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Museum – Politics –
Management

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The *Journal of Cultural Management and Cultural Policy* is dedicated to international perspectives that address a wide range of issues in cultural management and cultural policy research and practice. We invite articles that reflect on organizational structures of creative enterprises, economic and managerial issues in the arts, cultural policy in all its dimensions, as well as creative and aesthetic processes in cultural production, distribution and perception. The journal aims to present multi-faceted analysis and rich discourse on current issues in cultural management and cultural policy and to promote the development of research designs and methods relating to both new and established practices in these fields. The journal is open to any theoretical and methodological approach, as long as authors adhere to scholarly rigor.

Die *Zeitschrift für Kulturmanagement und Kulturpolitik* (Journal of Cultural Management and Cultural Policy) vertritt eine internationale Perspektive auf aktuelle Fragestellungen aus Forschung, Lehre und Praxis in den Feldern Kulturmanagement und Kulturpolitik. Das Themenspektrum umfasst nationale und internationale Kulturpolitik auf allen Ebenen (cultural policy, polity and politics); das Kunst- und Kultursystem /-feld sowie deren Institutionen, Praktiken und Angebote; Akteure in Kultur und den Künsten sowie Prozesse der Produktion, Distribution und Rezeption von Kunst und Kultur. Ebenfalls finden methodische (qualitative, quantitative, experimentelle) und theoretisch-analytische Arbeiten ein Podium, wobei eine prinzipielle interdisziplinäre Offenheit angestrebt ist.

**JOURNAL OF CULTURAL MANAGEMENT
AND CULTURAL POLICY**

**ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR KULTURMANAGEMENT
UND KULTURPOLITIK**

Editors-in-Chief

Constance DeVereaux, Steffen Höhne, Martin Tröndle

Guest Editor

Zahava D. Doering

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From This Moment: Museum Futures. Conversations with Tom Freudenheim, Anika Walke, and Geoff Ward

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The past year has seen museums, monuments, and memorials hostage to competing narratives of affirmation and condemnation of the very foundations of the United States. Protests and demonstrations demanding a racial reckoning for Black Americans specifically, and all racial/ethnic minority groups, more generally, were added to an existing tsunami of social upheavals. The months of institutional lockdowns, restricted population movement, and a precipitous economic downturn that resulted from the global COVID-19 pandemic have taken a toll. As of this writing, the outcome of the 2020 presidential election portends either a continuation of the present or some relief to the recent governmental instability.

After the initial disbelief, as COVID-19 spread unabated, museums around the globe turned to the internet as an alternative to their physical presence. Some pivoted with agility drawing on internal resources and creativity; others lumbered and needed external help. Most created digital analogs of physical offerings, others imagined new forms of interaction and many scurried to document and collect stories and material evidence from the pandemic. In this issue, the responses of cultural institutions and consortia, from Los Angeles, California and Washington, D.C. to Biel, Switzerland and Xi'an, China provide vivid examples. Very few institutions strayed from their avowed missions and collected or distributed food, assisted community members with emergency needs, or provided desperately needed practical and emotional support (DOERING 2020).

Museum responses to the calls for a racial reckoning have been mostly eloquent but vapid in support of Black Lives Matter; many promises limited, however, in constructive or innovative approaches to solving institutional racism, enacting major changes in managerial or operational structures, in plans to decolonize collections, or include

marginalized communities. Several articles, as well as books reviewed in this issue, respond to my quest for exemplary museum activism, dealing primarily with marginalized groups and voices such as Janes and Sandell's (2019) description of "... museum activism, in the sense of museum practice, shaped out of ethically-informed values, that is intended to bring about political, social and environmental change."

To explore these issues from a practitioner perspective, I talked to Tom L. Freudenheim former Deputy and COO of Jüdisches Museum Berlin, who also served as Assistant Secretary for Museums at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., and currently serves on advisory boards of multiple cultural organizations. To add further dimension to these issues, I talked with Anika Walke, Associate Professor of History at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri and Geoff Ward, Professor of African American Studies at the same university. The following conversation is shortened and edited from the original exchange.

I elicited Mr. Freudenheim's thoughts by first asking, "What do museums need to do to adapt to this moment?" but also, "What is the moment teaching us about the place of our institutions in the world?"

