Position or no Position?
Museums, Leadership and Social Change

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9 March 2019

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ACKNOWLEGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

This research project stems from my Clore Leadership Fellowship 2017/18 where I focused on the relationship between activism and cultural leadership. In this paper I explore 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.

Methodology

Research on activism and concepts of neutrality in museums is emergent, and lends itself to a qualitative, exploratory study. With this in mind, I designed a series of interviews, selecting leaders and practitioners across the museums sector with experience and viewpoints in the field of practice that I sought to investigate. I focused on the UK and the USA, interviewing curators and directors from a range of museums (see Appendix). I chose the USA and UK because both countries have a significant and growing practice in this area.

Social and political context

The current political context in the UK and US underlies this research: on 23 June 2016 the UK voted to leave Europe. Following this referendum, media debate around divisions within the UK dominated. The discourse was increasingly about difference, not along party political lines, but polarised ideological positions. The referendum was, and still is, often simplistically critiqued in a western context of growing nationalist and anti immigration sympathies. Alongside this, many argue that Donald Trump is normalising prejudicial language and actions, whilst social media is permitting users to stay in their own echo chambers[1]. The problem of 'fake news'; of either lies spread as truth via channels such as WhatsApp and Facebook, or of people denouncing proven facts, is a pervasive issue. In these past few years, political norms, our approach to human rights, and also the ways in which we develop and discuss opinions have shifted.

Museums' roles

In the context of this shift both in politics and in how the public learns, makes decisions and takes sides on a variety of contentious issues, museums have held tight as places that people trust (Janes and Sandell 2019: 5-6). The UK's Museums Association states that Museums must 'make sound ethical judgments in all areas of work in order to maintain this trust' (Museums Association Code of Ethics 2016). 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 contribute positively to the communities they are situated within[2].

At the same time as they are acknowledged as civic spaces, it is increasingly accepted that no museum is or can be neutral, nor have museums ever been unbiased in their intent, purpose or practices (Janes and Sandell 2019: 8). Institutions cannot separate themselves from their founding purpose and context. So alongside this call for museums to capitalise on their role as community spaces, there is a growing expectation for museums to acknowledge their biases. Dina Bailey (2018), Director of Methodology and

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[1] See for example Editorial Board 'Trump is normalizing Bigotry', *Washington Post*, 30.09.2016, https://tinyurl.com/ybps9wzx, and Younge, G. 'Despite all the warnings, we are normalising Donald Trump', *Guardian*, 08.06.2018, https://tinyurl.com/y6u8s2ct [accessed 20.02.2019]

[2] 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]

Practice for the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, advocates that museums should be explicit about their purpose and go forward in a 'conscious and strategic manner'.

As Richard Sandell and Robert Janes observe, 'museums have increasingly sought to take on contemporary, social justice-related issues – and to (explicitly and implicitly) take up particular moral standpoints in place of seemingly neutral and objective commentary' (Sandell 2017: 7). This is part of what Sandell and Dodd (2010) refer to as 'activist museum practice'[3]. As Janes writes, 'Museums, as public institutions, are morally and intellectually obliged to question, challenge or ignore the status quo and officialdom, whenever necessary. With the exception of museums, there are few, if any, social institutions with the trust and credibility to fulfil this role' (2011: 67).

I am interested in what Sandell terms the 'moral agency' of museums' (Sandell 2017); how museums are positioning themselves in their communities today; and if, when, why and how they take an ethical position on a contentious issue. With this in mind I expanded my initial question into four sections: first, why might museums develop a moral or ethical position on a controversial topic? Second, what are the issues, or notes of caution, that arise when expressing a position on an issue? Third, what informs the stance that museums may take, and what is the role of leadership in this? And last, to borrow Sandell's phrase, what is the 'art of activism'[4]?

Diverse museums and diverse contexts

In considering these questions I accept that individual museums have very different contexts, audiences, missions and impacts. And, as Esme Ward (2018), Director of Manchester Museum emphasised, each museum is unique, and there is, therefore, no one-size-fits-all approach. Ward challenged the sector and our 'sense of museums as a whole'.

There are of course many different types of museum: all have a bias, but some were set up with an activist mission and therefore a clear position running through every aspect of their work. In the UK, for example, there are the Museum of Homelessness (which has an explicit social change agenda) and the Migration Museum project (which is has a clear remit but is perhaps cautious about being regarded as an agent for social change). The visitors of these two museums (many of whom visit because they already sympathise with the cause) arguably get a lot out of a strong, in-depth, and activist approach. These museums talk easily to the converted and their challenge is to make an impact – perhaps smaller steps – with those visitors who are undecided; whom the Migration Museum has identified in the immigration debate, for example, as 'the anxious middle'[5].

Alongside these are traditional and long-established museums, such as city or national museums, that have a broad appeal, and are expected to be more 'neutral'. They arguably attract wider audiences from a broad range of perspectives and therefore taking an ethical position on a controversial issue may potentially be more challenging to visitors' expectations.

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[3] I am using the word activism quite comfortably in a way that perhaps even five years ago I might have have found difficult, using Sandell's definition of activist practice as 'a staging ground for efforts by a range of different groups with wide-ranging (sometimes conflicting) agendas and interests, to bring about social and political change or to advance or seek to elicit broader support for a particular standpoint' (Sandell 2017: 8).
[4] Discussed in supervision session, Richard Sandell has used this term in various lectures.
[5] Migration Museum Project (2018) *Migration Museum Project 2017/18 brochure*, p.43.
https://www.migrationmuseum.org/output/publication/migration-museum-project-2017-18-brochure/ [accessed 14/2/2019]

SECTION 1: THE CASE FOR ACTIVIST PRACTICE

There are many reasons for museums to take an ethical position on a contentious issue. If museums fail to take a view on a prejudicial narrative, it can be argued that they are sanctioning the prejudice by remaining silent. Richard Sandell argues that 'Where human rights revolve around…clashing moral positions it is no longer appropriate…for museums to operate as impartial observers or spaces for dialogue in which alternative viewpoints are respected, aired and debated' (Sandell 2017: 7).

Janet Dugdale (2018), Executive Director of Museums at National Museums Liverpool, highlights the role of museums as public spaces, at a time when genuinely public spaces are disappearing. She views museums as social and 'gathering places':

> There is an element of museums being safe and trusted but then dealing with histories that are contested. Talking about Brexit, we know in Liverpool that Hate Crime has gone up. So the Slavery Museum is a hate crime reporting centre. And so therefore that responsibility to show broader representation is really important. Because otherwise where do people get different information from, where do they encounter people who are different to them?

Part of a museum's civic role therefore is to bring people together in the same physical place to discuss the same ideas or issues, to hold a space for difficult conversations or challenging learning, and allow encounters between people that may not otherwise meet. Museums have a role in making the unfamiliar more familiar, and this means being a thoughtful, explicitly public space. Lonnie Bunch (2018), Founding Director of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, brings the case back to a museum's core purpose: 'If a museum doesn't make something better - their country, their community, their region - then why are they there? That has been my agenda my whole career.' He continues:

> I hate the word 'relevance' but museums need to think very consciously about their value (not their *values*, we are good at that). How are we of value to black communities, to DC, to progressive communities, to teachers? The value proposition forces you to get out of your comfort zone. Why just be any good museum? How do we explicitly give something that helps people find their identity, find hope? For me it's about social justice and the greater good.

Sharon Heal (2018), Director of the Museums Association, brings it back to organisational values and relevance:

> I think it is…about your values as an organisation. It's not about being controversial, it's not about saying 'we'll have this big debate' and 'we'll get a big crowd and have a big media profile and there might be heightened debate and awareness…' That won't take the conversation forward, you are not allowing people to ask questions or challenging assumptions. So there is no point in being intentionally controversial, but I do think we have to address some of the really challenging issues of the day.

Heal gives an example of going to Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum on the day of the Scottish independence referendum and although in the city it was on everyone's lips, in the museum there was not a sign of the tension evident outside.

Sara Wajid (2018), Head of Engagement at the Museum of London, agrees that relevance is important:

> 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. There is a lot of room before we get

to the limits. We have not begun to touch on uncomfortable territory as a sector. I have never thought of doing something in a museum where I have thought: 'That is the line!' I would love to see that.

Director of the Geffrye Museum, Sonia Solicari (2019), raised the internal debate her museum has been having as it goes through a redevelopment. 'As the Museum of the Home it feels relevant and vital to have a voice on contemporary issues, from the housing crisis to domestic design innovation. The big question for us is to what extent we become a campaigning museum or just shine a light.' Solicari exposes a key issue for many museums: whilst they accept a responsibility to feature potentially divisive topics that are important to people now, whether and how much they seek to move people to action is unresolved. At its starkest, the case for activist practice is both an ethical obligation and a means that enables a museum to thrive (relevance). As Solicari's quote suggests, many museums are working out what this means in practice.

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

Whilst none of my sources state that museums should be neutral, they do raise notes of caution. Sharon Ament (2018), Director of the Museum of London, in discussing their 'Archiving London after the Brexit Referendum' project, raises a point about when it is important not to take a position: in order to be able to gather archive material. People from both sides of this contentious debate have to trust the museum in order to talk and share their views and material, and the museum therefore frames the Brexit project as 'Brexit is important to London' rather than taking sides:

> Regardless of how we position ourselves within London, which is a lot Remain, there are some boroughs, like Barking and Dagenham, which are adamantly Brexit, so we really do need to reflect that and understand it. And whilst and it is very easy to be seduced by your own interests…Ultimately it's about understanding the moment.

