



**NOT A  
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BUT A  
CRUCIBLE**

**Building the creative power**

**of contestation**

**into the museum**

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*Not a shrine but a crucible: building the creative  
power of contestation into the museum*

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# Acknowledgements

For a document that speaks to themes of radical democracy, it seems fitting to be writing these acknowledgements on the day the 2020 US election results were called. I send my sincere thanks to the 74.8 million Americans who said, 'Enough!' to the 45th President of the United States. May we join in solidarity to ensure that the world never needs to endure his like again.

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# Abstract

How we see our history affects how we live in the now. As we experience global turmoil in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic distress and a crisis of representative democracy, we urgently need our museums sector to embark upon a new relationship with the public, one that welcomes knowledges and voices from outside the museum to help current and new audience members see history and the present from a multitude of perspectives. The conversation about how to activate and empower a larger, polyvocal audience takes place against the backdrop of a greatly contracted public sphere. Although audience development, marginalised voices and democratic crisis seem to present themselves as three disparate problems facing contemporary museums, I argue that the three are so intertwined that addressing them separately is counterproductive. To demonstrate how they might be addressed productively in tandem, I draw on insights from museum scholars and practitioners to argue that principles arising from critical pedagogies and radical democratic museum practice can be employed together to challenge dominant and marginalising narratives present in museums and their practices. When supplemented with elements from queer, feminist, anti-racist and post-colonial theories as required to suit institutional and community context, I argue that this framework has the potential to develop into a transformational force in museums' efforts to enact positive social change.

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## INTRODUCTION



Early in 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic took hold across the world. People inclined to follow scientific evidence stayed home and embarked upon a new routine of social distancing, masking and teleconferencing. But in June the death of African American man George Floyd under the knee of a white Minneapolis police officer brought millions of people worldwide out of their homes and into the streets to demand justice for Black lives. Governments struggled to cope with the pandemic and social unrest but amid the chaos, many managed to marshal law enforcement resources to protect not the right to protest but the monuments glorifying the racist colonialism being protested.

How we see our history affects how we live in the now. As we experience global turmoil in the wake of the pandemic, economic distress and a crisis of representative democracy, we urgently need our museums sector to embark upon a new relationship with the public. This new relationship should welcome knowledges and voices from outside the museum to help audiences see history and the present from a multitude of perspectives.

The spirit of this new kind of relationship underpins the *Queering*

*the Museum* projects undertaken by the History Trust of South Australia (HTSA). These projects, curated by Nikki Sullivan and Craig Middleton, focus on collaborations between the Trust's museums and 'LGBTIQ community members who [were] invited to place a queer lens on objects in [the Trust's] collections' (History Trust of South Australia, 2016). This body of work consists of a physical exhibition held in 2016, a book documenting the project's theoretical underpinnings and a digital iteration, *Queering the Museum Online* (QTMO), which began in 2019. For two months in that year, I served as an intern on the project which centres on a collection of digitised objects selected from the Trust's broader collections. Both the physical and digital versions sought to open up interpretation and meaning-making to new voices (Sullivan and Middleton, 2019) by soliciting responses from audience members. The digital version of the project has multiple aims, all of which emphasise the curators' intentions

[t]o demonstrate that objects can be, and indeed are, interpreted in different ways by different people...and [t]o try to make apparent the networked (and thus complex, situated, changing, and political) nature of meaning and identity (History Trust of South Australia, 2020, p. 3).

Museum professionals have come to accept that interpretations, knowledge and meaning, far from being stable and permanent, are unsettled and provisional, like iridescent surfaces that vary according to visitors' perspectives (Giaccardi 2006, p. 33). Given this acceptance of shifting meanings and an active audience role in making them, QTMO also includes the intention '[t]o unsettle the traditional relationships between museums, objects, people, communities and stories, and to disrupt the so-called definitive answers and the systems of power and privilege they support' (History Trust of South Australia, 2019, n.p.). This intention is characteristic of recent changes in how museums present themselves, moving away from the staid picture of grand spaces full of dusty dioramas and



‘Do Not Touch’ signs and toward an image of museums as more engaging, inclusive and audience-focused.

### **Contemporary concerns: audiences and marginalised voices**

This focus on audiences and how best to grow and connect with them has become a quest in the field, fuelled in part by declining visitor numbers (Jones, 2017; Beatty, 2018). Museum practitioners and academics in associated disciplines have scrutinised audience engagement due to its importance to the sector’s future sustainability (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994; Sandell, 1998; Simon, 2010; Fleming, 2016; Haviland, 2017; Walmsley, 2019). In short, no visitors means no museums. This seems obvious, but it hasn’t always been framed this way within museum practice. Traditionally, institutions had focused most of their energies on the stewardship of collections, with public programming situated as ‘something of an add-on’ (Black, 2013, p. 123). For much of museums’ history, collections were central and audiences peripheral.

Audience research shows that relying solely on the traditional museum audience—well-educated, middle-class white professionals—will not be enough to sustain the sector (Cerquetti and Ferrara, 2018). This is complicated by the ever-changing nature of current and prospective audiences who are undergoing rapid demographic, geographic and technological shifts (Black, 2013, p. 126). Of the three, demographic changes seem likely to pose the greatest challenge in light of how well or otherwise museums have addressed diverse audiences throughout their history. The origin story of museums is rooted in the colonial project and infused with the acquisitive and taxonomic sensibilities of fifteenth century Western Europe (Hooper Greenhill, 1992). As such, traditional museums can be understood as devices of power and empire, designed as storehouses of objects and certain kinds of knowledge. With ‘Western civilisation’ as their reference point, museums have been instrumental in constructing and upholding the differences between advanced and inferior societies, scientific and traditional beliefs, fine art and folk craft (Message and Witcomb, 2015, p. xxxvii). These differences produce the dichotomy of ‘normal’

and ‘other’ which excludes or pushes to the margins subjects who deviate from the WEBCCHAM—‘white, ethnically European, bourgeois, Christian, [cis, citizen,] heterosexual, able-bodied male’—norm (Caswell, 2019, p. 7). As Sumaya Kassim observes in her essay and short film, both titled *The Museum Will Not be Decolonised* (Kassim, 2017), this history makes the contemporary project of diversity, inclusion and multicultural representation in the museum suspect: how committed to serving more of the heterogeneous public can the museum truly be without dismantling itself entirely?

### **Practicing democracy in public**

The conversation about how to reach and engage a larger, polyvocal audience takes place against the backdrop of a greatly contracted public sphere. Much of the space in what would otherwise be considered the public sphere has been enclosed by private corporations (Low and Smith, 2006, p. 2). This is indicative of the larger enclosure of the commons that has progressed steadily throughout Western nations and their empires since the late Middle Ages (Brantlinger, 2018, p. x). Where do people go—what venues, physical or virtual, are available to them—to engage in the considered contestation essential for the practice of democracy? The local pub: not conducive to nuanced civil discourse in the presence of alcohol and gambling machines. The public library: perennially underfunded (Allen, 2003; Fitzgerald and Savage, 2004) and often closed in the evenings when adults are home from work. Media websites: as internet wisdom dictates, don’t read the comments (Jane, 2017; Naab, Kalch and Meitz, 2018, pp. 778–779). Social platforms such as Facebook and Twitter: these grow increasingly problematic since, particularly in Facebook’s case, their proprietary algorithms are configured to amplify controversy in order to wring the highest revenue out of each like, comment and share (Marichal, 2016; Madrigal, 2017; Omidyar, 2018).

Schools and universities would seem to present the next most obvious sites for practicing the skills of democratic citizenship. However, the ability for schools to perform this function is hampered by current trends

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in the education sector toward instructional and evaluation methods that focus on producing measurable results (Giroux, 2011, p. 35). When teaching and learning are reduced to dispensing and regurgitating standardised information, school becomes less a place of intellectual investigation and more a place of exchange and a locus of control (Keesing-Styles, 2003; Kincheloe, 2005; Giroux, 2011). Paulo Freire (1990 [1970]) describes this scenario as a ‘banking form of education’ in which teachers transfer certified knowledge into the supposedly empty vessels of student minds. Once students have spent 13 years in this kind of ‘learning’ environment, it is aspirational at best to expect them to have developed the critical facilities and skills needed to discuss, analyse and debate issues at the tertiary level. To further exacerbate the situation, initiatives like the recently-approved tertiary funding scheme called the Job-Ready Graduates Package (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020) look to increase university fees for those disciplines deemed unfit for turning out industry-ready graduates. Not coincidentally, these same disciplines are those known for critically examining society, culture, history, government, political economy and the relationship of the individual to all of the above. If less privileged students are to be steered away from the humanities, arts and social sciences in favour of science, technology, engineering and maths, or away from university entirely in favour of trades, there seems little chance for the level of public political discourse to improve in coming decades. If young people are priced out of learning and practicing the skills of world building then only those with time and money to spare will be the ones building our world (Australian Academy of the Humanities, 2020; McPhee, 2020)

So, where do we go? Gathering around the dining table to discuss the day’s news and events with family and friends certainly is not to be derided, but it is no substitute for practicing in public among our fellow citizens. How can we think of ourselves as not just informed but conversant citizens without a place to practice? To resort to a sport analogy, no fan of Australian Rules football would expect to hold their own, much less succeed, if they were dropped onto the pitch at the Melbourne Cricket

Ground on Grand Final day without having set foot on an oval to practice at any time in the preceding three years. Yet this is what we do when voting is the only outlet for practicing our citizenship. We 'prepare' by ingesting soundbites for a few weeks during campaign season and return home, sometimes bruised and shaken, to live with the consequences of our ill preparation for the next three or four years.

### **Combining critical pedagogies & radical democratic practices**

Audience development, marginalised voices and democratic crisis seem to present themselves as three distinct problems facing contemporary museums. But at the heart of each is a common element: people inside and outside the museum. In fact, I argue that the three problems are so intertwined that addressing them separately is counterproductive. To demonstrate how they might be addressed productively in tandem, I draw on insights from museum scholars and practitioners to argue that principles arising from critical pedagogies (Freire, 1990 [1970]) and radical democratic museum practice (Sternfeld, 2017) can be used together to challenge dominant and marginalising narratives present in museums and their practices.

Critical pedagogy (CP) is an emancipatory educational framework that emphasises classroom students' active participation in the knowledge-making process through dialogue and collaboration with teachers (Freire, 1990 [1970]; Kincheloe, 2008; Dale and Hyslop-Margison, 2011; Giroux, 2011). When introduced in the museum context, 'students' would correspond to audience members and 'teachers' to museum professionals. The scholar most closely associated with critical pedagogy is Paulo Freire whose work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1990 [1970]) details its theory and practice. While Freire's arguments are situated in the traditional school context, his ideas are deeply relevant to lifelong learning for citizens as learners in informal and non-formal educational contexts (Mayo, 2013). Although several feminist theorists have taken issue with critical pedagogy as a masculinist framework (Ellsworth, 1989; Kenway and Modra, 1992; Luke, 1992), museum educators Janna Graham (Fors-

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man et al., 2015) and Nora Sternfeld (2010) have made a compelling case for embracing it due to its liberatory potential. Additionally, five leading principles of critical pedagogy can be mapped onto the five strategies of radical democratic museum practice defined by Sternfeld:

From the pillars of collecting, exhibiting, organising, researching and educating, five strategies of a radical-democratic curatorial practice can be deduced: 1) challenging the archive, 2) appropriating the space, 3) organising an oppositional public sphere, 4) producing alternative knowledge, and 5) radicalising education (2017, p. 181).

As demonstrated below, I argue that each of Sternfeld's strategies corresponds to a greater or lesser degree to five key principles of critical pedagogy. Among the ten or so principles underpinning critical pedagogy, the five I have selected are among those cited most consistently by pedagogues pursuing a feminist critical pedagogy (Luke and Gore, 1992; Webb, L.M., Allen, M.W. and Walker, K.L., 2002; Chow et al., 2003). These five combine to provide what I consider to be the best distillation of critical pedagogy's goals along with the broadest intersection with Sternfeld's five pillars of radical democratic museum practice. I also argue that by virtue of its non-prescriptive nature, critical pedagogy is sufficiently malleable to incorporate feminist, queer, anti-racist and Indigenous perspectives as required by the time, location and specific audiences in question. Combined with elements from queer, feminist, anti-racist and post-colonial theories, this theoretical framework and practice could become a transformational force in museums' efforts to enact positive social change.

Critical pedagogy sets its stage by changing the dynamic between teacher and student; it can be used to do the same between museum practitioners and audience members. Freire called for a partnership between student and teacher, eschewing hierarchy and dominance in favour of solidarity (1990, p. 75). This can be seen to map onto Sternfeld's strategy of appropriating the space. To begin the radical democratic process, audi-

ences must be able to enter the learning space on their own terms and with their own agendas, thus changing the power dynamic between curator and audience.

Liberation through learner empowerment is among CP's main goals (Kincheloe, 2005; Dale and Hyslop-Margison, 2011). This is achieved not only by active participation but also by emphasizing critical thinking and discouraging conformity. This principle maps onto Sternfeld's call to radicalise education within the museum. Use here of the word *radicalise* should not be automatically associated with the connotation of 'extremism' (although those of a more conservative bent would certainly label it as such), but with Marx's (1970 [1844]) understanding of radical as grasping at the root or essence of, in this case, democratic practice. A critically empowered spine of this nature could support audience engagement strategies in museums and reap democratic benefits for the community far beyond the institution's doors.

