Re-appraising the Museum's Pedagogic Purpose in an Age of Uncertainty

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Abstract

As we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century, in which the assuredness and authority of the modern period has been eclipsed by the uncertainty of our global age, I reflect on aspects of the public museum's legacy for learning. I argue for greater recognition of the contested pedagogic purposes with which public museums have been tasked and I position twenty-first century 'disruptions' such as protests, interventions and contestations, directed at the practices of public museums, as having important pedagogic intentions and effects. To do so I refer to examples from some of my previous research projects and writings, which examine artists' and art teachers' relationships and interactions with art museums. I also consider the very different legacies left by two museum directors and influential educationalists from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Henry Cole in Britain and Alfred Lichtwark in Germany.

Key words

artists, biennale/triennale, censorship, contested histories, democracy, dissent, museum learning

Introduction

In 2005 I wrote a paper which advocated the potential benefits of art teachers and their students engaging with curatorial practices in museums. The paper's findings came out of a two-year funded research project investigating art teachers'¹⁾ experiences of using museums as learning resources. It found that many teachers

1) The research project "Creative Connections" (Robins & Woollard, 2005) was conducted with art and design teachers from London secondary schools.

perceived themselves to lack knowledge and confidence to teach their students effectively in galleries and museums. Both the psychological and physical implications of the museum environment affected teachers' decisions about visiting museums, collections and exhibitions with their students. The dual pressures of public accountability and managing or "disciplining" students in a public space were pronounced concerns. In response to the communal space and the complexity and unfamiliarity of exhibits, reluctantly, many teachers resorted to handing out worksheets and setting drawing exercises. In effect, irrespective of what students came to see in museums or what they encountered, they often simply drew.

Creative Connections

My recollections of watching teenagers on a school museum visit try to draw the figures in Sam Taylor Wood's three screen video installation, "Atlantic" (1997), convinced me that there are better ways to engage students meaningfully with a diversity of exhibits and art works. Much as I am an advocate for drawing, it needs be acknowledged that in relation to a wide range exhibits, drawing's potential for learning is limited. During the course of the research project it became apparent that drawing often served a rather specific educational purpose; it was being used as pacifier. Less to do with the benefits of paying close attention and more to do with exercising behavioural control. The research team, which comprised academics, gallery educators and teachers, proposed that engaging with curating and the wider stewardship of museums could be a way to facilitate more critical engagement with galleries and museums. It was also hoped that this would facilitate art teachers' confidence and critical usage of these public institutions.

The teachers in the research project began to engage with some of the questions that twenty-first museums were already being asked, such as: who has assumed the right to select and represent on behalf of others? Whose history is being told in the museum and whose is not? What is the status of cultural art/artefacts in world museums? How should exclusions from the canon be acknowledged? They layered these questions with others concerning display design, written labels and interpretation panels. Significantly, there were a number of discussions with the teachers about the ways in which artists had been leading a

questioning process through institutional critique, interventions, invited and collaborative projects, and protests. It felt timely to review the extent to which teachers of art and design considered these critical engagements to be relevant for their students.

In academe it is often taken for granted that the gallery or museum's authority to represent material culture lost its certainty in the latter part of the twentieth century. The old certainties of hegemonic institutional authority had after all been taken to task throughout the twentieth century. However, the praxeological shifts which gave rise to the critical examination of the museums as representational institutions, are not necessarily familiar to most museum publics, nor were they to the teachers involved with the research project.

