Editorial

Kylie Message and Sandra Dudley

Museums as/in Public Spheres

Whether or not museums can live up to the ideal that they provide a public forum has become something of a moot point, if not a stereotype of the past three decades. Museum studies researchers, scholars, and professionals have been proactive in their attempts to understand whether museums can or do provide a physical manifestation of what has been generally considered an aspirational concept or model of practice. Some have been directly inspired by philosophers and sociologists such as Jürgen Habermas (1991), Nancy Fraser (1990), and Craig Calhoun (1992), as well as the critical cultural studies “movements” that have circulated around interdisciplinary journals such as *Theory, Culture and Society* (<http://tcs.sagepub.com/>) and *Public Culture* (<http://www.publicculture.org/>). Others have drawn on current and emerging directions in disciplines such as anthropology, history, and geography to explore the public sphere concept from the perspective of transnational and postcolonial concerns, and have been influenced by theorists including Seyla Benhabib (1992), Arjun Appadurai (1996), Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), and Aihwa Ong (2006). Ultimately, of course, much of the museum-focused work—within which we include both the theoretical and the applied (for example, exhibition-based)—has been interdisciplinary. Like the wider critical debates on which it draws and to which it contributes, museum scholarship has been affected by ongoing global change, and has reflected—and, in many national contexts, influenced—public policy shifts before and since the new millennium.

This interdisciplinary work, then, often sits around the points of intersection between museums, governments, and the public/s. It has generated fruitful contributions to debates in, on, around, and about the museum and has led to increased recognition in the broader public and political sphere of the role of museums in progressing, challenging, or bearing witness to social progress and social injustice alike. A key outcome of this academic thought—combined with the social and political reform movements and museological transformations occurring over the last thirty years—has been renewed attention on the museum itself: as a conceptual idea, government apparatus, and physical landmark (evident in many recent volumes, including Karp et al. 2006; Basu and Macdonald 2007; Sandell and Nightingale 2012). Whether or not museums “are” or ever can “become” a public sphere, the overlaying of this theoretical academic discourse against empirical studies of behavior and practice has combined with what is happening “on the ground” to mean that museums today are more fully understood as sites of movement, memory, imagination, identity (individual as well as collective and national), and politics. Most usefully, museums have therefore been recognized as providing a locus for conversations about

methodologies and processes that combine these elements into meaningful assemblages for different people, communities, and stakeholder groups.

This broad critical perspective has led to a wide range of specific points of focus. In this volume alone, as we outline in more detail later in this editorial, there are explorations of the ways in which museum objects hold, express, shift, and participate in negotiated meanings between individuals, communities, and institutions over time (Colwell; Hegardt and Källén; Poulter); the potential empowerment by museums of the individuals who visit and are represented (or not) within exhibitions and collections (Schorch; the “Museums and Mental Health” forum); the category of “museum” and the physicality of museum building (Biln and El Amrousi); the analogies between museums and digital environments and the potential many museums have for achieving participatory democracy and sustainability (Sánchez Laws); and shifts in power, notions of mass spectatorship, and global and local contexts and politics beyond the walls of a museum (Coates).

One thing that has often remained missing from the public record, however, and hence from metanarratives about *how* museums make meaning, is the particular agencies of museum—particularly curatorial—staff, in the exchanges and endeavors that have combined to create the processes of transformation that are reportedly underway. The historical effect of this absence has been to anthropomorphize “the museum” so that it comes to stand in for the work of individuals. Through this process, the work of individuals—who have a range of loyalties and meaningful networks beyond their roles as curators, in the sense that they also “belong” to families, communities, interest groups, and so on—is sublimated to the interests of “the museum” as a compelling institution of state power that speaks with or as a singular and homogenizing authority. This process and effect has perhaps been particularly apparent in national museums that have their roots in nineteenth-century ideas about museums, modernity, colonialism, nationhood, and the ordering of the natural world; the same period that Habermas and others have attributed as playing a critical role in the genesis of ideas about the modern public sphere.