Building a community of learners is central to critical pedagogy (Kincheloe, 2008); Sternfeld would recognise this as organising an oppositional public sphere. This community comprises not only students (audience members) but envelopes the teacher (curator) as well. Community formation of this kind requires engaging in long-term relationship and trust building which would take the audience engagement project beyond the transactional space and into the relational space.

Critical pedagogy not only respects but encourages a diversity of views and accepts that lived experience and positionality will affect the meaning derived from a given situation or object (Freire and Macedo, 1987). This embrace of multiplicity maps onto Sternfeld's call for museum practitioners to work in with audiences to produce alternative knowledges. And finally, where critical pedagogy challenges traditional views and practices, Sternfeld challenges the archive and its attendant taxonomies.

### **Thesis aims**

This thesis argues that embedding principles of critical pedagogies and radical democratic practice into museum engagement strategies holds

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great potential for democratising museums. Through two case studies as well as a close analysis of the *Queering the Museum Online* project and examination of complementary research into civic engagement, the thesis will explore the obstacles and affordances that museum practitioners can expect to encounter in this process. Chapter two traces the emergence of ‘New Museology’ and its contribution to a shift within the sector from an emphasis on collections to an emphasis on audience engagement and participation. Chapter three presents two case studies selected for their differences in scale: the creation of The National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC and artist/researcher Sean Curran’s (2019a) crowdsourced exhibition *126* at the National Trust’s Sutton House in Hackney, London. The case studies will illustrate how practices that can be described as critical and radically democratic often emerge organically when marginalised perspectives, peoples and voices are centred. Chapter four delves into *Queering the Museum Online* using participant survey data gathered by HTSA as well as my own observations from my internship and subsequent employment at the Trust. This examination will determine where critical and radical democratic practices emerged and how they might be more fully employed in the project’s next phase. Based on observations from the case studies and *Queering the Museum Online*, chapter five evaluates the prospects for embedding critical pedagogy and radical democratic practices institutionally. The chapter also proposes some implementation guidelines derived from the CLEAR framework, a civic engagement tool devised by political science researchers in the UK. The thesis concludes with suggestions for future experimentation with the democratising practices discussed throughout.

## THE MUSEOLOGICAL SHIFT FROM CARETAKING TO ENGAGEMENT



The last three decades have spawned numerous museological theories, queer and critical museology among them. In this chapter, I examine the spectrum between traditional museology and critical museology and locate prominent approaches to audience engagement on that spectrum. The first section distinguishes between the conceptions of so-called ‘old’ museology and the discipline that came to be called new museology. The next section explores the forces that helped put in motion a ‘turn’ from an object-based, stewardship focus within museology to a focus on determining and serving the needs and interests of museum audiences. The final section briefly explores how two projects undertaken at the History Trust of South Australia serve the purposes of audience-focused new museology by interrogating and disrupting values, practices and power structures that have normalised the exclusion of queer and other non-normative subjects from representation in the museological record.



## New Museology

The term 'New Museology' was coined in the 1980s to establish a break between current or emerging museum practices and the object-based, 'old museology' of the previous century that critics argued should be abandoned (Miles, 1986; Hooper Greenhill, 1992; 1994). In his 1989 book of the same name, Peter Vergo did not provide definitions of either old museology or its descendent, but offered instead a form of diagnosis: '...what is wrong with the "old" museology is that it is too much about museum *methods*, and too little about the purposes of museums' (1989, p. 3).

Based on this assessment, we can infer that 'old museology' concentrated on objects, collections and the methods by which these were preserved, interpreted and displayed. Audience was an afterthought. According to the 'scholarly' perception as described by Roger Miles,

[visitors] are believed to come to the Museum ready to pass judgement on the level of scholarship exhibited. Therefore, few concessions are to be made towards the ignorant and the uninformed in the planning of exhibitions (1986, p. 75).

Accordingly, the focus in 'old museology' was on singular, authoritative interpretations of objects, conveyed by experts in the field who were perceived (at least by themselves) to be objective and rational.

New Museology, as conceived by Vergo and his fellow proponents, was to be a rejection of the primacy of the object and the assumption of curatorial objectivity. It called for a critically reflexive examination of the assumptions underpinning museum practices (Jordanova 1989), becoming less concerned about the *what* and *how* of museums and more concerned with the *why* of museums (Vergo, 1989, p. 3). Proponents also exhorted museum practitioners to acknowledge the inherently political nature of their work and the technologies of interpretation and display they used to create certain kinds of knowledge (Hooper Greenhill, 1992). The purpose of New Museology was to bring closer attention to context

and awareness (or admission) that the meanings ascribed to objects and collections are multiple and dependent upon myriad social factors at work within the curator, the institution, the community where the museum is located and broader society.

At the same time as this battle for museology's theoretical soul played out, the sector began to experience two parallel shifts. First was the gradual shift away from museums as artefact emporia and toward their reconfiguration as centres of informal and experiential learning (Hooper Greenhill, 1992). Simultaneously, an earnest turn toward audience-centred museum programming was taking place in Europe and the US (Ballantyne and Uzzell, 2011). The re-examination of both audiences and museums opened the sector to criticism for its exclusivity in curatorial practices (Sandell, 2002) and calls for institutions to actively combat social inequality through decolonising their methodologies (Vermeulen & Pilcher, 2009).

Kenneth Hudson (1998, pp. 45–46) enumerates four forces driving the changes in museums' focus from objects to audiences over the 50 years preceding his writing:

- Increase in public expectation of government provision, i.e., the public wants more from its institutions. Governments, in turn, felt the need to provide 'value for money' or the highest level of service provision for the lowest level of expenditure.
- The post-war increase in disposable income in developed Western societies increased expectations for both quality and quantity in leisure pursuits.
- A growing drive among increasingly professionalised museum practitioners for improvement of what museums provide, both from a visitor perspective and from the perspective of government and funders or 'upstream audiences' (Kershaw, Bridson and Parris, 2020, p. 345).
- A proliferation of privately-funded or independent museums, i.e., those which do not receive the better part of their funding from government.

It is important to note, however, that these causes have causes of their own. What Hudson describes as increased consumer demand and sophistication (1998, p. 46) did not happen simply because World War II had ended. It was and continues to be driven by Western economies based on consumption as well as the increasingly rapid growth of technology which has contributed to increased leisure time and has turned formerly luxuries into commodities. Citizens, more frequently and problematically known as consumers from the 1970s on, have had their desires ignited and fanned by advertising and marketing, both of which Hudson rightly identifies as having infiltrated operations in the museum sector (1998, p. 46).

Hudson's account fails to acknowledge the rise of neoliberalism as a major force driving practitioners to raise their profiles. That the rise in professionalisation in the sector happened in the 1980s and 1990s is significant. The timing coincides with the adoption of neoliberal doctrine by Western governments and the moment when those governments started cutting public expenditure. By the end of the 1970s, sputtering economies in the US and Europe offered fertile ground for the rise of neoliberal ideology and the inexorable creep of market logics beyond the economic realm (Harvey, 2005; Banks, 2011; Sewpaul, 2015). The reach of this ascendant worldview would include the social sphere and cultural sector, which in 20 years would see itself transformed into the 'creative industries' (O'Connor, 2010).

Neoliberalism's impact on the museum sector would be seen on two fronts. The most obvious would arrive early in the form of government efficiency measures, better known as funding cuts. This, in turn, forced public institutions including museums, galleries and libraries to cut services or to make up funding shortfalls through partnerships with the private sector.

The second impact came as governments began to look toward the sector to fill a social service role, providing support for community cohesion, social inclusion and informal education (Sandell, 2002) even as public cultural funding continued to wane through the 1980s and 90s. What funds the cultural sector did receive had to be accounted for in 'val-

ue for money’ terms: as a result, governing bodies introduced metrics by which institutional performance would be evaluated:

It was the Margaret Thatcher era, and museums were being “shaken-up”—challenged to pay their way. Museum professionals, who had traditionally been specialists skilled in identifying and classifying objects, were being retrained to communicate the value of their collections and attract the public (Ballantyne & Uzzell 2011, p. 85).

This, more than audience appetites, drove the increased need for professionalisation of the sector, particularly in management. When government funders began to treat museums as businesses, museums were forced to respond in kind and to ensure their staffs were trained in managerial theory and technique in order to perform the ‘administrative, financial and political duties’ (Hudson, 1998, p. 48) expected of them. In the UK for instance, Banks observes that ‘although the language moved from “New Public Management” to “modernizing” public services,’ (2011, p. 10) government sought to instrumentalise the cultural sector to ‘achieve improved outcomes for people and communities in terms of social inclusion, educational attainment and neighbourhood regeneration’ (2011, p. 10). Shrinking budgets, expanded remits and competition from other forms of leisure experiences have thus led museums to emphasise visitor satisfaction as a path to income generation (Banks, 2011, p. 88).

This shift in gaze within the sector also emerges in the evolution of the official definition of museum by The International Council of Museums (ICOM) since its founding in 1946. A portion of the sector, championed by curator Jette Sandahl, immediate past Chair of the ICOM Committee for Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials, believes it is time for the definition to

‘recognise...paradigmatic shifts towards a relational framework, in a conceptual language of involvement, of mutuality

and reciprocity, exchange, equal partnership, outreach and in-reach, cooperation, collaboration, shared responsibility, shared purposes and collective authority' (Standahl, 2018, p. 12).

Resistance against such 'ideological' language (Small, 2019, n.p.) originates from more traditional voices in the profession, who fail to see their position as equally ideological. Frictions between the two fronts in 2019 sparked infighting over a proposed new definition (the first since 2007) and scuttled the planned redefinition vote at ICOM's Extraordinary General Assembly in September. Nevertheless, even though ICOM's current definition begins with the language of collections, it ends by asserting collections are conserved, researched and exhibited 'for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment' (Ballantyne & Uzzell 2011, p. 87; ICOM 2018, p. 3). Logically, an *audience* must do the learning, studying and enjoying, despite the passive voice and erasure of people in the ICOM construction.

Regardless of ICOM's internal disputes, many voices (Simon, 2010; Black, 2013; Scott, 2013; Nielsen, 2015) have argued over the past decade that to ensure their sustainability, museums must address issues that are meaningful to audiences in their local context and demonstrate how those issues can be extrapolated across global society. Ballantyne and Uzzell (2011, p. 85) stress the need for museums to 'better show how they serve their communities: what value they add in educating visitors about important cultural, social, environmental, historical, and citizenship issues of the day'.

### **Audience development and engagement**

The transition from a focus on objects and collections to audiences and communities is in the midst of its own shift from a neoliberal managerial focus on quantifiable metrics to a realization that museum visitors amount to more than their behavioural tendencies. This move from transactions to relationships requires a different approach, one that ultimately should

help to both build in reflexivity and to stimulate long-term engagement by relating museum practices directly to the lives of visitors and communities.

Writing and research on audience engagement in the cultural sector has tended to approach the subject, problematically, from a marketing point of view, asking, 'How do we serve our customers?'. To answer this question, institutions begin with consumer or audience research. This research starts from the premise that the museum is a business selling a product or service and should therefore treat audiences as customers, learning as much as possible about their behaviour and motivations in order to increase sales (visits). The process begins with demographics. Once a sample is defined, the characteristics revealed by audience surveys are extrapolated across the entire audience. International consultancy Morris Hargreaves McIntyre has branded the newest spin on this methodology 'Culture Segments'. The segments into which their surveys sort people closely resemble the Myers-Briggs typologies that school career counselors and job placement agencies have used for decades. Whatever their name, the categories, segments and other groupings devised by audience researchers are arguably rooted in the Enlightenment obsession with taxonomy (Bennett, 1995, pp. 47, 81–82).

If the perspectives on audience engagement were expressed as a spectrum, the spectrum would be terminated by a transactional/mechanical perspective on one end and a relational/theoretical perspective on the other. A prominent exponent for each perspective is non-profit consultant and former curator Nina Simon and museum educator and curator Nora Sternfeld.

Perhaps the best-known and most popular book to address audience engagement in museums is Nina Simon's *The Participatory Museum* (2011). The book takes a transactional tone and addresses the 'experience' of museum visits and the mechanics of engagement. In many ways this can be heard as an echo of 'old museology' which concerned itself more with method and less with purpose. Throughout the book's 352 pages (excluding acknowledgements, notes and index), Simon uses the word 'content' 337 times, a frequency of nearly once per page. The book's tone

is reminiscent of the laudatory discourse around Web 2.0 from the early 2000s when social media, interactivity and user-generated content were predicted to transform the Internet into a truly democratic space.

At the time of the book's writing, Simon was also running her own exhibition design consultancy— Museum 2.0 (Museums and the Web, 2010, n.p.)—so a certain slant is to be expected since her livelihood depended on her ability to win the sector's readers over to her way of thinking. However, the popularity of her book within the museum sector makes problematizing the tone a useful exercise. The similarity between social platforms and Simon's approach is perhaps most tellingly displayed early in the book in a passage about designing museum experiences: 'When designing participatory components to exhibitions, I always ask myself: how can we use this? What can visitors provide that staff can't?' (Simon, 2010, p. 14). A more generous reader could see this as an effort at valuing visitors' lived experience as a valid knowledge source. However, we can just as easily read it as a reinforcement of the transactional nature of the museum/visitor interaction. This kind of content creation by museum visitors seems to fit into the dynamic described by Kotler and Armstrong (2010, cited in Walmsley 2019, p. 34) wherein the museum and visitor enter into a reciprocal arrangement of creating and capturing value from each other. Arguably, that arrangement does more for the museum than it does for the visitor creating the content. This draws a striking parallel to what we have come to know about social media and how user interactions are used and monetized by social platforms, frequently to the users' detriment. Ultimately, *How can we use this?* is not the right question. 'How can this be used and managed democratically?' (Mould, 2018, p. 196) is a better question if museums' purpose is first to serve audiences, communities and society at large.

