

## **Beyond Surface Representations: Museums, “Edgy” Topics, Civic Responsibilities and Modes of Engagement**

In contemporary societies where shared values, common meanings, disciplinary and institutional authority are under question, where debate and divisiveness are part of everyday life, museums face ongoing challenges to re-evaluate their roles in a diverse and deeply politicised world. In discussing museums and their evolving relationships to democracies, historian Dipesh Chakrapathy (2002: 5) characterises these tensions broadly as the shifting ground between pedagogic and emerging “performative” forms of democracy. The former, according to Chakrapathy, is typified by a nineteenth and early twentieth century democratic genre based on a pedagogic understanding of politics. According to this model, the process of becoming human was not equated to the condition of being political – people had to be educated to become good citizens within a public sphere imagined as unified and unifiable (Ibid). In this sense cultural institutions act as a moral technology dedicated to developing citizenry competence using tools of abstract conceptualisation and reasoning therefore privileging the analytic over the lived. On the other hand, the latter performative forms engage embodied and lived experiences. The political model according to Chakrapathy (2005: 5), “is not fundamentally a pedagogic one - citizens are conceptualised as already political.” He goes on to say that “this tension is what needs to be negotiated as we contemplate the future for museums” (Ibid).

Anthropologist Henry Giroux (1992:168) also points out that, in contrast to the

idea of a harmonious shared experience that underpins empiricist knowledge (and indeed museums and pedagogic forms of democracy), culture is viewed as a site of multiple and heterogeneous borders where different histories, languages, experiences and voices intermingle amidst diverse relations of power and privilege.

Contentious topics such as 'difficult' histories, taboo topics and 'hot' contemporary issues are difficult to represent in exhibitions and provoke controversy precisely because they are divisive and engage an individual's or group's values, beliefs, ideologies or moral position (Issues Laboratory Collaborative, 1995). Therefore, it strikes me that a pedagogic understanding of politics is perhaps no longer a productive conduit for museums to engage contemporary societies, ideological differences and divisiveness. In this research paper I argue these models – the pedagogic and performative – provide a useful conceptual framework for understanding the way museums develop exhibitions on contentious subjects and a platform for reconceptualising and renegotiating museums as spaces for the engagement of contentious topics, audience relationships, knowledge, authority, controversy and the “politicalness” of institutions.

### **Surface or deep - how do museums represent contentious topics?**

The tensions between pedagogic and performative models are evident in the multifarious ways museums approach contentious topics and exemplify the intersection between contemporary societies, social conditions and cultural institutions. Using cultural critic Frederic Jameson's analogy of surface/deep, I examine how the pedagogic and performative are played out in the context of exhibition development.

Jameson suggests that any topic can be explored in a superficial surface way or involve deep structural analysis:

[The] semiotic analysis ...of texts generally discloses the operation of 'deep' semic oppositions... imperceptible at the surface of the text and disguised or displaced by the emphasis on the sensitivity of the individual historian-subject. (Jameson 1979: 165).

Metaphorically speaking, the complexities and ambiguities that surround contentious topics cannot be seen from the surface but only by interrogating what is beyond that surface. When read in the context of exhibition development many of these 'difficult' or 'unsavoury' aspects of topics are disguised and displaced by the exhibition team due to the perceived moral, religious and cultural sensibilities of audiences and stakeholders, those of the subject matter, the values of staff and management, the political setting and interest group politics. In short, those museums surveyed as part of the study tend to investigate these subjects in a shallow, superficial, sanitised way or as deep probes involving critical analysis or on some level between these two extremes. As Elaine Gurian (2005:2) rightly argued in her presentation at the Contest and Contemporary Society symposium in Sydney, "there is a continuum between those museums who take a conservative stance and those that are braver."

These two extremes – surface and deep – according to a curator at a state history museum in the US, refer to two distinct interpretive strategies. The first involves a reaffirmation of consensual views and maintaining the status quo reminiscent of the pedagogic model, and the second questions and challenges in a constructive open way likened to a performative genre: "It's whether the museum is merely going to be a reflection of society in its discussion of these things or whether we're ... going to try to encourage society to step out of their preconceived notions." (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript USA#h)

The surface representation, although mediated rather than a literal reflection of society, according to the Manager of the Justice and Police Museum in Sydney Caleb Williams aims to flatter audiences and those it represents by offering celebratory, validating and endorsing experiences:

Museums can embrace popular culture in two ways...the museum just flatters the culture, flatters its audience, it operates as a mirror or it operates as a lens. When it operates as a lens, it's probing right down into the substance, looking at the parasites, not just passively endorsing and reflecting back in a very hegemonic consensual reinforcing way. (Contested Sites Interview Transcript AUS#b)

Moreover, the surface representation often created by interpretive consensus based on a paradigm of unification waives positions of difference, follows climates of opinion and reaffirms authorised versions of history while underplaying complexities and imperfections. Non-confrontational, the surface representation either avoids the “darker” aspects of topics or adds a coat of gloss to make them safer and less problematic for constituents and stakeholders. Historian Graeme Davison (2005: 10) explains this by suggesting that models based on institutional and interpretive consensus “inevitably tend towards the lowest common denominator...the museum becomes bureaucratised, creative initiative is fettered, people mind their backs rather than the interests of the public.”

The operation of museums in the representation of contentious topics using surface representations and editorial practices as a way of maintaining “safeness” was demonstrated by a recent exhibition on the Jewish community at a national museum in Canada. One staff member remarked “We did an exhibit on Jews in Canada and didn't mention anti-Semitism once.” (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript CAN#a). Likewise at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney the *Treasures of Palestine* exhibition was made politically safe and less problematic for sectors of Jewish community by the

removal of controversial photographs and political documentaries showing Israeli soldiers in conflict with Palestinian civilians (ABC Online, *The World Today* – Tuesday 18 November 2003:1). The exhibition was transformed into a sanitized surface representation – a celebration of Palestinian art and culture. (Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee, 2003).

