. The Trust agreed to the preservation of just a handful of examples, and only one that remained in situ. The south wall of the exhibition room features a giant eye on a red background, inspired by punk album art.

The eye now watches over a meticulously recreated room, featuring a bare mattress on wooden pallets, 1980s ephemera and objects donated by the original squatters, and recreated protest banners demanding 'homes for all!' The room was designed in collaboration with Philly Noon, Frankie Legere, Roxanne Stephens and Chas, a former squatter and member of the anarcho-punk band Flowers in the Dustbin. Like the Breaker's Yard project, established community groups contributed to the reimagining of the room. The Recycled Teenagers, who are Sutton House's over 55 community group, made their own punk gig posters which were added to the mural on the west wall of the room.

At the launch event in November, a reunion gig was held, featuring Flowers in the Dustbin, said to be the first band to have played at the Blue House. The event was attended by many of the original squatters, who were reportedly moved to tears by their inclusion as an important part of Sutton House's history. The room was seen to be an authentic reflection of their time there (although they complained there were no bed bugs in the mattress), and the whole project cost just £150. The Squatter's Bedroom is now one of the most popular, and commented-upon rooms in the house.

Flying the flag for LGBTQ communities

My own involvement with Sutton House began in a voluntary capacity. It resulted in the first LGBT History Month exhibition to take place in any National Trust property. My work was an attempt to bring alternative narratives to the forefront and an experiment in using crowd-sourced community curation as a form of activism to correct the failings I perceive many heritage institutions to have been guilty of towards my community. The first exhibition I developed, *126*, which opened in February 2015, was inspired by the way I had felt when visiting National Trust houses where LGBTQ identities were hidden, overlooked, or erased (Figure 24.2). My goal was to make clear that ambiguities around sexuality and gender have always existed and to open up possibilities for people to encounter and celebrate queer heritage in an institution, regarded by many to be a touchstone of national identity.

To create *126*, I invited LGBTQ people to record themselves reading one of Shakespeare's Fair Youth sonnets, which are widely accepted to have been written to a man, and to film a short video 'selfie' to accompany it. I edited the resulting films and sonnet readings into a single half hour film, which played on loop in the chapel in the basement of the east wing of Sutton House.

In retrospect, the exhibition was ambitious in a number of ways; in its attempt to broaden Sutton House's community; to invite excluded voices in and give autonomy to contributors to be seen as they chose to be seen; and in its exploration of the idea of crowdsourced, participatory curation as a form of activism to counter silences in heritage narratives.
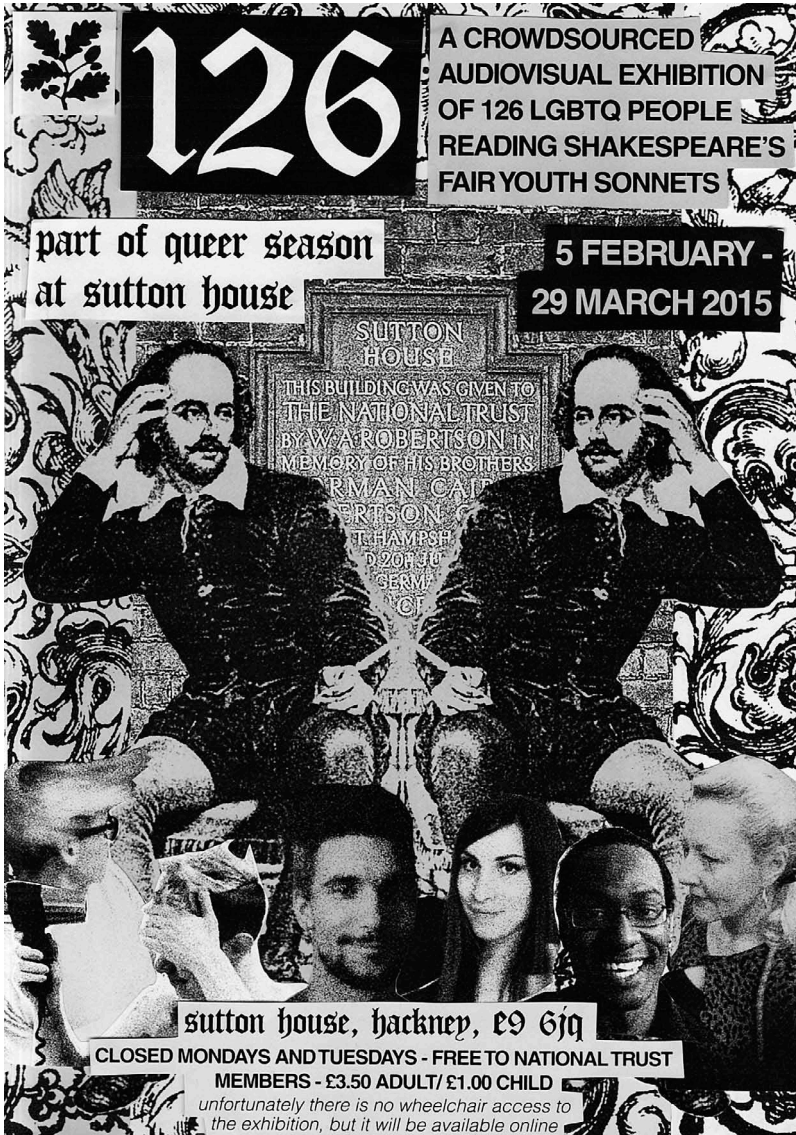
FIGURE 24.2 Poster for *126*.
Image courtesy of Sutton House.

   I recruited the participants through social media, and randomly assigned each of them a sonnet to read. Crowdsourcing in museums is increasingly becoming a 'means of promoting increased public participation in core tasks such as collecting, describing, categorizing, or curating heritage collections' (Noordegraaf, Bartholomew and Eveleigh 2014). *126* became an exhibition of a newly created collection that responded to historic source material, and that would continue to exist virtually online beyond the run of the physical exhibition.

Inviting participants to record videos of themselves as well, was not only an experiment in crowdsourcing, recognising the accessibility of high-quality cameras on smartphones, but was an attempt to make queer visibility the focus of the exhibition. On two accounts, *126* was influenced heavily by the most iconic LGBTQ crowdsourced project in history; in both the mode of collection, and in the naming, or making visible of LGBTQ people: the *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt*.

Upon seeing a wall of placards featuring the names of those who had died of AIDS, Cleve Jones was reminded of a patchwork quilt handed down within his family. This was his inspiration for the *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt*. Contributors were invited to create large panels, 3 feet by 6 feet (the size of a grave) and to decorate them as *memento mori* for loved ones lost to AIDS, and specifically featuring the names of those lost, as a way of personalising the mass endemic. Formally organised in June 1987, by the time the quilt panels were displayed on the Mall in Washington D.C. in October of that year, almost 2000 panels had been created. By September 1995, around 32,000 panels had been received.

The *NAMES* project, above all else, was a move to document names, to aid remembrance, and to avoid the 'threat of oblivion' (Hawkins 2009: 135) of a lost generation that the US seemed eager to forget. The quilt panels, en masse, exposed both the 'private loss and public indifference' (ibid.: 136) of a nation ill-prepared and unprepared to deal with a harrowing and sweeping disease thought to be one that only affected gay men. The very scale of the memorial might suggest authorlessness and anonymity, but rather it hints at a collective authorship, where the naming of individuals is of central importance. The quilt has 'no official status, no public funding, no fixed location in Washington, indeed, no single place where it can be seen as a whole' (ibid.: 138).

The very fabric of the *NAMES* project is queer. The various panels and their display, by their nature resist hierarchy, order or ranking; the project constantly evolves, grows and is reconfigured; it rejects a linear narrative, a beginning or an end; there is no 'correct' way to display it, or to view it. In spite of the solemn thread of grief weaving the panels together, they are not an earnest or miserable experience, they embrace camp, humour and 'tackiness' (ibid.: 140). Although the naming of individuals is important, this is not achieved exclusively with names recognised by legal documentation; panels include nicknames, pet names, assumed names and alter egos. This, alongside the familial links with quilting that Jones was inspired by, suggests a family outside of the nuclear, a collective and community that is, at its core, entirely queer. Unlike stone memorials, the NAMES project will fade, will come undone, will age; the fragility of fabric echoing the fragility of queer life in uncertain times. Like a protest banner, its multiple parts can be folded and stored, moved across borders, resurrected when needed.

Hawkins describes quilt-making as a 'quintessential folk art' (ibid.: 136). Arguably, today the most accessible folk art and means of cultural production is through audio-visual technologies and smartphones and, of course, the 'selfie'. Art critic Jerry Saltz describes the selfie as the 'most prevalent popular genre ever' (2014), and I would also argue that the selfie has been a liberatory device through which queer and other marginalised communities have been able to express themselves in their own terms and take ownership of their visibility. The selfie could be seen as one of the most democratic and inclusive art forms of the 21st century.

The promotional poster for *126* was designed by graphic designer and artist, Alex Creep. I approached Alex to design the poster, whose zines and club posters captured the DIY feel

that I wanted the artwork to suggest. The cut–out collage style resembles a 1980s club poster more than it does an exhibition poster. The echoes of the gig flyers produced by the squatters are unmistakable.

Sutton House Queered

In December 2016, the National Trust announced that it was to be running its first national public programme in 2017, and the theme would be *Prejudice and Pride*, looking at LGBTQ histories to mark the 50th anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales. Sutton House's rich and long-standing experience of delivering high quality experiences for LGBTQ audiences ensured that it had a central place in the programme and an invitation to share its expertise more widely across the organisation. The Trust worked in collaboration with Stonewall and the University of Leicester's Research Centre for Museums and Galleries. Whilst a number of Trust properties across England and Wales came on board to reveal previously hidden stories and some developed experimental approaches to engaging audiences, it was only Sutton House who decided to shape the entire year-long programme around the LGBTQ theme.

Sutton House Queered, which began in February 2017, was loosely linked to two main themes which tie with the history of the house. As Sutton House was saved by the activism of the local community, we used LGBTQ activism as a thread throughout the year, and drew parallels between Sutton House's threat of being sold to developers in the late 1980s with the vast number of LGBTQ community spaces, pubs and clubs being lost in London today. Throughout the year, *Sutton House Queered* exhibited works by Victor Zágon, a gay artist and member of the Recycled Teenagers; Sutton House volunteer Kev Clarke, a young queer artist whose collage style of work is inspired by Joe Orton and Kenneth Halliwell (Figure 24.3); non-binary femme photographer Sarah Moore who we commissioned to take photographic portraits of black trans activist, model, actress and DJ Munroe Bergdorf in and around Sutton House and the Breaker's Yard (Figure 24.4); Jacob V Joyce who explored QTIPOC (queer, trans and intersex people of colour) activism with community groups; regular collaborators Amy Grimehouse and Late Night Library Club, a queer arts and club night collective; and curator Kat Hudson, who put together an exhibition about LGBTQ night clubbing. Sutton House also hosted a series of events, including an immersive evening of performances as part of queer arts festival *And What?*; a zine fair celebrating DIY cultural production in marginalised communities organised by activist Kirsty Fife; and an academic symposium about the loss of LGBTQ spaces and nightlife in London inspired by the *Save Sutton House* campaign.

Sutton House became the first National Trust property to introduce gender neutral toilet signage, which was a simple but bold move that made a powerful statement of welcome to people who identify outside of gender binaries.

It is safe to say, that Sutton House could and would not have embarked on a programme as ambitious as *Sutton House Queered* if not for the success and scale of *126*. The exhibition shifted the way in which Sutton House operates. While it has always put community at the centre of its work, *126* encouraged a move to using Sutton House as a platform, and an amplifier for marginalised voices. Significantly, the experimental practice developed at Sutton House is helping to stimulate new approaches and building confidence to work more inclusively, across the wider organisation.
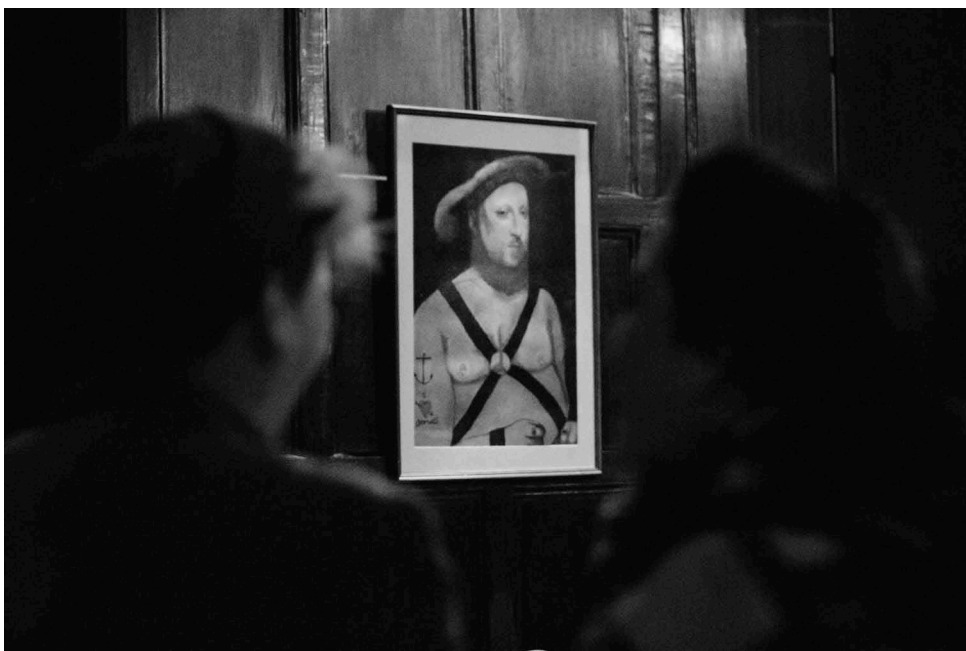
FIGURE 24.3 Visitors admiring *Henry VIII* by Kev Clarke at Sutton House Queered launch event, February 2017.
Photograph by Eli Beristain, courtesy of Sutton House.

FIGURE 24.4 *Portrait of Munroe Bergdorf* in the Great Chamber by Sarah Moore.
Courtesy of Sutton House, part of Sutton House Queered exhibition 2017.

Conclusion

The oldest house in Hackney was a nuisance to the National Trust. It lacks the ancestral continuity and neat linear narrative of aristocratic bloodlines to sufficiently inspire the Trust's previously rather homogenous top-down mode of storytelling. It's a complicated house that is not shaped by familial descent but by historical and cultural dissent, a patchwork microcosm of Hackney's own complicated history.

From being a rural retreat for the rich, an area renowned for the education of women, the industrialisation and urbanisation of the 19th century, the importance of immigration and international trade in the East End, the inner city decline in the 20th century, Sutton House encapsulates all of Hackney's many faces. With this rich heritage, it is fitting that it should strive to more fully reflect the rich diversity of Hackney today.

In many ways, *126* was a pivotal moment for Sutton House. In the *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums*, Vagnone and Ryan note that—for historic houses to survive—they 'must be turned upside down and inside out' (2016: 41) and this is precisely what *126* aimed to do. It helped to build new relationships between the house and its communities and created traces of LGBTQ narratives in an autonomous and authentic way for the future.

Is Sutton House's engagement with community groups a model that can be replicated across the wider heritage sector, or a bespoke solution to a particular challenge? I would argue that it has potential as both but, either way it should not be considered an anomaly, as its prioritisation of community engagement is entirely aligned with the Trust's founding concern for public good, public access and a democratic approach to heritage.

A visitor in June 2017 left the following comment on TripAdvisor: 'This place need[s] to decide what it wants to be for NT members—a historic building in need of preservation or a community centre of some description for the LGBTQ community in Hackney!' This call for Sutton House to more neatly fit popular expectations of heritage sites demonstrates a failure to understand its rich history of activism and its evolving relationship with the diverse communities of Hackney. Sutton House and, indeed, other historic houses, should not worry about being *either* a place for LGBTQ people, *or* a place for everyone else; their power to enact change lies in their capacity (and, I suggest, their responsibility) to be both.

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PART III

Assessing activism

As a growing number of museums become increasingly engaged in work that purposefully tackles social, political and environmental challenges, it is not surprising that such work has attracted considerable criticism. In some instances, this has emanated from groups whose interests, privileges and worldview—formerly reflected in the museum—have been challenged by more justice-oriented approaches that seek to recognise and support new voices and perspectives. Museums' efforts to bring about change—often experimental and sometimes tentative—are also generating robust, considered and constructive reflections on the obstacles, drawbacks, opportunities and lessons learned for activism.

As the chapters in this section illustrate, these attempts to evaluate and better understand the consequences that stem from museum activism come from practitioners, students and researchers with a deep understanding of the largely untapped potential for museums to engage with contemporary challenges. These insights and reflections are directed towards honing approaches, amplifying impact and stimulating further experimentation.

The contributors to this section also shed light upon the singular challenges inherent in activist museum practice. They help us to step back and reflect on what might be at risk—for example, the alienation of those who hold different views and the potential erosion of public trust and support—as well as what might be gained. In short, these authors collectively offer an abundant menu of insights and experience that enriches our thinking as activist practice assumes its rightful place in the canon of museum practice.

At the same time, and in common with all those who have contributed to this volume, they demonstrate a commitment to confronting what we refer to as the 'immorality of inaction.' These authors understand that, however uncomfortable it might be to challenge and redress the museum's knowing or unknowing complicity in injustices, there is an irresistible imperative to redefine the contemporary museum as an agent for progressive, societal change. The work chronicled in this section is an object lesson in the ideals and challenges of doing so.

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THE ACTIVIST SPECTRUM IN UNITED STATES MUSEUMS

Dina A. Bailey

The divisive climate that has characterized social and political life in the United States in recent years is inspiring a renewed sense of activism in the museum field and beyond. While many see this positively, the trend towards increasingly socially purposeful museum practice is not without its challenges. More particularly, we can see that groups with vastly different worldviews and outlooks rarely seem to engage in authentic dialogue with each other. Indeed, as one group moves into a public space, the opposing one very often moves out. More often than not, there is little or no room for mutual understanding, negotiation or shared concerns. In 2017, the opening of the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum was a high profile example of this type of battleground. As United States President, Donald Trump, flew to Mississippi to attend the opening of the newest civil rights museum in the United States, top African American leaders made themselves absent in protest of his policies and his record on race relations (Huffman 2017). While President Trump delivered prepared remarks at the opening of the museum, expressing support for civil rights sentiments, a number of political and civil rights leaders who refused to attend cited numerous examples of recent comments made by the President that were disparaging about women, people with disabilities, immigrants, and African Americans (to name a few). These leaders refused to attend a ceremony where—from their perspective—hypocritical commentary by the President would tarnish what should have been an epic moment for the people of Mississippi, a state that has consistently been seen as systemically racist throughout United States history and the present day. Within this context, the opening of the museum, which should have been a moment of celebration for both the museum field and for Mississippi race relations, was overshadowed as it became a political 'tug-of-war.'

In the United States, when opposing groups do not cede public space to each other, there is the potential for violence to occur. In this climate, museums in the United States have the potential to be places of peaceful gatherings, tense standoffs or violent eruptions. How prepared museums are for any of these potentials is often determined by where they fall on the activist spectrum—in other words, how comfortable they are with being seen as places where activism can occur in a constructive manner. Some museums, particularly those that are dedicated to presenting the lives of specific cultural groups, have been able to

hone their activism by activating lessons they have learned from civil rights and related social movements. Because of their familiarity and comfortability with concepts and practices of activism, they are often further along the spectrum of museum activism—a spectrum that is moving away from practices that reflect a belief in the museum as a neutral space and towards practices that emerge from the recognition that museums can (and should) be action-oriented spaces in order to fulfill their missions (Sandell 2017).

The activist spectrum

In working within their communities, a number of museums have taken up the role of 'platform' or 'staging ground' for activism. For example, The National Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta, Georgia, USA, whose mission is to, 'empower people to take the protection of every human's rights personally' (National Center for Civil and Human Rights 2017) has developed strong ties to its community and is seen as a natural space for activism and advocacy preparation as well as a site for actions of nonviolent protest and rallies. Two other examples are the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute in Birmingham, Alabama and the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee, USA, where these institutions have used their historical, social and political importance to address contemporary issues.

The three institutions noted above are examples of museums that are leading the way in social action as sites of conscience from a culturally-specific foundation. While the National Center for Civil and Human Rights was built with contemporary activism in mind, institutions like the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and the National Civil Rights Museum have grown into this role, moving from a primary focus on remembrance and memorialization towards a greater concern for inspiring calls to action in the present day. In the United States, museums are being built every year with activism in mind—Washington DC, Charleston, Memphis, Jackson, and New Orleans are only a few cities in the country that are in the midst of new museum construction where activist practices are explicitly woven into the organizations' missions, exhibitions, programs, and organizational plans.

That said, new museums and culturally specific museums are not the only institutions that are becoming increasingly open to the idea of activism. It is a clear trend that institutions across the United States are starting to reinterpret their missions or adopt new statements of purpose that acknowledge the need to be actively involved in contemporary issues as local, regional, and national constituents continue to look to museums as places of knowledge and inspiration. President Lincoln's Cottage in Washington DC and the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center in Hartford, Connecticut, are two remarkable examples of this trend. In 2008, the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center began 'Salons at Stowe,' 21st-century parlor conversations about race, class and gender that connect to 19th-century issues. In 2016, Students Opposing Slavery (SOS), a youth education program of President Lincoln's Cottage, was awarded the United States Presidential Award for Extraordinary Efforts to Combat Trafficking in Persons. SOS is a growing, grassroots network of youth abolitionists committed to empowering youth leaders and raising awareness about human trafficking among young people. In a press release about the presidential award they received, Executive Director, Erin Mast, described the program as 'mission-critical' to the organization's purpose of serving as a 'Home for Brave Ideas.'

Many organizations can be viewed as in transition, moving away from the idea of the museum as a neutral space towards the concept of the museum as an action-oriented space.

Examples can be pointed to along the entire spectrum of activism in museums, but the direction of travel is toward greater openness of the growing need for museums to become involved in activism—not just as safe spaces where people can talk, but as sites where action is welcomed, encouraged, and supported.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will explore this spectrum of museum activism further. In particular, I want to explore what museums seeking to take up more activist positions on human rights issues might learn from culturally-specific museums that have very often been at the forefront of practice in this arena. I will begin by exploring how social activism is fundamentally changing museums in the United States. Then, I will discuss United States museums that have moved farther along on this spectrum and how they got there. Finally, I will conclude with reflections on how museums may take these lessons and move themselves forward into a space of more intentional activism.

How social activism is changing United States museums

In allowing for activism to take a primary role in a museum's thinking and practices, numerous changes have to be made within each institution manifest in a variety of ways from mission statements and strategic plans, to communication message tracks and cultural competence training. Together, these myriad shifts are fundamentally changing the way many museums are operating. Activism cannot be assigned exclusively to staff in programming, curatorial or external affairs; rather, it must become a part of the work of each department, threaded through the full range of museum functions and activities in order for staff and visitors to be educated, inspired, and empowered.

A powerful example of a museum in transition is the Atlanta History Center in Atlanta, Georgia. The History Center originally hired a consultant for a six month period to audit the institution's major initiatives through a lens of diversity and inclusion. Following that analysis, they extended the consultant's contract for two years in order to truly commit to culture change at all levels of the institution, focusing on four major aspects that will make them a more inclusive organization: process; collaboration; leadership and management; and overall organizational culture. As the History Center becomes more inclusive, it is naturally becoming more comfortable with activism as well.

Major changes can also be discerned in the work of associations, museum studies programs and professional development collaboratives affiliated with museums, with a particular emphasis on training to better prepare professionals to engage with and advance concepts of diversity, equity, access, inclusion, transparency, advocacy and activism as those concepts relate to museum work. In 2012, the American Association of Museums changed its name to the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), believing that the name change would 'better reflect the 106-year old organization's mission of unifying the diverse museum field, championing its cause and nurturing excellence among all of America's museums' (American Alliance of Museums 2012). Subsequently, AAM focused its 2017 annual meeting theme on these concepts (ibid). The conference, held in St. Louis, utilized the city—closely associated with Ferguson, Missouri, a northern suburb that had been the location in 2014 of the fatal shooting of a young, African American man, Michael Brown, and years of subsequent unrest—as a fitting backdrop to the theme, 'Gateways for Understanding—Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion in Museums.' Also in 2017, the Association for State and Local History (AASLH) held its annual meeting in Austin, Texas, where months before

the Texas legislature voted on a bill that could have restricted the restrooms, showers and locker rooms available for use to transgender Texans. The theme for the event was, 'I AM History'—a concern to connect the past to the present and was designed to remind attendees that history is relevant and is happening every day, everywhere, and involves everyone.

Also during the fall of 2017, MASS Action (Museum as Site for Social Action), a collaborative project that seeks to align museums with more equitable and inclusive practices, brought together stakeholders who are committed to embedding strategies of inclusion into their institutions. The 2017 convening, hosted by the Minneapolis Institute of Art, included staff teams from approximately thirty museums. These staff members focused on how to put theory into practice based on the work that was completed by approximately fifty museum practitioners during the MASS Action convening of the previous year. The participants of the 2016 convening collaborated to develop a toolkit designed to guide emerging conversations about equity and inclusion throughout the museum field. The implementation of this toolkit has been a practical guide for museums who are interested in moving forward on the activism spectrum, but need support taking the next step.

These brief examples are all cited here to demonstrate growing consensus around the idea that museums can no longer only be reflections of the past; they must be active change agents who educate, inspire, and support the empowerment of their visitors and their staff members to become activists in their own right. In the United States, this trend can be traced to the 1960s and 1970s, to shifts that occurred during and following the American Civil Rights Movement, the American Feminist Movement, and the Anti-War Movement (amongst others). Over the past 20 years, the pendulum has swung toward more focused museum involvement in social action as can be seen in the construction of a new wave of culturally-specific museums; and, it has begun to gain even more momentum within the past five years due to an increasingly challenging political and social climate. While the divisive climate has (understandably) grown more concerning, it has also inspired a renewed sense of activism in individuals who are turning to their local museums as spaces for knowledge-gathering, dialogue, and personal reflection.

Museums at the forefront of the pendulum swing

Throughout United States history, the pendulum has swung back and forth, in terms of how far social action has been perceived as part of the museum's remit. The Black Museum Movement is perhaps one of the clearest and most consistent examples of this. The first African American museum was the College Museum (now the Hampton University Museum). It was established in 1868 and is located at the heart of Hampton University, a historically black college and university (HBCU) in Hampton, Virginia. Between 1868 and 1950, approximately thirty museums were established with a focus on African American history and culture. The majority of these museums were located at HBCUs or at libraries that focused on collecting African American history and culture. HBCUs were most often established following the American Civil War during which time the majority of higher educational institutions banned African Americans from enrollment. They continued to be established until 1964 when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

Throughout the 1960s and the 1970s a wave of new museums were established that focused on African American history and culture. For example, some of the most well-known culturally-specific museums in the United States were founded in 1960—the DuSable Museum of African American History—and, in 1965, the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History. Perhaps one of the most important aspects of African American museums established during the height of the Black Museum Movement was the commitment of the founders to be places *of* community, *in* community, and *for* community. The movement addressed issues of inclusion, community engagement, and self-identity while responding to a lack of representation of people of color in mainstream museums of the time. Then, as now, staff members of these institutions were aware of their efforts as deliberate social actions; they acknowledged that their museums needed to be located in cities with 'long histor[ies] of racial skirmishes and economic surge and decline' (Burns 2013: 25). And museums, like the African American Museum of Philadelphia, purposely made decisions that maintained that 'the black history museum should be accessible to "rich and poor, black and white alike"' (ibid.: 60).

Since that first wave of the Black Museum Movement, culturally-specific museums have continued to be established in locations across the United States. Between 1868 and 1991, there have been approximately 150 African American museums established. Across these sites, it is possible to discern a shift away from a focus on researching and presenting African American histories towards a greater concern for present day and ongoing issues that African Americans (and other people of color) specifically face. These museums have been more apt to stridently confront economic, legal, political, and social issues than their mainstream counterparts. That said, mainstream museums are also shifting to being more inclusive of, and being more relevant to, people of color. As these shifts have occurred, and another wave of culturally-specific museums has opened in the 2000s, the combined force of culturally-specific museums and mainstream museums focusing on inclusion and relevance has swung the pendulum in the United States closer towards a greater comfort with activism and less comfort with institutional assertions of neutrality.

Accepting that museums are not neutral makes the pendulum swing faster

It has been a favored standpoint for most museum professionals in the US to say that their institutions are neutral; that they are simply providing space for others to speak, that (because of their legal nonprofit status) their museums cannot 'speak up' for anything. However, this has begun to shift as professional and scholarly consensus around the political character of the museum has begun to emerge (Sandell 2007, 2017). Some have continued to argue that neutrality is simply 'stating the facts.' However, it is increasingly understood that 'the facts' are often the interpretation of whoever committed them to the annals of history, or science, or art; they are based on an individual or collective under-standing at a specific moment in time. In essence, facts change and facts are interpreted. In the context of the museum, 'the facts' are further fragmented by the word limits we have for labels and panels and the images, art, objects and documents that museums consciously decide to display. But, facts still matter. In February 2017, more than 280 museums and libraries devoted themselves to #DayofFacts on Twitter during which they published 140-character truths throughout the day (Kaplan 2017).

Even with debates about what it means to be neutral, there should not be any confusion about whether or not museums should be speaking up for accurate information and against misinformation. There should not be any confusion about whether or not museums should protect institutional values that embrace integrity, respect, and inclusion and speak out against any form of hate or violence. For those museums who do not yet feel comfortable taking on social action on a daily basis or in a largely visible way, they can certainly commit to efforts to bringing people closer together, to enhance possibilities for greater respect and empathy. Silence is not an option; we know from innumerable historical examples that silence is complicity; that when you do not say something, you are still *saying something*.