If you asked them in as many words, museum visitors likely would not say that they want to be measured and categorised; they would want to be understood. There is a world of difference between the two. Ben Walmsley (2019) examines what he calls the end of arts marketing. While his focus is on the arts specifically, his ideas relate to all cultural institu-

tions and experiences. Walmsley tracks a paradigm shift to ‘prioritize the long-term relational approaches offered by audience engagement over short-term tactical activities such as segmentation and promotion’ (p. 44). As proof, he cites Thibodeau and RÜling’s assertion that sustainable cultural organisations will of necessity ‘embrace a community-wide process which encapsulates internal and external stakeholders; nurtures relationships with them; and strengthens social and emotional bonds (Walmsley, 2019, p. 42). This view echoes Dindler (2014) who emphasizes the need to examine ‘relational work’, understood as the interpersonal and trans-institutional relationships within and around the museum, in interaction and exhibit design and recommends extended study of the ‘significance of social relationships and networks in terms of how these support sustained cultural heritage engagement’ (2014, p. 222).

If we read Nina Simon as a voice of transactional audience engagement then we should read Nora Sternfeld as a voice for relational engagement underpinned by wide-ranging cultural, educational and political theory. Sternfeld casts a dubious eye across the current participatory landscape in museums and finds its capacity for sustainability diminished by a lack of radical democratic practices and relationships of mutual learning (Sternfeld, 2010; Asche, Döring and Sternfeld, 2020; Prottas, 2020). Instead, she argues that museum practitioners must be ever mindful of their own institutional assumptions and the asymmetrical power dynamics these assumptions normalise.

When dealing with issues of participation, integration and inclusion, it is also important to consider the question of who is able to include whom, and what gives them the right to think they can make that decision (Sternfeld, 2012, pp. 5–6).

Stated more pointedly, if the institution in question is a public museum, funded by public monies and maintained for the public good, then the public—all of it—should not need permission to participate. That the



public is perceived to need this permission exposes the ‘empty gesture of participation’ (Asche, Döring and Sternfeld, 2020, p. 37) as an instrumental neoliberal strategy aimed at extracting value from the audience without the risk of that participation disrupting the regular order of things within the institution.

Throughout her research and published work, Sternfeld makes clear that there is more to authentic participation than performing audience surveys and issuing invitations to visitors based on the research findings. This practice creates nothing more than a game played by someone else’s rules. To be meaningful, audiences must be present before the game is even invented (Sternfeld, 2012, p. 4). There is little anticipated benefit for participants when the proposition begins with this type of invitation: ‘We created a game for you. Come play so you can tell us what you think’. It is likely that Sternfeld would go so far as to warn prospective participants against accepting such an invitation at all: ‘In Rancière’s political theory, politics take place in the moment when “the part that has no part” demands a part, in the name of equality’ (Sternfeld, 2012, p. 4). That is, participation is an action that cannot simply be allowed or even invited by authority; it must be demanded and wrested from authority to ensure that it is true participation. In other words, any power or ability that authority cedes willingly is not worth having since its possession by ‘outsiders’ has been planned for and prescribed.

Sternfeld envisions the future museum as a space to embrace multiplicity, polyvocality and the conflictual nature of democracy (Sternfeld, in Asche, Döring and Sternfeld, 2020). This vision resonates with the new alternative museum definition proposed by ICOM’s Standing Committee for Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials in 2019:

Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society,

safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.

Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing (International Council of Museums, 2019, n.p.).

This now rejected (Knott, 2020) definition frames the museum as a commons to be shared and managed by the community it serves, not as a service provider beholden to market forces.

### **Queering engagement**

While not directly influenced by Sternfeld's concept of the radical democratic museum, projects undertaken at the History Trust of South Australia (HTSA) under the banner *Queering the Museum* (QTM) should be understood as interventions in the same spirit. Curators Nikki Sullivan and Craig Middleton have collaborated in these efforts with audience members and the public since 2016.

To clarify their use of 'queer', Sullivan and Middleton observe that

queer theorists have used the term to refer to a form of critical practice (that is, as a verb) that aims to trouble heteronormative knowledge, identities, and practices (2019, pp. 30–31).

They began the process of queering the HTSA collections by inviting 10 LGBTQ-identified participants to collaborate with them in creating a pop-up exhibition titled *Queering the Museum* using objects that participants selected from the Trust's collections. The project launched with a symposium where participants learned about the project's origin and

ethos and incubated ideas for object combinations and alternative interpretations.

Sullivan and Middleton conceived of the project with two goals in mind. The first was to examine queer stories through objects from HTSA's collections; the second was to interrogate the web of unconscious assumptions that permeates museum practices resulting in fixed notions of what constitutes truth/fact/knowledge (History Trust of South Australia, 2020, p. 1). Although they could have created these reinterpretations from their own expert positions within the museum, the curators chose to engage audience members in the process to gather a greater variety of interpretations from the standpoint of subjects whose voices are typically marginalised within the archive. Following the exhibition's positive reception, Sullivan and Middleton undertook a second iteration of the project—*Queering the Museum Online*—in 2019. This project will be discussed in chapter four.

Sullivan and Middleton's 2019 book *Queering the Museum* documents their process in detail, exploring their efforts at queer inclusion, the results of those efforts and ways of moving forward. The book points to the adaptability of their queering methodology early on:

*Queering the Museum*, then, should be viewed not as a blueprint, a game plan for a brave new (queer) world of museums and museological practice, but rather as a (necessarily incomplete) toolbox that can be used, expanded, and adapted in ways that are, perhaps, currently unimaginable (Sullivan and Middleton, 2019, p. 6).

This framing is useful in that it sets up the curators' work as purposefully lacking in rigidity but not lacking in rigor. It hews closely to the tenet of queer theory that insists upon the recognition of the inherent fluidity of not just sex, gender and sexuality but of identity and being in general (Given, 2008, p. 719). When applied to the museum, it requires viewing the institution itself as always in a state of becoming, never fixed. This is as

it should be since the more broadly the museum is opened to a multiplicity of interpretations, the more obvious its inherent complexity becomes.

This chapter has tracked the emergence of new museology and its continued influence on institutional practice. It has also explored the turn away from a focus on collections and toward an emphasis on audience engagement and participation. This audience emphasis was at first characterised by a range of market-based strategies influenced by neoliberal instrumentalism. More recently, it has been influenced by relational approaches such as queering and audience participation strategies that seek to remove the institutional barriers that prevent audiences from democratically sharing in knowledge creation. Critical and radical democratic museum practices have emerged from this shift away from treating audiences as customers and toward inviting them to treating them as partners. The following chapter will examine these later influences in action through the use of two case studies specifically chosen for their differences in size and scope. These cases will demonstrate how relational strategies operate on the project and institution-wide scale.

## CRITICAL & RADICAL PRINCIPLES AT LARGE & SMALL SCALE



As shown in the preceding chapter, one of the most pressing issues for museums in the twenty-first century is audience engagement (Hooper-Greenhill, 2006; Scott, 2013). Ideally, this would be accomplished by building not simple brand loyalty but lasting relationships built on mutual trust, respect and collaboration. Moving from transactional exchanges to meaningful relationships will require approaches that view audience members not as mere users and choosers but as makers and shapers (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2000). By presenting two case studies, this chapter offers practical demonstrations of how the principles of critical pedagogy and radical democratic museum practice can be used to guide stand-alone projects or an institution-wide engagement strategy in an audience-centred direction.

As discussed in the introduction, I have identified common threads that run through critical pedagogy as elaborated by Freire and others and radical democratic museum practice as outlined by Sternfeld. I see them intersecting in powerful and productive ways, illustrated as follows:

- Challenging the archive's power dynamics of dominance and hierarchy;
- Interrogating dominant political assumptions expressed as neutral interpretations;
- Empowering visitors through radical museum education that creates opportunities for developing critical consciousness;
- Embracing diverse views and lived experience to inform and create alternative knowledges;
- Organising an oppositional public sphere through community-building.

For evidence of these principles in operation an institutional scale, I will examine the Smithsonian Institution's newest museum, the National Museum of African American History and Culture. To examine how they can be put to effective use by a single curator on a self-contained temporary exhibition, I will evaluate Sean Curran's *126* exhibition hosted by Sutton House, a National Trust historic property in London.

### **National Museum of African American History & Culture, Washington, DC**

After a full century of promises delayed and denied, the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) opened to the public in September 2016 (Gardullo and Bunch, 2017). The existence of this latest addition to the Smithsonian constellation serves as a counter-narrative to the literal master narrative of the United States. It also fills a public need for a counter-archive (as much as it can as a government entity) to the official white supremacist archive that excludes the contributions of African Americans and continues to portray members of this community as objects instead of historical subjects upon whose backs John Winthrop's fabled 'City upon a Hill' (Rodgers, 2018) was erected.

While the connections between urban planning and critical pedagogy may not be obvious, the museum's position within the Smithsonian complex is worthy of a brief examination through this lens. In what feels like a direct repudiation of the Jim Crow era when African Americans were legally shunted to the back door and the back of the bus (Alexan-

der and West, 2012), NMAAHC is centrally located within L'Enfant's plan on the National Mall near the Washington Monument. Structurally, the museum presents an intricate and angular bronzed façade inspired by Yoruban shrines as an architectural counterpoint to the collection of neoclassical white marble and granite structures that preceded it on the mall (Clytus, 2015). In this way, the museum situates its foundational challenge to dominant power structures within the fabric of the building, preparing the visitor for a different kind of conversation before they even cross the threshold.

A major pillar of the museum's mission is to 'stimulate a dialogue about race and help to foster a spirit of reconciliation and healing' (Cooks, 2016, p. 68). This commitment shows the museum fulfilling the Freirean task of challenging dominant narratives while politicizing and problematizing the silences that reinforce those narratives. Race is not easily discussed publicly in the United States (Brown, 2018; Khan-Cullors and Bandele, 2018; Kendi, 2019). Such fraught conversations begin in a stilted fashion and are often derailed by white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018). The taboos that apply to race discussions in general apply doubly to slavery; Smithsonian Secretary Lonnie G. Bunch III has called it 'one of the great unmentionables in contemporary American discourse' (Bunch, 2016, n.p.). That the entire institution is committed to a dialogue about race is in direct contrast to the rest of the Smithsonian's museums, which are devoutly about (white) race, but never say so directly.

Prior to his promotion to Smithsonian Secretary, Bunch was NMAAHC's founding director. In the run-up to its opening, Bunch was prolific in writing articles and giving interviews about the new museum. In one sense it was part of his job as chief marketer. But much of his writing on the museum seems couched in persuasion, as though trying to convince a child to eat their broccoli:

We want people to understand that the African-American story is the American story, to give them a sense of ownership and feel it is theirs. This in itself is a challenge because muse-

ums have not always been places that are seen as welcoming to all who enter.[...]This is not simply an African-American museum by African-Americans, for African-Americans. This is the quintessential American story (Bunch, 2017, p. 8, 9).

While some may read Bunch's first statement above as a welcome, I prefer to see it as a challenge: white America, this is an opportunity to own your history in its entirety. Will you? This alternative reading reflects the Freirean principle of problematizing dominant political assumptions and narratives enacted in most American museums whose collections centre whiteness. Centring African American stories and art to the (near) exclusion of white voices and visuals effectively sets the bait for racist arguments that a museum can't be 'for everyone' if it excludes some people. The obvious counter argument is simple: how, then, do we explain the 90% of other museums that systematically exclude Black folks while simultaneously claiming to be 'for everyone'? (Cooks, 2016, pp. 71–72). Pre-opening attendance projections reinforce the point. Before its opening, the museum's curatorial staff anticipated high numbers of international visitors: 'People overseas often find African American history and culture a quintessential part of the American story' (Cooks, 2016, p. 68). This should be read in direct contrast with historically white museums which *have not* treated African American history and culture as a quintessential part of American history or have, through infrequent exhibition, claimed that it is only a marginal part.

To further demonstrate how integral African American history and culture are to all facets of American life, NMAACC combines history, art, culture, social science, economics and more, all under one roof. Many museums are devoted to a single discipline (art, natural history, technology, etc.) and rely on that taxonomic separation to shape the messages and knowledges they convey (Hooper Greenhill, 1992). NMAAHC, following Sternfeld, challenges the archival habit of employing hierarchical divisions, leaving the disciplines as they exist in society, interwoven and dependent upon each other for full sense-making. This enables visitors to



discover and explore connections between art and social movements, economics and culture, and so on. For example, from the start the museum has built and housed a permanent collection of art by African American artists. Tuliza Fleming, lead curator for the museum's inaugural exhibition *Visual Art and the American Experience* (2016), affirms that from the outset,

Our goal was to align our historical and cultural interpretation with what was being explored in other areas of the museum. [...] We've really worked to make those connections between visual art and history (Cooks, 2016, pp. 69, 71).

This commitment builds on the foundations laid by the museum's multi-disciplinary explorations of history and culture. Aligning art and historical interpretation together under one roof enables visitors to understand the inherently political nature of Black art and Black artists and how these artists have used the historical circumstances of Black existence to feed their art practice. This in turn creates an opportunity for visitors to develop a critical consciousness. As numerous writers, scholars and activists have observed (Davis, 1971; Lorde, 1988; Du Bois, 2007; hooks, 2015), to exist as a Black person in America is a political and politicized act. To exist as a Black *artist* in America is an act of defiance. The vast majority of Black artists have not had the luxury that the Hudson River School painters had, for example, painting romantic landscapes and taking months-long holidays on idyllic islands off the New England coast. As a result, romanticism is often replaced by frank depictions of and observations on erasure, justice, community and the value of struggle in African American art.