Tristram Hunt (2018), Director of the V&A, states that:

> It's important for museums to be confident about their trusted space in civil society, not to fall victim to some discourse that because they are not neutral, their role is invalid, and actually to be quite muscular about helping to frame and foreground contemporary debate. We provide some of the context and insight that actually helps citizens. I think Museums have a role, indeed responsibility, to frame discourse and debate around contemporary issues. I don't think that they should adopt a partisan position themselves… I don't think they should pursue a policy outcome, but they can elucidate, highlight, bring to the fore, some of these issues…

This statement reflects the context in which Hunt stands – as director of a large national museum. It might be argued that a national museum cannot overtly pursue a policy outcome or be party political. But framing and foregrounding contemporary debate is inherently political (with a small 'p') and in choosing what to frame and foreground, even with masses of public consultation, a museum is choosing what matters and consequently influencing social and political discourse.

Louise Mirrer (2018), Director of the New-York Historical Society, similarly resists the thought that her institution is political, or that it aims to have a position. At the same time, the New-York Historical Society is privately funded (by liberal funders, which in this case allows a great deal of editorial freedom), and has a record of exhibitions exploring highly political issues such as modern slavery, and histories of activism, racism and LGBTQ lives. Mirrer states that 'In the best of circumstances we're not pushing a viewpoint but we are trying to make people think differently about a topic'. Are these two things so different? Mirrer is open that she and her staff might consider an agenda or position, or the impact they hope that might have, but that ultimately they strive for academic excellence and balance in an exhibition.

Clare Barlow (2018), Curator at the Wellcome Collection, offers further helpful perspectives on the issue:

> I think though that if you go in with an exhibition that you intend to change people's minds with you won't succeed – you can encourage visitors to reflect on how they think about something or to engage with new material. To assume that you can change the world is to do your audiences a terrible disservice: they may be far more advanced in thinking about these issues than you are. An exhibition is a series of propositions rather than a solid lump of knowledge that you pass to people in a straightforward way.

Dina Bailey (2018) says that it is important to have a position on a contentious issue. However, she talks about her work with museums embroiled in the (USA) confederate monuments debate and how she suggests that a museum's position does not always have to be whether they agree or disagree: 'the

position can be that "we value non-violence" or that "we believe in bringing the community together"'. Rather than taking sides, the museum is seeking to find a way to frame a contentious subject in a way that potentially unites rather than divides. This approach is helpful – especially in the context of a very heated public debate – but eventually the museums may need to revisit their position as they decide whether or not to take monuments into their collections, reject them, or support their care in any way.

At the Museum of London, Sara Wajid (2018) considers its role in city debate:

> We've been talking about being a confident convener here, when we think about the new museum, rather than taking a position. So on Brexit, London is famously at odds with the rest of the country. How do we deal with that? Do we reflect London, and say that the majority view is this and so as the Museum of London we have to get behind that? We can't, because not everyone in London unanimously voted the same. But being a confident convener in this complicated terrain is, I think, our role. The fact that we can draw on historical precedents around republicanism or the city being at odds, all of these questions of governance, uniquely positions us outside of party politics and means that we are able to draw on the collections to inform that conversation[6].

Picking this apart, does being a confident convener mean that the Museum of London is putting an argument in an historical context without taking sides? Does it mean it is aiming for a balance, rather like the BBC, without pushing a view? In the context of Brexit, where respect for both sides of a position is arguably necessary, balance is helpful. Striving for balance on some other topics (for example, sexism or racism) is more problematic: visitors can come away with existing prejudicial views strengthened and there is no challenge to think about equality. It would seem that questions of balance and impartiality need to be issue-specific.

Also related to this idea of impartiality is the role of museums and galleries in programming or commissioning activist artists and practitioners. If museums and galleries are seen as void spaces filled by rotating artists each with their own activist aims, where is a museum's voice (and role)? Visitors might assume that commissioning or showing a work implies agreement with whatever issues or positions are raised, unless stated otherwise. Does a museum have an obligation to state its position on an artist's political stance, to make it explicit rather than implied, to increase visitors' understanding of context, to endorse an ethical stance if that is a museum's aim?

Adam Weinberg (2018), Director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, states that the duty of the Whitney is to its artists, not to visitors:

> I think that artists are saying such different things, so if you harness yourself to one artist you would be in opposition to another artist. Our job is to offer up the ideas of multiple artists and multiple visions because art is not one thing. If you represent artists you offer yourself up to many views.

Implicit in this statement is the context of the Whitney: situated in the liberal city of New York, its visitors are broadly liberal. Weinberg wrote in his statement about the Whitney's Jimmie Durham retrospective[7] that:

> Durham does not belong to any of the three Cherokee tribes and vigorously opposes the system of tribal enrolment on political grounds. Recent discussions of these points have allowed audiences to

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[6] This is similar to the playwright James Graham who 'refuses to moralise', and explores, through historical moments, how similar values can lead to very different political views. Is he one of theatre's equivalents to a confident convenor? Billington, M. 'Ink review – James Graham's riveting account of the birth of the Sun' Guardian, 28.06.2017, https://tinyurl.com/y98w5zqt [accessed 28.02.2019]
[7] Exhibition: *Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World* (3.11.2017 – 28.01.2018)

consider vital questions about tribal sovereignty, and what it means—or does not mean—for an artist to self-identify as Native American. This exhibition does not claim to resolve these questions, but it can serve as an invaluable forum for discussion, debate, and education by bringing rich and powerfully intelligent art into dialogue with complicated ideas. Audiences can explore these issues through resources on our website, in-gallery tours, and public programs. Our role as a museum is to present the work of compelling artists who have significant things to say and questions to ask. We feel strongly that Jimmie Durham is one such artist.[8]

This stance on the one hand maintains the gallery's objectivity but on the other hand could be seen as an endorsement of Durham himself, and by extension, his politics. By choosing to exhibit Durham's work, the gallery validates the questions the work raises. Its position is that the work is important.

Katherine Ott (2018), Curator at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, feels that museums have a duty to intervene in controversial issues, even if that doesn't mean overtly taking a position. She states:

> We…make the world safer and we save lives. Because…there is sociological literature that shows that in schools where there is bullying for queer kids. Just saying 'LGBTQ', just acknowledging and naming that there are people, there are students for whom that is an identity. You don't have to say good or bad about it, just saying it reduces the bullying... We did a small press event…to announce some of the recent collecting we'd done relating to the LGBTQ stuff… The social media audiences were over 8 million. Globally. And thinking about knowing that just naming it makes the world safer… If they just see 'Smithsonian LGBTQ' it means we think it matters…That's what museums can do – validate and affirm people's lives and their connections, and make the world safer just by naming things we think are important.

Sharon Heal (2018) gives the example of *Protest Lab* where Museums Sheffield encouraged local people to decide which issues they might want to protest about. In that case their stance was not necessarily, 'we agree with what is being protested' but that 'we want to give local people a platform to voice their concerns about what matters to them'. Museums Sheffield saw their role as enabling activism and supporting communities, but not setting the agenda.

So whilst accepting that museums are inherently biased, practitioners are trying to resolve how contentious issues can best be interpreted and approached. Whilst all museums agree with holding a space in which contentious issues can be explored, some are cautious about how much it is useful to 'dial up' or emphasise an overt position.

The role of values

Another way of articulating a position is to insist on a set of values rather than explicitly taking one side of an argument. Values can inform, justify, direct and help sustain a position: Sandell and others have written about the importance of values-led programming, taking into account lived experiences and a multiplicity of perspectives (Sandell, Lennon and Smith 2018). At the National Trust, for example, the organisation's value of inclusivity embraced in the mission 'Forever, For Everyone', underpinned the programme *Prejudice and Pride*, which focused on LGBTQ hidden histories at National Trust properties through a series of exhibitions and events in 2017. Values can also *be* the position. As Tony Butler, Executive Director of Derby Museums Trust and the founder of the Happy Museum Project, says:

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[8] Weinberg, A. (2017) *Director's Statement. Jimmy Durham: At the Center of the World.* Whitney Museum of American Art. https://whitney.org/DirectorsStatementJimmieDurham [accessed 15.2.2019]

Museums can be activist organisations and (to paraphrase Berthold Brecht) be both a mirror to society, and a hammer with which to shape it. But if there is a reluctance to explore values at odds with a dominant cosmopolitan perspective, they will forever preach to the choir. [Museums] can…act as a starting point and stand for values which are non-negotiable such as religious tolerance, respect for the rule of law, the rights of minorities. These are the British Values taught in every English primary school…[9]

However, if museums take a position to, for example, support the rights of minorities, then it might be argued that they *are* taking sides on a contentious issue and potentially risk 'preaching to the choir'. Museums, I suggest, need to support these values overtly – and, at the same time, consider how best to appeal to as many people as possible.

Research into values by the Common Cause Foundation[10] came out of societal divisions following Brexit, and found that people think of themselves as holding certain values but tend to think that the person next to them doesn't hold the same values. It showed that we as citizens *should* think more highly of others, but we don't. What is the learning for museums in this? And how can emphasising and advocating shared values help when negotiating contentious issues in a museum setting?

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[9] Butler, T. (2017) 'If not here, where? – the museum as host in a polarised world.' *tonybutler's blog*, 15.03.2017, https://tonybutler1.wordpress.com/ [accessed 14.02.2019]

[10] Jennings, H. (2017) 'Values for stronger communities – new resource' *Happy Museum Project* http://happymuseumproject.org/new-resource-museums-troubled-times/[accessed 14.02.2019] and Common Cause Foundation research page: https://valuesandframes.org/downloads

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

In order to decide how to articulate a position, there are many things that an organisation and its leadership may need to consider. In dealing with the paradoxes that these considerations throw up, museums need to interrogate who they are, who they are there for, what they have and what they can risk.

