

Transcending fear - engaging emotions & opinion - a case for museums in the 21st century

In 1996 Robert Macdonald in his article *Museums and Controversy: What Can We Handle?* asked the question “controversy – can museums handle it?” and firmly stated that the answer to this question must be “yes” if museums are to advance their missions as centers for learning” (Macdonald 1996: 167-169). Now, seven years on, and post the Enola Gay fiasco to which Macdonald refers, how equipped are museums to deal with highly charged topics, responses and public criticism in a culture that has traditionally disengaged such emotions? What potential and future roles can museums play in contemporary debates, and in representing "difficult histories" and taboo topics?

This paper offers an overview of some of the multifarious and overlapping issues that impinge on museums as they engage with contentious topics. First, by discussing the terms of an internationally significant research project, *Exhibitions as Contested Sites – the role of museums in contemporary society*, aimed at the investigation of the potential and future roles of museums around contentious subjects. Second, I draw on case examples and preliminary research results to unpack the form and content of contentious topics, in order to deconstruct why these topics - divisive, emotional and opinion-based are so difficult to represent. I then examine museums' responses to contentious topics and the curatorial practices

employed to deal with this subject matter, drawing on case examples and observations from qualitative research undertaken with museum staff at institutions in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the US and UK. I then advance the discussion by testing and critiquing these practices against community needs and expectations of museums, drawing on current qualitative research. Finally I discuss new models of engagement for museums around contentious topics, utilising some preliminary results of omnibus surveys and focus group discussions with community groups.

The research context

Museums now exist in a cultural, social and political context of contestation. Although academics and museum practitioners such as Macdonald (1999) have mused on these ideas, conversations have been preoccupied with describing and deconstructing controversies or providing an introspective analysis of the emergence of museums as sites of controversy in the US context (see Harris 1999); (Boyd 1999). More recently Caleb Williams (2001) in his article *Beyond Good and Evil? The Taboo in the Contemporary Museum: Strategies for Negotiation and Representation* extended debates by accounting for the emergence of taboo topics in museums as part of a theoretical discourse while offering strategies for negotiating and representing this subject matter in programs.

Despite these recent arguments and the continuous reassessment since the emergence of the new museology of what the museum does and for whom institutions speak, there lacks a theoretical, analytical and practical

framework based on sustained research to understand the contemporary and future roles of museums in relation to these subjects. As a consequence the project *Exhibitions as Contested Sites – the role of museums in contemporary society* (with partners University of Sydney Department of History, the Australian Museum and the Australian War Memorial, funded by the Australian Research Council through the Strategic Partnerships with Industry SPIRT scheme) seeks to address these matters. That is, to extend museological debates about the roles of museums in contemporary society with an emphasis on how institutions can deal effectively with the challenge of developing exhibitions on controversial subjects.

The only other research of significance to date in this field was the Washington DC based ASTC Issues Laboratory Project on *Communicating Controversy in Science Museums* (Issues Laboratory Collaborative 1995). Although this project contributed substantially to an understanding of the way science centres could effectively interpret contemporary and contentious science topics, it did not encompass a broader examination of the social roles of institutions.

To this end, one of the most significant research objectives of the *Contested Sites* project for the international museum community is the investigation of the potential future roles and positioning of museums around controversial topics through an account of the attitudes and expectations of museum staff, stakeholders, media and audiences. Here the research team draws on case examples and a program of qualitative and quantitative research in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, United States and the United Kingdom to investigate these issues. From this point we aim to steer the

debate beyond rhetoric to address the important problem of what functions institutions and exhibitions might perform in the future representation of "difficult" topics.

So some of the challenging propositions examined through our research including the following. What is the current and latent roles of museums as information resources on contentious topics as opposed to other sources such as books, the media and schools? Should they act as provocateurs, leaders of public opinion and offer transformative spaces to challenge and change views? Or are museums to be safe civic places for the exploration of a range of views? Can museums take on a social activism role, to assist in the resolution of issues on a personal or political level or should they be places for non-challenging social experiences? Alternatively can museums be all of these things at once?

Other potent issues relating to these positions include questions of authority, power, trust and a redefinition of relationships between museums and audiences. A comparison of the different geo-political, social, cultural and institutional contexts within which the international museum community operates helps to illuminate the challenges, limitations and opportunities that institutions face in presenting contentious subjects. What makes US museums more prone to controversy than institutions in Australia and the United Kingdom for example? And to what extent are debates about museums and contentious topics, primarily derived from North American case examples, applicable to institutions in other countries?

Another research objective is to situate controversy in a historical context by investigating how particular exhibitions in the past have been

defined as controversial and how the definition has affected the roles and functioning of museums. The aim is to understand the dynamics of controversy and criticism around a number of exhibitions through specific case studies. How can museums deal with these difficulties in an increasingly politicised environment? What lessons can be learned from the deconstruction of controversies and how can they inform new roles, new interpretive strategies and effective ways of resolving conflict when it arises? Here an investigation into philosophies of conflict and conflict resolution along with interviews with stakeholders and the perpetrators of controversies, provide a framework for understanding these events. That is, the circumstances that aroused criticism, the position taken by museums, the motivations of interest groups as well as policies for the resolution of conflict. Additionally interviews with curators who are or have been involved in the curation of controversial topics, those that have engendered criticism and those that have not, help illuminate the decisions made in choosing and interpreting topics and their content. Furthermore, research also involves an analysis of the positioning of the museums voice, the consultation and evaluation processes involved in the development of content and the nature and role of particular stakeholder, institutional and managerial imperatives in the process.

In the past the media has been cast as a major contributor to the form of museum-related controversies. Yet little sustained research has been undertaken on the relationships between museums and the media. There is little firm documentation about the respective roles of museums and media as information sources, related issues of trust, authority and the latter's position

in reporting, and inciting museum controversies (Ellison 2002). Here the analysis of media theory, journalistic practice and media relationships with museums provide a useful conduit to discourses about how perceptions of museums and specific programs are formulated, the ways media debates can be used as a basis for program development and how museums can better function in these circumstances.

Another area the *Contested Sites* project addresses is learning theory and the ways programs have successfully communicated controversial subjects. What are the most effective ways of orientating and engaging audiences with these topics? What special opportunities do digital media and the web provide for ongoing conversations and arguments around these topics?

As a result research outcomes aim to

- Provide a framework that will enable museums in Australia and overseas to be more informed of their roles
- Improve the capacity of museums to anticipate and deal with controversial issues and debates
- Develop a set of strategies for museums on ways they can effectively represent controversial issues and sensitive topics in exhibitions while engaging audiences needs and expectations through an active learning environment.