One audience outreach project at NMAAHC is an example of breaking the wall of authority between curator and public. The Save our African American Treasures initiative has travelled to major American cities to provide hands-on learning experiences on the preservation of documents, photos, keepsakes, textile artefacts and other items that comprise signifi-

cant components of African American material culture (Clytus, 2015, p. 749). Since 2008, the project has visited 16 cities, each for about a month at a time. (The Trump administration's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic has curtailed the project's outreach efforts.) People who have brought their family heirlooms to these Antiques Roadshow-type events have been empowered to claim authority over their own histories. By informing museum practitioners about the provenance and significance of these items, visitors have overturned the traditional museological hierarchy of knowledge. In return, museum practitioners have been able to affirm the objects' importance in the broader story of African American history as well as provide crucial information about the proper care and preservation of the items in the interest of family and national history. This give and take mirrors Freire's vision of a learning environment free of dominance where teachers are in partnership with students and work together to create alternative knowledges (Freire, 1990, p. 75).

In much the same way that situating African American art within the so-called canon of American Art affirms and validates Black presence by claiming space, viewing American history through an African American lens affirms for Black viewers the centrality of their experience to the American experience. Just as '...the themes and content of the art can be understood as defining experiences of the nation as a whole' (Banks, 2010, p. 96), the threads that run through Black history form the taut warp that runs the length of the American tapestry. The labours of enslaved African American bodies built the young nation from its outset, underpinned its economic prowess and fought to make that nation extend its promise to all its people. There is no American history without African American history.

The National Museum of African American History and Culture demonstrates how an entire museum—edifice, collections and curators—can engage with the principles of critical pedagogies and radical democratic practice to create a critically-informed environment for audiences. On an even larger scale, the museum can be said to 'speak back' to the white archive represented by its fellow Smithsonian museums on Washington's

National Mall. But critical and democratic interventions need not be as grand in scale. They can also be self-contained and undertaken by a single curator who seeks to make a difference, as will be shown in the following case study.

### **Sutton House, Hackney, London, UK**

Inspired by his own feelings of exclusion when visiting heritage sites, Sean Curran's 2015 exhibition titled *126* was designed to centre queer visibility within a historic house owned by the National Trust. Set in Sutton House in London's Hackney district, this crowd-sourced exhibition featured the work of 126 LGBTQ-identified volunteers recruited via social media. Curran asked the volunteers to submit two pieces of digital media: a voice recording of themselves reading one of Shakespeare's Fair Youth sonnets 'widely accepted to have been written to a man' (Curran, 2019a, p. 284) and a 'video selfie' of 10 seconds in length. These were then edited together into a short film that played on loop in the Sutton House chapel (Curran, 2019b). The exhibition combined two towering symbols of British national identity—Shakespeare's writing and a National Trust house—and used them to make it clear to visitors that 'ambiguities around sexuality and gender have always existed' (Curran, 2019a, p. 284) and queer people have always existed, even in British history.

While his subsequent doctoral thesis based on the project did not focus on critical pedagogy, I contend that many aspects of Curran's project show its principles at work. His own description of the project reveals resonances with critical pedagogy:

...the exhibition was ambitious in a number of ways; in its attempt to broaden Sutton House's community; to invite excluded voices in and give autonomy to contributors to be seen as they chose to be seen; and in its exploration of the idea of crowdsourced, participatory curation as a form of activism to counter silences in heritage narratives (2019a, p. 284).

Curran's action research process puts the power and responsibility for representation squarely in the hands of the participants instead of an expert authority. Doing so centres traditionally absented lived experiences and subjects from their own point of view and allows participants to resist the 'othering' characteristic of representations created by dominant culture (Sandell, 2017, pp. 124–124). Each participant creates and curates their own narrative, free from strictures and specifications dictated by the National Trust.

Through this project Curran was able to create a kind of community when viewed in retrospect. One visitor comment card noted, 'The similarities between the texts and the ways people read created this weird sense of community, despite nobody (to my knowledge) collaborating' (Curran, 2019b, p. 193). Perhaps these similarities in approach could be attributed to the participants' resistance against the same power structures in their everyday lives. While it is arguable that a community is ideally defined by its members through a process of self-selection, it is still true that community can be found in shared struggle (Hamann and Türkmen, 2020), uniting across difference. Sullivan and Middleton argue that community can coalesce around common cause as well as, or even instead of, assumed common traits or identity (2019, p. 86). When their contributions were viewed together, the Sutton House participants became a community as well as members of Sternfeld's oppositional public sphere who were able to challenge their absence in the archive and British heritage in general and to deconstruct commonly held notions about queer identities and their 'essential' qualities. Their videos showed the breadth of what queer can and does embrace.

When he began to assemble the recordings into a longer film, Curran noticed a pattern in some of the locations chosen by participants for their video portraits: 'A recurring backdrop is one of urban messiness and decay; graffiti, broken windows, pylons' (2019b, p. 197). Intrigued by this, Curran saw this as a possible attempt to 'reclaim marginalised status in a neo-liberal time where [queer people] are superficially accepted in society' (2019b, p. 197). I argue it is also a way in which participants can question

the dual concept of ‘place’, meaning at once a physical location and one’s place in Britain’s rigid social hierarchy. In Freirean fashion, including gritty backdrops challenges the political assumption that these rough or ‘low status’ places are not part of or appropriate for inclusion in ‘British Heritage’. Their inclusion calls attention to the fact that dominant culture’s refusal to see something does not make it disappear; it remains a part of the cultural fabric. Curran also wondered how the locations selected and captured as backdrops by the participants related to their identities (2019b, p. 198). I interpret the selected locations as a commentary, conscious or otherwise, on what socially dominant narratives frame as queer and non-queer space. It’s a variation on the claim museums have often made about not having any ‘queer objects’ (Smith, 2016). As any object can be a queer object, any space can be queer space. Where the grittier locations can be read as interrogations of included and excluded space, participants’ self-placement in more common surroundings are firm assertions that queer is and should be everywhere.

Whereas locations may have been subtle forms of commentary, one participant in the *126* exhibition took issue with their assigned sonnet but determined to make it an opportunity for an overt and densely packed political statement:

The contributor responded to me saying that they did not like the theme of marriage which was evident in the sonnet, but that they would use their video as a platform to oppose it. In the video, the contributor holds an open note pad to the camera with the words **COULD NOT GIVE A FUCK ABOUT MARRIAGE** written across the pages (Curran, 2019b, p. 210).

As Curran notes in his thesis, this participant ‘disrupts homonormative politics’ (2019b, p. 210) that have swirled around the same-sex marriage debate. This participant made their video just after the UK Marriage Act of 2013 was passed and visually voiced a non-homonormative response to the debate as well as a queer response to one of the more hetero-

themed Fair Youth sonnets. They also staked their ground as someone who rejected the dominant norm of monogamous partnering, pushing back against the narrative represented by the heritage house as a centre of domestic life complete with spouse and children. Use of the word ‘fuck’ on screen in their video portrait also violates the gentility associated with a heritage home maintained by the National Trust. Overall, this participant’s contribution is a 10-second shout of alternative ways of knowing and being in the world.

Several participants in the *126* exhibition used their videos as embodied challenges to dominant power dynamics and their attendant harms along with political assumptions about what is appropriate in heritage spaces. The several videos that depict non-normative bodies—brief nudity, an interracial couple, scars from top surgery on a trans-man’s chest and a visible wheelchair signifying lived experience of disability (2019b, pp. 205, 211–212)—challenge the lessons from the unspoken curriculum (Mayo, 2013) that dictate only clothed, white, cisgender and able-bodied subjects can legitimately claim space in heritage structures or history itself. Another participant used her assigned Sonnet 97 as an opportunity to claim space for a queer woman within the hallowed frameworks of family and motherhood. When Curran asked how they wished to be credited in the project, they asked for their first name to be followed by these bracketed words: ‘mother of 3, daughter passed away from severe asthma February 2013’ (2019b, p. 213). As Curran notes, ‘For any visitors who watched through othering eyes, perhaps this sobering moment of a mother’s grief would undo that’ (2019b, p. 213). By insisting on being identified as a mother, this participant challenged the heteronormative assumption that queer life and family life are mutually exclusive, thus confronting visitors with a potent piece of alternative knowledge from her lived experience (Freire and Macedo, 1987; Kincheloe, 2008).

While more modest in scope than a museum’s entire engagement strategy, Sean Curran’s exhibition at Sutton House gave 126 unique and marginalised voices the opportunity to self-represent, to critique, and to inject subjugated knowledges into a heritage space. Following Sternfeld,

Curran appropriated the space on behalf of the participants and organised an oppositional public sphere that spoke back to the archive and claimed space within it.

The two case studies presented in this chapter show how principles of critical pedagogies and radical democratic practices emerge across the full spectrum of museum endeavour, from a whole-of-institution approach to a single temporary exhibit. As the evaluation of Sean Curran's *126* exhibition and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture have shown, curatorial practices that reflect these principles have led to engagement efforts that are more audience-focused and that offer more points of connection to visitors' lives. Even though critical pedagogy was not explicitly claimed as a guiding framework in either of these cases, the effects of practices that challenge dominant narratives, centre audience agency, embrace complexity and build community are no less present or potent. Additionally, differences in scope between the two cases demonstrate that critical pedagogies offer museum professionals frameworks that are highly adaptable, or in management parlance 'scalable', to widely varied circumstances and audience needs. In the case of the NMAAHC, these critical practices have been present from the museum's inception thanks to a founding director who has been committed to 'making a way out of no way' (Bunch, 2016, n.p.) and surrounding himself with museum professionals who shared this commitment. This leads us to wonder how much movement toward a critical and democratised practice might be expected in an established institution when curators make the attempt. Chapter four seeks to answer this question by examining *Queering the Museum Online* in detail.

## QUEERING THE MUSEUM ONLINE- HISTORY TRUST OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

# 4

The series of engagement projects and exhibitions under the banner of *Queering the Museum* at the History Trust of South Australia was created by curators Nikki Sullivan and Craig Middleton beginning in 2016. They designed the first phase to conclude with a two-day pop-up exhibition during Feast, South Australia's LGBTIQ+ arts and cultural festival. The curators invited ten LGBTIQ+ volunteers to participate by using one or more objects from the History Trust's collections to create displays and 'interpretative content that centred experiences of gender and/or sexuality' (History Trust of South Australia, 2020, p. 1). The only budget allocated for the exhibition was reserved for printing the exhibition's wall panels; all participants freely gave their time and Sullivan's partner donated graphic design services. Despite modest resources, the project and exhibition received positive feedback from participants and Feast Festival visitors. Perhaps more importantly for the project's continuation, it sparked no controversy or negative feedback from History Trust patrons or the community at large (History Trust of South Australia, 2020, p. 2).



Sullivan and Middleton were inspired by the work of Jo Darbyshire in Western Australia (The Gay Museum, 2003) and Matt Smith in the UK (Queering The Museum, 2011) whose projects explored LGBTIQ+ identity and history while challenging the processes of meaning-making in the museum, all through the use of existing museum collections (Sullivan and Middleton, 2019, pp. 49, 51–52). For the History Trust (HTSA) projects, the aim was to demonstrate, with the goal of changing, how limited and limiting the institution's catalogue was, especially regarding the representation of queer and 'othered' histories (Katz and Söll, 2018; Skujins, 2020). This chapter examines the extent to which the project's digital iteration, *Queering the Museum Online* (QTMO) exhibits characteristics of critical pedagogy and radical democratic museology and how purposefully integrating these principles into institution-wide audience development frameworks could further improve on the effectiveness of any given engagement vehicle. To guide the examination, I use the five overlapping principles I have identified between critical pedagogy and radical democratic museum practice (see page 26).

*Queering the Museum Online* was conceived in 2019 to build on the success of the two-day exhibition and to extend it into the digital space. It was at this point that I joined as a project intern to assist with print and social media promotion. As in the first iteration, its purpose was to demonstrate through crowd-sourced responses the polysemic quality of objects and how audience members can arrive at meanings that diverge widely from what is offered by the 'official' record. Following queer theory, when treated as a verb the word queer acts to '...put out of order, to make strange the taken-for-granted, the naturalised' (Sullivan, 2003, p. 52). Thus, inviting audience members to queer objects from the HTSA collection opens the door to sharing authority and enables audience members not only to arrive at divergent meanings but to share them with the archive and with other audience members. This project framework reflects the essence of participatory engagement and is a direct response to the shift from an object focus to an audience focus in museums, as discussed in chapter two. In addition, it shows hallmarks of critical pedagogy—partnership in

the learning environment, accessing lived experience, creating alternative knowledges (Kincheloe, 2008; Giroux, 2011) —and of radical democratic curatorial practice—challenging the archive, appropriating the space and collections, organising an oppositional public sphere—(Rogoff, 2008; Sternfeld, 2018a). Examining the project's outcomes to date reveals tensions between the curatorial intention to open up interpretation and knowledge creation and the ability and willingness of audiences to engage confidently in co-creating knowledges.

