



THE
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MUSEUMS:

Nonprofits in the Eye of the Perfect Narrative Storm

An NPQ Compilation

Editors' note: NPQ keeps track of what is going on in the operating environment of nonprofits largely through its daily newswire. A team of volunteer writers and staff produces around seven newswire stories and one feature a day—and these track, over time, developments in practice, policy, philanthropy, and movements. The newswires are informed by those that have come before, as well as by research and the practice experiences of the writers. With this process, NPQ keeps readers up to date on emerging ideas and forms of action. This article traces our coverage over five years of the evolution of a field in flux: museums. The newswire stories within highlight the role of museums in supporting status-quo narratives, and provide a sense of how ideas about and accountability in museum curation, repatriation of art and artifacts, and leadership and influence have developed over this relatively short period.

MUSEUMS, AS REPOSITORIES OF HISTORICAL artifacts, contain interpretations of culture, history, and the natural world, traditionally through the lens of the monied class. In this way, dominant narratives and cultural perceptions are reinforced to the visiting public with “authority” and “gravitas.”

Recently, activists have begun to apply increasing pressure on a number of leverage points in museum systems: leadership and curatorial staff, financial backers, and the institutions’ narrative habits, as well as the provenance of institutional holdings. The question becomes, “Whose knowledge is it?”—and, by extension, “Whose world?”

WHAT DOES A NEW PRACTICE ENTAIL?

Questions about the colonialist tendencies of museums are very active in that world and have been for a number of decades; but recently, the volume and persistence of questions has increased, and calls for a process of cultural decolonization have taken center stage. A recent article in the *Journal of Museum Education* is called “Inclusion Requires Fracturing.”¹ It discusses the fact that the process of decolonizing museums—and in this case the author is discussing art museums—requires more than merely additions to exhibits or special exhibit spaces:

Polyvocal representation, participatory and co-creative community-engaged interpretive practices can be powerful tools toward inclusive, reparative work in art museums. However, these tools can only ever be partially liberatory because they merely disrupt and fracture known museum practice. What becomes possible if the tools become strategies that are integrated into all aspects of museum practice? Within broader museum systems, similar work must infuse collection, curating, operations, hiring, staffing, and echo throughout all functions of the museum. There is great opportunity in new collecting practices to release artistic expression and cultural representation from long-held taxonomies; we can seek and create different ways of seeing and thinking to unfix what seemed fixed. Interpretive planning, as a relatively young field in art museums, and the work of educators in interpretive development can be vulnerable within institutions where stable ground is sought and practices become institutionalized as foundational. But in that yet-unformed space may lie the strongest opportunity to push for and achieve next practices in equitable cultural representation, identity formation, and critical reflection. These activities do not merely redress past wrongs but exploit the power of the art museum to design more generative, engaged, luminous, and joyful futures.²

WHO OWNS OUR STORY? THE PROBLEM WITH MUSEUM-BASED NARRATIVE

Many larger cultural institutions in the United States are, at least in significant part, supported by an elite class of donor members of which many share a dominant worldview, and this may cause a narrowness of approach to the exhibition of art and history. Some public, private, and individual funders have begun to push accountability regarding the inclusiveness of the arts. One large initiative NPQ reported on in 2017 was New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio’s, which links all of the city’s cultural funding to the diversity of employees and board members of those institutions. This followed the release of a report, funded by the Ford Foundation: *CreateNYC: A Cultural Plan for All New Yorkers*.³

This, explained Robin Pogrebin of the *New York Times*, “puts pressure on the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Carnegie Hall, the American Museum of Natural History and other preeminent institutions that are led largely by white male executives and power brokers from Wall Street, real estate and other industries.”⁴

New York City spends more on arts and culture than any other city in the United States—and more than any single state. The budget of the city’s Department of Cultural Affairs exceeds that of the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The city has been funding the arts since the nineteenth century, but until now, City Hall has never embarked on a comprehensive review of where all that money goes and what it does.

