

From the Margins to the Core?

Conference Reflections

Christopher Breward, Head of Research, V&A

Wednesday 24 March 2010 - Day One:

Introduction – Ian Blatchford, Deputy Director, V&A

Ian opened the proceedings with some reflections on the timeliness of the conference theme and its connections to the V&A. He noted a tradition of 'diverse' collecting dating back to the Museum's debt to the International 1851 Exhibition and reminded delegates of the current implications of the Single Equality Bill. Ian encouraged delegates to bring a degree of intellectual flexibility and humility to the conference and commended the current V&A 'Quilts' exhibition as a relevant example.

The Margins define the Mainstream – Gary Younge, Guardian journalist

Gary's keynote lecture usefully set out four broad contextual issues that encouraged delegates to question their assumptions about the conference theme. The first was that the margins define the core and the two are symbiotic in their relation to each other. Secondly, such definitions are contingent and never straightforward. Thirdly, these categorisations have everything to do with the exercise of power: that decisions made at the core have consequences which are felt at the margins. And finally, that such relationships are never settled, but constantly in flux and evolution. Gary went on to illustrate these points with provocative examples, ranging from Israel's recent redefinition of 40,000 members of its population along religious (non-Jewish) lines, Barack Obama's identity, the estrangement of sections of the British white working class and the concept of 'political correctness'. He also called for the recognition of points of commonality, for example that identities must make sense in order to have agency; that institutions avoid appropriating the diversity agenda as a form of 'photo-opportunity' cosmetics whilst withholding a real commitment

to equal opportunity, and that traditionalist or reactionary viewpoints distort history and stifle the possibility of change.

Responses:

Makeda Coaston (Cultural and Heritage Facilitator) noted that while the term ‘margins to the core’ had often been used as a rallying call, it was far harder to judge the degree to which good intentions had been achieved. For slogan to become practice, ‘people had to make change happen.’

Mark O’Neill (Head of Arts & Museums, Glasgow City Council) applied some of Gary’s observations to diversity practices within the British museum sector, identifying two approaches: the standard ‘welfare’ model where so called ‘core’ functions of curatorship, conservation and display are separated from temporary exhibitions, education and outreach. This model, he argued, simply replicates existing power relations. The second ‘social justice’ model embeds the ‘marginalised’, the community, at the core of the museum’s life, breaking down unhelpful dichotomies and creating a sense of the museum as a living resource, connected to culture.

The audience raised several questions and observations including the validity of Black History Month, the need to place questions of human identity within a broader context (of animal rights or environmentalism), the issue of agency in relation to the expertise of the curator and audiences (where does authority lie?), the challenges of introducing a sense of ‘core-margin’ flux and dynamism into permanent displays and the idea that the margins are the most creative of spaces.

Theme: Connecting or Competing Equalities?

**Unpacking Gender – Professor Amy Levin, Director of Women’s Studies,
Northern Illinois University**

Amy dedicated her paper to the late Christopher Bell who had produced challenging work on responses to AIDS quilt projects that took into account the perspectives of race, disability and gender. She also noted the history of the

V&A as a museum associated with empire and suggested that these theoretical and historical contexts could usefully inform any ongoing discussion of diversity issues in relation to gender and sexual identity. Amy acknowledged that many institutions now produced perceptive exhibitions and installations exploring previously hidden histories of women and minorities, but suggested that there were still lessons to be learned. Through a series of case-studies (largely of US museums) she raised questions of adopting appropriate methodologies in cataloguing and labelling, the identification of object types (such as clothing) that perhaps lend themselves more readily to interpretation from multiple perspectives, the usefulness of queer theory as a broader strategy for challenging the heterodox core values of institutions and the manner in which histories of collecting and collectors can reveal alternative stories about minority identities. Amy suggested that rendering visible the invisible and giving space to marginalised communities was a key function of the museum, one that could challenge dominant ideologies – but might also give rise to forms of sensation-seeking.

Questions

The audience were interested in the speaker's views on proportional representation of minorities on the staff and boards of museums and the degree to which curators consulted with community groups and representatives in developing expertise around the subject. There was also discussion of the validity of the term 'community' as a meaningful concept.

A Question of Faith: The Museum as Spiritual or Secular Space - Crispin Paine, Museums and Heritage Consultant, Chair

Atul Shah (Consultant, Diverse Ethics) focused on the devotional and ritual role of Jain objects and how the context of the museum, as opposed to the temple shifted meanings (from the functional to the aesthetic – when Jain belief saw no disjunction between these two positions).