### **Interrogating dominant assumptions expressed as neutral interpretations**

The QTMO project team established a series of goals articulated in a purpose statement. The first of these goals is '[t]o unsettle the traditional relationships between museums, objects, people, communities and stories, and to disrupt the so-called definitive answers and the systems of power and privilege they support' (History Trust of South Australia, 2019, n.p.). To that end, the curators developed a collection of 24 objects from the History Trust's holdings to serve as catalysts for audience interpretations. A dedicated website ([queeringthemuseum.history.sa.gov.au](http://queeringthemuseum.history.sa.gov.au)) houses the collection and visitor responses. Users are invited to craft their responses in any way they wish using single or combined objects, text, audio, video, images, etc. The collection provides a range of historical and social coverage and includes such disparate items as a World War I fundraising badge, a cylindrical metal ballot box, an ostrich feather fan and a Barbie campervan. Sullivan and Middleton intentionally provided only the most basic information about the objects, comprising what Wood and Latham (2009) refer to as the objects' material paradigm: their physical features, components of their construction, approximate date of origin and likely uses (2009, p. 2). This lays the groundwork for audience members to construct what Geismar (2018) calls object lessons, 'arguments about the world made through things' (p. xv). As the repository of collected responses grows, the hope is for visitors to create an ever-changing, networked virtual exhibition.

## Challenging the archive's power dynamics of dominance and hierarchy

Although the museum field is moving to embrace digital methods and experiences (Giaccardi, 2006; Bell and Ippolito, 2015; Geismar, 2018), the collection's online presentation and crowdsourced interpretations set the project apart from the traditional museum model. In the traditional model, objects enter into the institution's catalogue through the accession process. This process sees their provenance (origin) and significance (value to the collection) determined and documented by the accessioning curator(s), then presented as fact to audience members through displays, exhibitions, etc. Curatorial staff provide visitors with their interpretations on wall placards, labels, printed catalogues and similar text-based devices (Western Australian Museum, n.d., n.p.). In many respects, traditional museum practice deals with the production and distribution of knowledge in ways similar to the operation of mass media prior to widespread public access to the Internet. By placing the collection online and soliciting audience interpretations, this method of broadcasting 'certified knowledge' (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 4) is subverted. That is, knowledge no longer flows only outward from the museum; it flows inward via multiple streams. Thus, the project partially accomplishes goals of both critical pedagogy and radical democratic museology in rebalancing the power dynamic between curator and visitor and appropriating the display space by granting equal access to and authority over that space and the stories told there (Keesing-Styles, 2003, pp. 14–15; Sternfeld, 2017, p. 182).

However, it is important to note that these goals were only partially achieved. The reason for this lies within the mesh of institutional constraints placed upon the collection and the website prior to launch. Although it is freely available to users who may respond how they wish, the collection is restricted to just a few items—those deemed 'appropriate' for outsider interpretation (History Trust of South Australia, 2020, p. 3). Within the History Trust, the curators fielded concerns about the possibility that once live, the QTMO website would be flooded with fallacious and salacious responses, if not outright obscenity. At one point, a museum

stakeholder expressed a fear that images of dildos might be uploaded to the site. While initially this fear may seem ludicrous, that it was top of mind is useful for what it reveals about dominant assumptions about queer lives. It reflects an argument put forth by Eva Reimers' (2020) about the school environment, where heterosexuality is at once assumed as the norm and desexualised, 'while it simultaneously makes articulations of homosexuality into solely sexual positions' (p. 114, emphasis added). Based on the stakeholder's stated fear, this argument seems to extend to the museum environment as well. With that in mind, it is worth wondering if the same concern described above would arise if one of the Trust's museums were to mount an exhibition on (heteronormative) dating practices.

While this question remained unasked, the project team did make efforts to allay these concerns while still allowing for vibrant user responses. First, the team agreed upon an exceedingly simple set of guidelines for contributors: 'Be kind and respectful. Be mindful of other people's privacy' (History Trust of South Australia, 2019, n.p.). Beyond that, the team added a host of common disclaimers maintaining the right to delete, at HTSA's discretion, any content posted by users and declaring that such content was not necessarily reflective of HTSA's views (History Trust of South Australia, 2019, n.p.). Although these boilerplate disclaimers are simply standard operating procedure at museums the world over, it is useful to reflect upon how this practice may be interpreted as a barrier to participation and a reaffirmation of existing power structures. On the one hand, we invited contributors to perform intellectual and perhaps emotional labour, to share stories, insights and connections to their own lives. This would seem to serve the critical pedagogical principle of connecting learning and teaching to lived experience (Keesing-Styles, 2003). At the same time, however, the website's disclaimers told participants the institution would distance itself from their responses—'Materials posted by users do not necessarily reflect the views of [HTSA]'—and would summarily reject their responses if it saw fit—'[HTSA] reserves the right, at its sole discretion, to delete any material posted by users (2019, n.p.)'. This undermines efforts at challenging dominant power structures, established

practices and the archive itself (Sternfeld, 2017, p. 181). Additionally, it seems counterproductive if the goal is to establish and grow relationships (History Trust of South Australia, 2020, p. 2) based on mutual trust. Here we can see the first obstacle: museum staff intentions and the institution's intentions working at cross-purposes. While museum professionals may sincerely desire to open interpretation, to build trust and to engage audience members as partners, there are moments like these when the disembodied god-voice of the institution speaks in legal boilerplate language, theoretically to spare itself from litigation. In these moments, we are to understand the institution as one thing, one voice speaking for all who are employed by it. To overcome this obstacle, it will be imperative for museum management and boards to be convinced of the value in building relationships with audiences—and curators, for that matter—based on reciprocal trust (McCall and Gray, 2014).

The internal concerns that inspired the QTMO site disclaimers echo those voiced in the lead up to the project's first iteration when Sullivan and Middleton encountered 'resistance from staff who, at least initially, felt that the use of ('non queer') objects in a queer exhibition may offend those who had donated them (Sullivan and Middleton, 2019, p. 55) by linking the objects with stories different from those the donors themselves had conveyed. 'It was felt that doing so may compromise our organisation's reputation and bring it into disrepute (History Trust of South Australia, 2020, p. 2). Exposing these concerns led to Sullivan and Middleton engaging in a lengthy negotiation and 'ongoing conversations about how the practice we were deploying involved using objects as vehicles of exploration rather than as sources of singular truths' (History Trust of South Australia, 2020, p. 2). Although the curators were successful in the end, I find it interesting that early on in the project, people within the organisation were more concerned about the constructed 'life' of the objects, based on donors' wishes, than they were about facilitating and showcasing perspectives from historically marginalised members of the public/audience.

## **Embracing diverse views and lived experience to inform and create alternative knowledges**

Creating alternative knowledges was a key goal for QTMO's organisers (History Trust of South Australia, 2019, n.p.). This was accomplished, in some cases with flare and brilliance, by user interpretations that stretched far beyond the objects' literal descriptions and provenance:

One contributor's journey begins with a World War I fundraising badge and weaves its way through the London punk scene of the 1970s, radical feminism and gay erotica, in its exploration of 'comforts', those things that strengthen and fortify. Along the way are hyperlinks to photographs, an academic article, and a playlist of music regularly heard in Vivienne Westwood's first shop in Kings Road, Chelsea (History Trust of South Australia, 2020, pp. 3–4).

The invitation to users to combine objects and use them to tell stories from their own lives or the lives of people they have known honours the principle of critical pedagogy that insists on connecting learning to lived experience through the use of generative themes:

topic[s] taken from students' knowledge of their own lived experiences that [are] compelling and controversial enough to elicit their excitement and commitment. [...] Generative themes arise at the point where the personal lives of students intersect with the larger society and the globalized world (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 11).

This holds the potential to engage participants in a deeper, more meaningful way than if the objects were seen to have no connection with their experiences. The invitation to interpret also empowers audience members in that it discourages conformity with museum norms by open-

ing up interpretive validity to encompass stories influenced by the storyteller's standpoint. Standpoint theory asserts that knowledge is socially produced and socially located, giving rise to different ways of knowing and being in the world. Theorists argue that marginalised peoples have a fuller understanding of the way the world works due to being obligated to understand the world from their own perspective and that of their oppressors. Centring marginalised voices and perspectives is therefore an opportunity to expose naturalised assumptions that underpin the narratives of dominant culture (Allen, 2018). This chance to experience the view from alternative standpoints extends the potential for revealing multiple meanings, some of which would not be apparent to all participants or visitors to the site. Gestalt psychologist Kurt Lewin referred to this as the concept of affordance. He theorized that objects have 'suggestive character' (Aufforderungscharakter), but that a viewer's ability or inability to perceive this suggestive character varies depending upon their situation (Achiam, May and Marandino, 2014, p. 465). Situation in this sense should be understood to describe not only conditions of environmental, temporal and geographic specificity, but also a given individual's subjectivity—where they are positioned in society by intersecting elements of identity including class, gender, race, sexuality etc. This departure from the norm of supposedly dispassionate and 'objective' interpretation represents what Sternfeld has referred to as 'undisciplined knowledge production at the intersection between the museum...and militant investigations' (2017, p. 181). It is 'undisciplined' by being both outside the museum's traditional order and thus unruly, as well as outside the confines of any specific discipline of study. If there is any question about whether these investigations are indeed militant, we need only refer to the institutional fear and perception of threat described above.

### **Organising an oppositional public sphere through community-building**

One of QTMO's stretch goals is demonstrating how connections grow between objects, people, experiences and interpretations as responses are added to the website. By providing users with a space to like, comment

and further build on one another's interpretations, the QTMO website could be seen as a form of disruptive place-making. Compared to the well-ordered environment within the museum, the digital space allows for greater freedom of expression without being shushed by docents. Unfortunately, site visitors have yet to take advantage of this site feature. This first attempt at forming an online community of learning could, with appropriate nurturing, grow into an oppositional public sphere (Sternfeld, 2017, p. 181) where audience members engage in critical dialogue and 'activist knowledge transfer' (Sternfeld, 2017, p. 183). However, this option was not taken up by users and to date the site has received only one response to a response. Possible reasons for this reticence and ways it might be overcome are discussed in a later section.

### **Initial outcomes and evaluation**

As for the QTMO site being inundated, our colleagues need not have worried. Far greater was our difficulty in getting people to participate. Our promotional efforts including direct outreach, social media content, and a companion event at Adelaide's 2019 Feast Festival have thus far prompted 29 responses from 22 unique respondents. And despite Dr Sullivan's hopes for and encouragement of responses using poetry, short film, and artwork, the vast majority of the responses are text-based and have a similar narrative thread running through them.

The project's invited participants may have found it challenging to create object responses for any number of reasons. It may be the case that they did not know what to do with, or were not particularly moved by, the collected objects. It may also be the case that the idea of controverting the 'official record' made the creation of more incisive interpretations a disquieting prospect, even for queer subjects whose voices have been historically marginalised in museum collections. It is definitely the case that the curators are steeped in the language and practice of queering, but most audience members likely would not be. To fortify its ongoing efforts with more data and less conjecture about the obstacles participants encoun-



tered, HTSA sent the invited respondents a 23-question feedback survey. The survey data formed the basis for the 2020 progress report cited herein.

Several survey responses confirm a concern I had early on in my internship: that our invited participants could have used more support to help them begin or find direction for their queering responses (History Trust of South Australia, 2020, pp. 5, 22–23). These initial concerns were based on two hypotheses. First, although the people invited to participate were known to the curators and at least somewhat familiar with queer discourse, it seemed like an aspirational assumption that they would be willing or able to simply embark upon the queering/interpretation/response process without more background beyond what was provided on the site's About page. As a comparison, in the physical version of *Queering the Museum*, participants benefited from a workshop and selected readings to prime them for their part in creating exhibition displays and labels. No such scaffolding was provided for QTMO participants. Second, it is a rare occurrence for institutions to (sincerely) ask people for their interpretations or opinions of much beyond what is necessary to achieve a transaction—a sale, a vote, or provision of personal data to complete a customer profile. As a result, when someone does ask in earnest, people may feel unprepared to provide a considered and meaningful response.

The feedback survey asked those who hadn't posted a response on QTMO what factors would have made it more likely for them to do so. From the list of options offered, those receiving the most favourable responses were prompts or questions to help participants explore the objects (15 or 65.2%), a workshop about the project led by a museum practitioner (10 or 43.4%) and an event or exhibition displaying the objects with their collected interpretations (6 or 26%) (History Trust of South Australia, 2020, p. 2). The survey has provided additional useful feedback about the type and variety of objects presented, the website's interface and user experience and even the value of a deadline in motivating respondents to follow through.

The survey data also revealed that the invited participants held some reluctance about speaking back to the archive. In replying to the survey

question offering possible reasons for not submitting a response, three people (12.5% of respondents) indicated they were ‘concerned about other people reading [their] response’ (History Trust of South Australia, 2020, p. 22). Although museum practitioners now broadly accept that visitors will arrive at their own interpretations of collections and objects based on their own lived experiences (Hooper Greenhill, 1992; 2000; Sullivan and Middleton, 2019), arriving at those personal interpretations and sharing them with the world are two very different matters. Unlike such media as film, popular fiction, or reality television, the museum as a medium is perceived as less pliable and more credible and is thus afforded a higher level of respect (Dilenschneider, 2017). For its part, the museum management is unlikely to discourage this perception anytime soon. In many cases, the cause is an institutional need to project an air of gravitas and the impression of unassailable expertise. Elizabeth Wood and Kiersten Latham (2009) observe ‘the museum context has traditionally communicated a fairly uni-directional interpretation of an object’s meaning and purpose...and almost always from an expert-driven perspective’ (2009, p. 3). This, I argue, can contribute to audience reluctance to create alternative (or uncertified) knowledges. The museum’s cultivated gravitas is still palpable online in ways that social media platforms and news outlets cannot hope to achieve.