My book, *Curious Lessons in the Museum* (Robins, 2013) grew out of this research. It examined some of the changing and contested pedagogic purposes for museums, from their inception to the twenty-first century, and followed the histories of artists' interventions into the museum's representational and pedagogic purposes. Early examples of interventions, such as Surrealists' collaboration with the French Communist Party (PCF) in the early 1930s, which gave rise to "La vérité sur les colonies" (1931) (the truth about the colonies), are not well known outside of academe. This was a counter exhibition which criticised popular world fairs and ethnographic museums of the day. "La vérité sur les colonies" (1931) examined how colonial and patrician values came to be effectively "naturalised" in many museum displays. The counter-exhibition used juxtaposition, substitution, parody and irony which would later, in the 1960s and 1970s, become central techniques of institutional critique and artists' interventions. In this instance, indigenous art works from French colonised territories were exhibited alongside mass produced Catholic statues and votive offerings. All were subject to the same labelling, designating them as "fetishes," a term (usually reserved for the art and artefacts of colonised peoples) which inferred they were from an inferior, superstitious, belief system. Short texts accompanying the exhibits referred to "the destruction of the art of colonised people by religious missionaries" (Mileaf, 2001, p. 247). The intention would have been for exhibition visitors to critically question the devastating actions of missionaries and the ways in which exhibitions and museums are complicit in imposing negative judgment on the belief systems and cultural products of others.

Later examples of artists' interventions into the museum's representational

and pedagogic purposes in the 1960s and 1970s are more widely documented and reflect the process of artists becoming increasingly attentive to the hierarchies and “logic” of representative power in museums and galleries. Exclusionary practices of exhibiting almost exclusively white, male, European or north American artists, for example, became an equally important reason to question their centrality in determining and legitimating art. This was a part of the more general contestation of social injustice that manifested in social activism: civil rights campaigns, feminism, queer politics, multiculturalism, etc, where significant numbers of artists recognised that their own voices needed to be heard in the field of criticism and also that to be in control of their own work they needed to be in control of the site in which it would be seen. If this led to an increasing engagement with alternative spaces/places and brought the formation of a new genre of “site-specific art,” it also meant that more artists began to make galleries and museums the subject of their work. A substantive understanding of the historicity and contemporary condition of these institutions started to be researched and translated through art practice. Context became content, and the museum, both public and private, was regarded as a site whose illusion of impartiality was no longer tenable. In fact, many artists’ relationships with cultural institutions in the 1960s and 1970s were intended to expose what they believed museums “concealed” from public view.

By performing an archaeology, in every way connected to Foucault’s writings (1989; 2000), such approaches aimed to “unmask” the normalised discourses of hierarchy, teleology, nationalist propaganda, and dominant pedagogic ideology. The economic function of the commercial “white cube” gallery, labour relations, pay and working conditions and the dearth of living women artists and artists of colour collected by museums, were all significant concerns to artists attempting to change the policies and practices of public institutions. The pedagogic aspects of these projects often centre on the aim of correcting and reframing histories and performing a counteractive, critical pedagogy. As Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández and Alexandra Arráiz Matute (2014) remind us in their examination of pedagogy, “pedagogy always involves a desire; the desire of the one who teaches to induce change in the one who learns—and sometimes vice versa” (p. 57). So too has the intention of many artists’ interventions been to bring about a change in understanding.

The inevitable consequences of globalisation have meant that many museum

collections started to look troublesome and the need to address the legacies of “difficult collections,” reflective of outmoded values, became an imperative. Museum publics too, were increasingly comprised of the “peoples they once considered part of their object” (Shelton in Bennett, 2006, p. 58). Local history and ethnographic museums, in particular, began to be critiqued by artists from the disjunctive populations they once tried to put on display or, contra-wisely, conceal. One such example, *Mining the Museum* (1992–93), by artist Fred Wilson (who self-describes as African, Native American, European and Amerindian) proved to be influential in the course of museum practices. It took place in Baltimore’s Maryland Historic Society (MdHS), which until the 1980s had been a private museum.

Mining the Museum happened in part because the then MdHS director, Charles Lyle, wanted to attract a more inclusive audience that better reflected Baltimore’s mixed demographic. The process of asserting hidden and marginal histories is key to the methodology employed by Wilson and therefore by inviting this approach MdHS were taking a risky course of action. In a gesture of radical transparency, they were initiating a public-facing critique of their collection and its institutionalised values. By allowing Wilson to delve into their archives and curate an alternative interpretation of Baltimore’s history, controversial and divisive artefacts would be dredged from archive to display.

