

Museums and the Dilemma of Engaging with the Activist Spectrum

Museum Activism.

Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell, eds.

New York: Routledge, 2019.

“Should museums be activists?” asked *MuseumNext* founder Jim Richardson in 2016, after pinpointing the year as one of “political strife almost without precedent.” Richardson’s curiosity acknowledged the impact of decades of escalating activist practices and a growing recognition of the linkage between social transformation and key developments in museum practice and scholarship. It was also a response to the popular expressions of political activism culminating that year through and following events including the election of Donald Trump as US president and the United Kingdom’s Brexit vote. Accompanying the rise of popular interest in activist practices was the emergence of a new era of ethnical concern that urged museums and other places of public conscience to embody an activist outlook befitting the pronouncement made in 2009 by Andy Miah that “we’re all activists now.”

The publication of *Museum Activism* evidences the extent of the hold that an activist-oriented ethical turn has had over museums and museum studies in recent years.¹ Many museums have adopted a political status—something they acknowledge as having always existed—in increasingly explicit ways. The extension of their social role to speak out against populist forms of prejudice and actively promote community inclusion and diversity can be seen as a natural progression from the commitment to social responsibility regarded by Karen Brown and François Mairesse (2018) as the most important transformation in the function of museums in recent decades. This point was borne out by the development of identity-, issue-, and cause-based museums, including the National Museum of African American History and Culture. During the development phase of this museum, which opened on the National Mall in Washington, DC—also in 2016—its founding director, Lonnie Bunch III, explained that it was tasked with contributing to social transformation through “political advocacy.”² Bunch’s recent elevation into the position of Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution—“the world’s largest museum, education, and research complex”³—suggests that even where the incorporation of an activist purview by museums is considered to be incremental and incomplete (xxvii, 2–3), there is clear evidence of an increasing recognition, perhaps even normalization through acceptance, of the role that museums play as advocates for political engagement as well as sites of reflection and critique.

The 34 chapters of *Museum Activism* offer case studies demonstrating the tide of positive and democratic reforms to museum practice and governance that have constituted or reflected the transformations noted by Bunch, Richardson, and others in 2016 and thereabouts. The volume's commitment to activism is also clear, with the editors asserting that while "these chapters explore how museums are tackling a broad range of topics, themes and issues, we have been selective in identifying contributors that demonstrate a commitment to what we view as *progressive* activism" (137). We are in considerable agreement that "progressive" activism can, and has, transformed the reach and potential of museums today. But we are also fascinated, if horrified, by the backlash that has emerged against museums' activist credentials since 2016. The spate of nooses found at the National Museum of African American History and Culture and other US museum grounds throughout 2017, for example, suggest that even where museums have positioned themselves as spaces for inclusion, reflection, and multivocality, they can be appropriated as opportunities to promote fear.⁴ Susceptible to "antisocial" forms of sabotage activism including those intended to intimidate and exclude communities from the public sphere, museums appear to have been targeted as a result of their increasingly activist self-identification and intention to navigate and be inclusive of the spectrum of political views held by their constituents.

This article started as a book review but as we grappled with issues raised by its case studies and the broader political context, it transformed into something more akin to a commentary or discussion piece.⁵ We recognize that museums have achieved significant results from their efforts at reforming the institutions' elite and nonrepresentative historical foundations, and *Museum Activism* makes a valuable contribution to the project of reimagining museums as sites of inclusive and progressive values. However, we cannot quite shake the feeling that, as museums have taken steps to fully realize the social role attributed to them, they have become vulnerable to the emergence of "nonprogressive" activism evidenced by a spate of backlashes including nooses being planted on museum grounds. In response to this problem, we want to test the idea that an engagement with movements of "nonprogressive" activism and acts of hate can be combatted through a process of truth-telling that requires naming hate acts for what they are. Engaging with antisocial protest in the context of museum activism is extraordinarily difficult, but it is a project that we believe can be initiated by thinking about some core tenets associated with the museum's function as an instrument of public trust, culture, and ownership. Our sense is that this undertaking complements *Museum Activism's* process of front-footed engagement, and will contribute to discussions that ensure that museums retain their significance as sites of cultural politics and, by extension, their activist remit. We will return to these points throughout this commentary, which represents a very preliminary attempt to think through some of the issues.