The power of surface representations should not be underestimated as a way of offering affirmative, commemorative and contemplative experiences. The exhibition *September 11: Bearing Witness to History* at the National Museum of American History is a case in point. 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, come to terms with the event in their own way and remember those who died:

The idea of not making the terrorists a big part of the story was pretty universal. They wanted to remember what happened to Americans...not to give terrorists credence...The American public also did not want us to explain to them why Islamic fundamentalists hate Americans – not on September 11th" ...it's not a role that the museum could play at this moment. (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript USA#c )

On another level, this act was an avoidance mechanism to maintain the political status quo and to restrict the scope of public discussion within a zone of safeness. Likewise the exhibition *Anita and Beyond* at the Penrith Regional Gallery in western Sydney was designed to offer contemplative and healing experiences. Based on the 1986 rape and murder of Anita Cobby, a young Blacktown woman, it was used as an entrée for a discussion of gender, rape and violence, social economics and the media. The exhibition's aim was "to tell personal stories that examine the realities of life after violence in an attempt to heal" (*Anita and Beyond*, 2003) rather than an interrogation of

the violence itself or the forensics surrounding the murder.

National museums and particularly the Smithsonian operate in a more complex social and political setting and hence are under greater political pressure to select safer topics and present contentious topics as surface representations - to portray national history in a positive light, create a shared national identity and provide civic lessons. As one staff member at the National Museum of American History commented "there is pressure to use their civic role to represent a shared ideal and experience that excludes controversy and difference" (Contested Sites Focus Group Transcript USA#d).

Institutions with a commemorative role also face similar issues when attempting to negotiate and represent sensitive topics. In many instances the ethos and mission of an institution, the need to legitimise stakeholder service, affirm experiences and uphold positive imagery precludes a deep interrogation of topics. The Australian War Memorial is a case in point. Here the institution's mission statement to 'commemorate sacrifice and toil' as well as the sensibilities of stakeholders exclude discussions of the moral and political implications of war. As one curator noted:

Our mission statement, it's very loaded, it says to commemorate the sacrifice of Australians in war. The word sacrifice is not neutral...it can be moulded to exclude controversial views that might upset some stakeholders...We are not a war museum so you can't easily look at the political motives why Australians went to war. We are in danger of hiding the truth so not to upset stakeholders... (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript AUS#d)

Yet our research with visitors at the Australian War Memorial suggests that 80% of those surveyed out of a sample of 248 indicated that the institution should critically interrogate the moral and ethical issues around war (Australian War Memorial Exit Surveys Frequencies 2003:1). This clearly suggests that the museum looks to stakeholder values above audiences needs in the choice of topics and the way exhibition content is

framed.

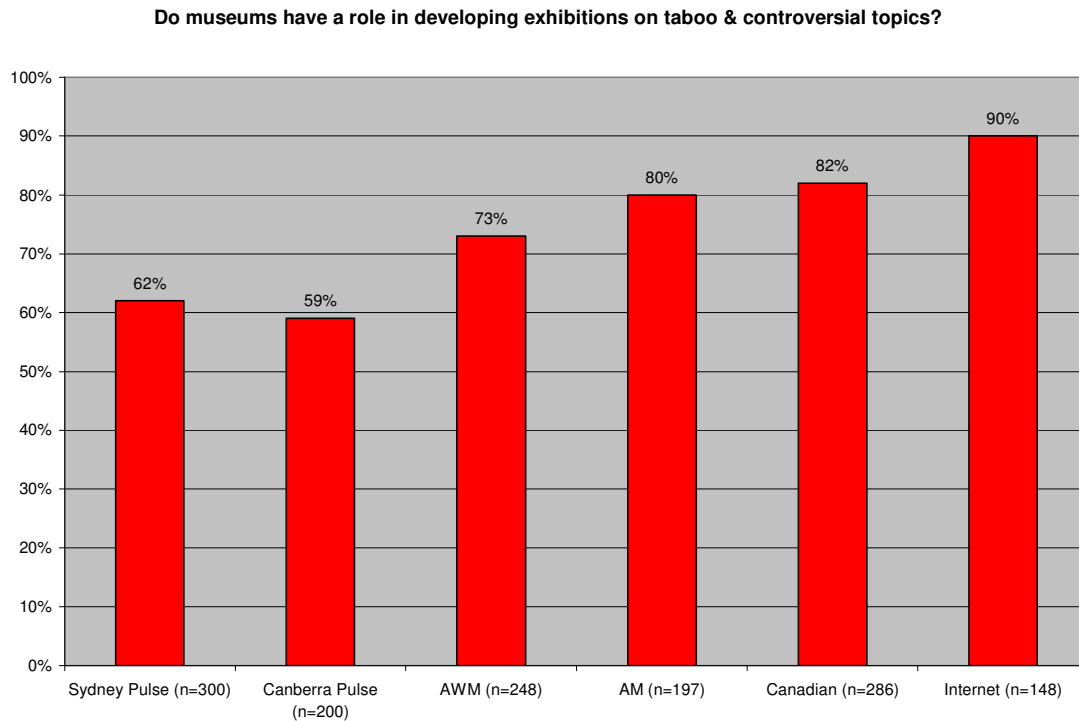
The deep representation on the other hand operates as a probe. It goes beyond the surface examining, interrogating and exposing societal values and actions with all their blemishes and imperfections. It is critical and challenging, engaging both lived experiences and embodied knowledge. It may offer enlightening, transformative experiences and promote tolerance by opening people's minds to other points of view on topics. Based on a pluralistic model, interpretive difference and contentiousness are not suppressed but rather made part of the show (Davison, 2004). Examples include the New York Historical Society's exhibition *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in its graphic portrayal of the Holocaust and the Imperial War Museum's exhibition *Crimes against Humanity*.