If museums try to cling to the idea of neutrality through the 'museum as temple' philosophy then they are implicitly encouraging the elitist, exclusive position that has historically been a part of that philosophy. They are also unlikely to find themselves as relevant or sustainable institutions in current social and political environments. Similarly, if a concern for neutrality is founded on contemporary social norms and standards then museums need to pay attention to changing demographics as an important factor in determining who and what counts as the 'norm.' In encouraging more diversity and inclusion within our institutions, we must take into account how the increase in diverse backgrounds and opinions of staff members will shape an institution's internal culture and external messaging.

This shift in internal culture and external messaging is exemplified by the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. As Sean Kelley, the Senior Vice President, Director of Interpretation discussed in an article titled *Beyond Neutrality*, the museum has rewritten its mission statement to remove the word 'neutral.' The Eastern State Penitentiary, he writes, believes:

> that the bedrock value that many of us brought into this field—that museums and historic sites should strive for neutrality—has held us back more than it has helped us. Neutrality is, after all, in the eye of the beholder. At Eastern State, more often than not, the word provided us with an excuse for simply avoiding thorny issues of race, poverty, and policy that we weren't ready to address.
>
> *(Kelley 2017: 23)*

Other examples of shifting cultures and messages can be seen through the commitments of the Atlanta History Center in Atlanta, Georgia, the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum in Chicago, Illinois, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

In 2016, the Atlanta History Center developed a new strategic plan that directly aligns with their vision to 'connect people, history, and culture.' In committing to the direction of the strategic plan, the History Center believes that it:

> guides us to become a more inclusive institution, a community resource and a connector, a best in class institution for our guests, more relevant in today's quickly changing world, and an institution with the financial strength to continue to improve our organization's performance and ability to serve our community for years to come.
>
> *(Atlanta History Center 2016)*

While this is a conscious strategic shift for the History Center, the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum has long-used the historical values of the site as its foundation for decades. The

museum and its programs make connections between the historic residents of Hull House—social reformers and activists—and contemporary social issues. Over the years, the museum has continued to play a highly active role in the political and cultural spaces of Chicago, underpinned by their commitment to the activist roots of their site, establishing both Chicago's first public playground and its first public art gallery and helping to desegregate Chicago Public Schools.

The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), located in New York City, might perhaps be understood to occupy a place on the spectrum somewhere between the Atlanta History Center (with its recent shift in strategic focus) and the Hull House (with its founding institutional values). On its website MoMA (n.d.-a) declares itself as a place that celebrates 'creativity, openness, tolerance, and generosity':

> We aim to be inclusive places—both onsite and online—where diverse cultural artistic, social, and political positions are welcome. We're committed to sharing the most thought-provoking modern and contemporary art, and hope you will join us in exploring the art, ideas, and issues of our time.

In 2017, MoMA used exhibition curation as a creative way to protest President Trump's controversial executive order on immigration. Curators rehung part of the museum's permanent collection with works by artists from some of the majority-Muslim nations whose citizens would be blocked from entering the United States if the executive order was upheld. These works replaced those of Picasso, Matisse, and Picabia, among other Western artists. Alongside each of the works on display was this statement about the museum's intentions:

> This work is by an artist from a nation whose citizens are being denied entry into the United States, according to a presidential executive order issued on 27 January 2017. This is one of several such artworks from the Museum's collection installed through-out the fifth-floor galleries to affirm the ideals of welcome and freedom as vital to this Museum as they are to the United States.
>
> *(Farago 2017: 1)*

During this time, Colleen Dilenschneider, the Chief Market Engagement Officer at IMPACTS Research & Development, wrote a blog about a request she had made for a topic-specific data cut on cultural organizations to the National Awareness, Attitudes, and Usage Study (NAAU) (Dilenschneider 2017a). The NAAU is an ongoing study regarding marketing perceptions of visitor-serving organizations. The data shows that there was a significant increase in positive data during the period of time when MoMA highlighted these artworks. While Dilenschneider resists inferring causality between MoMA's decision to display works by artists from Muslim-majority countries and a positive reputational outcome, she nevertheless argues that the data may suggest that our communities are more comfortable with museums taking up a values-based position on contemporary issues than we might have expected. Dilenschneider states that the data may underscore something even more fundamental—that it is not just taking a stand, but standing up for your *mission* that matters (Dilenschneider 2017b). As part of her analysis, Dilenschneider came to the conclusion that:

recent happenings suggest that when your museum is pinned against a politicized topic, standing up for your mission wins. This is illustrated by the data-informed success seen at MoMA when they highlighted artwork by artists from countries impacted by the original Muslim-majority national travel ban.

(Dilenschneider 2017a)

Since the MoMA (n.d.–b) mission statement states that the institution, 'seeks to create a dialogue between the established and the experimental, the past and the present, in an environment that is responsive to the issues of modern and contemporary art...,' it is clear that the museum's actions were entirely within its stated remit.

How to not get left behind as the pendulum swings

MoMA's example provides several important lessons. First, museums must enact their missions—and must acknowledge that they operate within a real world social and political context. Their work cannot be authentic if they avoid the realities of the world around them. Second, museums must defend the principles and ideas they have stated that they value. And, third, institutions can be more relevant and make faster decisions when the entire staff shares an understanding of the institution, its priorities, and its values.

These three lessons cross all boundaries. The United States has not fully reckoned with its violent racial history or the legacies that continue to shape the country's decisions and actions. Because of this, Americans are forced to confront individual and systemic racism again and again. Several racially motivated, violent incidents happened in 2016 and 2017 that triggered a national debate about what some consider to be the physical representation of racism in America: Confederate monuments. These monuments are most often statues that are meant to honor Confederate leaders, soldiers or states who made up the Confederacy; they were often intentionally placed in very visible public places, such as on the grounds of the local courthouse or close to the state capitol. The Confederate States of America, also known as the Confederacy, was made up of eleven states that seceded from the Union in 1860. This secession led to the American Civil War which the Confederacy lost.

Even though the Confederacy lost the American Civil War, and monuments are not usually erected for those who do not 'win' wars, a staggering number of Confederate monuments and iconography entered the American historical narrative following the end of the war. Most of the Confederate monuments were not built immediately after the end of the war (in 1865); rather the majority were erected between the 1890s and the 1950s; the number of monuments erected spiked as states enacted Jim Crow laws to disenfranchise African Americans (in the early 1900s), during the resurgence of the violent hate group the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, and as a backlash against the American Civil Rights Movement (in the 1950s and 1960s). Over 1,500 Confederate place names and symbols are displayed in the United States today; 718 of those are monuments, with nearly 300 of them erected in Georgia, Virginia, and North Carolina. Most of the monuments and symbols are displayed in the South and 179 are displayed in majority black counties (Lin and Mihalik 2017). Groups who oppose the removal of the monuments argue that eradicating them effectively erases history. Some believe that the monuments should remain as they are meant to celebrate Southern pride and/or that they should remain as a reminder of one of the darkest moments in American history. Still others believe that the monuments are constant

reminders of institutional racism, segregation and slavery and should be removed from public spaces. In 2017, these monuments became the venue for confrontations, both violent and nonviolent protests. Individuals and collective groups spoke out both for and against the removal of these monuments. And, museums are at the center of it all.

When Mitch Landrieu, the Mayor of New Orleans, Louisiana, USA, spoke about the reasons for removing the statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee from its pedestal on 23 May 2017, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center—not located in the South or in a majority black county—published a moving statement that leveraged Landrieu's words to affirm their institution's commitment to the power of inclusive history. The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center (n.d.) wrote that:

> History, at root, is a dynamic conversation about the significance of what it means to be human between those of us alive at any one moment and people who have lived at another time and/or in another culture. Fundamental to this conversation, is the act of remembrance. Remembering, and its companion act of forgetting, are selective processes not driven by evidence but by the filters of a particular moment.

Then, just a few months later, violence erupted in Charlottesville, Virginia. Charlottesville is the home to the University of Virginia; the core of its campus was designed by one of the 'founding fathers' of the United States, Thomas Jefferson. On the outskirts of Charlottesville is Jefferson's plantation, Monticello, and nearby are homes of several other United States' founding fathers, all of which have become historic sites. Charlottesville has been recognized as a relatively progressive city. On 11 August 2017, the city was infiltrated by white nationalists for a 'Unite the Right' rally. Reminiscent of other historical, white supremacist rallies—for example, rallies orchestrated by the Ku Klux Klan in the United States or the Nazi Party in Europe—the white nationalists marched through the streets carrying torches and yelling explicit slogans. The next morning, counter-protesters arrived, a state of emergency was declared by the governor, and (ultimately) a white nationalist ran his car into a group of counter-protesters, killing a 32-year-old woman and injuring at least 19 other people. In response to the events in Charlottesville, another Ohio museum spoke up. The Ohio History Connection (n.d.) (formerly the Ohio Historical Society), stated:

> As a public history organization, we use our mission (embrace the present, share the past and transform the future) and core values (authenticity, relevancy, stewardship, working together and inclusivity) to present complete and factual history that facilitates a public conversation about history's meaning. Through thoughtful study and interpretation, it is our duty to share the full story of Ohio's role in the Civil War and to view these monuments through the lens of what we know today. Only by engaging honestly and completely with the facts of history can we fully realize our mission to embrace the present, share the past and transform the future.

While the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center and the Ohio History Connection are very different museums, they both lived their missions within the context of the real world; they both were clear about their institutional values, and they both responded within days of the events that influenced them.

Museums and activism: you are not alone

Although many museum workers remain anxious about adopting a more activist standpoint, I hope that the numerous examples explored here offer a degree of reassurance that the many ways that museums can seek to bring about social and political changes are increasingly part of mainstream museum practice. Whilst some still prefer the idea of the museum as a neutral space, there is increasing recognition that this position is untenable. Museums are inherently political and there is no neutral position (Sandell 2007). Museums can no longer function as temples— we are part of our communities; and, we too, must reflect on our identities, our values, and our capacity for activism. As the recent divisive times have shown most recently in the United States, people and communities are in need of organizations that are committed to action. Finally, it is worth remembering that activism takes many forms and can be understood as a spectrum of practices; it is a journey that each individual organization must take in its own way. An organization need not move from one end of the spectrum to the other in a single step. However, to remain relevant, sustainable, and authentic museums are finally realizing that they need to be more open to their role as agents of social and political change and active in shaping the world around them.

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26

UP AGAINST IT

Contending with power asymmetries in museum work

Kevin Coffee

> If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning.
>
> Frederick Douglass (1857)

> I am very proud now that we have a museum on the National Mall where people can learn about Reverend King, so many other things, Frederick Douglass is an example of somebody who's done an amazing job and is getting recognized more and more, I notice. (*sic*)
>
> (Donald Trump, Washington, DC, 2 February 2017)

As even Donald Trump apparently recognizes, museums are traditionally places in which the past is 'learned' (Graham 2017). They are discursive instruments, centered on a collection of shared narratives drawn from, and illustrated by, the tangible and intangible heritage preserved in their collections. But the traditional museology of contemplative connoisseurship has generally militated against Douglass's (1857) dialectic of struggle-progress. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, many museums claimed scholarly veracity as proof of their social utility (Griffiths and King 2008; Skorton 2017). Indeed, that taken-for-granted authority demonstrates how museums operate as 'cultural technologies concerned to organize a voluntarily, self-regulating citizenry' (Bennett 1995: 63).

Curating and interpreting current or past socio-cultural behavior is a form of advocacy, which therefore may be considered traditional museum practice. For example, the World Eugenics Congresses hosted by the American Museum of Natural History in 1921 and 1932 featured exhibits that purported to scientifically explain anatomical, physiological and cognitive inequalities among humans worldwide. On the other hand, twenty years later, *The Family of Man* photography exhibition organized by the Museum of Modern Art, and curated by Edward Steichen, asserted human universality. That exhibition made an international tour (1954–1963) under the auspices of the US State Department.

Both examples illustrate how museum authority is closely held. Consequently, for those seeking to bring about or contribute meaningfully to a just and socially responsible society through their museum practice, that cultural technology must be intentionally diverted to critical and liberatory ends. In that effort, social activism becomes a highly contentious theatre of dialogic practice, nested within an extensive matrix of socio-economic classes, genders, ethnicities, and other lived personal experiences. Museums interpret lifeways and thereby provide a framework for the self-regulation Bennett describes.

Museums, through their collecting and exhibiting practices, confer or withhold designations of normativity regarding objects and social practices. Museum interpretation includes pronouncements of veracity, privileging collections and, by inference or by explicit policy, deprecating that which is not collected, displayed, etc. The effectiveness of such sorting processes is seen in social studies that have found high indications of 'trustworthiness' (Griffiths and King 2008: 25) and perception of museums as 'guardians of factual information' (Britain Thinks 2013: 3) among visitors in both the US and the UK. The regular, daily, socio-political agency exercised by governance, administrators and/or staff is cloaked by institutional assertions of objectivity, but which are means of effecting social distinction, inclusion or exclusion (Bourdieu 1984: 99–112).

Whose narrative?

The museum sector in the United States is notable for its conservatism, including orthodoxy attributed in part to policies that privilege the past over the present, objects over their users, or isolated acts over social processes. Traditionalist thinking aligns with the major premise of many American museums: to communicate narratives of wealth or political power emblematized in the art, material culture and structures treasured by donors, collectors and other elite patrons.

This privilege of tradition is, and has been, an object of contest throughout the modern period, certainly since the early 19th century, and that contest has accelerated in step with widening and deepening intra-societal confrontations about civil rights, political self-determination, and colonialism. For example, the United States is well known as the locus for repeated struggles over the social inequality and discrimination experienced by African Americans, Indigenous Peoples, and by women of all ethnicities. As those movements expanded, they attracted and then inspired other population groups suffering social discrimination. These social movements have changed the terms of public discourse about social equality in major ways.[1]

Social motion is not unidirectional. Advocacy from below, or within an organization, is frequently met by coercive force from above, or from outside that organization. Reacting to the social justice movements of the 1960s and early 1970s, agents of social tradition energetically asserted and re-valorized prior societal imbalances (e.g. Focus on the Family, n.d.).[2] This has been especially pronounced in the decades since, but the persistence of social inequities continues to engender opposition, including from within museum organizations.[3]

For example, during the 1980s, vigorous social activism converged on the civil and political rights underlying public health and health care practice. A major fulcrum of this contention was women's reproductive practices, which were increasingly targeted by advocates for 'traditional values', as well as by critics who read women's reproductive

practices as subversive to established gender roles and social structures. Near-concurrently, HIV/AIDS was identified as an epidemic disease that affected 'non-traditional' populations. These intersecting and dissonant social value systems were construed as so-called culture wars of the period. Underscoring the political rights involved, government leaders actively supported traditional patriarchal and heteronormative values in those confrontations and directed law and policy that marginalized women's reproductive health care and the health of those threatened with HIV/AIDS (Chamberlain and Hardisty 2000; Ernst, Katzive and Smock 2004; Holland 2016; Bell *et al.* 2017). Eventually, that co-marginalization engendered coalitions of shared opposition (Carroll 2015; Brier *et al.* 2017).

During that period of the late 1980s and early 1990s, I led the exhibition department of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. Several of my museum co-workers contracted and died from HIV/AIDS within a very few years. Moreover, local activists associated with the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) brought social protest into the museum by disrupting some of the private, after-hours, cocktail events often staged in the *Hall of African Mammals*. Internally, museum staff joined in observance of World AIDS Day in 1990 and the local *Day Without Art* exhibition events, in which museum workers around the city shrouded objects to dramatize the human loss resulting from the HIV disease. Aligned with this growing sentiment, some curatorial and program staff began to devise other public programming responses to HIV/AIDS by the museum; perhaps reading World AIDS Day activity as a tacit endorsement by museum executive officers. One early response by exhibition developers was to design an interpretive display about HIV to be included within a larger *Hall of Human Biology & Evolution*. Unfortunately, at almost the last minute, one influential curator vetoed the installation, claiming that HIV was a 'trendy disease' that did not merit mention in a long-term exhibition. For the next fifteen years, that gallery included one opaque display case window, inadvertently marking the silence of museum decision-makers.

Not long thereafter, an informal, but perhaps more inclusive, committee of curatorial and program staff began articulating a conceptual plan for a comprehensive exhibition about HIV/AIDS. In this effort, staff intended to follow the formal approval process and I was volunteered to convey the proposal to the curatorial vice-president. His collegial, but non-committal response, was to defer the decision to review by the museum president. Word came down several weeks later that our proposal was not approved. Simultaneously, an alternate curatorial team was assembled to lead an exhibition project about infectious diseases more generally, in which HIV would be one among several diseases discussed. More than five years later, that temporary exhibition—*Epidemic!*—opened to the public with the specificities of HIV discussed mainly in terms of the mechanism of the disease rather than its societal impact. While the museum's official response did not meet the discursive intent of the initial proposal, undoubtedly the exhibition was a response to advocacy from 'below'.

Collaborations such as a sector-wide Day Without Art extending beyond a single museum are vitally important, for despite their insularity, museums are highly valued in contemporary American society even by those who do not often use them. In part, that value stems from the perception of museums as keepers of important shared narratives and patrimony. My own and others' interviews with museum users and non-users repeatedly show that, while many museum visitors belong to economically and politically privileged socio-economic groups (SEG), most respondents, regardless of SEG, affirm a positive regard

for museum collections and public programs (Hendon 1990; Macdonald 1995; Kirchberg 1996; Coffee 2008; Griffiths and King 2008; Britain Thinks 2013). That widespread perception often includes the expectation that museums act in the public interest and, especially, according to high standards of stewardship and veracity. Those expectations presume that exhibitions, programs and collection policies advance a greater societal good.

During 1991–1993, the American Museum of Natural History and the Environmental Defense Fund collaborated on creating a major exhibition examining anthropogenic climate change. That project, *Global Warming: Understanding the Forecast*, drew more than 300,000 visitors to the New York museum when it opened in 1992 and then more than one million additional visitors to seven other museums that co-sponsored its national tour.

Audience research and evaluation conducted at each of those sites—eight American cities—included interviews that probed for affective and cognitive responses to the exhibition. In exit interviews, we found that nearly one-quarter of respondents read the intent of the exhibition as a call to save the planet. More than 90% commented on the exhibition's emotional impact on their thinking about global climate change, and more than four out of ten respondents declared that they would change their behavior as a result of the exhibition (Giusti 1993).

Rather than being perceived by visitors as extramural or inappropriate advocacy by the museum, visitors overwhelmingly appreciated and supported this concerted effort of public science and social responsibility. Many respondents agreed that the exhibition 'is what the museum should do', while more than a quarter of respondents asserted that the exhibition should have gone deeper into the issues and taken a stronger stand (ibid.).[4] Too often, practitioners diffuse their interpretations to deflect controversy or avoid offending stake-holders. Such self-censorship may distort the public discussion or stifle internal discussion, but it cannot fully eliminate dialogue and debate. Instead, it abrogates—in part or in whole—the curatorial and interpretive responsibilities of practitioners within that discussion.

In 1995, the Chicago Academy of Sciences set out to re-create itself as a wholly new museum of environmental ecology. That project envisioned multiple, new exhibition galleries devoted to specific ecological topics, including anthropogenic impacts on ecologies and habitat loss over time. One major gallery, *Wilderness Walk*, featured walk-through dioramas to describe threatened or destroyed habitats, alongside other vivid interpretive displays that described the ecological impacts of human activity.

In developing the exhibition, museum workers conducted audience research to better understand how potential users considered the ecologies and biology of the region, currently and in the past. Such research informed specific interpretive decisions, the selection of specific organisms to present, and the larger discussion of anthropogenic effects on environment. That research found that visitors were highly supportive of ecological restoration, even if they knew little about how that might be accomplished, and that finding encouraged exhibition developers to include examples of human-induced habitat regeneration as hopeful demonstrations of personal and social responsibility (Grønborg 1998).

The dialogic quality of the exhibition was also enhanced by presenting all of the interpretive text in English and Spanish, the two main languages spoken in that city—an initiative that did not proceed without arousing internal dissension from a few senior administrators.[5] Nonetheless, the bilingual graphics were observed to encourage cross-generational conversation among visitors; particularly enabling older visitors to engage on equal terms with younger members of their cohort. The advocational effect of the project was also observed among visitors who evinced visibly emotional responses to displays that interpreted ecological loss (Coffee 1999).

Policy drivers

Such dialogic activity is very often engendered by history museums, many of which ordinarily interpret socio-cultural patterns, norms and conflicts. Such interpretation may then engage with, or cascade into wider, societal discussion and debate. With such dialogism in mind, and drawing upon their own scholarly and audience research, education staff at Oneida Community Mansion House (an historic house museum in Oneida, New York, which I directed at that time) developed a programming plan that examined contemporary issues by drawing upon the practices and beliefs of 19th century social utopians, such as the Oneida Community. In 2017, museum educators organized a series of public discussions to examine the changing social status of women and of gender practices in historical context. The museum invited expert discussants to refer to their own research and to engage audiences in discussions about specific concepts and practices of adultery, gender, human reproduction, and political equality during the 19th and 20th centuries.[6] In order to practically enable these programs, organizers sought and received funding from Humanities New York (HNY), a regional public agency which had announced a funding program to mark the 2017 centenary of voting rights for women in New York State.

While each topic selected for the series was curated according to its socio-cultural prominence and relevancy, some were perceived by HNY to be more controversial than others. One discussion in particular—*Reproductive Rights: Who Decides?* in which the invited speaker also happened to be an employee of Planned Parenthood[7]—elicited a concerned response from the agency's program officer, who wrote: 'the resulting conversation has the potential to become political and even inflammatory to attendees with diverse viewpoints. As a non-partisan non-profit we cannot support work that endorses any one course of action' (Kushnick 2017). Interpreted literally, HNY explicitly proscribed programs in which participants might express contending opinions about the politics of women's reproductive rights and it threatened to withdraw its funding support.

This stance by a state agency charged with funding the humanities—however limited that funding may be—demonstrates how such agencies and other funders attempt to direct both policy and practice. Some portion of the money that HNY disburses is passed through from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH, a federal agency), and the HNY policy against 'endorsing any one course of action' recapitulates official policy of the NEH, which prohibits 'projects that seek to promote a particular political, religious, or ideological point of view' or 'that advocate a particular program of social action' (NEH 2017: 5).

Discussion—to say nothing of explicit advocacy—of a woman's civil right to control her reproductive health often triggers objections from two aligned segments of the political ruling class that also exert influence upon the NEH: those who oppose women's political rights, and those who oppose open, critical discussion within the humanities. Both groups continually seek to suppress what they deem to be 'politically correct' public discourse, through which persons of disadvantaged classes might debate matters of social justice or engage in oppositional action. Not surprisingly, the proscribed corrective speech and attitudes are often those that challenge social inequality engendered by racism, sexism and poverty. Prohibiting discourse that challenges social inequality thereby becomes practical support for that inequality.

The role of private and public funders in directing policy is under-theorized in contemporary museology but, in many organizations, the expressed or implied wishes of funders are too-often used to curtail, self-censor or redirect museum activity (see, for example, Janes 2009: 59–61) In

the case of this program, the museum determined that discussing women's reproductive rights outweighed any potential loss of funding support from HNY. Nonetheless, we challenged the program officers on their proscription and funding was not withdrawn.

Advocacy in a stratified society

These examples illustrate a larger and perhaps obvious point: that critical advocacy by museum workers must necessarily engage salient social practices and beliefs that exist outside or beyond the museum organization. AMNH senior officers did not explicitly state why they rejected an exhibition specifically about AIDS; they did not issue a signed memorandum. Perhaps the topic discomfited the museum president or was deemed tangential to public science.[8] The more general exhibition about infectious disease that AMNH staged five years later might imply the second supposition, or it may be unrelated.

Obscuring social contradictions or occluding public discourse are not the only functions performed by traditional museums. They also valorize the worldviews of elite patrons. This was strikingly illustrated during the 1990s and 2000s with ostentatious exhibitions that celebrated high-status, material culture such as diamonds and pearls. Advance marketing by the American Museum of Natural History for its *Pearls* exhibition promoted 'cherished symbols of purity and perfection, elegance and affluence [that] have long captured the attention of scientists as well as socialites' (AMNH 2002). In her preface to the book that accompanied its *Diamonds* exhibition, the AMNH president gratefully acknowledged DeBeers, which had been a key pillar of colonialism and apartheid in southern Africa (Harlow 1998).[9] Notably, these exhibitions about elite concepts of preciousness gloss over the human and environmental costs associated with extraction and manufacturing. Are highly paid museum executives oblivious to those affected places or populations, or are those executives guided by elitist interests?[10]

The long-term exhibition *Energy Quest* presented by Liberty Science Center in Jersey City, NJ, which highlights fuel and energy production as conducted by major petroleum companies, might exist chiefly because its named sponsor—ExxonMobil—is a major contributor to the science center (Liberty Science Center 1997).[11] ExxonMobil, which in 2015 refined 4.1 million barrels of oil-equivalent per day (ExxonMobil 2016) is, in fact, both a corporate sponsor (more than US$3 million) and a high level corporate member (between US$25,000 to US$49,999 annually) of Liberty Science Center (LSC, n.d.). At least one executive of the company has served as a trustee on the LSC board (Innovation Research Interchange 2012).

While LSC portrays its mission as engaging 'learners of all ages [to become] excited about the power, promise, and pure fun of science and technology' (Liberty Science Center, n.d.), the science center is publicly silent about its *de facto* role as a public relations forum for the largest US petroleum processor, which has directed considerable corporate resources in recent years toward discrediting scientific studies of anthropogenic climate change (ExxonMobil 2017). Further, Exxon's influence within Liberty Science Center may extend beyond championing a hagiography of the energy sector. LSC's environmentally focused *Our Hudson Home* exhibition depicts ecologies and human uses of the Hudson River estuary, but does not confront the degradation of hundreds of acres of tidal marshland by hazardous run-off from nearby oil processing facilities (*NJDEP v ExxonMobil Corporation* 2007).

Subversion or confrontation?

I have argued elsewhere (Coffee 2006) that museums are ideological agents, and that museum governors typically promulgate policy and practice that aligns with their own worldviews. However, understanding the history of a modern museum as an intentionally elitist institution should not deter progressive social activism by museum practitioners—rather, it should enable practitioners to recognize the social dynamics with which activism must contend and through which it must navigate. Opportunities for advocating social change through public discourse present themselves unexpectedly but frequently. There is little cultural activity in the humanities or sciences not facilitated by reflection, critique and actions that challenge the *status quo* (Eagleton 2000). Given that museum use aligns with social narratives, and that museum experiences are inherently dialogic, it follows that one of the museum's most effective roles is as a forum for public discourse (Hendon, Costa and Rosenberg 1989; Hendon 1990; DiMaggio 1996; Kirchberg 1996, 2007; see also Bourdieu 1984).

The New Museology prioritized this social function of museums, particularly regarding inclusion and access. Such priority implies—if not requires—transforming our understanding of social responsibility. Traditionally underserved audiences, whose participation is essential to museums if they are to achieve broad societal engagement, enact that participation through public programs and collection practices, not as trustees or executives. Access and engagement constitute a dialectical relationship between the many underserved users and the narratives that address those users and their lived experiences. Social responsibility does not mean, to paraphrase Lola Young, inveigling users or non-users to adopt the views of elites. Rather, it requires that we 'encourage [users] to ask the awkward questions and to make self-determined critical interventions' in the museum and in the society in which it sits (Young 2002: 211). Museum practitioners should seek out those questions and join in interventions—public programs, collections, exhibitions—through which museums can advance that larger project.

History is replete with examples of dissident and subaltern writers, artists and scholars who engage in societal subversion or ideological confrontation through their work. Writers have often used metaphor to critique official society but avoid official censorship. Museum workers also find themselves working under the gaze of political authority, a condition meant to encourage self-censorship and acquiescence to what is acceptable to those in authority.

Nonetheless, we construct our sense of acceptability through practice with others, including through practices of resistance. The New Museology itself arose as a result of vocal critique by external stakeholders. The perception that a certain topic is in or out-of-bounds is likewise construed in the vocal critique by those who oppose or advocate the practice it represents.

The last several decades of American museum practice provide many examples of inclusionary public programs, curatorial committees, policy discussion groups, and other collaborations with formerly excluded or underserved persons and groups, including some of the projects described above. That same time period, however, is replete with acts of censorship that have ranged from criminalizing photographs taken by Robert Mapplethorpe, to prohibiting critique at the Smithsonian Institution of the 1945 atomic bombing of Japan (Lewis 1994; Moore 2015). This history shows that advocacy and activism by museum practitioners is neither simple nor without 'thunder and lightning'.

Public engagement of history, of science and of art *should* mean dialogical discussion and expanding the inclusion of new or infrequently encountered interpretations, including concepts of acceptability and responsibility. Through that discourse—variously subversive or confrontational—we continue to redefine and expand museum practice and further liberate that social space.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 For example: US federal legislation in 1965 mandated 'equal opportunity' for all persons seeking housing, education and employment; the word 'negro' was removed from acceptable speech; female persons were described as 'women'; newspapers ceased categorizing job notices according to gender; and so on.

2 Militant advocates of theology promoting social reaction coalesced in the latter 1970s and early 1980s to form social networks such as Focus on the Family and Promise Keepers (e.g. Focus on the Family, n.d.).

3 Political 'conservatism' and reaction to subaltern social movements was a defining characteristic of the Thatcher-Cameron regimes in the UK and the Reagan-Bush regimes in the US. The ideological adherents of those regimes continue to derogate advocacy of social equality as 'reverse racism' and 'politically correct' subversion of traditional social values. To militantly defend traditional power relationships in the US, municipal police forces have deployed heavy armament and materiel against citizens protesting abusive power, in towns such as Ferguson, Missouri (see, for example, Buchanan *et al.* 2015).

4 *Global Warming* was developed in partnership with the Environmental Defense Fund and was among the first American museum exhibitions to address climate change (Giusti 1993).

5 In yet another example of power asymmetry, the Chief Operating Officer decried efforts to provide bilingual interpretive text, arguing that those who come to the US must expect to speak English. His obstruction was not fully successful, and external stakeholders helped to sway the internal debate regarding inclusion.