So what are potentially contentious topics and why are they so difficult to represent?

Controversial subjects include taboo topics, sensitive issues, a particular historical interpretation or an artwork that embodies an idea, or questions that have a divisive dimension, raising alternative answers while challenging an individual's or group's values, beliefs, ideologies or moral position. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) stated that humans are suspended in webs of their own significance, this assortment of ideologies and beliefs being the foundations of attitudes and personal truths. Therefore attitudes and responses to contentious subjects are the result of this array of beliefs, values and ideologies and subsequent responses to these topics are determined individually and collectively. In short, what is deemed controversial or confronting to one individual may not be to another.

Many issues have social, economic, ethical, religious and political dimensions. The sensitive topic of human embryonic stem cell research, for example, has both a dissentious social, ethical, cultural and religious dimension to it, raising a number of dilemmas, the most controversial being the cloning and use of human embryos for research. On the other hand scientific imperatives, the belief that such research can provide potential cures for debilitating conditions such as diabetes, Parkinson's disease and spinal cord injuries, as well as the consequent economic benefits it brings are other elements driving the issue. Bruce Lahn (2002:30) a human genetics researcher clearly sets out these arguments in a recent medical journal:

By now the controversy surrounding human embryonic stem cell research is familiar to most of us. At its center are two opposing views. One argues that such research may bring tremendous benefits to human health...The other

asserts that such research violates the sanctity of human embryos and therefore morally and ethically unacceptable.

Therefore, in this case a conflict exists between religious and moral sensibilities and scientific and economic needs within certain sectors of society.

The way a particular history is interpreted embodies differing values, beliefs and resulting attitudes, often setting up a contentious platform. Therefore, contentiousness can arise as a result of a collision around historical understanding, scholarly interpretation and the complex relationship to the recollection of events by those who participated. Often however, the facts of the dispute are not the only concern. Underlying ideological, belief factors, perceived threats to identity, self-worth and power (political or economic) of an interest group can drive the process. The exhibition *The Last Act: The End of World War II, The Atomic Bomb, and the Origins of the Cold War* (known as the Enola Gay fiasco) at the National Air and Space Museum, Washington DC in 1995 is the most famous case in point. Here a conflict arose between the air force veterans and their collective myth of glory and heroism against the museum's scholarly revisionist interpretation espousing the complexities and morality around the atomic events that ended WWII.

The focus of the dispute was one caption.

For Americans this war was fundamentally different from the one waged against Germany and Italy – it was a war of vengeance. For most Japanese, it was a war to defend their unique culture against Western Imperialism. (MacIntyre 1994)

In an appraisal of the draft of the text, Wallace (1995:42-43) argued that it was a fair, balanced and a good scholarly analysis of the situation, clearly setting out the

complexity of the issues using first person accounts and opinions. So what went wrong and what was the driving force behind the controversy? Here the text was interpreted by a highly motivated individual John T Correll, editor of the Air Force Association's magazine *Air Force*, as underplaying Japanese aggression while perpetuating the idea that the last act was an immoral one (Wallace 1995:42). Additionally estimates over the numbers of American lives saved by the atomic bomb, averting the need to invade Japan, was also a point of contention (Zolberg 1996:74). But more importantly, the inclusion of ground-zero objects and first person accounts of Japanese experiences juxtaposed with the Enola Gay created an emotive platform. According to senior curator Tom Crouch (2002:8) the exhibition was an honest presentation of the event but once the first person was inserted, it became highly emotionally charged and as such unconsciously questioned the war aims and the morality of the last act:

The show was white hot. Once you passed the Enola Gay you came up to a little bento box that belonged to a 14 year old girl filled with carbonised rice and peas. The parents found the box but not the little girl. So we had the box and a photo of the girl in a little sailor suit in the exhibition. That bento box was going to blow everything else out of the water and you can just see what the problem with the show was...it was too emotional ... And because of the nature of what happened it would have been impossible to do an honest show that wouldn't be emotional... And yet when you did an honest presentation, that was precisely what some people thought was calling the war aims into question...they, the Airforce Association wanted a cold and clinical presentation. The show was also communicating a non-nuclear message (2002:8).

Crouch (2002) goes on to say that institutions such as NASM that have a special relationship with their stakeholders (in this instance, the aircraft industry and the airforce) "care an awful lot about what the museum says because it is their sort of front window on the world" (8). Therefore the politicisation of the exhibition was an ideological struggle between the

institution, historians and stakeholders as to what narrative and hence message was to prevail. The latter won the war.

So on a social and ethical level the museum's interpretation, in which the motives for the atomic event were questioned, was perceived as a threat to the veterans' self-worth and identity. Yet on a political and economic front, the controversy surrounding the exhibition was used as a platform to defend the air force's image in order to curb cuts in airforce funding and a decline in recruits (Wallace 1995:42). Timing is also a major factor in what is deemed controversial. This exhibition coincided with the 50th anniversary of the end of the war. Therefore, a "revisionist" interpretation of the end of WWII was seen as inconsistent with the commemoration of the event.

What is contentious can change as moral sensibilities shift or new knowledge is created (Issues Laboratory Collaborative 1995:4). For example in the late 1970s and early 1980s assisted reproductive technology was very controversial. Since then the opinion of many sectors of society, albeit not for some religious groups, has shifted to embrace this technology as a legitimate and ethical means of helping infertile couples to achieve their dream of having a baby. Lahn (2003:30) predicts the same fate will befall the embryonic stem cell research controversy due to changing cultural conventions:

My prediction is that...in a few years most people will have forgotten about the controversy...Because I believe that viewpoint supporting stem cell research is predicated on a universal and eternal human drive, whereas the opposing side is based on a contemporary cultural conviction that is neither universal or eternal.

Similarly what is taboo also shifts with changing public opinion and moral sensibilities as topics such as homosexuality move from the private to the public realm.

Where new knowledge and museum representations are out of step with public opinion, especially with conservative voices or interest groups, controversies can be enacted. Curators of the *Trade and Empire* exhibition at the National Maritime Museum, London in 1999 sought to reinterpret the history of the British Empire away from accepted glory narratives to a critical analysis of the British involvement in slavery. The exhibition was critiqued by John Ezard in the *Weekly Guardian* (1999:21) as “depriving the British people of any aspect of their history in which they can take justifiable pride.”