Tom Freudenheim: I have a lot of feelings about what museums can and can't do. I feel like I'm back where I was in the 1960s; namely, that because most other institutions in the society are failing, museums are an easy target. They're expected to deal with issues that they really don't have the capacity to deal with. Which doesn't mean that there aren't things that museums can do. But the idea that the museum is all that important is just an illusion that museum people need to have. I don't think we've learned anything, nothing at all.

People say this moment is really different. I hope that's true, but I'm not sure. I have all the material from my Berkeley days about shutting the museum down during the Vietnam War era protests, and Black students talking about non-representation. The underlying major issues have to do with employment, where people live, schools — museums have nothing to do with those issues. Until employment, housing, and schooling issues change, racism isn't going to change. Museums are a little blip in this. I don't want to minimize how much I care about museums, but in terms of the large issues in the society, it's an illusion to believe that museums have any significant role to play.

COVID and the many ways in which museums have replied to the pandemic is a perfect example. I love the idea that the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met) was recently re-opened. But when the Met just opened, nothing changed. They had a press preview. Then they had a member's preview. Now, the public can come in with advanced tickets. They can't imagine functioning in any other way. That's in their DNA. They could have had a preview for bus drivers who've been keeping New York going or workers at grocery stores that made it possible for people to eat, or for homeless people; I don't know. They did what museums do. In terms of COVID, and Black Lives Matter, et cetera, et cetera. Museums are INCONSEQUENTIAL — all in capital letters. Please quote me that way. Museums are INCONSEQUENTIAL.

Despite his insistence on the inconsequential nature of museums at this moment, Freudenheim related an anecdote suggesting ways that racial issues are elided and significant moments in history erased by museum staff or “assumed” known by the public. In many instances, it is the definition of “public,” as well-educated and primarily white, that is problematic. His story focused on the development of First Ladies: Political Role and Public Image at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History (NMAH) whose most popular exhibition (since 1955) was period rooms with artefacts and memorabilia of the wives of US Presidents.

Freudenheim: I remember a discussion when NMAH was re-doing the First Ladies Hall. The staff didn't have anything about Eleanor Roosevelt, Marian Anderson, and Constitution Hall. I said, “I can't believe that you don't have that in there.” “Everybody knows that,” staff replied. I answered, “Well, the most important thing I knew about Eleanor Roosevelt when I was growing up was the issue about Marian Anderson.”

In 1955, Marian Anderson, recognized as one of the finest contraltos of her time, was the first African American to perform at the New York Metropolitan Opera. Sixteen years previously—in 1939—she performed to a racially integrated audience of 75,000 on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. It is significant that the sponsors’ original choice of venue was Constitution Hall, located near the US White House, and owned by Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) whose members can prove lineal, bloodline descent from patriots who served in the American Revolution. Rules of usage for the venue, in

1939, prevented any but white performers on their stage. DAR member, Eleanor Roosevelt resigned from the group in protest and the concert was moved to the Memorial.

Freudenheim's experience with the staff of NMAH is hardly isolated. It is not just a matter of curatorial omissions, but also about how museums encourage or discourage non-white visitors and creators directing exhibitions and interpretation to the public they know – people like themselves.

Freudenheim: Museums in general signal to 'others' that they don't belong. People of color think that they're being told that the museums are not for them. That's the current discourse in society. But lots and lots of people, who are not people of color, also feel that they don't belong, and they're not part of current discourse. Museums are generally white institutions because they were formed out of white cultural traditions. The concept of a museum is a western white cultural thing. Accusing them of current racism intentionally, seems to be a bit unfair, since they were founded as white institutions. I'm not defending that; I'm just describing it.

There are a lot of related issues. My favorite example at the moment is Norman Lewis (1909–79), an African-American artist, who came to prominence when included in a 2014 New York exhibition. Ever since, Norman Lewis' prices have gone through the roof, lots of museums have made recent acquisitions of his work. Even though he was part of the Abstract Expressionists 'group' and represented by a major gallery, he was ignored by the influential critics and few museums acquired his work.

Issues of gender, nationality, religion, race and ethnicity are inherently present in the exhibition of art and cultural objects. How they should be addressed in the museum – both in acquisition and exhibition – also raises a multiplicity of issues with which museums are currently struggling. Freudenheim, from his concern for the experience of visitors, raises the problem of informational labels and the ways a museum may choose to highlight or neglect the diversity of creators in exhibitions. He returns to the case of African-American artist Norman Lewis.