Clearly many institutions continue to act as a moral technology in service of specific stakeholders through forms of surface representations and pedagogic forms of engagement, although this is changing. That is, by defining what can be known, what interests and views are to be promoted and by the production of a consensual, unified and safe understanding of a given topic. In attempts to marginalise conflict, many institutions deny the inherent politicalness of topics and audiences and instead promote the public reinforcement of a particular set of values.

### **Contentious topics and social responsibilities**

In considering the tendency of institutions to play “safe” – to avoid contentious topics or represent difficult subjects as surface representations – we sought to sample community and audience views on the social responsibilities of museums in representing contentious

topics in exhibitions.



Despite what some members of the profession and stakeholders might think the results of our community telephone surveys in Sydney and Canberra suggest that around 60% of the 500 who were interviewed believe that museums do have a social responsibility to represent contentious topics (Market Attitude Research Services 2002b Canberra Pulse October 2002), (Market Attitude Research Services 2002a Sydney Pulse April 2002). The 20% of respondents who disagreed were mainly non-museum goers expressing a more traditional modernist and pedagogic understanding of what museums should be stating – that they are places to present “facts” as opposed to opinions and to document and showcase the past. Because edgy topics were deemed to be opinion-based rather than factual, their presence was seen as casting museums as too political (Ibid: 23-24).

Stronger support was given to this role by visitors sampled through our exit

surveys in Canada and Australia. Around 82% of those surveyed at the Australian Museum, 73% at the Australian War Memorial (sample of 197), 82% at the Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver (sample of 172), 73% at the Canadian War Museum, Ottawa (sample of 186), and 100% at the Musée d'Art, Montreal (non-statistical sample of 28) agreed with the idea. The majority were under 40, tertiary educated professionals and students. Clearly our survey results suggest that museums in both Australia and Canada have a substantive role to play especially for younger more educated audiences.

Notably, staff responding to our web survey (most of whom were based in publicly funded small, medium and large metropolitan multidisciplinary, social history and art museums in Australia, US, Canada and New Zealand) showed overwhelming support with 90% seeing contentious topics as a key role, although this was seen as dependent on the institution's mission. Admittedly this survey was self-selective and non-representative (sample of 176), but it is indicative of trends in thinking. Moreover, only 63% said that their institutions have had an exhibition on a contentious topic with 53% saying it incited controversy/criticism. Focus groups with over 100 staff in 26 institutions in US, Canada, UK, Australia and New Zealand supported this finding.

### **Reframing Museum roles**

Although interrogating contentious topics was seen as a fundamental function for many institutions by the community and the majority of visitors, there was considerable debate about what those roles might be. Our focus group research with Australian audiences in Sydney and Canberra revealed a range of opinions with three themes emerging.

## **Museums as places for historical reflection**

Around 25% of focus group participants saw museums as places for reflection by providing information on and interrogating controversial topics and events that are in the historical record. As one participant commented: “Museums are reflective, there is ...an opportunity to reflect on the past” (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a). Another used the analogy of war to explain the need for reflection on historically distant topics and the necessity for dealing with topics honestly: “All wars are controversial...a museum's got to show us what happened years ago, whether it's controversial or not, whether we agree with it or we don't” (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#c).

Current 'hot' topics were seen as too politically, emotionally charged, value laden and opinion based, thus having the potential to undermine a museum's reputation as a “safe” non-threatening place, and as a reliable and trustworthy information source. The relationship between current topics and the potential for political manipulation was raised by one participant: "My concern about a lot of topics is that there is tremendous scope for social engineering..." (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a)

One of the most noteworthy examples of a “too hot to handle” topic, and one that could potentially transform museums into confrontational zones, was the Australian government's use of military force to repel boat people and the “children overboard affair.” Here refugees were accused of putting their own children at risk by throwing them overboard, thus undermining their credibility as worthy Australians, a claim later to be proven false, and one that divided the country. These concerns were summed up in one participant's response: “The photos of [refugee] children in the water... It's too

political...too emotionally charged...You could imagine the arguments going on outside the exhibition.” (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#c). Some also questioned the ability of museum staff to present contemporary topics in an impartial way: “If you've got very political issues like this the curator of the museum has a lot of power” (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#b).

In short, this reflective reasoning is based on the idea that topics become safer with the passage of time thus allowing opinions and views to be carefully considered and a body of trustworthy scholarly information to emerge. According to one Canberra participant: “...a museum is not necessarily there to foster discussion on contemporary issues. Contemporary issues become historical issues with the passage of time, a lot of these are very political, very contemporary and to me they just don't fall into the gambit of a museum” (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#c).

### **Museums as places for contextualization – learning from the past to understand the future**

For the majority, around 55%, museums were viewed as places to contextualize topics and events whether current or historical so visitors can understand their origin, complexities and likely ramifications. This position was summarised by one Canberra respondent: “with September 11 and the Bali bombing for example a museum’s role is to build up a historical picture of where these events originated ...” (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#c).

Another explained how contextualization and the educational role of institutions can help people to formulate their own views and heal: "9/11...is very controversial and

recent... museums could help people to process it and come to terms with it" (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a).

Like visitors, many staff saw their institutions' roles to provide information about the context and background to historical and current topics: "Historical museums can pick topics than can allow you to refrain from discussing these topics...they can also allow you to understand why you have come to the place that you are now in the dialogue..." (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript USA#a).