What is safe for one is not always safe for another

So how "unsafe" is the historical scholarship offered in museums? Clearly some aspects of the past are safe whereas others are not. Topics that are inherently political such as war or reconciliation with Indigenous peoples often embody a division of opinion that is so large it is difficult to represent and transcend without mobilising the voices of interest groups or motivated individuals. At the National Museum of Australia for instance, the interpretation of national history, in particular frontier conflict and massacres of Aborigines, received much criticism from the conservative political commentators David Barnett and Keith Windschuttle. Here Windschuttle lambasted the museum for using oral sources in the exhibits and contented that it was an inadmissible form of evidence. More specifically he argued that some massacres such as Bells Ford Gorge, near Bathurst in the 1820s, did not occur as they were not officially recorded, discounting the oral tradition of the Wiradjuri people as they were not there (Windschuttle 2001:15-16).

Paradoxically, the museum according to Windschuttle should only represent one history, the official record (Casey 2002b, 2-3).

Where Windschuttle largely based his criticism on inconsistencies with official records, Miranda Devine, a journalist with the Sydney *Daily Telegraph* lead her attack by directly appealing to traditionalist views of history and patriotic sensibilities. In the *Daily Telegraph* of 12 March 2001, Devine claimed that the National Museum of Australia represented "a sneering ridicule at white history." Likewise Barnett (2001:2) is reported to have advocated a serious and strictly educational approach to national history, avoiding any reference to the more depressing matters but rather engendering a sense of pride and patriotism. As with the Enola Gay example, we may also wonder what other hidden agendas and unmet needs may have driven these responses.

Historical scholarship in support of the existence of massacres was first produced by historian Professor Henry Reynolds more than 20 years ago. This research according to Professor Robert Manne (2003:1-3), formed part of a movement to break the "great Australian silence" about the dispossession of Aborigines first begun with anthropologist W R H Stanner in his seminal lecture on ABC radio in 1968. Although clearly this history was not a new concept, having been presented in other media and publication contexts, the National Museum of Australia was one of the first museums to represent this view. Additionally, the tone and content of the exhibition was developed by a group of leading academics drawing on the "best scholarship" available on the topic. For the majority of museum-goers, who tend to be well-educated, the accounts of history and the role of the museum in presenting alternatives views of history was entirely appropriate. The tone of responses are summed

up in one visitor's comment, "it's a courageous museum, and the only one I have visited which both informs and creates a platform for debate" (Tonkin 2002). Traditionalists however viewed the same approach to history, one that failed to present a master narrative, a strong authoritative voice and a chronicle of progress, as confronting. Interestingly, in a memo to the acting director in 2000, Barnett's stated that "the role of the museum was to present history not debate it" (quoted in Macintyre 2003:192). Interestingly, Barnett's accusations clearly countered the general feelings expressed by many visitors. As Director Dawn Casey (2002b) stated in a recent interview with the author "what is safe for one is not for another"

So from a die-hard traditionalist's point of view the National Museum of Australia is certainly confronting. They believe we should only be covering high achievers and significant parts of Australian history, we should not be quirky and we should not be covering a whole lot of activities, and we do and we should...So for those people the fact that we have changed is confronting – the museum is no longer considered a safe place to be (Casey 2002b:5).

Similarly, the perceived roles of museums as historical experts vary.

Like the National Air and Space Museum, the assumed authority of the National Museum of Australia as the voice of the nation made the institution more vulnerable to attack. Museums are still experienced by many people including Barnett as institutions where one gains an understanding of a celebratory and objective history through the veneration of historical objects (Shelton, 1990:97). Barnett also warned of trouble from audiences as well as parliament and the media (Macintyre 2003:193). Paradoxically, only a minority of visitors reiterated the critics' charges. That is, showing a darker side of history in the national museum is tantamount to "letting the country down" in the eyes of some Australians and tourists. One respondent stated

“this history is profoundly offensive to Australia, taking the mickey out of everything” (Tonkin 2002:2). Another declared “it’s culturally biased towards this Indigenous rewrite of history and I feel as a white male I’m made to feel embarrassed by the exhibits” (tonkin 2002:2)). In this instance contemporary academic scholarship collided with “unfashionable” official histories, popular understandings of national history and traditional perceptions of what a national museum is and should be.

On the basis of this dispute, and shifts in the way some museums are representing history, there is a strong case for museums to be more transparent in the way they curate content for exhibitions. That is, to explain the sorts of editorial decisions made in selecting topics that inform the fashioning of ideas and the disciplinary paradigms that shape contemporary curatorial practice. In the case of historical subjects for example institutions need to acknowledge more overtly that history is a changing body of knowledge, full of contradictions and paradoxes and that in current historiography the master narrative is no longer sustainable or at least belongs to an earlier paradigm. The infallibility and inherent bias of sources also needs to be stipulated in exhibition text. Yet few museums refer to these inconsistencies in contemporary historiography. Significantly, due to Windschuttle’s criticism, the exhibit on the Bells Ford massacre was modified to include an explanation of oral histories as evidence. This, according to Director Dawn Casey (2002b:3) was a strategy to explain the nature of contemporary historiographical inquiry and the difference between oral history and official records as historical evidence.

Is a lack of transparency in curatorial practice a legacy of the past? Or is the problem outmoded community perceptions of what museums are? Do

museums fear the loss of trust, status and authority if they expose their processes of cultural production and present themselves as subjective? Or is it simply a case of bringing practice up to speed? Arguably, it is time to fundamentally re-evaluate curatorial practice and to develop strategies that incorporate complex epistemological ideas into popular discourses. Here, like other changes in museum practice over recent years, such as the incorporation of subaltern voices and disparate racial, ethnic, gendered, class and doctrinal perspectives in exhibitions due to the emergence of 'new histories' since the 1970s, museums need to institute a program of gradual reform in terms of their *raison d'être*. That is, they need to overtly acknowledge to their audiences that institutions are not some divine entity but rather are created by communities and change with each generation. Topics are included and interpreted according to how the current generation chooses to see things. Likewise controversial subjects as well as their interpretation are individual and group specific, based on competing values and attitudes (2002b:3). One participant in a recent audience focus group discussion for the Contested Sites project in Canberra summed this up by stating "there is scope for change in the perception of what a museum represents...it's the museum to a point that drives this perspective of what it is and should be" (Contested Sites Audience Focus Group, Canberra, Wednesday 20th November 2002).

The Transformative Museum

Unpredictability and complexity are defining characteristics of contentious topics (Issues Laboratory Collaborative 1995:4). These subjects often exhibit no one single correct answer. The diversity of alternative opinions given to an issue by different sectors of society (age, gender, cultural/ethnic background), as well as deciphering the hidden agendas, unmet needs and frustrations that drive individual and group responses, are key variables contributing to their complication and volatility.