Freudenheim: Should the label, for somebody just wandering through the Museum of Modern Art, say that Norman Lewis is an African-American artist? I don't really know. If it indicates that this is an African-American artist – is a person of color going to feel better because somebody

who is African-American is being shown in this “white environment?” And is that the point of the museum? Does a Hispanic person feel good looking at pre-Columbian art because they’re Mestizos and some of their DNA comes from Spanish Conquistadors and some of it comes from the indigenous populations in Latin America?

The other question, does being African-American influence the art or not? That’s what art historians and theorists spend their careers discussing, and I’m not one of those, and so I don’t pretend to have an answer. I don’t think there are good answers. From the point of view of the museum visitor, I honestly don’t know whether it matters if I know that somebody is an African-American artist or belongs to any other ethnic or national group like that.

Does it mean, by the way, that I don’t believe that acquisitions policies have been geared toward white males, white European, not people of color? No question about it. That’s a woman artist issue as well, and women have certainly been downplayed both historically and recently.

As another example, let’s think about the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo [NY] where I grew up and first learned to be comfortable in a museum. The Albright has a major Soutine, a major Modigliani and a major Chagall, just to pick three obvious names. If it said that they were Jewish versus not saying something similar about other artists, would that have been considered anti-Semitic? That’s a good research question. I bridle with German museum information when “Jewish” is thrown in unnecessarily. I bridle, but I understand that everything Jewish in Germany always works that way, so I’ve gotten used to it. I don’t know that it’s the same as a little red dot that would show you all the African-American artists and a green dot that would show you all the Latinx artists. It’s hard to get at an understanding of how this can work.

But does anybody know whether somebody who’s a Franco-American or Italian-American feels differently about art that comes from France or from Italy? When we (at the Smithsonian) were working on the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), the question of who gets to talk about the objects came up frequently. (For example, why does some Jewish guy get to be an expert on Italian Renaissance Christian painting?) Or can you include a variety of approaches? As I recall, at NMAI the decision was to favor Native American voices over those of anthropologists.

Another issue for labels is religion. At the Met, for example, they don’t tell you much about the religious meaning of devotional art. I wrote an

essay about museums being embarrassed by religion (FREUDENHEIM 2017). Museums can deal with Renaissance paintings, for example, in terms of the medium, material, light, colors, and maybe the model. But not to explain that they are devotional images, and that some were made for personal prayer and others for placing in a church for group assembly. Why? But it's just not in the DNA of most museums to deal with this. That may never to change. And, in addition, we don't know if this matters to people.

Doering: In response to call for representation, would you change museum structure or composition of their staff or boards? What if museum boards adopted charters that specified the composition of their membership (similar to the Smithsonian's Board of Regents)? What if community representatives had the same rights as wealthy donors on the Boards?

Freudenheim: Yes, they certainly should diversify their staff, absolutely. I do think that having a more diverse staff might make a difference, I say 'might,' because new staff people tend to acculturate. I don't know that there's a lot of evidence that bringing in diverse people necessarily changes things. A workplace has its own history and way of operating. One of the problems is available people. Are there are African-American scholars working in Italian Renaissance painting? Some people are working on this problem by encouraging paid internships and apprenticeships.

You can change the rules for what it means to be on the board. But you've got to get back to how these places are funded. You've got to get the people with lots of money to believe they still want to be involved, even though they're not just going to be meeting with the same people with a lot of resources. Seriously, I mean, how do you change the funding paradigm without having people of means as the primary funders of these institutions. The old European model of state support isn't working either. You have to remember; other countries are looking at the American model and trying to emulate us because their government funding hasn't been sufficiently successful. It's never going to be primarily governmental.

The fundamental institutional change required in museums, if they are jarred from the current stasis, will require visionary leaders as role models and committed, trained staff. A pilot project. Memory for the

Future, planned for the 2021 Spring term at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, aims to prepare students for the personal and professional challenges experienced in a world under the shadow of colonialism, slavery, and genocides of the past. Walke and Ward are conducting a seminar that prefigures a studiolab, a year-long course and a public project that combines “collaborative study of representations of the interlinked histories of colonialism, slavery, and genocide with development of curatorial skills and public educational projects to facilitate reparative memorial practices in and around St. Louis.”

Walke’s research focuses on how people remember and live with the effects and repercussions of systemic violence, especially the Holocaust. Her current research looks at the long aftermath of the Nazi genocide in Belarus. Ward’s research examines racial politics of social control, and the pursuit of racial justice, historically and today. His current projects examine histories of racial violence, their legacies, and implications for redress. We began with a description of the project, its goals, and its urban context in St. Louis, with about half its population Black/African American. I also wanted to hear what the current moment teaches us about our institutions.

