

Inclusivity in Art Museums

The statement ‘... the traditional role of the art institution as a keeper of collections in the form of static art objects and scholarship has been shifting. Many institutions are actively concerned about access, inclusivity and issues of relevance for audiences, exploring different curatorial avenues in order to work in more socially engaged ways.’ (Paul O’Neill, cited by T. Leimbach, ‘Innovative programming and social engagement in art institutions: an Australian case study, International Journal of the Inclusive Museum, vol.6, 2013, p.171) discussed in the light of current museum policy and practice in Australia and internationally.

During the late ‘70s, arguments formulated around the structure of institutions; stating that it reflected aspects beyond technical demands and resource dependencies. In fact, the organisational structure was equally a product of institutional forces embedded in a wider socio-political environment.¹ This debate set in motion a line of research which introduced the museum sector to the term, *neo-institutionalism*. New Institutionalism or ‘neo-institutionalism’ is defined as a field of curatorial practice, institutional reform and critical debate, concerned with the transformation from within.² As time passed society saw divergent shifts, mediums of expressions changed. Therefore, transforming the nature of museums and the exhibitions housed. Today, museums are expected to achieve more than just ‘collecting, preserving, interpreting and displaying of objects’; they are looked at as institutions that facilitate positive change. Treated as forums and laboratories, they are spaces responsible for enriching communities, fostering questioning of contemporaneity, while maximising social impact.³ Exhibitions within museums are consequently conceived as social projects,⁴ actively concerned with enabling access, inclusivity and nurturing talks around relevant issues for audiences.⁵ For which, New Institutionalism is perceived as the novel model of curatorial practice.⁶

While in theory, the model may seem ideal; pragmatically, the increasingly growing dialogue of New Institutionalism has not necessarily translated into complete action. Contemporary museums still tend to face issues of racism, sexism, political neutrality and bias. Instances of conscious or unconscious ‘seclusion’ can be traced to a systematic haul of power positions within museums, favouring members belonging to a certain section of the society. Although there are noticeable attempts by contemporary museums in terms of curatorial practices and public programs to engrain the ideas of inclusion, diversity and access within society, the ‘need for neutrality’ within museums

¹ Powell, 2007

² Doherty, 2006

³ Arinze, 1999

⁴ Kolb and Flückiger, 2013

⁵ Leimbach, 2013

⁶ Kolb and Flückiger, 2013

often cause bluster than effect. Hence, delineating intent but at instances, lacking rigorous implementation. There is a constant ‘tug of war’ between the adopted ethical policies and publicly addressing real-world issues. Museums are seen to take a passive seat unless faced by public scrutiny. Instead, it is of utmost importance for institutions such as museums, particularly, to be active as it is context — historical, social and cultural, which forms the basis of their contemporary existence. Choosing not to talk about politically risky issues such as colonisation, climate change or systematic racism disrupts the very nature of museums, making them nothing less than an endorsed space reserved for blather.

The year 2020 has been one which has seen multiple, colossal occurrences including the geopolitical event of Brexit, Harvey Weinstein found guilty for sexual harassment and the infamous case of the global pandemic, COVID-19. It is a year predicting numerous changes in the museum sector. The year also saw a major uprise of communities all over the world as a consequence of the death of George Floyd. The incident took place on the 25th of May when a 46-year old, African American man, by the name George Floyd was arrested by Minneapolis police officers for buying a pack of cigarettes with a counterfeit note. When in custody Floyd was pinned, beneath the knee of one police officer. Soon, showing no signs of life.⁷ This event was recorded by one of the bystanders. The video of the incident went viral and in days to come, revolutionary protests flood city streets in America, Canada, U.K and Australia. Instagram feeds blacked out as the peaceful marchers held signs with slogan, ‘Black Lives Matter’. It was a historical march, covered by all forms of media as the movement spoke volumes on existing issues of contemporaneity. During which, museums were continually criticised for being silent.