Furthermore, a controversial issue can be found in almost any representation of history or a topic of which there are strong opinions (Issues Laboratory Collaborative 1995:4). Emotion is almost always a factor. Consider the Tampa incident and the Australian government's treatment of asylum seekers for example, now firmly entrenched in the national historical record as a formative event (Manne 2002). The government's decision to use military force to repel boat people as well as the "children overboard" affair invoked reactions from anger, sadness, despair, fear and shock. However, contest and emotions have traditionally been disengaged in museums and exhibitions except for commemorative spaces such as Holocaust museums. Arguably this is due to museological preoccupations with the presentation of empirically based research, one that demands a separation of emotion from a topic in order to engage rational thinking. More recently however, the National Museum of Australia's *Eternity* Gallery used emotions such as Joy, Passion,

Hope and Fear as key themes to explore people's life experiences, using the first person. Here the exhibition and its emotional tenor acted as a conduit to broader issues and the expression of audience concerns around the emotions hope and fear in the aftermath of September 11th 2001 (Casey 2002b:4).

In most instances the museum's voice remains devoid of an emotional tenor or position in an effort to set up a "safe", balanced and seemingly impartial environment to represent a potentially contentious topic. The National Museum of American History's exhibition *September 11 Bearing Witness to History* attempted to maintain a detached interpretation of the topic while using witness stories to convey the sensitive aspects of the event. Here the absence of an overt curatorial voice, the use of factual statements in labelling and "benign" lighting all sought to under-cut some of the emotion as a kind of antidote to the drama of the media coverage (National Museum of American History 2002: 6).

There are objects in there that could easily move people to tears if we really wanted to...but that is not what we were doing. It is presenting their stories without sentiment. We certainly could have lit the exhibit very dramatically and had evocative soundscapes, and we could have stopped everyone in their tracks and given them a box of tissues and sent them home. There was no need to do that – it would have been squandering the public's trust to do that (National Museum of American History 2002::9).

Yet, emotions were engaged. The power of objects such as the fragments of aircraft that crashed into the World Trade Center and personal testimonies elicited strong emotions from some visitors in an institution unaccustomed to dealing with such responses:

One man came out of the witness section, leaned his head against the wall and cried. It is not something we are accustomed to seeing. As historians we don't normally deal with emotions because most of our exhibits are too far in the past that people don't care (National Museum of American History 2002: 9).

So what is the role of emotions in representing contentious topics? Can museums engage the opinions, politics and emotional responses of their audiences without losing their trust and respect?

Omnibus surveys conducted with museum and non-museum goers and focus group discussions in Sydney and Canberra suggest that for many, museums can potentially be powerful places for the engagement of emotions and opinions around contentious topics (Market Attitude Research Services 2002a); (Market Attitude Research Services 2002b). Adding to this, several participants in focus group discussions in Sydney and Canberra (all of whom have visited museums in the last year) overwhelmingly suggested that trust and respect in museums is based on the reliability of information provided, and their inherent belief that museums have and should maintain a non-political or unbiased stance on topics (Contested Sites Focus Group discussions, Sydney, Monday 11th November 2002, Tuesday 12th November 2002, 6pm, Tuesday 12th November 2002, 8pm); (Contested Sites Focus Group discussions, Canberra, Tuesday 19th November 2002, Wednesday 20th November, 2002). That is, if topics are presented in a balanced way, are based on the best scholarship available, show a range of positions on topics using a variety of sources even if contentious, then that trust will be maintained.

Zahava Doering (2002) argues that national museums, according to her research, are perceived by audiences as places of celebration and validation, extending but not challenging beliefs, a mission that the institution should not attempt to deviate from. Boyd (1999:216) however, doubts whether this premise is as clear cut. He argues that the country is divided over whether or

not the Smithsonian can or should celebrate the nation's past without re-evaluation (216).

Our research and the results of exit surveys conducted at the National Museum of Australia challenge Doering's findings and support Stephen Weil's (1999: 236) contention that museums are quintessentially places that have the potency to change what people may know or think or feel, to influence the attitudes they may adopt or display and the values they may form (242). Only a minority of visitors to the National Museum of Australia were looking for confirmation of their own beliefs and a safe and comfortable interpretation of Australian history. Most sought more challenging experiences, that is, programs that use scholarship as a conduit to engage with the emotions and the intellect. According to one respondent surveyed at the National Museum of Australia (who encapsulated the views of many others) "the museum made us think, especially about Indigenous people - these displays changed our views positively" (Tonkin 2002:2). Another remarked that "the museum made me think about the future – its not just about giving the facts" (Tonkin 2002:2).

Even more significantly 59% of people surveyed as part of the *Exhibitions as Contested Sites* omnibus survey in Sydney suggested that museums should challenge generally accepted views, with a further 63% stating that museums should not be afraid to change views of their audiences on important topics (Market Attitude Research Services, 2002a:3, 9). There were, however, differences between socio-demographic groups regarding the perceived social roles of museums. Generally older people and lower socio-economic segments represented in the survey (the latter often non-museum goers), were more conservative in their perception of museums (11). Younger

people and those of higher socio-economic groups by comparison (many of the latter identifying themselves as museum goers), see a need for museums to have a more active role, particularly as places that challenge generally accepted views on important topics and for the unafraid examination of contentious subjects (11).

Transformative experiences and attitudinal shifts, according to many focus group participants, can be achieved by expanding audiences' knowledge by opening them up to a range of perspectives on topics through diverse viewpoints, the provision of alternative historical accounts and sources, and new information on contentious subjects (Contested Sites Focus Group discussions, Sydney, Monday 11th November 2002, Tuesday 12th November 2002, 6pm, Tuesday 12th November 2002, 8pm); (Contested Sites Focus Group discussions, Canberra, Tuesday 19th November 2002, Wednesday 20th November, 2002). According to one retiree surveyed "such exhibitions can help people become more broadminded". Perhaps our results suggests Australian communities and museums are more liberal in their thinking to those in the US. To this end, one of our long-term research plans is to investigate how other communities might respond to the same questions in an effort to present a cross-cultural picture of museums and their potential roles.

Mark O'Neil, Director of Glasgow Museums (2002:10) in a recent interview suggested that museums tend to preach to the converted. That is, talking to audiences that hold similar values and beliefs as museum staff. But according to O'Neil this is a valid exercise as everyone has pockets of prejudice. So if museums engage with their audiences in a spirit of openness

through a diversity of information sources, opinions and values then transformative experiences on a personal level may occur.