It has thus become a truism that national “public” museums do not tend to identify authorship in information provided for the public. Yet, this public-faced curatorial invisibility is at odds with the politics of recognition that gave intellectual and historical shape to the political and conceptual museological transformations occurring throughout the 1960s and 1970s. This process, which coalesced in the enthusiasm for the public sphere that was generated in the 1980s and 1990s, insisted upon the importance of naming, identifying, and acknowledging individual contributors as present and active agents. The changing approach grew out of recognition that despite the general awareness that collections and exhibitions were often created around the ideological position and personalities of specific curators, the debates *between* curators, which are so often crucial to the development process, have tended to remain unseen (or unheard). Moreover, the debates about authorship, identity, and agency—for individuals as well as institutions—gained traction in mainstream media and played out in multiple ways and across diverse forums through the culture and history wars of the 1980s and 1990s. This period of debate and transformation (of and within both the museum and the broader public sphere) contributed to an increasing awareness among the public of individual curatorial authorship, and encouraged analysis and academic exploration of curatorial agency.

Hence, this public absence of individual curatorial agency and evidence of constructive debate over various taken-for-granted terms or concepts (such as “nation,” “ethnicity,” “identity,” “belonging”) leads to a dilemma: how can we expect exhibitions to function as public spheres or as contact zones—a postcolonial version of the public sphere (as described, for example, in Clifford 1997)—when we don’t *see* the dialogue and debate, let alone the people, that have lobbied, fought, and worked so hard to make them? This absence itself became a notable part

of the public record when the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington DC opened in 2004. Attributing exhibition work to particular named curators on wall texts meant that the exhibition's "authors" were formally acknowledged for the contribution they had made to shaping national history. This recognition functioned as a form of empowerment for American Indian peoples and the communities to and through which the curators spoke, as well as evidencing the agency and authority through which individuals speak (whereby the authority is to speak as, or, in some cases, on behalf of, community members as well as credentialed experts and professionals doing their job). This process went some way toward making the point that institutions are complex assemblages of people, albeit, of course, with complex and uneven dynamics of knowledge and power (Boast 2011). Contributing curators also gained an identity through a process of empowerment for American Indian peoples and the communities to and through which the curators spoke.

Key Curators

While accepting the general utility of the public sphere concept, this editorial—which is, perhaps, more a provocation or a call to action—focuses on and seeks to redress the absence of authorship that has continued to exist in public museums around the world.¹ To do this, we propose beginning within this journal what we might call a "Key Curators" series of articles, which will provide an opportunity to feature dialogue with some of the many key curators with whom museum studies has had a productive exchange. We believe the "Key Curators" series should be an open forum to which anyone can contribute, using whatever methodology and format they believe to be most suitable (interview transcripts, written accounts, and so on). If successful, the series will provide an archive of changing museological thought and practice and the links between what happens inside a museum and the broader social and intellectual context within which it operates and to which it contributes. It may also provide an international survey or, if that is too ambitious, at least a snapshot of current thinking and practice in regard to different kinds of museums. We are not calling for a rush of personality pieces featuring the celebrity curators of the art and festival world, many of whom have already attracted considerable attention. Instead, our appeal is for profiles of key museum curators that might contribute to building a public record and historical archive about changing museum practice and the analysis and debate that has surrounded, engaged with, or taken issue with the museums, collections, and exhibitions and the concepts of public history that result as the physical manifestations of this curatorship.

Our proposal for the creation of a "Key Curators" series extends this journal's interest in the boundaries and exchanges between museum studies and other disciplinary fields, as well as our interest in the role of theory "in" (as well as "around" or "about") the museum. It recognizes the argument made by Stephen Gilchrist (2014) that curatorial practice is itself a form of cultural heritage that should be documented and recorded. Our proposal places the authority for articulating the significance of this curatorial contribution with curators themselves, as well as with the range of other colleagues, collaborators, and critics whose research, scholarship, or other agendas align on museums and the often complex and entangled relationships that museums have with the social, political, and intellectual worlds within which they are located; this includes community-based advisers and collaborators. These interlocutors may not always be from museum or museum studies worlds, or even from one of the many most typically connected disciplinary fields of research.

A brief focus on curatorial activities within the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC may illustrate the kind of activity that we see as possibly contributing to our intended "Key

Curators” conversation. As the world’s largest museum and research complex, with 19 museums, 9 research centers, and more than 140 affiliate museums around the world, the Smithsonian Institution has contributed to and produced an important and identifiable record of key words, concepts, and phrases that have had a discernible effect on the shape and history of the American public sphere and on broader understandings of key topics such as nation, democracy, citizenship, community, and identity. The intention implicit in our proposal to establish a “Key Curators” series is to provide a foundation from which to explore the contributions made by curators to social and museological transformations, specifically in relation to key moments in global history, including, but not limited to, an American context, where the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s and the congruent establishment of the Anacostia Community Museum in 1967, as well as the later interest in and establishment of “agenda,” “identity,” or issue-driven museums, including the National Museum of the American Indian and the National Museum of African American History and Culture had a broad-reaching influence. We are particularly interested in examples that cover areas of local, national, and global relevance, and accounts of and by curators at any of these museums would potentially make for well-suited contributions.