Irna Qureshi (Anthropologist) reported on the Heritage Lottery Fund project *Pillars of Life* project where the experience of the Hamara Pakistani Women's Group (Leeds based, older women, family dependent and relatively isolated) at

the exhibitions *Palace and Mosque* and *Speaking Out* revealed much about the power and interpretation of Islamic objects in museum settings. The women clearly perceived the exhibition spaces as sacred and prepared themselves appropriately. They derived a huge amount of spiritual comfort and pride from encountering familiar forms in the museum environment, and in ensuing reminiscence sessions, were keen to pass this experience onto family members through discussion of personal objects.

Mark O'Neil (Head of Art & Museums, Glasgow City Council) proposed the four key issues that beset any publicly funded curator of religious artefacts:

1. Whether to present objects in a cultural or religious context and whether to include the views of believers in their interpretation.
2. Whether museums could promote mutual understanding and respect amongst people of all faiths and none in their presentation of religious themes.
3. Whether museums had a duty to present the destructive histories of religions as well as their positive contributions.
4. How museums might respond to fundamentalist lobby groups who are increasingly turning to human rights legislation to censor museum work and personnel.

He suggested that arising debates went to the core of the meaning of life in a pluralist society.

David Anderson (Director of Learning & Interpretation, V&A) offered a secularist position, but acknowledged that many moved from positions of belief to unbelief and back and that this demonstrated the shifting nature of identity very well. He considered the extent to which the concept of the museum as public space, already threatened by commercialisation, surveillance and institutional power, might also be challenged by particular religious positions and wanted to defend museum space as a non-partisan and democratic place for critical thinking (as opposed to devotional practice). He also defended the right of museums and democratic governments to establish the ethical guidelines by which objects in their care were acquired, maintained, presented and interpreted. And he asked whether the secular represented the core or the opposition in relation to religious belief, whether a faith believer could be an

advocate for secular ideas and whether the secular space was the natural space of human rights.

Questions

These ranged from a questioning of Creationist museums and Creationist interventions in public science museums, the placing of believers' interpretations of objects (in the gallery or on the web), and the role of the museum (as opposed to the temple, church, synagogue or mosque) as a place to learn about religious belief and tradition, or as a place of spiritual (but non-religious) contemplation in its own right.

Thursday 25 March 2010 - Day Two:

Theme: Connecting or Competing Equalities?

**Jo Littler, Senior Lecturer, Media and Cultural Studies, Middlesex University,
Chair**

**Diversity and Cultural Policy - Dr Leon Wainwright, Senior Lecturer, Art History
& Design, Manchester Metropolitan University**

Leon reflected on his experiences as a member of the HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council of England) funded Globalising Art, Architecture and Design History (GLAADH) project, convened to address under-represented aspects of teaching programmes in the subject area that pertained to diversity. He stated that the project set no prior definitions of what cultural diversity might entail in this context, but allowed participants to set their own parameters under the rubric of the global. Though the project had aimed to support the embedding of diversity in the curricula of HE Institutions, it revealed a number of tensions and challenges, some disciplinary, some institutional and some personal. In order to achieve the aims of the project, Leon suggested that the field would need to work on breaking down the distinctions between the concepts of world art and art, the mainstream and the diverse, the core and the margins. On an individual level, the project found that participants often felt they lacked the necessary expertise to launch teaching modules engaging with the margins. Leon also identified the hierarchies imposed by the Research Assessment Exercise as a disincentive to questioning disciplinary boundaries (on the contrary it tended to shore up 'core' values) and suggested that the coming Research Excellence Framework would impose its own priorities in relation to impact, priorities that may, in some cases, favour those whose work engaged with audiences and non-academic institutions in a culturally diverse world in interesting ways. On a more personal note, Leon reflected on his own scholarship on Caribbean-based artists, its challenge to the Black Atlantic orthodoxy and its location between the academic sphere and the public sphere of curating. Finally, he stressed that his experiences had given rise to a degree of self-examination, an acknowledgement of discomfort, and an opportunity to find an elective affinity

with others at the margins. There is, Leon suggested, 'a need to win back our own sense of diversity.'

**Tate Encounters: Britishness and Visual Culture - Professor Andrew Dewdney,
Faculty of Arts & Human Sciences, London South Bank University**