The first exhibit Wilson chose for visitors to encounter was a curious silver trophy, made in the 1870s with the word “truth” cast into its surface. He strategically placed the “truth globe,” once awarded for achieving the truth in advertising, at the entrance to the exhibition as if to pose a question through the visual metaphor of this somewhat bizarre award. Wilson joked “they stopped making it in 1938 which I guess is when people stopped believing there was any truth in advertising” (Karp and Wilson 2000, p. 255). With scepticism about the tendency for museum displays to tell “a” history as if it were “the” history, Wilson invited visitors to consider where truth *per se* resided in the museum and by extension, whose truth it might be? And, how it came to be regarded as such?

In proposing such a question, Wilson was aware of the licence he had been afforded in this sanctioned intervention. He reflected that there would be a contrast between the authoritative, supposedly neutral, interpretations of the institution’s curatorial staff and his own situated and personal reading. In common with Michel Foucault, Wilson’s understanding of truth is as “a system of exclusion” (Foucault, 2013, p. 2). Wilson reflected on public expectations of the museum to

provide “some form of universal truth or knowledge’ a notion that he holds suspect” (Buskirk, 1994, p. 109).

An iconic and enduring image from *Mining the Museum* is a pair of rusty slave manacles placed in a vitrine containing *repoussé* silverware, for which Wilson’s label reads simply: “Metalwork 1793–1880.” The conjunction of these two artefacts, so closely imbricated in Baltimore’s history of slavery, was hitherto unspoken of in the museum. Fortuitously, Wilson’s exhibition occurred in the same year that the American Association of Museums held their annual conference in Baltimore thereby maximising its impact. Its influence opened up many more collaborations and partnerships between museums, artists and publics aimed at creating more inclusive institutions where the re-telling of histories will continue. Yet the need for vigilance remains.

Even though the 2019 Whitney Biennial, in New York City, was one of the most diverse in the event’s history, (with a majority of the artists being people of colour, and half identifying as women) before the exhibition opened the museum had become a site of protest by nearly 100 Whitney Museum staff and one of the Biennial’s curators, Rujeko Hockley. Their objection? Warren B. Kander’s status as vice chair of the Museum.

I visited the exhibition in May 2019, before the work by London based arts group “Forensic Architecture,” a film installation titled *Triple-Chaser*, was withdrawn by the artists from what has now been called “the tear gas Biennial” (Black, Finlayson, and Haslett, 2019). *Triple-Chaser* investigates the distribution and use of tear gas canisters. Significantly, the canisters under scrutiny were produced by a defence manufacturing company called “Safariland,” owned by Mr Kanders. Used globally against protesters and closer to home, on asylum seekers along the U.S.–Mexico border, these weapons are not illegal but their use is highly contested by human rights groups. Forensic Architecture weren’t the only or the first, in the long list of Biennial artists who withdrew their work from the exhibition in protest at Kanders’ position in the public museum but they were the only artists making work that directly addressed what Kanders’ business activities meant for others. To put this another way, their work was pedagogic in guiding the visitor to better understand the connections between public museums, ethical responsibility and publicly accountability.

Elsewhere in Japan, another controversy temporarily closed down the 1919 Aichi Triennale, only three days after it opened in Nagoya. Ironically the cause in

this case was an exhibition section titled “After Freedom of Expression?” featuring art works that have been censored in Japan. In a curatorial venture not too dissimilar to Joseph Kosuth’s *The Play of the Unmentionable* (1991) at the Brooklyn Museum, New York (which addressed the censorship of art and design dictated by political and religious circumstances at different points in history), “After Freedom of Expression?” overtly raised the issue of external influences on what and how visual culture is made available in public museums and arts events.