6 Programs were provocatively titled: *The end of marriage: adultery in the 19th century; Teddy Roosevelt among the lumberjacks;* and *It saved my life: AIDS & reproductive rights activism and the creation of Queer politics.*

7 Planned Parenthood Federation of America describes itself as 'a nonprofit organization that provides sexual health care in the United States and globally.' It specializes in female reproductive health care, including contraception and pregnancy abortion.

8 The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports 'in 2015, 18,303 people were diagnosed with AIDS. Since the epidemic began in the early 1980s, 1,216,917 people have been diagnosed with AIDS' (USCDC 2017).

9 Similar exhibitions were organized during this period by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Denver Art Museum, Field Museum of Natural History, Royal Ontario Museum, and Victoria and Albert Museum, among others.

10 'Highly paid' is a personnel category reported to the US Internal Revenue Service in annual 990 statements. For FY-2015 AMNH president Ellen Futter's salary was reported as US$1,472,360 (Economic Research Institute 2017). An example of elite response to the *Pearls* exhibit is seen at MarthaStewart.com (2016).
11 Liberty Science Center's press release states 'E-Quest has been made possible by a $1 million grant from Exxon Corporation. This grant brings the corporation's total support of Liberty Science Center to more than $3 million since its opening' in 1994 (Liberty Science Center 1997).

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27

TAKING A POSITION

Challenging the anti-authorial turn in art curating

Lynn Wray

In 2010, as a fresh-faced PhD student, I found myself in the fortunate position of being invited by Tate Liverpool to propose ideas for a retrospective, survey exhibition, exploring the relationship between art and politics. I used this opportunity to test out if, and how, I could put my own political values and agendas into practice through the curation of an exhibition at a state-funded art institution. The resulting exhibition, *Art Turning Left: How Values Change Making 1789–2013*, ran from 8 November 2013 to 2 February 2014 (Figure 27.1).

As part of my research for *Art Turning Left*, I reviewed the growing body of literature relating to contemporary curatorial practice in art museums, galleries and biennials for examples of effective activist approaches. This literature has served to sustain an ongoing dialogue between art curators and leftist philosophers, which originated in the conferences accompanying political art exhibitions around the turn of the Millennium, such as *Documenta X*, in Kassel in 1999 and *11*, which took place in various venues in 2002. What emerged most strikingly in this discourse was an assumption that art curators *ought* to use their practice to challenge the hegemony of neoliberal ideology and the forms of democratic politics operating in neoliberal states. Yet, despite the ubiquity of this radical aim in the professional discourse, I found that curators rarely voiced this, or indeed any other political position, in the exhibitions they created. Instead, they have focused their attention on how they can experiment with the form and function of exhibitions to activate their audiences—to help constitute more critical and politically conscious viewing subjects empowered to challenge the status quo.

In this chapter, I contend that these efforts to activate exhibition visitors have been compromised by the increasing tendency of curators to employ anti-authorial strategies that do not shake the 'myth of museum neutrality' (Janes 2015). 'Anti-authorialism' is a phrase I have appropriated from Sean Burke (1998) who uses it to describe the various challenges to the idea of the author as *the* creator of an artistic work, since Roland Barthes' infamous *The Death of the Author* (1977). Here, I use it to describe the manifold strategies that curators have employed to negate, deconstruct or delegate their own authorial control over the exhibition in the name of viewer empowerment. By focusing

FIGURE 27.1 *Art Turning Left: How Values Change Making 1789–2013*, Tate Liverpool, 8 November 2013–2 February 2014.
Photograph © Tate, 2018; photography by Roger Sinek.

on the effect that such strategies have on the exhibition visitors, I seek to demonstrate that anti-authorialism is a misdirected and often counter-productive route to boosting the political agency of the visitor. I argue that curators might better mobilise *and* activate audiences by instead harnessing the most unique, engaging and affecting attributes of the exhibition medium to articulate a political position. I draw on my experience at Tate Liverpool, to highlight what institutional beliefs and practices might inhibit curators using this approach in museums.

Anti-authorialism

The anti-authorial turn has been spurred by a critique of the 'post–political condition' by post-Marxist philosophers, such as Jacques Ranciere, Chantal Mouffe and Slavoj Žižek. Their critique centres on a belief that the consensus-driven, technocratic politics operating in neoliberal states has disenfranchised people from civic life and prevented them from thinking politically. The contention is that neoliberal elites have maintained their hegemony over global politics by successfully propagating the idea that there is 'no alternative' to the existing ways of doing things and by presenting politics as an administrative procedure carried out solely by experts. Progressive art curators influenced by post-political critique have, therefore, explored how exhibitions could be used to subvert the idea that there is 'no alternative.' Rather than use the exhibition as a technology to agitate for their own vision of an alternative political future, these curators have tended to

focus on how they could alter the form and function of exhibitions to facilitate greater democratic engagement.

Political scientist Chantal Mouffe's concepts of 'articulation' and 'agonism' have provided much of the theoretical grounding for the ways in which curators have attempted to activate audiences. For Laclau and Mouffe (1985) the meaning of all social institutions, including museums and their exhibitions, are formed through precarious 'moments' of articulation—the process of producing meaning by bringing together certain elements (people, objects, words, and so on) in a specific way. As the word 'moments' indicates, the social function of institutions is never fixed and can always be transformed by a process of disarticulation (taking apart existing elements) and rearticulation (putting them back together in a different way). Mouffe (2010) argues that art museums could be rearticulated as forums for 'agonistic pluralism'—a form of politics which, in contrast to consensual models of democracy, sees social antagonism and conflict as potentially productive forces. It is the articulation of genuinely conflicting positions that she argues (2000, 2005) will stimulate the political thinking and the debate necessary for social change. This emphasis on bringing a plurality of different voices into contact with each other, has prompted progressive curators to examine what might repress other voices being heard within the exhibition space. Most commonly, they have identified their own authorial power as that central hegemonic force that restricts others from speaking and prevents visitors from thinking for themselves.

Francesco Bonami's curation of the 2003 Venice Biennale (*Dreams and Conflicts: The Dictatorship of the Viewer*) provides a clear example of how Mouffe's ideas have been interpreted by curators to necessitate a negation of their own authorship. Bonami (2003: 2–3) argued that the Venice Biennale could be rearticulated as a forum for counter-neoliberal resistance, if the 'dictatorship of the curator' was dispersed to create a 'dictatorship of the viewer.' He symbolically gave up his authorial control by delegating the curatorial project to ten independent guest curators to do whatever they wished with. In a statement that clearly evoked 'agonistic pluralism,' he argued that 'today's exhibitions, like a Greek tragedy, must address the clash of irreconcilable elements' and 'allow multiplicity, diversity and contradiction to exist inside the structure of the exhibition' (ibid.: 2). The exhibition should no longer resolve contradictions into one synthetic (or singularly authored) concept but, instead, allow the 'madness of conflicts' to play out. His activism was rooted in the idea that more active readership (or viewership) would stimulate critical thinking and prompt political action. With no singular 'grand narrative' offered, the curator would not impinge on the viewer's ability to think 'against the grain' and they could 'reduce the influence of imposed, pre-packaged hegemonic views' (ibid.: 2).

Agonistic pluralism also had a strong influence on the 'discursive' or 'relational' exhibitions that emerged in the early 2000s. In these exhibitions the facilitation of social relationships and conversations are given primacy over the display of art objects and the articulation of curatorial narratives. Though activist intentions lay behind the experimental structuring of these exhibitions, the curators purposefully avoid articulating their own political position in the space of the exhibition itself. Here, the curator rescinds their authorship and instead positions himself or herself as an impartial facilitator, envisaging the exhibition space as a neutral container where others' political values and opinions can be played out. A case in point is the open-ended series of research exhibitions, *Utopia Station*, that took place at various locations between 2003–2007. The curators presented a series of flexible structures designed by artists to facilitate collective discussion about what an ideal society might look

like.[1] This was positioned within the professional art world as counter neoliberal activism: an 'invitation to self-organise' against the idea that there is 'no alternative' (Obrist cited in Griffin 2003). They aimed to recuperate the concept of 'utopia' as a valid means of imagining and working towards a better future society. Yet, the curators (Nesbit, Obrist and Tiravanija 2003) were clear that they deliberately intended to 'leave the definition of Utopia to others' to avoid creating a hierarchy of viewpoints that could stifle democratic debate.

Curators influenced by Mouffe have also tried to create more dialogical exhibition structures by employing anti-authorial strategies derived more directly from literary, post-structuralist techniques. Mouffe's articulation theory stems from the same post-structuralist tradition as Roland Barthes who originally proclaimed 'the birth of the reader is the death of the author.' The curators of the 29th Sao Paulo Bienal, *There is always a cup of sea to sail in* (2010), for example, sought to empower the visitors to think critically and politically by purposefully unravelling their own, carefully constructed, curatorial narrative. Despite developing six themes to guide the selection of works, curators Moacir dos Anjos and Agnaldo Farias decided not to physically group these work together; rather they were distributed in a seemingly random arrangement throughout the building. They hoped that the viewer would understand these themes as a conversation, or dialogue, in which they could actively participate—that ebbed and flowed through the space. Architect Marta Bogéa was also employed to develop an exhibition structure that would avoid leading the viewer around a space in a predetermined way. She opened up the space by creating a diagonal grid system of freestanding walls, which conferred the impression of a structure blown open. They, thus, applied the technique of deconstruction, in retrospect, to their own original curatorial narrative, in a bid to subvert the usual hierarchical relationship between curator and viewer.

The examples above appear to be exemplary manifestations of a curatorial activism modelled on Mouffe's agonistic pluralism. However, a critical analysis of these exhibitions highlights a number of reasons why undoing, delegating or avoiding curatorial authorship is a problematic means of activating audiences. Firstly, anti-authorial approaches often create new barriers to comprehension that can work to alienate, rather than empower, exhibition visitors. Secondly, they fail to work with the unique attributes and limitations of the exhibition medium that make them such potentially mobilising forces in the first place. And finally, anti-authorial approaches reinforce the impression that the museum is impartial and objective. This can only work to inhibit the process of critical consciousness raising that the curators are striving for.

The critical response to *Dreams and Conflict*, for example, suggested that the exhibition resembled an overwhelming cacophony where individual voices were hard to discern through the din. The multiple viewpoints and fragmented structure were intended to increase the visitor's agency, by offering them the opportunity to organise their own experience and think for themselves. However, the chaotic dissemination of multiple messages—the assault on the senses—made orientation, thinking and reflection difficult. This worked to alienate even the most experienced visitors, who struggled to engage with the content or the concepts.[2] Decentring authorship by delegating it to a wider team of curators, therefore, simply transferred agency horizontally to Bonami's curatorial peers, rather than vertically to the viewer. Similarly, my own experience of visiting the 29th Sao Paulo Bienal, was that it was exceptionally difficult to undergo the process of self-determination the curators intended. The open plan exhibition design meant that there were so many objects

impinging on other objects that it was hard to focus. This combined with the lack of contextual information made it difficult to make meaningful connections between the works. The curators may have given me the agency to determine my own course around the exhibition space, and dip in and out as I chose, but it did not effectively engage me in a discourse about the relationship between aesthetics and politics, or expand my critical capacity.[3] Hence, by disarticulating the themes, and by taking away any interpretive materials that might inhibit autonomous individual thought, the curators unwittingly created new barriers to comprehension.

The critical responses to *Utopia Station* revealed that a negation of content could be as disempowering for the visitor as too much. They indicated that there was little engagement with the artist-designed platforms after the opening events. Visitors were confused by the lack of content: without it there was little to react to or to talk about. Hence, the structures, rather than facilitating social relations and collective discussion, tended to isolate those who did not understand what they were *supposed* to be doing, and how they were *supposed* to be doing it. Because anti-authorial approaches place the responsibility for making meaning firmly in the hands of the viewer-as-reader, there is a danger that any failure to construct meaning—to have an emotional, critical or political response to what is presented—could be misrecognised by visitors as the result of their own limitations. The reviews suggested that *Utopia Station* ultimately offered nothing more than an empty political gesture, gift-wrapped for an elitist art world audience. It failed to suggest any coherent way forward that could forge the kind of unity capable of driving a viable form of political resistance to neoliberalism. Ultimately, these exhibitions resembled the kind of chaos of 'pure dissemination' that Mouffe (2008) herself warns against. By refusing to take a position or articulate a vision of an alternative future, curators risk leaving exhibitions as disarticulated sites of openness. In doing so, I suggest, they leave the ground open to non-progressive forces and right-wing extremists who tend to be less reserved about asserting their own beliefs and values.

Deconstructive approaches also overstate the authorial control a curator has over the structuring of a narrative. However fitting an analogy between the exhibition form and a literary text is, it is important to point out for the purposes of actually producing exhibitions, the exhibition is not a written text. It is primarily, a visual and spatial medium which is experienced multi-sensorially. Moreover, whereas a writer is free to select any word they choose in any meaningful sequence, the curator is extremely limited. Many artworks are too expensive or fragile to transport and loan requests are frequently rejected. The media, size, shape and conservation requirements of artworks dictate where they can sit in a space. An exhibition will, thus, always be a compromised narrative, skewed by these omissions and considerations. Furthermore, no matter how far the curator has attempted to dictate a set narrative or route through the space, the authorship of an exhibition is already decentred by the viewer. An exhibition is an amalgamation of existing 'texts' or artworks, which already contain multiple signs, with multiple meanings and possible interpretations. The viewer has the freedom to move about as they choose in the exhibition space, and may completely ignore interpretive texts without necessarily negating the quality of their experience. Anti-authorialism is therefore, I argue, a misdirected approach to viewer empowerment because it is based on a perceived need to open up a text that was never legible, stable or closed in the first place.

Perhaps the most critical issue with anti-authorial approaches is that, by positioning the curator as a neutral facilitator, they actively reinforce the idea that museums are and ought to be apolitical. Indeed, the likely reason that public art institutions have so readily

accommodated anti-authorial strategies is that they do not challenge the idea that museums are neutral and objective. This notion remains entrenched in museum practice despite the vast body of research published in the last three decades, that has demonstrated that they are always deeply ideological spaces whether this is openly acknowledged or not (Sandell 2017). As Robert R. Janes (2009: 59) notes, museums..., museums have vastly increased their reliance on corporate funding, yet failed to acknowledge that accepting corporate funding is not a neutral act, it helps to reproduce the neoliberal ideology capitalist enterprises are grounded in. The principle of neutrality remains important to the institution not only because it protects them from accusations of political bias and corruption, but also because it creates an image of scientific authority and objectivity that bolsters the status of, and public trust in, their work. Yet, there is an obvious contradiction in enacting a practice which aims to increase the critical, political consciousness of the viewer, within a space that makes a foundational principle out of obscuring the ideological and political nature of its own work. Anti-authorial approaches *cannot* constitute more critical and politically conscious viewing subjects empowered to themselves challenge the status quo, *because* they willfully obscure the roles that museums play in reinforcing the very hegemonic structures that are working to prevent political thinking.

Exhibition-as-argument

As theorist Mieke Bal (2006) argues, the institutional exhibition is, by definition, an argument through which the curator consciously tries to produce an effect on the viewer (political, critical, emotional or spiritual), through their choices, placements, juxtapositions and texts. The curator as 'the exposing subject' is always making, not only, objects public, but also their own subjective opinions and value judgements. It would make more sense, then, for curators, to harness their symbolic power and use it as a means of political influence, rather than trying to neutralise their own privileged position. Surely, if museums want to bring about change then they could allow curators to use the means of influence that they have at their disposal: the exhibition.

Leftist exhibition-makers from outside the curatorial profession have often implicitly understood that exhibitions will always be a construction; an 'impure' mediation that purposefully influences the viewer. Rather than imagining themselves as neutral facilitators, such exhibition-makers have sought to instill the viewer with more political agency by finding ways to make the exhibition more legible, more direct and more affective. When socialist polymath, Otto Neurath, curated exhibitions in the 1920s for the Gesellschafts und Wirtschaftsmuseum in Vienna, he understood the task of improving the legibility of exhibitions to be an important socio-political project that would help instill in the working class citizens of 'red Vienna,' the political agency to participate in civic decision-making. For Neurath, the unique property of the exhibition, which made it a potentially emancipatory medium, was that it facilitated comparison and contemplation on the viewer's own terms and, thus, allowed them to carefully formulate their own arguments, in relation to the material presented. He explained:

> Visitors, for example, can stand around an exhibit, look for longer or shorter times, compare one with another. A filmgoer is presented with a set sequence; a scene appears and goes by quickly, he cannot turn back the pages.
>
> *(Neurath [1933] 1973: 238)*

Neurath raises an important point: the unique properties of the exhibition medium mean that it is possible to present political arguments without them becoming authoritarian. Indeed, the articulation of a strong argument could better enable critical thinking by providing something for visitors to locate their own position in relation to.

Bal (2006) argues that for the exhibition-as-argument to function as an empowering strategy it is necessary to foreground the authorial voice of the curator. Acknowledging the curator's first-personhood, and thus their subjectivity, in the in-gallery texts makes it possible to draw the viewer into a more equal and dynamic political dialogue. Labels written in the first-person, bringing the curator's intention to the fore, give the viewer the opportunity to engage in a dialogue with the curator despite their literal absence. Far from being authoritarian, such an approach cuts through the institutional authority and indicates to the viewer it is something they can either agree or disagree with. If the visitor understands that the exhibition is the subjective articulation of real people, they are much more likely to question both the legitimacy of the discourse and the authority presenting it.

The curatorial collective, What, How and for Whom (WHW), demonstrated in their edition of the Istanbul Biennial, *What Keeps Mankind Alive?* (2009), how this could work in practice. WHW consistently exaggerated their status as authors to open up their polemic to critique. In their original press conference, for example, they literally 'took a stand' on four chairs, dressed all in black before a dramatic red curtain. WHW identified the idea of the exhibition as a neutral space as the hegemonic concept that most needed to be challenged: 'the real, objective point of view is one that emphasises its position' (2009: 101). They asked themselves: 'was it not somehow possible ... to give the public some form of "agency," ... boost their capacity for action?' by 'explicitly turning the exhibition into a propagandist tool' (ibid.: 95). WHW carefully defined and articulated their own political position—a revised communism—to give the viewer something to mobilise around or react against. It was this clear assertion of an alternative ideological position that comprised the critical moment of rearticulation that is so lacking in anti-authorial exhibitions.

Art Turning Left

I turn now to discuss how these issues played out in my own practice and the creation of a specific exhibition, *Art Turning Left*. Because I was operating in a curatorial team at Tate Liverpool, who did not necessarily share the same specific political agendas as I had, I could not construct the exhibition as a partisan argument in the way that WHW did. I took a different approach to 'taking a position.' I used my own political values to guide the rationale for every aspect of the production of the exhibition; developing alternative approaches to interpretation, display and access. I also used this principle to devise an exhibition concept, which examined how different artists had put leftist values (such as collectivism, equality or solidarity) into practice through the way they chose to make, distribute and display their work. The central thesis of the exhibition was that left-wing values had driven-forward major developments in art practice, from collective working methods to experiments with alternative economies such as 'gifting.'[4] Both concept and method were intended to challenge the technocratic framing of politics as something done only by politicians and to point to ways in which visitors could be 'political' in their day-to-day life and work.

The exhibition was not left wing propaganda, but it was activist as it emerged out of my own political agenda connected to my own broadly socialist position. The focus on

value-driven politics was, for example, motivated by my belief that if the UK Labour Party reaffirmed their own values they could better differentiate themselves from the centre-right.[5] I hoped that the focus on the Left would act as a polemic device that would stir some 'passion' into stale consensus-orientated politics and trigger a debate about the future of the Left. For this concept to empower people to think more politically, I argued that it was essential that we used the terms 'left' and 'right' and spoke from the first person ('I' or 'we') in the in-gallery texts. The in-gallery texts would be positioned as statements of intent, describe our rationale for including the works and pose questions to the visitor that invited critical judgements about the political efficacy of the work. The purpose of this was to make clear that it is people, not a 'faceless' authority, that made these choices—and hence that they are contestable. The visitor would take on the role of 'critic' rather than 'viewer.' This is a crucial distinction, as it sets up a completely different dynamic between the curator and the visitor. It assumes an equality of intelligence from the outset.

WHW shifted the parameters of curatorial practice by opening up the possibility of an openly partisan curatorship. However, their exhibition was produced in the context of an international biennial which has a different institutional context to the art museum. If the museum exhibition is to function as a technology for the articulation of political arguments, the institution would have to be willing to accommodate polemic language and subjectivity in exhibition texts. Though it was not possible for me to construct the exhibition-as-argument, reflecting on how Tate received and implemented my proposals provides insight into how willing museums might be to break with the idea that their programming is impartial and objective.

Tate Liverpool were surprisingly accommodating of my ideas. There was no obligation to take on this subject or consider any of the strategies I proposed. Indeed, they were bold to accept this proposal when they were already taking a substantial risk by letting a doctoral student co-curate an exhibition. However, as the time came to announce the exhibition to the press, doubts crept in about the appropriateness of focusing on the left. Tate (the wider institution) declared that they could no longer support the exhibition if the word 'left' was included in the title. The curatorial team were asked to submit alternative ideas. The reasons for this self-censorship were never clear. Allusions were made to threats from corporate funders. And Tate would have been understandably wary of feeding into the perception that arts institutions are inherently left-wing: right-wing parties have often used this perception as a rationale for reducing the public funding of such institutions.[6] The risk to funding clearly creates an ethical dilemma for the museum: would it be right to jeopardise the sustainability of the museum for the sake of one exhibition? However, the justification that was directly invoked related to democratic legitimacy: that 'national museums' had a civic responsibility to represent all tax-payers equally. It was argued that the focus on the left could be perceived as unrepresentative, or even exclusionary. The fear was that it could undermine the public trust in the museum, a trust that was assumed to be contingent on the political neutrality of the museum. Yet, specifically refusing to use the term 'left' in relation to an exhibition about 'the left' is not a neutral decision, it is a political stance. This, I argue, suggests that it is *the appearance* of neutrality rather than *actually being* neutral that is most important.

I persisted to advocate for the inclusion of the word 'left.' Tate agreed to gauge public reactions through an online questionnaire. The vast majority of respondents, 94%, (Wray 2016) had stated that they were not put off by the left-wing focus of the

exhibition or concerned about political bias. Indeed, the clarity of the political subject was what particularly resonated with many people. Some respondents self-identified with the theme, stating that they found it appealing as they are 'a socialist,' 'left-wing' or 'working class' (ibid.). On the basis of this evidence, Tate agreed to a revised title: *Art Turning Left*. Similarly, the visitor comments recorded during the exhibition indicated that we could have been more direct in our articulation of leftist politics. Only one visitor complained about the focus on the 'left.' Yet, many more suggested that the exhibition was not political enough. One visitor wrote, for example: 'this exhibit is tame. Tate—where's your fire.'

Though Tate Liverpool has a particularly strong track record of experimental and visitor-generated interpretation they chose not to risk the credibility of the museum by adopting my proposal to use the first person in the in-gallery texts. The curatorial team, instead, decided in favour of a strategy of organising the whole exhibition around a series of critical questions such as 'does it matter who makes art?' These questions were used as the titles of each section, and the wall panels employed to demonstrate how the included art related to these questions. The captions ultimately followed the standard institutional template: objective statements of fact, written in the third person. They did not connect the questions explicitly to leftist ideology and neither indicated who was asking the questions, nor offered a position in response to which the visitor could react. Though both audience research and reviews suggested that our chosen approach stimulated a high level of critical self-reflection, the atmosphere in the space tended to be staid and quiet. Visitors appeared concentrated, contemplative and introspective but it did not get people's political passions burning or stimulate any kind of collective discussion or action.

These responses led me to question how far the public really demanded neutrality from the museum. Though other research does indicate a strong desire for impartiality, it also shows that this is underscored by utopian beliefs about the museum's ability to offer untainted, purely factual information, and to represent everybody's 'values and truths' equally (Cameron 2008). Hence, whilst people might desire wholly representative, author-itative and objective information, it is not ethical to suggest this is what the museum can offer. We must either agree that public funding necessitates a firm maintenance of a neutral position in all aspects of a museum's programming, or invalidate this idea so that museum curators, can openly pursue activist agendas and articulate political arguments inside the institutional space. The two positions are irreconcilable.

My experience at Tate indicated that there would need to be a 'sea change' in thinking about the social function of public museums for the concept of exhibition-as-argument to take hold. As a collaborative doctoral award student, working across and between the university and museum worlds, I became acutely aware of the differences between the roles I inhabited in each. At the university I was *expected* to use my research to construct a clear argument and present this in my own name; at the museum it was considered inappropriate to take a position.

Yet museums are not constitutionally bound to be apolitical or objective and the balance of public, self-generated and private funding is not dissimilar to a university. Indeed many museums, including Tate, have already formally established themselves as independent research organisations, to enable them to apply for funding from UK research councils. Many museums now initiate their own research projects and some even edit and distribute their own academic journals. One possible route to opening up

the museum to activist practice would therefore be for museums to forcibly reposition themselves as academic, knowledge-producing institutions akin to universities. However, to do this it would be necessary for the museum to reframe their exhibitions as the speech act of the curator (and potentially, collaborating external groups) by identifying the curator as the author and using the first-person voice in interpretative texts. If this idea took hold, I argue, it would enable museum curators to properly pursue activist agendas and voice their political arguments.

Notes

1 At the 2003 Venice Biennale this comprised of a plywood stage designed by Rikjit Tiravanija, seating designed by Liam Gillick, a bar operated by Superflex and toilets designed by Atelier van Lieshout. A poster project was facilitated by the online journal *e-flux*.
2 Lisa Dennison stated (Vogel 2003) it 'was confusing and hyperstimulating' and Adrian Searle (2003) 'This clamour, you say, is how the world is, and art is part of it. But for the spectator to deal with all this, we have to be cruel, or be swept along in the mass. We need to be slowed down.'
3 It must be acknowledged that this disorientation was mitigated by the incredible guided tours that were offered to anyone who wanted them in the exhibition space. These tour were tailored to the interests and needs of each individual or group. However, not everyone visiting the exhibition would have taken one of these tours.
4 The surrealist artist Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio, for example, developed his 'industrial painting' technique as part of his anti-capitalist mission of abolishing alienating work. These incredibly long paintings were sold by the metre in street markets in order to bypass the art world.
5 I shared Mouffe's perspective that there is an urgent need to revivify the political left, in order to revitalise democracy as a whole.
6 In the Netherlands, for example, state funding of art institutions was cut on the basis that they are playgrounds for left-wing intellectual posturing (Esche 2011).

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28

MEMORY ACTIVISM AND THE HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL INSTITUTIONS OF THE 21ST CENTURY

Diana I. Popescu

Introduction

The vantage point of several decades of sustained memorial work dedicated to the Holocaust offers sufficient ground to explore the meanings of activism—at both the level of language use and of practice. The current memory work would not have had the global relevance it now enjoys, were it not for the long-term activism of Holocaust survivors and their families. An important advancement of the practice of 'memory activism' led by survivors (see Katriel 2016) was the Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust (2000) which saw 31 state governments in Europe and abroad formally institutionalise Holocaust memory and education in their societies.

Today, Holocaust museums form part of a broad network of museums of 'difficult knowledge' (Lehrer, Milton and Patterson 2011), some of which have joined the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience. Founded in 1999, this independent organisation comprises over 200 institutions in 55 countries including museums, memory initiatives and historic sites—all 'united by their common commitment to connect past to present, *memory to action*' (International Coalition of Sites of Conscience n.d., emphasis added). This commitment is prominently reflected in Holocaust memorial institutions whose 'common mission,' observed Paul Williams, is 'to prevent future horrific suffering ... [and] to mobilize visitors as both historical witnesses and agents of present and future political vigilance' (Williams 2011: 220).

This chapter reflects on the agency of leading Holocaust memorial institutions faced with an ongoing challenge to turn memory into action in the spaces they inhabit, and for the audiences they wish to mobilise. I will follow two lines of inquiry aiming to first analyse the language used to construct activist discourses in mission statements, and second, to distil some prevalent practices of activism as reflected in educational and commemoration activities and reflect more broadly on the performativity of such practices. The term performativity (in this context, the performativity of Holocaust memory) derives from philosopher John L. Austin's conceptualisation of 'performatives' as speech acts which have perlocutionary function (i.e. an act of speaking or writing intended to produce an effect—for example, an act of persuading or

convincing). When uttered in certain contexts, performatives can change an aspect of one's social status or identity in the world (Austin 1962).

Performativity has gained influence due to philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler's ground-breaking works on the performativity of gender. For Butler, 'performativity starts to describe a set of processes that produce ontological effects, that is, that work to bring into being certain kinds of realities or, . . . that lead to certain kinds of socially binding consequences' (Butler 2010: 147).

While one must duly acknowledge the good intentions of memorial institutions to inspire visitors to endorse an activist stance, by actively opposing human rights violations, discrimination, intolerance and prejudice, one must also examine the performative functions of activism, and the strategies used by memorial institutions to implement it. Given the prominent presence of activist narratives in memorial organisations' mission statements, some difficult, yet urgent questions need asking such as: How effective are the discourses on memory activism in building solidarity among individuals and communities? Under what conditions can an activist discourse transform into an activist stance? How far are memorial museums willing to go to endorse contemporary causes? Can activism go wrong, and produce social or inter-ethnic unrest, perpetuate states of conflict, or even encourage complacency with the status quo? Finally, what do memorial institutions mean by agency and activism? Such questions cannot possibly be answered in great length in the short space of this chapter, yet, their presence here serves both to frame the discussion and to draw attention to the complex field of inquiry about to be entered.

Agency and activism

When thinking about agency and activism, it is useful to recall that these terms share etymological origins in the medieval Latin words *agere*, which means 'to set in motion, drive forward, to do, perform,' but also to 'incite to action, keep in movement,' and *agentia* which means 'effective, powerful.' In line with such understandings, the agency of a memorial institution can mean to hold a position of power from which it acts, but it can also refer to a form of acting (i.e. activism) which enables the institution to gain a position of power. Activism has been commonly associated with groups or with individuals who lack political representation, and it has been discussed in relation to social and civil rights movements, black power movements of the 1960s, and to the feminist, gay and lesbian movements of the 1970s and the 1980s.