Andrew summarised the findings of the AHRC (Arts & Humanities Research Council) funded project 'Tate Encounters: Britishness and Visual Cultures' which had aimed to 'reverse the direction of cultural flow' at Tate in respect to engaging BAME audiences. He suggested that the cultural diversity policies associated with the New Labour agenda are a spent force and we face a serious dilemma: to return to a concept of culture defined by the experts or to adopt new paradigms that embrace a real engagement with cultural difference. The project had examined the factors that keep non-traditional gallery visitors away (environmental, political, historical) and that sustain unchanging audience profiles despite years of targeting. It found that simply following the demographics of non-visitors in a manner analogous to segmented marketing is diversionary and achieves nothing of lasting value. Often this sort of thinking merely reproduces the marginalised status of particular groups and racialises them in a reductive manner, resulting in a situation where there is 'no coming together, no possibility of transformation'. What is necessary is a more thorough re-thinking of institutional flows and networks that disrupt restrictive boundaries between acquisition, display, curation, viewing and interpreting artefacts and enforce an unnatural division between concepts of expertise and the audience (who are often constructed as an afterthought in institutional planning and practices). In conclusion, Andrew suggested that institutions are required to be more open to risk and change and the metaphor of margin and core should be replaced by the more fluid concept of global citizenship and open networks.

Questions

The audience were keen to hear how Tate might act on the findings of the AHRC project. Questions were also raised about disciplinary difference in relation to cultural diversity and the 'problem' of art history (the more global perspectives of anthropology and cultural geography, the politicised agenda of

sociology, the requirement to think in inter-disciplinary terms – ie: at the margins). The personal and real politics of academic / museum collaboration were also raised, alongside a sense of loss and marginalisation experienced in both sectors due to the effects of a decade of blunt utilitarian government policies. It was suggested that the conference might represent the end of an era and that the challenge now was to engage an ‘ambivalent mainstream.’

Theme: Social Justice

Museums and Social Justice – Dr Richard Sandell, Head of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, Chair

Richard introduced the session by outlining an HLF/NESTA (National Endowment for Science, Technology & the Arts) funded project *Rethinking Disability Representation* that his department had driven. He suggested that the research of best-practice projects such as *Rethinking Disability* and similar projects had uncovered cause for optimism in terms of the positive effects that had been achieved in the sector so far. The project demonstrated that acknowledgement of global concerns, activist practice, and increasing understanding of social agency were all becoming embedded in museums, archives and galleries more willing than ever to take a moral position and make change happen.

Ten years on - John Vincent, Founder of ‘The Network’ an organisation tackling social inclusion

In a review of progress over ten years in the libraries sector, John was also able to claim a sense of progress in tackling social exclusion issues. In 1997 he identified patchy work on equality and diversity, an assumption or resignation to a market-driven agenda, stifling managerialism and the shadow of a political correctness backlash. Yet from 2000 onwards new initiatives and a new sense of leadership following DCMS (Department for Culture, Media & Sport) and MLA (Museums, Libraries & Archives Council) input, the availability of funding, the prioritisation of training, development of strategic policies, an increase in project work (which comes with the problem of short-termism) and some re-

direction of internal funding, have vastly improved the capacity of the sector. Exemplary library services including Leeds, Southend and Manchester had properly embedded a social inclusion agenda at the core of their business. In the future John anticipated that Libraries would need to make a stronger case for social inclusion practices as a necessity at the heart of their function and seek synergies and connections with other cultural sectors to achieve their aims. He suggested that poor attitudes still remained in relation to the needs of refugee, LGBTQ and traveller communities and reflected on his own marginalised status as a gay man in respect to this. An acknowledgement of the personal is, he believes, an important aspect of the struggle for improvement.

Contemporary Art & Human Rights - Victoria Hollows, Museums Manager, Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow (GOMA)

Victoria presented on the success of GOMA's combined exhibition, outreach and education programme since 2002. Here, a biennial sequence of projects focusing on asylum seekers (sanctuary), violence against women (rule of thumb), sectarianism (blind faith) and LGBTQ issues (sh[out]) had fundamentally transformed the way in which the institution operated. She identified five areas of important progress arising from the programme:

1. Programmes had provided greater opportunity to attract broader audiences, engage international and local artists and develop the collection.
2. Programmes had demonstrated that social inclusion work could be of a very high quality and raise awareness via real participation and collaboration (not just mosaics!)
3. Programmes had supported integrated team-work across the institution, breaking down barriers and engaging expertise (via advisory boards).
4. Programmes had encouraged a profound understanding of the emotional investment made by staff and participants to life-changing projects.
5. Programmes had improved the institution's attention to issues of planning, sustainability and risk.

Victoria concluded her presentation with the metaphor of a memorial sculpture made by a contemporary lesbian artist in New York State, where the entwined toes of sleeping lovers suggested the intimacy denied them by a state unwilling to sanction same-sex marriage. In such small gestures, she suggested, great power resides.

Questions

The audience raised issues around responses to less progressive attitudes, the problems of an inclusion agenda that didn't recognise the hierarchies and tensions that exist within and between groups and the relationship between social justice work in the cultural sector and social work.