In particular, it was the work of South Korean artists, Kim Seo-kyung and Kim Eun-sung and their presentation of a ‘sculpture of a *Girl of Peace*,’ that attracted consternation. The Japan Times reported that the decision to close the exhibition section at the Aichi Arts Centre was made for safety concerns, after the Triennale organisers received a flurry of threats of violence over the sculpture in the exhibition. Reminiscent of many other such statues that appear in major cities across South Korea as a reminder of the Korean women (euphemistically called comfort women) who were sexually enslaved by the Japanese military during the period of occupation, this is still an aspect of history largely repressed in Japan. As with Kosuth’s 1991 example, in those instances where art or artefact has been perceived as a threat to political/social cohesion it has often been silenced.

The Japanese newspaper also pointed to political pressure following a statement by the mayor of Nagoya, Takashi Kawamura, in which he demanded the closure of an exhibition which “tramples on Japanese people’s feelings” (Duron, 2019). For most of the Triennale “After Freedom of Expression?” remained closed to the public and in response to this decision a number of participating artists also removed their work. It was not until 8 October, less than two weeks before the whole Triennale came to a close, that the section was re-opened and the works of the artists, protesting at the forced censorship were reinstated.

In the twenty-first century it is untenable for museums to elide the fact that they present a point of view. A curatorial decision, an interpretation panel, even a label reflects ideological positions and methodological approaches. Richard Sandell (2007) reminds us that “there is no neutral position and exhibition makers face choices concerning the way they develop narratives” (p. 195). The Aichi Triennale is a global arts event, with international participants and artists and the controversy could not be ameliorated or glossed over.

The Museum as a Space for Dissent?

Public museums in Europe owe their provenance to momentous changes brought about by radical events in the eighteenth century (the French Revolution 1789, to name just one) that transformed societies and created new freedoms and obligations. As a concept, *the public sphere*—seems unremarkable in many parts of the world today, but in eighteenth century Europe this new arena for social interaction at a remove from the state and the church, marked significant social change, not least of which was the constitution of the right to dissent, which is fundamental to the Western concept of democracy.

The right to dissent concerns the right to speak of what is right and wrong. For the reformers of the eighteenth century there was no world view that wasn't rational and hence in their view there was only a rational subject, who in the normative rules of a deliberative democracy would be able to exercise such rights and was able to give good reasoning to support particular positions and statements. As Sharon Todd testifies, with every good intention for the governance of institutions this would also be a system that from the outset excluded those for whom this was not a defining aspect of selfhood, those who defined themselves in religious terms, for example and those without the appropriate education needed to sustain reasoned and rational argumentation (Todd, 2009).

At first glance the museum's pedagogic role might seem at a remove from such constitutional matters but the museum as part of the public sphere has also always been a site of contested values and expectations. It is a space too where competing truth claims, values and perspectives exist and in the rules of engagement laid down in the eighteenth century there are questions to be asked about the management of diversity and incommensurability.

The transition from early collections to public museums was not smooth but rather one that fitfully imposed new organising principles and priorities for learning. From a pedagogic standpoint, the reformers of the Enlightenment thought that early collections encouraged a mythic view of the world and consequently sent out the wrong educational messages. The imaginative projections, poetic analogies, mystery and superstition that these collections might inspire were to be replaced by a more rational and scientific world view. The concept of a collection and its interpretation also changed considerably as differences became more important than correspondences. Curiosity's fixation with exotic, rare and strange specimens

could not provide an overview from which such deductions could be made.