Museums should also think about what success means for them, in their context. How do you tell if your approach is working? A key indicator is audience numbers. David Fleming (2018), Professor of Public History, Liverpool Hope University, Former Director of National Museums Liverpool, queries 'Have we affected people's viewpoints? I like to think so. If a museum has a particular viewpoint and is very busy it's probably working.'

Dina Bailey (2018) thinks of movements needing different approaches depending on the situation. For example, she sees that the American Civil Rights movement needed both Malcolm X's uncompromising approach and Martin Luther King's more open approach. Using this analogy, different issues and different museums have to use different approaches, and have different measures of success. There is no right or wrong.

Knowing yourself and your organisation

Sharon Ament (2018) at the Museum of London states:

> First of all know who you are…your mission gives you the ground rules, the framework and the parameters within which you can legitimately and properly operate. So for the Migration Museum that would be very different to the Fan Museum.

David Fleming (2018) agrees, and also advises authenticity: 'Have clear principles of your own. The worst case of cultural practitioner is someone who sways anyway the wind blows'.

Dina Bailey (2018) explains that it is important to be clear on where you stand on contentious issues (both individually and as an organisation) so that if you are in dialogue with someone about this issue you can listen to them fully in the moment without being distracted by simultaneously working out how you feel. Knowing where you and your organisation stand on an issue and understanding why certain decisions were made can increase bravery and improve the approach.

Director of the International Slavery Museum, Richard Benjamin (2018), says you also have to be clear of your goals and your limits in order to make best use of resources:

> It's a broad church of subjects but very strategic and that's why there are gaps. Because of resources you can't do everything… We had to do something really current, and that's why we've developed all those partnerships. We were new and when you are new you have limitations and aspirations.

Embracing risk

Many of the interviewees spoke about the importance of risk-taking in activist practice, talking about anxiety as well as bravery. David Fleming (2018) puts risk in an international context:

> If you're in Moscow it's a whole different world than it is in Manchester. In other countries there are genuine worries about safety, funding etc. In those cases you have to get into international

dialogue. So if you are trying to work in a totalitarian state, the only way you've got of being more modern is to talk to people in other countries, get them to come and talk about freedom of speech, about their practice. I get very impatient with people in free speech areas who say 'We can't do that…' Have a go! You're not in Myanmar, in Cambodia, in the Philippines. What everyone wants in every nation is big diverse audiences, and in some countries that is not as easy as falling off a log. But in this country I actually believe it is.

Dina Bailey (2018) concedes that it is easier to be more radical in theory than practice: theory allows one to be idealistic. There is anxiety in many museums about being overt about an ethical position and in changing practice. There is concern about the risks. There is also a lack of confidence. Lonnie Bunch (2018) dares the museums sector to, in his words, 'Have the will to be bold and also to recognise that a third of what a museum wants to do they don't know how to do. Be comfortable with that ambiguity.'

Taking a position often involves interpreting collections in a different way, which can feel like a liability. To take risks, all kinds of support are necessary. In the context of the exhibition *The Past is Now: Birmingham and the British Empire* (2018)*,* Sara Wajid and Rachael Minott explain that:

> 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 lent 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 (Wajid and Minott 2019: 33).

So to be radical, Wajid and Minott needed to feel supported. But what about taking risks in a place that does not even have this level of support? Related to this, how can leaders best empower staff throughout their organisation to be values-driven and to take risks? What do leaders need in place in order to take a position?

Bailey (2018) suggests that the senior team needs to create safety nets for staff and ensure that they are and feel supported. She also goes back to the importance of knowing one's organisation. The senior team should create a box (mission and value statements, strategic frameworks, forward plans) that allows staff to make realistic decisions within it but also to understand those frameworks and limits and to jump out of that box when they need to.

Clare Barlow (2018) advises that if a museum is taking a risky approach then it should be aware that staff are putting themselves in a vulnerable position, and need supporting in many different ways. Staff need to be sure that senior management is utterly behind the approach being taken. They need to recognise that they may be exposed to offensive remarks or behaviour, and their managers need to put support in place in case this happens. Barlow agreed with being explicit in support - for example flying the rainbow flag to show support for LGBTQ equality (as the National Trust did for their *Prejudice and Pride* programme), reading it as a message of support from the organisation to staff as well as visitors. 'That duty of care to staff is something that should at times be publicly visible.'

Margo Lukans (2018), trustee of Abbe Museum (USA), writes in the context of decolonising a museum that it is important to 'engage the emotional experiences' and 'if we expect a bit of a rough emotional ride, then we are less likely to get stalled by guilt, or by feeling blamed, or by our own sorrow':

> Learning to expect the strong emotions helps. I advise venting: I advise my students to write, or scream into a pillow, or to have a good cry all alone in their car—and I also say, give yourself a

break and expect that you're going to experience these things—don't be shocked, and trust that the feelings will evolve and eventually be manageable…It all comes back to your vision of the way life should be—I know the reason we've already come so far is our shared desire to live in a world of truth and justice.

The National Gallery of Art in Washington DC named Kaywin Feldman as its new director in December 2018. She voiced that we should expect risk:

> Art museums are intensely political organisations—political with a small 'p'. Art is political because it is an expression of lived human experience; identity, love, sex, religion, death, home, happiness, and trauma have always been subjects for artists. A concerned trustee at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, where I am the director, recently asked me if we would ever be the focus of protest. I assured him that we would, and urged him to walk around the galleries if he wanted to find offense. We have it all on our walls: imperialism, colonialism, war, oppression, discrimination, slavery, misogyny, rape, and more[11].

Esme Ward (2018) makes the point that sometimes we can worry too much about risk, about being the safe space for unsafe ideas - and who wants to come and explore an unsafe idea? She challenges the way we as a sector frame this invitation and our remit. She also says that often risk comes where we least expect it and is not present when we do anticipate it:

> We worked with Art Fantastic, with a drag artist called Cheddar Gorgeous, exploring collections around the theme of transformation and gender…They did a drag show intended for families…I did a lot of work and thinking to prepare for it. When it came up: no problem. Our nervousness and sense of what might be divisive, challenging… No, it really wasn't! It's an ongoing process as an organisation to look at ourselves and think maybe we are throwing our energy in the wrong place actually.

Clare Barlow (2018) asserts that museums are far too risk-averse and advises audience consultation:

> I think museums are intrinsically conservative. They often assume that visitors will be more concerned than they actually are. Audience research is an incredibly powerful tool if you want to do something contentious. There is a place for those bland, beautiful shows. That is totally legit. At the same time there is a nervousness that if you do something never done before, audiences won't like it or you… There is then a sense that you ought to do it in the way that visitors are most likely to expect.

Sharon Ament (2018) describes this conservatism as nervousness and empowers her staff to experiment, and to think about the future and present as well as the past:

> For [the Museum of London] as an institution…what we are doing is, and this takes a little time, is to really start to feel confident between the interplay of the past, present and future. Museums really, really feel confident with the past, and that's great, as the past is a safe place, because it's distant. So that's where I think the issues are. It's about that confidence and knowing about that interplay, and in fact looking into the future. The institution of the museum and particularly

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[11]Kinsella, E. 'Kaywin Feldman Becomes the First Woman to Direct the National Gallery of Art in Washington', *Artnet*, 11.12.2018 [https://tinyurl.com/y3b7bt7d][accessed 03.01.2019]. See also MIA's Centre for Empathy and the Visual Arts; a think tank researching how museums can build a more just society: https://news.artnet.com/art-world/minneapolis-institute-art-empathy-center-1169075.

museum curators feel nervous about that. So what we are doing is becoming less nervous by testing and piloting and doing things which…shift us and can help us explore.

Conducting audience research, piloting ideas and gaining confidence to try out new approaches can help mitigate anticipated risks.

As the in-house curator, Sara Wajid (2018) invited risk when working with external co-curators for *The Past is Now: Birmingham and the British Empire* (2018), who specifically wanted an exhibition panel on capitalism:

> They explicitly said that capitalism is a system that exploits the many for the few. At the time I was uncomfortable with the panel and thought that it was a bit partisan, it's not super sophisticated, limited as it was by the word count. That is quite a confident assertion of a complex idea that is being necessarily grossly simplified by the panel. Sure enough, that was the panel that exercised audiences the most, that led to complaints more than any other, that sparked the critical press coverage in *The Times*.
>
> The reason that I didn't debate with the co-curators to take that panel out was because it felt, well if this is uncomfortable this is probably exactly the thing we need to test. The only way we will test it is by platforming it. We will test it, and frankly there is an implicit neoliberal tidying away of capitalism as a model in a lot of museum content and panels. This is the default background and context and of course this is how we do things… We operate in a neoliberal context and if you don't actively question it at any point you are by default affirming it. So I thought okay, so this is going to be a bit uncomfortable but equally this is why many people don't come to museums – because they are boring and they tidy things away and they are too discrete and you can only let it poke out. So I guess that was a way of doing that.
>
> It wasn't sophisticated, wasn't subtle, and I think that often things are too subtle in Museums. I am middle class and my tastes are very museumified, discrete and radio 4-y but that wasn't who the co-curators were and that wasn't their style, so it was really our job to be a confident convener, let it play out, and then we had the conversation with the people who were very troubled by it, and now the museum knows something it didn't know before. From my point of view it was great for the museum, because when does the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery get featured twice in *The Times*? [At the same time] by the piece coming out I was able to say [to the co-curators] this is why we had to be careful.

Lonnie Bunch (2018) constantly anticipates and mitigates risk: 'We just had to realise that controversy was always going to be part of who we are… I spent many years getting the media excited about our museum so that if there was a controversy we could have our say'. This proved useful – for example when women protested against convicted rapist Bill Cosby being featured in the museum. Bunch's response was:

> I'm a historian of a culture that has been erased and misinterpreted. No one who is important in history will be cut out of this museum. I will ensure at the time that we write about it. Cosby did this, but his reputation has been tarnished for all time. So the notion was to make sure you can get your message out. Work with the media before you need them. Play to your strengths – I am good at talking about things. When I needed them I could reach out to the reporters I knew.

