

## SUMMARY

### **Position or no position? Museums, Leadership and Social Change**

Summary of the Clore Leadership Programme/AHRC research project report, supervised by Professor Richard Sandell, Research Centre for Museums and Galleries, University of Leicester  
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## INTRODUCTION

Informed by interviews with key museum figures in the UK and USA (see Appendix), this paper explores why and what happens when museums explicitly or implicitly express an ethical position on a contentious topic, and the implications for leadership, practitioners and the role of museums in society. It is written in the context following the 2016 Brexit referendum of changing political norms, of polarised opinions, of 'fake news': in these past few years our approach to human rights, and also the ways in which we develop and discuss opinions have shifted.

Museums have held tight as places that people trust (Janes and Sandell 2019:5-6). There is recognition that museums should strive to be civic spaces; capitalise on their ability to function as safe spaces for debate; be part of and contributing positively to the communities they are situated within<sup>1</sup>. It is increasingly accepted that no museum is or can be neutral, and, as Sandell and Janes observe, 'museums have increasingly sought to take on contemporary, social justice-related issues' (Sandell 2017:7). This is part of what Sandell and Dodd refer to as 'activist museum practice' (Sandell and Dodd 2010).

## SECTION 1: THE CASE FOR ACTIVIST PRACTICE

There are many reasons for museums to take an ethical position on a contentious issue. If museums don't take a view on a prejudicial narrative, it can be argued that they are sanctioning the prejudice by remaining silent (Sandell 2017: 7). Lonnie Bunch (2018), Founding Director of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, challenges: 'If a museum doesn't make something better - their country, their community, their region - then why are they there?'

There is another key reason cited by many: relevance. Sara Wajid (2018), Head of Engagement at the Museum of London, argues that 'I think we should be a bit more worried about being boring than being offensive. I think at the moment the challenge facing us is the former: being irrelevant'.

## SECTION 2: A NOTE OF CAUTION - RESISTING AN OVERT POSITION

Whilst accepting that museums are inherently biased, practitioners are trying to resolve how contentious issues can best be interpreted and approached. Museums agree with holding a space in which contentious issues can be explored, yet some are cautious about how much it is useful to 'dial up' or emphasise an overt position. Museums might be aiming to be non political, trying to position a museum as, in the case of the Museum of London, a 'confident convenor', taking a position when that position may avoid taking sides, such as 'we value non violence', or resisting a position to prevent visitors feeling unwelcome or patronised. It has been proven that when a national museum simply names an issue or identity (for example LGBTQ), regardless of whether they express a position, this reduces bullying.

## SECTION 3: WHAT INFORMS THE POSITION OR APPROACH MUSEUMS MAY TAKE?

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<sup>1</sup> For example: '...one common feature spans the different geographies: the belief that in such turbulent times, there is an urgency about arts organisations being supported and encouraged to think and act civically.' Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation UK Branch (2017) 'Inquiry into the Civic Role of Arts Organisations, Phase 1 Report.', p.21.  
<http://civicroleartsinquiry.gulbenkian.org.uk/resources/rethinking-relationships-phase-one-of-the-inquiry-into-the-civic-role-of-arts-organisations> [accessed 20.02.2019].

In order to decide how to articulate a position, there are many paradoxes and issues that an organisation and its leadership need to consider. Museums should interrogate who they are, who they are there for, what they have and what they can risk. It is important to embed practice, to share control and to get people behind the vision.

#### **SECTION 4: THE ART OF ACTIVISM**

This section focuses on the practicalities of how a position is successfully articulated. What do museum staff have to consider in their practice? What are the most successful strategies that museums use to navigate taking a position?

Accept that it is a long game, that it requires consistency, trust, good relationships and an ability to share power. Consider the comfort of audiences. Try to evoke a range of emotions. Be playful and creative. Use platforms well. Consult others (particularly colleagues across the organisation) and bring in partners and advisors. Give audiences what they want and then they may take more. Model best practice. Focus on scholarship and allow facts to back up your arguments, unless there is information missing, in which case be honest about what you know and don't know. Accept that context is important – and draw lines up for what you accept and what you don't. Try to be subtle yet complex. Don't make text too simplistic, but reflect the real world.

#### **CONCLUSION**

I am finishing this research project with a huge respect for the task that museum professionals in many kinds of museums are undertaking with such care: to interest, shock, cajole and entice audiences into considering controversial issues from a moral standpoint is not easy, and yet it feels urgently necessary today.

What came up again and again was risk – and museum leaders need to increase their appetite for – and capacity to deal with – risk. Funders need to support this. More research needs to be done on which strategies are most effective, for whom, why and how. Museums need to consult with audiences, stakeholders and funders more, to be open to learn, to be honest about what they know and don't know, about why they have made certain decisions. They need to interrogate and be driven by their core purpose. The interviewees I talked with highlighted the need for bold, open, difficult and impactful practice, that needs to be adopted widely. Museums aren't neutral, and they have a vital civic role: stating an ethical position is just the beginning.

[941 words]

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## **APPENDIX**

### List of interviewees

Sharon Ament, Director, Museum of London, interviewed 18 December 2018

Dina Bailey, Director of Methodology and Practice, International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, interviewed 11 December 2018

Clare Barlow, Project Curator, Wellcome Collection, interviewed 30 October 2018

Richard Benjamin, Director, International Museum of Slavery, National Museums Liverpool, interviewed 13 December 2018

Lonnie Bunch, Director, National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian, interviewed 10 December 2018

Janet Dugdale, Executive Director, Museums, National Museums Liverpool, interviewed 14 December 2018

David Fleming, Professor of Public History, Liverpool Hope University, Former Director of National Museums Liverpool, interviewed 13 December 2018

Sharon Heal, Director, Museums Association, interviewed 23 November 2018

Tristram Hunt, Director, Victoria and Albert Museum, interviewed 16 November 2018

Rachael Lennon, Curator, National Trust, interviewed 30 October 2018

Louise Mirrer, Director, New-York Historical Society, interviewed 5 December 2018

Katherine Ott, Curator, Curator at the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, interviewed 7 December 2018

Sanjit Sethi, Director and Professor of Ceramics, Corcoran School of the Arts and Design, George Washington University, interviewed 10 December 2018

Sonia Solicari, Director, Geffrye Museum, interviewed 10 February 2019

Sara Wajid, Head of Engagement, Museum of London, interviewed 19 November 2018

Branden Wallace, Leslie-Lohman Museum, New York, interviewed 5 December 2018

Esme Ward, Director, Manchester Museum, interviewed 23 November 2018

Adam Weinberg, Alice Pratt Brown Director, Whitney Museum of American Art, interviewed 4 December 2018