So too with the new orders for exhibiting material culture, in which fissures between education as cognitive rationality and entertainment, amusement, pleasure, the emotions, and senses were riven. In museums prescribing an appropriate social conduct of visitors has been well documented (Duncan, 1995; Foucault, 1975). The eighteenth century reformers thought that to be amazed and astonished was only suitable for the lower orders or as Patrick Mauriès (2002) writes, “the most vulnerable in society: women, the very young, the very old, primitive people, the uneducated masses: a motley group collectively designated as *the vulgar*” (p. 193). Crucially, tensions concerning the museum's pedagogic purpose also concern its dual aims of democratising access to material culture on the one hand and on the other controlling how such a culture is defined, represented and ‘used’ by ‘the public’. Foucault's (1975) observation that “the Enlightenment which discovered the liberties also invented the disciplines” (p. 197) is noteworthy here. For it is disciplinary technologies that became increasingly significant in managing radically different world views through a continuous appeal to models of rationalist pedagogy.

By the nineteenth century museum reformers were consumed by a growing sense of the museum's role in achieving political ambitions meant that educational and political ideals became closely intertwined and the museum began to be seen as a powerful institution for achieving specific national goals. In Britain, ensuring high quality artisanship and producing skilled manual workers became an imperative for Henry Cole, the first director of the Victoria and Albert Museum in South Kensington. Cole was also a senior civil servant, as Minister for Education in the mid-nineteenth century, his aim was to facilitate an art education that would secure the exemplary quality of British craftsmanship. Cole saw the museum's role, in concord with the school: to educate by exemplar. He was responsible for introducing art into the curriculum of state schools however, in the late nineteenth century art classes did not extend beyond formulaic drawing techniques. In the *Journal of Design and Manufacturers* (1849) Cole wrote: “We think every carpenter, mason, joiner, blacksmith, and every skilled artisan, would be a better workman if he had been taught to see and observe forms correctly by means of drawing” (Bermingham, 2000, p. 233).

The specific objective of producing skilled manual workers, determined the art pedagogy that Cole promoted. It was an anti-intellectual curriculum of geometric shapes, straight lines, and simple perspective. Uncomplicated still-life drawing, focussing on individual objects and learning from exemplars drawn by teachers

onto blackboards. This would be ideally suited to pupils' progressive skills acquisition and would be easy to correct and assess. In Britain object drawing characterized pupils' experiences of art education well into the twentieth century, and inaccuracy in representing objects, mistakes in perspective and untidiness were almost the only, and certainly the main grounds for assessment of pupils' work. It is useful here to refer back to the examples of the museum research project with teachers and their continued reliance on drawing. Although attitudes and values surrounding the teaching of drawing and art in schools broadened throughout the twentieth century, the principles underpinning Cole's nineteenth century edict for drawing in schools have been remarkably persistent.

In German speaking Europe a very different interrelationship between museums and art education can be found through the figure of Alfred Lichtwark (1852 - 1914) who was appointed director of the *Hamburger Kunsthalle* in 1886. This was a position from which he was also able to influence and direct both art education and museum education. That he did so in close collaboration with several teachers' associations in Hamburg was perhaps more surprising.

Lichtwark was critical of German culture and bemoaned what he thought of as the "philistine state" of Hamburg's middle classes. His objectives for museums and art education were not those of emulation or of improving hand to eye competencies of manual workers. Instead his ideals leant towards the need for wider public participation in the cultural sphere. He saw the constraints and limitations of what he characterised as stuffy intellectual and academic conventions, as a barrier to enabling wider participation in museum learning. Consequently, he directed attention instead towards the senses, particularly fostering a capacity for feeling and looking as foundational precepts for developing the 'taste' of the German people. Somewhat radically for the time, Lichtwark declared in 1900 that "there is no fundamental difference between the capacity for sentiment of a working man or an educated person" (Ashwin 1983, p. 165). He proposed distinct advantages for individuals not to be burdened by, what he thought of as, the prejudice of art historical dogma. When it came to engaging people with art, both canonic and avant-garde, Lichtwark's views on education were quite radical for their day. He advocated *dilettantism*. To our contemporary ears this sounds strange, as today the term carries negative connotations meaning mainly a dabbler or an ill-informed amateur. However, Lichtwark's adoption of the designation *dilettante* stays more within the sense of a non-specialist's right to enjoy art without first having to

freight this enjoyment with classical training. For Lichtwark *dilettantism* was a democratising idea that came very close to Humboldt's concept of "*Bildung*."²⁾ It implies the individual's autonomous education of the self, as s/he engages in many different subjects without becoming narrow-minded or inflexible.