More broadly, we also intend for this to be a conversation about key concepts, and our call here is also for better documentation of curatorial action to emphasize the role of culture in society, a point reiterated by Terry Eagleton’s (2000) contention that the three political currents to top the global agenda in the late twentieth century were revolutionary nationalism, feminism, and ethnic struggle. Culture was the heart of each of these causes, and language, identity, and forms of life became the fundamental terms in which political demands were shaped and voiced. While this movement became acute toward the end of the century, its roots were based in the earlier politics of recognition urged by African American activists and advocates such as Black Power leaders, Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton (1967). Eagleton understood the change as indicating a situation where culture has, in fact, become part of the problem rather than the solution. In traditional forms of political conflict, he argued, “working people have proved most inspired when what was at stake was not just a living wage but (like the mining communities) the defence of a way of life. The political demand our rulers find hardest to beat is one that is [both] cultural and material” (Eagleton 2008, np). This focus on the explicit politics of culture has driven the research projects of many museum studies researchers.

The curators that we see as fitting into this type of project are distinguished by their ability to engage directly and analytically with contemporary society and its intellectual, historical, and experiential parameters. One such curator is Lonnie Bunch, who has been interviewed on various occasions in his capacity as founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (see Bunch 2012; O’Neal Parker 2014). Bunch consistently makes a compelling case for the capacity of the new museum to do more than just reflect contemporary cultural politics or preceding processes of museological transformation, effectively suggesting that it offers a possible prototype—albeit a nationally and culturally specific one—for thinking about what might come after the new museology. This is partly because Bunch frames his conversation globally, including in reference to the National Museum of Australia and the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, which offered trans-Tasman monikers of the new museology upon opening in 1998. However, it is also because of the way Bunch addresses what he sees as being the role of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, in relation to exhibiting the legacy of slavery, the civil rights movement, and other key moments and concepts, for a broad and culturally diverse American constituency.

Bunch’s profile—like that of other key curators—needs to be understood in relation to other relevant key concepts that occurred in later twentieth-century museum practice, as well as the

work of other curators. These factors have combined to make important, if often unknown, contributions to the two fields of contemporary cultural studies and American political history. In the context of this all-too-brief discussion of Bunch and the Smithsonian, key concepts would include culture; community; cultural and curatorial activism; self-determination and social justice; museological transformation; and civil rights. Our overarching aim is that potential “Key Curators” contributions will seek to contribute to building an understanding that curators historically have encouraged critical and collegial discussions around the idea of “theory” as a basis for building on the intellectual foundations of fields including social history, anthropology, and art history/connoisseurship in the public sphere, but that curators today often continue the practice that has been elsewhere called “curatorial activism” (Message 2013) in order to explore the variety of theoretical ideas and concerns that inform practice-based work and the community relations central to the concerns of current museology.

This Volume

All the research articles in this 2014 volume of *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research* deal in some way with the museum as a public institution with sets of obligations to, and entangled legacies of individuals and communities outside itself; moreover, all engage in different ways with theory. A number also specifically address, within their wider discussions, the role of curators and other individuals. In the order in which they proceed in this volume, the articles can be conceptualized as moving from a focus on objects and collections, through visitors, to conceptions and spaces of the museum. Metaphorically, it is almost as if we are examining a small area of a garden with a pair of binoculars and then gradually reducing the strength of the focus so that the breadth of the view increases. Nonetheless, the analogy is, of course, too simplistic: despite the metaphor’s ramifications, the earlier articles that look in detail at specific institutions and collections do not lack complexity and awareness of wider contexts, and the later pieces that explore wider contextual questions or issues that reach beyond the single museum still evince critical depth and an awareness of their implications for single cases.