Darren Walker, the Ford Foundation’s president and a major proponent both of the arts and racial equity, has said, “Some part of this is going to be disruptive. That is a good thing, if it produces a fairer system.”⁵ But pressure is not only coming from institutional supporters of the arts. A year later, a high-dollar donor couple made their contribution to the Metropolitan Museum dependent on a less colonialist approach to the exhibition of the art of Native American people—and they made that gift conditional on the placement of the art in the American wing rather than the galleries for Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, so it would be seen

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as part of this country's narrative.⁶ But depending on enlightened individual donors to make these points leaves the ownership of narrative in their hands, and sometimes those hands have an interest in controlling the narrative. Corporate sponsorship of museum exhibits is eliciting numerous environmental protests across Europe. A newswire report by *NPQ* in 2013 addressed Sebastião Salgado's *Genesis* exhibit, at the Natural History Museum in London:⁷

"These photographs document environments that have great scientific importance as well as aesthetic appeal," says museum director Dr. Michael Dixon. "They show the inspiring diversity of our planet, a natural wealth for which we are all responsible."⁸

But the sponsor who made the whole thing possible was Vale, a Brazilian mining company that had been called out in 2012 by *The Public Eye*, an annual competition held by Greenpeace and the Berne Declaration, as the corporation having the greatest "contempt for the environment and human rights" in the world.⁹ [In "Sebastião Salgado and Cultural Capital,"¹⁰] Lewis Bush writes: "Hans Haacke, whose art and writing have long critiqued the relationship between cultural institutions and large corporations, argues that sponsorship is rarely about altruism and always about exchange. It is 'an exchange of capital: financial capital on the part of the sponsors and symbolic capital on the part of the sponsored.' According to Haacke, symbolic capital represents or results in public good will, corporate recognition, and a favourable political atmosphere for the activities of the sponsor. He also notes that the tax-deductible nature of cultural donations means that paying museum visitors are often in effect subsidizing tax breaks for the corporations who donate."¹¹

Similarly, recent research has also uncovered the way in which the billionaire class appears to marry its cultural and political influence. Chelsea Reichert reported on this in her newswire story

"Philanthropy, Democracy, and the Weird Civic Playground of Nonprofit Museums,"¹² in which she covered Andrea Fraser's book *2016: in Museums, Money, and Politics*.¹³

Fraser . . . states, "Social scientists and other observers of politics...conclude that our system of government is no longer a democracy—government by the people through elected representatives. Instead, the United States has become a plutocracy—government by the wealthy."¹⁴ As elected officials increasingly prioritize the acquisition of wealth, nonprofit institutions follow. And as the wealthy find increased power and influence in political contributions, they find the same in philanthropic donations. Just as Donald Trump assembled "the wealthiest cabinet in U.S. history,"¹⁵ nonprofits have assembled some of the wealthiest, and most politically influential, boards in history.

In the book's study of 5,458 individual board members, over 42.5 percent made political contributions over \$200 (the threshold for reporting). These individuals made over 36,000 political contributions. For perspective, less than 1 percent of the adult American population gives more than \$200 to political campaigns. The same individuals, as nonprofit board members, are often called upon to donate to their respective nonprofits or cultivate donations from affluent friends and colleagues. As the wealthy doubled their wealth between 1984 and 2016, donations to cultural institutions grew from \$3.85 billion to \$18.21 billion. The same people influencing political policy tend to be the same people influencing the decisions of major cultural institutions, and they don't represent the common American.¹⁶

In fact, U.S. museum leadership and curatorial staff have traditionally been so white that the institutions they guide have helped to marginalize entire cultures into subsidiaries of a main dominant and largely colonialist narrative. This has been well documented in studies done by the

American Alliance of Museums (AAM).¹⁷

It should be said that the field is one of the few that have undertaken such studies on a consistent basis. Still, the 2017 AAM study offered pretty stark statistics as far as diversity and inclusion are concerned¹⁸—worse than the sector overall, if we compare these numbers to the nonprofits surveyed by BoardSource's most recent *Leading with Intent* study.¹⁹ For instance, the demographic profile of museum board members in the United States reveals considerable ethnic and racial homogeneity, along with minimal age diversity. Board composition is tipped to white, older males—more so than at other nonprofit organizations. Forty-six percent of museum boards are all white, compared to 30 percent of nonprofit boards.²⁰

Additionally, the study's findings revealed that 93 percent of museum directors are white, as are 92.6 percent of board chairs and 89.3 percent of board members.²¹ But even though “museum directors and board chairs believe board diversity and inclusion are important to advance their missions,”²² they have failed to prioritize action steps to advance these goals. Despite this, museum board chairs identified fundraising as the most important area for board improvement.

