

# MUSEUM ACTIVISM

EDITED BY  
ROBERT R. JAMES AND  
RICHARD SANDELL



MUSEUM MEANINGS

# MUSEUM ACTIVISM

Only a decade ago, the notion that museums, galleries and heritage organisations might engage in activist practice, with explicit intent to act upon inequalities, injustices and environmental crises, was met with scepticism and often derision. Seeking to purposefully bring about social change was viewed by many within and beyond the museum community as inappropriately political and antithetical to fundamental professional values. Today, although the idea remains controversial, the way we think about the roles and responsibilities of museums as knowledge-based, social institutions is changing. *Museum Activism* examines the increasing significance of this activist trend in thinking and practice.

At this crucial time in the evolution of museum thinking and practice, this ground-breaking volume brings together more than fifty contributors working across six continents to explore, analyse and critically reflect upon the museum's relationship to activism. Including contributions from practitioners, artists, activists and researchers, this wide-ranging examination of new and divergent expressions of the inherent power of museums as forces for good, and as activists in civil society, aims to encourage further experimentation and enrich the debate in this nascent and uncertain field of museum practice.

*Museum Activism* elucidates the largely untapped potential for museums as key intellectual and civic resources to address inequalities, injustice and environmental challenges. This makes the book essential reading for scholars and students of museum and heritage studies, gallery studies, arts and heritage management, and politics. It will be a source of inspiration to museum practitioners and museum leaders around the globe.

**Robert R. Jones** is a Visiting Fellow at the School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, UK, Editor-in-Chief Emeritus of *Museum Management and Curatorship*, and the founder of the Coalition of Museums for Climate Justice. He has devoted his career to championing museums as important social institutions that can make a difference in the lives of individuals and their communities.

**Richard Sandell** is Professor of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, UK. His research and practice is concerned with the social roles and responsibilities of museums, galleries and heritage sites and, in particular, their capacity to shape the moral and political climate within which human rights are experienced.



# **Museum Meanings**

Series Editors

Richard Sandell and Christina Kreps

Museums have undergone enormous changes in recent decades; an ongoing process of renewal and transformation bringing with it changes in priority, practice and role as well as new expectations, philosophies, imperatives and tensions that continue to attract attention from those working in, and drawing upon, wide ranging disciplines.

*Museum Meanings* presents new research that explores diverse aspects of the shifting social, cultural and political significance of museums and their agency beyond, as well as within, the cultural sphere. Interdisciplinary, cross-cultural and international perspectives and empirical investigation are brought to bear on the exploration of museums' relationships with their various publics (and analysis of the ways in which museums shape – and are shaped by – such interactions).

Theoretical perspectives might be drawn from anthropology, cultural studies, art and art history, learning and communication, media studies, architecture and design and material culture studies amongst others. Museums are understood very broadly – to include art galleries, historic sites and other cultural heritage institutions – as are their relationships with diverse constituencies.

The focus on the relationship of the museum to its publics shifts the emphasis from objects and collections and the study of museums as text, to studies grounded in the analysis of bodies and sites; identities and communities; ethics, moralities and politics.

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'Museums have woken from their slumber. Here is a clarion call to leave behind the "immorality of inaction" and confront a troubled world, a threatened planet, and threats to cultural diversity, equality and justice. This volume documents the extraordinary range of ways in which museum activism, as an integral and *necessary* part of contemporary museum practice, is at work in the 21st century. Janes and Sandell marshal an impressive line-up of authors across the globe who are using the "civic resource" of the museum to bring about environmental, social and political change. The book is a handbook for this urgent task. Read it and join the struggle!'

– Conal McCarthy, *Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand*

'Are museums shrines to the past, hubs of engagement for the present, or shapers of the future? Assembling dozens of contributions by leading and new voices in museum studies, *Museum Activism* targets the core values and principles guiding museum practice today with the aim of transforming the way we think about the social role of museums. This book offers a deep reflection on the limits and potential for museum activism at a time of deepening economic inequality and environmental collapse, a bold call for action for the international museum community, and a field guide to museum activism in practice. Slaying the zombie myth of institutional neutrality that excuses institutional complacency and inaction, it argues for a vision of the museum as an ally and agent of change. Activists around the world are calling on museums to leverage their cultural power to help shape the future for the common good. This book is an insider's guide to making it happen.'