We start, though, by meeting the requirements of the book review we were charged with writing. A book primarily for and about museums and the museum sector—that is, about how museums can do better to adopt and promote values for the betterment of communities—*Museum Activism* considers the contribution that museums can make to broader social and political reform. Through a well-selected collection of current and best practice activism by and at museums across a global community spanning six continents, *Museum Activism* builds upon the genealogy of museums' activist practices (Wajid and Minott; Woods and Cole; Vlachou; Lyons and Bosworth; Heal; Murta) and cites "widespread scepticism and often derision" as having plagued the institutions' reformist credentials (xxvii). Evidence that this skepticism has been defied and an era of museum activism is upon us, the volume affirms that an "irreversible shift" has occurred to transform the way practitioners, scholars, and museum visitors "think about museums as knowledge based social institutions" (xxvii).

While museums' orientation toward activist practices is often illustrated through the growth of issue-based museums such as the National Museum of African American History and Culture,

the range of museums discussed in *Museum Activism* demonstrates that activist thinking is becoming a priority across all cultural institutions. With more than 50 writers, researchers, artists, activists, and professionals contributing thoughts and case studies, the volume challenges activist thinking beyond the purview of specific cause-oriented museums to include national museums (Lleras et al.; Chipangura and Marufu; Heal; Murta; Hughes and Phillips; Coffee), regional museums (Forni et al.; Brekke), museums of science and natural history (Lyons and Bosworth; Rodegher and Freeman), memorial museums (Golding; McCann; Popescu; Conley), art and history museums (Bailey; Wray; Gauld), children's museums (Wood and Cole), and heritage institutions (Curran). The idea underpinning this collection, that all museums, irrespective of their conventional mandate, contain a "largely untapped potential . . . to engage with contemporary challenges" (290), echoes loudly and powerfully throughout *Museum Activism*. Many contributions, such as the chapter by Elizabeth Wood and Sarah A. Cole, argue that, within museums and broader society, "it is ultimately the role of the individual to bring about change" (37), whether they be practitioners, scholars, artists, and/or activists. Together, contributors reveal the extent to which museums have always existed as contested sites of cultural politics with the potential to harness their role to enforce positive change.

Individual chapters present a range of case studies and approaches for exploring or undertaking museum activism, challenging the long-held belief that museums are neutral and "safe spaces" beyond the remit of political agendas. For example, Schellenbacher, Wajid, and Minott and Ho and Ting see museum activism as a phenomenon comprising complex activist networks motivated by a desire to progress political reform, while Coleman and More examine its grass-roots origins and community orientation. Hollow, Kudlick and Luby, French, and McFadzean et al. show how practical methods taken by museum management and staff can enable greater accessibility and foster inclusive narratives that better represent diverse communities. Bergevin illustrates how a dedication to museum narratives that align with progressive values has been seen to increase critical reflection in visitors. McNamara addresses the productive exchange between artists and museums that can raise awareness concerning issues of contemporary significance, while other contributors emphasize the interaction between museums and contested social issues such as migration (Vlachou), climate change (Janes and Sandell; Lyons and Bosworth), and LGBTQ representation (Curran). These contributions demonstrate that museum work is never neutral and that "safe spaces" have traditionally privileged an elite portion of society rather than the diversity of its constituencies.

Importantly, *Museum Activism* also demonstrates that museums can exist as targets (or subjects) of activism as equally and frequently as they provide or support agents of activism (Serafini and Garrard). Yet, if protest—even against museums—is identified as a form of recognition of and engagement with their political roles, it can become a trigger for museums to remember and uphold their social obligations, a point made by Kidd in regard to the increased acceptance of museums' activist potential within the media. Recognizing that museums are not naturally or inherently synonymous with progressive activism is quite critical, as it allows an understanding that they can be barriers to as well as proponents of change. It also allows museums to be held accountable for the rhetoric they employ (Lynch). Maria Vlachou's appeal for museums to fully embody their activist potential by engaging with the diverse beliefs held by its communities reverberates with our understanding of the importance of multidirectional museum activism, as she states:

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

fear and perhaps also with greater empathy. In their desire to function as agents of social change, museums cannot simply “preach to the converted,” but must also engage with people of different views. (54)

The recognition that museums’ social role demands activist practices that reform institutional structures and traditional modes of representation, as well as the ability to engage those with “vastly different worldviews,” who may feel left out of the public sphere’s ethical turn, is of fundamental importance. As museum practitioner Esme Ward, Head of Learning and Engagement at the Whitworth and Manchester Museum, has said, the pursuit of museum activism is only valuable if “We [museum practitioners and scholars] . . . speak to people who feel and think differently to us” (214).