Also, at that time, the survey found no sign of a leadership pipeline for museum staff from historically underrepresented minorities among the 181 art museums responding. Among those highly paid positions of curators, conservators, educators, and leaders, 4 percent are African American, 3 percent are Latinx, and Asians account for 6 percent. Whites hold 84 percent of these high-level jobs.²³ Mariët Westermann, vice president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, suggested at the time that two specific results point to pathways for diversifying museum leadership and the positions that shape museums as venues of research and lifelong education:

First, progress is likely to be swifter and easier on gender equality than on minority representation. As museum staff has become 60 percent female over the past decade or so, there is now also a preponderance of women in the curatorial,

conservation, and educational roles that constitute the pipeline for leadership positions such as museum director, chief curator, and head of conservation or education. With close attention to equitable promotion and hiring practices for senior positions, art museums should be able to achieve greater gender equality in their leadership cohorts within the foreseeable future.

Second, there is no comparable “youth bulge” of staff from historically underrepresented minorities in curatorial, education, or conservation departments. The percentages of staff from underrepresented communities in such positions are basically level at 27.5 percent across the different age cohorts born from the 1960s to 1990s. Therefore, even promotion protocols that are maximally intentional about the organizational benefits of diversity are not going to make museum leadership cohorts notably more diverse if there is no simultaneous increase in the presence of historically underrepresented minorities on museum staff altogether, and particularly in the professions that drive the museum's programs in collection development, research, exhibitions, and education. This finding suggests that diverse educational pipelines into curatorial, conservation, and other art museum careers are going to be critical if art museums wish to have truly diverse staff and inclusive cultures. It also indicates that the nation will need more programs that encourage students of color to pursue graduate education in preparation for museum positions.²⁴

And in fact, more and more often, permanent and temporary museums are bringing untold narratives to communities where museums won't, and this may be helping to push institutionally based museums to act more responsibly. The following newswire reports illuminate how museums can help to deepen and legitimate underrepresented narratives.



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CENTERING AND HONORING MARGINALIZED HISTORIES

Museum of the American Indian Seeks to Change Thanksgiving Narratives

by Steve Dubb | November 21, 2018; *PBS NewsHour*
and *Education Week*

“School children in the US often celebrate Thanksgiving by dressing up as pilgrims and ‘Indians,’” notes Kavitha Cardoza of *Education Week*, reporting for *PBS NewsHour*.²⁵ (For a humorous send-up of the standard account, see this old movie clip from *Addams Family Thanksgiving*.)²⁶ Cardoza, in a masterstroke of understatement, notes that “these traditions tend to perpetuate myths that are offensive to Native American communities.”²⁷ A couple of years ago, writing in *Smithsonian Magazine*, Dennis Zotigh, a cultural specialist at the Museum of the American Indian, was less restrained:

The Thanksgiving myth has done so much damage and harm to the cultural self-esteem of generations of Indian people, including myself, by perpetuating negative and harmful images to both young Indian and non-Indian minds. There are so many things wrong with the happy celebration that takes place in elementary schools and its association to American Indian culture; compromised integrity, stereotyping, and cultural misappropriation are three examples.²⁸

Building counternarratives that are truly respectful of Native American communities and that accurately tell the story of the Wampanoag is no small thing, but the National Museum of the American Indian is seeking to make inroads.

Cardoza, in her story, profiles a group of 50 social studies teachers who come to the Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC, for a week-long training on “how to teach the first Thanksgiving in a way that is true to actual events and respectful of Native cultures.”²⁹ This class is part of a broader set of programs, some taught under the banner of Native Knowledge 360°, as well as related efforts like the Teacher-in-Residence and the July Educator Institute “in order to build a network of teachers dedicated to providing students with new and accurate perspectives.”³⁰

Participating teachers at the training learned that the Pilgrims weren’t the first settlers in the US, and that Native Americans had celebrated fall harvest feasts for years. They got to listen to first-person stories, analyze historical photos, and learn about traditional Native foods. They also learned the broader context of Native American history, including key federal policies, such as assimilation, the Dawes Act, and American Indian removal under Jacksonian policy, and are provided strategies for incorporating these in lesson plans.

“These affected my people, you know, my community, personally,” notes Renee Gokey (Eastern Shawnee/Sac and Fox), who serves as a teacher services representative at the museum.³¹

The stories help teachers devise ways to counter textbook interpretations that often treat American Indians as if they are not part of the US today. As one teacher tells Cardoza, “When you tell [students that] Native people are still here in America, they’re like, Oh, we didn’t know that.”

Eric Shed, who trains history teachers at Harvard University, tells Cardoza that “understanding the past is all about narratives or stories that help us make sense of the present... Narratives are fundamentally important to us as a society... they’re what binds us together.”