– Beka Economopoulos, *Founding Director of The Natural History Museum, USA, a traveling museum and museum transformation project*

'Janes and Sandell have assembled a powerful volume of essays that encourages museums to transform themselves from precious vaults into active agents of social justice. *Museum Activism* is a collective call for museums to become more mindful, moral, and courageous places of conscience. These timely essays challenge museums to become more aware of the toxic legacies and current devastation of colonialism, imperialism, xenophobia, homophobia, racism and sexism and to become unafraid in "addressing the big problems and the big questions" that confront us globally. This publication provides a needed wake-up call, a radical re-imagining of museums and a range of practical strategies for action!'

– Jennifer Scott, *Director and Chief Curator of Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, University of Illinois at Chicago, USA*



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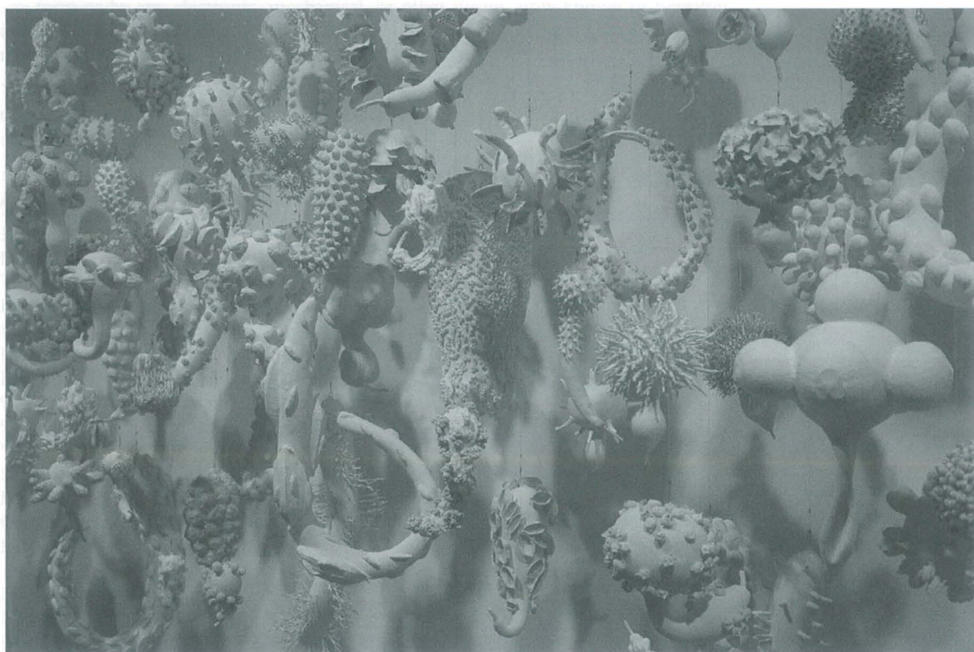


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# CONTENTS

To those who continue to inspire, guide and assist us.



**FRONTISPIECE** Lyndal Osborne: *Curtain of Life*, 2016. Mixed media installation. Dimensions: 20 x 10 x 3 feet.  
Photograph by Josh Palmer.



# CONTENTS

<i>List of colour plates</i>	xiii
<i>List of figures</i>	xv
<i>List of tables</i>	xvii
<i>List of contributors</i>	xviii
<i>Preface</i>	xxvii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xxix

1 Posterity has arrived: The necessary emergence of museum activism	1
<i>Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell</i>	

## PART I

<b>Nurturing activism</b>	<b>23</b>
2 Detoxing and decolonising museums	25
<i>Sara Wajid and Rachael Minott</i>	
3 Growing an activist museum professional	36
<i>Elizabeth Wood and Sarah A. Cole</i>	
4 Dividing issues and mission-driven activism: Museum responses to migration policies and the refugee crisis	47
<i>Maria Vlachou</i>	
5 Access as activism: Bringing the museum to the people	58
<i>Catherine Kudlick and Edward M. Luby</i>	