Geoff Ward: The studiolab comes out of an initiative in the Center for Humanities, funded by the Mellon Foundation, called Redefining Doctoral Education. This initiative is responsive, in part, to the kind of mismatch between traditional graduate training in the humanities and realities of changing labor and other opportunity structures. The assumed translation of graduate training to university research and teaching remains an interest for many graduate students in humanities. Others are interested in more creative, community engaged, entrepreneurial, and other kinds of applications. Traditional graduate training does not support those kinds of interests as well.

The initiative supports faculty in retooling themselves to teach courses that provide access to things like the experience of documentary filmmaking or podcast production, curation, or writing for broader audiences. The program creates opportunities for faculty and students to partner in developing new skills and experiences and asking different kinds of research and practical questions. We’re planning this experimental class to figure out more of our strategy and to get partnerships underway with institutions.

Anika Walke: We're not only aiming to attract students who want to work in museums. Rather, we intend to provide opportunities for graduate students from various departments, and this can be History, African-American studies, or Germanic Languages and Literatures, to think about different ways to make scholarship legible to the public. This is an effort to shore up the public humanities by providing necessary skills. There is a lot of talk about how the humanities need to be more accessible, more open, more involved in public conversations, but there is fairly little knowledge and confidence in how to actually do that.

Ward: The studiolab will meet off campus, near the university, in a community embedded and accessible space. Studiolab projects developed with museums and others we're working with will be visible in this neighborhood space in St. Louis. We also intend to recruit a humanities scholar-in-residence who will be a part of our team, and a pre- or post-doctoral fellow. You can imagine how, over the period of the project year, this will be a pretty interesting pop-up of creative activity around the idea of reparative commemorative work.

Walke: We're also going to place our students in local and regional museums to think about and to learn how to make humanities scholarship impactful and meaningful beyond the university and to a wider audience. That will include skills in visualization, and in making things knowable in variety of media, not only in textual form, which is still the most common form used by humanists. We're trying to reach a student population that is willing to think more broadly about a skillset that they may need to succeed either in the academic realm or in some other, non-academic fields. The ability to speak to various audiences in appropriate and thoughtful ways will be crucial for that.

Doering: Thus far, the discussion has been very general about the studiolab. From what perspective will they approach museums so that participation is distinct from a more standard internship?

Ward: There is also an interest here in demystifying museums and what happens in museums and other cultural institutions; our collaborations will facilitate reflection on how these institutions work, and how that work might be approached in different ways with a more critical lens, or in terms of public participation, or with a more explicit focus on, an idea like 'transformative justice', or as a practice of 'multidirectional

memory’. How do you translate those humanistic ideas into an exhibition context or a memorial context, and why should we?

In noting ‘multidirectional memory’ and ‘transformative justice,’ Ward is highlighting two contemporary approaches that are helpful in understanding the past, its presence, and the possibility of a just future. These ideas are central to the Memory for the Future studiolab and its planned intervention.

Rothberg (2009) coined the term “multidirectional memory” to conceptualize what happens when various histories of extreme violence confront each other in the public sphere. Public remembrance is frequently viewed as “competitive memory,” a zero-sum game. He argues

... that collective memories of seemingly distinct histories—such as those of slavery, the Holocaust, and colonialism—are not so easily separable from one another. I have discovered not only that memory of the Holocaust has served as a vehicle through which other histories of suffering have been articulated, but also something even more surprising: the emergence of Holocaust memory itself was from the start inflected by histories that at first glance might seem to have little to do with it. (2011: 524)

These histories of violence create enduring structures of inequality, in museums, health care, housing, and so on, and the idea of transformative justice is to fully confront and reconfigure and not merely reform these structures of injustice. Paul Greedy and Simon Robins write:

Transformative justice is defined as transformative change that emphasizes local agency and resources, the prioritization of process rather than preconceived outcomes and the challenging of unequal and intersecting power relationships and structures of exclusion at both the local and the global level. (2014: 340, original emphasis)

Ward: To be sure, as a professor in African and African-American Studies, part of my interest is in fact to spark interest among our students in the potential for museum careers, in heritage preservation, and other relevant areas. The studiolab will not be credentialing, but a socialization or immersive experience that says,

this is a world where your voice can be quite significant, and where there are opportunities that you might find fulfilling and meaningful.