### **Museums as social activists**

A significant number of people, around 20% of focus group participants, see museums as having a more active role in building a better society and to facilitate social change. That is by opening people's minds to alternative views on a given topic and offering suggestions on how audiences might become active to bring about change. As one participant commented, "I like the idea of an exhibition being empowering – in presenting good ideas but how to turn them into action." (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#b). Social activism according to one participant combines a museum's educational, reflective and contextualizing role with social responsibility: "If museums are to continue to exist as people-friendly institutions, they have to come forward with programs to educate people about the history of terrorism, stimulate people's ideas of why terrorism happens and the role of civil society to combat terrorism..." (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#c).

By presenting a variety of cultural viewpoints, museums can bring about social change by promoting racial tolerance, challenging stereotypes and fostering

intercommunity respect: “Given today's troubled times, I want to understand the Muslim religion or culture...” (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#c).

Engaging controversy for publicity sake and to increase visitor numbers was not seen as a legitimate reason for representing these subjects. As one respondent stated, representing contentious topics must be matched by a clear rationale: “we need to know the context and why you are showing this? Is it just [to] stir up controversy – get attention, or is it because you've got an important message that you want to teach people” (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#b).

By contrast, few staff saw museums as having a role to promote social activism. One exception was a senior manager in the UK museum sector. In referring to the New Labour’s social inclusion agenda that is currently leading museum sector reform in the UK, the respondent defined social reform broadly: "To institute change on a broad scale we need to work with other arts organizations, social workers and schools who are working towards a more tolerant, 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" (Contested Sites Interview Transcript UK#a).

Facilitating activism on an individual level according to this respondent involves museums raising difficult issues and acting as information sources to assist personal resolution. Social action on a larger front however, requires institutions to consider their own values and to work with other social and educational agencies to bring about change and combat disadvantage (Sandell, 2003).

Contentious topics such as immigration policy epitomise change, uncertainty and

the challenges faced by people in a rapidly changing world (Issues Laboratory Collaborative 1995: 5). And because change induces anxiety, people look for stability, constancy, predictability and for some empowerment, all roles museums can support by offering reflective experiences, contextual information and activist know-how.

## **Museums and positioning**

Given that our findings suggest that history and science museums have a number of roles to perform in representing and interrogating difficult topics, our next research question was how can institutions better orientate themselves to these topics by taking account of the needs and expectations of their audiences. To do this we asked participants in the omnibus, visitors at the five institutions surveyed in Australia and Canada, museum staff in focus groups and through the internet survey to respond on a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree) to a series of roles/positioning statements.

### **Museum positioning statements**

**AM (n=197), AWM (n=248) Canadian Museums (n=286) Web survey (n=148)**

**Places that should provide information sources about topics**

97% AM, 99% AWM, 96% Canadian Museums, 94% Industry

**Places that should allow their visitors to make comment**

91% AM, 86% AWM, 90% Canadian Museums, 92% Industry

**Places that should challenge generally accepted views**

83% AM, 63% AWM, 71% Canadian Museums, 69% Industry

**Places for non-challenging social experiences**

46%AM, 49%, AWM, 40% Canadian Museums, 31% Industry

**Places that should not be afraid to change visitors views**

84% AM, 65% AWM, 80% Canadian Museums, 79% Industry

**Safe 'neutral' spaces to explore a range of ideas and perspectives**

89% AM, 90% AWM, 81% Canadian Museums, 80% Industry

**Places for visitors to resolve issues in their own minds**

65% AM, 73% AWM, 62% Canadian, 75% Industry

**Places that should lead opinion on topics by pushing a particular view**

43% AM, 14% AWM, 30% Canadian Museums, 14% Industry

**Places that should take an active political role to bring about change**

31% AM, 16% AWM, 26% Canadian Museums, 37%, Industry

## **Museums as information sources**

There was overwhelming support, over 90% of those surveyed, for the role of museums as places that provide information on contentious topics (see Table 2). The findings from our focus group research with Australian audiences explain these functions in greater depth.

The strength of and trust in museums as places to represent contentious topics, according to many, is founded on long established roles as sources of reliable and credible information: "You've got this notion of museums that there is an edifice and therefore this must be so..." (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a). Others compared museums to libraries as knowledge sources: "...museums are like a library... a very reliable, informative first hand source of information ..." (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#d). These findings validate Rosenzweig's and Thelen's (1998) study on sources of historical information which rate the credibility of museums above all others.

Quality scholarship founded on sound principles of investigation underlies a museum's information credibility factor: "...museums have a reputation like university professors, and you expect to see things which have the backing of scientific method, a well thought out established point of view. It is not just some rat bag sprouting some propaganda." (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#b). The importance of maintaining a high level of scholarly integrity was considered vitally important: "if a view isn't well founded then I don't think you need to present it..." (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#d.)

### **Socially integrative/inclusive experiences – visitor interaction and comment**

The capacity to engage contentious topics for the majority of audiences, 90% of those surveyed (see Table 2), is explicitly tied to the ability to provide socially integrative experiences in exhibitions – to engage with other visitors, the institution and to leave evidence of debates in exhibitions. Clearly engaging the values, experiences and political capacities of audiences is a key element in museum reformation. As one participant stated: "... everyone should have the opportunity to express their political view whether others agree with it or not..." (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#b years).

Our research suggests that facilitating visitor feedback, comments and discussion serves a number of functions. It can contribute to considered decision making: "with more discussion, people would be better informed and therefore form their own opinions" (female 30-39, homemaker, Market Attitude Services 2002:20).