6	Fossil fuel sponsorship and the contested museum: Agency, accountability and arts activism <i>Paula Serafini and Chris Garrard</i>	69
7	The activist role of museum staff <i>Victoria Hollows</i>	80
8	From the ground up: Grassroots social justice activism in American museums <i>Laura-Edythe S. Coleman and Porchia Moore</i>	91
9	Spectacular defiance <i>Julie McNamara</i>	104
10	'I'm gonna do something': Moving beyond talk in the museum <i>Bernadette Lynch</i>	115
11	Feminism and the politics of friendship in the activist museum <i>Viv Golding</i>	127
<b>PART II</b>		
	<b>Activism in practice</b>	<b>137</b>
12	Memory exercises: Activism, symbolic reparation, and non-repetition in Colombia's National Museum of Memory <i>Cristina Lleras, Michael Andrés Forero Parra, Lina María Díaz and Jennifer Carter</i>	139
13	Auto agents: Inclusive curatorship and its political potential <i>Jade French</i>	152
14	Museums as public forums for 21st century societies: A perspective from the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe <i>Njabulo Chipangura and Happinos Marufu</i>	164
15	Museums in the climate emergency <i>Steve Lyons and Kai Bosworth</i>	174
16	Activism, objects and dialogues: Re-engaging African collections at the Royal Ontario Museum <i>Silvia Forni, Julie Crooks and Dominique Fontaine</i>	186



17	Museological activism and cultural citizenship: Collecting the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement <i>Selina Ho and Vivian Ting</i>	197
18	Museums in the age of intolerance <i>Sharon Heal</i>	208
19	Activist practice through networks: A case study in museum connections <i>Mercy McCann</i>	220
20	Whose memories for which future?: <i>Favela</i> museums and the struggle for social justice in Brazil <i>Marcelo Lages Murta</i>	232
21	From vision to action: The journey towards activism at St Fagans National Museum of History <i>Sioned Hughes and Elen Phillips</i>	245
22	Inside out/outside in: Museums and communities activating change <i>Moya McFadzean, Liza Dale-Hallett, Tatiana Mauri and Kimberley Moulton</i>	256
23	Quiet is the new loud?: On activism, museums and changing the world <i>Åshild Andrea Brekke</i>	268
24	Heritage and queer activism <i>Sean Curran</i>	278

### PART III

	<b>Assessing activism</b>	<b>291</b>
25	The activist spectrum in United States museums <i>Dina A. Bailey</i>	293
26	Up against it: Contending with power asymmetries in museum work <i>Kevin Coffee</i>	304
27	Taking a position: Challenging the anti-authorial turn in art curating <i>Lynn Wray</i>	315

28	Memory activism and the Holocaust memorial institutions of the 21st century <i>Diana I. Popescu</i>	326
29	Advocacy and activism: A framework for sustainability science in museums <i>Sandra L. Rodegher and Stacey Vicario Freeman</i>	337
30	Narratives of transformation: Stories of impact from activist museums <i>Jennifer Bergevin</i>	348
31	Memorial museums at the intersection of politics, exhibition and trauma: A study of the Red Terror Martyrs Memorial Museum <i>Bridget Conley</i>	359
32	'I attack this work of art deliberately': Suffragette activism in the museum <i>Nicola Gauld</i>	369
33	Museums, activism and social media (or, how Twitter challenges and changes museum practice) <i>Jennie Carvill Schellenbacher</i>	380
34	Unprecedented times?: Shifting press perceptions on museums and activism <i>Jenny Kidd</i>	388
	<i>Index</i>	400