Rebecca Daugherty, who teaches third-graders in Colorado Springs, underscores the importance of getting the narrative right. Her students, she notes, are “going to be the future of this country. And if everybody has a misunderstanding and nobody tells them the truth, then we’re a nation built on lies... hopefully, I taught them to not always believe what they hear first time, but to look further and investigate more.”

For her part, Gokey says that part of what motivates the work she does is her belief that “there’s much more opportunity when we speak frankly and truthfully about the past.”

Pop-Up Museums as Political Organizing: Can Totem Poles Help Turn the Tide on Fossil Fuels?

By Eileen Cunniffe | December 4, 2018; *Last Real Indians*

Since 2002, the House of Tears Carvers of the Lummi Nation in northwest Washington have been advocating to protect water, air, and land from natural

and anthropogenic forces by leveraging their traditional art form of carving totem poles. These sometimes massive works of art are then sent on “totem pole journeys”³² across North America to “raise awareness, build alliances, and unite communities around issues of concern,” as explained by *Last Real Indians*³³ and highlighted in a brief YouTube video.³⁴ The totem poles are part of ongoing efforts by Native American tribes to apply sovereignty and treaty rights—along with storytelling and art—to protect the environment.

For the last six years, the new totem poles have focused on issues relating to the fossil fuel industry. The newest carving emphasizes risks to the Salish Sea (off northwest Washington and southwest British Columbia) and its dwindling population of orcas, or killer whales, if proposed industry initiatives are not stopped. This month, the new totem of a whale will take its place in a traveling exhibition opening at the Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville. The exhibition, titled *Whale People: Protectors of the Sea*, “narrates the plight of the orcas from an Indigenous perspective.”³⁵ The exhibition was created by Lummi Nation and a nonprofit pop-up museum called The Natural History Museum. This nonprofit, established in 2014, has several Native American leaders on its advisory board, and the work of the organization is described on its website in this way:

The mission of The Natural History Museum is to affirm the truth of science. By looking at the presentation of natural history, the museum demonstrates principles fundamental to scientific inquiry, principles such as the commonality of knowledge and the unavoidability of the unknown. The Museum inquires into what we see, how we see, and what remains excluded from our seeing. It invites visitors to take the perspective of museum anthropologists attuned to the social and political forces inseparable from the natural world.³⁶

The Natural History Museum is not a brick-and-mortar operation. Its exhibitions are developed in collaboration with Indigenous communities and presented in established mainstream museums. The other museums seem to welcome the exhibitions,

even if they might not have tackled such complex climate justice topics on their own. The advocacy efforts of The Natural History Museum have had some impressive results. Working with 150 top scientists and Nobel Laureates, the nonprofit issued a letter urging museums to cut all ties with fossil fuel interests. To date, nine museums have done so, and the initiative contributed to the resignation of climate-change denier (but big contributor) David Koch from the board of New York’s American Museum of Natural History.

Through its work, The Natural History Museum also appears to be building bridges with institutions that historically have often had poor reputations within Native communities. As described in the *Last Real Indians* article:

Born from a history of plunder, natural history museums in North America are slowly rebuilding relations with Native communities. For decades, Native activists have placed demands on these institutions, making real gains in the process: from the repatriation of human remains and sacred objects to the affirmation that Native Peoples should have authority over the representation of their cultural traditions and histories.³⁷

In addition to their overall commitment to environmental causes, the *Whale People* exhibition has particular resonance for its creators. In the Lummi tradition, orcas are considered as kin. The Lummi phrase for killer whale is “qw’e lh’ol mechen,” which translates as “our people that live under the sea.” The Salish Sea orcas are very much at risk, as are their waters:

Critically endangered, the threats they face range from climate change, starvation, toxic and sound pollution, oil pipelines and tanker traffic. The proposed Trans Mountain Pipeline, which would bring 800 new oil tankers annually to the Salish Sea, would mean game-over for the 74 remaining resident orcas.³⁸

So, back to the totem pole journeys, where we began. Lummi Master Carver Jewell James explains that the totems themselves are not considered sacred. The whale totem, like others before it, has made many stops on its journey from Washington to

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Florida. Along the way, it has been used to educate people about environmental issues, and especially the threats to the Salish Sea and its whales. Those who have turned out to see the totem have been invited to touch it. And once the exhibition opens in Florida, museum visitors will be invited to do the same. As James explains, “It is only when the totem is touched and shared by many communities standing together that the totem becomes a lasting part of our memories and a symbol of our resistance.”³⁹