However, the key issue in the reformation of museums is audience participation in debates. Overwhelmingly, 95% of people surveyed in our recent Canberra omnibus survey (Market Attitude Research Services 2002b:1) and a further 87% of Sydney respondents wanted museums to provide more opportunities for audiences to have their say about the topics being presented (Market Attitude Research Services 2002a:9). That is, they wanted to exercise their democratic right to be heard in a publicly funded institution. Here visitors expressed a desire to take centre stage in discussions and arguments about contentious topics within exhibitions as well as other public programs. Surprisingly the majority of staff focus groups I have conducted did not score visitor interaction as highly, although the analysis of this data has yet to be completed.

Here museums have the potential to offer other types of spaces for engagement other than thought provoking and reflective places in which to consider potentially contentious issues in context. To this end museums face a new challenge, to create more socially active and engaging spaces creating dialogue not just with the institution but also with other audiences. This means embracing rather than showing a disdain for and an attempt to control visitors' emotional responses and opinions. The ideal is not always to provoke controversy but to engage with important issues and encourage people to think, feel or get involved with them. As such, museums have the opportunity to draw strength from diversity and dissension, and to use the range of opinion to foster tolerance and even personal transformations. As

one respondent (female 30-39 demographic, homemaker) remarked “if there is more discussion then people will be better informed and form their own opinions” (Market Attitude Research Services 2002:20). Taking the argument a step further, another participant (male 40 years, employed, blue collar trade) advocated “that museums should challenge views, and should create and stimulate opinions” (19).

For some, the engagement of emotions and opinion has the potential to cast museums (including those with a specific commemorative function), as places for resolution and healing on a personal level. According to one survivor of the Pentagon attack, the 9/11 exhibition at the National Museum of American History “did more than all the counseling sessions at the Pentagon...this was very healing for me” (National Museum of American History 2002: 5).

Leading on from this proposition, do museums have a role in the resolution of important issues beyond personal transformation? According to preliminary findings from our research for many this issue is a point of contention. Here both audiences and staff suggest that a potential role in the resolution of issues portrays museums as political advocates, a position normally reserved for government and not heritage institutions. Interestingly Mark O’Neil, in a recent interview (2002:10) suggested that museums can play a role in resolving issues, that is in fostering social reform rather than providing answers, by working with other agencies:

To move beyond interesting pilot projects and symbolic statements to where we stand and to make a difference, museums need to accept that they are a small part of the educational structures in society. To institute change on a broad scale we need to work with other arts organizations, social work, schools and fit in with a whole range of other people who are working towards

a more tolerant and open society that's honest about difficult issues. Museums can provide the backdrop for raising these issues. We have to think about what sort of society a museum aspires to help create. (10)

Arguably some museums do attempt to resolve broader issues on a smaller scale, in a more subtle, less adversarial way by promoting a certain position. The *Ecologic: Creating a Sustainable Future* exhibition at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney for example advocates sustainable living by promoting certain environmental policies and practices such as efficient power, water usage and recycling and endorsing the use of alternative fuels. The values espoused in an exhibition such as this are basically consensual, but what the museum does in this instance is to inform and encourage visitors to take an active role in promoting a sustainable society. In the words of Stephen Weil (1999:236) "museums are in the process of transforming themselves into an instrument for communal empowerment, as an instrument for social transformation".

Beyond consensual values

Williams (2002:1) argued in his recent article that sensitive topics have a melting point. This is a point where public opinion is aroused, where values, beliefs and ideologies are challenged and controversy is enacted. Should museums interpret topics to "play out" the melting points of specific audience sectors or remain within widely tolerated limits? And what is the role of the museum's voice? Can museums openly advocate certain positions or lead opinion?

Subsuming and editing contested subjects to adhere to consensual values, often erring on the side of conservatism, is one of the underlying premises of the Enlightenment model. Hein (2000: pix) contends that museums are conservative agents of normalisation, institutions that tend to create and express socially acceptable conventions in an effort to find a common ground with their diverse audiences. Many museums would argue otherwise, that their efforts are geared towards presenting a unbiased and incontrovertible account.

Preliminary findings from qualitative research with museum staff in Canada, United States, United States, New Zealand and Australia have confirmed this tendency to seek exhibition topics and curate others in a non-confrontational way that attempts to find common ground with targeted audience groups rather than to mobilise responses and engage audiences in serious debate. In many institutions curating potentially contentious topics (if undertaken at all) results in an attempt to adhere to acceptable norms and tolerated limits. The setting of limits however varies from institution to institution with the topic, the geographical, socio/political and funding contexts within which institutions operate and the perceived sensibilities of their targeted audiences. Maintaining a position as arbiters of good taste and a place that insulates people (and increasingly family groups) from what is "too" shocking continue to be underlying premises for the majority of museums. But for many staff this process is not seen as a form of censorship but rather an attempt to present a topic in a balanced way.

There is a tendency to exhibit objects and topics in an uncontroversial way. Contentious issues are often latent in collections and not borne out in

interpretation. A case in point is the Benin Bronzes and the Elgin Marbles at the British Museum. Here these collections are exhibited with little mention of highly contested repatriation issues.

Likewise the exhibition *September 11 Bearing Witness to History* at the National Museum of American History was carefully crafted within tolerated limits. Here curators gauged their own sensibilities against what they believed would work with visitors, and more importantly survivors and victims families (Contested Sites Focus group 9/11 team, Monday 16th September 2002). To this end curators made a conscious choice to downplay the role of the terrorists in the events of that day:

The idea of not making the terrorists a big part of the story was pretty universal. They wanted to remember what happened to Americans...but they did not want to give terrorists any credence...The American public also did not want us to explain to them why Islamic fundamentalists hate Americans – not on September 11th! They are not prepared for that discussion and it's not a role that the museum could play at this moment. Every exhibition is a manipulation. We have a tremendous responsibility to manipulate wisely (National Museum of American History 2002: 3-9).

In spite of these concerns, the curatorial team did push the boundaries beyond what the majority view saw as acceptable. That is, the inclusion of remnants of the aircraft, for around 50% of people surveyed, was seen as far too emotional. But maintaining trust and credibility with a range of audience sectors was of utmost importance in the portrayal of this event.

The outcome was an exhibition that was framed within acceptable parameters. Here the contentious aspects of the topic - the role and motivations of the terrorists - were defused in an effort to create a safe, non-confrontational, commemorative space where visitors could contemplate, act out their own emotional responses and remember those who died. The exhibition certainly

fulfilled this need for commemoration as witnessed by the number of visitors who visited the exhibition on September 11 2002 and the reverential way people viewed the objects and personal accounts. And for myself, living on the other side of the world, the exhibition provided the proof that this horrific event did in fact happen, by the presence of objects such as the aircraft fragments, juxtaposed with twisted pillars from the World Trade Center. Therefore the national museum's role was to present the majority national discourse that at this moment defies sustained analysis. Clearly there was no place for a critical analysis of the US foreign policy and the grievances perceived by the perpetrators.