Constantly coerced by their audience and artists, eventually, museums put out vague statements of remorse, with no clear attempt to address systematic racism; specifically affecting African-Americans in the United States. Forced and futile, their statements⁸ were impassioned with a ‘we-must-do-more’ chorus on media platforms and museum home pages, followed with negligible mention of what precisely, the ‘more’ could be.⁹

One museum that raised its voice was the National Museum of African American History and Culture (Washington D.C). The George Floyd incident, as a catalyst, continues to expedite a plan which was in the pipeline. The museum, with the help of the conglomerate Johnson & Johnson, has arranged for a \$10 million fund to bridge racial disparities. Together, they will use the financial means to initiate educational programs about the history of racism in the U.S. One such program, instantly set up was the web-based initiative of ‘*Talking About Race*’.¹⁰ It transformed the museum to being a pioneer, during the times of COVID-19. The program uses videos, role-playing and question-based activities to empathise with the concept of race and identity. Thus, proving sheer dedication towards its policies as complied in the *National Museum of African American History*

⁷ 8 Minutes and 46 Seconds: How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody, 2020

⁸ Greenberger and Solomon, 2020

⁹ Museums Are Finally Taking a Stand. But Can They Find Their Footing?, 2020

¹⁰ Talking About Race, 2020

and Culture Act.¹¹ With National Museum of African American History and Culture as an influence, Black Cultural Archives in south London has asked museum stakeholders to soon release a set of policies called ‘*collective anti-racism action*’, which aims to instil a sense of anti-racism in all aspects of the museums — curatorial, public programs and practice.¹²

On the contrary, during a similar time-frame the Toledo Museum of Art (Ohio), Adam M. Levine released a public letter denouncing actions of the protestors, asking the museum workers to have a ‘nonpartisan and disinterested’ stance. Reinstating constantly occurring hypocritical need for neutrality within museum organisation, at instances when museums face uncomfortable situations. Museums claiming not to pick a side is equivalent to supporting the status quo, they have a duty to be political rather than choosing to stand on safe grounds.¹³ Levine’s letter incurred brutal backlash on social media and finally, the director succumbed to laying out initiatives as his first phase of apology. These initiatives are to be set in play as the new fiscal year begins i.e on the 1st of July 2020, to include unconscious bias training for staff and an appraisal of its exhibitions to ensure diverse programming. The initiatives will be planned as per *Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion (DEAI) plan*, which global thinking, access and leadership at its forefront. As the museum gains momentum to reopen on June 23, Levine’s apology is apparent in the curatorial avenues which a consciously explore works of African American artists, Alison Saar and Thornton Dial. His most recent letter addressed to the public end with promises revisit collections development policies, exhibitions selection and recruitment process.

In response to the social unrest and the pandemic of 2020, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) released a statement of solidarity to highlight its new Resolution.¹⁴ Resolutions Adopted by ICOM charts out, in *Resolution No. 3*, a Commitment to the Concept ‘Museums as Cultural Hubs’.¹⁵ Cultural hubs having a commercial inkling as well as a socio-cultural one, allow a variety of interaction within institutions.¹⁶ The engagement of audience—museum is usually an informal one, bringing together a diverse range of visitors. Emphasising on the role of the museum to act as a central point for the exchange of ideologies, the resolution also suggests a need for sustainability connection between museums and local development.¹⁷ It highlights the need for a museum to overthrow boundaries of geography, race, sex and so on to form wider interdisciplinary connections.

¹¹ Public Law 108–184—DEC. 16, 2003

The Act states “collections and resources of the Museum, including policies on programming, education, exhibitions and research will be used as contributions to African Americans to society” further mentioning, “The purpose of the Museum shall be to provide for periods of the African American diaspora”.

¹² Sector bodies call for stand against racial injustice amid Black Lives Matter protests | Museums Association, 2020

¹³ Steinhauer, 2018

¹⁴ EULAC Museums - Home, 2020

¹⁵ Resolutions Adopted by ICOM’S 34th General Assembly, 2019

Cultural hubs are venues such as museums, galleries and performance spaces with secondary attractions including food and retail.

¹⁷ Resolutions Adopted by ICOM’S 34th General Assembly, 2019

Resolution No. 5 of ICOM also stands out, while discussing the particular issues of contemporaneity issues. It falls in line with *UNESCO's Declaration of Santiago de Chile*¹⁸ which speaks about the concept of “extended museum”.¹⁹ According to resolution 5, community-led organisations which do not adhere to *ICOM Definition of a Museum* are to be given support by museums for easy access to intangible cultural and heritage resources. Sustainability is another goal which must be kept at the forefront while running museums.²⁰ Especially while considering indigenous and ethnic minority communities, sensitive differences must be safeguarded to demonstrate values of human rights and peace.²¹ Institutions have been recommended to empathise with geo-political dimensions of 'being a museum'. In lower to middle-income countries, local and regional differences, should be traded with extra precaution.