# COLOUR PLATES

- 1 *The Past is Now: Birmingham and the British Empire* exhibition at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, 2017
- 2 Opening Day of the exhibit, *Patient No More*, at the Ed Roberts Campus, a hub of disability rights groups in Berkeley, California
- 3 Members of *BP or not BP?* hold theatrical intervention at the press launch of the British Museum's BP exhibition, *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation*
- 4 Lisa Reihana, *Hinenuitepo*, (from *Mai i te aroha, ko te aroha* – 'From love comes love'), 2005
- 5 Julie McNamara with *Pullen's Giant*, Langdon Down Museum of Learning Disability
- 6 Nabaz Mohammad Ahmed's gift of tears from prison
- 7 *Danza por la Paz*, an artistic performance on the construction site of the future National Museum of Memory of Colombia
- 8 Curators of *Auto Agents* undertaking research at Niamh O'Malley's exhibition *Glasshouse* at Bluecoat, 2015
- 9 The Natural History Museum, *Will the Story of the 6th Mass Extinction Ever Include the Role of its Sponsors?* American Alliance of Museums Annual Convention, Atlanta, GA, 2015. This diorama depicted the David H. Koch Dinosaur Wing at the American Museum of Natural History in New York several hundred years into a dystopian future
- 10 On 28 September 2014, police fired tear gas and pepper spray at the protestors who could only use umbrellas to defend themselves. The patched canopy, made from the broken umbrellas, could be considered as a monument to the event and also a functional object that offered shelter to the activists who occupied the government headquarter at Admiralty
- 11 A refugee from Oasis Cardiff interpreting the *Refugee House* to visitors
- 12 *Talking Difference* studio screen interface, Museums Victoria
- 13 Litunet traditional hamlet, Ryfylke Museum
- 14 International café at Ryfylke Museum

- 15    Upon entering the National Center for Civil and Human Rights, visitors are greeted by this striking mural. Designed by Pentagram, the piece features graphic designs from human rights movements around the world and unites them through the rising open hand. It has become one of the central features of the Center with visitors interacting with it in a variety of ways including the movement #High5forCHR in which visitors photograph themselves giving the mural a high five

# FIGURES

Frontispiece	Lyndal Osborne: <i>Curtain of Life</i> , 2016. Mixed media installation. Dimensions: 20 x 10 x 3 feet	vi
2.1	William Gear, <i>Mau Mau</i> , 1953, displayed in <i>The Past is Now: Birmingham and the British Empire</i> , Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery	29
2.2	<i>The Past is Now: Birmingham and the British Empire</i> , at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery	30
5.1	Large central ramp that easily fits two wheelchair riders side by side and that was integrated into the design of <i>Patient No More</i> in the lobby of the Ed Roberts Campus	62
6.1	Members of <i>BP or not BP?</i> perform as BP and the British Museum directors during the BP exhibition, <i>Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation</i> .	72
7.1	Rachel Duckhouse, <i>Gallery Assistant ii</i> , 2015	88
7.2	Rachel Duckhouse, <i>Gallery Assistant iii</i> , 2015	88
8.1	Grassroots Growth	94
10.1	David Tovey, <i>A Soldier's Story</i> at State of the Nation, January 2018	117
11.1	Remembering a Kurdish Landscape in prison	133
11.2	A mother's tears	134
12.1	Aerial view rendering of Colombia's National Museum of Memory	140
12.2	Indigenous site cleansing ritual performed at the National Museum of Memory construction site on 9 April 2016, National Day of Remembrance in Memory of Victims	142
12.3	<i>Volver la mirada</i> travelling exhibition, a display focused on children and war	144
13.1	James Harper, <i>Meet at the Tree</i> , 2016, commissioned for <i>Auto Agents</i> at Bluecoat	154
13.2	<i>Auto Agent Bob</i> : a participatory arts activity exploring the authorial boundaries of the artist and curator, 2016	159