Lichtwark's concept of *dilettantism* was therefore strategically positioned to counter a lack of cultural engagement, that was responsible, in his view, for an over reliance on outmoded aesthetic ideals that stymied development and growth in his home country. His approach to museum and art education appeals to a sensory-emotional learning and was particularly influential in informing later models for teaching art and design, such as the Bauhaus.

However, he took a universalist position on the immediacy of sensory learning experience which, as Priem and Mayer (2017) point out, may appear to enable participatory and inclusive learning but "simultaneously neglects knowledge based reflections about the symbolic, political and social meanings of art and things, or objects, in general" (p. 211). In spite of the very different examples, promoted by Cole and Lichtwark, both men's aims reside within in the nationalistic, instrumental ends they had in sight, namely, serving manufacture and industry by providing a better skilled workforce of labourers, on the one hand, and extending access to culture and promoting more progressive aesthetics on the other. Although their legacies played out in very different ways for museum learning and art education both were sceptical of promoting intellectual, political and theoretical approaches to cultural engagement. And neither appreciated that the museum itself might become the object of study.

In 2019 the International Council of Museums (ICOM) began the process of updating its definition of a museum to better reflect recent transformations and reforms in the sector, and its July 2019 proposal for a revised description begins:

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- 2) The German term *Bildung*, in its most literal sense, means formation but refers more specifically to self-formation or self-cultivation, in education or otherwise, of human moral virtues and intellectual capacities (Herder 2002, Humboldt 1791-1792/1993, Gadamer, 1960). Although Humboldt only served as head of the education section of the Prussian ministry for six months, in that short time he laid down foundations that would support educational direction for decades to come. As a philosopher, linguist, and educational reformer he had a substantive influence and ensured that *Bildung*, with its emphasis on human self-cultivation, would become central to educational philosophy in German speaking Europe. In a philosophical treatise from 1791-92, Humboldt defines *Bildung* as —'the highest and most harmonious development of powers to a complete and consistent whole'(Humboldt in Hohendorf, 1993/2000, p. 187).

“[m]useums 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. . . .³⁾” Although this definition is still in its consultation stage the crucial difference from the older definition is the acknowledgement of different voices, possible disagreements—conflict and the need for critical dialogue. Present too, is a renewed commitment to democracy. Whilst the certainty of the museum’s role as a universal good for society and as a disseminator of knowledge is now balanced with recognition of the museum as a contested site.

The museum is not a monolithic font of knowledge but a dynamic site for understanding the past and its effects on the present. If we are to create inclusive learning opportunities and allow many more voices to have their say in the role of cultural institutions, then museum educators, art teachers and artists need to employ critical vigilance, not as an instrumental resource for short term political ends but to sustain the fractured, disputed and lively space which more fully reflects the egalitarian purpose of a public museum. At the heart of any such aim is the necessity to acknowledge that there are multiple and often conflicting aims for museum education just as there are for art education. Any purposeful engagement with the museum’s educational role needs to accommodate its historical complexity and its ongoing contradictions. Perhaps, most significantly, in our uncertain age when relativism can be mistaken for pluralism and the masking of underlying agendas continues, we need to nurture the right to dissent where it is still possible and to encourage the ability to speak ‘truth’ to power. As some of the artists of the 2019 Whitney Biennial in New York pointed out, they had the right

3) ICOM’s current definition of a museum reads as follows: “A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.” The draft proposal still in the consultation stage but demonstrates the perceived needs from the professional sector to rethink priorities. “Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. 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” [draft July 2019].

to say no and withdraw their labour and that is a human right not available to many people in the world.

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