Esme Ward (2018) balances risk against what she says is knowing and acting on what is 'Your true North': 'We need to be brave. I know the places I have been that have got me excited are not the ones talking about it, they are just doing it. They're trying, they're failing, they're trying again, failing again… their commitment is in the DNA of the museum. The purpose is clear, the commitment is clear.' How does a museum balance risk against bravery and mission? What is the sector's attitude to failure and how does

this influence the level of experimentation taking place in museums? How can (or should) practitioners, directors, funders feel more comfortable with risk?

Resources and organisational structure

Linking risk to resources, Sonia Solicari (2019) makes the point that many funders aren't encouraging museums to change their practice. 'Tackling controversial subjects carries an element of risk - I'd…love to see more funders embrace this and challenge museums to be heard.' As Solicari's point underlines, resources are a huge consideration in a museum's approach. Richard Benjamin, for example, states:

> I have always believed that content and exhibition subject matter is led by me and my team. The difficulty is when there are things beyond my remit, e.g. resources, timescale… it affects the content you are trying to look at... So it isn't just a straight sit down, what do we want to do next? Saying that...I don't think it's actually ever prevented us to do what we wanted to do, but there have been battles. And its alright saying you're going to have a brilliant photo exhibition on Brazilian Slavery, you've got the partners in place…But then you've got to work out where its going to go, the size of it…That's where there are frustrations, it's the structure of the organisation, working with other teams, that can be difficult.

Embedding practice across the museum can overcome resource issues. Janet Dugdale (2018) explains how this strengthens practice and the museum's message:

> It is being core. It is not doing something separately on the side that can be cut. Embedding something. All of the history curators have as part of their job descriptions to be outward looking and develop participatory practice. Quite a lot of the work has continued [since the new Museum of Liverpool funding ended] and is more distributed. Which is actually good. You can't have just two or three people pushing it forward it…it needs everyone to push it…'

Sonia Solicari (2019) raises a question about 'moving from being object-focused to more issues-focused: we need museum staff who are confident to drive this vision forward – comms, curatorial, front of house - it's all-encompassing.' David Fleming (2018) explains: 'After a certain amount of time with a good positive recruitment policy, you end up with a team that is comfortable with controversy and comfortable with issue-based museum work, as opposed to pretending there is no issue and that is all academic.' This point about staff also raises an issue for collections and collecting – it is easy to find archive material about controversial issues but what about objects? How important and central are museum objects to whether and how museums take a stand on an issue?

Sharing control

There is also a point to be made about power and control in taking a position. Should a museum always control its position, its ethical stand on a subject? Or should it delegate and consider itself, as in the case of a city museum, part of a much wider community. As Esme Ward (2018) considers:

> It depends on what it is you are doing…who you think tells that story. Part of it for me is thinking about who tells those stories, and thinking about the whole museum and our work as a collective endeavour, for our city. And the moment you do that that starts to become a very different form of exploring culture, telling stories, making change, or however you want to think about it. It's a very different way of thinking about it than we are going to transmit this knowledge or tell this story. It really does change how you think about it. So it's the role of the museum to mobilise, convene, as well as sometimes broadcast, sometimes much more active and indeed activist than that. And I

think it is indeed all of those, there's a plurality I think that we need to grapple with at the moment and that raises all sorts of issues around control…

Sharon Heal (2018) raises another point about networks. Until recently the Museum sector was very top down (and arguably in many respects it still is) but there has been a rise in networks within the sector that are changing practice at all levels:

> One of the fantastic things that I've observed in the sector is a real burgeoning of networks. They often started as a peer support network, thinking about careers. If you take the example of Detox, that is about solidarity. And it has moved on to thinking about 'we need better representation in the workforce more generally, and representation in audiences and collections', and it has become much more of an activist network. I see that happening with other networks, for example LGBTQ networks, women's networks, no matter what that common interest is, and then move on to, 'Actually how do we bring about change?' The [Museums Association] is now ensuring that we give these networks the support and platforms we can.

There has been a rise in participatory practice, spurred on by funders and policy makers, such as Paul Hamlyn's Our Museum Initiative[12], the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Arts Council. Anecdotally there has also been an increase in museums working with community organisations and activist, issue-led organisations who can advise and collaborate. Museums are actively working to democratise what they do and how they work, to be as closely aligned to their place as possible, as well as the people around them.

Leadership

Individual leaders within or of an organisation, at any level, have a huge role to play in their organisation's activist practice. It helps if there is alignment between personal values and those of the organisation. If someone can't be authentic (living and working to their values) they may become exhausted, demoralised, and ineffective[13]. It can be helpful for individuals to work out their institutional and activist stances, if there is any difference between the two. For example, Sara Wajid (2018), Head of Engagement at the Museum of London and also founder of activist organisation Museum Detox, says she is very conscious of code switching depending on the role of a particular moment, alternating between being activist and institutionalist. Both roles are valid and both can work towards the same cause but in very different ways.

At the Whitney, Adam Weinberg (2018) was involved in a controversy where there was huge dissonance between his staff and trustee board:

> Contemporary museums are locked in a paradox. We are the establishment but are often presenting ideas that are against the establishment. That to me is the edge, the conflict in contemporary museums today – how do you present programmes and exhibitions that might seemingly be at odds with your power structure, where your money comes from, which enables you to function? How does the content then affect that structure and what are the potential conflicts it creates in relation to that structure? Sometimes those conflicts are profound, internally and externally. I'm managing up to the board, who represent the establishment and then the staff, for example, who believed that there was a trustee whose company was producing things that are contrary to the values of the museum. If you look at the founding of most museums…that founding is often based on money that might be seen as coming from controversial sources; either you accept the contradiction, or you undermine the capacity for museums to function in a country

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[12] Moriarty, G. and Medlyn, S. (2016) *Our Museum Special Initiative: An Evaluation*, Paul Hamlyn Foundation https://www.phf.org.uk/publications/our-museum-special-initiative-an-evaluation/ [accessed 11.02.2019]
[13] See, for example, the *Clore Leadership Programme* website for articles about values: https://www.cloreleadership.org/cultural-leadership/leading-values [accessed 23.02.2019]

where there is virtually no public support for the arts. Basically, what I had to say to my staff is: pick your battles. If they want to be activists they need to understand that it's within the structure of who we are[14].

It is the leader's role to manage the relationship to the board. They also need to ensure that the board is diverse. Dina Bailey (2018) raises the important issue of diversity, observing that at board level diversity is essential to help dissipate power of a board holding a single united viewpoint. Diversity throughout the organisation is vital: a range of lived experiences will enrich and strengthen every aspect of the organisation[15].

Bailey (2018) encourages agency at every level of an organisation, noting that 'management is very different to leadership'. She encourages people at all levels to 'find a way to use the power that you have'. Small steps are good, as long as those steps don't stop.

Leadership has a huge role in projects on contentious issues, where Bailey (2018) notes 'leadership has to help their teams see the vision, see themselves in the vision and also mitigate against all concerns over the project and even perhaps the sheer scope and size of a project'. Lonnie Bunch (2018) discusses how he managed his project and staff:

> I took risks. I knew what I wanted, I knew my expectations, but recognised that curators, staff might need different kinds of leadership – I was chameleon-like depending on who needed what. There is a notion of leadership being a place where you define reality and give hope. And that's what I really tried to do. Setting the highest bar possible. One of the things I realise about leadership, especially in museums: it's so hierarchical. People often like to see the leader fail. What I wanted to demonstrate that we are in this together and I am going to listen and that I want their help. For example, if there was something really important or controversial, I would call people and ask them to think things through. For example a couple of management and curatorial staff to advise, and share ownership. The other thing I do, is make sure we have moments where we come together and have fun as a team.

In David Fleming's (2018) view:

> The role of a leader is to be as principled as you can and as open as you can. You've also got to know when to take the heat. It's very important that people are able, for example, in the Slavery Museum, to do what they want to, without getting blamed or castigated. I will take the heat - that is what I am paid to do as a leader. What you don't want from any leader, is that the leader disappears when the going gets tricky.

Sharon Ament (2018) agrees, saying that 'My job is to help people, to challenge, to suggest, to back them up to know that I've got their back, to give them the license to feel a bit more confident and to build and build and build that confidence…'

There should be a clear line of responsibility and an openness embodied by the leadership team. Clare Barlow (2018) advises that:

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[14] See for example: https://www.thevillager.com/2019/02/whitney-comes-under-fire-on-tear-gas-trustee/. For advice on funding ethically or meeting other ethical challenges see Long, V. (ed.) (2016) *Meeting Ethical and Reputational Challenges Guidance*. What Next? https://www.whatnextculture.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Meeting-Ethical-and-Reputational-Challenges-Guidance.pdf [accessed 20.02.2019]
[15] There is lots of data to support this. See for example Larson, E. 'New Research: Diversity + Inclusion = Better Decision Making At Work', *Forbes*, 21.09.2017 [https://tinyurl.com/y3fqnr6d] [accessed 23.02.2019]

You need to have a clear chain of responsibility. There can be a tendency for the institution to throw up its hands and say it's happening over there… For example, there is a diversity thing going on in the basement but the rest of the institution is unchanged. I think you have to think about how you are responsible for what and what isn't said, to how you are going to use this responsibility, to admit when you've got it wrong, to be upfront about what is possible.