- 15.1 The Natural History Museum, *Mining the HMNS: An Investigation by The Natural History Museum*, Project Row Houses, Houston, TX, 2016. The eponymous exhibition interrogated the symbiotic relationship between the Houston Museum of Natural Sciences and its corporate sponsors. The exhibition analyzed key narratives and displays in the Houston museum, highlighting the voices and stories that were excluded—those of the low-income Latinx fence-line communities along the Houston Ship Channel 182
- 16.1 *Worn: Shaping Black Feminine Identity* featured a site specific installation by artist Karin Jones. It was on view at the Royal Ontario Museum in the Wilson Canadian Heritage Exhibition Room from 31 January to 1 November 2015 190
- 16.2 *Lesley* still image from three channel video installation *Suck Teeth Composition* by Michèle Pearson Clarke (After Rashaad Newsome), 2017, one of the nine artworks included in the exhibition *Here We Are Here: Black Canadian Contemporary Art* 194
- 17.1 Organically formed, the Admiralty Study Corner became a social object that invited activists to participate in its process of making and helped created a sense of community among the activists 202
- 18.1 Museum of Homelessness object storytelling at Tate Exchange 213
- 19.1 *Deportation from Würzburg*, 25 April 1942. A police officer stands guard as Jews are led through Würzburg to the train station. This image is used in the Law Enforcement and Society (LEAS) programme to demonstrate the progressive complicity of law enforcement in Nazi Germany and the path to the Holocaust 223
- 20.1 Community Museums Graffiti in Rio 238
- 20.2 Main exhibition hall of Muquifu Museum in Belo Horizonte 240
- 21.1 Iorwerth Peate, first curator of St Fagans, wearing a Cymdeithas yr Iaith (Welsh Language Society) pin badge 247
- 22.1 Janet Taylor and Ann Jarvis at Women on Farms Gathering, Yarram, 2003 257
- 24.1 *Save Sutton House* Campaign poster 280
- 24.2 Poster for *126* 285
- 24.3 Visitors admiring *Henry VIII* by Kev Clarke at Sutton House Queered launch event, February 2017 288
- 24.4 *Portrait of Munroe Bergdorf* in the Great Chamber by Sarah Moore, courtesy of Sutton House, part of Sutton House Queered exhibition 2017 288
- 27.1 *Art Turning Left: How Values Change Making 1789–2013*, Tate Liverpool, 8 November 2013–2 February 2014 316
- 32.1 Minute 268 from 10 June 1914 relating to the slashing of *Master Thornhill* by Bertha Ryland (Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery Committee, 1912–1917, BCC/1/BQ/1/1/1) 370

Journal of Museum Management and Curatorship, and is Vice-President of the board of directors of the National Holocaust Museum.

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8.1	Architects of activism in American museums	96
29.1	Sustainability engagement framework	344
30.1	Breakdown of participants interviewed by site	351
34.1	UK and US samples split by storyline of articles (percentages)	390
34.2	Breakdown of sources quoted in the reporting	395

## CONTRIBUTORS

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**Viv Golding** was Associate Professor at the University of Leicester's School of Museum Studies (2002–2017) and Head of Formal Education at the Horniman Museum (1992–2002), both in the UK. Since her academic research relates closely to international museum practice, she was elected President of ICME (The International Council of Museums of Ethnography) in 2013 and 2016. Publications include: *Learning at the Museum Frontiers: Identity, Race and Power*, (Routledge, 2016) and *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections, Collaboration* (edited with Wayne Modest, 2013).

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**Selina Ho** completed her PhD at the Asia Institute, the University of Melbourne, Australia. She graduated with a Masters degree in Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, UK. Selina had been a museum Curator before she moved to work at universities in Hong Kong. Her research focuses on art museum practices in China, and a recent publication regarding the methodologies for researching Chinese museums was published in *The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum* (2016).

**Victoria Hollows** is Chief Executive with Renfrewshire Leisure, Glasgow, UK and formerly Senior Museum Manager for Glasgow Museums, UK, where she led the operational, curatorial and research, learning and community engagement teams. She has a particular interest in how museums navigate the ethical terrain of their social role, having previously managed Glasgow's Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA) and its social justice programmes. She published *The Performance of Internal Conflict and the Art of Activism* (2013) on the challenges of this work and recently completed a PhD reflecting on trust in the museum.

**Sioned Hughes** is currently Keeper of History and Archaeology at Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales, UK. She has held various roles at the museum, including Assistant Curator of Historic Buildings; Curator of Politics, Trade and Beliefs; and Head of Public History. Throughout her career, she has played a key role in leading projects that explore new and creative ways of interpreting collections through public engagement, collaboration and co-production.

**Robert R. Janes** is a Visiting Fellow at the School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, UK, Editor-in-Chief Emeritus of *Museum Management and Curatorship*, and the Founder of the Coalition of Museums for Climate Justice. He has devoted his career to championing museums as important social institutions that can make a difference in the lives of individuals and their communities. He was given a traditional Blackfoot First Nations name in 1995. His museum publications have been translated into nine languages.

