

ICOM Shanghai

INTERCOM 9th November 2010

Session 1: Changing roles of museums: approaching controversy- neutral spaces or political places?

Chair: Dr. Carol Scott

Good morning and welcome.

It is my great pleasure to chair this session and to introduce my co-presenters. But first, a few words of introduction on the subject of museums and controversy.

In preparing this paper, I was reminded of a time in the late 1990's when I was asked by the Director of the museum where I was then employed to chair a working party tasked with developing guidelines for managing controversy. Though controversy was not new to museums, it suddenly seemed to be gaining momentum. High profile cases at the time included the *Enola Gay* at the Smithsonian Institution Air and Space Museum and the disquieting news for some stakeholders that there were plans to re-interrogate events surrounding the bombing of Hiroshima during World War II. Importantly, that case and others had come to the attention of the media and were being debated in the public domain. It was a phenomenon that senior museum executives observed with increasing alarm with the result that the subtext for the working party that I was chairing at the time was aimed at risk management and risk minimisation.

A significant difference between the late 1990's and today is that controversy is no longer an isolated phenomenon. It is a reality of museum life in the 21st century. Controversy can be found in every facet of museum practice. The taxonomy outlined in Figure 1 represents my own attempt to find some structure in what is occurring.

Sites of controversy

We find controversy in issues associated with our *collections*. One major source of contention centres on perceptions of rightful ownership with calls for repatriation to countries in which objects were first discovered or, in the instance of war looting, to the original owners.

Collections are linked to other controversial issues. In these challenging economic times, some museums have considered 'de-accessioning' objects to manage escalating operating costs or to assist the purchase new works- a move often accompanied by dismay from the public and other professionals. And the provenance of objects acquired by museums and galleries, often in good faith, has been the subject of more intense public scrutiny in recent years.

Inclusions and exclusions are another contested area. There has been controversy over the exclusions of women, migrant groups, indigenous cultures and different expressions of sexuality. Inclusion has not eliminated controversy because conflict can then arise over representation of difference. Decisions about inclusions also involve exclusions. I am reminded of the comment of a colleague who said that every selection of an object, every choice of one story or theme over another privileges that object, story or theme and becomes a political act in itself.

Controversy is also played out through questions of what is *admissible* according to standards, ethics and mores. The exhibition of human remains is a contested area, overt sexuality can provoke dispute- and art, with its capacity to bring with it ‘the shock of the new’, still contains the power to deeply divide public opinion.

Important narratives can be a source of discord. There are divergent views on how we represent war from lionising heroism and celebrating nationalism to deploring inhumanity and the huge social cost to specific groups and generations. The contention around national narratives has witnessed overt intervention from at least one government that did not subscribe to the notion of plurality and diversity in interpreting the national story. The origins of the world and its species is currently a highly polarised debate between creationists and scientists.

Often, however, controversy arises when museums explore *emerging or unresolved social issues* which come accompanied by divergent views and value positions. Whether these are perceived as being linked in some (often indirect) way to current geo-political conflicts, reflect deep divisions within a society or explore issues around which there are contested positions, museums can find themselves in the centre of a maelstrom.

| Collections | Inclusions exclusions | Standards, ethics and mores | Grand narratives | Unresolved/ emerging issues |
|--|----------------------------------|--|-------------------------|--|
| Ownership and repatriation | What should we include? | Human remains | War | Political conflicts |
| De-accessioning | Interpreting difference | Sexuality | National | Societal divisions |
| Provenance and authenticity of objects | Politics of selectivity | Shock of the new | Origin of the world | Emerging issues |

Fig 1: Sites of controversy within museums

Sources of controversy

Why is controversy so prevalent? I suggest four reasons:

1. In a post modern world, plurality brings its own challenges. There is no adherence to one clear, unifying narrative and the vacuum that this provides allows for a diverse range of individualised perceptions about which narratives should be chosen and what form these narratives should take;
2. Increasingly, public discourse is being constructed through social media, giving people a potent vehicle for expressing their views and opinions;
3. For the media, controversy is news; and
4. Our world itself is becoming more polarised and less consensual. Enforcing entrenched positions (be they political, social, cultural or religious) is becoming the norm rather than the exception.

A second major development within the last decade in relation to controversy is that there has been a perceptual change. We are moving beyond the taxonomic classifications and the grand unifying narratives of the previous two centuries in favour of a plurality of voices telling multiple stories about the complexity of history and the world. And, in this we find an opportunity.

Though self-censorship and risk aversion still exist, though containing potential controversy within manageable proportions concerns many senior executives, more museums are seeing in controversy an opportunity to redefine what museums do, welcome difference into their midst and embrace the ambiguity that it brings. The emerging position is one in which museums choose to become proactive rather than reactive in relation to controversy.

So, let me introduce my co-speakers by saying that we speak today from a value position. And that value position is- that it is the responsibility of museums to listen to multiple perspectives, embrace ambiguity and create collaborative conversations around unresolved social issues.

Adopting this position involves conscious choice. By choosing to work from a position which is inclusive of difference and which addresses the conflicts that accompany difference, museums can help people define and find themselves in relation to today's world. Moreover, in the process of fostering those conversations, museums may also provide the space for recognition of the commonalities that unite us all. We contend that the opportunities for museum professionals to see their work as active collaborators with the public in joint problem-solving is redefining museums and their contribution to Public Value in the 21st century.

Lonnie G. Bunch III is founding director of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). Historian, author, educator, curator and scholar, Bunch has spent 30 years in the museum field. Prior to his July 2005 appointment as director of NMAAHC, Bunch served as president of the Chicago Historical Society. The title of his paper is '*Meaning, reflection, hope: the National Museum of African American History and Culture*'.

David Fleming, OBE is Director of the National Museums Liverpool. The International Slavery Museum is one of the major capital projects which have opened since his arrival in 2001. Prior to his present position, David was director of the multi-award-winning Tyne and Wear Museum. He is Past President of the UK Museums Association. His topic is '*Pushing boundaries: establishing the International Slavery Museum*'.

Marsha L. Semmel has been Acting Director, Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), a federal agency in Washington, DC. She has worked in federal cultural agencies, including the National Endowment for the Humanities, and museums, including the Smithsonian Institution, the Women of the West Museum, Conner Prairie, and The Taft Museum, since 1975. Marsha will speak about '*Public Trust, Public Value, Tough Issues: IMLS and Contemporary Museum Practice*'.