Our comments from this point extend from contributions in the volume by Serafini and Garrard, Vlachou, Bailey, Heal, and others. We urge cautious engagement with some of the broader issues that “progressive” social-justice-oriented activism and reform movements rally against and perhaps provoke, including the emergence of instances of antisocial activism on US museum grounds. We believe the question of what contribution and engagement with the spectrum of activism might make to discussions concerning museums’ activist role complements the volume editors’ interest in fostering new ways of thinking and working (see xxviii). As museums have increasingly claimed an activist status open to including debate on contested issues, a backlash has emerged from portions within society that—perhaps threatened by the rise of identity politics and issue-based museums—prefer the institution to retain its formerly “neutral” status. The nooses found on museum grounds demonstrate a polarizing conflict over representation within the public sphere reminiscent of the culture and history wars that took museums as sites of contestation at the turn of the century (Luke 2002), as well as of the historical legacy of these events.⁶ It is again the case today that

groups with vastly different worldviews and outlooks rarely seem to engage in authentic dialogue with each other. Indeed, as one groups moves into a public space, the opposing one very often moves out. More often than not, there is little or no room for mutual understanding, negotiation or shared concerns. (293)

Bailey’s attention to the spectrum of activism (a phrase we have borrowed for our review title) provides a useful frame through which to approach this discussion about museums’ responsibility to engage with “vastly different worldviews” and activist practices. There is not adequate space in this article to examine this discussion fully, but we will make some brief comments regarding Bunch’s mid-2019 appointment into the role of Secretary at the Smithsonian Institution. More than just indicating an institutional commitment to the social justice/activist mandate evidenced by Bunch’s professional track record, his appointment represents an acknowledgment by the institution that museum activism needs to recognize, engage with, and combat morally challenging social problems and behaviors within society in order to fully realize its social responsibilities.

The spate of nooses left on the grounds of the National Museum of African American History and Culture provided both an opportunity for the museum to reinforce its activist role, and a warning of the work that is still to be done. Bunch argued that the act was “clearly intended to intimidate, by deploying one of the most feared symbols in American racial history” against the community for whom the museum was established (Bunch 2017). Signaling “the power of the institution that was targeted” (Kennicott 2017), the event also demonstrated that the work of activist museums to promote inclusive and reflective narratives regarding contemporary social issues is never complete and requires constant engagement with portions of society that do not share “progressive” ideals. A clear instance of antisocial activism, the noose, like all incidents of

hate speech, aimed at a basic level to “exclude its targets from participating in broader deliberative processes” and, as an extension, the public sphere (Gelber 2011: 84, and, as postcolonial museum studies shows, see Karp et al. 2006). While the event demonstrates an undeniable risk in museums’ broadening social mandate, we concur with the editors’ argument that activism is always accompanied by this potential, and that while

museum activism involves work that is undeniably challenging and risky, there is a growing and irresistible imperative to redefine the contemporary museum as an active agent in shaping the world around us and making it a better place for all. (xxviii)

Acknowledging the risks associated with this imperative, “speaking back” is one powerful political instrument that can be used by museums against such actions, and is a tool that works to assert multiple identities and agencies as a way to progress the volume’s call for museums to “counteract and transcend the ‘immorality of inaction’” (xxviii). Acts of fearmongering are not just forms of distraction but exercises in testing or challenging the legitimacy of legislation and community standards around freedom of expression. They show how difficult the act of maintaining freedom of expression and curbing racism is in all parts of the world, particularly given the increasing influence of right-wing commentary and views in mainstream media forums.⁷ Erik Bleich (in Message 2018b: 11–12) describes the rise of hate acts, and how to best respond to them, as being “a fundamental dilemma for liberal democracies.” The conundrum that is caused by this “inevitable” dilemma means that there is little space available for dialogue between museums, governmental organizations, and proponents and followers of the extreme or even moderate right.

If it is true that, as a spokesperson for the Southern Poverty Law Center has said, “we haven’t seen such mainstream support for hate in decades, not since the Civil Rights era 50 years ago” (Milloy 2017), museums cannot afford to focus solely on “progressive” cases of activism.⁸ They have a critical and urgent obligation to address and take a clear and active opposing stand to extremism and the expression of even apparently moderate forms of intolerance that are ubiquitous throughout other public forums and that work to normalize hate and structural racism (see, for example, the comment sections of Naidu-Silverman [2019] and Kennicott [2019]). While institutional change is essential, Ereshnee Naidu-Silverman, Senior Director for the Global Transitional Justice Initiative at the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, argues that activism at the governmental and community levels typically overlooks “one component crucial to addressing the ongoing structural racism in the United States: truth telling.” She contends that community reparations can only make a difference “if accompanied by a public truth-telling project that addresses continued white denialism, exposes the reality of racism and makes clear the consequences of decades of inaction.” The museum is a prime vehicle through which public “truth-telling” can be enacted, as its authoritative position converges between governmental mandates and the aspirations of its communities.