**Jenny Kidd** is Senior Lecturer in the School of Journalism, Media and Culture at Cardiff University, UK. Her research interests are at the intersections of museums, heritage and new media studies. Jenny is a Managing Editor of the open access journal *Museum and Society*, author of *Museums and the New Mediascape* (Routledge 2014) and Co-Editor of *Challenging History in the Museum* (Routledge 2014) and *Performing Heritage* (2011).

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**Cristina Lleras** is a Colombian independent Curator and Professor, the Visual Arts Manager for the District Institute of the Arts (2012–2013), and the Art and History Curator of the National Museum of Colombia (2008–2012). She also collaborated with the National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation in curatorial work and was the Curatorial Head of Colombia's National Museum of Memory.

**Edward M. Luby** is Director of the Museum Studies Program and Professor of Museum Studies at San Francisco State University, USA, where he is also Chief Curator and former Director of the Global Museum. He was formerly Associate Director of the Berkeley Natural History Museums at the University of California, Berkeley, USA. Professor Luby's work focuses on understanding museum interactions with community groups, collections-based museum research, and developing international museum exchange programs, as recently published in the journals *Exhibition*, *Collections*, and *Museum International*.

**Bernadette Lynch** is an academic and museum professional with twenty-five years' experience in senior management in UK and Canadian museums. Her research and consultancy work focuses on public engagement and participation with diverse communities and in museum transformation and change. She has published widely on all aspects of participatory democracy in museums and is internationally influential in raising debate on the ethics of public engagement. She is Honorary Research Associate, University College London (UCL), UK.

**Steve Lyons** is Director of Research at The Natural History Museum, a mobile and pop-up museum based out of Brooklyn, USA that partners with scientists, major public museums, educators, artists, and community groups on environmental justice-themed exhibitions and programs. He is also FRQSC Postdoctoral Fellow at the Humanities Center of the University of Pittsburgh, USA.

**Mercy McCann** is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Leicester's School of Museum Studies, UK. Her background is in museum education and public programming, specifically youth programmes. She completed her Masters at the University of Washington, USA, and received her PhD from the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, UK.

**Moya McFadzean** is the Senior Curator of Migration and Cultural Diversity at Museums Victoria, Australia. She was Lead Curator for the award-winning *Identity: yours, mine, ours* exhibition (2011) and *British Migrants: Instant Australians?* (2017), and a key partner in the Australian Research Council funded project *Using museums to counter racism and increase acceptance of diversity among young people* (2012–15). She has presented and published numerous papers on museums as sites of migration histories, narratives and social activism. Moya earned her PhD in History at the University of Melbourne in 2009.

**Julie McNamara** is Artistic Director of Vital Xposure, UK, a disability-led theatre company. A leading voice within Disability Arts, her work is driven by social justice. Julie is an award-winning playwright and filmmaker. In 2015 she was commissioned by the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries to be one of four artists on a major collaborative project,

*Exceptional and Extraordinary: Unruly Bodies and Minds in the Medical Museum*. She has extensive theatre production history nationally and internationally and is Honorary Fellow and Miegunyah Distinguished Visiting Fellow of University of Melbourne 2019.

**Happinos Marufu** is an African Humanities Programme Postdoctoral Fellow in the School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa, and a Senior Curator of Archaeology at National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe. His research interests include the following: Late Stone Age studies, rock art, burial studies, heritage management and museum practices.

**Tatiana Mauri** has worked across the arts, cultural, community and education sectors for over 20 years. She has extensive experience in designing, developing and delivering engagement strategies for organisations committed to long-term community development. After working at Museums Victoria, Australia, for eight years as Community Engagement Manager, Tatiana recently began working as a consultant and on engagement projects with the Department of Environment, Land, Water Planning, City of Nillumbik, Department of Health and Human Services and Hobson's Bay City Council.

**Rachael Minott** is a Jamaican-born Artist, Researcher and Curator. She champions the idea of self-authored histories and challenges neutrality in public spaces. Rachael holds an MA in Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas from the University of East Anglia, UK, and a BA in Art and Art History. She researches Jamaican national representation. Previously she worked with Birmingham Museums Trust, the London Transport Museum, Reading Museum and the Robert Sainsbury Library. She took part in the fourth Ghetto Biennale in Haiti 2015 and the Jamaica Biennial 2017.