Sullivan and Middleton (2019) offer a possible explanation for audience reticence in the face of institutional authority and credibility:

Visitors too come armed with expectations, and while these differ depending on the individual visitor’s ethos and the type of museum visited, most expect to feel confidence in the information that is offered and in its mode of delivery. In fact, the thwarting of such expectations (and the subjective investments and affective attachments associated with them) can be a source of disappointment, dis-ease, and even complaint (p. 57).

Historically, visitors have been taught that their role in the museum is to be consumers rather than makers of knowledge. Although it has been 20 years since Andrea Cornwall and John Gaventa heralded a transition from conceiving audiences as ‘users and choosers to makers and shapers’ (2000, p. 50), it would seem that habits are more easily acquired than broken. As Livingstone (2003) argues, ‘Audiences themselves know what is expected of them and they develop habits or conventions of behaviour which fit these expectations’ (2003, p. 8). Livingstone also contends that a marked characteristic of the audience-producer relationship is the maintenance of a certain distance between the parties (2003, p. 5). It is useful to envision this distance as vertical rather than horizontal and to recognise that it is increased by the producer’s perceived authority; in other words, it is a hierarchy. Given this now long-standing hierarchy, audiences will tend to persist in behaving as the institution has conditioned them. Bourdieu presents the concept of habitus as the product of history, which I take to include something as (small) as an individual’s history of interaction with an institution. If this is so and the ‘active presence of past experiences’ (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 54), such as being told not to yell, run, touch or do anything else disruptive in the museum, tells audience members how to behave without their conscious awareness, museum professionals must take this into account. It is likely to be more difficult to overcome than practitioners like Sullivan and Middleton would prefer. Optimistically, we could read this as an opportunity for museum professionals and audience members to bond over their shared struggle against their respective roles and to form the oppositional public sphere that Sternfeld (2017) envisions.

Audience members need more than a simple invitation to engage in the co-production of meaning and knowledges. As Sternfeld (2012) observes, ‘Extending an invitation does not result in participation: this is achieved through struggles that transgress and reshape the hitherto existing social logics’ (2012, p. 4). It is reasonable to expect that subjects with one or more marginalised identities will struggle at first to muster the confidence to speak out within institutions of dominant culture. Thereafter,

it is likely they will still struggle to be heard. They must first overcome the ambient WEBCCCHAM noise: voices of the ‘white, ethnically European, bourgeois, Christian, [cis, citizen,] heterosexual, able-bodied male[s]’ (Caswell, 2019, p. 7).

Evaluating and reflecting on the physical and digital iterations of *Queering the Museum* presents a variety of lessons. One of these is the realisation that despite its creators’ best intentions, QTMO asked too much and offered too little in return. Following Sternfeld’s (2012) analogy, the digital phase of the project presented our participants with a game and rules entirely of our own making. If anything, the QTMO outcomes to date and the subsequent survey responses point to the likelihood that there is still much work to be done to democratise curatorial practice.

Fortunately, this also presents an opportunity: to pursue what Sternfeld, echoing Freire (1990 [1970]), calls a mode of para-educational practice (Prottas, 2020, p. 213) rooted in reciprocal learning as the foundation for the next phase of this work. Entering into this kind of reciprocal learning relationship will require doing even more to change the dynamic between the museum—as controllers of the collection, the display technology and the rules of engagement—and audience members—as contributors of unique knowledges and understandings. This is an opportunity to rebalance the scales of power and to build a knowledge community around QTMO. Accomplishing this will require commitment to long-term relationship and trust building, taking the audience engagement project beyond a transactional space and into a relational space.

Both the physical and the digital iterations of the project have shown that almost any object in any collection can serve as a point of entry for exploring queer and other marginalised identities/knowledges and have also ‘troubled the assumption that LGBTIQ+ objects are self-evident as such’ (Sullivan and Middleton, 2019, p. 52, emphasis original). What else they have done, not for the participants but for the curators and now this researcher, was to reveal the uncontested assumptions that ‘queer’ objects would be inherently sexual in nature, to the exclusion of almost any other trait. This is not a direct benefit to the participants but it should be seen as

a high-value moment for introspection for the institution's staff, management and board of trustees. One uncomfortable conversation that needs to be engaged in starts with the question, 'Why would you have assumed that?'

This close analysis has demonstrated how the intersecting principles of critical pedagogies and radical democratic museum practice are reflected in features of *Queering the Museum Online*. It has also exposed on the project level several barriers to implementation including institutional resistance and risk-aversion, staff reluctance and the difficulties audience members encounter in overcoming their habituated roles as receivers rather than makers of knowledge. The discussion that follows will continue exploring these barriers, this time on the institutional level, and will consider the likelihood of critical pedagogies and radical democratic practices being adopted as foundational principles for audience engagement.

## BUILDING SOLIDARITY WITH BORROWED TOOLS



*At the point of encounter there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know.*

*Paulo Freire, 1970*

The preceding two chapters have shown how the principles of critical pedagogy and radical democratic museum practice emerge organically in engagement efforts that seek to open up interpretation and centre traditionally marginalised voices and identities. Traditionally, this kind of research would lead to recommendations for museum practice; however, in this instance I decided that such recommendations would be of limited utility in the current environment. My reasoning is based on first-hand observations in an institutional context and on discussions inside and at the margins of the museum sector that have become more heated and urgent during 2020. As a result, this chapter will instead explore the obstacles to institutional adoption of democratic practice; thereafter, it will offer suggestions for committed museum professionals to use a seemingly bureaucratic tool, the CLEAR framework, in their practice. The CLEAR framework is a diagnostic tool devised by political science researchers Vivien Lowndes, Lawrence Pratchett and Gerry Stoker (2006) to evaluate participatory schemes devised by local government bodies in the UK. The framework will be explored in greater detail below. With its

origin in political science and the public sector, the CLEAR framework has the potential to appeal to museum leadership as a non-threatening management aid that will help to articulate outcomes to ‘upstream audiences’, i.e., funders and government (Kershaw, Bridson and Parris, 2020, p. 345). At the same time, its focus on citizen engagement makes it useful for prioritising democratic museum practice. The questions that serve as headings later in the chapter arise from the overlapping principles from critical pedagogy and radical democratic practice and are suggested as prompts for museum professionals to ‘keep themselves honest’ while subversively opening up their practice to carry out the disruptions necessary for building audience solidarity and dislodging current power structures.

In 2014, the twenty-fifth anniversary of new museology, Vikki McCall and Clive Gray published the results of their research on 23 publicly-funded museums in the UK. While the researchers are careful to state that their study was ‘a synoptic overview’ (2014, p. 21) and did not cover a statistically representative sample of UK museums, it is still somewhat telling that at the time of publication ‘a full transition into [new museology had] not been achieved by any museum service in this study’ (2014, p. 32). In fairness, the research reveals numerous reasons for this slow uptake: ambiguities in policy and implementation, polarisation of viewpoints between ‘old school’ and ‘new school’ staff members, internal power struggles over job roles and so on (McCall and Gray, 2014). Nevertheless, after twenty-five years, we might be justified in expecting more progress. The same obstacles are likely to be encountered when attempting to adopt the principles discussed in this thesis. Embedding critical and radically democratic principles into institution-wide engagement strategy would require authorisation not only from museum management, but from boards as well. Therein lies the problem. Foucault (1978, p. 95) reminds us not only that ‘where there is power, there is resistance’, but also of the inextricable relationship between power and resistance. Neither exists outside the other; in a finite universe, there is no ‘outside’. Like the opposing muscles of a limb, when one acts as agonist, the other responds

as antagonist, enacting the reciprocal of rhythm push and pull until the death of the body. So it is with institutional power. Resistance *to* the power structures at work within the museum would necessarily invite resistance *from* those same structures. It is true, as Sullivan and Middleton observe, that ‘publicly funded institutions are generally more highly regulated, more risk-averse, and have less freedom to experiment than those that are privately funded’ (2019, p. 2). However, being publicly funded means it is equally true that these museums are obliged to serve the *whole* public, not just the portions of it who identify with the dominant culture.

Despite mission statements, solidarity statements, diversity initiatives and inclusion programs, a majority of museums and their boards have shown little evidence of commitment to democratic structural change. This is evidenced by the testimonies offered, often anonymously due to fear of reprisal, by museum workers via dozens of social media accounts and websites dedicated to exposing the ongoing racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, classist and otherwise abusive norms within museums, whether publicly or privately funded:

I approached Guggenheim Director Richard Armstrong at an event to applaud the impactful Hilma af Klint exhibition, especially as a necessary first step in diversifying the rotunda exhibitions. He politely smiled as he picked up a glass of champagne and said that if I liked shows by women, I’m in luck because it’s basically all the museum is **allowed** to show anymore in this new climate -- punctuated by an eye roll and a sip of his wine.



## NOT A SHRINE BUT A CRUCIBLE

The new deputy director of global public affairs and communications, Ben Rawlingson Plant, was hired in April 2020, the same week 92 employees were furloughed. His hiring was not shared with the institution, not even with the communications department. This leaves me to ask: why did leadership keep this secret?

Perhaps even they knew it looked bad to hire someone, a white man, to an executive position, who no doubt makes a high salary, at the same time they cut off staff who rely on the museum most and slashed pay for others? This lack of transparency has left people unsure of who they report to, of how the department is structured and who they can trust. Plant has been participating in cabinet meetings.

Again, why wait until now, four months later to announce his hiring? Because it would look bad to add another white person to the cabinet while trying to emphasize leadership's commitment to the DEAI plan? And now that that plan is public, you won't face any bad press? I have lost faith in my department and am scared to voice it due to the retaliation I may face.

**This page and previous:  
Screen captures from the  
Instagram account  
@abetterguggenheim**

## BUILDING SOLIDARITY WITH BORROWED TOOLS

I work in a very large and busy public library. Acknowledging traditional custodianship before public events is still optional to staff, if they feel 'comfortable' saying it.

A number of solely white (because there is no diversity in our workplace of middle-aged white women) co-workers say they never bother to say it, they say it quickly, they intentionally 'forget' or outright refuse and dismiss it.

**Screen captures from the Instagram account @changethemuseum\_AUNZ**

I've been told there are no indigenous visitors to the library - and indeed none who live in the area - and 'it's embarrassing to say if you aren't indigenous'.

At a small arts institution where I am the curator, I have brought up the lack of diversity of our all-white board and staff (including me) in 2 meetings with our board chair and director. Both times, the board chair interrupted our conversation about diversifying staff with concerns about the "decline" of excellence. Most recently he simply responded "I suppose excellence is a dirty word." I said to him that excellence is not possible without diversity. The director has remained silent every time.

I have been encouraged to seek employment elsewhere if I am committed to "activist" curatorial work. My job is predicated upon my willingness to perform external expressions of BIPOC solidarity while not rocking the boat about internal change. It's a bargain with the devil.

**Screen captures from the Instagram account @changethemuseum**

These and many more examples have led to the conclusion that to offer recommendations for wholesale revision of policy and procedure to facilitate ceding of power would be naïve at best and arrogant at worst. It has become increasingly clear from observations during my internship and subsequent employment at the History Trust and from my expanded awareness of conversations in the museum sector taking place outside of the ‘official’ channels that this work will need to be done somewhat subversively.

The power of critical pedagogy and radical democratic museum practice to be transformative forces driving deep structural change is the precise reason curators and museum educators should have little confidence that boards and management will agree to adopt these practices in a meaningful way. Therefore, museum professionals will be faced with the task of mounting successive incursions designed to expose the structures and the weak points in the museum’s institutional logics. These logics should be understood as having an interest in ‘maintaining existing relations...with a history of discipline and violence’ (Sternfeld, 2018b, p. 159). If this is their interest, with the power to back it up, it is fair to ask how these individual, self-contained efforts can ever hope to amass sufficient force to overcome centuries of embedded conservatism. Are these simply one-off acts to help museum workers feel better for a time, less impotent and helpless? Or can they be something more?

In the absence of all-out revolution wherein the Louvre is once again stormed in the name of the people, regularly engaging in these subversive actions can be the means of maintaining connection to emancipatory practice—and to hope itself. When citizens see themselves only as isolated, self-interested actors, the prospects for change can look very dim indeed. These activist incursions can help to create what Sternfeld describes as an oppositional public sphere where practitioners and audiences can engage in collective action to ‘generate important moments of activist knowledge transfer’ (2017, p. 183). When like-minded people have the opportunity to find each other and learn they are not alone, solidarity replaces solitude.

When we feel less alone we gather more courage to act (Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker, 2006).

With this in mind, I propose a two-pronged strategy for disrupting and democratising museum practice while appearing to conform to institutional norms that prioritise the evaluation and demonstration of measurable outcomes. The first prong involves the CLEAR framework, the public policy diagnostic tool introduced above. The second prong involves the subversive or clandestine use of principles from critical pedagogy and radical democratic museum practice by museum professionals. By cloaking the subversive core in an appealingly bureaucratic outer wrapper, practitioners can follow Freire's advice to work 'tactically inside and strategically outside' the system (Freire, cited in Mayo, 1993, p. 19). Admittedly, there are risks inherent in these recommendations, the greatest of which is the risk of neoliberal co-optation: the CLEAR framework becomes just another measurement cudgel. How the framework might be used to further critical and democratic practices while satisfying management priorities relies upon leveraging this pursuit of measurement. Vigilance and a sincere commitment to revisiting democratic and reflexive principles will be critically important in the process.

