Perspective

Museums beyond neutrality

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More and more, museums are facing demands of accountability. The days are over when museums could legitimise their place in society simply by referring to the traditional functions of collecting, researching and disseminating (Black 2012, Achiam & Sølberg 2017). Today, urges for museums to clarify their contributions to broader society come from many different sources: governments, who may allocate funding based on an institution's potential to generate financial returns (Rex 2019) or public health benefits (Desmarais *et al.* 2018); historians and indigenous experts, who critique the colonialist structures that enable museums to retain property rights to objects looted from former colonies (Knott 2018, Bakare 2019, Owen 2020); or scholars of cultural history, who demand that the white, western, male gaze prevalent in many exhibitions be replaced with a more diverse range of perspectives (Levin 2010, Robinson 2017, Balle 2019).

We suggest that these and other demands for accountability may be symptomatic of a general frustration with museums' *feigned neutrality* (Janes & Grattan 2019), and therefore an expression of an underlying societal need for museums to declare themselves more openly and explicitly. By neutrality, we mean not

being engaged, or decided, on either side of an issue. As we shall argue in this position paper, a neutral position is neither possible nor, indeed, desirable for museums. We develop our argument by drawing on examples from research as well as from recent conversations in the museum community, and conclude by considering the implications of our proposal for museum practice. We focus on science museums (natural history museums, science and technology museums and science centres) because this is our collective area of expertise, and because realisations of the non-neutrality of the scientific endeavour have been much longer in the making in the natural sciences than in other disciplines. Even so, the arguments we make could be considered in other contexts and across museum genres.

MUSEUMS ARE NOT NEUTRAL

First of all, we contend that the institution of the museum is not, nor has it ever been, neutral. Evidence of the value-ladenness of museums comes from many quarters. Kathleen McLean says about museum practice:

Even in the earliest temples of the muses, someone set forth some object for others to experience, and

who selected what for whom is the question at the heart of all conversation about exhibitions. The objects may be trophies of conquest, curious things from the natural world, masterpieces, or constructed environments, but embedded in their presentation is material evidence of the presenter's intentions and values (McLean 1999, 83).

What McLean is referring to here is that the simple act of setting forth objects in exhibitions is not neutral; it is rather an expression of institutional authority intended to prompt certain reflections among audiences. This is so, even though the intentions of exhibition designers are often hidden from public view, or even unconscious (McLean 1999).

The manifestations of museums that emerged in Europe in the sixteenth century, the *curiosity cabinets* or *Wunderkammern*, explicitly drew on 'exploration' and colonisation of other parts of the world. Today, the collections of many natural history museums in the Global North remain based on objects and specimens collected from former colonies, when the rights of westerners to take them was often not questioned (Norris 2017, Steinhauer 2018). Often, the dissemination of these objects and specimens largely ignores or downplays their provenance (Balle 2019).

Other types of museums have similarly non-neutral roots. For instance, the emergence of science centres in North America in the late 1960s was a response to the perceived success of science in the Second World War, but also a reaction to the successful launch of the satellite Sputnik by the Soviet Union and the resulting worry about the technological gap between the Soviet Union and the western nations. The appearance of science centres thus manifested an urge to create a scientifically competitive public (Ogawa *et al.* 2009) – hardly a neutral or non-ideological position.

Today, reduced public funding for museums prompts them to seek financial support from other avenues. This poses further questions about neutrality, as exemplified by the recent refurbishment of the fossil hall of the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History. Rieppel (2019) reported how this refurbishment was made possible by a donation from David Koch, an American multi-millionaire. With his brother Charles, David Koch was a key funder for climate change denialism, and the refurbished fossil hall that he helped fund has been accused of whitewashing the present climate crisis by making it seem part of a natural continuum, rather than a problem caused by human activity (Little 2015). The choice of downplaying or ignoring evidence of anthropogenic climate disruption in an exhibition that addresses climate is a curatorial decision, certainly, but not a neutral one.