As Naidu-Silverman argues, most work on racism and its manifold realities tends to emphasize legal and governmental apparatuses at the expense of exploring its implications on human subjects. Although the situation is changing, the same can generally be said about the effects of hate speech, with insufficient academic research undertaken on the cultures and structural sociopolitical conditions under which singular concepts of white nationalism, racism, hate, and fear thrive and become normalized (Gelber 2011; Message 2018b). While attention to internal and structural inequities is vital, museum programs and activities can model critical-thinking approaches that can challenge stereotypes and question perceptions of ideological certainty (as seen in Bergevin). These actions require museums to engage in the uncomfortable and risky business of naming extremism for what it *is*. And this is not for the purpose of legitimization, but

because it is a phenomenon—and itself a form of activism—that needs to be named and understood in order to be combatted. The target audience for this activism is less the noose-leavers themselves than the people who visit museums, including the National Museum of African American History and Culture (which hosted 1.9 million visitors in 2018). Museum visitors who have been exposed to this public “truth-telling” might be expected to leave the museum better equipped to understand the impact of hate crime and its continued presence in contemporary society and to be able to identify the existence of alternatives to fear.

There is a rich history to this approach, in which Bunch has himself played a significant role. In 1999, in his capacity as Associate Director for Curatorial Affairs at the National Museum of American History, Bunch said:

History museums interpret difficult, unpleasant, or controversial episodes, not out of any desire to criticize, be unpatriotic, or cause pain, but out of a responsibility to convey a fuller, more complex, history. By examining incidents ripe with complexities and ambiguities, museums hope to stimulate greater understanding of the historical forces and choices that have shaped [in this instance] America. (Quoted in Message 2014: 37)

Full engagement by political activists (which includes the potential to mobilize others) still, even ten years after this statement was made, requires the ability to work across ideological divisions, to occupy a slippery position of discursive as well as ideological liminality. It also continues to include engaging at times with causes that are “difficult, unpleasant, or controversial” and with which we do not personally agree, even where they are forms of extremism that are considered morally anathema to rational thinking (which should thus have no logical place in the public sphere).

It might be true that you cannot fight politically instrumentalized irrationality (the kind that defends offensive and hate speech on the grounds of freedom of expression) with rational arguments, which is why ideologically driven actors—noose-leavers, for example—are not the target audience for the kind of engagement we are talking about. However, calling hate speech out for what it is does not *prima facie* result in legitimation but can place a firm imprint of protest on the cultural landscape in which such events occur. Moreover, exhibitions—such as the display of Emmett Till’s casket at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, but many others also exist (consider Holocaust museums)—have shown that an insistence on critical-thinking skills and public truth-telling by museums can communicate the realities of racism and the consequences of decades of inaction and white denialism. Curators involved at the coal face of cause-based collecting, who have assembled material evidence from “antisocial” forms of activism associated with extremist ideologies based on hate and fear have also made this point (see Message 2014; Message 2018a; and Message 2019). As a precursor to achieving understanding about difference, engagement with “difficult, unpleasant” histories requires identification and analysis of the barriers to, as well as the political potential of, social movement and activist expression. Understanding the limits of “progressive” activism (which can include the restrictions of organizational structures and forms of governance) by interacting with different, “nonprogressive” causes for the purposes of understanding or critique can also work to diminish the risks associated with the depoliticization of activism that Popescu and Lynch caution in their contributions to *Museum Activism*.

Even where museums’ social role in theory or aspiration does not align with realities in practice (keeping in mind that “contestation” can be directed both within and against the museum), their currency in contemporary debate reveals their enduring significance as a site of cultural politics. This significance was reaffirmed in a recent *Washington Post* story called “Lonnie Bunch Isn’t Afraid to Address White Supremacy: What Else Will that Change for The Smithsonian?”