**Porchia Moore** earned her PhD from the University of South Carolina, USA, receiving the Cultural Heritage Informatics Leadership Fellowship. Her work employs Critical Race Theory to interrogate museum space to advocate for inclusion. She also examines the intersection between culture, technology, information, and race. She serves as Project Advisor for MASS Action, Inclusion Catalyst for the Columbia Museum of Art, and Lecturer at John Hopkins University in Museum Studies. She founded M+ Consulting and regularly contributes to *The Inluseum*.

**Kimberley Moulton** is a Yorta Yorta woman and Senior Curator of South Eastern First Peoples Collections at Museums Victoria, Australia. She was Assistant Curator for the *First Peoples* exhibition and Curator and Project Officer for Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre and contemporary gallery Birrarung at Melbourne Museum 2008–2015. Kimberley has received several national and international Indigenous fellowships and has published widely across the art and museum sector. Her curatorial practice is centred on the intersection of First Peoples culture, art and museums.

**Marcelo Lages Murta** is a Cultural Manager specialising in culture, heritage and international cooperation and a PhD Candidate at Lusófona University, Lisbon, Portugal (scholarship from CAPES Foundation/Ministry of Education, Brazil). He holds a Masters in International Cooperation from Cantabria University, Spain, (scholarship from Fundación



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**Elen Phillips** is Principal Curator of Contemporary and Community History at Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales, UK. Based at St Fagans National Museum of History, her subject specialism includes dress and textiles. She is currently leading on a programme of co-curated projects with communities across Wales to develop, diversify, and increase the relevance of the collection.

**Diana I. Popescu** is a Cultural Historian and Research Fellow at Birkbeck, UK. She holds a PhD in Holocaust studies from University of Southampton (2013), UK. Her current research, a collaborative project with Stockholm University, investigates the performative dimensions of the post-2000 Holocaust memory culture and its reception among contemporary audiences. She co-edited *Revisiting Holocaust Representation in the Post-Witness Era* with Tanja Schult (2015), and now serves on the editorial board of *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*.

**Sandra L. Rodegher** currently leads the Walton's Science Museums Initiative at Arizona State University, USA, which has reached over 100 museums in more than 30 countries. Previously, she helped form the Office of Diversity and Inclusion at Yale University, USA, and served as a consultant in senior leadership development, organizational change and diversity training. Her education includes a Masters in Industrial and Organizational Psychology, and a PhD in Sustainability. Her research focuses on the ethics and psychology of group dynamics on deliberative processes.

**Richard Sandell** is Professor of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, UK. A researcher-practitioner, his work explores how museums, galleries and heritage sites can shape the moral and political climate within which human rights are experienced and continually fought for. He is Series Editor, with Christina Kreps, of *Museum Meanings*. His publications include *Prejudice and Pride: LGBTQ heritage and its contemporary implications* (edited with Rachael Lennon and Matt Smith); *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights* (2017), *Re-Presenting Disability: activism and agency in the Museum* (edited with Jocelyn Dodd and Rosemarie Garland Thomson, 2010) and *Museums, Equality and Social Justice* (edited with Eithne Nightingale, 2012).

**Paula Serafini** is a Cultural Politics Scholar. Her work is concerned with the relationship between aesthetics and politics in environmental and social justice movements, art activism, and contemporary cultural production. Paula's recent publications include the monograph *Performance Action: The Politics of Art Activism* (Routledge 2018) and the co-edited volume *artWORK: Art, Labour and Activism* (2018). She is Research Associate at CAMEo Research Institute for Cultural and Media Economies, University of Leicester.

**Vivian Ting** is an independent Researcher, interested in examining multiple narratives of local history through creative means. Graduating from The Chinese University of Hong

Kong, she obtained her MA and PhD in Museum Studies from the University of Leicester, UK. She has been teaching Museum Studies and Material Culture Studies in universities, and working on curatorial projects, such as *Sparkle! Let's Art* (2015, Oil), *Envision Hong Kong* (2016), and *Handover/Talkover 2.0* (2017).