To be sure, we are not seeking here to condemn the use of private funding in the development and maintenance of museum practices, although it has been argued that museums should completely avoid funding from certain sponsors (cf. Lyons & Economopoulos 2015). We acknowledge that donations and funding from private organisations are a fact of life for many, if not all, museums. Nor are we advocating that those institutions whose genealogy is intertwined with values and ideology should suddenly cease to exist! Our critique here is of positions that tend to *obscure* the ideological foundations of museums and their practices.

NEUTRALITY IS NOT POSSIBLE

Although the examples we have given in the preceding can be seen as *proof of existence* of non-neutrality in museums and their

practices, we would like to take our argument one step further. We claim that a neutral 'view from nowhere' (Haraway 1988) is impossible, because such a viewpoint simply does not exist. Even though objectivity has historically been an important part of the self-image of science (Reiss & Sprenger 2017), science is not culture-free, and cannot produce culture-free, ahistorical knowledge (Brickhouse 2001). This means that attempts to maintain a disinterested and objective position on science by disseminating just 'the facts' flies in the face of research that shows how science is, among other things, gendered, raced and classed (for example Harding 1986, Code 1991, Leslie *et al.* 2015, Wong 2016). In the words of Jillian Steinhauer, "claiming not to take a position is actually a way of taking one - it means supporting the status quo" (Steinhauer 2018).

Even so, the enlightenment view of science that positions it as objective, disembodied and universally true has long characterised public engagement efforts (Davies 2014). This is a problem, because the enlightenment perspective appeals to only a fraction of the public: typically middle-class, well-educated people. This results in feelings of being excluded among many members of the public who are left out, for instance those from lower socio-economic groups, from minority ethnic groups or older adults (Garibay 2011, Dawson 2014, OECD 2018). We thus contend that not only is neutrality impossible, but also that feigning neutrality (by supporting the status quo) can seem excluding to a wide diversity of publics.

(FEIGNING) NEUTRALITY IS NOT DESIRABLE

Finally, we suggest that rather than trying to conceal the ideological, political, institutional and cultural conditions that shape their

practices, museums should openly disclose those conditions, as well as their own motivations for selecting, displaying and engaging with certain aspects of science. We argue that rather than risking their reputation as trusted communicators (cf. Janes 2013, Rodegher & Freeman 2019) or alienating their funders (cf. Janes & Sandell 2019), this disclosure can *maintain and strengthen* museums' credibility. This is because even though feigning neutrality may seem to justify a museum's focus on telling the facts and effectively absolve it from having to consider the implications of science for society, actually the feigned neutrality position just places this responsibility squarely on the visitors' shoulders (Rodegher & Freeman 2019). This displacement of responsibility seriously undermines the educational mission of museums (Janes & Grattan 2019) in a climate where they are increasingly being called upon to justify themselves. In other words: if museums, the stewards and repositories of scientific thinking (Janes & Sandell 2019) cannot engage the public in reflecting on how science and society mutually affect each other, who can?

On a positive note, the growing movement among museums to create equitable and inclusive experiences, decolonise their collections, and address social justice seem to be evidence of a commitment to jettison notions of neutrality, and embrace a more transparent point of view. We encounter international examples of this movement, including the newly established museums of climate change in Hong Kong, New York and Oslo. We also encounter more local examples of this commitment, as exemplified by this comment from a museum professional close to us:

The activist tendency among museums is, as I see it, on the rise. Museums give their points of view on current debates, and use their position to suggest solutions to on-going

societal issues. We witnessed this, for instance, in connection with the election of Trump, when several American museums exhibited works originating from the seven countries Trump banned immigration from.

At our museum, we talk about how this is a tendency that cannot be overlooked in our present society and the time we live in. Moreover, that it helps create trustworthiness in museums when they take a stance based on a scientific rather than a political point of view (Anonymous, personal communication, 20/10/19).