In post-Holocaust contexts, activism is associated with the victims of World War II, and those who survived the Nazi genocide and strove for public recognition. For many decades, however, survivors' stories remained known only in their own small communities (for reasons to be discussed elsewhere). Since the late 1970s and the 1980s, and because of the popularisation of the Holocaust in mass culture (e.g. NBC's TV series *The Holocaust* 1978), survivors of the Holocaust gained public status. Their struggles for recognition and justice were no longer only individual struggles but came to be adopted and adapted on a grander scale and at a collective level, by nation states that held different historical positions in World War II. The activist work of a few influential survivors, especially Elie Wiesel and Simon Wiesenthal served as a model for developing activist-centred, Holocaust education.

Individual forms of activism underwent a process of institutionalisation, most apparent in Holocaust memorial institutions' mission statements—which I shall soon turn to. Prior to this, I would like to consider the potential risks of the institutionalisation of activism in memorial museums. For these purposes, I invoke again Judith Butler's and political ethicist, Michael L. Gross's, reflections on agency and activism. In Butler's complex vision on the constitution of gender, agency is most commonly perceived as a process which exists in a highly regulatory frame (i.e. a state of normativity). For example, in Butler's work 'normative heterosexuality' would represent the regulatory frame for the constitution of a gendered identity.

Agency is associated with a form of subversion which leads to different political ends than the ones anticipated within the regulatory frame. Notably, too, subversion and agency are conditioned, if not determined, by broader regulatory or normative discourses (such as racialised discourses, see Salih 2002). If we take such reflections to illustrate some relevant aspects of agency, then we can also ask more critically about the nature of agency performed in the regulatory contexts provided by Holocaust memorial cultures. When does a certain kind of activism become normative? Can it then serve as a measurement for judging more subversive forms of action?

Michael L. Gross's *Ethics and Activism: The Theory and Practice of Political Morality* (1997) invokes the activist work of Dutch and French rescuers of Jews during World War II, Americans in the pro-life and pro-choice movements, and Israeli supporters of retaining or returning occupied lands—to discuss the meaning of personal autonomy and social activism in relation to morality. In particular, he invites us to consider the existence of activism in the lack of a clearly defined morality. Gross (1997: 18–19) suggests that:

> Activism is not driven by moral maturity as [other philosophers] Rawls, Habermas and Mill suggest. Instead parochialism and conventionality are the dominant forces behind ethical activism. . . . Knowing how individuals can act, helps us understand how they ought to act. Understanding their limitations forces us to rethink our image of the ideal citizen and his political obligations.

Hence, what drives individuals to become involved in activist work may not always be informed by ethical or social responsibility. Activism can result from a passive acceptance of one's social roles (i.e. one's inherited or gained social position in society), rather than from a more desirable active embrace of such social roles. Activism can also result from normative obedience, rather than only from a constant re-evaluation of social obligations.

In light of such insights, I would like to consider how several Holocaust memorial institutions in the USA, the UK and Israel utilise the language of activism in connection to their publics. These institutions include the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. (USHMM), the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles (MOT), the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center (Illinois HM), the Dallas Holocaust Museum Center for Education and Tolerance (DHM), and the Holocaust Memorial Center Florida (HMC Florida). In the UK, Holocaust education charities include the Anne Frank Trust UK (AFT), the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust (HMDT, London) and, in Israel, the national memorial museum, Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, and the Ghetto Fighters' House in Haifa (GFH).

Activism in mission statements of Holocaust memorial institutions

Agency has been connected to the transformative potential of memorial museums to create 'a narrative powerful enough to initiate in the visitor a change in consciousness' (Hansen-Glucklich 2014: 2–3), or to an affective pedagogy (see Witcomb 2013: 255–71), which works to 'mobilize a productive affective response to the representation of violent pasts,' and to 'provoke sustained attention, concern and corrective action' (Simon 2011: 206). If this type of pedagogy works, it would position the contemporary public in a role of active social responsibility. In practice, however, such agency has proven to be highly elusive. As Roger I. Simon has pointed out, 'unfortunately there is ample evidence that an awareness and moral assessment of previous unjust violence and brutality does not automatically constitute a bridge for linking the past and present so as to diminish the recurrence of injustice' (ibid.: 207).

Furthermore, Holocaust scholars have expressed concern about the impact of Holocaust education globally. Yehuda Bauer argued that Holocaust education does not necessarily lead to the prevention of future mass atrocities or genocides, but this should not diminish its relevance. Education is part of 'a general attempt to create a world that will not be "good," but possibly slightly better than the one we live in now' (Bauer 2014: 181).

In what follows, I proceed with a linguistic analysis to highlight recurrent patterns of speech, and to determine the nature of the relationships that museums aim to build with their publics. My analysis of mission statements (retrieved from the institutional webpages) shows that a central goal of many Holocaust institutions is unsurprisingly related to memorialising the victims of the Nazi genocide, including the Jews, the Roma of Eastern and Southeast European origin, the Sinti (Romani minority groups living in Western and Central Europe), homosexuals, and other persecuted groups. This is apparent, with a degree of variation, in statements like 'to keep Holocaust memory alive' (USHMM); 'the founding principle: Remember the past' (Illinois HM), and 'must not only remind us of the past, but remind us to act' (MOT).

Concerned with 'the fate of Holocaust commemoration among members of the fourth generation (both Jewish and non-Jewish)', Yad Vashem (n.d.) 'places a heavy emphasis on educating the younger generations about the Holocaust.' In the UK, the HMDT displays a staggering number of 13 clauses in the statement of purpose, among which the fourth goal is to 'ensure that the horrendous crimes, racism and victimisation committed during the Holocaust are neither forgotten nor repeated, whether in Europe or elsewhere in the world' (HMDT n.d.-a).

Notably, memorial goals are less prominent in statements by MOT, which is illustrated in the careful phrasing 'it must not only. . ., but. . .,' and in the mission statements of museums in Dallas and Florida. The latter prioritise educational and moral citizenship aims, having the 'ultimate goal of developing a moral and just community through its extensive outreach of educational and cultural programs' (HMC, Florida), and 'teaching the history of the Holocaust and advancing human rights' (DHM). Alternatively, the Ghetto Fighters' House defines its mission of commemoration in collaborative terms, stating 'to work together with institutions of research and commemoration in Israel and abroad in order to increase awareness of the universal significance of the Holocaust' (GFH n.d.-a). The Anne Frank Trust UK's goals are to 'empower young people with the knowledge, skills and confidence to challenge all forms of prejudice and discrimination' (Anne Frank Trust UK n.d.).

The language of activism that follows such statements appears in connection to the central goals to memorialise, albeit to different levels of prominence. This language involves the presence of terms usually associated with a militant/activist discourse. There is a clear preference for perlocutionary speech acts which, as mentioned earlier, are used to elicit behavioural responses. This includes verbs such as: 'confront,' 'promote,' 'prevent' (USHMM), 'transform,' as in 'transform the future' and 'combat' (HM Illinois), 'to act,' 'to prevent,' 'challenge,' 'confront' (MOT), 'combating' (HMC, Florida), 'advancing,' 'combat' (DHM, Dallas), 'fight together against' (GFH, Haifa), 'empower,' and 'challenge' (AFT, UK), and 'need for vigilance,' 'to oppose' (HMDT, UK).

These uses present us with the promise of performativity, as museums aspire to mobilise the agency of their visitors. These imperatives are connected to recurrent and well-defined museum goals to combat core sources of conflict and violence in the world, which include 'hatred' and 'genocide' (USHMM), 'hatred, prejudice, indifference' (HM Illinois), 'anti-Semitism, racism, prejudice' (HMC, Florida), 'prejudice, hatred and indifference' (DHM, Dallas), 'hatred, instances of racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and denial of the Holocaust' (GFH, Haifa), 'all forms of prejudice and discrimination' (AFT, UK), and 'racism, antisemitism, victimisation and genocide' (HMTD, UK).

These harmful expressions of human behaviour are contrasted with positive values which memorial museums frame in similarly mobilising terms, using words such as 'inspire' and 'promote human dignity in a constantly changing world' (USHMM), 'transform the future' (MOT), 'provide Jewish youngsters with the history of the Holocaust from a Jewish perspective' (Yad Vashem), 'assume responsibility for change' (MOT); 'developing a moral and just community' and 'teach the principles of good citizenship' (HMC, Florida), 'advancing human rights' (DHM), 'intensify commitment to the values of liberty, human dignity, tolerance, and democracy' (GFH, Haifa), 'empower each individual to take a stand against it, to embrace positive values, personal responsibility, and respect for others' (AFT, UK), and last, 'promote a democratic and tolerant society,' 'highlight the values of a tolerant and diverse society based on the notions of universal dignity and equal rights and responsibilities for all its citizens,' and 'assert a continuing commitment to oppose racism...' (HMDT, UK).

Two distinct strands of activist practice emerge from these citations: one deals with the museum's efforts to oppose and combat, and the other with the museum's commitments to promote, advance, inspire, and empower their visitors. Hence, these mission statements collectively construct an institutionalised vision of activism wherein museums tend to position themselves as both catalysts and as agents of change.

Audiences are, for the most part, defined in inclusive terms such as 'people of all backgrounds' (MOT), 'people of all ages, religions and backgrounds' (HMC, Florida), 'wide audiences in Israel and across the globe' (GFH, Haifa), and 'all citizens—without distinction' (HMDT, UK). A few museums address specific audience groups such as 'citizens and leaders' (USHMM), 'younger generations' of Jews (Yad Vashem), and 'young people' (AFT, UK).

These forms of address do not necessarily mean that these institutions neglect other groups. In fact, most are frequently visited by young people on school visits and, depending on their location, some receive many tourists on a regular basis. These forms of address work to shape what audiences should be or should represent, namely a community united through ideals of citizenship and committed to values of 'human dignity' (USHMM), 'liberty, human dignity, tolerance, democracy' (DHM, Dallas), or as communities which cultivate their Jewish identities (Yad Vashem).

The relationship established between museums and audiences is a contractual one, based on the agreement to commit to 'keep the memory of the Holocaust alive.' This works to create the very foundation of what has been referred to as 'a civic religion' (Allwork 2015). Such commitment is made manifest in a range of educational exhibitions and initiatives which claim to place visitors at their centre, by inviting them to take a more active stance. I will now look at two recurrent practices used by several memorial institutions to urge their visitors to get engaged in memory activism, through a) the call to stand up, and b) the ritual of making pledges.

Standing up: activism practised in and outside the museum setting

In the USA, a notable example of a programme that encourages individual forms of activism is the Florida Holocaust Museum's *UpStanders: Stand Up to Bullying* which, since its inception in 2010, has drawn more than 20,000 students from the 6th and 7th grades. The programme claims to 'empower young people to combat bullying,' by studying examples of prejudice and by providing students with role models of 'upstanders,' such as rescuers during the Holocaust. This anti-bullying prevention programme starts with the 6th grade students' visit to the museum with the goal to learn about 'the Holocaust and how it relates to human rights and American ideals,' and to 'explore how prejudice and bias can escalate into violence and discrimination and discover the power of speaking out against bullying.'

This session is later followed with a school visit by a museum worker who hands out to students a 'toolkit' designed to help them recognise bullying, and to identify methods to intervene and prevent it. The stories of Holocaust rescuers are meant to inspire students to take on the message that they 'can become an UpStander, not a bystander' (FHM n.d.). This programme is one among many other anti-bullying initiatives, including MOT's 'Point of view diner' exhibition which is a re-creation of a 1950s diner that 'serves' a menu of controversial topics on video jukeboxes and uses interactive technology to engage students in conversations on personal responsibility' (MOT n.d.).

A broad range of learning activities and resources are built around the concept of 'upstanding,' including the Dallas Holocaust Museum's 'upstander connection blog' and, more importantly, the Illinois Holocaust Museum's *Take a Stand Center* which opened in November 2017. It 'provide[s] an immersive, empowering visitor experience through its Survivor Stories Theatre, interactive Upstander Gallery, and action-oriented Take A Stand Lab' (Business Wire 2016). Such a diverse range of programmes, centring on a memory activism based on the upstanders, may serve to describe what Edward T. Linenthal referred to as 'the movement from passive unaware inhabitant of the nation state to active vigilant citizen empowered with the agency of a coherent moral public narrative' (Linenthal 2001: xiii).

The upstander activism rests on the underlying assumption that visitors can be transformed by the museum into upstanders capable of heroic acts. One need not forget that such heroic stances emerge from an interpretation of Holocaust history which foregrounds redemptive outcomes. Linenthal cautioned against it, stating, 'there is always the danger that the allure of redemptive narratives will inappropriately soften the story of mass murder or transform it into an act of heroic sacrifice' (ibid.). Given the historical reality which shows that upstanders against Nazi persecution were driven by different motivations, not always of an ethical nature, and that they constituted the exception rather than the norm, the reliance on a redemptive narrative to support activism is rather fragile.

In the UK, an activism discourse based on the notion of being an upstander appears in activities designed by a broad range of individuals, institutions, and communities to mark the Holocaust Memorial Day. One such activity is the 2016 'I pledge' memorial organised by the History Department and Student Association of Farnborough Sixth Form College, for the HMDT's annual memorial theme 'Don't stand by' (HMDT 2016, n.d.-b). Such memorial days are fashioned to address the annual themes set up by the HMDT's annual themes, many of which carry mobilising titles such as 'Speak up,' 'Speak out,' 'Stand up to hatred,' and 'Communities together: build a bridge,' and 'Don't stand by' (HMDT n.d.-c).

These themes act as moral imperatives meant to shake-up audiences from a state of indifference and inspire an activist stance and a change of attitudes. Since the memorial actions are in fact shaped by the HMDT's expectations, we are left with the question of whether activism must be neatly framed to have an effect. If not, how then can a memorial institution facilitate an activism which can be reached independently by individuals and communities?

Making pledges in the museum space: USHMM's exhibition *From Memory to Action: Meeting the Challenge of Genocide* (2009)

Given the ritualisation of Holocaust memory, it is worth questioning whether the practice of making pledges represents what Erving Goffman called a 'ceremonial agenda involving long strings of obligatory rites' (Goffman 1971: 63). Given the risk, what is the function of the pledge in museum settings? Does it work to raise a genuine and long-term activist stance? Undoubtedly, USHMM is a leading actor in the Holocaust memorial landscape and in the practice of memory activism. The best illustration of this is the USHMM's Simon–Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide guided by the Committee on Conscience, whose mandate is 'to alert the national conscience, influence policy makers, and stimulate worldwide action to confront and work to halt acts of genocide or related crimes against humanity' (USHMM n.d.-c).

Also concerned with genocide prevention is the exhibition *From Memory to Action: Meeting the Challenge of Genocide* launched in 2009 at the Wexner Learning Center. The exhibition consists of three sections. The first 'Meeting the challenge of genocide' contextualises the subject of genocide more broadly. The second 'Nuremberg trials,' examines the legal and historical contexts of genocide, and the third, 'Eyewitness to genocide: Darfur, Sudan' deals with contemporary accounts of genocide.

Importantly, an interactive wall of pledges is placed at the end of the exhibition, inviting visitors 'to join a growing community of people taking action against genocide.' Each visitor can take a card with the question 'What will you do to help meet the challenge of genocide today?' The question provokes in most cases a response that begins with a personal pledge such as, 'I will…' For instance, visitors have written: 'I will educate myself so I will not be able to plead ignorance'; 'The Holocaust Museum opened my eyes. I will help people,' and 'I will teach my students in 10th grade English about genocide' (cited by Carter 2016: 251–4). The handwritten pledge can be projected on a digital wall, making it visible to subsequent visitors. The accumulation of pledges creates a visual statement and encourages the participation of other individuals invited, in this way, to form a community of conscience.

This approach appears to have been successful with visitors. In the two years since the exhibition's opening, over 116,000 pledges have been made. Ten months after, more than

4,000 individuals asked to receive e-mail updates and information about contemporary genocide (ibid.). An evaluation of its impact on visitors claims that the exhibition had 'social action-oriented effects,' and that it was 'a powerful catalyst for on-going action in the spaces of visitors' home communities' (Sather-Wagstaff and Sobel 2013).

In addition to writing one's own pledge, and to becoming informed, the most obvious way for audience members to be part of this collective, activist culture is by encouraging them to donate funding to support the organisations' activist work. Such a practice of activism is, in fact, very common among both Holocaust and human rights organisations. For example, Amnesty International uses imperatives such as 'take action' to encourage donations in support of specific cases of human rights violations (Amnesty International n.d.). Similarly, on USHMM's webpage, by clicking the tab 'take action' one is directed to a page which offers the chance to 'make a pledge' in the form of a donation. Under the tab titled 'what can I do?,' the museum answers: 'Help the Museum confront genocide and related crimes against humanity today' (USHMM n.d.-a). On a different museum webpage, one finds telling examples of personal pledges made by public leaders, celebrities, politicians and opinion makers, all of which work to further reinforce the activist discourse.

These statements contain promises such as: 'to identify early warning signs,' 'to prevent,' 'to become activists for humanity,' 'to step in and to mobilize others to step in,' 'to fight injustice,' 'to be alert to any and all potential of actual genocide,' and so on (USHMM n.d.-b). The visitor is encouraged to make similar pledges. These pledges function well at the level of a political correctness discourse, although their application remains elusive. The museum does not offer a programme of activities which might enable visitors to think more practically about how such universal pledges could be implemented in their immediate surroundings. The most direct form by which visitors are addressed on the webpage is by providing contributions to the activist work of the institution.

The activism discourse may, in this way, serve to further strengthen the position of the museum as a world leader in education, research and genocide prevention—entrusted by the public to carry out this activist work in their name. Importantly, this discourse on activism encourages a relationship of interdependency, making the museum indispensable for the implementation of such pledges, with the visitor in a participatory role as a funder of activism projects. In this case, however, visitor participation is of a symbolic and financial nature as visitors cannot make concrete decisions to shape the activities of the museum.

Conclusion

While memory activism is a cause worth fighting for, and Holocaust memorial museums are well equipped to promote it among their publics, it remains largely unknown to what extent ritual actions of memory activism, such as making pledges or participations in anti-bullying prevention programmes, are leading young and adult audience members to act against wrongdoings in their immediate surroundings. One empirical study of visitor reactions to USHMM's core exhibition showed that, after taking part in an art therapy session aimed to allow visitors to develop personal responses to the exhibition, the visitors' levels of empathy increased. Yet, there was 'no change in the levels of these visitors' engagement in social action and political activities' (Betts *et al.* 2015).

Further to this, Paul Williams questioned whether feelings triggered by Holocaust exhibitions 'stayed with the person and came to bear on later ideas and actions' (Williams

2011: 229). Before we can draw any conclusion regarding audience impact, it is fair to say that there is simply not enough audience research to fully understand the performativity of memory activism as practised by Holocaust museums.

There is a great need for more openness on behalf of Holocaust museums to allow and support empirical and sociological research aimed at examining how visitors enact the calls for activism months and even years after their visits. When opening the doors to visitors and researchers, it might benefit museums to recall Paul Williams' (2011: 233) words:

> . . . memorial museums potentially serve a valuable social role as spaces that can provide a public forum for discussion: it is their very ability to stand for unpopular ideas, to be bettered by and absorb criticism, and to weather the storm of political sea-changes, that makes them suitable vessels for histories that, due to their severity, will likely remain essentially contested.

My reading of memory activism in Holocaust museums has a cautionary underpinning, as I have argued that, to create conditions for transformative action is desirable, but that activism cannot be imposed, prescribed or moralising. Perhaps activist discourse in Holocaust memorial contexts should be viewed with some scepticism. In particular, because this discourse could serve a regulatory and normative function which, rather than inspiring concrete acts of change, allows visitors to feel that, by their very acts of visiting the exhibitions, they have realised their moral duties. As the experiences of many social and human rights activists' show, for activism to take place it should be part of long-term processes of independent moral reasoning and be embedded in individual and communal experiences.

How can memorial activities work against a redemptive stance, and prevent audience members from developing a comfortable feeling of belonging to a moral community of memory, or of being on the right side of the moral discourse? Participation in memory activism, as appealing as it may be, is not necessarily performative. Memorial institutions might therefore need to acknowledge that, if they continue to aim for social justice in practice, they are not only responsible for keeping the memories alive, but also for creating free spaces where individuals can practice moral reasoning, can test the possibilities and the boundaries of what they can achieve as individuals and as communities and, finally, decide on their own what to do with those memories.

Acknowledgements

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29

ADVOCACY AND ACTIVISM

A framework for sustainability science in museums

Sandra L. Rodegher and Stacey Vicario Freeman

Introduction

In our respective roles as sustainability scientist and educator, we support museum educators in implementing sustainability science within their museums and centers.[1] Through these interactions we found that, although there is staff and community dedication to sustainability, many institutional decision makers are hesitant to implement sustainability science because they view it as too politicized, or a topic that does not constitute actual science. Rather than viewing sustainability as an action-oriented science, museum educators inadvertently undercut it as a political topic or stance. Though politicization is less of a concern for non-US residents, educators experience conflict in terms of what constitutes science, and some feel that sustainability science is not a 'real' science.

Indeed, some museum employees have told us they cannot incorporate sustainability into their programming because, as a science museum, they are tasked with focusing on science. Informal educators that are willing to address sustainability tend to focus on topics such as energy or ecology. However, they tend to avoid the crux of sustainability science, which is the generation and utilization of basic and applied knowledge in order to address some of the world's most complex and pressing problems.

Whether stemming from US political dynamics or institutional perceptions around what constitutes science, there is a shared and underlying concern that appears to originate from the action-orientation of sustainability science. Science museums can engage visitors in science education and engagement, but not topics that appear like activism. This perception of sustainability, as an area best left to activists, is the result of conflating it with other historical movements, namely early environmentalism which often had a conservation-focused approach. As a result, environmentalism-driven efforts did not always account for the economic and social well-being of all citizens.

This is compounded by the apparent misunderstanding around what it means to be an action-oriented science. Action-oriented science is not a process of indoctrination but, instead, citizens are engaged in a process which still remains scientific in nature. As sustainability science and education experts, we help bridge the gap between theoretical and applied sustainability

science in museums. Though basic science is valuable, its societal benefit is fully realized only when applied.

In just two years, we have collaborated with over 130 science and natural history museums on five continents and trained over 700 museum professionals (from thirty countries and fifty US states) to find meaningful ways to implement sustainability science programming. Despite some hesitation to incorporate sustainability science into programs, exhibitions and organizational practices (ranging from basic infrastructure changes, such as recycling, to operational efforts, like embedding sustainability training in new hire orientation), we believe it is the role of these highly trusted institutions of public good to share all relevant science—particularly science that has real-world implications and impact.

When museums opt to skirt sustainability issues, it is often done with a positive objective—they seek to maintain neutrality. When considering controversial science, museums fear their reputation as trusted communicators is at stake. They strive to avoid the role of 'activist' for fear of alienating visitors by appearing biased and not displaying scientific credibility related to contentious topics. Though we will build a case for why museums should incorporate sustainability issues in their programming and messaging over the course of this chapter, we acknowledge that this initial response is understandable, for two reasons. First, they must ensure donors and visitors remain happy because attendance often drives revenue. Second, as previously noted, sustainability can be a hot-button, contested issue (Fisher, Waggle and Leifeld 2012; Porter, Kuhn and Nerlich 2018). However, we believe that this is not reason enough to avoid integrating sustainability science and museums. Our position aligns with Janes (2015: 3) pivotal work around the end of neutrality, in which he notes that museums' unique characteristics do not 'absolve them from greater accountability.'

Indeed, there is a societal need for museums to participate in this discussion. A subset of the US population continues to deny the existence of climate change, even as the results are seen and felt globally. Perhaps most damaging to science and natural history museums' willingness to engage visitors in sustainability science is the aforementioned perception that it is not a science, but a values-driven cause. However, the fact that there are 'causes' that result from sustainability science does not diminish it as a science any more than medical science and research are diminished by stem cell research activists.

Regardless of societal unease or controversy and, perhaps because of the controversy, we argue that museums cannot, and should not, feign neutrality in the face of scientific research and facts. Considering current events occurring at the governmental level in the United States alone, such as the withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement (Betsill 2017) and the restructuring of the Environmental Protection agency under the leadership of a climate change denier (McKee, Greer and Stuckler 2017), it is even more important for citizens to have the knowledge and skills necessary to take a leadership role in creating a sustainable and just world.

In what follows, we provide our understanding of the arguments in favour of claiming neutrality through the viewpoints of both scientists and museum leadership. Then, we provide the arguments against claiming neutrality, through articulating the characteristics of sustainability problems, as well as describing the role that museums perform in society. Finally, we offer a framework through which museums can reconceptualize their role in sustainability science communication. We differentiate between an advocacy approach, which relies on discussion and debate, and a 'traditional' understanding of an activism-driven approach, which leans toward direct action that should be executed.[2] Ultimately, the goal of this chapter is not

to critique the concerns or approaches of museums, but instead to offer an alternative, ideally less contentious, and a more effective approach to engaging visitors in sustainability dialogue.

The case for neutrality

There are numerous reasons why science museum leadership may prefer to aim museum messaging and programming toward neutrality. Museums may avoid taking a stance on an issue that aligns with sustainability, or they view as activism due to different factors, such as perceptions around how activism-attributed information is interpreted. This is not an unfounded concern. Bashir *et al.* (2013) found that, if information is attributed to someone who is labeled as an 'activist,' that information is less likely to be viewed as trustworthy which, in turn, weakens the message-creator's ability to influence positive change.

In this section, however, we focus on specific reasons why science museums may be hesitant to engage with information they view as activist. First, museums may be concerned with maintaining good standing with sources of income (donors or paying visitors)—in service of their bottom line and continued operation. The second motivation we consider is more closely coupled to scientific practices and norms. Specifically, it is the practice of striving for objectivity and to reducing bias in order to more accurately interpret and represent data and facts. We articulate these two points in greater detail below.

Client-focused organizations

Science museums are public institutions and, as such, must be mindful of their clientele, or visitors, as they are typically called. Weil (1999) argues that museums' societal role has shifted from collections repositories to having a service focus, and functioning as providers of information for the public good. Further, he articulates that this focus on the public extends beyond publicly funded institutions, as private institutions often rely on public admissions fees as a primary source of income. He posits that this repositions museums to be less focused on collections and more entrepreneurial, marketing themselves to meet clientele desires. It is worth noting that Weil (1999) also identifies opportunities in this increased dependence on visitors. For example, this shifting focus has allowed museums to emerge as community-hubs and places for dialogue and social change.

This client-focus also creates space for institutions to expand beyond their traditional institutional boundaries. For example, in March of 2017, a storm knocked out power and cable lines for several days in the city of Detroit, Michigan (US). While temperatures dropped into the single digits, the Detroit Institute of Art, which offers free admission to county residents, used social media to announce that they were fully functional. They invited residents to come, warm up, and use their free Internet. This demonstrates how a museum can shift roles from an educational destination to an institution deeply embedded in the community.

Scientific objectivity

To understand science museums' desire for objectivity, it is important to first understand objectivity within science. Objectivity, or evaluating things without prejudging or inserting biases, has come under scrutiny in recent years (Carrier 2013; Street 2016). Historically, objectivity was valued for its ability to steer scientists closer to the truth and facts. In recent

years, there is consensus that true objectivity is not possible, but there is tension within the broader scientific community around how to address this. This tension stems from scientists' concern that they will lose credibility by presenting themselves as advocates (Alm 1997).

It is important, however, to acknowledge and accept that scientists are indeed also driven by their values. Noss (2007), an expert in conservation biology (a field, much like sustainability, scrutinized, challenged, and sometimes discredited by scientists and the general public for having embedded values), states that scientists, like anyone else, are indeed values driven. All science is imbued with the values of the scientists, from the topics they choose to study, to the types of questions they ask. Though they employ methods intended to increase objectivity in analysis, scientists cannot fully escape their value systems.

Similarly, museums often choose values-driven topics to focus upon, as is the case with the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, California (US). They recently developed *Big Ideas*, which refers to strengthening research efforts on the California coastline and coral reefs, as well as expanding environmental literacy offerings and access. This allows the academy to focus on creating targeted, scientifically accurate and compelling visitor experiences. Specifically, staff scientists conduct primary research on coral reefs and the California ecosystem and their education department maintains expertise in environmental education, while the organization has policies and programs in place to support equitable access to these educational resources within their local communities. Further, they have a coral reef exhibition and will soon feature a California exhibition, which further explores the state's unique environment. This choice of focal topics is likely tied to the global importance of coral reefs and California ecosystems, their proximity to the Pacific Ocean, and research relationships with communities reliant on coral reefs. Given societal interdependence, it is prudent for the academy to focus on science that is relevant and within the scope of influence of their local communities. This thematic concentration does not make their science inherently biased, but does demonstrate how science is values-laden even at an institutional level.

Noss (2007) offers a middle road for navigating the space between accepting that humans are not objective, while still understanding why the scientific community values objectivity in the first place. He posits, 'If we can be inspired by our positive values—life, truth, fairness, and the standards and professional norms of science—then we can be honest advocates' (ibid.: 18). Thus, if museum employees are aware of their values and how they affect their decision-making, while still relying on scientific norms and practices in how they present data, then they can relay the empirical facts about relevant science similar to any other researcher or communicator.[3]

The case against neutrality

Here we provide two arguments against neutrality in science museums. First, we explain the nature of sustainability problems and why it is imperative for citizens to play an active role in sustainability-oriented, deliberative discourse. Then, we articulate the shifting role of science and natural history museums within society. Further, we posit that it is reasonable and appropriate for museums to support and engage their audience in sustainability dialogue. For a richer discussion of why museums should not maintain neutrality, see Janes (2009).

The nature of sustainability problems

Sustainability is often described as a nebulous field without clear or defined boundaries. This is sometimes mistaken to mean that there is confusion around what sustainability is, although this is not the case. Scholars in the field understand that this is simply the result of the nature of sustainability problems (Ravetz 2006). To elaborate, sustainability problems are complex and globally interconnected, but operate differently depending on the location. Therefore, the boundaries of sustainability may shift based on the unique characteristics of the problem being addressed. We use poverty as an example of a sustainability problem to illustrate the challenges and complexities faced by the field of sustainability.