Offering dialogic experiences enables visitors to express their own opinion, to share experiences and to come to terms with 'difficult' issues, events or exhibition content: "You get to share the experience...if it is shocking or upsetting ...you can deal with it." (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a).

Many acknowledged that museums are not the only authority on emotionally charged and divisive topics. And sharing knowledge and experiences through these means was seen as promoting freedom of speech and principles of social inclusion in public civic spaces: "...a museum needs to be inclusive – to be open to all people. And even if you disagree you should still be welcome there" (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#b).

### **Challenging experiences**

Between 70% to 80% of those surveyed, view museums as places to challenge people's ways of thinking as opposed to places for non-challenging social experiences (refer to Table 2). However only 63% of respondents at the Australian War Memorial agreed with this proposition and may be explained by its strong commemorative role. Offering challenging experiences for many audiences means providing an even-handed, 'honest', uncensored picture of an event or issue, a balanced range of viewpoints representing all sides of a topic and scholarly information based on sound research.

Challenging people to think critically means providing scholarly information that is thorough and analytical. For example, according to one focus group participant, the critical examination of topics: "implies rigor, an unbiased, in-depth, analytical presentation of a topic" (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a).

According to one visitor at the Canadian War Museum, an 'honest' and challenging portrayal of a topic is tied to the development of a more socially responsible society: "Hiding something doesn't help kids and the future of Canada. You have to air it in order to get to the truth, whatever the truth is" (Contested Sites Exit Survey, Canadian War Museum).

Most wanted censorship decisions left to their own discretion with forewarnings and censor ratings the preferred means of controlling content: "...as long as there is a warning a museum shouldn't show something so that no child could see it. I would still make the decision for myself and my child" (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a).

### **The museum's voice**

One theme that emerged from our research and in which 60-75% of our respondents supported, is the need to develop representational strategies that enable personal resolution. Contingent to this, based on the results of our surveys, between 58-86% of respondents stated that museums should not try to lead opinion by pushing a particular view (see Table 2). Visitors come to museums with their own opinions (Kelly 2005). Unpacking this further, our research revealed that for many a museum's role is to maintain an impartial stance and to inform opinion making rather than overtly express strongly held beliefs or values or engage in a partisan debate. In supporting this, one respondent stated: "museums should not express an opinion, they should provide good information and arguments....We have our own opinions" (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#c). Presenting a range of views while not strongly advocating positions validates the findings of the Issues Laboratory Collaborative study (1995:4)

Ideally scholarly information ought to be presented in a way that empowers people to engage in critical thinking, stimulates or prompts debate, assists audiences to weigh up information to inform their own decision making and to draw their own conclusions. In the words of one focus group participant, "Museums should present things in a non-judgmental way so that kids and people can form their own opinions from the information presented" (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a). A neutral/non-partisan voice for many is akin to presenting opposing sides on a given topic, "...it becomes neutral if there's two sides of the story..." (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#d).

Audiences are also becoming more savvy on how they read information sources and are increasingly sensitive to bias and attempts at being told what to think: "Material should be presented in a way that lets you make up your own mind. I don't like being told what to think, and I wouldn't want my kids to be told what to think" (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a).

Given that these topics are value and opinion laden, and information sources are biased, presenting a range of sources including opposing views on a topic contributes to a more informed or 'objective' opinion to be formulated. The inherent subjectivity of information sources for many can be offset to an extent by incorporating a range of opinions: "everything that you read is somebody's opinion. The best you can do is try and get as many different opinions as you can and try and formulate your own..." (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#b). Findings from Issues laboratory Collaborative add to this by suggesting that people like to be given information of the relative acceptance of various viewpoints (1995: 5).

Presenting a range of reliable information is also analogous to having all the 'facts' to weigh up arguments and formulate personal opinions: "If you want to resolve issues you would have to have every piece of information really in order to make it an educated judgment on something..." (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#e). By incorporating diverse views including those of the left and right a more comprehensive pool of data can be presented for consideration: "some people will be offended, others aren't, that is why museums should present both sides of the argument, absorb them and you make up your own mind" (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#c).

### **Transformative experiences**

Most importantly around 80% of those surveyed with the exception of the Australian War Memorial at 65%, believe museums have the power to shift an individual's point of view (see Table 2). Our focus group research revealed that transformative experiences can occur by opening people's minds to a range of views, new knowledge based on sound scholarship, and by offering suggestions on how people might become socially active. Alteration can occur by engendering empathy to others points of view: "You have got your own views...you want to see how someone else sees things – to go hey, that's another way of looking at it" (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a).

In providing the latest scholarship on a topic, museums can both change views and lead opinion: "... a lot of archaeological findings are being challenged...museums can lead by good scholarship" (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#c).

Around 70% of those surveyed did not see museums as places for resolving issues on a political level (see Table 2). As one respondent remarked: "Museums should just present the facts – not opinions, they are not political places" (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a years). At a fundamental level, museums are perceived as non-threatening places because they are impartial, present credible information and are places for learning, in stark contrast to the partisan and confrontational approach taken by political parties and government. As one focus group participant noted: "...a museum should be a steady safe haven where you can go to learn and not have issues thrown in your face...if you want to resolve important issues you join a political party or get involved in the local council or some lobby group" (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a).

Instead resolution on a personal and political level can occur in an indirect way by the provision of a range of information and the means for visitors to formulate their own views and actions. As one respondent commented: “Museums could help...to present a more true picture of what’s going on and therefore it could resolve important social issues” (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#c). Therefore most respondents were not comfortable with the idea that museums take an active political role to bring about change. For activism to be transformative it has to go beyond the individual and involve multi-scaled strategies that encompass the institutional and structural.