The article referred to Bunch's track record of tackling racism in his role as Founding Director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (Kennicott 2019). It attracted over 90 comments, most of which articulated prejudice based on race, rights, history, and entitlement (many were explicitly racist or "anti-antiracist" in nature). A small number voiced the opinion that museums should stay out of politics. Public response to the news of Bunch's appointment shows that cultural institutions are not free from judgments based in hate or fear and that they cannot, as such, ignore them so long as values deemed "nonprogressive" continue to circulate through society. The journalist Philip Kennicott agrees, calling "the fact that Bunch can utter the words 'white supremacy'" an "occasion for hope." "White supremacy isn't just a chronic and defining condition of American cultural life," he says. "Learning how to recognize it, seeing it in its manifold fullness and historical persistence, requires agility of mind and breadth of learning" (Kennicott 2019).

Although ostensibly lauding the appointment of Bunch into a new role, Kennicott projects onto the Smithsonian the responsibility for engaging fully with the complexity of the world in which it operates as well as with the legacies of prejudice and discrimination that it embodies. This is not a politically benign or distant memory (as it is not for most museums; see 2–3). The Smithsonian, like many other museums, has a history influenced by forms of knowledge and behavior discredited today. Reparations can only occur where implicit and structural inequities and prejudice are acknowledged, and, even more importantly, where there is a history of activism—and truth-telling—against such acts. It also requires engagement with collective and individual legacies of past trauma and with the fact that many contemporary institutions share dark histories. Dismantling these histories through the structural and cultural reimagining evidenced throughout *Museum Activism* requires the construction of a conversation between museums and the environment within which museums operate, as we have suggested. This context includes the historical past and instruments of governance, including the media and policy, that reflect, act upon, and help shape the public sphere.

Museums need to be able to respond to episodes that cause pain for what they are, particularly when the progressive activism they advocated for may itself have become the subject or target of counteractivism, as may be the case in museums with explicit social justice remits such as the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Kennicott sees the Smithsonian as uniquely suited to this task because of its national scope and mission. He says there is "no way to recognize the operation and impact of white supremacy without that kind of interdisciplinary worldview and the ability to range across all the disciplines incorporated in the Smithsonian's scientific, cultural, historical and artistic mandate." But, just as important, he says, is recognizing that "there's no hope of putting that knowledge to good use if it can't be widely shared with the widest possible audience" (Kennicott 2019). As key instruments of public trust, culture, ownership, and nation-building, museums have a clear part to play in this process of truth-telling so that, in the words of Naidu-Silverman, "future generations will remember us as the generation that took action to craft a new founding story where all Americans are included."

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NOTES

1. Recent notable publications include those of Maura Reilly (2018) and Kirsty Robertson (2019).
2. Interview with Kylie Message, 12 June 2012, in Message (2014).
3. According to the Smithsonian's own website, www.si.edu/.
4. See below, note 5.
5. This article addresses specific issues raised by the volume. It complements a previous review that considered the volume in the context of the genealogy and literature of museum studies (Message and Foster 2019).
6. "The noose has long represented a deplorable act of cowardice and depravity—a symbol of extreme violence for African Americans. Today's incident is a painful reminder of the challenges that African Americans continue to face" (Bunch, email to National Museum of African American History and Culture staff, quoted in Boissoneault 2017).
7. Anti-antiracism is a both an active form of fearmongering and a passive but no less effective tool in the normalization of prejudice (where sentences, such as 'I'm not racist, but,' that end with the reassertion of racial stereotypes as the basis of a factual statement appear unremarkable). Anti-antiracism can take many forms, including the willful interpretation of hate acts as fakes and hoaxes. One example is right-wing media reporting of crimes such as arson against symbolic cultural sites like churches (equivalent in many respects to noose-leaving at museums) as having been likely undertaken by left-wing activists to look as if they had been committed by racist Trump supporters (Gomez 2019). Accounting for hate acts as "fake" has the explicit aims of discrediting the legitimate experience of hate-motivated crime and undermining (by raising questions about) what reasonable discourse identifies as hateful acts.
8. This is not a freedom of speech argument in which we take the libertarian position that everyone should be free to express any opinion, regardless of how offensive it may be. Quite the contrary: freedom of expression is directly hampered and closed down by hate acts.

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New Conversations about Safeguarding the Future

A Review of Four Books

A Future in Ruins: UNESCO, World Heritage, and the Dream of Peace

Lynn Meskell

New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Keeping Their Marbles: How the Treasures of the Past Ended Up in Museums—And Why They Should Stay There.

Tiffany Jenkins.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

World Heritage and Sustainable Development: New Directions in World Heritage Management

Peter Bille Larsen and William Logan, eds.

New York: Routledge, 2018.

Safeguarding Intangible Heritage: Practices and Politics.

Natsuko Akagawa and Laurajane Smith, eds.

New York: Routledge, 2019.