**Smithsonian National Museum of American History, the Mall,
Washington DC, September 11th 2002. Photograph: Fiona Cameron**

Other 9/11 exhibitions are more overt in referencing the more unsavoury aspects of death and dying, offering a different experience beyond commemoration. The New York Historical Society's exhibition *Beyond Ground Zero: The Forensic Science of Disaster Recovery* examined the forensic science of the recovery process and the way victims were identified (New York Historical Society Current Exhibitions, September 2002: 1). Being a small privately funded institution, this museum is not quite so encumbered with nationalistic expectations nor by the same level of bureaucratic intervention and stakeholder politics as witnessed at the Smithsonian. The exhibition *Here is New York: A Democracy of Photographs* shows the events through the eyes of amateur and professional photographers and includes confronting images, body parts and people jumping off the World Trade Center. Begun as a single image taped to a shop window in Soho, it developed into a larger display with a mirror exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. Additionally the exhibition at the Corcoran offered a more critical element, the inclusion of images of the suffering of civilians in Afghanistan which could be read by some as a criticism of the US war on terrorism. Here there was little attempt to insulate people from the realities of events, an approach only permissible because it is seen as an artist's record with a consequent licence to be confronting and critical.



***Here is New York: A Democracy of Photographs*, Princes Street, Soho, New York City, September 2002. Photograph: Fiona Cameron**

In Australia the ground-breaking exhibition *Indigenous Australians* (opened in August 1997) at the Australian Museum was one of the first to raise difficult subjects such as the death of Aborigines in custody, land rights and the stolen generation. Likewise St Mungo's Museum of Religious Life and Art (opened in 1992, Glasgow) raised contentious issues such as sectarianism in Glasgow, abortion, and religious practices such as female

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genital mutilation. Arguably, these exhibitions represent some of the first tentative steps towards the honest representation of topics, a testing of the water so to speak. Yet these topics were not discussed or critically examined by the museum voice in each instance. Rather the first person in the case of the former, was used to convey the more sensitive and emotional aspects of the topics.



Raising the issue of female genital mutilation in the exhibit, *Coming of Age* at St Mungo's Museum of Religious Life and Art. A young Egyptian girl after a clitoridectomy, the ritual removal of the clitoris. Photograph: Fiona Cameron.

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Why have many museums tended to stay clear of contentious topics or, if attempted, have edited the subjects (intentionally or unintentionally) to the point where their power has been reduced? The attempt to avoid confrontation by many museums (as borne out by my research with museum staff in Canada, US and UK) is more extreme in the case of highly emotive topics such as 9/11. This may, in part, be based on the museums' perceived role as trustworthy information source. There is a fear of undermining the trust of their constituents, and the moral standing of institutions, and more importantly of being perceived as "political". That is, specifically advocating a particular position on a topic. Arguably museums are and always have been political. Des Griffin (1999) makes this point very clearly by stating "it cannot be claimed that a museum in Australia which does not show the conflicts between Aboriginal peoples and Europeans is non-political". For others, representing contentious topics is also not seen as a role museums should necessarily perform.

Qualitative research undertaken with museum staff indicates that mostly museums aim to reflect acceptable narratives on the past, rather than undertake a serious and critical evaluation of the same history. Our findings also suggest that in some instances this position is often not a personal curatorial decision, but one imposed from above and perceived stakeholder sensibilities. Moreover, coming from an empirical, scientific or aesthetic tradition museums tend to espouse a sense of non-involvement or detachment from contemporary or contentious topics, although our research

suggests this approach is shifting. Furthermore, museums tend to express a range of socially acceptable positions on topics and issues.

The Migration Museum in Adelaide has since its inception developed a culture of curating difficult subjects. As one staff member stated "just because something is contentious it doesn't mean you don't present it - it just means you present it slightly differently, contextualise it, or present it from multiple sides of the story" (Migration Museum 2003:5). This culture has developed in part due to the institution's mission to represent immigrant experiences, and if done in an honest way the portrayal of sometimes conflictual and disturbing histories. Leading on from this is the resultant potential to engage government policy and the treatment of asylum seekers witnessed through exhibitions such as *Twist of Fate* and more recently an exhibition of children's drawings about their experiences in the Woomera Detention Centre (Migration Museum 2003:13-14). Surprisingly, in the latter case, the artworks were not accompanied by labels but rather a pinboard for visitors to express their own thoughts.

The fact is however, that most museums steer clear of using their voice to discuss contentious topics, but rather use first person voices to convey the more emotional and contentious aspects of a topic, rather than overtly act as places to confront, challenge views, lead debate and shift opinions whether rightly or wrongly. One exception to the rule is the recently opened national British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol. Through an emotive choice of words in text, the museum's voice becomes directly provocative as well as drawing on first person accounts to support statements. One text panel titled *Land and History* commented that "When the colonists wrote their

history, they described themselves as peaceful settlers not bloody invaders" (British Empire and Commonwealth Museum 2003).

Casey (2002:5) however, argues that there is no value in museums being confrontational, but are rather places to facilitate discussions and to create awareness of the issues. Our research suggests that for many institutions a reticence to engage with "hot" topics includes a responsibility to provide access to a broader audience, to court greater popularity, to generate revenue and to avoid criticism and the alienation of sectors of the community and stakeholders. Clearly presenting popular and soothing topics makes better commercial and political sense. And for the majority it is a case of not being sure about how to go about dealing with these topics in a way that ensures trust is maintained with audiences, responses are controlled and negative ramifications are avoided. Moreover, museums can attract criticism if by omission they fail to represent histories, issues or taboo subjects in an honest way. In support of this theory for example, some visitors to the National Museum of Australia suggested that representations of the "stolen generation were very sanitised and did not refer to the heartbreak and agony of the mothers left behind" (Tonkin 2002:1).

For many respondents, other forms of programming were seen as more appropriate, effective and safer means of presenting and debating contentious ideas as they did not have the permanent imprint of an exhibition. Mark O'Neil (2002:3) counters this argument by stating that communities should have the courage and honesty to face to the destructive aspects of their culture and museums should act as a conduit to these discussions through exhibitions.

Despite these institutional positions and concerns, what are the public perceptions of museums? How does the perceived roles of objectivity and impartiality and as places of civic pride for the celebration of consensual values perceived to transcend political and social divisiveness sit with the engagement of controversial topics?