### **Institutional trust**

Maintaining institutional trust is directly related to sustaining physical safety and civility within its public spaces and the reliability and integrity of information. As one focus group participant noted: “..it's pretty hard to get a balance to talk about very controversial issues such as asylum seekers when there is political protest out the front – a museum would not be a place where you could just walk into and feel comfortable” (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#d). Additionally sound scholarship, a range of views on topics and events, facilitating personal resolution, opportunities for debate and maintaining civic responsibilities of inclusiveness and impartiality were key expectations.

Undermining institutional trust and the politicisation of institutions for many has the potential to occur when museums present unsubstantiated opinions and openly engage in a partisan debate: “it would turn [museums] into a different institution altogether if

they were trying to lead public opinion...that would border on political.” (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a). Similar sentiments were expressed by staff: “we should be inciting debate not championing single points of view. If we become too politicized we lose our power and for many perhaps our funding” (Contested Sites Web Survey).

In taking a political role, some respondents feared that museums might be hijacked by certain groups as a political vehicle: “an exhibition about asylum seekers ...people might use it to push their own political angle...you’ve got to be very careful” (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#b).

### **Museum authority**

Culture and its representation in museums can no longer be understood as an autonomous realm of words, things, beliefs and values nor an objective body of facts to be transmitted to passive receivers (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 19). Attitudes and responses to contentious subjects are also the result of frameworks of intelligibility – the range of beliefs, values and ideologies held individually and according to the interpretive communities to which one belongs (Ibid: 119-121). Moreover, our findings also suggest that audiences want a greater stake in what they are allowed to know and the opinions and views they are able to express.

A rich body of scholarship on museum learning is emerging that validates these concerns and suggests that institutions need to consider themselves as mediators and advocates for knowledge rather than suppliers of information, and to provide tools for visitors to explore their own ideas and to reach their own conclusions (Kelly 2005).

Freedman (2000: 299) explains this shift as a consequence of increasing access to technologies such as the Internet where communication and indeed information gathering and analysis are in the hands of individuals. And because morality in a postmodern world, according to cultural theorist Zygmunt Bauman (2002: 138), is re-personalised and individual, institutions need to decisively move away from framing exhibition content according to a consensual, collective morality to one that also encourages self expression.

Therefore engaging 'edgy' topics requires a reframing of museum authority to one of expert mediator, informant and facilitator. In the words of one senior manager: "The authority of expert knowledge no longer gives museums the final say on the social and ethical issues involved in controversial topics...Expert knowledge can help inform a debate but can't make it." (Contested Sites Interview Transcript UK#a)

A responsibility to select, interpret and validate information and scholarship as reliable and trustworthy from which visitors can make informed decisions is a vital and continuing role: "Curators are the ones to find things for exhibits and make sure they are presented correctly and accurately which is so important..." (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#c). In referring to lessons learned from the controversy surrounding the use of oral histories in an exhibit on frontier conflict and massacres of Aborigines at the National Museum of Australia one curator commented: "if you are found out to be wrong on facts or the views the institution presents are marginal you run the risk of undermining the museum's authority" (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript AUS#f).

In summary, bringing important, challenging and controversial points of view in a

democratic, free-thinking society for many was seen as a key role for museums – one of the few places where these debates can happen: "Museums are a public forum for issues that should challenge society" (female 30-39 years business owner Market Attitude Research Services 2002a:18). That is because museums are public civic spaces that offer a protected non-judgmental environment to explore sensitive topics, are accessible to everyone, provide trustworthy, credible, scholarly information and are seen as impartial. One visitor at the Australian War Memorial remarked "if museums don't do it who will?" (Contested Sites Exit Survey, Australian War Memorial).

For others this role is an extension of the emerging pluralistic and inclusive role for museums: "controversy is just one factor in diversity and people have a choice to attend an exhibition or program" (Contested Sites Exit Survey, Museum of Anthropology). And it is tied to a democratic right of exposure, the need for society to face up to its more unsavoury qualities and the engagement of the political potential of audiences: "taboo and controversial topics must be brought out into the open and discussed freely" (female pensioner, Market Attitude Research Services 2002a: p.18).

To this end museums can contribute to debates, act as deep probes and engage a performative agenda in a variety of ways; provide a place for people to reflect on topics and subjects in the historical record, offer a contextual framework within which a topic can be understood, and empower people to make decisions and take action. That is achieved by providing information, challenging, discussing and critically examining important topics, rather than pushing a particular view or museums taking an active role to bring about political change. Maintaining calmness, "safeness" and civility while engaging topics was an emerging theme: "museums should be places to vent controversy

to present a range of emotions and opinions in a non-threatening environment"

(Contested Sites Exit Survey, Australian War Memorial).

These findings support Stephen Weil's (1999: 236) contention that museums are places that have the potency to change what people think and to influence attitudes and values. Our findings qualify Weil's statement and reframe the pedagogic model by suggesting that museums can be trusted incubators for social change as long as audiences are left to engage topics on their own terms and resolve issues in their own minds. By raising awareness of issues, empowering people to educate themselves on important topics, to determine their own position around these subjects and to become socially active, museums can have a role in social transformation.

Moreover, a cultural relativist agenda is only partially realised. What emerges from our research is for institutions to provide two types of information – expert and citizen knowledges. Many visitors still long for a tangible, factual and validated scholarly narrative they can rely on. But on the other hand visitors seek more subjective information that expresses a range of differing opinions on a given topic and in which the relative acceptance of each is signalled. Both these types of information provide sources to which their own views can be formulated, tested, analysed and expressed.