Bringing people with you

In the National Trust programme *Prejudice and Pride*, Richard Sandell acknowledged the importance of working in a team as a team, and recognising that compromise is part of allowing others to take ownership and endorse the project. By working closely with volunteers throughout, many became strong advocates of the programme[16]. National Trust curator Rachael Lennon (2018) explains that:

> We had strong leadership support at start, which quietened the resistance. Volunteers were a more complicated relationship than with the staff. For example, if a volunteer was unhappy with the material then they just didn't work in that room. To lessen this, we informed volunteers about the project as early as possible, made sure everyone understood the project, could articulate it and express their concerns. The National Trust brings volunteers in and involves them in projects, for example it is very common for them to carry out research for exhibitions. For one exhibition we recorded their voices. We worked with an artist who worked with our volunteers.

Dina Bailey (2018) gave the example of working with Hampton-Preston Mansion, part of Historic Columbia, who recently reinterpreted the house to give a lot more interpretative space to the enslaved people who had lived there. Formerly it had focused almost exclusively on the owners. The team then added interpretation in the basement about the enslaved people. Realising this was not enough, that many visitors didn't visit the basement (and even that some guides were not leading people there), the director got funding to do a complete overhaul of the interpretation and give equal space and emphasis to both the stories of the enslaved people and the owners. Now their strapline is 'One of Columbia's oldest remaining structures, the Hampton-Preston Mansion explores the lives of enslaved workers and their planter-class owners[17]'. As the project was in progress, many of the staff and volunteers were apprehensive about this shift. Now, the project has finished and the staff members have nominated the reinterpretation for a national museum association award.

Clare Barlow (2018) advocates bringing people in at all levels. She consulted across the Tate and communities for her exhibition *Queer British Art 1861-1967* (Tate Britain 2017):

> It felt like all of us were on this extraordinary journey together. I think that if you are doing a tricky project it helps to be open about the process and really engage with the widest range of colleagues that you possibly can, because if it blows up it is going to rebound on everyone, so you need everyone to come on the journey with you…and everyone needs to have an opportunity to pull you up short and ask have you thought about this…

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[16] Sandell, R., Lennon, R. and Smith, M. (eds) (2018) and Dodd, J., Plumb, S., Bergevin, J. and Sandell, R. (2018) https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/museumstudies/rcmg/publications/prejudice-and-pride-an-analysis-of-visitor-engagement-and-response [accessed 16.02.2019]

[17] https://www.historiccolumbia.org/tours/house-tours/hampton-preston-mansion-and-gardens [accessed 16.02.2019]

SECTION 4: THE ART OF ACTIVISM

Up until this point I have discussed the case for activist practice and what might influence a particular strategy on a position. In this next section I focus 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? In the words of Adam Weinberg (2018), 'One can make things better but because [the museum] is part of the power structure this has to be done in a very clever way. You can't just break the door down.' How do you do it then?

The long game

Many of the interviewees emphasised that working in the area of social justice required being prepared to wait, until the time was right, until trust was there, until partnerships were strong. It can take years. David Fleming (2018) said that he was very conscious that politicians 'want things to happen tomorrow' (for the exhibition/event/programme to happen during their term) but that relationships (with the people a museum can involve and support) take a long time. This demand for instant results should be balanced against the need to develop trusting and lasting partnerships.

Alongside this recognition that projects can take a long time, Katherine Ott (2018) talks about the significance of small interventions, or 'tiny bites':

> The first line of the display [in the National Museum of American History] about the Special Olympics is 'Segregation takes many forms.' It's not a radical showcase but it just raises an interesting question. And those tiny bites matter because we get, what, 4 million visitors a year. Whether they all read that sentence [is doubtful]…but [even] if a third do…The athletes illustrate what you can gain by participating in sports when you are not excluded.

Ott also relays that every project takes time and patience; 'A lot of my projects don't go anywhere because it is not time. I get it, and people outside the museum get it, but people inside the museum don't – because we are white middle class, have education privilege, body privilege…' Ott advises to 'build alliances, invite speakers in, develop colleagueship with like-minded people… if you think there is an anniversary or something relevant [capitalise on that].' Speaking from the point of view of being a curator in a huge museum – part of the Smithsonian, Ott offers:

> …before you even raise an issue, talk informally with all the people you think might get in the way, who might be on committees to judge it. So that they are familiar with it and can give you suggestions of how to pitch it. If people have ownership they are less likely to put up barriers, and one of the things that puts people off is being blindsided. I don't know why, but if people know about it, have heard about it from you… Laying the groundwork takes time and is exhausting.

Dugdale's (2018) advice is:

> If you take a position it needs to absolutely follow through with the themes and message of your museum - that you really think about the themes, narrative and audiences, and if you take a position you can follow it through and really see it as long term… I often feel we are on a journey and part of that is walking the talk… Really think about what agency you as a museum have or the people that you work with have around that position, and be really clear about why you are doing it, that you are honest about that. Think about audiences.

Consistency

As we have seen from the previous section, activist practice is a long-term commitment. It is also arguably linked to a degree of consistency: time and consistency build trust. Museums are very good at giving space to artists and allowing them to be as political as they want to be (thereby despite programming something quite radical, the institution arguably maintains a more neutral position). They are also good at holding one-off exhibitions or events with a particular viewpoint, and yet that viewpoint recedes from all programming once that one exhibition/event has ended. This temporarily expressed viewpoint or perspective that can't be sustained is less effective than one that can.

Sara Wajid (2018) questions what position-led programming is using different examples, concluding that the most effective programming reinforces the position of the institution: it's about consistent messaging:

> There is a lot to be gained from position-led programming. Let's take the example of *gal-dem Late* [at the V&A, 2016]. Either you can describe that as position-led – it was a black feminist night, and the V&A is not a Black feminist organisation: it is not led by Black feminists. It was a very strong night – it attracted a lot of Black feminists and a lot of young people who would not otherwise have come to the museum. It had a strong brand, a clear mandate to the event and the night: come to the museum at this time, to this event, and you are going to be in a black feminist environment. And if I compare that to the artwork at the Brooklyn Museum's [*We Wanted a Revolution:*] *Black Radical Women*[, *1965–85* (2017)], a lot of the people in the exhibition were broadly equivalent to those coming to the *gal-dem* night at the V&A. This was an exhibition. There is a centre for feminist art [at Brooklyn], and it is part of the brand. That is position-led programming because *The Dinner Party* [artwork by Judy Chicago] is there permanently. The exhibition linked to the permanent work and amplified it massively. That one artwork isn't taking a position, but doing the temporary exhibition is. If you compare that to *Soul of a Nation*[: *Art in the Age of Black Power* at Tate Modern (2017)]; it was about black radicalism, about the civil rights movement in America. It is a very explicitly political show. But I would say that it is not position-led programming on the part of the Tate because there is nothing else at Tate that you would then associate…with Black radical art.
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> There is something there in that example – those are different models for working with Black radical art, and different places on the spectrum where what you've signalled to that audience is quite different. For example, in Brooklyn it is more deeply sewn into the cultural DNA of the organisation, so you are more likely to come back to see *The Dinner Party*. There is massive benefit in that.

Comfort

Consistency is important to audiences. It is also useful to consider comfort: comfort levels can affect audiences' receptiveness to a discussion of a controversial issue. Dina Bailey (2018) states that it is important that people need to be slightly uncomfortable in order to learn. Her organisation, International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, uses a model by Tammy Bormann and David Campt called the Arc of Dialogue. The arc is a structured way of bringing people with you to – and through – a place of discomfort in order to learn more about how they and others view certain topics. She likens this process to teaching someone to dive: you wouldn't just throw someone in at the deep end and expect them to be able to swim. In utilising the arc, you first introduce a (comfortable) question to a topic; and, then, bringing in increasingly more sensitive or challenging material, drawing on an awareness of difference (which is slightly uncomfortable). Then, you reach the most challenging phase, where people are at their most vulnerable, but can also learn and deal with the most difficult (uncomfortable) material. 'Then, you debrief, and allow people to synthesise and think about where they will take what they have experienced or learnt,' which brings them back to a comfortable space[18].

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[18] Bormann, T. (2009) 'Designing the Arc of Dialogue'. Sites of Conscience. https://www.sitesofconscience.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Members_member-Benefits_010.pdf [accessed 20.12.2019]

What about a huge museum like the National Museum of American History, where you have people flitting in and out of galleries, not necessarily following a prescribed visitor route? You may not be able to move them through these levels of comfort. And they may not enter or engage unless they feel comfortable and retain this feeling. Katherine Ott (2018) talks about making people comfortable so that they can learn, or even to enable them to walk through the door. Ott also sought advice from some Feng Shui practitioners who:

> had a lot to say about object placement and visitor flow. Because my hope was the threshold needs to invite people in, make them open to learning, and make them comfortable enough with where they are that they want to continue in, and are open to new information. For me, museums should be, not always, but the dream for the museum is that it be, one of the safe spaces to learn and to coexist with things you don't know about, things that you are uncomfortable with, with difference and danger, so it should be a space like that, where you can encounter things. A safe space in that way. Thinking about Feng Shui, energy flow that pulls you in, or pushes you in, I learnt, for example: don't put something really huge right in the middle of the gallery, have the text pads through the exhibitions, have it be curvy and windy and not angular, have it meandering, otherwise the Chi will zip right through. Particularly with the topic I work with it is really important to think about design as content. Which is why universal design is so important in thinking about who is going to come into the space, how will they feel and what will they take away.

Creativity

In interpretation, there are many strategies that can make a difficult subject easier to explore. Katherine Ott (2018) explains:

> Creativity is important – make [the exhibition] appealing. Visitors are more likely to want to be a part of it. The other thing is humour. If you can have a sense of humour you can make the visitors feel happy even when you are telling them horrible things. People will stay then because they have places of relief in the gallery to give them breathing space.