More generally, this project will inform how we all engage with museums going forward, including the kinds of questions we ask, and what we will expect or hope to experience, or the ways we think about support-

ing these institutions, whether or not anyone becomes a museum leader, professional, or staff member.

Doering: In our conversation, you've indicated that the George B Vashon Museum, with a collection spanning 250+ years of African American history in St. Louis, The Griot Museum of Black History & Culture, with its displays of wax sculptures, art and memorabilia, and the St. Louis Holocaust Museum & Learning Center (HMLC) will form the core museum partnership. With a rich variety of institutions in St. Louis, you picked a difficult subset. Why these? Second, you mentioned to me the ability of 'voice' to be heard through those institutions. My experience argues the reverse. In our current institutions, multiplicity of voices is precisely what is silenced. There is a striking uniformity both across and within institutions.

Ward: Our collaboration is hopeful in the sense that we are really interested in thinking critically about redress, and specifically the idea that memory work [as discussed by cultural geographer, Karen Till (2012)], can be reparative in 'wounded cities' like St. Louis where historical traumas continue to be socially embodied and reproduced.

I would agree that voice is a problem we face, the uniformity of voice, the intolerance of difference or divergence. I question the extent of uniformity in this case. I think there are categories of institutions, like elite institutions as a group, that are more uniform than not. But another category of more vernacular, community-based institutions are more idiosyncratic, but probably internally do stifle difference. We will learn more about this, but my impression is that these institutions look and feel and work quite differently than, say, elite institutions.

I feel like we are in this inflection point as a society where there is growing consensus that these norms are not sustainable for various reasons, economic and otherwise. In these smaller community-based institutions, highly dependent upon individual founders, in many cases leaders are ageing and thinking about succession. How does this institution endure beyond the tenure of this individual? How does it indeed become a community institution, and how is that sustained? Even elite institutions are scrambling amid this crisis of legitimacy, hence #MuseumsSoWhite, and questions of sustainability. This is an opening for new voices, new perspectives and approaches, though it will always be contentious.

Doering: I do get discouraged and a good example is the Metropolitan Museum that Tom Freudenheim talked about. The Met adjusted 'business as usual' by adding masks, hand sanitizer dispensers, and route signage.

I worry, that unless external pressures are maintained, they'll regress even more. You're right, the small community institutions behave differently, perhaps a bit more like European culture centers. In them, 'museum' is not at the forefront of their activity, rather the purpose is to promote and encourage cultural values among their communities. So, what's it going to take to really change museum directorships, staff composition, employment practices, acquisition and exhibitions processes?

Walke: I don't know if I have an answer to your question, but we are certainly thinking about that long-term prospect and how to achieve substantial changes. But, just to come back to your earlier comment about our museum partners. They are, indeed, very community-oriented museums, and that is why we chose them. All of these museums work in isolation from one another, there are few, if any, connections across St. Louis in terms of memorialization and musealization here in the city. In a way this disconnect, and our desire to help overcome it, reflects the scholarly divides. I focus on the memory of the Holocaust and World War II, and Geoff is working on legacies of slavery and other forms of discrimination and violence in the United States. There are largely separate theoretical discourses of scholars thinking about the legacies of slavery on the one hand, and of others who are concerned with the legacies of the Holocaust. And there is still comparatively little interaction or overlap, even though the repercussions of systemic violence would lend themselves to a comparative or intersecting conversation. So, we propose that bringing together theory and practice and bringing together these different strands of inquiry and musealization could not only be really interesting, but it will also facilitate a conversation that is absolutely necessary.

Of course, we could have gone to the so-called big players, like the Missouri History Museum or The St. Louis Art Museum (SLAM) – in fact, the History Museum is one of our partners. But we think that those community-oriented institutions are likely more relevant to particular communities, and they're also a little bit more malleable in the way that they operate. For instance, the Holocaust Museum is currently expanding. They are not only building new facilities but are also rethinking and redesigning the museum, adding, for instance, a so-called Impact

Lab. This Lab will be a physical and mental space to explore and analyze forms of violence and injustice beyond the Holocaust, and to think creatively about how to overcome antisemitism, racial hierarchies, and other identity-based hierarchies. We think we can contribute to this endeavor, and it will be insightful for students and faculty to participate in what will surely be difficult conversations. We were somewhat pragmatic in choosing our partners, but it really is also an effort to facilitate an essential dialogue. Legacies of violence are always distinct, but they also echo the history and legacy of other forms of violence, they are always connected to other experiences of discrimination and marginalization. We want to facilitate perspectives that uncover these connections and bring that into the community.