In a newswire story by Anne Eigeman, “Museums, Neighborhoods, and Gentrification: Lessons from the Nation’s Capital,”⁴⁰ she discusses an exhibit called *A Right to the City*:

Examining six city neighborhoods—three in the city’s northwest quadrant (Adams Morgan, Chinatown, and Shaw) and three from the city’s three other quadrants (Brookland in Northeast, Southwest, and Anacostia in Southeast)—the exhibition takes a close look at how ordinary Washingtonians have helped to “shape and reshape their neighborhoods.”⁴¹

The exhibit focuses on the period from the 1940s to the 1970s. The 1970s, as Washingtonians know well, was the period when limited “home rule”—including a directly elected city council and mayor—came to the nation’s capital. The rise of home rule was linked closely to the Black Power movement of its time. By 1970, the city’s population itself was more than two-thirds Black. In 1975, the funk group Parliament released a song that famously labeled Washington “Chocolate City.”

Last month, at a day-long symposium sponsored by the museum, the rise of Chocolate City was contrasted with the city’s more recent gentrification. In 2011, the percentage of Black residents in Washington fell below 50 percent for the first time in over half a century. Howard Gillette, professor of history emeritus at Rutgers University, observed that in many respects the District of Columbia has become “ground zero for gentrification and social justice issues that are going on nationally.”⁴²

Introducing the symposium, Samir Meghelli, senior curator at the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum, explained that it was no mistake that the museum’s founding director, John Kinard, also the first Black director of a Smithsonian museum at age 31, had previously been a community organizer. “Museums, he believed, had to reimagine their roles, to connect and strengthen communities and to ignite change.”⁴³

Stakeholders have become more activist in holding up their concerns about the ways in which museum exhibits are mishandled and reflective of dominant narratives. This can be traced back to the identities of curatorial staff, as Chelsea Dennis describes below.⁴⁴

Decolonize This Place . . . Now: Museums Are Increasingly Monitored for Their Curatorial Representation

by Chelsea Dennis | October 5, 2018; *NPR* and *The Root*

Affectionately known as the “Blacksonian,” the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture (NMAAHC) came under fire recently after a Twitter user questioned the appointment of a white woman to curate the museum’s hip-hop exhibit.⁴⁵ The original tweet was in reference to Timothy Anne Burnside, a specialist in Curatorial Affairs at the museum.

What seemed to be an honest question led to robust discussion, with popular Twitter users such as #OscarsSoWhite creator April Reign,⁴⁶ Ferguson activist Brittany Packnett,⁴⁷ and Grammy-nominated rapper Rapsody defending her credentials and giving credence to her work as an ally. While a number of discussions surrounding Burnside’s position took place, it was clear the focus was not on her credentials but whether there was a Black person suitable for the role, especially since such positions are few and far between.

Issues of representation are not new to the museum sector (*NPQ* has reported extensively on this).⁴⁸ Earlier this year, the Brooklyn Museum faced similar controversy after announcing the hiring of Kristen Windmuller-Luna to manage the museum’s

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African art collections. Decolonize This Place and other activists decried the choice, with Shellyne Rodriguez, who helped lead the protest, stating, “Diverse programming is not enough! It is cosmetic solidarity. The museum wants our art, our culture, but not our people.”⁴⁹

Essentially, Twitter commentators were questioning that same notion. In the wake of #OscarsSoWhite, #BlackLivesMatter, and discussions of gentrification and cultural appropriation, issues of museum diversity have become increasingly common. In this specific instance, being that hip-hop originated in low-income Black and Latinx communities, people are questioning the reasoning behind appointing someone outside of a living, breathing culture as a gatekeeper, especially when museums have not traditionally catered to diverse audiences. What’s more, as one Twitter user so eloquently put it,

If hip-hop is a culture—not just a genre of music—then there are nuances that the people who created and lived IN that culture will know that others will not, no matter how deeply they study the content.⁵⁰

In response to the criticism, NMAAHC released a statement addressing concerns and supporting Burnside’s work.

The museum is shaped and led by a leadership team that is largely African American—and the staff is firmly grounded in African American history and committed to the mission of the museum. We value that diversity and also recognize the importance of diversity of thought, perspectives and opinions. It has helped make the museum what it is today.