Lonnie Bunch (2018) says that he wants his public programme to draw on three things: scholarship, lived experience and humour: 'fun, not without laughter…' Sharon Ament (2018) would agree, urging the sector to evoke a range of emotions:

> Some of the things we do may be controversial but we are not there to be controversial. We are doing something that's important. If it is controversial, so be it. Museums are really good at dealing with the past and being po-faced; scholarly. You know, throw off the comfort blanket and span the range of human emotion, some of which might be laughing raucously, crying, falling in love with something, being frightened. Let's just do that.

Janet Dugdale (2018) adds:

> People don't visit museums in a structured way. They do the butterfly thing, they will wonder around. Unless you send them down a very structured route. People take in what they are interested in, so it's probably all a bit like bumping into people in a city and you just take in all different bits of information. Maybe you shock people a bit and that changes them. So some of the work we've done aims to do something that triggers an emotional response more than a logical one: it's about whether museums can engender feelings of empathy, happiness and sadness.

So in interpretive strategies it is really important to think about evoking a range of emotions, and about creative ways to engage visitors. Particularly when presenting serious, contentious topics, shifting the mood can affect levels of comfort and interest.

Using objects to take home a message

Art is a powerful conveyor of messages. Museum objects can be too of course. And using museum objects is an art in itself. Katherine Ott (2018) explains:

> In this country…people need a catchy, straightforward sound bite, but you can give them that and it will go boom. So they will have that to mull over…If the objects carry those messages then, because the objects are sensory they carry the message right into their brain much more [easily] than five paragraphs will ever do.

Often curators might get preoccupied with text, when actually the placing of an object will have a far greater impact.

Acknowledging the role a museum building plays in messaging

As well as objects, the physical museum building is sometimes a key part of the message it broadcasts. Sanjit Sethi (2018), Director of Corcoran School of Art, uses the art school building to inform part of his programming. He acknowledged the importance of the building in carrying or contradicting a message. The Corcoran School of Art, 'a porous community of civically engaged artists and practitioners, aiming to impact the world outside of our walls[19]' has a golden board room which looks beautiful. However, the Neoclassical decoration consists of intricately carved guns designed to endorse slavery and settler power. Sethi said that he wanted to acknowledge this room and its context in a way that was true to his and his organisation's values. To use it and turn it on its head he holds a series of round table discussions in the salon, where groups have to generate ways to bring about impactful societal change. He calls this the salon doré series, which in 2018 focused on equity[20].

Thinking about what a building can tell its visitors (and all stakeholders) and how you can use, counter or enhance this, can be important in ensuring an organisation's message and values are consistent and clear. Esme Ward (2018) spoke about this in regard to the new South Asia Gallery Manchester Museum are developing. 'You have lots of people saying you are a colonial institution and we have a problem with it. That doesn't change just because we are doing this sort of work. It's a really important challenge to us.' Visitors can see that Manchester Museum is a Victorian colonial building and institution, and the museum has to acknowledge and address this.

Branden Wallace (2018), Registrar at the Leslie-Lohman Museum in New York, founded 'to preserve LGBTQ identity and build community', talks practically about the activist potential of the architecture. The Leslie-Lohman Museum building is a former shop, boasting huge display windows that face the street. Wallace says that the museum draws people in by using the windows as a museum showcase, commissioning installations that pique the curiosity of passers-by. When the Smithsonian withdrew David Wojnarowicz's film *A Fire in My Belly* from the National Portrait Gallery exhibition *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* (30 October 2010 – 13 February 2011), the Leslie-Lohman, privately funded with a remit for activism, simply screened it in their museum window so that it could be seen from the street. The window functions as a huge advertisement for the museum, makes the museum integral to the local

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[19] https://corcoran.gwu.edu/about [accessed 29.01.2019]
[20] https://corcoran.gwu.edu/community-creativity-and-culture-salon-doré-solutions-equity-series [accessed 29.01.2019]

architecture and the area – and more welcoming. It also allows the museum to make explicit political statements – for example in the case of *A Fire in My Belly*, exhibiting a censored piece of work 24/7.

Which platform?

Like the architecture it inhabits and the objects it displays, the type of platform a museum choses to use can also affect how the public consumes a story, who sees it and who gets involved. Museums use their different channels in diverse ways, but broadly, gallery text is the most agonised over, the most traditional and conservative platform. Katherine Ott (2018) recognises that:

> There are things you can do on the web that they [the Smithsonian] wouldn't let you do in a gallery. There are things you can do in a programme that you can't do elsewhere. The museum doesn't care. But if I write a label on a wall, people stew over it and they want to change a word. But if I do a website: not a word! We do a really radical public programme and they are fine, so if your goal is to educate people then you pick the platform that works for different audiences. So what you can say in a public programme, you can stream it, you can publicise it to the people you think need this info. It's like tiny bites of things that accumulate and little things get through…Programming is where we push things that we really can't say [in an exhibition], or for more complicated topics. We have word restrictions [for labels] – for example 50 words or 150 words. Which is ridiculous. You shouldn't have a book on a wall but there are some things you just can't explain that well. And the stuff that needs more [text] you shouldn't even try to do it. And that is a hard lesson for scholars that read five books on something and then they have 50 words.

Lonnie Bunch (2018) also recognises the importance of different platforms, and the uses of social media:

> The exhibitions are bedrock – they are the foundations…What we said was that in our education programmes we'd wrestle with the broader questions. For example, one of the things we do is teach teachers to teach about race. So we create good materials, provide good content, but that is a given. But how do we then ask the big questions? About teaching, about the role of tech? We stimulate discussions to extend the interpretations. We have a social media staff of 12, which is the largest in the Smithsonian. They gather data but also consciously send out issues so that we see how they are responded to.

Choosing and using platforms effectively can greatly enhance reach, understanding and impact.

Consulting others

In talking about how a museum may tell a story, Esme Ward (2018) noted that sometimes knowing our museum, spending time with different visitors, so to speak, can really help us to understand different needs and ways of learning. Interpretive strategy should not just come from the top or from one place, it should come from everyone across the museum. Visitor services staff may notice what toddlers need in their visit, for example. They will know what works and what doesn't. Unless all staff communicate, the approach may not change and we are missing out on potentially engaging some people.

Clare Barlow (2018) advocates a lot of research: 'Audiences are amazing – they give up hours of their time to see something. That is an extraordinary gift. The very least you can do is to find out what their expectations are'. As well as audience research her advice is to: 'Consult, consult, consult. Be open and transparent. Set up meetings and coffees with people, teams, work closely with the marketing team… We had to get it right for the community, diverse as it is, as it would have a knock-on effect.'

Katherine Ott (2018) also advocates spending time on the museum floor. She tells the story of wanting to do a display about Ed Roberts, an American rights activist, and having his wheelchair in the collection:

> I thought that would be a great way to talk about Ed. I took the chair out to see how people responded… I was coming out of my background of disability rights. So I took it out to people and just asked 'What strikes you about this? What do you want to know about it?' Pretty much everyone wanted to know about the technology – no one asked me who owned it. Who was this guy, why do we have such a gnarly looking chair? Then I showed them the picture of Ed Roberts and they still asked me about the chair, which was pretty interesting to me. I wanted people to know there was a disability rights movement, this guy was a part of it, and he was in your face… the preachy part of it: 'Look what he did! Because he was able to get an education the government of California put him in charge of the rehabilitation agency in the state.' They didn't care if you present them with a wheelchair. Because of its size and denseness, they never get to the person. And then getting to the person and the person's consequences is a whole other complicated step, so along the way here I have done those things to try and figure out how to get through to people. Meet people where they are – give them what they need and then they make take in a little bit more.

Inviting others in

Consulting others and asking for advice is key to the ethos of working with controversial issues. Katherine Ott (2018) says:

> I'm staying open which makes it always a better project. I invited groups in to help me. Now I have a framing emotion for the exhibition, and can think about what objects best carry that. It's letting as many people give you information and taking it in. Have advisory groups to help you craft messages, to tell you what is missing. It makes it a better exhibit because fewer people are put off and walk away if you can give information that meets a lot of people's needs. And there is a great saying in disability circles: 'Nothing about us without us', which is pretty self-evident: 'How dare you objectify me yet again, talk for me, and assume you know my experience'. And I don't – I'm constantly brought up short about my expectations are. I have targeted things I want to check out. I have people to email to run language by. The idea of peer review is widening – peers aren't just scholars but can be the experiential museum community. And also the museum literature is showing that younger audiences want to be engaged from the beginning. They want to feel part of stuff, they want feedback, they want to hear back from someone, they want to be in it. So if we want to be successful the audiences we want to come and see it need to be involved. The comments that people put on social media: they want to hear back. People's needs are changing.

Louise Mirrer (2018) says that consulting others has often changed the exhibitions that the New-York Historical Society does:

> For example the exhibition on the Chinese Exclusion Act[21] – the Chinese were the first group to be refused entry to US on grounds of nationality. For 60 years, almost no one could come here legally from China. The truth is that Chinese have been coming for centuries and each wave has had a different historical fate. We had huge discussions over whose story we were telling and whether we were victimising Chinese Americans by telling this story of woe, when there are other stories that are much more the American Dream story. Usually when we do an exhibition like this we get a group of scholars around a table. In this case, we invited people in the Chinese American

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[21] *Chinese American Exclusion/Inclusion*, New-York Historical Society, 26.09.2014 – 19.04.2015, http://chineseamerican.nyhistory.org [accessed 20.02.2019]

community in New York [many of whom thought the exhibition plan was too negative]. We tried to give the exhibition more balance as a result. I wanted to be attentive to those views. We absolutely don't want to victimise anyone. To me it was a surprise but I think it was a legitimate complaint so it was my decision to do what we did. We're a history museum and you have to be careful to get the history right, otherwise people won't trust us anymore.