Here the results of our omnibus surveys in Sydney and Canberra informs this discussion and seriously challenge some of the conservative and editorial approaches taken by many museums. More than 62% of people surveyed in Sydney (Market Attitude Research Services 2002a:5) and 59% in Canberra (Market Attitude Research Services 2002b:1) agreed that museums should be researching and presenting exhibitions on topics that people see as controversial or taboo. As one respondent, a female pensioner stated “taboo and controversial topics must be brought out into the open and discussed freely” (Market Attitude Research Services 2002a:18). Likewise a female 30-39 years business owner reiterated this sentiment, implicating museums in such discussions by stating that museums “are a public forum for issues that should challenge society” (Market Attitude Research Services 2002a:18). But those who disagreed with this premise (the majority of whom were non-museum goers) based their argument on the belief that museums present the “facts”, are spaces to document and showcase the past and not to present opinions (23-24). That is for a minority of respondents, 21% in Sydney and 20% in Canberra, the presence of controversial topics or comment on these subjects by the institution is seen as casting museums as political. More specifically respondents were split over the proposition about whether museums should lead public opinion over topics. Here 46% of Sydney people

surveyed agreed with the idea (Market Attitude Research Services 2002a:3). A further 40% disagreed with the proposition and the remainder stating no preference either way (3). So our research supports the idea that museums are spaces to represent contentious topics but concerns with their presentation for around 50% of those surveyed is tied to the recasting of museums as political (Ibid). That is where institutions attempt to direct opinion or push a particular view.

Even more significantly both museum and non-museum goers (90% in Sydney and 95% in Canberra) want museums to be more challenging, to act as information sources around important topics (Market Attitude Research Services 2002a:3); (Market Attitude Research Services 2002b:1). Here 70% of our respondents in Sydney and 63% in Canberra saw museums as places that should critically examine important topics (Market Attitude Research Services 2002a:3) (Market Attitude Research Services 2002b:1). Another male in the 20-29 demographic stated that “institutions need to push socially accepted boundaries. It is critical for museums to be dynamic”. For many, museums are one of the few sources of information that people can consult that are considered trustworthy because they are not seen as biased, as possessing hidden agendas (Market Attitude Research Services 2002a:3-22). Here museums can make an important contribution by advancing an understanding of, adding value to and informing debates. That is, to provide more in depth information based on scholarly investigation, to put debates into a historical context, to provide access to a range of other information resources including historical sources and present a range of competing

points of view, and expert opinions as a counter to editorial presented through the media.

On the other hand, the majority of participants in focus group discussions wanted to make their own decisions about what content they saw as acceptable (Contested Sites Focus Group discussions, Sydney, Monday 11th November 2002, Tuesday 12th November 2002, 6pm, Tuesday 12th November 2002, 8pm); (Contested Sites Focus Group discussions, Canberra, Tuesday 19th November 2002, Wednesday 20th November, 2002). That is, they wanted museums to present information and additional resources and for any censorship to be based on their own decision-making rather than by the institution (Contested Sites Audience Focus group, Canberra, Tuesday 19th November 2002). According to one respondent in the Sydney omnibus survey (female, 20-29 years, employed full-time white collar clerical) “not everyone may think a topic is taboo, therefore any topic should be available” (Market Attitude Research Services 2002a:19). In this instance forewarnings on the nature of the content and censor ratings as with any other forms of censorship was the preferred means of controlling content within acceptable limits. Like “having a say”, instituting self-censorship was for many museum audiences an extension of their democratic right to exercise freedom of speech and in this context, to information.

So for many audiences the critical and unfearful examination of issues, histories and taboo subjects can go hand in hand with the maintenance of trust if museums represent topics in an honest, balanced way based on the best scholarship available and inform visitors of content (Contested Sites Audience Focus group, Canberra, Tuesday 19th November 2002).

Duncan Cameron argued in his formative 1971 article, the genesis of the new museology, that museums should recast themselves as a forum, a place for confrontation, experimentation and debate. Here Cameron suggested that institutions can act as an antidote to the traditional temple. The temple according to Cameron is an institution that embraces a timeless and universal function, presenting a structured sample of reality as an objective model against which to compare individual perceptions (1971:11-24).

One of the more disconcerting beliefs of museums, still held by around half of those surveyed, is that museums are viewed as places for the presentation of objective knowledge, truth and fact (Contested Sites Focus Group discussions, Sydney, Monday 11th November 2002, Tuesday 12th November 2002, 6pm, Tuesday 12th November 2002, 8pm); (Contested Sites Focus Group discussions, Canberra, Tuesday 19th November 2002, Wednesday 20th November 2002). Concerns over museums casting themselves as political are tied to a misguided belief that they are objective (Market Attitude Research Services 2002a). That is, in terms of the presentation of contentious topics the museum's role, like that of the temple, is to present the "facts" and then test them against the opinions of visitors. The interpretation of objectivity for many is not so much the belief that one narrative usurps all others, but rather that museums are impartial, detached and dispassionate, unbiased and unprejudiced, in short neutral. That is the presentation of "facts" may encompass multiple views on a particular topic but where the museum voice remains impartial. Significantly, freedom of expression and opinion-making is seen as the heart of newspapers, books and films not museums. Clearly people do not understand that museums are

political and do advocate positions no matter however subtle that may be. This misunderstanding was expressed by a number of participants in the Sydney Omnibus survey. Museums, according to one 30 something professional male, “should just present facts – not opinions, they are not political places” (Market Attitude Research Services 2002a: 24). Likewise a recent visitor to the National Museum of Australia affirmed that “museums should be factual, this museum presents someone’s opinion” (Tonkin 2002:1).

Why are museums still viewed by many as impartial and truthful? At an interpretive level the representation of histories in exhibitions has generally been defined in terms of the synthesis of established values and perspectives, homogeneous in approach, abstract and universal rather than expressing specific stances. Additionally there is a tendency on the part of many museums to present consensual views. Here consensual views are not read as taking a position by many, but rather taken as the affirmation of values for the majority of audiences. The museum’s voice, the way text is written and presented is not seen as the result of reasoned opinions, even though points of view are often presented through first person voices. Heyman (1996:28-29) suggests that curators “do what other authors cannot: they present their views anonymously in a context where the audience takes them as authoritative statements”. Contingent on this is the fact that museum spaces are sanctified, detached places where the conditions of reality are suspended. Williams (2001:10) sees museums as having the ability to tame contentious topics, to defuse, control and isolate elements whilst creating an air of detachment and objectivity. Here topics can be inserted behind glass, be

viewed and interrogated within the controlled and safe parameters of the physical and intellectual space of the exhibition.