Though poverty is often conceptualized as simply an economic concern, it is actually more complex. Along with issues of access, areas with high degrees of poverty also tend to have high degrees of environmental degradation (Scherr 2000). Thus, issues of poverty are often identified as sustainability concerns. However, solutions are often different depending upon the unique characteristics of the geographical locations. For some areas, the most critical means of addressing poverty-related concerns are gender-based, social justice issues, such as women and girls being denied the right to education. In other contexts, poverty is related to a lack of physical infrastructure, such as public transportation and poor economic conditions. Thus, to address these complex sustainability challenges, we must think about them in terms of the differing magnitude and complexity of the problems and locations in which they occur.

Furthermore, due to the wicked nature of sustainability problems (for more information on 'wicked problems' see Rittel and Webber 1973; Frame 2008; Lazarus 2008), solutions often have unintended consequences and trade-offs. This means that in order to best address sustainability challenges, they must be continually evaluated and refined with an eye toward the well-being of all people in the system. Further, potential negative impacts resulting from solutions must be considered. Thus, sustainability scientists and humanists share the distaste of science museum professionals for the direct and overly simplified actions used by the numerous single-issue-focused groups within sustainability activism.[4]

For example, Whyte and Thompson (2011) articulate this aversion to overly simplified actions, often packaged as 'solutions,' by acknowledging that many people may have a desire to 'solve' sustainability problems, but that it is more ethical and correct to seek instead to 'tame' or manage sustainability problems. In a similar vein, other sustainability scholars and scientists have opted to use the term 'challenge' instead of 'problem.' By reframing the dialogue, sustainability scientists acknowledge the complexity of sustainability problems and the imperfectness of a solution-focused mindset.

In order to better manage wicked problems, all stakeholders within the system, including those affected by the challenge, must be engaged to fully understand the many facets of the problems. This holds true for poverty, as well as all sustainability-related problems. Given the pressing nature of sustainability issues, the real implications of not taking action, and the reliance on local knowledge to address these issues, society and scientists must find ways to communicate more effectively. Museums are poised to play a critical role through their ability to disseminate scientific findings and engage community members in decision-making. Therefore, neutrality in the form of inaction by museums is not neutral and has negative consequences for their local communities. Though their intent may be to remain neutral, when faced with empirical findings that demonstrate widespread environmental and social impacts, the inaction is a value judgement unto itself.

The role of science and science museums in society

Though concerns about the politicization of science, or science communication, may be well-reasoned, it is important to acknowledge the role that science and education have played throughout history, particularly in democratic societies. Scheufele (2014) posits that science and scientists have always influenced political decision-making. He illustrates this belief through the example of the pivotal influence Albert Einstein's letter had on President Roosevelt. In this letter, Einstein, along with other notable scientists, warned of the potential creation of the atomic bomb by the Germans. This letter was important to the creation of the Manhattan Project, the US government-funded initiative that brought together world-class scientists to create the first atomic bomb. Indeed, in the aftermath of World War II, numerous scientists and scholars, such as Bronowski (2011), reflected deeply on the necessity for ethics and human values to permeate the conduct, understanding, and use of science.

Similarly, education is a critical part of democracy, with increased levels of education functioning as a predictor of the degree of democracy or dictatorship within a society. Grant (2016) pushes this one step further and states that, in order for students to be active parts of a democratic society, they must not be simply reminded that they are able to vote at 18. They should also be taught how to listen to information, evaluate it, engage in critical thought, and ultimately reach their own conclusion. In short, they must be taught how to operate as sophisticated citizenry.

Although museums that refrain from taking a stance on controversial scientific topics may be well intentioned, it does not reflect the intended and historic function of education in society. Would the same museums refrain from communicating other contested, but well-established, science? Indeed, when considering evolution, a strong creationism movement contributed to several science museums strengthening their programming around evolution. Their rationale for incorporating evolution was to explain its importance in understanding and enhancing the medical and health-related fields. This pro-evolution stance is decidedly advocacy-driven.

Furthermore, addressing sustainability issues is just as important as medical advancements to human health and well-being, given the characteristics of sustainability problems. These are wicked problems that require immediate action and have unequal negative impact on vulnerable communities. For example, people who are already disadvantaged are at greater risk to experience the ill-effects of extreme weather induced by climate change, man-made pollution and environmental degradation. Museums have begun expanding from being repositories for art and specimens to also serving and supporting the public (Weil 1999), and should include global concerns.

It is important to acknowledge the significant role science communicators play in decision-making, and the void that is left when they disengage from science tied to complex societal problems. Alm (1997) explores the nature of the relationship between scientists and policy makers. She finds that, in the case of environmental policy, the best and most effective policies are well informed by scientific findings, but acknowledges that there are many mismatches between the policy and science worlds. Further, scientists are not always the best communicators, and this can make these dialogues challenging. Alm (ibid.) believes that there should be a broker between the two.

This mirrors the nature of the sustainability conversation around citizen engagement. Who is better equipped to serve as broker between scientists and the public than institutions focused on science communication? In the case of sustainability, we believe science museums

should not shy away from their role and responsibilities as science communicators, but should embrace and even expand it to include new areas, such as policy. Museums are in a powerful position to educate the public and enhance its ability to make decisions for their communities and themselves.

As purveyors of scientific knowledge, it is irresponsible for museums to avoid relevant, timely and important science, like sustainability science, for fear of backlash from funding organizations who may believe their bottom line will be impacted by sustainability efforts, or by visitors who may view sustainability as simply political. As learning institutions, museums should support knowledge acquisition, particularly when it could improve visitor well-being.

Although the focus on social good and public deliberation is not a departure from the goals of science museums, it is critical to address an area that may make sustainability more complicated for science museums—specifically, the types of science on which they generally focus. Chittenden (2011) identifies two types of science: 'known' and 'unfinished' science. By 'known' science, he means concepts that are clearly understood or universally accepted, such as the law of gravitation. In contrast, 'unfinished' science is evolving and in development, such as sustainability, and often involves messy or contested areas.

He notes that museums are more likely to focus on complete knowledge sets for two reasons: (1) it is easier to ensure clarity when explaining something that is well understood and (2), permanent exhibitions are costly, so creating something with information that may change comes with financial risk (Chittenden 2011). He also draws attention to why it is important, perhaps even critical, to address unfinished science. Namely, unfinished science exists when information is not yet fully understood because it is complex and often deals with emerging societal issues. Along these same lines, Cameron (2011) posits that science museum visitors *want* to be engaged in critical thought and discussion. Thus, if museums are to embrace their roles as visitor-focused, community-hubs, they should also embrace incomplete science because visitors want to engage in discussion and they trust museums to function as communicators of pertinent, contemporary science.

A framework for museum societal engagement as a continuum

In the preceding sections, we sought to articulate *why* museums may be hesitant to engage with sustainability science. We also built a case for *why* they should not allow these hesitations to hold them back from addressing this timely issue of sustainability, a subject matter that does align with their goals and societal role. In what follows, we provide a framework that outlines 'how' they can move forward in what may feel like a new and, at times, uncertain direction.

Given museum professionals' valid concerns, and the action-oriented and critical nature of sustainability problems, we suggest looking to an older, established field that also deals with real world problems that require immediate attention—medicine. Similar to sustainability science, medical science advancements are often contested and, without advocates and communicators between the science and public, there would be significant societal consequences. Specifically, we propose adopting the continuum employed by Ryan and Cole (2009), although they focus on mothers of children with autism and the mothers' level of engagement and intervention in autism-based issues.

In their continuum, Ryan and Cole place advocacy at one end and activism at the other. They identify numerous ways that activism can be defined, but ultimately articulate the two

poles as follows. First, at the extreme end of 'advocacy,' the mother acts on behalf of her specific child and his or her unique issues and situation. At the other end, at the extreme of 'activism,' the mother expands her reach to act on behalf of all children with autism.

In the museum context, we define the continuum based on the museum's purview, or its realm of control. Given the scientific nature underlying these institutions, we add an additional point on the spectrum, which we have called 'feigned neutrality' (see Table 29.1). We coin it as such because, as previously mentioned, all individuals and institutions operate under a set of values. Though striving for objectivity is valuable for honest and balanced discourse, representing science or science communication as valueless is misleading at best.

At the other end of the spectrum is 'activism.' In the case of activism, the museum may or may not be speaking about an area in which it has a genuine level of knowledge. Rather than engage in a dialogue, the communication involves the depiction of a specific problem followed by a very clear action that should be taken. Such an approach, although simple, may actually be problematic. To illustrate, we will consider a hypothetical natural history museum in a large US city. As with many museums, many of their visitors are affluent and do not represent the community in which the museum is situated. However, museum staff organize outreach activities targeting underrepresented community members.

When discussing sustainability challenges with these low-income communities, staff from this hypothetical museum offer simple explanations for complex problems and equally simple solutions by way of actions that individuals can take. Both the explanation of the challenges and the solutions offered do not take into account the community, especially in terms of social class. In cities, low-income populations tend to already have the smallest environmental impact due to lack of resources. Further, identified solutions, such as buying organic produce and installing low-flow toilets, are not feasible for low-income families.

TABLE 29.1 Sustainability engagement framework

Feigned Neutrality	Advocacy	Activism
'We (the science museum) will give you (the visitors) just the facts.'	'Together, let's share information and challenges. What do we think could be done?'	'This is the problem, and this is how you should handle it.'
Reports simply on the information and area of expertise that the museum explicitly addresses.	Speaks and/or acts on sustainability issues that are connected to the museum's expertise and place-based concerns. Creates mechanisms for reflexive dialogue.	Speaks and/or acts on behalf of a broad array of sustainability issues with clear, direct action in mind. Does not necessarily include current or community-relevant research.
Stays well within natural bounds of areas of expertise.	Works within the bounds of the museum's areas of expertise and may occasionally stretch beyond. Includes current and community-relevant research and feedback.	May or may not sit within the bounds of the museum's area of expertise.
Puts onus on visitors to consider/choose to initiate action.	Challenges staff and visitors to identify (and take) action of their choosing.	Articulates set actions in which visitors and/or staff 'should' participate.

This organization has good intentions, but their approach has not increased knowledge or information that are relevant to the local community and, in turn, do not improve the community's ability to engage in sustainability decision-making.

Sustainability problems often have geographically and demographically specific factors, and these unique characteristics must be taken into account when solutions are created. Thus, simple arguments and solutions may be inadequate. For example, although it is often true that buying and eating local food is best, if an area is experiencing a drought, or is located in a place with polluted soil or water, eating locally is actually reducing the resilience of the local community or environment. Simply put, in sustainability science and sustainability solutions, there are no panaceas (Ostrom, Janssen and Anderies 2007). This understanding leads us between the two poles of 'activism' and 'feigned neutrality,' to what we call 'advocacy.'[5]

Advocacy again parallels the Ryan and Cole (2009) framework in terms of its area of control. A museum that strikes a balance through advocacy focuses on an area within its bounds of expertise, while also challenging itself to move beyond low hanging fruit, such as simply providing visitors with a concise, clear-cut solution to a complex problem. Instead, museums should embrace the ambiguity and create a space where complex problems can be discussed in a democratic way (Cameron 2011). Returning to our theoretical natural history museum and their target outreach group, everyone might have been best served by simply articulating what sustainability is and giving community members the opportunity to identify relevant issues within their neighborhoods. The museum can provide the space for dialogue so that community members can identify and explore relevant, place-based solutions.

Conclusion

Museums may be hesitant to address issues of sustainability, labeling the field as overly politicized. It is prudent to be mindful and not inadvertently introduce polarizing issues, but museums should not avoid them out of fear. Rather, because they are rooted in presenting empirically based research, museums create a unique space for citizens to learn about sustainability, as well as create discourse not only between the museum and its visitors, but also between visitors. We understand the influence that politics can have on perceptions of sustainability. Many communications experts and academics point to Davis Guggenheim's documentary film, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), to inform citizens about global warming. However, Al Gore's status as a politician undermined the message, often relegating the information to 'junk science,' meant only for liberal-leaning citizens (Unsworth and Fielding 2014).

As Kahan *et al.* (2012) have noted, scientific literacy regarding climate change is not the most important variable in deciding if global warming is happening. Rather, people make decisions based on their peers who typically hold similar political affiliations. This is to say that, through engaging diverse visitors in dialogue with staff and each other, an opportunity is created where perspectives can be further explored and political affiliation can be decoupled from the facts around the changing world we all live in. If there is one lesson to be gained from *An Inconvenient Truth*, it is not that sustainability science should be avoided by museums. Instead, sustainability science needs advocates, such as museums, that are able to engage diverse audiences in rich discussion and debate around sustainability issues, including those with different political affiliations.

In this chapter we have examined common perceptions of activism. We acknowledge that activism is more complex and nuanced and, as public-facing institutions, museums must be mindful of public perception and not simply the academic understanding of concepts. By focusing on an advocacy role and creating a space for dialogue, museums can avoid major pitfalls or visitor backlash, while still aligning their institutions with sustainability science. Museums should not avoid the truth about a controversial scientific topic. Rather, by feigning neutrality, they are instead choosing not to engage in science that is critical to our society.

If museums, as highly trusted, educational institutions, do not present real-world challenges to their visitors, how can we ever hope to solve the various global crises associated with climate change? It is our hope that, through this chapter, we can help extricate sustainability science from misconceptions of activism and support museums in incorporating sustainability science that can lead to solutions on which societal health depends.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 Though we tend to work primarily with science and natural history museums, we have recently branched out to other types of museums and have found that this work is equally relevant and important across the various museum settings.
2 We place 'traditional' in quotation marks with the understanding that societal perceptions of what activists do does not actually capture the diversity of efforts that exist within the activist community.
3 This is to say that the construct of neutrality is bounded by the premise that communication of the science is empirically driven. Hence, choosing topics and exhibits may be value-laden but the facts about the chosen topics cannot veer from empirical findings.
4 An example of this would be the organizations focused on encouraging people to stop using palm oil due to its negative impacts on the forests and orangutan populations in Indonesia. However, without acknowledging the complex socio-economic factors that contributed to the current level of degradation, reducing palm oil usage is only treating a symptom rather than the underlying problem.
5 It is worth noting that 'activism' can be employed in a number of ways and that what we seek to describe as 'advocacy' may be described in other contexts as 'activism.' One might consider this to be, instead, a subset of 'activism.'

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30

NARRATIVES OF TRANSFORMATION

Stories of impact from activist museums

Jennifer Bergevin

Introduction

Whilst on a brief holiday in Amsterdam (The Netherlands), I had the opportunity to spend a long morning at the Anne Frank House. My visit to the museum was awash with emotions for which I was not entirely prepared: anxiety, sorrow, admiration, anger, grief, and hope. The final exhibition space, *Reflections on Anne Frank*, included a film presentation which featured actress Emma Thompson speaking passionately about the person Anne Frank would have been had she survived. Visitors were left with the thought that, 'all her would-haves are our real possibilities, all her would-haves are our opportunities.' I was struck with that message, which was emblazoned on the wall of the gallery. It was a strong call to action; a call for visitors not to waste their own opportunities to make a difference in the world.

The Anne Frank House has made it part of its mission 'to encourage [people] to reflect on the dangers of anti-Semitism, racism and discrimination and the importance of freedom, equal rights and democracy' (Anne Frank House 2017). It is part of a vibrant community of museums and heritage sites which have made the promotion of democracy, human rights, and anti-discrimination part of their core work. These institutions might be considered campaigning museums (Fleming 2010, 2016), or activist museums (Sandell and Dodd 2010; Sandell 2017), in the way in which they work to garner support for social justice.[1]

Questions abound about the impact of this sort of work on individuals and communities. While the word *impact* can be fraught with unintentional meaning, an implied violence and the notion of passivity on the part of those perceived as being impacted (Matarasso 2015), it is nonetheless the word used among funding and political bodies, practitioners, and researchers when discussing the effects of engagement with culture and cultural institutions. With the aims of many activist museums focused on promoting more just societies, the question inevitably arises: are they making a difference? Does their work contribute to people's desire and ability to commit to the ideas and actions necessary to promote social justice? How can we begin to measure this type of long-term impact?

I will explore these questions in this chapter, beginning with a brief introduction to the landscape of longitudinal research within the museum and heritage sector. From there, I will continue the discussion by focusing on the findings from a recent study conducted at the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool (UK) and the Center for Civil and Human Rights (Plate 15) in Atlanta, Georgia (US). What emerged from this study can best be described as 'narratives of transformation'—stories which illustrate and highlight the role museums play in promoting and encouraging social justice to become an embedded part of people's experience.

The landscape of longitudinal research in the museum and heritage sector

There is a growing body of research with regard to the impact of museum visits on visitors, from both practitioners and academics who are hoping to better understand and model the reach of museum and heritage practices on visitors and community members. Many of these projects have focused on evaluating and understanding the impact of participation in community projects, programmes, and co-curatorial endeavours on participants. Fewer studies have focused on the long-term impacts on the day-to-day visitor—the visitor who comes to the museum and spends a few hours in the galleries and then leaves.

Designing a longitudinal impact study in the museum environment presents several methodological challenges. For example, challenges in recruiting participants from a transient population of visitors at a specific site on a specific day, as well as challenges in contacting participants weeks or months after the initial museum visit. It is, therefore, unsurprising that few longitudinal studies have been attempted with museum visitors (Anderson, Storksdieck and Spock 2007). Those which have been conducted (Falk and Dierking 1997; Falk, Moussouri and Coulson 1998; Adelman, Falk and James 2000; Ellenbogen 2002; Storksdieck, Ellenbogen and Heimlich 2005) tend to be centred on learning outcomes, recall, the free-choice environment and the effect of visitors' agendas and identities on what has been learned.

Looking broadly at the longitudinal literature, Anderson, Storksdieck and Spock (2007) completed a cross-study summary of some of the most important findings. In relation to memories, studies showed that visits tend to be remembered contextually rather than for the content of the exhibitions, and that memories change over time as individuals experience new things. The ability of visitors to learn and the long-term effects of that learning are often dictated by prior knowledge, visitor agendas, and the depth of interest in the material, as well as the type of learner. Finally, many of the most striking aspects of the visit may be buried unless awakened subsequently or rehearsed through social discourse. Many of these findings speak to cognitive functioning tied to learning, recall, and memory, all of which are essential parts of understanding the longitudinal impact of museum visits on users.

Few of the findings reported by Anderson, Storksdieck and Spock (2007) speak to what sorts of experiences cause visitors to access those memories, or to act on what they have experienced at the museum. It is challenging to assign causation to a relatively brief museum encounter, as all experiences are constructed within the identity of the individual and a change in behaviour or attitude may be the result of a complex network of previous encounters of which the museum visit may only be one piece. Despite this, understanding how the museum visit fits into these personal constructions is, I suggest, an important—albeit poorly understood—issue for activist museums.

Two specific studies are of particular interest when considering the long-term impact of activist museum practice. Both were conducted in the United States and investigated the impact of environmental education at free-choice learning sites on visitors. These studies sought to assess whether museum-like encounters produced changes in attitude and behaviours consistent with conservation education. The first study examined visitors at the National Aquarium in Baltimore, Maryland (NAIB) and focused on changes around the idea of conservation (Adelman, Falk and James 2000). The findings suggest that while internal changes, such as changes in attitude and understanding continued through the six to eight-week period following the visit, 'these personal experiences rarely resulted in new conservation actions. In fact, their enthusiasm and emotional commitment to conservation (inspired during the NAIB visit) generally fell back to original levels' (ibid.: 33). The authors concluded that without subsequent reinforcing experiences, visitors tend to revert to pre-visit levels of commitment to action.

Similarly, the second study (Storksdieck, Ellenbogen and Heimlich 2005) looked at the impacts of a traveling exhibition entitled *Biodiversity 911 Saving Life on Earth* at the National Geographic Explorer's Hall in Washington, DC (US). The findings in this study echo those in the first, where knowledge and perceptions of biodiversity were increased following engagement with the exhibition. This study, however, also assessed how visitors ranked activities to protect diversity across three categories, including personal direct action, personal passive action, and impersonal action. Following the visit, participants ranked personal direct actions as the most effective form of activity to protect biodiversity.

The authors noted that, 'Visitors' increased emphasis on personal direct actions over impersonal actions is arguably the most significant finding of the study. It is also a sign that a majority of visitors were ready to consider embracing personal behavioural changes' (ibid.: 257). While these results were encouraging, the longitudinal data revealed that participants reverted to their original opinions, citing indirect actions as the most effective means of protecting biodiversity. Again, the authors believed that reinforcing experiences would have aided participants in retaining their post-visit enthusiasm for personal action.

The missing pieces

Despite the contributions these studies have made to our understanding of impact, there are areas which remain frustratingly unclear. A drawback to this previous research is the unintentional way in which the methodologies reinforce didactic ways of thinking about impact, as researchers were testing visitors' reception and retention of the overarching messages of the exhibitions. It is often the case that evaluations tend to look at whether the themes of the museum experience have been recognised and absorbed, rather than trying to understand in what ways visitors might interact with these messages in the weeks and months following—by constructing their own meanings and building their own under-standings. When impact is viewed in these binary terms, we lose the nuance of the experience. Viewed through a holistic lens in which we take into account more than the exhibition themes and messages, we can begin to study and understand the complexity of the experience surrounding impact.

Perhaps one of the most illuminating findings of these studies is the need for reinforcing experiences. We might think of experiences as a network or web, interconnected and reinforced. What sort of experiences help to reinforce or alternatively weaken museum

impact? What circumstances bring the museum experience to mind? Is it ever possible to unravel this network enough to be able to point to the museum as the impetus for change in an individual? These missing pieces are essential if we are to gain a better understandding of the impact of museum visits and more specifically of activist museum visits.

We need to understand to what extent visits to activist museums contribute to visitors' ability and desire to commit to ideas and actions which promote social justice. We need to consider the visit as one part of this web of experience, and also look holistically at the social and psychological processes taking place. Finally, we should ask ourselves what practices best contribute to the process of promoting critical reflection and action within visitors. The morning I spent at the Anne Frank House planted a seed which eventually grew into a research project designed to better understand the long-term impact of activist museums on visitors. Using a qualitative approach designed to embrace the complexity of visitor experiences, I sought to find these missing pieces of the puzzle around activist museum impact.

Designing to understand impact

To answer these questions, I designed a study using a multiple case study approach in which I embedded myself for two weeks at two activist museums, specifically the International Slavery Museum (ISM) in Liverpool (UK) and the Center for Civil and Human Rights (CCHR) in Atlanta, Georgia (US). I spent my time speaking with staff members about their perceptions of the impact of their work on visitors. I also interviewed visitors following their visits, asking them to describe their experiences and how they felt their visit might have inspired or changed them. Six months following these initial interviews, I contacted my visitor participants for a second interview in which I asked them to share their experiences since their visit and to speak about how their impressions, inspirations, and/or actions had changed in that time.

Table 30.1 illustrates the breakdown of how many participants were interviewed by site, as well as comparing the number of participants who completed the initial interview at the museum and the number of participants who completed follow-up interviews. Attrition rates are one of the most challenging aspects to conducting longitudinal research, and while only 22.8% of visitor participants completed a follow-up interview, the depth of their responses, as well as the data from the initial interviews and staff interviews, help to form a rich, qualitative pool from which to analyse and synthesise the findings.

TABLE 30.1 Breakdown of participants interviewed by site

	# of participants completing initial interview	# of participants completing follow-up interview	# of staff members interviewed
International Slavery Museum	24	6	3
Center for Civil and Human Rights	33	7	8
Total	57	13	11

Narratives of transformation

What emerged from the analysis of these interviews were stories which illustrated the complex and unique, social and psychological processes taking place. To better understand and contextualise these stories, I brought together three theoretical frameworks from the fields of learning and clinical psychology. These include critical pedagogy developed by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1972; see also Freire and Shor 1987), transformational learning theory (TLT) first suggested by Jack Mezirow (1990, 1997, 2009) in his study of adult learning, and the trans-theoretical model of change (TTM) developed by James Prochaska and his associates (Prochaska and DiClemente 1992; Prochaska, Norcross and DiClemente 1994). All of these frameworks include elements which illustrate and model the process of change and commitment to action.

Some of the main points considered during the analysis were the importance of internal, critical reflection in the transformation process, the cycle of reflection and action to produce change in the world, the non-linear nature of the process of transformation which often includes relapses to earlier parts of the process, and the importance of integrating new understandings and actions into one's life. Rather than rely solely on one model of understanding, embracing a wider contextualising view of the processes of change and transformation allowed me to view the data more reflexively and organically.

The stories which emerged from the data might best be described as narratives of transformation. They are wholly unique to the individual and are shaped by an intricate web of experiences before, during, and following the museum visit. Before continuing, it is necessary to point out that while the phrase appears to suggest participants universally experienced a full transformation, I suggest a meaning which reflects more of the process of transformation as outlined in the aforementioned theories. This suggests that there are visitors whose museum experience brought them only part of the way through the process, and that their narrative will continue far past the parameters of this one study and may include transformational elements and relapses to previous understandings and actions.

While each narrative of transformation is unique, there are several broad themes which emerged from the study. Visitors who reported experiencing impact often described this as something internal—for example, feelings of pride, appreciation, affirmation, and new knowledge and understandings. Those who went on to take action had been emotionally invested during their museum visit and often had a platform for action already available to them either through their work, family, or personal commitments. The museum visit sits within a complex web of experiences and influences which work together and against each other to 'nudge' people towards ways of thinking and acting within the world. There is strength in embedding activist practice ideals within all aspects of the institution, not only through exhibitions and programmes. For example, this can be done through diverse hiring practices, building accessible spaces, and providing gender neutral facilities. Finally, participation in the study permitted visitors to critically reflect on their experience and this ability strengthened and deepened their understandings of that experience and commitments to change.

These themes are further illustrated and elaborated upon in the following sections. I have relied upon the stories visitors shared with me to further enrich these main points. These are only a selection of the many narratives which emerged from the research. While they are being used to highlight overarching themes, it is still important to consider the individuality of each story. The names of the participants have been changed to protect their identities.

I'm just really glad to have that fire relit in me

The most common types of change or impact visitors shared were often related to internal aspects of specific emotions and feelings, as well as those related to new knowledge and understandings. For those who were already quite active in their communities, or were doing activist work, their museum visits helped to reaffirm their commitment to that work. Below are just a few brief excerpts from the stories visitors shared:

> It just makes me appreciate all the things that we do have in life. Places like this remind you of the struggle. They bring it back to you in a very real way and it lets you know that this was not easy. None of this came easy. And so we need to be appreciative but we also need to be very protective because it didn't come easy and it could slip away at any point in time. So, I'm just really glad to have that fire relit in me and museums like this do that.
>
> *(Caroline, visitor to CCHR, aged 67)*

> I think it's a wonderful museum and the raw power of some of the exhibits helps to foster a deeper understanding of some incredibly important (and upsetting) issues. I think that having more of a sense of the cruel realities of slavery, as well as of its unimaginable extent, has helped to deepen my understanding of a range of con-temporary issues.
>
> *(Matt, visitor to ISM, aged 31)*

> I do a lot of community service work so sometimes because things can be so political, you're like I'm not dealing with that anymore. I'm going home. But you know, [my visit] gives me the motivation to keep going. To stay there and to keep going.
>
> *(Aniyah, visitor to CCHR, aged 41)*

What can I do for the people in my community?

This is the story of Evonne, a 55-year-old, African-American woman and the owner of a nursing school. I interviewed her at CCHR and she told me about her first visit to that institution:

> Well I've been here before. I have my own [nursing] school and when I was here the first time with my husband I cried, and I've been crying ever since. But I left out of here and I wanted to know what can I do for the people in my community? So, when I got back to my school I decreased my prices . . . And the kids in the class . . . they cried and they were like, you know we've been struggling trying to pay for this.

There was no doubt in Evonne's mind that it had been her visit to the museum that had inspired her to lower her tuition fees for her students. Her story is an excellent example of the deep emotional connection made during the visit, as well as the importance of having a platform for action—something already existing in a person's life which facilitates the steps toward action. Evonne's platform was her nursing school. Other

visitors found platforms for action through their careers as educators, pastors, and through organisations such as churches or university programmes. Most often these platforms were already heavily integrated into the participants' lives and taking action through them was not far removed from their everyday experiences. What makes Evonne's story quite unique is that the change she experienced was sudden and dramatic. It is more often the case that change is much more subtle and incremental as is illustrated in the next narrative.

It's these little nudges you get along the way

I first met Omar, a 27-year-old medical doctor from Australia, at ISM. His experience of museum impact typifies what the majority of visitors shared with me:

> I don't think that I could say that the museum specifically has [inspired me to change], but I would have to say that it's certainly been a contributing factor this year. Part of the reason why I was taking this year off was because I was having some uncertainties about career direction and I suppose the museum, as well as other things that have been part of this year, have inspired me to be more proactive with regards to human rights in general.
>
> So, I suppose in terms of thinking about the long-term, I'm a lot more interested in working with vulnerable populations as a group. That's probably the thing I can say about it is [the museum] certainly added to the motivation or inspiration for doing something about it . . . It's not always an epiphany-type moment. It's these little nudges you get along the way and I suppose looking at it that way, the museum experience, on reflection, is probably something like that.

Omar was able to put into words what many visitors struggled to describe: the idea of different experiences nudging them towards change and, in some cases, action. Omar spoke about a trip to India, books he had read, and discovering a family connection who was involved in humanitarian efforts as all being part of those nudges he had experienced. Other visitors pointed to documentaries, news reports, and conversations with co-workers, family members, and friends and, importantly, visits to other cultural institutions such as museums and heritage sites. Like Omar, they mentioned their museum visit as part of the inspiration or motivation they felt to think or act differently. Omar's nudges are the illusive reinforcing experiences that the studies mentioned previously in this chapter had posited as being essential for the longevity of changes in attitudes and behaviours.