Working in partnership

Adam Weinberg (2018) is conscious that museums have to acknowledge what they don't know and seek expertise, be that lived experience or academics. For example:

Jimmy Durham is a Native American artist. Although I don't think he sees himself as that. He sees himself as an artist who is Native American rather than a Native American artist. We presented his retrospective. We don't have expertise on staff to work with Native American communities so in the process of presenting that exhibition we worked with a lot of outside people. You have to meet the work/artist on their own terms. You have to understand what it is, and who the person is, you have to treat it seriously and it is difficult to do this without knowledge. You have to figure out how to get the knowledge if you don't have it in the first place.

The International Slavery Museum works strategically with external partners, usually NGOs. Richard Benjamin (2018) sees this as an important way to give their work and their message a platform, and also to keep the International Slavery Museum relevant:

With this role and these partnerships, you need trust and time. You carve a niche out where it doesn't surprise people where you do something very hard hitting. With that though comes a heavy responsibility. With that things take time, and a lot of trust. If critical friends stop caring about what we do that is a bad sign. And the NGOs – this is a ten-year relationship.

Janet Dugdale (2018) believes that 'Working with organisations and knocking on doors makes museum work more cutting edge'. She adds that:

A museum voice can only be amplified by working with other partners. I think we are in a fortunate sector that a lot of people are interested and willing to work with museums…In museums there has always been that discussion around sponsors and their messages. In fact there is a lot of negotiation with partners as well. Small museum: big organisation, or the inverse. The scale thing is important. There can be small community organisations of just a few people and suddenly you're part of a whole wheel of process and procedure.'

It is important to communicate frequently with partners:

Open conversations, being really clear where things are, keeping in touch even when there isn't anything to say, of course they don't always happen in practice. Sometimes if you step back you can see things starting to unravel – it's keeping the dialogue going even when it is difficult to stop people taking positions or things becoming entrenched.

Clare Barlow (2018) issues a warning that museums can work with others, can seek advice and help, but can't then evade responsibility for what they do:

You have a responsibility for which bits of advice work…You still have to do all the thinking and labour: you can't be naïve. Seeming naïve is quite attractive to museums: either they can throw up their hands and say some issues are so complicated there's nothing we can do, or they tend to

bring in people with no experience of working with museums, who will have high expectations of what is possible, whom the museum will end up perpetually disappointing. You need to think about how to take care of everyone involved with the exhibition: Curators, Front of House, Café, External. It needs to be something where there is shared understanding.

Sticking with facts

Working with other people, visitors, and organisations is really important and can lead to a more rigorous exhibition or programme. Practitioners from national museums in particular underlined that, as well as being fostered by consultation, everything they did was underpinned by the most recent scholarship. So that if there was any dispute about the museum's position, it could be justified by its academic approach.

Clare Barlow (2018), however, brings up the issue of dealing with lack of evidence, challenging museums not to let this stop them from raising issues through exhibitions and programming. This is relevant to *Queer British Art 1861-1967* because many of the people featured in the exhibition didn't leave comprehensive evidence of their identities:

> So it's extremely rare that a document that says 'You and me last night in the bushes, this is what we did, this is who I am' exists… In the past museums have taken this to mean, well we can't talk about diverse sexualities unless we have that mythical golden bullet piece of evidence. I think that is a mistake, because then you erase a whole range of variety and difference, what variety and difference meant then and what it means now…I think where museums need to be a lot more explicit is talking about what they don't know. As a curator you are often wanting to explain what you know and what feels certain. But lots of people have had different interpretations of this – these are some of the interpretations. Ultimately it's up to you to decide. You have to be careful and not wash your hands of the whole affair and say 'oh its far too complicated – over to you guys' but you can say: 'Well, we know that these two people loved each other very much and were in a relationship. We don't know exactly what that relationship was, we don't know whether it was sexually expressed or not. All we can say is that this person was the most important person in this person's life, that they lived together throughout their lives', and you would outline the different things that you know. For me acknowledging those absences and also acknowledging what you do know, is really important.

Using current research and also acknowledging any gaps in knowledge or research, is a useful way of underpinning interpretive strategies.

Modelling

Katherine Ott (2018) states that her curatorial practice models her values and approach rather than explain them:

> When I do exhibits I assume the revolution has happened. That is where I write from. I model how you should think, given that I'm still racist, ableist, but I try and not explain it, just do it. When you start explaining it, that's when people shut down. If you behave in a way that's different but kind of interesting, people pay attention more. And they might start modelling: people are mostly mimics, so there is that. It has taken me so long to realise I should do this. So when I give talks… I start now by acknowledging the native people whose land we're on. I thank them. I name them, I do background research to see what tribes used to live there when I give a talk somewhere, and I say 'I'd like to acknowledge and thank the x people on whose land we have the opportunity to meet' and that's all. But it raises the invisibility of the people who came before and people can take it as

'Yeah well don't say we stole it'. I'm not saying we stole it, but I'm just showing the tradition/history of other peoples who are not white.

Balance

Earlier I touched on the issue of balance in the context of when it might be helpful to resist an overt position. In this section on the art of activism, I look at the *approaches* to balance in exhibitions, events and programming. Janet Dugdale (2018) reflects that at National Museums Liverpool, staff strive for a *mix* (multiple views/representations) rather than a *balance* (implying there are two sides) because they have to be *of* a place, representing Liverpool; *for* a place, promoting Liverpool internally and also to tourists, and *explain* the place, exploring the history of trade, exploitation, migration, deprivation and power in Liverpool and talking about Liverpool today.

When programming a discussion or trying to give multiple perspectives, Dina Bailey (2018) suggests excluding extreme views. Bailey uses a 1 to 5 scale where one may be extreme conservative and five may be extreme liberal. She aims to pick a panel of speakers that sit in the 2 to 4 range, where differences are subtler and attitudes are potentially more conciliatory. Incidentally, by selecting speakers in the 2 to 4 range, any panel discussion is likely to be more nuanced and therefore potentially more complex and interesting.

In addition, if you programme extreme views, 'There is a danger of false equivalents' states Clare Barlow (2018):

> For example pitting a climate change denier against scientists – it distorts current thinking about the issue. There is also a question of who you give a platform to. That is different to censorship. Censorship is when you punish people for their views. You have this space and can expand this power and authority to people. If you programme them you've sanctioned them as a legitimate person to listen to. This doesn't mean you agree with them but you are giving them a degree of licence and you need to think carefully about who you extend that to.

Sara Wajid (2018) adds 'You want to have enough difference – too consensual it's boring, a total vicious bun fight: that is boring too. What museums sometimes do is a polite dinner party type of convention.' Wajid talks about a successful panel discussion:

> Most of the people in that room were on the left side of the debate, and that is the one irritation, you know, with museums you do speak to the converted more. But we had specifically drawn journalists into that conversation too so that it wasn't too consensual, and there were a few spikier questioners and provocateurs in the circle. That is what we can usefully add. But I don't think it is fair to use public space and tax payers' money to promote your personal politics or even your institutional temperature.
>   The taste for appetite for challenge is limited. For example the National Maritime Museum (NMM) programmed a lecture by David Starkey who had made some controversial comments about Black culture and so on, but he had co-curated this exhibition and he was on the programme. People said 'No no it would be terrible for our brand'. Why would you shy away from it? People are grown ups. If they don't want to come they don't have to. I think people would be far more offended by looking into who funds some galleries. I remember learning from that how narrow the limit was for the liberal consensus of the museum. It quite quickly would have impeded the quality of the programme. It would have been pretty lame and pale not to have a Republican voice on that programme.

When tackling a contentious issue, Dina Bailey (2018) talks about the amount of change or buy-in you might expect from visitors and how we should meet people where they are, try to understand their context and why they say or think what they are saying. She recognises that in dialogue or facilitation, it is helpful to understand motivations or contexts as fully as possible. But at the same time, it is okay to draw a line. If you as an organisation and individual do not want to give space to any holocaust deniers, then that is your line and there is no need to enter into a conversation about it. Knowing who you are, where you are and what you are doing, helps to draw these lines.

What about visitors that outwardly disagree with your position or the way it is articulated? For example, should you listen to the racist ranter in the lift, or ask them to leave the museum? For some, that is a line, and they would ask them to leave, but for others, it is an opportunity to try to understand the context of this person. David Fleming (2018) stated quite firmly that his personal and institutional values wouldn't accept this. He thinks that staff at the Slavery Museum 'overtly discussed red lines regarding the Slavery Museum because it has been subject to commentary by right wingers. We regard it as a badge of honor that a museum is a subject of debate, because most of them don't get debated at all.'

Richard Benjamin (2018) agrees, stating:

> I wouldn't invite Tommy Robinson to co curate an exhibition on English identity. He's a racist so I don't want him in the museum. Talking *about* him, that is different…If I thought there was an opportunity to get speakers together to debunk the arguments, then I would think about it. But there are some people or organisations that you wouldn't want in your museums, even just for a party. Museums for everyone? Sadly I don't think the world works like that. It might sound good, being democratic. I often say to people, Freedom of speech? Be careful what you wish for. *Understanding* other views, *Talking* about other views, that's one thing, but come to us, be one of our visitors. No! You try to take away my human rights, as some of these people do, then that's when I think it oversteps the line. A lot of people may disagree and say I shouldn't be saying that, but I'm just being realistic.

At Manchester Museum, Esme Ward (2018) explains that this is about context:

> I think that as Manchester Museum there are things that we absolutely would not do as a civic university, as a socially responsible university and within the context of being in Manchester. So you know I'm not going to start doing a load of work with the EDL. Ultimately we are within the context of a liberal, humanist university and we are there very clearly to build understanding between cultures and a sustainable world, and if there is a challenge to that we welcome that challenge. We aren't going to be the platform to something which is actively trying to build animosity between cultures.