If museums wish to take greater risks in the way they interpret subjects and engage with difficult topics and contemporary issues more honestly, then they have a responsibility to dispel popular myths and injudicious notions of objectivity and impartiality. As museums increasingly question assumptions and present viewpoints, as well as their own, it is imperative to expose the museum's voice as an expression of carefully considered opinion based on scholarly imperatives. That is, to explain to audiences that museums are not inherently objective in the way they present information but are nonetheless reliable and trustworthy, as opposed to neutral sources of information, and as counter to media reporting and editorial.

Shifting perceptions of museums for certain sectors of the community, while retaining a level of respect and trust, requires museums to present information based on best scholarship and, where museums advocate positions, to do so in a socially responsible way. This requires museums to more clearly articulate their interpretive goals and objectives and to establish a new basis for trust based on contemporary epistemologies rather than an outdated empirical tradition. Allied to this is a need to foster a greater level of connectedness with communities and to no longer expect audiences to defer to an absolute respect for deference to the museum's cultural authority. That is, to open themselves up to critical debate.

Just as with the shift to community inclusiveness witnessed in museums as a result of the new museology, the exposure of changing views of historical interpretation, the transformation of museums and the perceptions

communities hold is a case of gradual reform. This process is however underway, but museums must be more overt in their objectives and guiding statements, to make people aware that museums of the 21st century are different from those of the 1960s. Significantly, engaging with controversial issues and creating an entirely new kind of national museum was an aim outlined in the Pigott Report of 1975 (Museums in Australia 1975:12-16)

The museum, where appropriate, should display controversial issues. In our view, too many museums concentrate on certainty and dogma, thereby forsaking the function of stimulating legitimate doubt and thoughtful discussion.

In 2001 these espoused values were tested against visitor perceptions. As one visitor stated, “the museum is alive to the idea that Australian identity is a contested thing” (Tonkin 2002:1). For another visitor “the museum presented a different perspective on history rather than the standard textbook stuff” (1). To this end, the National Museum of Australia is contributing to this reform process both in terms of history and views of what a museum is and can be. Although it remains to be seen how far the recent review of programs at the National Museum of Australia encroaches on this reformatory process.

Engaging in a spirit of social activism

Now returning to Cameron’s forum model, to what extent have his ideas of confrontation and debate been embraced in exhibitions? Arguably some museums are increasingly acting as gathering places for presenting a range of opinions around difficult topics but they tend to act as brokers of perspectives rather than as sites for serious dialogue and meaningful engagement with their constituents around contentious topics. One notable exception is the Antenna contemporary

science issues program at the Science Museum, London. Here the museum employs a journalistic approach in the presentation of contemporary science topics such as climate change, advocating a particular position and engaging audiences in debate through a range of interactive devices. The reasoning behind the program and mode of engagement was clearly described in a focus group with Antenna staff:

Antenna's role is not to give an overview or balanced view but to take a journalistic approach. Any time we take a view it's after research with a large number of experts and our view is based on that consensus. And we are up front about taking an advocacy role which all museums do of course by providing information. We never go out on a limb and take a view that cannot be backed up. (Science Museum London 2002:2)

Yet opinions can be mobilised and put to more productive ends in the creation of informative and transformative experiences, for problem solving and in the promotion of tolerance if museums adopt new models for visitor participation in exhibitions. This means embracing not only the concept of community inclusiveness and the use of first person voices in exhibitions but also fostering a socially integrative model, to place visitors at the centre of discussions and arguments in and to incorporate views that may be confronting to certain sectors of the community. Similarly, Boyd (1999: 224) advocates that "museums must engage the world with a spirit of activism and openness far beyond what they are used to...they must re-examine and rethink some of the most fundamental assumptions they hold about what they do and how they do it... ". Additionally museums need to let go of the fear of fostering divisiveness and engendering criticism and to really understand foundational beliefs and divergent opinions around topics. This involves

letting go of the need to find a consensus in a pluralistic society, taking risks and perhaps receiving disapproval from certain sectors.

As a result of these actions, museums have the potential to open themselves up to multiple roles beyond informing, by creating awareness of issues and facilitating discussion to a greater level of social consciousness and in the promotion of “social activism”. That is, the museum can add value to people’s understanding of issues and judgment making through the presentation of competing viewpoints and sources, not just those the museum chooses to exhibit but also of other groups and visitors. Moreover, museums can foster critical thinking skills, facilitate audiences to become aware of the limits of their own knowledge and understanding around an issue or history for example, and foster the ability to discern and analyse competing arguments. Furthermore, as both Walsh (1992:22) and more recently Casey (2002:7) argue, museums can better equip people to deal with claims and counter claims they see and hear in the media, and to ask questions and share those questions with other audiences. In tackling difficult problems museums can foster relevance to local and global problems by linking events and ideas to real life situations in an effort to promote tolerance. Beyond this, museums can encourage involvement in community issues by providing information and resources on how audiences may contribute through active participation in alleviating and perhaps resolving issues on a local scale.

Elaine Gurian (2002) contends that museums are “safe places for unsafe ideas”, acting as congregational places while providing a balance in interpretation. “Safeness” in this new context, I believe is not interpreted as calm or comfortable as Gurian and more recently Dawn Casey (2002:5)

suggest, but rather as respect, a place of democratic expression and to seriously engage with and present opinions, that is, to push audiences and museums beyond the known and comfortable. The rules of engagement within this socially active space however must foster respect for other points of view if trust is to be maintained. Here a balance needs to be found between the need for freedom of expression and the need for authority within exhibitions and other programming initiatives.

“Safeness” can also be interpreted as museums not harbouring any hidden agendas. This may appear as a retreat to a “neutral” position, but is an argument for honesty and being more overt about positioning agendas in the way we curate programs, in text and through media materials. The travelling exhibition about lesbian love relationships, *Forbidden Love Bold Passion*, that incidentally was not initiated in a museum, is a case in point. Here the agenda of an interest group History Inverted, and arguably political, was presented in press releases. That is, “to redress the lack of information on lesbian culture by educating the general public about lesbian experiences and changing stereotypes” (*Forbidden Love Bold Passion* 1998).

It is however worth noting that one of the most important and difficult ongoing challenges for museums is the negotiation of stakeholder, management and staff concerns and agendas in this transformative process.

Postscript

We can say that no one model typifies museums in the present or the future. Institutions are characterised by diversity in founding principles, audiences,

stakeholders, management, staff interests, community and the different social/political and economic contexts in which they operate. As a result museums can choose to embody multiple models and offer a range of experiences. That is, by merging the established roles of offering information, contemplation and non-challenging social experiences with newer roles that address difficult questions, foster problem solving, critical thinking, challenge, transform and resolve.

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