Although by 10th June 2020, most well-known museums and related regulatory bodies addressed the stance of museums in regards to the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement. One particular section of the society was disregarded time and again. They were People of Colour also belonging to the LGBTIQ+ community. Contemporary museums yet have to release specific statements, programs or policies catering specifically to the LGBTIQ+ community who suffered during similar times of the George Floyd tragedy. As hate crimes are on a constant rise targeting African Americans, black trans women face an even higher risk of facing fatal violence.²² The American FBI reported approximately 7,175 hate crime incidents in 2017, out of which 57.5% were racial crimes and 17% were due to the victim’s sexual orientation. This phenomenon was at its peak in the years 2017-18.²³ It was then Queer Art, further gained prominence within the museum realm.

With the pioneering example of Smithsonian’s Jonathan Kats (2010) exhibit, called ‘Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture’, queer exhibits have been using New Institutionalism to its advantage by fostering firmly bound social engagement strategies. Firstly, Kats ensured excluding stereotypical queer nomenclature from the title of the exhibition. With a dual purpose in mind, the exclusion was a shield against a prejudicial response of the audience as well as a conscious reflection of language, as it shifts, referencing ontological ground. Keeping the Modern American perspective in mind, Kats curated artists to explore the fluidity of gender and sexuality.²⁴ Using previously seen history and themes of modern art, including that of abstraction, the curating involved a novel story-story-telling quality which struck a dialogue between artworks

¹⁸ UNESCO, 1973

¹⁹ Museums and Cultural Landscapes, 2017
Extended museums have a strong aim towards the mission of connecting the museum to its context and community.

²⁰ UNESCO, 1973

²¹ UNESCO, 1973

²² New calls to confront transphobia after murders of two black transgender women, 2020

²³ FBI: Hate crime murders hit record in 2018; crimes targeting transgender people soar, 2020

²⁴ Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture | National Portrait Gallery, 2010

and audience. It questions human taste which is constantly mutating in a non-binaristic way; rather than defining queer culture as a strictly sexual one.²⁵ The exhibit showcases pieces such as the Shower Bath (1917, George Wesley Bellows) which informs the codes of homosexuality of the early 20th century which are divergent from those experienced in contemporary times. Another important piece of work exhibited was Men Reading (Joseph Christian Leyendecke), which translates to nothing more than ‘men at work’ if not curated within Kats’ arena. On adding it to Hide/Seek Leyendecke’s work immediately shifts to a homo-erotic scene, therefore altering the representation of the subjects. Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture successfully highlights the transition within queer culture, from historical times to crystallised autonomous LGBTIQ+ culture that exists today.

In Australia, the George Floyd event may be in close relation of the place held by Indigenous Australians within socio-cultural systems of Australia. The ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement struck the streets of Sydney and Melbourne as they did in Minneapolis, showing a need for a similar public demonstration. With no public statements made on the issue by museums, Australian intuitions also took an initial passive stance. Regardless of the fact that *Indigeneity* has consistently been a marker of Australian identity on global platforms.²⁶ Aside from the recent incident, ‘strategical curation’ of Indigenous objects within the walls of a western concept, that of museums, fuel existing complexities of the repatriation of ancestral and sacred objects.²⁷ Since non-western cultural objects are primarily examined through a western-crafted lens of scientific or an aesthetic concave,²⁸ the objects automatically are decontextualised as Aboriginal artists are, in fact subordinates to their culture. In accordance, curatorial avenues of museum practice can not be considered tailored to sentiments associated with cultural material belonging to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Prominent Indigenous community members have also previously, claimed the lack of initiatives taken by institutions to identify overseas museums that have still not returned ancestral material.²⁹ The separation of sacred pieces from their original keepers, causes not just a decrease in the number of ceremonial objects, but also an elimination of aspects of culture and derogation of indigenous beliefs.

For instance, in April 2015 the British Museum put up a contentious exhibition of Australian Indigenous artefacts which caused an uproar from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.³⁰ The selection of works for the exhibition was reportedly focussed on Britain’s colonial rule, making the exhibition itself, a way to achieve a sense of political correctness. British museum was accused of not just neglecting rich indigenous culture, but also of systematic plunder of the culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Since the objects were removed from their traditional land and custodians, the separating was not simply an issue of political concern. But

²⁵ Söll, 2018

²⁶ Philip, 2007

²⁷ Griffin & Paroissen, 2011

²⁸ Stevens, 1982.