You came in here, you changed your mind about something

David a staff member at CCHR, told me a story about a visitor he had helped one day at the museum. What began as a routine interaction resulted in a transformative experience:

> This lady asked me a question I hear a thousand times a day—where's the bathroom? I pointed and then I went and did something and . . . [when] I saw

her again with her friend, they were loosely discussing a discomfort with the restrooms up here. They're unisex bathrooms which can be a little uncomfortable for people who are used to the idea of going to separate gendered bathrooms.

So, when I heard their conversation, I [said], 'Hey if you were looking for a men's and women's restroom they're on the second floor or the first floor.' The woman kind of caught my eye and then she was like 'Can I ask you a question? What's with these unisex bathrooms? I find them in restaurants more . . . So what is this all about?'

I . . . took a pause because initially I wasn't really sure this was the right conversation but you have to take a risk sometimes so I said, 'The reason why these bathrooms don't have a gender is because one of the things that we are concerned about as the Center for Civil and Human Rights is gender equality for transgender people, for men, for women, for parents who need to breastfeed, all ranges of people should be accepted here.'

She was like, 'Oh! So, if I didn't have a gender that I feel comfortable with, I can go to either one of these bathrooms.' I [said] exactly. And she was like, 'Well shoot I wasn't going to use that bathroom but now I'll go back and use that bathroom' and she marched right over there and used the bathroom . . . Then I saw her another half an hour [later] . . . and she was like, 'You should tell everyone' and I was like 'You should tell everyone. You came in here, you changed your mind about something' . . . and she was like 'Yeah, I will! I'm proud of this!'

This story illustrates the strength of embedding the principles of activist museum practice within all aspects of cultural institutions. The woman David spoke with, like Evonne, experienced a sudden, dramatic epiphany with regards to gender identity which came not specifically from the exhibitions at CCHR, but from an experience with gender neutral bathrooms. Narratives such as this one prompt more questions about how museums can achieve consistency between exhibition themes and institutional practice.

So, I think you do reflect on it more, but it's probably a good thing

When I designed my follow-up interviews, I included a question about whether participation in the study had impacted the way visitors had viewed their museum experience. I had initially done this to ensure the validity of my work, but what emerged was something unanticipated. All but two visitors reported that participating in the study had allowed them to reflect about their experience, and that had prompted them to remember and consider their visit in much more depth than had they not participated:

It has helped me to remember notable things about the museum and digest the information a little bit so that I retain more. It's good to discuss the information and the emotions because it helps to remember the information later on.

(Ashley, visitor to CCHR, aged 20)

> I think you're reflecting on it more by having a discussion with someone about it who's asking you pretty thought-provoking questions about your experience of the museum. So, I think you do reflect on it more, but it's probably a good thing.
>
> *(Omar, visitor to ISM, aged 27)*

Critical reflection was one of the most important aspects of the change theories I used as an analytical framework. It might appear that the validity of the research is compromised, as participants were prompted to recall their visits and reflect more deeply on their experiences as a result of their participation. Despite this, these data present an opportunity for moving forward for researchers hoping to study long-term impact, as well as for museums themselves. Giving visitors a way to reflect deeply, with specific questions and through dialogue, aids not only in retaining the experience of the visit, but also is essential to prompting and encouraging the sort of change and impact activist museums are seeking.

The next chapter

Research around museum impact will continue to be challenging, although strides are being made. The few studies which have been done provide a starting point for further inquiry and my own research is a small stepping stone along that journey. What I have found confirms the data from these earlier studies and advances our understanding. We can now state that impact is a highly individualised phenomenon which relies upon emotional commitment and critical reflection. Visitors are nudged through the transformation process by a myriad of experiences which include personal experiences, exposure to different forms of media, and other visits to cultural institutions. Visitors who are able to turn their museum experience into action often have ready-made opportunities in their lives to do so.

As museums professionals, we should consider new ways to facilitate personalised, critical reflection in our galleries. We must consider forging stronger partnerships with other institutions not only within our own sector, but also across other sectors such as social services, environmental groups, and community organisations in order to create more reinforcing experiences for visitors. It is also essential for us to embed the principles of activist practice in all aspects of our museums, from the content of our exhibitions to our hiring practices and public facilities. We must also think differently about impact as a sector. Beyond activist museums, the heritage sector must begin to think about the complex, unique, and dynamic process of impact as a holistic and contextual narrative of transformation, replete with the incremental nudges that this process often requires.

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Notes

1 Recent years have seen growth in the numbers of human and civil rights museums as well as museums which memorialise sites of war, genocide, and human rights violations. Examples of such sites are the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, the District Six Museum in Cape Town, South Africa, and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York, United States. Professional international networks such as the Federation of International Human Rights Museums (FIHRM) and the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC) connect practitioners from these and other similar institutions to share best practices in the areas of museology, memory, political science, and activism.

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31

MEMORIAL MUSEUMS AT THE INTERSECTION OF POLITICS, EXHIBITION AND TRAUMA

A study of the Red Terror Martyrs Memorial Museum

Bridget Conley

Introduction

Activism, broadly defined as intentional and public provocation of behaviors and ways of thinking about social or political change, is embedded in the conceptual foundation of the memorial museum. The genre is distinguished among museums by its aim to commemorate 'victims of State, socially determined and ideologically motivated crimes' (International Committee of Memorial Museums in Remembrance of the Victims of Public Crimes n.d.). Connecting historical sites and survivor or victim communities, memorial museums often explore history through discrete places and people, query how states justify and enact violence, and provoke connections to political engagement today. But merely stating that memorial museums address social or political issues is different from analyzing the tenor of that activism, which can challenge or reinforce existing political hierarchies (Brett *et al.* 2007; Brown 2013; Rieff 2016).

Adapting Tony Bennett's (1997: 24) discussion of the techniques of power at play within public museums, I argue that understanding the activist potential for memorial museums is best pursued by disaggregating and analyzing three tensions inherent in the form: how a specific institution is constructed as a social space in relation to political narratives; what are its modes of representing history; and how does it envision a relationship to community through the performance of the tour. Each of these areas can be politically conservative or oppositional, democratizing or centralizing power, and the impact of any one does not necessarily reinforce that of the others. Activist potential emerges from tensions between these areas, within a specific moment of time, shifting as debates evolve. The very transient character of debates, however, renders the museum a particularly potent vehicle through which to examine memory politics, as the practices that define museums are predicated on enduring physical presence, even as debates change.

In this chapter, I analyze one such institution, the Red Terror Martyrs Memorial Museum in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, which provides a distinct lens through which to examine the activist potential of the memorial museum.

From the terror to the museum: navigating Ethiopian politics

Historical context

The Red Terror Martyrs Memorial Museum (RTMMM)[1] documents state-sponsored violence in Ethiopia following the 1974 revolution that overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie. The revolution was spurred by a widely embraced critique of the social, economic and political practices of the Imperial regime, filtered through the discourse of Marxism. Violence arose as different actors competed to control the direction of the revolution.

From the beginning, the competition was heavily weighted in favor of the military: a well-established organization, it also held in its hands the greatest coercive power. As protests against the Emperor grew, a committee initially composed of 120 mostly mid-level officers, 'the Derg,' took over (Kebede 2011). Steadily jockeying for and concentrating its power, the Derg implemented some socialist reforms and co-opted portions of the radical civilian opposition, namely a group called Meisone. They failed to enlist the support of the largest opposition group—the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP). From 1974 to late 1976, political violence was regularized, but not systematic.

Two factors contributed to a stark increase in violence. First, was the passionate and uncompromising approach to politics across the leadership of groups who vied to control the outcome of the Revolution. A generation of youthful activists, spurred on by Marxist-Leninist critique and ideals, grabbed their chance to remake their country. Pitted into unforgivingly opposed camps, even relatively minor differences of doctrine forged lethal schisms (Zewde 2009: 22–3; Wiebel 2015: 15). The EPRP took a stand against the military's dominant position and launched a program of targeted assassinations against leaders within the military and their political allies, eventually even turning against those in its own ranks who opposed the tactic. This unwise and costly decision fuelled radicalization of the military regime, but it alone does not account for the violence unleashed upon the civilian population.

The more crucial factor was the steadily increasing willingness of the military leadership to authorize and reward the use of violence to silence political competitors. The Derg used violence as it seized power by unceremoniously killing 59 government ministers from the Imperial regime, later targeting protesters and the organized opposition. Violence expanded in parallel as Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, who himself killed and ordered the murder of many moderate military officers, concentrated power and assumed leadership of the country. The Red Terror, which marked a steep increase in violence, steadily escalated through the fall of 1976, punctuated by Mengistu's speech on 3 February 1977, when he symbolically broke three bottles of 'blood' to symbolize the enemies of the Revolution as he stood before a crowd in newly-renamed Abyot (Revolution) Square. He announced: 'Our enemies'—designated as the EPRP—'were planning to eat us for lunch, but we had them for breakfast... Revolutionary Ethiopia or death! We will fight until the last man and the last rifle' (Teffera 2012: 222).

Mengistu's regime deputized officials in neighborhood-level state organizations, *kebele*, who were armed, given wide latitude to use violence, and encouraged to control the population. In Addis Ababa, almost every neighborhood housed a torture center; dead bodies would regularly appear on the streets; left to fester as families were forbidden to mourn or bury their loved ones, or compelled to pay a fee for the bullets used to kill their family members. House-by-house searches were carried out with people killed on the spot or dragged away to prisons. Violence

cut across the country, ravaged the cities, fractured neighborhoods, even dividing families. It is estimated that a minimum of 10,000 people were killed in Addis alone between 1977–1978, and likely another 10,000 elsewhere in the country (de Waal 1991: 110). Among the dead, in a poor country with low levels of education, the 'best minds of the time' were targeted; many perished or fled into exile, 'depriving the country of irreplaceable talent and skill' (Zewde 2009: 30). Once the Derg decided it had adequately stifled the EPRP, it turned on its erstwhile allies, Meisone, condemning the members of the group to torture and prison.

The violence achieved its immediate aim by the end of 1978, although many people languished in prison well beyond this date. Mengistu turned to the task of consolidating his rule, the next serious threat to which arose later in the 1980s in the form of rural-based insurgencies. These groups were also mostly socialist in political orientation but organized through ethnic communities, the most effective of whom were the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF). A new chapter in violence then opened as Mengistu led a ruthless counterinsurgency campaign, targeting civilian centers and implementing a resettlement program that produced the famine of global headlines in 1983–1985 (de Waal 1997). The TPLF slowly gained ground and built a coalition of ethnically based guerrilla forces, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which closed on the capital on 28 May 1991. Mengistu fled, and the ERPDF set about establishing a new government.

Power and memory

The narrative of the Red Terror does not belong to the EPRDF-led government, which has remained in power since 1991. The story of violence in the 1970s neither condemns nor rationalizes their current position. In this manner, the work of memorializing the Red Terror is distinct from many other countries' memorial museums, where the memorialization efforts retain a stronger affinity with a justifying narrative of powerful political actors. For example, in Rwanda (where the ruling party emerged out of the rebel group that defeated the genocidal regime), or Bosnia (where the memory of the crimes of the war period continue to feed nationalist political parties), or Holocaust-related museums and memorials in Israel and the United States (which justify narratives of a fortress nation or interventionist global power, respectively). In such cases, the use value of memory relies on the extent to which powerful actors can contain and stabilize the historical narrative, and rarely does one see a large-scale shift in the general orientation to memory, per se.

In the Ethiopian context, there is a fundamental ambiguity in the relationship of the post-Mengistu state to the history of the Red Terror that is instructive for the question regarding the activist potential of memorial museums. The ambiguity exposes Red Terror memory projects to vacillations in the relationship of power to memory. The idea of creating the Red Terror Martyrs Memorial Museum emerged during Ethiopia's transitional period (1991–1995), as the horizon of Ethiopian politics was shifting and there was considerable experimentation with what the national practice of democracy might—or might not—look like. The EPRDF undertook a number of transitional programs: creating a government of national unity including most opposition groups; a large-scale disarmament and demobilization program; disqualifying former Derg leaders from holding positions of power; and prosecution of some 3,000 perpetrators of violence from the Derg regime.

The new government was primarily concerned with decreasing poverty, hence their development policies took precedence over political or human rights issues, although in the post-Cold War era, certain forms of democratization were necessary for a state to establish its legitimacy (de Waal 2012, 2013; Lefort 2013). Nonetheless, documenting the abuses of the former regime provided a stark, negative counterpoint as the new government sought to establish itself as qualitatively different from its predecessor. Memorialization in the 1990s must be understood within this context.

There is no reason to doubt that EPRDF leaders, while not politically aligned with the vision of state articulated by the student activists targeted in the Red Terror, were truly disgusted with the Derg's violent excesses, having themselves survived the brutal excesses of the Terror in Tigray and the counterinsurgency. Notably, on 28 May 1994, President of the Transitional Government, Meles Zenawi, presided over the dedication of a modest memorial stone at Meskel Square intended to mark the location of a future Red Terror Memorial. There is no need to be cynical about the words Prime Minister Meles Zenawi spoke at the commemoration of the memorial stone: 'we lay this memorial stone in memory of those who were massacred while fighting for democracy and justice.'[2]

For some families of the dead and survivors of the torture centers, the commemorative work remained unfinished. The Association of Survivors was one of the few organized efforts to carry on this work, but they made little headway until spurred by the evolving political context. The government's tolerance for organized political opposition and civil society began to seriously ebb in 2005. That year, the country called elections in which to the surprise of the EPRDF, the opposition did well, winning most of the major cities and a large portion of seats in several rural areas. In the wake of the elections, both sides adopted an all or nothing view of the political stakes. The opposition, claiming it had been cheated of victory, called for protests and a Parliamentary boycott. The EPRDF arrested political leaders and expanded its reach among the populace, embracing an identification of the government with the party, and reducing the space for organized dissent outside its structures (Abbink 2006; Aalen and Tronvoll 2009). The history of the Red Terror got caught up in the politics of the time.

For the formal political opposition, memory advocates were seen as still participating in the process of legitimizing the EPRDF by providing the narrative of the Derg as political counterpoint. The government had moved on to other issues; the political aspirations of those targeted in the Red Terror and endorsement of popular activism implicit in its historical narrative were no longer helpful. The history was orphaned. However, members of the Association of Survivors, seeing their window of opportunity closing, redoubled their efforts and focused on creating a memorial museum. Led by Nunu Tsige, they advanced an argument for why the city government of Addis Ababa should give them land adjacent to the memorial stone's location for a museum. The city relented and with the location secured, the group embarked on a private fundraising campaign.[3]

With the additional passage of time the RTMMM has not escaped this liminal position, neither favored by the government nor the opposition; it is constricted in its work and self-reliant for finances. It is also instructive how the relationship between power and memory vacillates over time, varying to the extent memory is deemed useful and relevant (and by which actors) to evolving political debates. In some contexts, powerful actors are better equipped to 'fix' the meaning of memory than in others, but in none is it entirely successful. In Ethiopia, memory-work focused on the Red Terror has maneuvered between

the interests of powerful political actors in both the government and opposition—seeking to walk carefully between the two in order to carve out a space for relative autonomy for the story it seeks to tell.

Activism on display: the exhibition

In 2010, the RTMMM opened to the public. Unlike many peer memorial museums, the narrative of victimization is not primarily presented through a lens of innocence, whereby people are targeted for violence only because of their identity and not something that they chose to do, which poses distinct activism challenges. The exhibition asserts the power of a collective political movement from the perspective of EPRP activists. Its exhibition tells inherently an activist story, concerning not only the *topic* of abuse of state power, but also the emergence of a politically engaged community organizing across social sectors to claim a right to define the future of their country.

While the exhibition glosses over violence between and within the various political parties, it nonetheless provides a compelling historical presentation of how the military came to dominate the revolution and turned its overwhelming lethal force against the population. In keeping with the ideological orientation of the activists of the time, which emphasized the 'people' as the main protagonist of history, the exhibition only allows the Emperor and Mengistu to gain prominence, neither of whom is celebrated. The heroes here are peasants and student activists, mostly pictured in clusters of images portraying peasants suffering from famine, and boisterous crowds protesting first the Imperial and later the military regime.

As the exhibition progresses, crowded street scenes mingle with images and artifacts of the rising military intrusion into everyday life, including the devastating documentation of the violence. A wall of images picturing those targeted by the regime dominates the gallery devoted to the Terror. Using a technique common to memorial museums of displaying headshots, the exhibition presents the height of violence by contrasting individual faces with their collective fate.

Across the narrative arc, three unique exhibition techniques stand out. First, is the inclusion of a life-sized model of a torture technique from the period: victims were trussed up on a heavy pole suspended between two desks. The painful position contorted their bodies so that the bottoms of their feet were easily vulnerable to torturers' weapons. The torture model is displayed behind a curtain, opposite the wall of faces of victims, historical photos of various detention centers, and torture implements. It is a disconcertingly realistic display of violence and an aesthetic departure from the Museum's primary exhibition presentation.

A second technique is their inclusion of skeletal human remains. A controversial decision in any context, many memorial museums struggle with how to incorporate human remains into their structures while being respectful of traditional burial rites. The remains in the RTMMM are of people who suffered together, bonded through secular revolution, not identity. Hence, there is no properly consecrated ground that might contain the remnants of young protesters who could have been Ethiopian Orthodox Christian, other Christian faiths, Muslim, or non-religious. For the Museum's founders, the lack of a single, religious ground to unify the dead was a crucial factor in their decision to create a secularized sacred ground in the form of a museum. The remains are displayed in two, glass-fronted vitrines composed of square self-contained boxes. Each box holds the skeletal remains of one person. Tucked against the glass, for those remains that could be identified, is a small photo

or the name of the person killed. Alongside the bones is exhumed rope—evidence that the victims were captives at the time of their execution.

A third element is the Museum's art collection. The first piece of art one encounters is at the entrance. Intended to symbolize the losses of the Terror, it also encapsulates tensions between the modernizing impulses of the Revolution and Ethiopia's more traditional culture. Female activists during the revolution, some of whom are represented within the exhibitions, sported fantastic Afros and bell-bottom pants. The statue, however, presents traditionally garbed women, mourning a lost man symbolized by a jacket held in grief.

More exceptional is the Museum's uneven, yet sometimes powerful, collection of two-dimensional artwork. The most compelling paintings were included from the beginning of the Museum's life; subsequent ones were donated and are more haphazardly produced and displayed. One of the stronger paintings, by Naizgy Tewelde Kidane, presents victims of the Terror as representing a cross-section of Ethiopian urban society: men, women, children, and several faiths lined up within the scopes of the Derg's guns.

The painting conveys the exhibition's overarching message—the potential for Ethiopian political unity through a vision of the people as a collection of equals. Their equality, the Museum asserts, stems from a call to reject the use of force to resolve political differences, albeit tempered by the exhibition's exclusion of violence within and between political groups. The goal of the Museum, the staff argues, is to teach the current generation to solve problems by looking for non-violent solutions. In this context, the message alone might be construed as politically outspoken, depending on how and by whom it is articulated, and which acts of violence are included. Museum staff are cautious not to instruct on the contemporary implications of the Museum's position against the use of violence for political ends—this, they leave up to the visitors.

The power of the living witness

The RTMMM made another choice common to memorial museums: its docents are all family members of victims or survivors of torture and prison. Their eyewitness accounts provide an indelible introduction to the human losses of a period otherwise presented within a strongly political and collectivized narrative. In psychological terms, trauma is an experience that cannot be incorporated into everyday forms of remembrance and tamed knowledge. As Cathy Caruth (1995: 153) writes, trauma is:

> the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge . . . For the survivor of trauma, then, the truth of the event may not reside only in its brutal facts, but also in the way that their occurrence defies simple comprehension.

For a survivor to tame the experience by integrating it into a narrative so it can be conveyed to others is to deprive it of the very 'truth' of its exceptional character. Some people can achieve this and convert the tour experience into a form of empowerment. In a study of the Japanese American National Museum, whose docents are survivors of internment camps, Raina Fox argues that in their museum role, survivors 'can participate not only as depositories of memory but as active agents of political change thereafter' (2016: 77). In this way, museums function by 'resisting the temptation to act as single authorities but creating space

for multiple experiences to be spoken, heard, and acted upon. It is the testimonies of docents that embody and energize this mission' (ibid.: 80).

The ability of a survivor to work within an institution dedicated to telling their traumatic history is not generalizable within a given context or institution; it varies among individuals. Trauma survivors, even for those who commit their lives to memory-work, retain individual struggles with the history. Some survivors are patient, while others lash out. Some fall into depression or need regular time away in order to sustain a relationship to the traumatic event; others are invigorated by engaging with the public. As one survivor-docent at the RTMMM told me, he hates working there, but it is the only place he could get a job. The violence of what he cruelly suffered became his most potent career credential.

His view was not necessarily shared by the other RTMMM docents.[4] Nonetheless, several had strong emotional responses when they first visited the Museum, as for most this was before they began their employment. As one docent told me the first time he visited, 'Everything came to mind, bad memories' of a time he had 'started to forget.' He had lost one brother during the Red Terror and his surviving family members refuse to visit the Museum. One brother tried to talk him out of taking a position as docent, telling him that they had lost their youth—'we're old now'—and he should be wise and not return to that time period. Another survivor-docent described his first visit as an experience that left him 'upside down in the head.' For the first few weeks after starting the job (less than one year previously), he had what he simply described as 'trouble' with feelings and memories. He clarified that with time, he has been able to work without difficulty, as the Museum exhibition pales in comparison to the much greater horrors that he personally saw and experienced during the Terror. Another survivor-docent, employed by the RTMMM since it opened, started crying when asked if it is difficult to work there.

Overall, regardless of their personal struggles, the survivor-docents recognized and welcomed that their work contributed to the preservation of, and education about, the history of the Red Terror for future generations. 'It's my history,' as one survivor-docent told me, 'preserving the history of a country is not just *my* job, it is a job for all of us. It is a duty'. These two simultaneous impulses, to struggle with traumatic memory and yet feel an imperative to speak about it, is the conundrum of the survivor of extreme violence. It manifests as a compulsion, as psychologist and Holocaust survivor Dori Laub argued, both to testify and to recognize the impossibility of conveying experience (Laub 1992: 78–9). Individual traumatic memory, pulled by the need for both testimony and silence, can produce a powerful tour experience, but provides a poor foundation for stabilizing either meaning or communities.

If there is a collectivity constructed through the docent-led tour, it is ephemeral and disjointed. In a world where the dissemination of information is increasingly fractured, museums remain highly trusted institutions of knowledge, but for any particular visitor, a memorial museum experience is often riddled with contradictions. The memorial museum visit is, in theory and often practice, akin to a sacred activity: voluntary, repeatable, but also exceptional; edifying yet enjoyable. Despite the unique strength of the museum, its capacity to forge a community through a tour is weak, circumscribed by the duration of a visit and the dialogic interactions of the group of visitors with the guide, each other, the exhibition narrative and the context the visitors bring with them to a tour.

At the RTMMM, most visitors fall into one of three main profiles. First, are Ethiopian visitors old enough to have their own memories of the Revolution. Sometimes these

visitors argue with the docents, saying that they should have cooperated with the government, not fought against it, or they advance the Derg's justifications that the regime did what it had to do during a period of instability. Overall, most are sympathetic to the Museum's presentation. The second group is younger Ethiopians, who often know little of the history. While Mengistu's regime is taught in school, the official curriculum includes few details about the Red Terror and family members often do not talk about the events, as it is either too difficult or merely receding into the past.

Youth tend to ask about details, for example: how was violence possible, why was there impunity, and how the narrative contrasts with an ethnic-regionalist politics that dominates today. The third group is international visitors, who frequently know nothing of the history and arrive because a tourist book or program recommended the Museum. The depth of their emotional responses surprises some docents: people cry and are deeply moved by the visit.

Beyond the conversations with visiting groups in tours guided by survivor-docents, within a memorial museum the community for survivor-docents extends via memory to their friends, mentors and family members who did not survive. As docents at the RTMMM note during the tour, among the faces on the wall of victims are people they loved. The photographs of torture centers resonate with their worst memories, and the model of torture echoes with the pain several of them still feel in their feet daily, while walking through the museum. A community thus extended to those who suffered torture is marked by the impossibility of fully explaining this violence to those who did not experience it. The community also includes those who did not survive—the dead, whose memory informs the shape of survivors' reflections on the past. Further, the experience in which humans committed the most atrocious violence against each other shatters the possibility for faith in any future communal bonds. Traumatic history disrupts communities, undermining the intention to inculcate 'lessons' or capture the narrative for any particular use or value, be it conservative or progressive.

Conclusion

The RTMMM must be understood as a lonely outpost, circumscribed by its marginal position in the context of Ethiopian politics and by the particular modes of presenting history and engaging their visitors—not a resolute or powerful actor forging social change. Nonetheless, it can be understood as an activist space that disrupts any effort to reduce violent history to usefulness to political actors. Its activism arises out of the tension within and between core elements that adhere to any museum: its relation to power, exhibition narrative, and the way it engages a community. The RTMMM displays a distinct arrangement of these factors, including its ambiguous and evolving relationship to the justifying narrative of the government, its exhibition detailing a history of political activism and state-sponsored violence, and its docents' tours that expose a traumatic personal loss. Tension within and across these elements provides the grist for activist potential.

This potential, however, should not be understood as necessarily either hegemonic or oppositional. Memorial museums can be conservative and reinforce existing power relations. They can be oppositional and challenge the limits of what and how issues are engaged. They can also be intensively personal, disrupting the possibility of any efforts to produce easy lessons. The difference between these impacts resides in how a museum's narrative and exhibition techniques align with each other and the larger political context at a particular juncture in time. Inherently, any narrative of massive violence, especially when introduced through the eyes and

words of one who suffered its impact, resists power politics. The history and experience of violence as conveyed by a memorial museum is pivoted by a different logic than that which seeks to make a narrative useful for political ends.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1 All information contained herein about the Red Terror Martyrs Memorial Museum comes from the author's interviews and on-site research conducted in November 2017 and August 2017. To the extent of my knowledge, there are no other publications addressing the history of the institution or its exhibitions.
2 Quoted on a plaque displayed at the RTMMM.
3 They wisely included space for several small for-profit businesses, rent from which helps sustain the museum.
4 Interviews in 2017 with survivors who work in memorial museums in Potocari, Bosnia suggested similar variation, which also conforms to the author's personal reflections formed over ten years of working at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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32

'I ATTACK THIS WORK OF ART DELIBERATELY'

Suffragette activism in the museum

Nicola Gauld

On 9 June 1914, Bertha Ryland, a member of the Women's Social & Political Union (WSPU), walked into Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. She approached the painting *John Bensley Thornhill (1773–1841) as a Boy* (known as *Master Thornhill*) by the 18th-century artist George Romney and took a meat cleaver to it, slashing the canvas three times (Figure 32.1). The museum minutes from 10 June 1914 record that 'the damage was committed by means of a chopper concealed beneath her jacket' (Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery 1912–1917: 113). Bertha had in her pocket a note explaining her actions:

> Christ says 'I came not to bring Peace but a Sword.'
>
> I attack this work of art deliberately as a protest against the Government's criminal injustice in denying women the vote, and also against the Government's brutal injustice in imprisoning, forcibly feeding, and drugging Suffragist militants, while allowing Ulster militants to go free.
>
> Let all sensible men and women enquire into the cause of militancy instead of condemning the militants. We are militant because only so can the Vote be won; we need the Vote because only by it can the Women's Movement become a truly effective power. The Woman's Movement means the spiritual, mental and physical salvation of the race, because it is the one Movement that undertakes to stamp out sexual immorality and all its attendant horrors.
>
> It is futile to attempt to crush this great Movement by persecution and misrepresentation. No power on earth can stop a Movement that is working, with Divine Guidance, for Purity and Righteousness.
>
> *Bertha Ryland*[1]

The gallery was immediately closed, remaining so for a number of weeks, and damage to the painting was estimated at £50. This was one of the last attacks on paintings in an art gallery by militant suffragettes before the declaration of war with Germany on 4 August 1914.

The historical account of social and political activism as enacted by the WSPU, particularly during 1913–1914, contributes to our understanding of the broader themes

state that the attendants have exercised the keenest super-
vision during the last six weeks, but an outrage of this
character is quite unpreventable

A photograph showing the damage done is submitted
herewith:-

The Keeper added that he was in London at the time of the
outrage, but that the Assistant Keeper, on the authority of Mr
W.A.Cadbury, had the Gallery closed immediately.

269.   RESOLVED: That the action of the Assistant Keeper
in closing the Gallery be approved, and that the Gallery be kept
closed until after the ordinary meeting of the Committee on
Monday next.

The Keeper submitted certain suggestions for additional
protection of the Galleries and further suggestions were made
by members of the Committee.

FIGURE 32.1   Minute 268 from 10 June 1914, relating to the slashing of *Master Thornhill* by Bertha
Ryland (Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery Committee, 1912–1917, BCC/1/
BQ/1/1/1).
Photograph courtesy of the Library of Birmingham.

and issues around the museum as a political site. The WSPU was the first political
movement to actively target the museum, their acts a significant part of the fast-paced and
rapidly changing militant campaign that had, up until this point, focused mainly on
interrupting political meetings and haranguing politicians in public, smashing windows and
carrying out acts of arson. They now shrewdly decided to target a site that symbolised civic

democracy. This deliberate selection of the museum as a place suitable for militant activism rejects the notion of the museum as a neutral, non-political space: the WSPU clearly recognised the power that the institution held. In this specific context, and at this particular time, the museum represented a site of cross-class mingling and of civic democracy, but was also symbolic of the exclusion of some members of society from the democratic process. This chapter will explore one of the last attacks in a museum before the outbreak of war in August 1914, carried out by a Birmingham WSPU member, Bertha Ryland, a woman with many years of involvement with the organisation and who had experienced forcible feeding in prison. Bertha's militant act will be set in the wider context of other outbreaks of violent attacks in museums over the preceding months. The chapter will also consider how the campaign for votes for women reached this stage, and the reasons given by members of the WSPU for carrying out this form of militancy, alongside the reaction of the press and public.