### **Museums, political agendas and moral authority**

One theme emerging from our findings is the relationship between museums, political agendas, interest politics with fiscal accountability in many instances taking precedence above public accountability, although this varies. Because museums are often government funded and the public face of scholarship, they tend to be under increasing

pressure to align themselves with government policy and the political, moral and religious values of their funders and other significant stakeholders. For these reasons topics that have a political, moral or religious tone are highly sensitive and can engage interest, donor or government agendas, putting ongoing funding at risk. The question of Indigenous-settler relations is a political one. Political agendas and the telling of national stories about Indigenous politics and massacres of Aboriginal people for example at the National Museum of Australia were at odds with government policy. In this instance these debates contributed to the loss of the director's job and espoused tensions around pedagogic and performative understandings of museum roles:

The Museum was planning a major Aboriginal gallery for a nation in which public figures had been claiming that Aboriginal people had received preferential treatment...Massacres had supposedly been exaggerated or even invented. There was no stolen generation, and if Aboriginal children had in fact been removed from their families, it was for their own good. 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. (Contested Sites Interview Transcript AUS#c)

Likewise, many state museums in Canada are compelled to align themselves to policy goals relating to environmental issues in order to secure ongoing funding. These concerns were expressed by staff from a state natural history museum: "The current government is very pro-business, right-wing. It is now possible in Ontario to clear thousands of hectares of forests but there's no way that this museum could talk about that because we get so much money from the province. In the environmental community this is a very serious issue" (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript CAN#c).

Those free of government monies tend to exhibit greater freedom to engage with

contentious topics as they are not so constrained by stakeholder politics and policy. This is indeed the case for a privately funded local historical society in New York: “We had already made a commitment to revisiting controversial chapters in American history. It began with the lynching show. We are privately funded so not so constrained by stakeholder politics and political agendas” (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript USA#f).

In explaining this phenomenon in the political arena, theorist John Rawls (2002:125) argues that political agendas are often based on moral values worked out for political, social and economic reasons. The relationship between moral values and political ambition is also a factor within the museum sector as articulated by one director: “...museum boards and politicians, often funders, tend to be dominated by conservatives...active in politics and socially upwardly mobile. They support their own sets of values in their work to get approval. Everything comes down to values, will, determination, money and politics” (Contested Sites Interview Transcript UK#b). Negotiating these difficult contexts is often down to the political skills and values of senior management. Changing the culture is very risky, accounting for a tendency towards timidity on the part of many directors.

Overwhelmingly those institutions surveyed tend to be overly concerned with the political environment tending to look to particular stakeholder groups above audiences in deeming what is acceptable. Levels of tolerance in exhibition content and the choice of topics in many instances are determined by gauging stakeholder and interest politics as expressed the manager of a Sydney social history museum:

There's nothing wrong with museums being a bit radical and a bit controversial...that's a very important role for us. But I think the reality is that we are all very much looking

over our shoulders, a little bit careful about what our funders might do or react to because we're all government institutions, funding can be retracted, John Laws or someone can get on the phone, have a word to Bob Carr, it's that political stuff which goes on. (Contested Sites Interview Transcript AUS#b)

Similar trends were observed in a number of Canadian museums. This dilemma was espoused by one staff member from a large state natural history museum: "to remain relevant museums have to be at the forefront of thinking and of controversial issues ...but how do you do it when federal or provincial government has different opinions. It puts funding at risk." (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript CAN#d)

Here political philosopher Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony and alliances of class strata offers a useful analogy to understand the ideological struggles operating within museums over contentious topics as well as the character of stakeholder moral authority:

Hegemony is always the (temporary) mastery of a particular theatre of struggle. It marks a shift in the dispositions of contending forces in the field of struggle and the articulation of that field into a tendency. Such tendencies do not immediately 'profit' a ruling class...but they create the conditions whereby society and the state may be conformed in a larger sense to certain formative national-historical tasks. (Gramsci cited in Forgas 2000:32)

Clearly our research suggests that many museums operate as hegemonies of stakeholder moral authority and are characterised by alliances of class strata, values and political motivations while lacking a conception of equal citizenship - the values of visitors. This equates with the public reinforcement of a particular set of political values to which a pedagogic approach to exhibition content serves, and acts as a mechanism for boundary making – limiting the scope of public discussion within certain parameters and

whom may enter with particular discourses and interests.

Ideological hegemonies are created within museums when struggles occur over values and one set, namely those of stakeholders, gains the upper hand and is then transposed into moments of social, political and cultural leadership and authority. The much quoted 'Enola Gay' fiasco at the National Air and Space Museum, Washington DC in 1995 is a case in point where the values and political aspirations of airforce veterans created a hegemonic authority over the nature and content of the proposed exhibition *The Last Act: The End of World War II, The Atomic Bomb, and the Origins of the Cold War* (Wallace 1995). Here a struggle 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 (McIntyre 1994). The conservatives had their way and the exhibition was scrapped.

It is therefore useful to conceptualise institutions as a hierarchical and complex web of values held by heterogeneous actors (management, trustees, funders, audiences, curators, educators, interest groups, non-visitors) exhibiting significant differences in status, accountabilities and responsibilities. And to consider them as spaces shaped by particular interests that intersect with debates in other arenas such as government. Together these factors define the boundaries of possible action and the form and tone of particular exhibitions. The priorities placed on sets of values operating within each institutional setting explains the diversity in approaches to controversial topics, with ideological struggles assuming a different character provoking challenges of different kinds and setting boundaries of possibility dependent on the definitive forms of society, the balance of contending forces and the historical conjuncture. Struggles will continue

to occur over museum representations as ideological hegemony - attempts by some stakeholders to impose their own “moral clarity” – is never a permanent state of affairs and never uncontested. Therefore the poignant issue is how to deal with and engage with these hegemonic moments and reframe democratic models to admit the values, views and interests of audiences.