²⁹ Griffin & Paroissen, 2011

³⁰ Neuendorf, 2015

also, an existential one.³¹ Asking for prompt repatriation of artefacts, Dja Dja Warring tribe launched a legal case against the museum to keep the cultural objects within the country.³² Although, the legal challenge proved to be unsuccessful for the tribe, the eventuality showcases the politics of cultural institutions. It narrates the importance of power an institution such as the British Museum holds, for it to overthrow sacred beliefs of the traditional custodians of the objects and curate them as they seem fit.

Interestingly after, the Australian Government released *The Australian Best Practice Guide to Collecting Cultural Material* in December 2015. In the document, acquisition of Australian cultural objects by institutions followed a stringent set of rules, including a need for consultation and formal permission taken from the people related to the cultural material.³³ In addition to this publications and former exhibitions of the cultural material are scrutinised to understand their spiritual relevance, place within their historical and cultural systems, family associations as well as contemporary attachment of the object with the community. Moreover, under the *section 5.2.1 Legal title/authority to lend* clearly states to first, investigate the reputation of the donor, followed by extreme diligence regardless of the former results. *Section 5.2.2* instructs a thorough research of the provenance. It is of utmost importance to scrutinise the historical context of the work — if it has been produced shortly after conflict, acquired from continents listed on the ICOM Red Lists database or religious/historic buildings.³⁴ Special care is taken while handling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage. Collaboration and sharing research outcomes with Traditional Owners is a mandate; while only the use of recognised ethical research practice is acceptable.³⁵ Where there is difficulty establishing provenance, suitable documentary evidence is complimented by an in-depth analysis of INTERPOL Stolen Works of Art database and the Art Loss Register, to ensure legitimacy.³⁶ Import and export of Australian work is done in accordance with PMCH Act;³⁷ regulating valuable cultural material from leaving the country. Hence, evading the British Museum case from repeating itself, in the future.

With mere presupposition of New Institutionalism and discourse on access and inclusivity without real-world action is inefficacious. Contemporary museums need to bridge the gap between the didactics of text and spoken word into visible action, just as the Australian government did in 2015. Governments must support and have a strong affiliation with cultural institutions to ensure, the cultural artefacts are devoted the appropriate resources and policies to keep them in they rightful place. In turn, public voices are heard in order to encourage their involvement within the sphere.

³¹ Pilger, 2015

For the Aboriginal community time is cyclical, not linear. Similarly, people and objects of country are inseparable from the country. Separating the objects from country is equivalent to removing the essence of the country. Hence, the exhibition was more than just a political concern for Aboriginals and Torres Islanders. It was also an existential issue.

³² Neuendorf, 2015

³³ Australian Best Practice Guide to Collecting Cultural Material, 2015

³⁴ Australian Best Practice Guide to Collecting Cultural Material, 2015

³⁵ Australian Best Practice Guide to Collecting Cultural Material, 2015

³⁶ Australian Best Practice Guide to Collecting Cultural Material, 2015

³⁷ Australian Best Practice Guide to Collecting Cultural Material, 2015

PMCH Act states that Indigenous and Torres Islander cultural material over 20 years of age requires a permit for export.

Contemporary museums, being the ‘custodians of culture’ and ‘agents of education’ have an added responsibility to set higher standards in terms of culturally-acceptable, social behaviour. For this to occur, there is a need to internalise the grave need for openly politicising museums. Without vocalising points of concerns, issues will be buried within didactics of museum documents rather than fostering a sense of belonging. To reiterate museums need to pick a side and have a stance; as anything otherwise is equivalent to supporting the status quo.³⁸ Issues of contemporaneity must be publicly addressed as museums are no longer temples reserved for the elite. Including, complex issues such as those of racism, sexism, climate change, equity and Trump, in the case of United States. Shying away from discourse that may cause rift, is not dutiful in museum context. In fact, stepping beyond their modern stage of being forums and labs, contemporaneity calls for a transition to being facilitators for communities, especially post 2020. It is then clear that, to work in more socially engaged ways, substantial effort must added by making mandate an obligation to scrutinise who is audience and a constant process of examining their needs.

³⁸ Raicovich, 2017

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