The first three articles are all in-depth studies of particular sets of objects and the historical and social pathways they have moved along. None, however, is a simple story of a collection. Each of these articles, in very different ways, critically explores how the trajectories of the things in question have both been shaped by and in turn molded wider personal and communal actions, values, and relationships. Using collections in the Denver Museum of Nature and Science to illustrate his arguments, Colwell traces the cultural trails of the Zuni Ahayu:da (War Gods). These are objects that remain uniquely and intrinsically sacred to the Zuni, despite their repeated movements and decontextualizations outside Zuni cultural settings in the hands of collectors, antiques dealers, and curators. Colwell’s contention is that museums and scholars need to have a better understanding not only of the fact that such objects *are* still sacred to their originating communities, but of *how* this is so. We can gain greater insight into this, he suggests, by piecing together the objects’ trajectories and by reflecting on how those trajectories have impacted upon the objects, the originating community, and the relationships between the two. He frames his approach to this using Appadurai’s notion of “diversion” and Weiner’s “dilemma of loss”, concluding that trying better to understand such things is of much more than mere academic importance: museums, as Colwell points out, are still loci of power, and particularly so for the indigenous peoples from whence many of the institution’s collections may come. If ongoing conceptions of the sacred are better understood and articulated not just in the academy but also in the museum, museums can also better understand their own obligations

and more adequately address ethical, epistemological, and practice-based issues—including in their responses to the concerns of originating communities.

Poulter's article is also especially focused on the trajectories of objects, originating communities, and questions surrounding the museum as a forum and locus of power. In particular, she explores West African collections in the Manchester Museum and demonstrates how they embody historical connections between their places of origin and the northwest of England. She repositions Clifford's use of Pratt's notion of the "contact zone" (Pratt 1992; Clifford 1997) and argues that a focus on the materiality of objects combined with a careful unpicking of the objects' biographies enables us to conceptualize the artifacts themselves as contact zones. Through careful exploration of a series of case studies, she shows us the very hybridity of the artifacts. We come to see too how far the objects themselves demonstrate the historical transnational connections that link people and places. Sub-Saharan Africa is a region long characterized by trade and other interactions between a range of peoples, and, as Poulter shows us, this is materialized in the artifacts. They demonstrate contact, but they also *are*, as Poulter argues, zones of contact.

The third article in this issue, by Hegardt and Källén, also explores the movements and pathways of objects. In this case, the focus is comprised of archaeological and ethnographic artifacts associated with Olov R. T. Janse (1892–1985), a Swedish-born archaeologist and ethnographer. Janse's well-traveled career mainly spanned 1920–1960 and the settings of Sweden, France, Indochina, the Philippines, and the United States—with the result that his life and work was set against a variety of political backdrops, including colonialism, nationalism, and the Cold War. He collected extensively in Indochina and the Philippines for museums in Sweden, France, and the United States, and initiated artifact exchanges between Swedish and French museums. The result of all this activity was a highly complex pattern of object movements. Hegardt and Källén contend that we should think of these, and their effects on the meanings and values of the artifacts concerned, as object *translation*, rather than merely transmission/movement. They illustrate their argument through exploration of the shifting political and personal contexts that impacted upon Janse's life and the objects and their movements. Their article, like the two that precede it, while looking particularly at artifact trajectories, shines light on the museum as public institution, all elements of which are inevitably affected by the world within which it sits; in the case of these three articles, the particular elements in question are the collections and relationships with originating communities and collectors.

The issue's fourth article takes us into a slightly different terrain, though still with a collections focus and still with reference to external communities as well. Now, however, the concerns have moved to sustainability and management, with particular reference to digital collections. Sánchez Laws is concerned with the challenges presented to the heritage sector by digital materials, with respect to curation, conservation, and dissemination. Digitality has, she suggests, pushed museums not only to rethink approaches toward collection, curation, and interpretation, but also to renew the ways in which they view and approach relationships with stakeholders. There has, for example, been an expansion of outreach using social and mobile media, and real shifts in how museums use their online presence. Such shifts, and the participatory nature of digital media, directly engage with contemporary calls for museums to consider their roles as public fora. So far, so good. However, as Sánchez Laws points out, the challenges that digitality brings to museums are considerable. She seeks to address these by contributing to the debate on museums and the digital as a new framework for digital heritage sustainability—DHS—that goes beyond existing technical and curatorial capabilities and concerns alone.

With Schorch's article, the emphasis shifts away from museum collections and resources *per se* and onto their visitors. In particular, Schorch is interested in how visitors find meaning in exhibitions. He focuses on a narrative study made of Australian visitors to the Immigration

Museum in Melbourne. His article demonstrates how, through a process of interpretive negotiations, the visitors' own biographies and the content of the museum's displays become entwined in narratives of migration. Migration as a process becomes humanized and given meaning through individual stories and faces, and this in turn enables it to be better understood as a lived reality. Schorch reflects on visitors' identification with the displays and on reflexivity and empathy. The findings of his study lead him to suggest a "cosmopolitan museum practice that opens interpretive spaces for shifting subjectivities and multiple identifications across differences and commonalities." This too, then, speaks to the idea of the museum as a public forum—here, one where differences of identity, history, and experience can shift, interact, and be shared and aired.