Out of a deep commitment, Ms. Timothy Anne Burnside launched the Smithsonian’s first hip-hop collecting initiative 12 years ago while at the National Museum of American History. Since joining the Museum in 2009, she has also played a key role in building the hip-hop collection as part of a larger curatorial team. Dr. Dwandalyne Reece, the curator of music and performing arts, leads that effort. We are proud of their work.⁵¹

The statement also notes the lack of African

Americans in curatorial positions and their current efforts to address the issue through paid internships and fellowships. Since then, the museum has released a feature article highlighting Black curators at the institution in addition to some of the current initiatives it is undertaking in DC public schools to encourage more people of color to consider careers in museums.⁵²

One thing of note in this entire fiasco was the seeming lack of concern regarding the optics of appointing a white person to what is considered one of the largest institutions focused on African-American history in the country. Since its opening, NMAAHC has experienced record attendance, with more than 3 million visitors having walked through the 400,000-square-foot building.⁵³ In a field that is constantly reinventing itself to remain relevant to a changing demographic, it’s surprising that the museum did not take extra steps to introduce the public to Burnside’s work. The museum’s oversight may make people wonder about its commitment to stakeholders and question who it actually considers its stakeholders. In an act of transparency, maybe they should take a note from the Cleveland Museum of Art, which recently released its strategic plan explicitly detailing how it intends to engage the community—not simply through attendance, but through hiring decisions, selected curated art, and organizational policies.⁵⁴

NPQ has published a number of newswire stories on the development of pipelines for curators of color at HBCUs and elsewhere, but the museums will also need to create internal systems to train and promote leaders of color for prized curatorial roles. They owe that to the public and to themselves, and apparently the public is growing unwilling to accept any less.

But habits of cultural appropriation die hard, as the report below describes.⁵⁵

The First Contemporary Art Museum in Africa Is Run by White Men

by Cyndi Suarez | September 21, 2017; *Artsy*

NPQ has written about the lack of diversity on the boards of US nonprofits—a problem that is getting worse, according to the latest BoardSource report.⁵⁶ And we have also written about a persistent diversity problem at this country’s museums.⁵⁷ But this story

about the new and first contemporary art museum in South Africa shows us how absurd this problem can become.

In Africa, this trend intersects with a long history of colonialism.

Though black people were barred from entering a museum in South Africa until 1994, when Apartheid officially ended, this month—September 22nd to be exact—the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary African Art (ZMOCAA) opens in Cape Town. According to Antwaun Sargent, writing for *Artsy*, it is “the first public institution to be devoted solely to contemporary African art (and art of the Diaspora) on the entire, 54-country continent.”⁵⁸

The 11-story building is the result of the conversion of Cape Town’s grain silo complex, comprising 42 silos. For almost 50 years, it was the tallest building in sub-Saharan Africa and played a key role in “the movement of the country’s goods, ideas, and people around the world.” From this “tight network of tubed silos” comes a post-industrial, 100,000-square-foot museum featuring “100 galleries, a rooftop sculpture garden, and six research centers dedicated to Art Education, Curatorial Excellence, Performative Practice, Photography, the Moving Image and Costume Institute.” Sargent describes it as “a truly awe-inspiring, concrete-cave-like, architectural wonder.”

The museum’s inaugural exhibitions feature 300 works of art across 11 shows by the leading artists in African art, mostly Black and from across the continent. They include South African performance artist and photographer Gabrielle Goliath; South African sculptor, videographer, and photographer Nandipha Mntambo; Tunisian photographer Mouna Karray; Malawi-born filmmaker Samson Kambalu; Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui; British-Nigerian sculptor Yinka Shonibare; South African photographer (visual activist) Zanele Muholi; Soweto-born photographer, performer, filmmaker, and sculptor Mohau Modisakeng; and Kenyan sculptor and painter Cyrus Kabiru.

Sargent writes, “If Zeitz MOCAA succeeds curatorially, the building could put South Africa in a position of considerable cultural power as it seeks to become the global trader of contemporary African visual experiences.” Museum representatives say they hope it will provide “a platform for African

artists to subvert deeply entrenched stereotypes of African life and art.”

And this is where it gets sticky.

The “Zeit” in the name is Jochen Zeitz, the former CEO of Puma, “avid collector of contemporary art from Africa and its diaspora,” and a white German. The museum is built on his collection; however, unlike other museums that are named after principal patrons, the collection is not permanent; it is on loan “for the duration of Zeitz’s lifetime.” Some African artists are critical; one said, “We obviously all want it to succeed, but why is Zeitz’s name on the building? Is this colonialism?”