We believe the brief examples provided here represent different ways for museum professionals to respond to a broader societal need for museums to make their purposes and intentions explicit. In the final sections of this text, we offer principled suggestions about what these responses might look like from our perspective.

WHAT MIGHT NON-NEUTRALITY LOOK LIKE IN MUSEUMS?

As researchers in the natural sciences, we do not claim to have in-depth expertise in the detailed workings of science museums. In the following, we limit ourselves to briefly remarking on the general features of what non-neutrality could look like across the museum pillars of collections, research and dissemination. We are well aware that these suggestions are slightly removed from everyday museum practice, and require operationalisation. We hope the museum professionals who read this text will consider these suggestions in the constructive spirit in which we have attempted to write them.

Collections. Even though not all science museums have collections (e.g. science centres), for many institutions they play an important role in research and visitor engagement.

Although the historical asymmetry between those who collect and those who provide the specimens has gradually been replaced with much more equitable practices (Norris 2017), other problems related to the sustainability of collections have emerged. In particular, consumerist and materialist aspects of collecting have come to the forefront of discussions, given the increasing costs of maintaining and expanding collections (Bradley *et al.* 2014) coupled with sometimes vague claims of preserving heritage for posterity (Allmon 1994; Janes & Sandell 2019). For museums, non-neutrality could consist of being explicit about how the accumulation of specimens and objects (and the related expenditure) can help us understand the problems we face as a global society, such as the biodiversity crisis (Suarez & Tsutsui 2004) or climate change (Robbirt *et al.* 2011), or serve as repositories of technological memory as we search for solutions to modern-day problems (Janes & Sandell 2019).

Research. The scope of present-day museum research goes well beyond the descriptive classification that characterised early work. New analytical techniques, digitalisation and other developments has multiplied the contributions of museum research to society (Howarth 2017) where it provides crucial insights on public health (including pandemics), agriculture, habitat loss and many other problems (Suarez & Tsutsui 2004). Current museum research thus distinguishes itself from the ‘value-free’ stance that has been a historical part of the self-image of the natural sciences (cf. Reiss & Sprenger 2017). Declaring this non-neutrality could consist of explicating what sustainability values guide the museum’s research, and how those values shape its identification of problems, formulation of research questions, and findings (cf. Schneider *et al.* 2019). Whether those findings are ultimately used to argue for

changes in government policy or to promote informed civic engagement (Achiam & Sølberg 2017, Howarth 2017), we claim that transparency about how they came about will strengthen the credibility of the museum.

Dissemination. Finally, a science museum's dissemination activities are its most immediate interface with the public, and thus where a non-neutral stance will have the greatest impact on public perception. Just like museums' collections and research activities have changed over time, so have its dissemination activities, perhaps most obviously in the case of exhibitions. Here, early communication models intended to show the scientific primacy of the object have been gradually replaced with models that acknowledge the role of the visitor's prior knowledge and experiences (cf. Achiam 2016). Today, the most progressive exhibitions are making important steps towards fully embracing and declaring the cultural diversity and significance of the displayed objects and their provenance (Blond 2017). Therefore, non-neutral exhibitions in museums are those that openly question authoritative or canonical accounts of science, and engage their communities in negotiating the meaning of scientific objects and practices (Sandholdt & Achiam 2019). This engagement can take place in the design phase through co-curation or co-development processes with relevant publics (for example indigenous communities or people impacted by climate change, Anderson & Hadlaw 2018) and by explicitly including and contextualising the multiple voices of those publics in the exhibition (Blond 2017).

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have argued that museums have never been neutral, nor is it a desirable position. In fact, we believe that an explicitly

non-neutral stance presents the museum community with an opportunity to clarify their many contributions to broader society, thereby increasing their relevance and inclusiveness to the public. We thus invite the community of (science) museum professionals to consider the day-to-day and long-term implications of a museum beyond neutrality.

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