Biln and El Amrousi's article adjusts the focus again, this time problematizing the category of "museum" itself in the contexts of urban space and the public articulation of history. Specifically, they examine the city of Dubai—often, as they point out, thought of as somewhere artificial, repackaged, and lacking a material past. The "history made visible within the public realm" tends to be seen as fictionalized and/or sanitized. The authors begin by asking how, if this artificiality really is the case, in the absence of real historical fabric, do the city's museums represent its past? Their answer, however, interestingly leads not so much to a new perspective on the existing museums per se, but to a new way of thinking about the public expression of history in Dubai and, indeed, to a rearticulation of the concept of "museum" in such a setting. They argue that to understand the ways history is "represented and circulated in Dubai's public spaces" necessitates extending the category of "museum" to Dubai's large, history-themed malls and to its small heritage houses. Taken as a whole, Biln and El Amrousi contend, all these institutions comprise "a conceptually complete and closed system"—and in fact, far from Dubai being an urban context characterized by absence and historical loss, articulations of "historical fullness" abound.

The broad focus of Biln and El Amrousi's article is widened even further by the last article. Indeed, in this piece we go even further beyond the museum itself. In it, Coates explores the ongoing development of contemporary art biennials. She is especially concerned with biennials outside the older European and North American contexts for such activities. Biennials in the so-called global south began in the 1980s, and have had a significant impact on shifting notions of center and periphery in the contemporary art world globally. Coates demonstrates that in this global "biennialization" of contemporary art, the São Paulo, Sydney, and Istanbul biennials have played particularly important roles. This raises issues of mass spectatorship, the complex entanglements of the local and the global, and, significantly (not least for our wider interests in curators), the coming to the fore of a new generation of peripatetic curators and artists who embody these issues in their work. Coates contends too that the most recent biennials may indicate a further stage in their evolution of the biennial model, in which biennials are coming to constitute a global forum for local politics.

The research articles are followed in this issue by a forum centered on the subject of museums and mental health. The forum begins with an article by Chen, Lin, Lin, and Lau that describes a study, unprecedented in its Taiwanese context, of the museum experiences of individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia. A number of authors have then written responses to this article. The authors were all invited to do so based on their previous work in the broad subject area, and their brief was to use the article as a starting point for writing about an aspect of their own particular perspective. The forum has its own introduction, but we are delighted to note here the inclusion of response pieces from an international range of curatorial and academic voices in the field.

Also in this issue are several reports. These include Alice Semedo's account of a current, cross-European project on museum mediation, Tanya Zoe Robinson's report on a symposium on

museums and collecting, and Per Rekdal's reflective description of a visit to the Favela Museum in Rio de Janeiro during the 2013 ICOM conference in Rio. The reports are followed by a wide range of exhibition reviews and book reviews.

In summary, this is a wide-ranging issue, but the theme of the museum (however it might be defined) as a public sphere and public forum of some kind can be discerned running throughout. Museums and related spaces are made by and engaged with a range of individuals and communities, historically and in the present. They are unavoidably public. How they work and how they are characterized depends upon a range of actions by a diversity of actors, as the research article contributors to this issue all, in their different ways, show. The case studies and discussions on the pages of this issue present and analyze evidence of the movements and processes of transaction that occur across various fields. On some of these pages we see the moving and influential figures of curators, individuals who speak from and to a range of associations and affiliations and whose actions network across diverse and discrete spheres of meaning in society. We will welcome expressions of interest for our future "Key Curators" series—as well, of course, for any other aspect of relevance to advances in museum theory and practice.

■ NOTE

1. The rejection of authorship is connected to the postmodern turn toward reading against the grain and the shift away from authorial intention that is associated with semiotician Roland Barthes (1977). Although there is not sufficient space in this editorial to discuss this fully, it is important to understand that attempts to deconstruct the museum as a monumental site of culture have been part of this process. However, to an extent, anti-authorship discourses have come into conflict with postcolonial discourses that have asserted the agency and authority of traditional or community-based knowledge. This paradox has raised interesting challenges for understanding authorship around community-based curatorial practice.

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