### **Leveraging external pressures for measurable outcomes**

Museums are under constant pressure from government and private sector funders to prove their worthiness by producing demonstrable outcomes (Holden and Gulbenkian, 2006; Andersen and Oakley, 2008; Meyrick, Barnett and Phiddian, 2018; Rosenstein, 2018). This 'proof' generally comes in the form of measurement against key performance indicators (KPIs) pinned to strategic goals and objectives. As an example, the first objective set out in the History Trust of South Australia's *Strategic Plan 2018-2022* reads, 'We inspire curiosity and interest about South Australia's diverse histories for locals and visitors alike' (p. 11). The document later lists six strategies for achieving this objective including the provision of engaging and 'immersive and emotional experiences' (p. 13). How does

one go about measuring visitor curiosity and interest or the impact of an immersive and emotional experience? What we measure is important. For example, high visitation numbers, although easy to count, are meaningless if audiences retain nothing from their visit. One alternative to raw counting is determining what and how much audiences remember from engaging with exhibitions. Visitor survey data obtained by Rachael Coghlan (2017, 2018) on the Museum of Australian Democracy's *Power of 1* exhibition revealed an outcome which resourceful museum professionals could deploy as a means of disruption. I argue that practitioners could theoretically use the combination of democratic participation and retention measurement to subvert the reductive neoliberal logics of quantification and measurement. Coghlan recounts that visitor exit interviews revealed '[a] staggering 84.9% of visitors could recall information or messages from the exhibition which directly related to the intended themes and aims as defined by the exhibition organisers' (2018, p. 801). As a comparison, a three-country survey of more than 4,500 visitors to traditional (non-participatory) exhibitions revealed a much lower 37% retention rate. If participatory engagement has the potential to increase information and message retention this dramatically, museum professionals can use this to their advantage. Evidence of meeting this KPI over time via numerous projects can then be used to help maintain institutional funding; more importantly, this evidence can be used to secure funding for similarly participatory and disruptive engagement efforts, thus applying Freire's ideas about working both inside and outside the system.

### **The CLEAR framework**

The CLEAR framework resulted from research completed by Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker in 2006 for the UK Economic and Social Research Council. The project was designed to examine local variations in public participation in order to help local governments recognise barriers to and incentives for citizen participation in consultation efforts. The researchers stress that the framework is diagnostic rather than judgemental (2006, p. 285) and thus supports the implementation of positive change. More

importantly, it is conceived from the citizen's standpoint, not that of policy makers: '...the tool places an emphasis on understanding participation from the citizen's perspective: what needs to be in place for citizens to participate' (Lowndes, Pratchett, and Stoker 2006, p. 285). This aspect of CLEAR makes it distinctly different from engagement frameworks that centre on institutional needs, thus making it a better fit for radical democratic aims.

The CLEAR framework takes its name from the factors the researchers found must be present to ensure high levels of uptake and satisfaction in citizen engagement efforts. They argue that participation is most effective where citizens:

- *Can do*—that is, have the resources and knowledge to participate;
- *Like to*—that is, have a sense of attachment that reinforces participation;
- *Enabled to*—that is, are provided with the opportunity for participation;
- *Asked to*—that is, are mobilised by official bodies or voluntary groups;
- *Responded to*—that is, see evidence that their views have been considered (Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker 2006, p. 286).

Each factor reinforces the others and all work to engender in participants a sense that they are welcome and vital to the process. Furthermore, in the spirit of critical pedagogies, CLEAR's non-prescriptive character makes it suitable for adjustment to site-specific needs. I argue that because the framework stems from policy research concerned with improving citizen participation in local government, it can be useful for keeping a truly democratic focus while simultaneously appearing appropriately bureaucratic to be palatable to senior management personnel.

### **Can do—resources, knowledge and confidence**

In practice in the museum context, 'can do' may be expressed in a number of ways: opening audience access to collections (physically or digitally),

providing learning resources to get them up to speed with the concepts to be explored and offering prompts to help stimulate responses. This is assisted by invoking a spirit of partnership and reciprocity. All participants in the museum—staff and audience members—must enter the space on equal footing. The institutional space must be one of personal and cultural safety where people have an opportunity to experiment and to become more fully realised citizens. In speaking of *citizens*, I use the word not in the sense of individuals defined by nation-state boundaries, but in the sense put forth by Turner (1993, p. 2), meaning ‘competent member[s] of society’. We can see the ‘can do’ factor at least partially at work in QTMO. Invited respondents had open access to the collection via the website and the site’s contributor guidelines and moderation policy provided a level of cultural safety (History Trust of South Australia, 2019, n.p.). However, the site lacked learning resources and prompts which could have helped generate additional responses.

### **Like to—a sense of attachment and community**

As discussed previously, an invitation to audiences does not guarantee their participation. They must see a reason to put in the effort. ‘Collective participation provides continuous reassurance and feedback that the cause of engagement is relevant and that participation is having some value’ (Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker, 2006, p. 288). Using *Queering the Museum Online* as an example, although the website attempted to provide the means by which to create community, it lacked obvious functionality to support it and ongoing encouragement from HTSA staff to do so. As a comparison, one reason for Facebook’s continued success at retaining active users despite its toxicity is the knowledge that so many people users already know are there. Visitors to the QTMO site didn’t have this benefit; in fact, it was likely that nearly all the other contributors would be strangers. One way to counteract the potential discomfort of this situation could be a ‘buddy system’: suggesting that site visitors work on their responses with one or more friends or family members, or even turning it into a party game. In addition to helping to break the ice, working in small

groups can help to stimulate conversations beyond the museum's walls about the concepts on offer.

### **Enabled to—opportunities for participation**

Through their research, Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker observed that

[p]olitical participation in isolation is more difficult and less sustainable (unless an individual is highly motivated) than the mutually reinforcing engagement of contact through groups and networks' (2006, p. 288).

In the museum context, this fact will require building mutually-beneficial relationships with established community organisations. Although many museums work with community groups, these relationships are often transactional in nature and lack the kind of open communication—complete with opportunities for respectful conflict—required to build sustainable working relationships based on mutual trust (Lynch, 2011). Building these kinds of deeper relationships will certainly take time and effort to move beyond the transactional level. But they are indispensable for their ability to enable museums to meet audiences where they are in deeply contextualised ways. For example, instead of a group of completely unrelated individuals, QTMO could have approached a local LGBTIQ+ community group to act as the first group of respondents. This would have reinforced a sense of community for people who might have been reluctant to post a response and would have provided visitors with an outside source of support for skills, access and discussion.

### **Asked to—mobilisation through trusted groups and incentives**

This aspect of the CLEAR framework is realised by 'extending a variety of invitations [and a] variety of participation options' and by offering the right kind of incentive (Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker, 2006, pp. 288, 289). In the case of QTMO, each respondent received a direct email message inviting them to participate, along with a few reminders from



Dr Sullivan. While more personalised than an open call via advertising or social media, this method was also easy to ignore.

To date, QTMO has limited the mechanism of participation to the online space, which is understandable, given the ‘O’ in the project title. QTMO’s online framework was dictated by an internal need to work with a prototype digital collection to engage audiences. No other means of participation were offered because of this organisational agenda. To supplement online submissions via visitors’ own devices, HTSA might consider setting up a dedicated kiosk inside the Centre of Democracy to collect submissions. This might not be practical, however, due to the length of time most respondents have spent on their submissions. The variety of media options (audio, video, etc.) could also be made more obvious by the QTMO site’s user interface. At first glance, the site interface seems to lend itself more obviously to text-based responses. A user experience designer could be a useful addition to the project team, even on a short-term consulting basis, to better inform decisions about the site interface and its level of welcome and usability (MacDonald, 2015).

As noted above, the right incentive can also help participant mobilisation. According to survey responses, several QTMO invitees would have been more motivated to post a response if an exhibition of the responses had been planned. It is worth repeating here that the first iteration of *Queering the Museum* featured participants’ contributions in a pop-up exhibition as part of Adelaide’s annual Feast Festival, a celebration of queer arts and culture. A similar event where participants’ work is recognised may spark more enthusiasm for participation in QTMO.

### **Responded to—evidence that views are heard and considered**

Sternfeld (2012, pp. 2–3) asks us, ‘How are we to understand this participation, which aims to include as many people as possible, but without giving them any possibility of having an impact on the decisions made?’ Coghlan (2018) would understand this as ‘pseudo participation’ which, apart from wasting people’s time, holds the danger of hardening public cynicism toward engagement efforts and the institutions organising

them (p. 805). *What difference will this make?* is a useful question to ask at the outset of any engagement project and at multiple stages throughout the process. It can be asked about the visitors who engage with the project, about internal practices and attitudes and about the differences that can be made when visitors take their experiences beyond the walls of the museum.

Although QTMO's website sets out the project's purpose, it doesn't specifically state what *difference* the curators hoped visitors' contributions would make. In addition, the lack of a concluding exhibition likely reinforced the idea that nothing would really come of it, apart from the possibility that responses would be added as comments to the collection management system.

## PURPOSE

To unsettle the traditional relationships between museums, objects, people, communities and stories, and to disrupt the so-called definitive answers and the systems of power and privilege they support.

To demonstrate that objects have no inherent meaning, but become meaningful through their connections with people, places, usage, ideas.

To question what we think we know and how we know it.

To engage in the co-production of knowledge with our audiences, in particular those who may never have been asked to share what they know or what they have experienced.

To share authority and to acknowledge the authority embedded in lived experience.

To promote creative engagement with our collections, beyond the walls of the museum.

To give our collections new life.

From [queeringthemuseum.history.sa.gov.au](http://queeringthemuseum.history.sa.gov.au)

The difference-making and responsiveness components listed above are major hurdles for QTMO because, based on my observations during my internship and after, I have concluded that HTSA's leadership is unlikely to make changes to practice as a result of responses collected by the project. In discussing attempts at radical educational projects in art museums and galleries, Janna Graham notes that interventions similar to QTMO are still often shunted to the margins in terms of both budget and publicity (Forsman *et al.*, 2015, p. 2). This can be equally true in history institutions, as demonstrated by QTM and QTMO. Both projects were seen by the institution as short-term in nature and one-time-only. The physical manifestation of the project was relegated to pop-up exhibit status and was on view for only two days. Additionally, a proposal by the curators to make QTM an annual event was coolly received: 'The general feeling was that we had already done it once, and that successive iterations would be repetitive and therefore of little interest and/or value to our audiences' (History Trust of South Australia, 2020, p. 3). Although the proposal for a digital iteration generated more enthusiasm, sporadic human resourcing led to weaknesses in the project plan in that it did not fully anticipate the barriers visitors encountered. Finally, although the project's digital manifestation had a larger budget than its physical version due to the need for website design, management interest in the project may well have been focused less on the project's queering impetus and more on what it could do to enhance HTSA's digital profile (History Trust of South Australia, 2020). Ultimately, until HTSA's strategic priorities explicitly include LGBTIQ+ inclusion, decolonising, accessibility and similar efforts to centre marginalised identities, QTMO and projects like it are likely to remain on the organisation's periphery.

### **Critically and radically democratic**

Where do these observations on institutional intransigence lead in terms of radically democratising the museum? The largest implication of institutional reluctance to cede or even sincerely share some power is that the work of democratisation will need to be covert and even subversive, as

advocated by Sternfeld (2017, p. 180). As a practical matter, the precarity of most modern museum staffing arrangements (Museums Association, 2020; Small, 2020) means workers can push only so far without risking their livelihoods. The best I can do at this point is recommend a series of questions to keep practitioners honest with themselves about their educational, curatorial and engagement practices.

Coghlan (2018) argues that by adopting a participatory culture and democratic practices, museums have a chance to create the visitor-centric, participatory engagement environment that their mission statements have been touting for more than two decades. In so doing, museums could also subvert their own internal hierarchies of power, becoming more democratic and relevant to their publics and society as a whole. While I unreservedly agree with this argument, the problem since critics started calling for participation and internal democratisation has been the *how* of it all. How does the museum maintain accountability to its intentions to democratise and to share power? How do practitioners, with or without the support of their boards, begin to do this and with what tools? One might as well ask for a simple answer to *How do you raise a child?* or *How do we build a world worthy of all the people who live here?*. There is no simple handbook or manual, which is what most museum workers would understandably crave in their over-scheduled, over-committed and under-resourced professional lives. The professionalisation and corporatisation of museum workers and the institutions themselves has led to a reliance on packaged managerial methodologies—Agile Management, Six Sigma, Management By Objective etc. (Miller and Hartwick, 2002; James, 2019)—that focus on efficiencies and measureable outcomes. This tendency, what Giroux (2011) calls ‘methodology madness’, has the same effect in the museum as he observes in schools: it ‘substitutes technological control for democratic processes and goals’ (p. 35). This stands in stark contrast to the proposal to radically democratise the museum through critical pedagogy’s principles.

The slippery aspect of critical pedagogy is that its scholars refuse on principle to specify the exact steps to take to implement it. As Kincheloe (2008, p. 121) observes, the framework offers no prescriptions. This is largely due to the deeply reflexive and contextual nature of the theory; its focus on process necessitates iteration and adjustment. In practice it is much like meditation, built neither for efficiency nor measurability in the conventional sense. This should not be read as an attempt at avoiding the question; it is simply an acknowledgement that this will be a complicated process and a hard-sell for museum management. In the absence of a prescription, practitioners can return to questions based on the combined principles of critical pedagogies and radical democratic practice as I stated earlier. Placing these questions at the core of a museum's overall engagement strategy would be the ideal. In the absence of management buy-in, asking these questions regularly throughout individual projects can go a long way toward ensuring accountability to practitioners' democratising intentions.