**Maria Vlachou** is Executive Director of Access Culture, based in Portugal and a blogger for *Musing on Culture*, writing about culture, the arts, museums, cultural management, communication, and access. She is the Manager of the Facebook group *Museum texts/Textos em museus*, the Facebook page of *ICOM Europe*, and co-manager of the blog *Museums and Migration*. An alumna of the DeVos Institute of Arts Management (Kennedy Center, Washington, 2011–2013), she gained her MA in Museum Studies (University College London, 1994) and her BA in History and Archaeology (University of Ioannina, Greece, 1992).

**Sara Wajid** is Head of Engagement at Museum of London, UK, working on the development of the new museum opening in 2023. A recipient of the Arts Council 'Change Maker' award, she spent a year as Head of Interpretation at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, conceiving and leading the experimental project *The Past is Now*. She is trustee of the Pitt Rivers Museum and founder of Museum Detox, a network of Black and Minority Ethnic museum workers. She previously worked as a Journalist and Editor.

**Elizabeth Wood** is a Professor of Museum Studies and Public Scholar of Museums, Families, and Learning at Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis, USA. Elee's research includes the study of visitor–object experiences in museums, object-based learning, critical museum pedagogy, and evaluation capacity building. She was the Editor of the journal *Museums & Social Issues* from 2013–2017 and the 2015 recipient of the John Cotton Dana Award for Museum Leadership from the American Alliance of Museums.

**Lynn Wray** is a Research Associate at Leeds University, UK. Her research explores the crossover between visual culture and political action. She is passionate about investigating how museums can engender critical thinking through making. Her practice is interdisciplinary, bringing together art-making, design and exhibition-making with art and exhibition histories. She previously studied art and design practice at Glasgow School of Art and Royal College of Art and gained her doctorate from Liverpool John Moores University in Curatorial Studies and Practice.



# MUSEUM MEANINGS

**'Museums have woken from their slumber. Here is a clarion call to leave behind the "immorality of inaction" and confront a troubled world, a threatened planet, and threats to cultural diversity, equality and justice. This volume documents the extraordinary range of ways in which museum activism, as an integral and necessary part of contemporary museum practice, is at work in the 21st century. Janes and Sandell marshal an impressive line-up of authors across the globe who are using the "civic resource" of the museum to bring about environmental, social and political change. The book is a handbook for this urgent task. Read it and join the struggle!'**

Conal McCarthy, *Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand*

Only a decade ago, the notion that museums, galleries and heritage organisations might engage in activist practice, with explicit intent to act upon inequalities, injustices and environmental crises, was met with scepticism and often derision. Seeking to purposefully bring about social change was viewed by many within and beyond the museum community as inappropriately political and antithetical to fundamental professional values. Today, although the idea remains controversial, the way we think about the roles and responsibilities of museums as knowledge based, social institutions is changing. *Museum Activism* examines the increasing significance of this activist trend in thinking and practice.

At this crucial time in the evolution of museum thinking and practice, this ground-breaking volume brings together more than fifty contributors working across six continents to explore, analyse and critically reflect upon the museum's relationship to activism. Including contributions from practitioners, artists, activists and researchers, this wide-ranging examination of new and divergent expressions of the inherent power of museums as forces for good, and as activists in civil society, aims to encourage further experimentation and enrich the debate in this nascent and uncertain field of museum practice.

*Museum Activism* elucidates the largely untapped potential for museums as key intellectual and civic resources to address inequalities, injustice and environmental challenges. This makes the book essential reading for scholars and students of museum and heritage studies, gallery studies, arts and heritage management, and politics. It will be a source of inspiration to museum practitioners and museum leaders around the globe.

**Robert R. Janes** is a Visiting Fellow at the School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, UK, Editor-in-Chief Emeritus of *Museum Management and Curatorship*, and the founder of the Coalition of Museums for Climate Justice. He has devoted his career to championing museums as important social institutions that can make a difference in the lives of individuals and their communities.

**Richard Sandell** is Professor of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, UK. His research and practice is concerned with the social roles and responsibilities of museums, galleries and heritage sites and, in particular, their capacity to shape the moral and political climate within which human rights are experienced.

## MUSEUM STUDIES

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