### **The political – apolitical dilemma**

Interestingly two divergent views of museums emerge – museums as political and as apolitical institutions. Our findings strongly suggest that museums continue to be inextricably political and moralising, acting as instruments of political and cultural power. Nonetheless, most audiences see museums as apolitical. That is because the ideological struggles and hegemonies that operate in museums are disguised because institutions are still perceived by many as objective and factual, all legacies of the empirical scientific tradition and the view that: "The museum has always been factual – we can rely on it." (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a)

Moreover, the qualities of cultural production implicit in the pedagogic model such as object-based epistemologies, narrative homogenisation, the use of dialogic neutrality as a steering mechanism and non-reflectivity as a consequence of an intrinsic position of superiority as knowledge authorities marginalises the potential for engaging critical capabilities and makes power relations less comprehensible. Consequently many audiences have a utopian view of the communicative genre of museums and as a democratic space, "In principle the whole concept of dealing with something that is overtly confrontational in a non-judgmental way – which is really the sense of how a

museum should operate...its not there to manipulate, its simply there to say here it is"

(Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a).

And it is from this objective argument that the debate over facts/opinion occurs and the fear of engaging contentious topics and politicising museums arises. Contentious topics are seen as opinion based - subjective rather than factual/objective and hence open to manipulation, "If history are facts why cloud it with opinions. Museums have artifacts, why cloud it with politics" (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#c).

Central to this is the confusion over modernist and post-modernist understandings of knowledge, "facts" as knowable settled truths and scholarly information based on informed decision making that now forms the basis of the integrity of museum knowledge. Although some audiences acknowledge objectivity no longer exists, some question the ability of curators to present impartial information on emotive topics: "when you talk about these things emotion comes into it and you may not be able to present the facts. Depending on who is presenting the exhibition. They put their own point of view so you have got to be careful" (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#e).

## **Conclusion**

Many museums have defined particular relationships with communities through a pedagogic model characterised by distance, objectification, abstraction, reification, ideology, rationalisation and consensuality. Although this is changing, much has yet to be done to redefine cultural institutions as dynamic performative spaces – landscapes of diverse and accessible forms of citizen and expert knowledges with opportunities for audiences to reclaim cultural territory and play out their political potential. The key to

cultural theorist Iris Young's politics of difference is not a melting away of differences as museums have tended to do, but for institutions to promote the reproduction of and respect for group differences without oppression (cited in Harvey 1993: 105). Hence the problem of managing difference claims and views becomes as important epistemological task.

Much has been written about the exercise of institutional forms of power (Foucault, Bennett 1995) but it might be more useful to acknowledge the productive aspects of power relations, most notably the roles of museums as trustworthy information sources. It is also imperative to consider the various forms of countervailing power that may be exercised by audiences through an axiom of shared authority. In the 'Mastering Civic Engagement' report, Robert Archibald (2003: 3) argued that museums must develop collaborative transparent relationships with their audiences based on a concept of shared authority. The sharing of power and decision making according to Hirzy (2002: 9) offers citizens expanded obligations and unparalleled opportunities. The report also asks how can museums share authority over meanings?

Our research suggests that the first step towards this is in promoting a visitor-focused agenda and to engage the experiential, critical and political capabilities of audiences. Shared authority is about sharing knowledge and opinions – creating more socially integrative experiences, making a stronger commitment to promoting free debate and allowing genuine diversity in opinion in exhibition contexts. As one staff member at the National Museum of the American Indian commented, "...we do very well at being intellectual bastions, we don't do very well at giving social experiences...if we become better social experiences we may be more able to deal with controversial topics" (staff,

National Museum of the American Indian 2002).

Shared authority is also about tone, that is to stimulate, prompt and provoke and not to preach, rather letting people resolve issues in their own minds. The Science Museum in London is one of the few institutions experimenting with this approach. As one senior manager commented “We act as a prompt, raise the issue, provide the options and look at how society might begin to deal with them. The museum does not advocate a specific solution or determine the outcome.” (director Science Museum, London 2003). Shared authority is also about consultation on topics and the content of exhibitions in identifying levels of tolerance and diversity of opinion.

Promoting a more egalitarian approach requires museums to relinquish a level of interpretive licence and empower audiences to complete the interpretive cycle – to act more as expert knowledge brokers as opposed to authorities. Positioning the museum voice involves engaging a problem solving framework. That is, by raising questions rather than providing all the answers, presenting a range of scholarly information, perspectives and sources and most importantly assisting people to analyse and weigh up arguments and draw their own conclusions from a range of evidence. Surrendering control also means empowering audiences to make their own censorship decisions to a greater extent rather than it being solely an institutional decision.

Integral to this is the overt demonstration of museum agency. In a contemporary world for museums to maintain the trust of their audiences as places for impartial, trustworthy and reliable information, visitors need to critically consider the nature and source of the evidence and information presented. Audiences are beginning to deconstruct knowledge sources but as yet no canon has been established that reveals the

decisions that are made as an exhibition is developed. As one focus group member commented “I recently watched a documentary on the Palestinian Israeli conflict and we were told it is an extremely biased point of view – with exhibitions there is usually a bias but you are not told about it, I need to be aware of where people are coming from” (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#b).

This involves the exposure of the epistemological basis on which knowledge in museums is based by the inclusion of information on methods and perspectives as well as authoring to inform decision making. There is danger that museums are still seen by many as objective and non-political in a modernist sense and so institutions have a responsibility to dispel this myth by demonstrating their capacity and willingness to truly engage divisive topics in an open and honest way including their own processes of knowledge production. And most importantly for institutions to extend the rules of engagement and repoliticise audience relationships and exhibition practice.