Friday 26 March 2010 - Day Three:

Theme: Drivers for Change

**Julien Anfruns (Director General of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), and President of the International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS),
Chair**

**A Change of Heart: Fred Wilson's Impact on Museums - Fred Wilson,
Conceptual Artist**

Fred Wilson offered an illuminating insight into the creation of his installation at the American Historical Society, Baltimore. Amongst several fascinating strategies for disrupting the unreconstructed nature of the Museum's displays and questioning issues of 'truth' in history and curation, Fred introduced empty pedestals to signify the absence of named black heroes, a series of cigar store Indians whose authorship and iconography suggested the highly constructed nature of ethnic identity and stereotyping, a series of portraits including images of slave children which were accompanied by an audio of contemporary black American children voicing the emotions of the subjects, the juxtaposition of fine metalwork and slave manacles, domestic furniture and a whipping post and a Klu Klux Klan hood in a perambulator, and a doll's house whose content had been re-arranged to take black servants out of the lobby and kitchen and into the grand rooms. Fred stressed the sense of discomfort he had felt in entering the institution and how this had inspired his investigations. He talked about his interaction with curators and non-curatorial staff and suggested that these personal contacts and journeys were an essential component of his working practice.

Janet Marstine, Director, Institute of Museum Ethics, Seton Hall University, New Jersey

Richard Sandell presented a response to Fred Wilson's work on Janet's behalf. This focused on the more general questions of institutional critique and

adopted the Freudian metaphor of the mystic writing pad to investigate the traces of conscience and consciousness that such projects produce.

Questions

The audience questioned the difference between drivers and agents of change, they wondered how the rising popularity of artist interventions impacted on curatorial practice and asked Fred about his status as an outsider / lay expert and the role of national and regional contexts in his work.

Moving forward on all fronts? - Eithne Nightingale, Head of Diversity Strategy, V&A (introduced by Makeda Coaston, Cultural and Heritage Facilitator & Enabler)

Eithne presented an overview of the challenges and advances that had occurred in diversity work at the V&A over the past ten years. She remarked on the need to address issues of age, both under 17 and under-represented elements of the over 65 retired audience. In relation to gender, there was a higher % of both women visitors and staff but under-representation of women at senior management level. LGBTQ initiatives had been a great and acknowledged success, promoted with the prior backing of management and vindicated by sell-out numbers at events. Advances in issues relating to disability had been eased by the introduction of new legal requirements and their attendant responsibilities. In the area of ethnicity, debates and HLF-funded research surrounding the display and interpretation of objects related to the African Diaspora had encouraged new attitudes and potential. Work with refugees had demonstrated the real-life changes that it is possible to achieve. Negotiating faith issues had been a great challenge with respect to the integration of the secular perspective of the Museum and the interests of religious groups, but the potential for bridge-building between groups and positions is huge. Social inclusion remains a continuing concern. In essence, the incorporation of a diversity agenda at the V&A had however been a cause for quiet celebration. The Museum had moved beyond the confines of legal requirement towards a real shift in culture and looked forward to the dispersal of leadership and empowerment throughout the institution, where the core will find it necessary to listen to the margins.

Questions

These focused on the issue of 'future-proofing' the sector's diversity gains against the likely effects of legal, governmental and funding changes over the coming decade and the possibilities of effecting change at the 'core' when shifts in attitude were often progressed through the external challenges.

Workforce diversity: positive action and other steps towards lasting cultural change - Sandy Nairne, Director, National Portrait Gallery, Chair

Sandy introduced the final session on diversity in the workforce, highlighting the registers of opportunity that existed in a sector where full equality had not yet been achieved. **Lucy Shaw** (Diversity Coordinator, Museums Association) reported on the positive shifts in percentage representation of minority ethnic workers (from 7 – 11%) employed by UK museums between 1993 and 2008 as revealed through MLA surveys, but she noted that this still lags behind the 12% representation in the national population. Lucy was followed by **Helen Wilkinson** (consultant and author of the *MLA Collections for the Future* report) who provided a contextual overview of some of the issues underlying the statistics, particularly relating to the growing problems of income inequality and declining social mobility amongst the UK population. **Praveen Heart** (Consultant) had benefited from the *MLA Diversify Scheme* through his move from international development and charity to a management traineeship at the Royal Pavillion and Museums, Brighton and Hove. Finally **Joseph Harker** (Guardian journalist) delivered a challenging analysis based on his experience in national newspapers and advised institutions to ensure that real inclusion and the valuing of opinion amongst staff were the keys to effective diversity policies.

Questions

The audience remarked that rising unemployment is a great leveller, raising opportunities for the emergence of new talent and job creation. Some commented that exhibitions needed to reflect a diverse society. Others suggested that institutions needed to be open to the benefits that active diversity policies could bring.