The incident at Birmingham was not an isolated one; museums and galleries and the works of art that they housed had been a focus for militant suffragettes since early 1913; the public nature of these sites along with the symbolic and financial value of paintings made such spaces attractive targets. The first attack by WSPU members occurred at Manchester Art Gallery on 3 April that year when 13 paintings were damaged. Annie Briggs, Lillian Forrester and Evelyn Manesta carried out their raid after the museum had closed; their intention was to shatter the glass in front of the paintings rather than damage any canvasses and so had more in common with the window smashing campaign of the previous year that had targeted government and commercial properties. The *Manchester Guardian* reported:

> Just before nine o'clock last night, when the Manchester Art Gallery was about to close and few people were about, an attendant in a room leading to the big room of the permanent collection heard crackings of glass follow each other rapidly. He immediately rushed into the big room followed by another attendant, who was nearby. They found three women making a rush around the room, cracking the glass of the biggest and most valuable paintings in the collection. They had already completed their work on the right side of the room going in, where pictures by such great artists as Watts, Leighton, Burne-Jones and Rossetti were hung, and were going around the top of the room. The outrage was quickly and neatly carried through, and when the attendants came running in the women were within reach of two more large pictures—one by Millais, the other by Watts. The attendants at once rushed to arrest them but as there were three to two the women escaped from the room. The attendants, however, called to the door-keeper and immediately the big doors were closed and the retreat cut off.
>
> *(Irving 2011)*

The women were clearly aware that by systematically and efficiently attacking the largest and most valuable paintings in the gallery their actions would attract even more attention to the cause. Such public examples of violent action were usually provoked by a turn of events in the campaign to secure women the right to vote. Earlier that day Emmeline Pankhurst, WSPU leader, had been sentenced to three years' penal servitude for causing an explosion at David Lloyd George's (uninhabited) house in Surrey. The threat of prison and the treatment the women would receive once inside was another reason for the escalation of militant activity during the period 1913–1914. Imprisoned suffragettes would typically

commence hunger-striking, which would lead to forcible feeding, a practice that the Liberal Government had introduced in September 1909 in order to prevent any deaths occurring while the women were in custody. In response to this ongoing issue the Government were about to pass the Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill-health) Act, or 'Cat and Mouse' Act as it came to be known. Under this new legislation hunger-striking women would still be forcibly fed but released before suffering serious illness and expected to return to prison once they had partially recovered.

By 1914 militant activity and methods had intensified. Museum authorities across the country were aware that they could be the victim of suffragette protest at any time. Birmingham Museum's committee minutes from March 1914 reveal intense discussions about insuring works of art and arrangements were made for the continuous attendance of a detective officer at the building's entrance. There were also serious concerns that Emmeline Pankhurst might die as a result of her repeated hunger striking, felt not just by her loyal WSPU members but also by the authorities who feared the impact this could have. In April 1914 the Keeper of Birmingham Museum noted:

> I have made arrangements with the Detective Department and the editor of the *Birmingham Daily Mail* to kindly telephone me at once in the event of the decease of Mrs Pankhurst, and I think it would be advisable that the Gallery should be immediately closed in the event of her death.
>
> *(Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery 1912–1917: 101)*

As well as frustration with the continued refusal by Asquith's Liberal Government to give women the vote while preparing to extend the male franchise, the lenient treatment of Ulster militants was a further source of vexation for the suffragettes. Unionists were allowed to gather publicly where, unlike members of the WSPU on demonstrations, they did not face the same level of violence from police and members of the public that women frequently had to deal with. On a lecture tour of the United States in November 1913, Emmeline Pankhurst singled out Sir Edward Carson and the Ulster Unionists for criticism, accusing them of inciting violence and justifying the taking of life which then went unpunished by the Government. Pankhurst's treatment, being constantly hounded by police and repeatedly imprisoned, seemed grossly unfair in light of the WSPU determination not to cause injury to people: 'while he [Carson] has justified the shedding of human blood in a revolution, I have always said that nothing would bring me to the point of claiming that we should destroy human life in the course of our women's agitation' (Pankhurst 1913b). However, the increasing urgency of the campaign led to women themselves employing more violent tactics. Aaron Jaffe (2005: 184) has suggested that:

> the signatures of militant suffragette protest—smashing windows, burning letter-boxes, slashing paintings in public museum space, and blasting assorted national assets and treasures like kiosks in Regent's Park and the pavilion at Kew Gardens—were designed to solicit attention and elicit 'outrage.'

Between March and July 1914 there were 14 attacks on paintings and nine women were arrested. Each incident received widespread publicity and was universally condemned by politicians and the newspapers. The first, and most infamous case, occurred on 10 March

when Mary Richardson slashed Velazquez's *Rokeby Venus* at the National Gallery. The suffrage newspaper, *Votes for Women* (1914a: 357–8), reported the event on the front page of the 13 March issue: by damaging the painting Mary had, according to the writer:

> . . . thereby demonstrated once more the fact that human society rests upon mutual forbearance and consent, and that if a section, however powerful, outrages the feelings of another section, however small, there are means of retaliation open to those who are wronged which will be keenly felt by the community at large.

The blame was laid squarely on Prime Minister Asquith's Liberal Government, for showing women that politicians 'care nothing for equity or justice or the priceless traditions of liberty, and that the only thing which influences them is the strong right arm which can strike an irreparable blow' (*Votes for Women* 1914a: 357–8). Richardson's defence speech was reported in full in *Votes for Women* on 20 March:

> I care more for justice than I do for art, and I firmly believe that when a nation shuts its eyes to justice, and prefers to have women who are fighting for justice ill-treated, maltreated and tortured, that such action as mine should be understandable.
>
> *(1914b: 384)*

Her words were also reported in *The Times* (1914a), indicating that while her actions were to be condemned, her argument was at least being listened to by the wider media. In response to the incident the National Gallery was immediately closed, as were other institutions in the London area including The Wallace Collection, Tate Gallery, Guildhall Art Gallery, Hampton Court Palace, Kensington Palace, Kew Palace and, further afield, Windsor Castle and Holyrood Palace.

Acts of violence in museums gathered pace in May and June: on 4 May, the opening day of the summer exhibition at the Royal Academy, a John Singer Sargent portrait of the writer Henry James was attacked by Mary Wood, an alias of Mary Aldham, who was described by *The Times* as 'an elderly woman of distinctly peaceable appearance.' The canvas was slashed three times with a meat cleaver. Wood sent a statement to the weekly WSPU meeting in London, her justification echoing that of Mary Richardson:

> I have tried to destroy a valuable picture because I wish to show the public that they have no security for their property nor for their art treasures until women are given the political freedom.
>
> *(The Times 1914b: 8)*

An eyewitness report was printed in *Votes for Women* on 8 May: after carrying out the damage, Mary Wood was reported to have said 'If they would only give women the vote this would not have happened. . . What about Sir Edward Carson? Why is he not arrested? Many a poor girl is arrested for nothing, and he is allowed to go free.' The unnamed eyewitness then described the transformation of the crowd from 'a company of well-dressed, decently-mannered and pleasantly-speaking men and women, interested in beautiful things. . . into a red-faced, brawling crowd, with shaking, clutching hands, ugly naked souls, and violent, evil speech' (*Votes for Women* 1914c: 490). Similarly, Mary Richardson

reported the violence she faced after her attack, as she was struck on the back of the head by two Baedecker guidebooks thrown by German visitors to the Gallery, and observed later that it was 'as if out of the very walls angry people seemed to appear around me. I was dragged this way and that . . . in the ensuing commotion we were all mixed together in a tight bunch' (Richardson 1953: 169).

A week later, on 12 May, a portrait of the Duke of Wellington by Sir Hubert von Herkomer on display at the Royal Academy was attacked by Gertrude Mary Ansell, who was aged 50, and presumably, given her age, as with Mary Wood, may not have been suspected by the attendants as being involved with militant activity. Ansell's statement was reported in *Votes for Women*: 'her act was a protest against the present unjust position of women, the prosecution of Mrs Pankhurst, while Sir Edward Carson was free, and the summoning of Mrs Drummond and Mrs Dacre Fox while Ulster militants were let alone' (1914d: 506) (Flora Drummond and Norah Dacre Fox were high-profile WSPU organisers and had both been arrested that month). Later that same month, on 22 May, provoked by the re-arrest of Mrs Pankhurst, a George Clausen nude, *Primavera*, also on display at the Royal Academy, was badly damaged by a meat cleaver wielded by Mary Spenser, the alias of Maude Kate Smith. And on the same day at the National Gallery, Freda Graham, the alias of Grace Marcon, managed to deface five paintings including *The Agony in the Garden* by Giovanni Bellini, despite two plain-clothes detectives and a number of students present in the room. The following day saw an attack in Edinburgh, at the Royal Scottish Academy, when Maud Edwards took a hatchet to a portrait of George V by John Lavery. The attacks continued into June. On the 3rd, Ivy Bon damaged two paintings on display at the Doré Gallery. *The Times* reported that, on arrest, she said that she wished she had 'smashed the whole lot' and at her court hearing 'shrieked furiously throughout the proceedings.' Like Mary Richardson, Ivy Bon was out on licence under the Cat and Mouse Act, having been sentenced in May for two months with hard labour for window smashing. She was given six months for her actions inside the gallery (*The Times* 1914c: 8). A few days later Bertha Ryland's attack on *Master Thornhill* took place in Birmingham Museum. The final defacement of a painting took place on 17 July when Ann Hunt (also known as Margaret Gibbs) used a meat cleaver to slash Millais's portrait of Thomas Carlyle on display at the National Portrait Gallery. Her given reason was the refusal of the Home Secretary, Reginald McKenna, to meet with a WSPU deputation.

Why attack works of art?

While the refusal of politicians to meet with the WSPU was often given as a reason for acts of militancy, there were also other contributing factors. In each case those responsible for attacks on paintings gave similar explanations: the contrasting treatment of the Ulster Unionists; exploitation of women and children; and the refusal of the Liberal Government to listen to WSPU demands. The incident usually took place at the middle of the day in crowded galleries and the damaged painting was quickly repaired, erasing all visible traces and encouraging the pretence that the attack had never occurred. Unlike some other militant activity, for example setting fire to post boxes, or anonymous hoax calls to the fire brigade, this type of tactic was much more public and followed on from the 1912 window smashing campaign in its targeting of middle-class areas, asserting unequivocally that 'a woman could be a danger in a public space' (Fowler 1991: 124). Although many of the women gave statements that spoke of their anger and determination to strike out, undertaking such an act in a public gallery would have been extremely

nerve-wracking. While the window smashing campaign tended to be carried out in open public spaces by small groups, each of these women acted alone and knew that arrest and imprisonment was inevitable. As A. E. Metcalfe wrote in her history of the suffrage movement, published a few years after the militant campaign had ceased, 'in the case of attacks on pictures and other works of art, escape was of course impossible, and was, clearly, not contemplated. Those, therefore, committing this offence, did so in the full knowledge of all that their act would entail' (1917: 319). In a 1975 interview Maude Smith, responsible for the attack on Clausen's *Primavera*, painted a dramatic picture of how it felt in the hours and minutes before carrying out such an act. She recalled travelling from her home in Birmingham to the WSPU headquarters in London at Lincoln's Inn House on Kingsway and receiving instructions to go to the Royal Academy. She was told to target *Primavera* as it was one of the paintings of the year and so would attract attention. Maude then described hiding a hatchet under her coat and, after she arrived at the gallery, sitting in front of the painting for a long time, reluctant to take action but too scared to return to the WSPU office without fulfilling her mission. Once arrested, Maude gave a false name as she had previously been in prison for window smashing and knew that conditions were better for new prisoners than for repeat offenders. In her autobiography, Mary Richardson described similar anxieties and anguish in the build up to her attack: 'I hesitated, hedged with myself, tried to say that someone else would be better able to do such a job than I' (1953: 165).

Another reason for striking out, given by Bertha Ryland and Gertrude Ansell, was sexual immorality: in 1913 Christabel Pankhurst had written a series of articles published in her newspaper *The Suffragette*, which were then published as a collection titled *The Great Scourge and How to End It*. The subject of the book was sexually transmitted disease, the 'hidden scourge' of syphilis and gonorrhoea, which could only be tackled through 'Votes for Women and Chastity for Men' (Pankhurst 1913a: vii). Not only could women's bodies suffer the effects of forcible feeding but there was also the risk of being ravaged by contagious diseases. Pankhurst urged, 'let all women who want to see humanity no longer degraded by impure thought and physical diseases come into the ranks of the Women's Social & Political Union, and help with the Vote!' (1913a: 145). The sexual exploitation and abuse of children was also a factor for some of the women. The following year Dr Ethel Smyth (1914: 58), composer of *The March of the Women*, the suffrage campaign's unofficial anthem, wrote in *The Suffragette*:

> there is to me something hateful, sinister, sickening in this heaping up of art treasures, this sentimentalising over the beautiful, while the desecration and ruin of the bodies of women and little children by lust, diseases and poverty are looked upon with indifference.

After her attack at the Royal Academy Ansell had stated:

> I have myself visited a home where there are forty-four children all under twelve years of age who have been outraged by male relatives, half of whom have not been punished at all. It is [acts] such as these and the subjected position of women generally that nerve us to protest by defiant acts.
>
> *(*Votes for Women *1914d: 506)*

For Bertha Ryland, acting with 'Divine Guidance,' it was the women's movement 'that undertakes to stamp out sexual immorality and all its attendant horrors.'

Traditionally a site of bourgeois leisure and pleasure, the museum now also became a site of improvement for the working classes. As Suzanne MacLeod explains, in the early 20th century, 'these new institutions would symbolise the civil society and generate civility across class and gender divisions through the benign and apolitical activity of looking at pictures' (2006: 47). Museums were a 'key site for male middle class identity and authority ... for the civilised values it claimed to uphold' (ibid.: 54). Writing in the *Museums Journal* in 1913, John Burns, President of the Board of Trade, expressed the view that 'museums were absolutely essential if they [the authorities] were to provide for the greater mass of the people a nobler method of spending their leisure time than the public house' (Kavanagh 1994: 100). But although a site of 'cross-class mingling,' values of moral improvement and citizenship were not on equal terms; '... these values validated the political exclusion of women' (MacLeod 2006: 47), and prevented them from fully participating in democratic society by being denied the right to vote. As Jaffe has observed, attacks on paintings in galleries demonstrate 'a subtle awareness of institutional power, for it aims to shift the struggle from the non-legitimized public space outside in the streets to the hyper-legitimized public space inside the gallery' (2005: 191).

The 'wonderful propaganda' these acts provided, as well as the inconvenience caused to museums and local authorities, were given by Christabel Pankhurst in her autobiography as reasons for pursuing this line of protest (1959: 270). By selecting art and, particularly, portraits to attack, the suffragettes disrupted the supposed passivity of art. Indeed, Mary Richardson commented later that she disliked the way male visitors 'gaped' at the Venus (Nead 1992: 37). But it was not only paintings of nude women that were the target of the militants, portraits of men were attacked too, the suffragettes recognising that all portraits represented people as objects to be looked at. There was also an awareness of the financial value attached to the male artist, most notably in the case of the *Rokeby Venus*, which had only recently been acquired by the National Gallery at a cost of £45,000, an amount, which for Mary Richardson, paled into insignificance compared to the importance of Mrs Pankhurst. Her anger was directed at a cultural authority which valued paint on canvas more than flesh and blood:

> Values were stressed from the financial point of view and not the human. I felt I must make my protest from the financial point of view, therefore, as well as letting it be seen as a symbolic act.
>
> *(Richardson 1953: 165)*

After discovering how much the damage she had caused to the portrait of Henry James affected the painting's value, Mary Wood responded, 'I quite understand; if a woman had painted it, it would not have been worth so much' (Bonnet 2014).

Militancy and the middle classes

Statements like Mary Wood's assert that not only did these acts demonstrate the suffragettes' awareness of the value of art but they also clearly understood the sphere of bourgeois leisure and pleasure. A large majority of WSPU members belonged to the middle-classes, where 'the art gallery was part of their social experience, a space they frequented, where they could move around unnoticed' (MacLeod 2006: 55). Like the other painting attackers, Bertha Ryland had long been involved in militant activity. An instrumental member of the WSPU campaign in the Midlands since 1908, she had previously served six months in

Holloway prison in 1912 for her involvement in the window smashing campaign, during which time she was forcibly fed. As Erika Rappaport remarks in *Shopping for Pleasure*, 'suffragettes delight in the ambiguities of metropolitan life' (2001: 218), and just as there was confusion during the raids on West-End shops between female shoppers and suffragettes, a similar confusion reigned between gallery-goers and suffragettes. The attendants on duty at Birmingham Museum said that Bertha, who was a member of a respectable upper middle-class family, had not aroused suspicion as she entered the museum and so was therefore not searched. For women like Bertha, a member of the Edgbaston elite (a wealthy suburb of south Birmingham), the disruption of a traditionally middle class patriarchal space and the outrage provoked by these attacks confirmed the suffragette view that the public and the press cared more for valuable objects than for women undergoing the pain and trauma of forcible feeding or sexual exploitation.

The *Birmingham Daily Post* reported on 11 June that when the Magistrate called out her name during the court hearing, Bertha jumped up and exclaimed, 'I refuse to have anything to do with the trial. I refuse to be tried' (1914a). She continued to interrupt the hearing and was reported to have responded to the prosecuting solicitor when asked about the damage to the painting; 'it is nothing to the damage caused by civil war. These Ulster militants are inciting to damage; why don't they arrest Sir Edward Carson and the rest of them?' Committed for trial and on remand in Winson Green Gaol, Bertha followed WSPU tactics, as she had done in 1912, by embarking on a hunger strike and was again forcibly fed. A few days later Bertha's father applied for bail, which was granted after Bertha gave a verbal undertaking that she would refrain from committing any similar act or attending suffragette meetings. On 10 July a statement by Bertha was published in *The Suffragette* (1914). Here it was revealed that Bertha had suffered a kidney complaint since 1912 and that forcible feeding should never have been performed as this had drastically worsened her condition. Bertha described how she was held down by four wardresses while the prison doctor forced a thick rubber tube into her nostril and down her throat; 'the acute agony, the inevitable retching, and choking, and the feeling of suffocation, accompanied by the utter helplessness, all combined to make this the most unutterably hideous experience.' On 17 July the *Birmingham Daily Post* (1914b) reported that the trial had been postponed.

Bertha's trial had not taken place by the time war broke out in August 1914 and after which all imprisoned suffragettes were granted amnesty. The charges against Bertha were officially dropped in October 1914. A matter of weeks later the museum minutes record that *Master Thornhill* had been fully repaired and would be placed back on display as soon as glass could be procured (Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery 1914: 135). Intriguingly, in the following year the committee reported that Bertha's mother, Alice, herself no stranger to suffrage campaigning both militant and constitutional, having been a long-serving member of the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society and a supporter of the WSPU, had donated two paintings to the museum, presumably in an attempt to absolve the feelings of guilt that the Ryland family may have had (Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery 1912–1917: 159). *Master Thornhill* is now part of the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (it was on loan to Birmingham at the time of Bertha's attack). The accompanying label makes no mention of the painting's history. Although she suffered permanent kidney damage as a result of forcible feeding, Bertha lived until the 1960s (Crawford 1999).

The public nature and the civilising aims of the museum made it a prime target for militant suffrage campaigners, not only determined to secure women the right to vote, but

also concerned with wider rights and protections for women and children. While the sensationalism of these attacks and the press attention that they generated were important factors at this stage of the campaign, which had employed militant tactics since 1905, they also reveal the precariousness of these spaces, despite the semblance of immovable permanence; a carefully-crafted democratic, civilising space, easily shattered by outbreaks of violent protest. Arguably there is still an unease felt by some about the actions of the militant suffragettes, a perception that the messiness of politics must not taint the beauty of art or the quiet calm of the museum space. There is a sense that art in the museum must be protected from all threats and that no reason can justify its coming under attack. In his review of the 2013 Tate Britain exhibition, A*rt Under Attack: Histories of British Iconoclasm*, the critic Richard Dorment remarked in reference to the curator's defence of Mary Richardson's attack on the *Rokeby Venus*, 'this pernicious drivel amounts to an open invitation to any person or any group with a grievance to target works of art hanging in national museums' (2013). There is a permanency in art that we do not see replicated in politics or political struggle. But while, 100 years later, there is no mention on either the accompanying label for *Master Thornhill* or on the label at the National Gallery for the *Rokeby Venus* of their part within suffragette history, viewers can, with close inspection, still see faint evidence of those slashes carved into the canvas, indelible markers of the suffragettes' radical activism that cannot be completely erased.

Note

1 'Exhibit A', HO 144/1205/221,862, National Archives.

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33

MUSEUMS, ACTIVISM AND SOCIAL MEDIA (OR, HOW TWITTER CHALLENGES AND CHANGES MUSEUM PRACTICE)

Jennie Carvill Schellenbacher

The emergence and growing use of social media has brought about fundamental changes in the way that people communicate. It has shaped and reshaped discourse around diverse contemporary issues and even played a part in overthrowing governments. It represents a democratisation of production (Baumer, Sueyoshi and Tomlinson 2011) that has seen traditional gatekeepers circumvented and disrupted the speed and intensity with which people engage in knowledge exchange.

This chapter will look at how social media is helping to facilitate grassroots and non-hierarchical initiatives that seek to change museum practice and, more particularly, to embed 'activist practice' (Sandell and Dodd 2010) within museums, equipping visitors with tools to become active, engaged citizens. With a particular emphasis on the use of Twitter by emerging and established museum practitioners and activists, I examine the ways in which these campaigns, conversations and interactions have intersected with and informed more established dissemination methods (conference papers, policy statements, etc.) and explore how this use of social media is shaping museum thinking and practice more broadly.

The case studies used in this chapter—#MuseumsRespondToFerguson and Museum Workers Speak—both examine the museum through a social justice lens, addressing their potential (and, oftentimes, reluctance) to respond to flashpoints and contested contemporary issues as well as critiquing their organisational cultures and employment practices.

In each case, these social media initiatives have challenged the sector, demanding improvements and driving discussion by developing an online network of activists and supporting them to effect change. Each of the initiatives began by utilising social media to gain a critical amount of support and exposure before expanding the group methods to include more traditional channels of discussion and dissemination. This chapter will look at how each initiative developed, how their nature and effectiveness was shaped by their use of Twitter, and how the work they do can be understood to be activist, not only in terms of content, but also in terms of the methods they utilise to meet their stated aims. In doing so, it also highlights how new forms of communication and methods of online networking present opportunities for museums to engage in activist practice, circumventing the

conservative character and often slow reaction time associated with more traditional public programming that is, in many museums, planned months and sometimes years in advance.

Museum professionals, social media and online activism

Online engagement in issues has often been dismissed as 'slacktivism' or 'clicktivism'; a reduction of political engagement to low-threshold, low-participation measures such as electronically signing petitions or sharing news stories with followers. However, these critiques fail to recognise the powerful ways in which social media has sometimes been harnessed to challenge people, companies, political parties and governments to reassess or change their approach to certain issues. For example, social media has enabled the emergence of 'citizen reporters,' where witnesses to crimes or acts of oppression can not only intervene but also record, and even live-stream, injustices exposing them to a potentially huge audience. The #metoo movement—begun in 2006 by Tarana Burke but gaining extensive coverage in 2017—has shown how threshold moments or 'tipping points' can stem from conversations that expand to bring about a fundamental shift in the way that media and society view and approach an issue. Through social media, women shared their stories and experiences of the well-known, but often unspoken problem of sexual harassment, or simply typed '#metoo' if they had been affected. It was low-threshold, low-participation on an individual level and yet the sheer volume of participation meant that it was impossible to ignore.

Social media takes many forms, but what all platforms and services have in common is that they make content production available to anybody with the requisite technology. Access to an internet-enabled device is the only barrier, as the vast majority of services are free. Blogging allows for people to produce long-form opinion pieces whilst microblogging sites offer shorter, more rapid forms of self-expression, whether text-based (for example, Twitter) or image-based (for example, Instagram).

Writing has tended to focus on how social media has changed the ways in which museums engage and interact with their audiences, think about their collections and approach questions of access, marketing and the crowdsourcing of material. As museums have become increasingly confident in their ability to become forums that negotiate and discuss contentious and difficult subjects (Kidd *et al*. 2014), the question of whether they should be doing this work has given way to the debate within the sector about the methods used. An emboldened profession has begun to respond to political upheaval with open resistance to government policy, for example in the US in response to the Trump presidency (Scott 2017) and fuelling debate around the role and potential of activist museums that not only seek to shape society through their traditional formats, but also by equipping their visitors with the methods and tools that they can use to effect change outside of the museum and by ensuring that their values are represented in all strands of their work (Carvill Schellenbacher 2016).

Amelia Wong (2012) has written about the ways museums might use their social media presence to effect social change, yet little attention has been given to how individual museum professionals (rather than institutions) use social media to discuss issues affecting the sector and agitate for changes in museum practice. The use of social media as a discussion forum for museum professionals at all levels—but particularly early career professionals—has seen intense online debate that reacts rapidly to current events and questions how museums can respond in responsible and meaningful ways.

Twitter and the anatomy of a tweet

Twitter is a free microblogging platform that allows users 280 characters and up to four pictures in each 'tweet' (prior to November 2017 tweets were limited to 140 characters). Conversations can be grouped according to users or by subject. When individuals respond to another user, their profile name is included in a tweet (for example, @twittername) and the recipient will be notified of the interaction. Alternatively, if a user wishes to add to a broader, ongoing discussion, a hashtag is used to mark the tweet as relating to a certain topic (for example, #museumtwitter) which can be found by others who browse or search for that topic. For each country, a list of the top ten hashtags currently trending is displayed. Specific hashtags might be determined in advance (often the case with slogans, products, television shows or conferences) or come about more organically (often names of people or places that are being tweeted about at increased frequency). Users are able to tweet under their own name or a pseudonym, or as a collective or group. Institutions often tweet with an institutional voice, but more and more the individuals in charge of the account are also named. As with many other forms of social media, Twitter uses an algorithm—based on factors such as the number of 'likes,' 'retweets' or 'followers' in common—that influences the likelihood of posts appearing in a user's news feed.

Not only does Twitter offer people the opportunity to respond to events and share information in real-time but planned weekly or monthly online 'chats' have been established that allow people to 'meet' online at a certain time, using a specific hashtag to communicate. An established example of this in the museum field is the UK-based @MuseumHour. It is managed by Tehmina Goskar, Kate Groome and Katy Jackson, but the account is turned over each week to a guest host who volunteers their time to facilitate a discussion on the topic of their choice. Questions and prompts are used to spark conversations and the various strands can be followed by checking back on the hashtag (#museumhour). The discussion often extends well past the allotted time—albeit without the host—and the conversations remain searchable and visible for those who were unable to participate as it happened.

Both of the case studies used in this chapter also host a regular, scheduled Twitter chat. The case studies have been chosen to show two aspects of how museums professionals are communicating on Twitter and the effects and changes these conversations are driving. The first, #MuseumsRespondtoFerguson, challenges museums to engage in difficult conversations and to act on currents events, affecting how museums address issues of race. The second, Museum Workers Speak, sees museum professionals 'turning the social justice lens inward' and adopting an intersectional approach (considering issues of gender, class, ethnicity and sexual orientation and how these are intertwined) to agitate for changes in museums' hiring and employment practices and organisational cultures.

#MuseumsRespondToFerguson

> The word 'Ferguson' in museum discourse has come to refer not so much to the town and event as to larger concerns about race, racism, and the continuing lack of inclusion in our cultural spaces.
>
> *(Jennings 2015: 97)*

The hashtag #MuseumsRespondToFerguson began with two museum bloggers (Adrianne Russell and Gretchen Jennings) tweeting about the killing of the unarmed black teenager

Michael Brown in Ferguson in 2014, the subsequent refusal by a grand jury to indict the police officers responsible and the resulting protests. As a 'contested contemporary event with deep roots in American history' (Brown 2015: 109), Ferguson became a by-word for the larger emergency of the killings of black people by white police in the US (Jennings 2015), something that came to be referred to as the 'Age of Ferguson' (Brown 2015).

Dissatisfied by the scant attention paid to the events by museums and on museum social media (Jennings 2015), Russell and Jennings began to aggregate their content and any other museum-related commentary with the hashtag #MuseumsRespondToFerguson in November 2014. In December 2014, Sam Black, president of the Association of African American Museums (AAAM) published a statement encouraging members to use their museums to provide understanding and context to the events (Jennings 2015). For African American museums the work is a natural fit, Aleia Brown (2015) argues, as the events are part of a wider historical trend in the history of America, especially as regards race relations and the treatment of black people, something intrinsic to the mission of the Black Museum Movement:

> The Civil Rights Movement, Black Power, and the Black Arts Movement motivated African Americans to create museums of their own. Black people documenting, disseminating, and celebrating their history was a primary tenet of all these movements. ... The black museums movement was created and executed with a clear strategy. However, mainstream museums did not progress with the same resolve.
>
> *(Brown 2015: 111–12)*

African American museums were able to contextualise these events within a longer narrative of black history in the US that they were already telling, including oppression, race relations and injustice as they had been established in response to the way that mainstream museums otherwise ignored these issues and acted to maintain and uphold inequality.

Mainstream museums, however, were slow to act and Jennings, looking to harness the 'participatory, "bottom-up" orientation of the "open authority" concept in museum discourse' (Jennings 2015: 100) reached out to fellow museum bloggers to develop a collaborative statement. The 'Joint Statement from Museums Bloggers and Colleagues on Ferguson and Related Events' was released on 11 December 2014 via multiple blogs and social media channels. The first organised #MuseumsRespondToFerguson Twitter chat was held on 17 December 2014 and asked museum professionals to respond to concrete questions about the ways their institutions were responding.