Clare Barlow (2018) urges that:

> It's finding that place where you can talk about the unknown and the known with authority. You should call things by their name. If you're talking about a racist text you should call it by its name. I think it's very easy to get seduced into the 'well, you know, is it really racist, homophobic because...' That's ridiculous because you need to be as explicit as you can be about stuff. I once described a book as racist in a caption and I did get a couple of complaints, and I talked to the director and he was happy to back me up on it, because the book in question was extremely racist, even by the standards of its own day. So we drafted a response together that outlined why we came to that conclusion. But his attitude was that we couldn't pussyfoot around it. It would be far

worse in my view to suggest something was neutral and [have a visitor] feel awful because it wasn't being challenged, or [have a visitor] being confirmed in their own horrible views. If you come across as coy about it, you are taking a stand of a different kind.

Abbe Museum in Maine, USA, has been through and is going through a process of decolonisation and drawing up non-negotiables. It is setting up a Museum Decolonization Institute (MuseumDI) and is clear about its lines and intentions:

> Decolonization is the process of reversing colonialism, both politically and culturally, and it involves not only recognizing Indigenous perspectives and the ongoing colonization of Indigenous nations but the devastating effects that colonialism has on Indigenous cultures. Through collaboration with Wabanaki people, the Abbe is a space that privileges Native perspective and voice, and includes the full measure of history, ensuring truth-telling. We're a role model and mentor for decolonizing museum practices and in the past 18 months, Abbe staff has been asked to train, talk, teach, present, and offer guidance to dozens of museums, cultural organizations, and National Parks on how the Abbe is decolonizing its museum practices[22].

Too ranty?

It is a good idea to consider balance, to draw up lines. It is also sensible to be aware of when the message or position is conveyed too strongly. Esme Ward (2018) gives an example of a time she thinks Manchester Museum went a bit too far:

> The museum had been leading a lot of work around human remains and as part of that work and thinking there were staff in the museum that thought that things had to happen, and so they covered up one of the mummies with a sheet. But they didn't communicate why. So it was a bit weird. But also I think it's the spirit in which things are done. It was slightly ranty. We're going to make a point, in a bit of a blunt way. When that does happen…it has become a product or an outcome rather than that focus on the process.

Richard Benjamin (2018) avoids this by combining different approaches 'You have to understand a part of your audience are very unfamiliar with the subject and that's a difficulty because…you have so many different audiences coming in. So you do a bit of everything.' Esme Ward's (2018) suggestion is to bring in different voices, and be open:

> I'm a curious soul. I want the sort of relationship that is conversational with everyone we work with, ourselves included. We want to be a learning organisation. If you've got that spirit, that tone in everything you do I think you invite in all sorts of different perspectives. I would hope that you don't get that kind of either/or, or we're really going to rail against you. I understand that people want things to rail against. I've been thinking that maybe we as a museum need to be railed against and actually maybe we need to be comfortable with that.

Katherine Ott tries (2018) not to be too strong in her interpretation:

> I can't tell you what to think but I can give you something to think about it. The way I position things, is a subtle way of editing, of guiding you… [If you try to preach] They won't take it in, they will shut it out, they will harbour against you, so don't even try to. But if you give them some information in a way that is interesting, fun, that's appropriate; they will take it in. And they will be

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[22] https://www.abbemuseum.org/musedi/ and https://www.abbemuseum.org/blog/ [accessed 03.01.2019]

on the plane or bus going home and they will remember something. It means there is great care and intention into everything, and there should be.

Subtlety and complexity

What Katherine Ott is advocating in the last quote, is subtlety and care. The language museums use in their work around different issues is important: some language is provocative and intentionally so. It can make standpoints really clear and unambiguous, but it can then also alienate and provoke controversy. So there is a case for subtlety. After Donald Trump instigated the travel ban, the Museum of Modern Art, for example, replaced seven of the works in its permanent display with works by artists from Muslim-majority countries. Each work was accompanied by a label including the text:

> 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 Jan. 27, 2017. This is one of several such artworks from the Museum's collection installed throughout the fifth-floor galleries to affirm the ideals of welcome and freedom as vital to this Museum as they are to the United States.

By emphasising ideals of welcome, the curators are disagreeing with Trump. The subtle technique arguably makes their argument harder to disagree with[23].

Alongside subtlety (which navigates away from a clear, simple argument), Lonnie Bunch advocates addressing ambiguity. He described his aim in creating the National Museum of African American Culture and History as showing people not what they want to remember, but what they need to remember; not what they want to imagine (their role as hero) but in what they need to imagine (their part in racism). Through personal stories he wanted to present the public with complexities and ambiguities rather than presenting simple answers. He is taking a position (that African Americans are a crucial part of the American story) and at the same time asking complex questions[24]. Seen from this perspective, he shows that taking a position doesn't mean that issues are simplified – the interpretation should be as messy and complex as the issues themselves.

David Fleming (2018), from his perspective in Liverpool, urges caution, saying:

> I always see museums as places where communication has to happen, so there is no point making it so complicated that people stop listening... You have to be as complex or as simple as you can get away with. That is a talent. We have to put things across in such as way that people get it. Brexit is a good example of something that is very complicated but has been mis-sold.

Katherine Ott (2018) reminds us of the small tweaks that can aid understanding. She curated an exhibition about Polio[25] and there was a label about children being separated from their parents to go into hospital:

> The label read 'the state took, families were broken…' Any way you say it people are going to have an emotional response. How do you make it neutral? I take out adjectives all the time because you don't need them. And if the person is so removed from human emotion then I'm never going to reach them anyway. It's like teaching a class, you are never going to get the whole lot, you get

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[23] See for example Scott, A. K. 'New York museums signal their resistance to Trump'. *New Yorker*, 17.02.2017. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/new-york-museums-signal-their-resistance [accessed 23.02.2019]
[24] Bunch, L. 'Building the Dream: the Creation of the African American museum and the problem of race in American museums' Lecture at University College London, Centre for Critical Heritage Studies, 30.10.2018.
[25] *Whatever Happened to Polio?*, Smithsonian National Museum of American History, 12.04.2005–12.04.2006, https://amhistory.si.edu/polio/ [accessed 01.03.2019]

three or four and they are just on it. And they can be the ambassadors. Because you can't reach everybody.

Bunch (2018) said that in preparing for the new museum:

> We looked at every exhibition and asked: Is it scholarly?; Is it done in such a way that has a strong point of view but is not heavy handed? It doesn't want to hit people over the head with the obvious. In essence… While we want to push you in a certain direction…what we want is for you to grapple with this history, for you to interpret it through your own lens.

This is an issue echoed by Esme Ward (2018) who calls for us to look at issues and collections now: 'So rather than thinking about the past… actually let's really think about what we do moving forwards. I've just got really interested in how museums make our understanding of the world more complex and that feels like a wholly good thing at the moment.'

This is relevant to a range of contexts: Janet Dugdale (2018) discussed complexity with a trustee who said 'You just need to put both sides down' when discussing a topic. 'That sounds straightforward', Dugdale reflects, 'but it is so much more complex than that. And even if you do that you're still taking a viewpoint, you're taking a stance on something. If it is something quite political but also links to economics, you miss out the middle: we're operating in the real world.'

With similar reasons, Sites of Conscience would talk about dialogue rather than debate, implying that there are not just two sides but a multiplicity of perspectives, and different responses depending on the context. This research suggests it is possible (and important) for museums to avoid the binary and still, to use Esme Ward's words, follow their true North.

Respect and consideration

Taking a careful and considered approach is a thread that runs throughout this research. It is vital to consider what you are doing, how you are doing it, who you are doing it with and who you are doing it for. Clare Barlow (2018) makes a point about interpretive intention:

> For me the curator is a bridge who can connect different types of knowledge and experience – lived experience, academic research, an artist exploring their own experience… When curation is at its best, instead of trying to tap dance in the limelight, the curator is instead creating the opportunities for all of these experiences and opportunities to be held and to happen in the space. In such a way that they may contradict each other, they may disagree, but ultimately the audiences will feel that even if some of their thoughts get challenged, their core sense of self is respected'.

Barlow also urges us to assume a more honest relationship to audiences:

> I think that having a more open relationship with audiences, in which museums stop pretending they have all the answers and instead think about how they did things, why they did things, what decisions they made, who they talked to about those decisions and what difference it made – being able to cite what you took on board and not (and why) helps.

This is a lot to consider. Barlow says that because it is difficult:

> That is one of the reasons it is such an exciting place to work. It's not enough to have good intentions. A lot of museums assume that because they meant well that is how it is going to land.

That is not the case. You ought to be worrying. You ought to do it, but you ought to be worried about it.

Lonnie Bunch (2018) would agree that activism practice requires huge consideration:

We need to have the will to make a difference, and then that will means you have to figure out what are the politics. I have never said let's jump in the water and make trouble. While I like to pretend that I shoot from the hip, it's all carefully thought out.

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.

It seems that the most successful museums invest time in partnerships, seek advice and co-authorship. They embrace and acknowledge complexity, ambiguity, and multiple perspectives. They evade the binary. They know and stand for their values, yet respect differences in views. They are clear about where they draw a line in support of staff and visitors, and in support of their position. They negotiate subtlety as a strategy. They embed practice across a museum, encouraging distributed leadership and collaborative working to ensure their projects are consistent, sustained and meaningful. They are creative and playful, looking to use their exhibitions, collections, their buildings and their texts to instigate a range of different emotive and intellectual experiences. They interpret their collections from the perspective of today – using objects and their historical contexts to provoke discussion about contemporary issues.

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.

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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