This is especially problematic given the purpose of the museum. Much of the art engages Africa’s long history of colonialism. For example, Zimbabwean artist Kudzanai Chiurai has an early-career survey titled “Regarding the Ease of Others,” which explores political, religious, and cultural post-colonial conflict.⁵⁹

Further, the museum’s chief curator and director is white South African Mark Coetzee, who “oversaw every aspect of the museum’s creation,” including the ironically named group exhibition, considered the primary opening statement, a “sprawling survey of contemporary artists working in the country” called “All Things Being Equal.”⁶⁰

Matthew Blackman, the editor of *ArtThrob*, “South Africa’s leading contemporary visual arts publication,”⁶¹ published “An Open Letter to Jochen Zeitz and Mark Coetzee” back in 2015 that is worth quoting.⁶² He writes, “I have become, in the last few months, progressively more concerned with the direction that the ZMOCAA is taking.” Among his many bulleted points about what is wrong with the development of this museum, he has this to say about Coetzee and his “one-man selection system.”

My first concern is that there is still only one person who is selecting the work for the ZMOCAA and that selections are being made without broader consultation. This is problematic for several reasons. One is that it goes against all museums’ “best practice.” Museums of this nature (as opposed to private collections) have rigorous acquisitions policies and review processes. Not only do they consult with the curatorial staff,

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“Sargent concludes that the very concept of a contemporary museum is a Western idea and that African artists seeking to create images for themselves may have work to do to make the concept more African. (He’s onto something here.)”

but would have an acquisitions committee, which would include academics and critics. The reason for this is that, as you well know, museums by their very nature codify and canonize. As much as museums include, they are also involved in very complicated and contentious issues around exclusion. In a country and continent whose very history is bound to notions of exclusion, the ZMOCAA will have to be extremely careful as to how it codifies and identifies “Contemporary Art Africa.” This is a task that one man can simply not do.

Celebrated British architect Thomas Heatherwick completes the triumvirate. According to Sean O’Toole of South Africa’s *Sunday Times*, who wrote an aptly headlined article, “Are there blind spots in Zeitz MOCAA’s permanent art collection?,” this is Heatherwick’s first art museum and it has garnered much attention, including two R70,000-seat fundraisers.⁶³ Sargent captures the status that Heatherwick confers on the museum when he writes, “the Thomas Heatherwick-designed museum is a symbol of South Africa’s historical place within the global context.”⁶⁴

Perhaps this is what happens when a group of white men set out to subvert deeply entrenched stereotypes of African life and art. Whose perceptions need to be subverted? Is the museum aimed at them? Sargent quotes *Art Africa* staff writer Ellen Agnew:

Agnew put it this way: “When researching Zeitz, there is certainly some difficulty in ignoring the overarching amount of white male voices present in the construction of the museum.” She notes that the building was designed by Heatherwick, a white British man; founded on the collection of Zeitz, a white German man; and is being run by Coetzee, a white South African man—all in a country that is nearly 80 percent black.

“One is reminded,” Agnew writes in a profile of the museum, “of Sartre’s words about how the ‘white man has enjoyed the privilege of seeing without being seen for the past 3,000 years.’”

Then, Sargent hits it home.

The appearance of the museum being yet

another white power grab in Africa is further exacerbated by the fact that the museum’s five trustees are white and the advisory board is co-chaired by David Green—the white British CEO of the V&A Waterfront, who funded a large part of the museum’s 500 million rand (\$38 million) construction cost—and Jochen Zeitz himself.

These concerns go beyond the few critics quoted here. Sargent shares that “gallerists, curators, and artists” he spoke with “raised concerns about the museum’s centers of power.”

The museum does have black staff. They are in curatorial positions, and that’s no small feat. The museum has an endowed curatorial program for African curators. Sargent notes that there are few international opportunities for African artists. Artists are excited about the opportunities they do have. South African artist Robin Rhode said, “Look, if there is any institution that can support and house African art on the continent, I think it’s a very positive thing.”

Nigerian curator Bisi Silva said, “We are all very excited about it, of course, but what we do definitely want to see is that it reaches out across the continent, and that’s something that’s sometimes not as easy from South Africa.”

According to the curatorial statement of the inaugural major group exhibition, “All Things Being Equal,” the question guiding the exhibit is, “How will I be represented in the museum?” Sargent notes that much of the art centers on the Black body and all it has had to endure. He shares that when he mentioned this to Coetzee, the director said, “That’s a higher-level art problem.” Unfortunately, the artists’ reflection of the violence done to the Black body is consumed by a Western, or white, art market used to symbolically eating the Black body.