Ward: I tend to be somewhat optimistic, but I do think that this studioloab – insofar as its interventions prove impactful and compelling – will be something that agitates the way some of these institutions think about what it is they’re doing.

This is already underway in various ways in St. Louis, which has an incredibly vibrant arts and culture community. Our university museum, the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, is committed to increasing engagement with the art of the African Diaspora and the Americas, and themes like empire and its aftermath. The Kemper is already working with our new university Center for the Study of Race, Ethnicity & Equity, where we are developing an Arts & Culture Impact Lab. The Kemper will also be a campus partner in our project, offering insight into areas like exhibition planning and curation, and publications, and may host a future exhibition we begin designing in the studioloab. So, the museum is expanding the network of people with a voice in shaping its strategies and programs, including how its collection is used, but also the spaces where the museum is present and active, outside the museum itself.

Walke: In this vein, I want to come back to the earlier point about cultural or community centers, which for me is a very important dimension to consider. For instance, I am very interested in revisiting the model of the History Workshop that Roger Fletcher describes (1988). This was a movement of especially social historians and what one could call “community historians”—people who were interested in the history of their neighborhood or their neighbors—in the 1970s and 1980s. The goal was to write “history from below,” to bring communities together and document their own history by using methods like oral history, but also

by collecting artifacts and then creating a space to exchange knowledge about their own history, especially of marginalized communities, of histories that were not part of “big H” history at the time.

For the German context, this meant for instance that a lot of the documentation of ordinary citizens’ experience of the Nazi regime, of the persecution of communists, of local Jewish experiences of the Nazi regime, grew out of these efforts. Much of that scholarship started in History Workshops, not in the academy. It then entered the academy. So, when we are thinking about how to redesign museums, I would really like to think about how to make them participatory, how to make them inclusive so that people from the community actually create their own museums, so to speak. One could frame this as Public History, but I think it is much more inclusive. That may of course include art, there is a large number of people who create art that is not typically seen as art and not seen as worthy of preservation, but, of course, it testifies to human development and how humans perceive and respond to historical change and should therefore become part of the archive.

Our project opens up these more community oriented, more participatory and interactive models of engagement to understand our own history. When we talk about memory we talk about history, but we also talk about the future. We want to mobilize history for creating a better future. Part of the reason why Geoff and I came up with this project was that in a workshop organized by the Redefining Doctoral Education initiative, I realized that we always talk about the things that don’t work. We also often talk about violence and destruction, but we never actually get to talk about a vision of a society that we want to have, and how we can build it. This is where this model of reflecting on history and memory to think about a different kind of future actually came from. We have a goal in doing so, namely, to imagine a society that has the capacity to overcome antisemitism, racism, and other forms of hierarchization and violence.

While approaching these discussions from different perspectives and experiences, Freudenheim and subsequently Walke and Ward, explicitly and implicitly raised many seemingly intractable issues that museums faced at this moment. In the midst of present political polarization, the relevance or significance of cultural institutions is being subjected to piercing scrutiny and increasing critique. Can their current and prospective collections and narratives they tell about the past and present, be harnessed to address inequality, injustice, and trauma?

Decades of research in museums has shown that exhibitions have been inefficient and ineffective methods for influencing change, whether by communicating new information or changing attitudes and behaviors. They are more often used by individuals as tools for confirming, reinforcing, and extending existing beliefs. This is especially so since individuals bring with them different entrance narratives, or internal storylines about subject matter, different perspectives and expectations, different interests and preferences. Intending to engage the behaviors they learned in prior visits, museums can influence these outcomes but not control them (DOERING/PEKARIK 1993).

Freudenheim highlights museum behaviors that alienate non-white, non-middle-class audiences in museums as they are and raises questions about possible changes. The Walke-Ward studiolab aims to initiate alternative conversations about ‘difficult issues.’ The papers in this issue contribute by clarifying public needs from cultural institutions and highlighting practices that can be exemplars for museum futures.

As social science scholars, practitioners, and scholar-practitioners in the cultural arena, we have a critical role to shape thinking about the future and articulate our vision for societal change. We address challenges where we live, in our professional lives, and in the world around us. This is not just idle discourse – social change is at the core of who we are. Ultimately, our goal is to improve the human condition and move people, groups, organizations, society, and cultures toward a more positive future. The key question is “what can cultural institutions DO?”

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