The Twitter chats continue each third Wednesday of the month and continue to evolve in response to unfolding events. The organisers do not have a set idea of how the project will develop:

> We want to encourage change so we spend a great deal of time in the actual Twitter chat discussing our vision for what museum practice should look like when it engages race and its intersections. We share articles, and examples of related exhibitions, programs and policies. We did not have a crystal-clear vision of how our work would materialize and evolve, but we wanted to, at the very least, keep the hashtag alive so that there was always documentation of our resistance and proposed solutions.
>
> *(Aleia Brown and Adrianne Russell, quoted in Fletcher 2016)*

The statement was printed in the *Museums and Social Issues* journal (2015) as part of an issue that looked more closely at the matters raised by the bloggers and activists a year earlier (Wood 2015). In doing so, #MuseumsRespondToFerguson used more traditional forms of academic knowledge dissemination to communicate their message. The two communication channels—social media and academic publishing—differ dramatically in terms of their audience, participation and form. Academic publishing is slower to react to events and not well-suited to be a forum for a fast-paced discussion; the issue of *Museums and Social Issues* is able to report about events over a longer period of time (in this case a year) and even offer the opinion of the activists about how the discussion might proceed. However, academic articles require time, long-form writing, academic referencing and a formal structure. Many academic journals are behind a paywall that makes their content expensive and difficult to access for those who are not affiliated with a university or research institute (including many museum workers). Furthermore, there is a gatekeeping process; articles are anonymously approved by two recognised experts in the field. The model works to ensure high standards of work, but it is slow, relies on free labour and can be less favourable towards more radical or imaginative ideas (Siler, Lee and Bero 2015).

#MuseumsRespondToFerguson uses established publication tools to document and disseminate their work, capturing the progress being made, but the emphasis of the organisers is on encouraging action rather than generating academic outputs. Beginning the conversation was important, but they are clear that it should go beyond that, that the monthly Twitter meeting should be more than a learning experience, it should challenge people to act (Brown 2015: 111).

Museum Workers Speak

> In contrast to the dominance of museum leaders' voices in the discourse of social justice in museums, this conversation is facilitated by a diverse team of emerging museum professionals who are uniquely aware of the challenges presented by working in this field, particularly barriers to entry and advancement rooted in race and class.
>
> *(Museum Workers Speak 2015a)*

The Museum Workers Speak group grew out of the conversations about social justice and museums surrounding #MuseumsRespondToFerguson and the recognition that, in many cases, museums were advocating for change and equality in wider society but failing to embody a commitment to inequality within their own practices. The group have highlighted a range of issues and concerns including fair payment of workers, diversity in staffing and the need to break down barriers to access and participation. There is an overlap of people involved in the projects as they met or became acquainted online via informal peer networks that had developed alongside the discussions (Palaez and Greenberg 2015), but Museum Workers Speak has developed into a different type of project than that relating to Ferguson.

Beginning with a 'rogue' session at the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) conference in 2015 (not an official part of the conference programme, but aimed specifically at participants), Museum Workers Speak sought to start a bottom-up conversation about museums and labour, deliberately focusing on those affected and 'turning the social justice lens inward' (Museum Workers Speak 2015b). The conversations continued via social

media (for example, in monthly scheduled Twitter chats) and in regional meetups in several US cities. Over the course of the group's first year two things became apparent to the organisers: 1) the problems they were exploring were complex and diffuse and defied a simple, unified solution, and 2) whilst the events and conversations were productive, they tended to attract graduate students and emerging professionals, not those within management or decision-making roles in museums (Greenberg *et al.* 2016).

To address the two points, Museum Workers Speak chose not to expand their activities into the area of academic publishing, but rather to explore another traditional method of academic dissemination: the conference. A year after the initial rogue session, the people behind #MuseumWorkersSpeak returned to the AAM conference to further the agenda of their, now more focused, intersectional approach. Together with other groups advocating for change (for example, The Empathetic Museum) they organised, facilitated or participated in four discussions and roundtables at the annual conference. The momentum and support that the group had been able to develop over the course of a year ensured that there was enough online 'buzz' around their work and their aims, that conference organisers—the gatekeepers in this case—included their events for the official programme, a move that brought with it resources (event space, infrastructure, promotion and so on) as well as the prestige of being invited to participate.

It is interesting to note, that in several of the sessions, people who were unable to attend in person and questions that had been raised via Twitter and during the Twitter chats were also included in the discussion, along with the assurance that at least one event would be held in an 'unbadged space,' accessible to those who had not paid the conference fee (Greenberg *et al.* 2016). In the same way that academic publishing is being challenged to become more accessible with open-access journals and papers, conferences and other professional meetings are also becoming more democratic and accessible thanks to the live-streaming and live-tweeting of events. Live-streaming makes video or audio available online in real-time and often remains available after an event has ended. This is commonly facilitated by the conference organisers, but thanks to Facebook Live and other tools offered by social media apps to upload video as it happens, participants are increasingly streaming material themselves. Live tweeting is similar to a Twitter chat in that participants use a specific conference hashtag to tweet information about events and their reactions and analysis in real-time for people who are not there and in discussion with others who are.

Museum Workers Speak understands itself differently to #MuseumsRespondToFerguson, with a more substantial online presence (web, social media accounts and hashtag). United under a mission statement, Museum Workers Speak has geographic subgroups and arranges meetups. They actively agitate for change in the mould of more traditional examples of organised labour activism, ensuring that people are aware of their employment rights and amplifying the voices of those affected:

> #MuseumWorkersSpeak is an action-oriented platform for social change at the intersection of labor, access, and inclusion. We are a collective of activist museum workers interrogating the relationship between museums' stated commitments to social value and their internal labor practices.
>
> *(Museum Workers Speak n.d.)*

Conclusion

Both of the initiatives used as case studies in this chapter have sought to challenge and change museum practice, and both have been successful in using Twitter to drive a discussion within the sector often (but not exclusively) involving younger museum professionals who might not have otherwise had the opportunity to meet in person and build a network of people dedicated to effecting change. In doing so they have been able to show how traditional methods of knowledge dissemination in the museums world—and academia in general—are inadequate for the immediacy that some issues demand. Not only that, the intention underlying these initiatives was not only a call to action, or a desire to report on developments, but rather to bring professionals together to call for change and demand action as well as conversation. In each case, as the online conversations developed and grew, it became important and necessary to also utilise more traditional and 'offline' settings for exchange. Organising a session, for example, at the American Alliance of Museums' annual conference allowed the conversation to find a wider audience; online, less formal discussions had helped to identify problems and debate approaches to resolving them, but too often museum directors and those at management level with the power to make necessary changes within museum structures were not participating.

Social media has shown itself to be a tool that has helped museum professionals and activists to communicate, connect and organise. Twitter doesn't allow for face-to-face communication, but it facilitates conversations that break down barriers of geography and seniority, offering museum workers without decision-making powers within their institutions to demand and organise for change. It can be considered a new tool in the museum activist's arsenal; a modern form of 'zine' or 'sit-in' that has shown great potential to facilitate timely, important and exciting exchanges. As the cases considered in this chapter have shown, these exchanges can have real effects, disrupting traditional gatekeeping barriers and bypassing hierarchies in the museum world and academia, opening up new, more accessible routes to participate in debate and helping to drive and shape wider discussion within the sector. Whilst social media alone will not transform museum thinking and practice, it shows great potential as a tool for museum professionals and activists to catalyse change.

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34

UNPRECEDENTED TIMES?

Shifting press perceptions on museums and activism

Jenny Kidd

Introduction

This book testifies to the ways many museums now position themselves as live constituents in efforts to promote change whether that be social, cultural, political, or environmental. Through (for example) their exhibitions, acquisitions, education programmes, work with communities variously defined, and even through their staff recruitment, there is a demonstrable will to campaign, persuade, improve the quality of public debate, and to produce critical-creative citizens as a result. Many museums now open their doors to alternative viewpoints, protest and controversy, recognising that dissent is an important riposte to their traditional positioning as 'safe' and 'neutral.' As Kerry Hannon (2017: F18) has written in the *New York Times*, some museums are now promoting a new message: 'Don't just look. Do.'

If museums remain cautious about engaging with difficult subjects, encouraging activism and being 'purposeful' (Janes 2009: 14), one of the reasons has been a fear of press scrutiny and criticism. This has been noted in previous research into the challenges of doing work promoting human rights and social justice (Kidd 2009; Sandell 2011; Kidd *et al.* 2014). But how justifiable is that anxiety in the current context for museums' work? Under what circumstances *has* that scrutiny been forthcoming, and what sources has it come from? The idea for this chapter originated in curiosity as to whether concerns about press criticism had become out of proportion with its likelihood, or its severity. Might the narrative about negative press attention have become a myth perpetuated by museum professionals themselves? Could there be an alternative or counter-narrative in press coverage if one looked hard enough? Richard Sandell (2011, 2017) notes that press hostility is, at least in part, rooted in the broad conservative bias of the media, and has explored ways in which negative press scrutiny has undermined the confidence of museum professionals. But how those biases continue to inflect coverage of museums' practice remains underexplored.

This chapter begins to explore those questions, presenting findings from an analysis of global English language press reporting over a two-year period (1 July 2015 to 1 July 2017), a time of extraordinary global tension and a political landscape characterised by unpredictability and uncertainty. The insights offered here from the analysis matter because the media—and

often the press in particular—do still maintain an agenda-setting role (McCombs and Shaw 1972; McCombs 2005); in this case informing public perceptions about what *acceptable* museums' practice looks like. The discussion will explore the frames activated in reporting to make sense of high profile moments of dissent. With a subsidiary focus on press *sources* in particular, it will present findings about who gets to articulate (and thus, perhaps, determine) what constitutes appropriate and ethical museum work. Discerning that the sample demonstrates, on the whole, an impassive discourse rather than an outright conservative one, the chapter ends with a warning against complacency. As museum professionals look to do more politically engaged and challenging work in the future, keeping one eye on mainstream media reporting will be important, as will (increasingly) being alert to commentary on blogs and in the searchable talk of the Twittersphere, the latter of course representing a particularly challenging discursive context.

An insight into the method

The first challenge in this study was to identify a workable sample of news coverage of museums and activism. Newspaper database Nexis retrieved 351 articles that reported on a 'museum' alongside the terms 'activist,' 'activism' or 'protest,' between 1 July 2015 and 1 July 2017. Once false positives were removed, a sample of 228 articles was used in the analysis.

Each news report was coded along a number of key lines of enquiry. Firstly, for geographic focus. Secondly, for the key storyline, and in particular, a breakdown of who was being presented as the architect of the protest/activism; was this a story about advocating for a cause from within the profession either as an individual or as an institution, or campaigners using the museum as a site for protest (local groups, civil society groups, religious groups and the like). All reports were then coded for sources used within the coverage, with a total of 386 sources identified.[1] A source was classed as an individual or body contributing a direct quote that appeared in quotation marks within a news story. Coding for sources was important in determining who got to speak, and consequently perhaps who was heard, in high profile cases concerning museums and activism. Each source was then individually interpreted for the discourses and rhetorics they activated in their discussion of the case; were they talking about rights, ethics, propriety, faith or identity for instance? Key lexical choices made in the reporting were noted here.[2]

It is important to remain minded throughout this chapter of a number of key limitations to the study. These don't render the analysis beyond recuperation, but are important in gleaning the nuance in what follows. Firstly, the focus on the keywords identified above will have limited the kind of reporting that appears in the study (as keywords always do). For example, stories about museums tackling sensitive or challenging topics will not appear in this sample beyond instances where they attracted or featured activity subsequently reported as 'activist,' 'activism' or 'protest.' Secondly, Nexis allows for searches within international press reporting in English, so stories reported in languages other than English are rendered invisible in this discussion. This limitation is not inconsequential, and could make the study open to accusations of bias and ethnocentrism. In light of this, I try not to over-generalise from the sample, one that is skewed toward the UK (100 stories) and the US (79) in particular.[3] The reporting wasn't necessarily focused on activity within these regions however, with museum practice in countries from (for example) Denmark to Germany, Iran and the United Arab Emirates featuring in the sample.

It became apparent that the sample ebbed and flowed around a number of key cases about which there was more reporting and, it seemed, more conflict. These are introduced in the following section in an overview of the reporting.

Reporting museums and activism: 'the museum's gates were opened and the activists were welcomed in'[4]

The above quotation should be read as a framing device for what follows. As will be seen, most of the reporting was not characterised by hostility or sensationalism as might have been expected. In large part reporting was instead dispassionate, with only 17% of news stories coded as more partial, and most of these being positive in their appraisal of museums' emergent role as actors within civil society; openly curious about what the potentials might be for public debate and understanding on a range of issues.

What kind of stories emerged in the sample?

As noted previously, within the two-year sample, a significant majority of the reports came from the US and the UK. Table 34.1 details the breakdown of those regions only, alongside the range of storylines coded in the sample. As can be seen there was a higher instance of museums in the US receiving coverage for being activist through their mission and programming, and a much higher likelihood of reporting in the UK covering groups and individuals who were themselves protesting against museums' practice. Such differences might attest to a more forceful movement in the US to make museums activist at this time, or perhaps they reflect more scrutiny of museum practice in the UK given the public funding received by (much of) the heritage sector in that context. As is demonstrated in the table, activism and protest were inflected in different ways within the reporting, each with rather different implications.

Firstly, there were cases of museums 'being' activist, that is—through their mission, programming or acquisitions—seeking to position themselves as activist in their orientation. An example of this included the discourse surrounding the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in the US, where Barack Obama, speaking at the opening event, was quoted saying that '. . . this museum can help us talk to

TABLE 34.1 UK and US samples split by storyline of articles (percentages)

Storyline of article	UK (%)	US (%)
Museum 'being activist'	23	57
Potential build of activist museum	1	6
Debating future of a museum	3	5
Museum practice subject of protest	46	17
Museum as symbolic site of protest	12	10
Pop up museum by activists off site	1	0
Museum strikes	11	4
Other	3	1

each other, and more importantly listen to each other, and most importantly see each other'
(Landler and Weiland 2016: 27). There were also stories about museums actively collecting
at sites of protest to produce rapid response displays that intervene in the political landscape,
such as at the International Women's March in January 2017 (Roper 2017; *The Toronto Star*
2017a).

Secondly, there were reports about museum practice being the subject of protests by
campaigners of all orientations. In these instances, museum displays, policies or programmes
were deemed ethically or morally contentious for reasons introduced (if not always
elaborated on) in the reports. These included the following reports, for example:

> In the Glasgow *Herald* a report states that 'Gaelic language advocates are due to
> protest outside the museum today over what they claim is "linguistic and cultural
> erasure" after learning that the entire exhibition would be curated in English'
> *(Simpson 2017: 13)*

> In the New York *Daily News* a report highlights protests from animal rights group,
> PETA, after a researcher from the American Museum of Natural History kills a rare bird
> *(Boroff 2015)*

> In the UK, *The Guardian* closely follows the story of anti-gentrification protestors
> angry at the opening of the Jack the Ripper Museum in London (also controversial
> for gender rights activists)
> *(Halliday 2015)*

> On a lighter note perhaps, a group of anti-Renoirists picket Boston's Museum of Fine
> Arts demanding the gallery remove his work because #renoirsucksatpainting
> *(Lo Dico 2015)*

As noted previously, in the overwhelming majority of cases, reporting of these protests was
dispassionate rather than sensationalist in tone. Reporters are likely to document a timeline
of key events, and to steer clear of emotive or inflammatory language as they introduce key
sources to comment on the protest. This is not to assert that 'balance' in the recounting of
events is straightforward, or is itself akin to neutrality; noting the politics of language,
omission and silence is important here. Yet the sample was not rich in sentiment or
agitation when it came to reporters' own framing of protest activity in the majority of
cases, and attempts to inform the coverage with a tapestry of perspectives from protesters to
museum spokespeople, academics and citizens were the norm, as will be seen. Some of the
highest profile activity by activists within the sample was that of environmental groups
protesting against sponsorship of art galleries and exhibitions by oil companies. These
protests, perhaps also high on the news agenda because of their visual impact, were again
presented with attempts at impartiality, and little or no journalistic interpretation. In most
instances, oil companies and museums were offered space to present their defence of such
financial arrangements, arrangements that have become difficult to maintain in the face of
more robust criticism from within the cultural sector.

The third category featured articles about protests in museums and on their outer steps.
Here campaigners were attempting to activate what Chris Garrard (2016) calls museums'

'symbolic status in society' in order to stress their point. For example, one report high-lighted a protest against Donald Trump's '"anti-science" stance and climate change skepticism' (*The Times* 2017: 4), symbolically held at the London Science Museum. Also, a series of articles reported protests about cuts to cultural funding in Cardiff, Wales, where protesters met on the steps of the National Museum in order to highlight the value of culture to the city (Tegeltija 2016).

Fourthly, there were stories about museum staff undertaking strike action. This was a more significant percentage of the UK sample than any other at 11% of reporting, a statistic that can, in part, be explained by the continuing politics of austerity in that context.[5]

By quite some significant margin then, it can be seen that the highest percentage of reports were about museums tackling an issue or being activist. What is significant in light of the discussion here is that the slant on these stories was far from negative. In 58% of instances the reporting made no judgment on the activity; an attempt at journalistic objectivity perhaps. The remainder, a not insignificant 42% of these stories (38 stories in total), were more partisan in their coverage with 37 incredibly positive reports about museum activism and only one negative. This is good news for museum professionals who might be concerned about a lingering conservative bias in the press, or about journalists wanting to trip cultural sector workers up in their coverage. Within this sample, that kind of activity was wholly absent. Where reporting was about museums being more proactive in representing and working with previously marginalised or excluded groups—LGBTQ, Black and Minority Ethnic communities, and disability rights groups for example—the consensus was that museums were doing important and thoughtful work. Indeed, a number of articles went as far as to prompt them to do *more* of it, and to set the museum in question's practice against a current socio-political context that demanded such work. Examples of such coverage are worth producing here at length to demonstrate these perspectives:

> Times of political change and social upheaval raise questions about what a museum is for. When an institution like the Guggenheim is confronted by such tumult, should it respond? And how? Should a museum change with the events around it, or should it stand true, like an immovable rock, as political storms come and go? [The correspondent who writes these lines responds with a considered 'yes'].
>
> *(Bowley 2017: 2)*

> Yet the exhibition is timely because now we are on the march again.
>
> *(Feigel 2017)*

> Art tethered to politics has come to feel more urgent than ever in recent months.
>
> *(*The New Yorker *2017: 18)*

> Hearing hyper-intelligent, super-activist thinkers giving rousing speeches (in a house dedicated to Black excellence) was something I desperately needed right before the storm [reporting an event on the eve of Trump's inauguration at the National Museum of African American History and Culture].
>
> *(Thrasher 2017)*

Now the Museum of Art—which in the past decades has cultivated a templelike attachment—is making its voice heard as well. In one of the strongest protests yet by a major cultural institution, the museum has reconfigured its fifth-floor permanent-collection galleries. . . to showcase contemporary art from Iran, Iraq and Sudan whose citizens are subject to the [Trump travel] ban. A Picasso came down. Matisse, down.

(Farago 2017: 1)

A local citizen is quoted talking about the Andrei Sakharov Centre in Moscow 'lately this place has become a different planet [from Russia], a place where tough issues can be freely discussed, talented people speak and perform, where I can feel totally at home. . . it's like a temple of freedom'.

(Weir 2016)

A curator at the V&A talked about displaying a pink pussyhat from a protest against Donald Trump: 'This modest pink hat is a material thing that through its design enables us to raise questions about our current political and social circumstance'.

(Roper 2017)

It is notable that most of the quotations presented here in some way reflect practice responding to the charged geo-political context within which we have found ourselves since 2015. Tumultuous times with tumultuous politics; increased consideration of identity politics on the one hand, and increased xenophobia on the other. Trump, Brexit, a climate in crisis. What cannot be judged at this stage is whether the more positive reporting evidenced during this two-year period was anomalous, or whether it represents a longer-term and more permanent shift in perspective on museums as actors within civil society. Either way, at this moment, the consensus from the sample was that museums not be taken to task for presenting a hyper-visible stance on questions of politics and identity within their communities.

The above quotations (most explicitly, perhaps, the final one) make visible processes of museum 'making' in all of this. We learn of staff at the National Museum of American History collecting items at the Women's March on 27 January 2017, just as 'other museums and libraries [took] to social media, asking protesters to donate their signs, buttons and the [ir] knitted pink hats' (*The Toronto Star* 2017a: E7). Also, we learn of museum professionals from the Seoul Museum of History in South Korea collecting around 400 items from candlelit rallies protesting the President's actions (Bo-Eun 2017). In Witwatersrand, South Africa, the Origins Museum collected 'rubber bullet shell casings, spent stun grenades and bits of rock and paving thrown at police' after protests (Laganparsad 2016: 7). Collection, selection, representation, all of it was being made conspicuous within the pages of these reports. Frustrations about processes of museum-making were also evident in the sample. In Hong Kong, protesters took issue with the fact that decision making about the Chinese Museum project had been (in their eyes) far too opaque: 'The city's residents were given the chance to comment on the museum project yesterday—months after it was approved in secret' (MacLeod 2017: 34).

The only report in the sample which presented museum activism seemingly as an outright negative came from art critic Jonathan Jones (2017) in *The Guardian*. For those familiar with Jones' writings, this will not come as a surprise; he often seeks to challenge cultural consensus. The piece is again fuelled by our charged socio-political context, with

Jones asserting that a proposed 'art strike' against Donald Trump (January 2017) would ultimately be futile:

> Cultural elites cannot effect change ... an art strike is just about the least effective idea for resisting Trump that I have heard. The American left is in for a long, wretched period of irrelevance if this is its idea of striking back.

Jones' claim that society is likely to pay little attention to activism by 'cultural elites' is no doubt a provocative one to those reading this book. It tallies frustratingly with Richard Sandell's own findings about museums being consistently under-acknowledged and even undermined as they carry out vital—and impactful—human rights work (2017). Jones' critique should not be lightly dismissed therefore. The positioning of 'elites' and 'experts' as detached from the rest of society has been a feature of political debate during the period under study here, and Jones connecting that critique here with museums is a powerful rhetorical device which serves to undermine and deny their influence.

Who gets to speak about museums, activism, and protest?

This brings us to consideration of the sources recorded in the sample (Table 34.2).

The range of sources was intriguing and, I would argue, broadly encouraging. In previous research on press reporting of questions of museum ethics (Kidd 2017), one notable almost complete absence from the sample was the category of museum directors and spokespeople. In this sample, however, such sources were evidenced passionately and confidently engaged in debate and discussion about the ethics of their practice and the implications of their institutions' messaging. It would seem that being involved in debates about museums and activism is desirable from a professional standpoint at this time. Cultural professionals from external institutions were also keen to come forward and comment, although the visibility of museums' professional bodies was poor in the sample.

Interestingly, many of the *most* positive appraisals of museums' activist practice came from arts correspondents who were the likeliest sources in the sample to urge museums to push their activism further, again a positive finding given the interests of this volume. Arts critics might be considered allies in doing this work on the whole, with those featuring in *The New York Times*, in particular, presenting passionate appraisals on matters of equality in representation. In one example, art critic Holland Cotter wrote enthusiastically about the visceral language used in a new exhibition, *Kongo: Power and Majesty*, at the Metropolitan Museum:

> ... the show detailed an African-European encounter that began as a fruitful exchange—an ambassador from the Kongo court traveled to papal Rome—and disintegrated into a nightmare of white-on-black exploitation ... I've rarely read a text so forthrightly polemical in an exhibition organized by the Met. I don't remember ever reading anything like it in any of the permanent galleries. But it is a model for the kind of truth-telling approach that museums could, and should, be taking to art: factual, incisive, politically astute, connecting the past to the present and inviting argument.
>
> *(Cotter 2016: 204)*

TABLE 34.2 Breakdown of sources quoted in the reporting

Source	Frequency
Academic	14
Artist	39
Arts correspondent	32
Campaigning group, animal rights	7
Campaigning group, data justice	2
Campaigning group, disability rights	2
Campaigning group, environment	18
Campaigning rights, gender rights	1
Campaigning group, language rights	1
Campaigning group, local community	2
Campaigning group, race equality	11
Campaigning group, political	19
Campaigning group, religious	3
Campaigning group, wealth re-distribution	3
Citizen	39
Government source	25
Journalist	11
Local official	12
Museum Director	36
Museum Professional Body spokesperson	1
Museum Spokesperson	54
Oil company spokesperson	8
Other	25
Other cultural professional	8
Police	3
Trade union spokesperson	10

Here the traditional image of museums and galleries as apolitical and objective conduits of neutrality was not presented as even remotely desirable.

One other source category worth noting at this stage for its frequency was the artist. Artists and their activism are a highly visible feature of this landscape, a fact that becomes interesting when seen in light of previous research noting a potential (over-)reliance on artists commissioned to provoke 'from outside' as a seemingly safer and easier way of asking questions or pushing audiences than, say, wholesale institutional change or positioning.[6] As Miranda Stearn notes, 'the risk element is not only transferred but contained, isolated to a one-off project rather than threatening to become part of ongoing practice' (2014: 109). This was hinted at in one report detailing how curator Janelle Porter brings in big name artists intentionally so that they might 'be provocative' (Vankin 2017: E1). Interestingly it was often difficult in the sample to disaggregate the activism of artists from the institutions that were hosting them until, in one rolling story, a moment of tension, and then fracture, made this a particularly visible problematic.

The story about participatory internet streaming performance, *HE WILL NOT DIVIDE US*, unfolded over the sampling period with great drama and global attention. It had all of

the makings of newsworthiness; an out-of-the-ordinary story making reference to elite persons; an artwork about a new and divisive president of the US; made by the unpredictable and infamous Hollywood star, Shia LaBeouf. *HE WILL NOT DIVIDE US* was a project by LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner, which was located (for a time) at the Museum of the Moving Image, New York. This interactive video installation offered visitors to the museum the chance to record messages and become part of an evolving work, but quickly became the subject of disruption, most notably from users of a notorious trolling forum on 4Chan. Following a number of high profile incidents including, eventually, the arrest of LaBeouf for assault, the museum stated publicly that the performance site had become 'a flashpoint for violence' (*The Sun* 2017: 27) and would need to be closed. In a moment of very public fracture, the museum announced that it was to permanently disassociate from this particularly volatile artwork. LaBeouf released a statement saying that 'On 10 February 2017, the Museum of the Moving Image abandoned the project ... The artists, however, have not' (Saad 2017: E2). The museum had deftly extracted itself from the project, which continued online, and remained the subject of controversy.

One related theme that emerged in the sample was the increasingly creative use of digital media to protest, including by artists. In New Zealand a pro-Palestine group hacked the Wellington Museum Trust website and posted messages and graphic images upon it (*The Dominion Post* 2017). Edward Snowden supporters projected calls for a pardon onto the walls of the Newseum in Washington (Pilkington 2016). A campaigning group produced a mobile application for use in the British Museum which presented alternative interpretation about the Parthenon Marbles (Pewsey 2016). A Twitter campaign criticised a decision by the Victoria and Albert Museum not to buy Margaret Thatcher's clothes at auction (Paton 2015). Two artists surreptitiously scanned a 3D image of a controversial bust of Queen Nefertiti at the Neues Museum and then printed replicas to return to Egypt (Wilder 2016b). They later released the data to the world for anybody to print their own 'Other Nefertiti' (Wilder 2016a). Such examples demonstrate how internet activism is changing practices of protest, including those in and around museums (Johnson 2016).

Conclusions

In summing up these arguments, I wish to avoid suggesting that negative press attention of museums' activism is a thing of the past. Far from it. Whilst writing this chapter and reflecting on the findings from my research, I was struck by the hostile way in which the National Trust's *Prejudice and Pride* programme in 2017—that celebrated queer heritage and LGBTQ lives linked to its properties—was covered by the UK's press and broadcast media. Moreover, there are chapters in this book that outline the very real impacts of negative press attention. Rather, what I would like to tentatively suggest is that many journalists are now relying less on superficial and limiting understandings of the role and purpose of museums than might have been the case in the past (as discussed, for example, in Sandell 2011, 2012). I would like to suggest also that there are allies, most notably arts correspondents who, on the whole, might wish to see more challenging museums' practice. Negative assessments of museums' activism, and their programing, are still a feature of public discourse. But how that manifests, and how visible it is, is subject to change over time.

It is likely that such debates now bleed into online and social media platforms in ways that will be less easy to capture and to track. This matters hugely as a shift from discussion

about museums' practices within mainstream media toward debates within social media is one which impacts significantly their language and character. The prevalence of hate speech in such spaces, coupled with sharing logics and immediacy of response, make for unpredictable and often hostile communications. At a series of conferences in 2016 and 2017 the point was made repeatedly that, for those working in museums with activist agendas, online encounters are often characterised by aggression and oppression.[7] Research into this shift would be enlightening, as would further investigation into how activists are utilising digital technologies more broadly to protest museums' practices, including from within the profession. This was an intriguing sub-strand offered up in the sample.

The reporting under analysis here represents only a snapshot of activity, and of discourse surrounding that activity, rather than a comprehensive global or historical account of press engagement with the idea of museums, activism and protest. The snapshot that it offers up is a vibrant one, revealing museums, journalists and their publics visibly, carefully and creatively tussling over, negotiating and 'making' culture.

Notes

1 Sources were coded as Arts Correspondent; spokesperson for Government department; spokesperson for a Museums Association; Campaigner/Action Group spokesperson (these were sub-divided into religious, data justice, race equality, environment, wealth re-distribution, animal rights, language, political, gender and disability rights); Citizen; Museum/Gallery Director; Museum/Gallery spokesperson (other than a Director); Academic; Museum Trustee, Artist, UNESCO source, Local Council official, Police spokesperson, Other cultural professional, Journalist, Union representative, Oil company spokesperson and Other.
2 The data collection started with a pilot of the coding methodology (on 10% of the sample) and after the main coding period the data was analysed using the software package SPSS.
3 There were also stories from Canada (7), Australia (7), China (4), South Korea (3), Ireland (3), Russia (3), Thailand (2), Singapore (2), South Africa (1), Poland (1), Bulgaria (1), the Philippines (1), and a number of stories from International news outlets (13).
4 This is a quote from *The Toronto Star* (2017b).
5 Strikes in London and Cardiff in particular.
6 Stearn (2014) cites a number of critiques.
7 For example, the Museums Computer Group conference 2016 featured a session on 'Creating Anti-Oppressive Spaces Online', resources available at https://github.com/the-incluseum/anti-oppressive-spaces/blob/master/checklist-tech.md.

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