Sargent concludes that the very concept of a contemporary museum is a Western idea and that African artists seeking to create images for themselves may have work to do to make the concept more African. (He’s onto something here.) It seems, to do this, they would have to situate the entire experience in historical context, since, as Roland Barthes pointed out in his framework for supremacist consciousness (highlighted and expanded on Chela Sandoval’s *Methodology of the Oppressed*), removing history from the understanding of current issues is

one of the strategies of the dominant.

It'll be interesting to see how this project unfolds. African artists are already doing the work of deconstructing colonial violence; sadly the contemporary museum that should be supporting this work is also requiring that they do it in the here-and-now.

THE PANDORA'S BOX OF MUSEUM REFORM MUST INCLUDE REPATRIATION

In November 2018, a report commissioned by French president Emmanuel Macron on the repatriation of African art removed without permission, caused a storm of conflicting narratives that are perhaps now closer than ever to being resolved in favor of those looted of their cultures.⁶⁵

Can Colonialism Be Remediated? Macron's Report Alarms European Museums

by Ruth McCambridge | November 28, 2018;
New York Times

A report commissioned by French president Emmanuel Macron and written by Bénédicte Savoy of France and Felwine Sarr of Senegal recommends that any artifacts taken without consent from Africa and sent to France be permanently returned if their countries of origin ask for them.⁶⁶ Macron, however, stopped short of implementing that recommendation, instead ordering only that 26 items be returned immediately to Benin from the Quai Branly Museum and that the cultural treasures of sub-Saharan Africa be made accessible in Africa not only through restitution, but also through exhibitions, exchanges, and loans. He also calls for an international conference on the matter early next year. The report specifically advises against temporary restitution measures such as long-term loans.

Museum directors across Europe are reported to have reacted uneasily, clarifying that Macron was speaking for France and France alone.

The restitution of 26 objects to Benin "does not change the policy of the British Museum, nor legislation in Great Britain," said Hartwig Fischer, the director of the London institution, which has 73,000 objects from sub-Saharan Africa in its collections, many obtained in colonial times. The museum has been in a

decades-long dispute with Greece over the so-called Elgin marbles, which came from the Parthenon, and the governor of Easter Island requested last week the return of Hoa Hakananai'a, a statue that is among the British Museum's most popular items.

Mr. Fischer said that while the British Museum's trustees were open to all forms of cooperation, "the collections have to be preserved as whole."

He recognized that Mr. Macron's announcement would "intensify the debate" about access and would contribute to "the next dimension of cooperation" as African countries develop their cultural and museum infrastructure.

Fischer calls the French report "a radical proposal" that made a "moral argument" against colonialism, whereby "everything that took place under the conditions of colonialism is eligible for restitution." Further, he notes that Macron's commitment was more "nuanced," providing for a range of measures short of restitution.

Stéphane Martin, president of the Quai Branly Museum, said in an interview with the French daily *Le Figaro* that the report was "a bad answer to the courageous question posed by the president." While restitution is "not a word that I'm scandalized by," he says, there are "other ways to engage in cultural cooperation with Africa."

Stakeholders in Africa understandably feel very differently.

Prince Kum'a Ndumbe III of the Duala people in Cameroon, who runs AfricAvenir International, a nonprofit that calls for the restitution of artifacts taken without consent, said that the French report was "the first step in the right direction." He added that such a political commitment had been awaited since Cameroon and much of the rest of Francophone Africa gained independence from France in 1960.

"This is not just about the return of African art," he said. "When someone's stolen your soul, it's very difficult to survive as a people."

He invited Britain and Germany to follow the French example and commission their own restitution reports.

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The ball is now in the court of France's culture minister and foreign minister, who have been asked to bring together African and European museum managers and cultural professionals to ensure that works of art circulate not only among the major museums of the world—which hold 90 percent to 95 percent of sub-Saharan Africa's cultural heritage, according to the report—but also on the African continent.

The Paris conference next year will be a test of that process.

Sindika Dokolo, a businessman from the Democratic Republic of Congo who runs an art foundation in Angola and who has bought back looted African art, said the French president's restitution offer had "no precedent."⁶⁷

"Macron has opened a Pandora's box," he said.

At the same time, Dokolo urged African leaders to respond quickly, before a change of government or mood in France—to "put their foot in the door before it closes."

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