### **Are we interrogating dominant political assumptions expressed as neutral interpretations?**

At the outset, museum professionals must acknowledge, to themselves and to audiences, the political nature of museums. At all times, for all collections and for all institutions, the museum is not neutral. As David Fleming admonishes, 'Museum people who claim they present neutral views about the world are either being disingenuous or stupid' (2016, p. 74). Additionally, museum staff must humbly admit the fact that expertise, no matter how hard studied, is contextual, conditional, and mediated by one's distance from the source material. In other words, if you are a straight, white male curator, you cannot legitimately make exclusive claims of expertise because there are things you simply cannot know from the perspectives of queer, Black, Indigenous, colonised or female people. Furthermore, so-called 'ethnographic' information must be elevated from its suspect status (by virtue of being 'too close to be objective') to the level of expert knowledge. Who can be said to know the facts about any given identity better than people who claim that identity?

Following Freire's observation at the start of this chapter, curators and audiences come to the engagement encounter with knowledges that are necessarily *partial* in both senses of the word: incomplete and non-objective. Acknowledging the incomplete and situated nature of their knowledge (Haraway, 1988) may cause the curator great discomfort. It will entail letting go of the security of expertise. That act of letting go is its own gift: the freedom to meet audience members as equal partners in exploration and knowledge production (Hooper Greenhill, 1992; Keesing-Styles, 2003; Kincheloe, 2008; Fleming, 2016). Thus, radical democratic practice presents the opportunity for practitioners to continuously self-radicalise through a reciprocal learning process.

### **Are we embracing diverse views and lived experience to inform and create alternative knowledges?**

It is especially important to recognise the authority of source communities and the validity of their knowledges. In cases where the subject matter under study for interpretation is non-white, non-Western sourced, white Western (colonial) voices should be the ones submerged in favour of source community voices. What does this look like in practice? Perhaps the best illustration comes by way of comparison. Practitioners can ask themselves if their museums are welcoming visitors in to gaze upon (but never touch!) their curious collections or if they are helping visitors to appropriate the space by opening their doors and resources to the people, stories and lived experiences held within the communities they serve.

### **Are we organising an oppositional public sphere through community-building?**

Lincoln Dahlberg contends that the post-structuralist conception of radical democracy is 'that particular type of politics that seeks to come to terms with—that is, institutionalise—radical contingency' (2015, p. 494). It is always in a state of self-reflexive becoming, ever unstable and contested and thus always embodying the possible, lingering in the space of *what if?* Sternfeld's (2010) demand for the museum's learning

framework to leave open a space for the possible thus institutionalises or embeds this kind of radical contingency. This stance also honours Sullivan and Middleton's (2019) mission to open up interpretation to multiple and indeed innumerable voices, situations and identities. Resisting closure in this way can be seen as an ongoing exercise in epistemological improvisation, ready to be built upon and added to by always ending a sentence with, 'Yes, and...'

Organising an oppositional public sphere requires embracing not only contingency but contestation as well. The neoliberal museum shuns conflict and friction, preferring instead to rely upon a detached professionalism to maintain what King calls a 'negative peace which is the absence of tension' (1963, n.p.). This is not the pathway to building relationships of trust with audiences, community partners or even museum colleagues. The radical democratic framework, wherein nothing is established once and for all, rightly endorses conflict as deeply productive and constitutive of democracy itself (Lynch and Alberti, 2010; Dahlberg, 2015). Practicing the skills of contestation within the museum can enable audiences to strengthen their citizenship muscles in a lower-stakes arena in order to better prepare them to use these new skills in wider society (Lynch and Alberti, 2010; Lynch, 2011).

### **Are we empowering visitors through radical museum education that creates opportunities for developing critical consciousness?**

As stated earlier, use of the word *radicalise* should not be associated with 'extremism' but with Marx's (1970 [1844]) understanding of radical as grasping at the root or essence of, in this case, democratic practice. A framework based on critical pedagogies offers fertile ground for 'counterdiscursive activity that attempts to provoke a process through which people might engage in a transformative critique of their everyday lives' (Keesing-Styles, 2003, p. 60). For every educational program, every exhibition, every community outreach effort, practitioners must ensure there are multiple ways to connect the museum's project directly to visitors' lives. Freire (1987) calls this process 'reading the word and the

world'. To illustrate Freire's process, Kincheloe recalls, 'After exploring the community around the school and engaging in conversations with community members, Freire constructed *generative themes* designed to tap into issues that were important to various students in his class' (2008, p. 16, emphasis mine). This description also demonstrates how embedded in the life of the community museum practitioners must be in order to be able to develop these generative themes—topics so connected to visitors' lives that they spark excitement and compel further investigation (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 11).

### **Are we challenging the archive's power dynamics of dominance and hierarchy?**

Practitioners must move away from the conception of the museum as an invited space into which audiences are 'allowed' (Lynch, 2011, p. 451). This framing puts control squarely in the hands of museum staff and establishes audience members as guests who can eventually wear out their welcome. Following Turner, we should make no mistake; the museum is a politicised public space that belongs to the people:

The transfer of sovereignty from the body of the king to the body politic of citizens is thus a major turning point in the history of western democracies, because it indicates a major expansion of political space, indeed the creation of political spaces (1990, p. 211).

This provides solid ground for the argument that the museum is an appropriate space for the practice of democracy: it is already a political space because it is a public and in some cases a publicly-funded space. As a result, every action that happens there can be understood as political or at the very least politically inflected. In this context, space should be understood as both the physical space of built infrastructure as well as the intellectual and emotional space framed by the museum's intangible infrastructure.



This space of the people can become a tool for the people when museum practitioners (who are also citizens) reach beyond the museum's walls to join in solidarity with citizens and communities outside the museum. Doing so can create the 'para-institutional space' described by Sternfeld (2018b, p. 165) which consists of the free and equal relationships between people from which reciprocal learning emerges.

This chapter calls for an entirely new relationship based on solidarity between museum practitioners and audiences. It is a call for collective action against the forces that maintain the bureaucratic wall separating them. I have argued that the tools for building this relationship and dismantling this wall—critical and radical democratic practices—will work best when couched within the CLEAR framework for civic engagement. These are changes that will take years of iterative practice. Done conscientiously, they may come to resemble a spiritual practice like meditation. It will entail showing up with a beginner's mind every day and asking simple but complicated questions of every act. This is a slow, deliberative process. Returning to the moment, returning to the act with intention and consciousness is necessarily slow. As a result, it is likely that upstream or 'high-level' stakeholders will not embrace it. But museums do not exist solely for upstream stakeholders. They exist for the people—all the people.

## CONCLUSION



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*If museums want to continue to have a place, they must stop seeing activists as antagonists. They must position themselves as learning communities, not impenetrable centers of self-validating authority.*

*Olga Viso, former Walker Art Center Director, 2018*

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In the nine months it has taken to write this thesis, the world has witnessed extraordinary changes, the scale and swiftness of which I have never experienced in my lifetime: the COVID-19 pandemic; the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police, causing the Black Lives Matter movement to burst beyond its American borders; the misuse of history for political purposes; the practical cessation of international travel, separating family members, friends, colleagues; the sudden mainstreaming of teleconferencing for everything from corporate meetings to primary school lessons to Friday knock-off drinks; Zoom fatigue; the incessant use of the word ‘unprecedented’. All this and so much more has played out against the backdrop of the global climate crisis while another global financial crisis looms. These are historic times, times for which museums are, or at least should be, uniquely positioned to help make some semblance of sense out of apparent chaos.

But are they? The case studies presented in chapter three give reason to hope that institutions are open to adopting more critical and democratic practices, especially if these practices are present in some form from the museum's conception, as was the case with the NMAAHC. However, the resistance and trepidation observed during the course of a modestly-sized intervention like *Queering the Museum Online* offers reason to doubt how much progress could be realised. While these are only three examples among myriad others being undertaken around the world, there are other clues in the sector that serve to tip the scales, at least for now, in favor of the status quo.

Practitioners inside and academics outside the museum sector have been discussing, debating, researching and demanding democratic and inclusive changes for more than a century. Yet so little has changed. According to a study by Sara Selwood (2018) of government-funded museums in the UK, trends for the period between 1997 and 2017 showed little change between present-day audience profiles and those compiled from 1851-1891 data. The current visitor profile remains racially homogenous and persistently middle-class and above and has, particularly in the UK, increasingly skewed to overseas and domestic travelers attracted to blockbuster temporary exhibitions (Selwood, 2018, pp. 289, 291). The picture painted by her research led Selwood to dolefully conclude, 'Governments have shown little interest in changing that' even as '[r]hetorical optimism endures alongside the failure of political will to create, and maintain, "museums for the many"' (2018, p. 291).

Here in Australia, the publicly-funded portion of the sector continues to be pushed in the wrong direction by governments bent upon embracing the US model of 'diversified funding sources': philanthropic giving and developing partnerships with corporations (South Australia and Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2019, pp. 12, 23, 26). I use the term 'wrong direction' due to the inherent conflicts present in a system

## CONCLUSION

that chooses to rely upon the profit-seeking and tax-avoiding classes to invest in institutions ‘for the many’:

While philanthropy is composed of many organizations committed to redressing syndemic harms, it is also home to donors and activists who embrace market fundamentalism, white supremacy, climate-change denial, and inequitable treatment of women, LGBTQ people, and immigrants. While many nonprofit and philanthropic organizations care about equity, many do not (Bernholz, 2020, n.p.).

Bernholz’s use of *syndemic*, a term from medical anthropology describing mutually reinforcing simultaneous epidemics, is particularly apt in the plague year of 2020. To paraphrase Audre Lorde (1984), the master’s intertwined metastatic oppressions will never be cured by the master’s donated medicine.

### **A way forward**

Turner’s (1990) argument that the revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries created public political spaces (p. 211) provides ample context for the museum to be used by citizens and museum staff as a democracy lab. It also adds weight to the argument that museums, as public political sites, should apply tools like the CLEAR framework, emerging from community development research, to museum engagement and participation strategies (Scott, 2013, pp. xiv, xv; Coghlan, 2018, p. 798). This interdisciplinary approach presents a rich vein to tap, particularly for social history museums that deal with the interpretation of complex social relations, politics among them.

While museum professionals are waiting for their boards to embrace the concepts of critical pedagogies and radical democracy—and educating them so it eventually happens—there are some interventions to recommend. First, practitioners can watch for opportunities: teachable moments when they can cede power to their audiences by asking instead of telling. Keeping the principles of critical pedagogy present during the development of projects and public programming will help more of these moments emerge. Second, they can look for focus areas where they can test theory on a small scale, similar to the way Sean Curran approached the *126* exhibition. Practitioners could also try creating a Democracy Lab by devising several low-stakes scenarios that bring visitors together to wrestle with a topical issue in their museum's community. However museum workers chose to start, they must use the authority museums hold in the public consciousness to make and hold space for those voices muted by dominant culture's narratives. The chaos described at the beginning of this chapter tells us how imperative this work is. The storm will not calm itself.

The information I have gathered through the case studies, my internship observations and subsequent work-related engagement with practitioners in Australia, the UK and the US indicates that there are museum professionals who want to make positive change in the sector. Organisations and grassroots collaboratives including MuseumNext, OF/BY/FOR ALL, Museum Detox and Death to Museums were created by passionate professionals who want to push museums to realise their full potential. Their members want to work with visitors in dialogue and collaboration to create and share new knowledge, to dislodge unquestioned expertise and marginalising practices and to transform museums into spaces that more of the public *wants* to be in. By uniting the principles of critical pedagogies with Sternfeld's strategies of radical democratic museum practice, I have demonstrated a way to pursue this work. Further supplemented with elements from queer, feminist, anti-racist and post-colonial theories as required to suit institutional and community context, this framework has the potential to develop into a transformational force in museums' efforts to enact radical social change.

## CONCLUSION

On the audience side, the QTMO survey responses, though limited in number, indicated enthusiasm for the project's aims and for HTSA's willingness to try this new method of engaging audiences. But the survey also revealed that overcoming the museum's perceived authority will take time, creativity and encouragement. Overall, participants and even those who did not submit an interpretation on the QTMO site voiced support for future opportunities to engage in 'curating by the masses' (History Trust of South Australia, 2020, p. 34).

The similar level of enthusiasm for change shared by a large number of museum professionals and visitors presents an opportunity for the two groups to become not only collaborators, but perhaps co-conspirators against the inertia of upstream stakeholders. Sternfeld (2017) references Janna Graham's notion of 'para-sitic' museum interventions, calling upon practitioners and audiences to unite and to act 'critically, provocatively, considerately, subversively, affirmatively, productively and disobediently' (p. 12) within the museum. More research is needed in this area to find gaps where the oppositional public sphere can insert itself. Museum professionals and audience members can choose to move beyond exhibits and collections entirely and focus on creating together new ways of 'doing the museum', ways that at last put the institution solidly in the hands of the people it serves.

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How we see our history affects how we live in the now. As we experience global turmoil in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic distress and a crisis of representative democracy, we urgently need our museums sector to embark upon a new relationship with the public, one that welcomes knowledges and voices from outside the museum to help current and new audience members see history and the present from a multitude of perspectives.

*The final chapter builds on the understandings of resistances within and the risk averse nature of the publicly funded institutions to advocate a piece-meal and subversive approach to opening up the museum to wider audiences and to challenging the... 'neutral' voice of the museums. This is a particular strength of the thesis, which will be useful to museum practitioners and should be required reading for museum directors and governing board members.*

#### **EXTERNAL THESIS EXAMINER**

*The conceptual framework [offers] a synthesis of Critical Pedagogy and radical democratic theory and practice which is innovative and used consistently across the case study methodology to produce an analysis of depth, coherence, and relevance.*

#### **FLINDERS UNIVERSITY THESIS EXAMINER**