It’s Personal: one size does not fit all

“At the forefront of these revolutionary possibilities is personalized medicine, which is the idea of precisely tailoring each person’s medical care to his or her own unique genetic makeup. In fact, if all goes as we envision, today’s mostly one-size-fits-all approach to medical care will seem as outdated to future generations as bloodletting leeches and patent-medicine potions are to us.”

—Francis Collins

The industrial era birthed the modern retail industry through the mass production of affordable goods. Handmade and bespoke items quickly became synonymous with luxury: only the wealthy could afford goods made to their personal measure. Now we’ve come full circle, as technology makes it relatively cheap and easy to personalize goods and services to each individual user, or use “mass personalization” to create the illusion of individual attention. This trend is playing out in three arenas: the creation of personalized goods, the filtering of personalized content and the creation of personalized experiences. Audiences of the future, shaped by the broader marketplace, may expect museums’ products, communications and experiences to be tailored to their interests and needs.

The trend towards personalization results from the interplay of technological and cultural drivers of change. Our desire for personalization is, in part, a reaction to our increasingly impersonal, faceless interactions with the digital world. “Personalized” also can connote “personal,” i.e., a relationship with a flesh-and-blood person. (Perhaps this is what the polymathic artist Miranda July had in mind when she created the Somebody app, which recruits a stranger to act as your in-person avatar, giving life to your text message with voice and emotion.)

While technology fuels our sense of alienation, it also provides the tools to fight back against being treated as interchangeable cogs in the digital machine. Why struggle with earbuds that fall out every few minutes when you can...
buy a pair custom fitted to your ear? Or angst over badly fitted jeans that could be tailored to your digitally scanned measurements? It took the Human Genome Project 12 years and $2.7 billion (in 1991 dollars) to sequence the first human genome. Now companies like 23andMe offer personal genomic analysis in about a month for less than a hundred bucks.

**Recommendation Engines**, made possible by massive data collection and sophisticated data analytics, enable us to filter the overwhelming number of choices on the Web to something relevant and manageable. And since the underlying algorithms can learn from a user’s behavior, they deliver better results the more someone interacts with them. Instead of being limited to whatever a radio station wants to play, people download Pandora or Spotify and teach the service to deliver the songs they prefer. At the same time, the spread of affordable, increasingly sophisticated software and hardware supports the design and creation of one-off physical products. Individuals, startups and major companies are using 3D scanning, design programs and 3D printing to make custom, personalized, fitted designs.

As a business strategy, personalization is impelled in part by the fact that so many of the mundane services companies used to deliver can now be accomplished directly by the user, using the power of digital tools. Anyone can jump on Google and read up on general nutrition advice, but perhaps they will pay for dietary recommendations geared to their genome. Research libraries, realizing that their role as the “first place to go for scholarly content” is eroding, are starting to offer personalized search services to provide added value.

Data-driven personalization faces two big challenges. One, it’s difficult to write an effective recommendation algorithm. When Netflix
offered $1 million to anyone who could improve the performance of its recommendation engine by 10 percent, it took three years for someone to collect the prize. (And even that solution was soon abandoned because it was too hard to implement.) Two, a recommendation engine has to have massive amounts of data to work on before it can generate useful results. Big companies like Amazon and Netflix have so much data on user interactions that they can jumpstart the process, but achieving critical mass is a lot harder for small businesses, including nonprofit cultural organizations.

What This Means for Society
In commerce, personalization opens new economic niches, including the rise of the DIY economy—not only the sale of 3D printers, but also the use of 3D printing to create customized products. There are huge opportunities for businesses offering personalized services as well. Some companies, like the customer loyalty program Fivestars, encourage small businesses to pool their customer behavior data so that collectively they have enough information to create tailored communications and offers. This enables small vendors to realize some of the advantages of scale previously confined to big retailers.

Personalization is starting to transform health care, both baseline wellness programs and interventions. BaseHealth’s GenoPhen provides doctors with a platform to create health plans customized to a patient’s genome, personal health history and data from quantified self monitors like Fitbit and Jawbone Up. Whereas in the past, medical treatments were designed for the “average” person (usually, in

Previous page: Normal uses “nerdalicious software” and 3D printing to create ear buds customized to the shape of an individual’s ear.

Right: The Alternative Limb Project provides personalized prosthetics that reflect the wearer’s imagination, personality and interest. Photo: Rachel Williams MUA: Katt Betts
practice, the average adult white male), now researchers are beginning to mine genomic data to identify personal risk factors and model how an individual might respond to drugs. They are experimenting with cancer treatments that target an individual’s unique cancer cells.

One key characteristic of the emerging era of education is **personalized learning**. We are moving from a model in which students are expected to conform to one-size-fits-all instruction to expecting systems to adapt to each student’s learning style and interests. Last year, Vermont became the first state to mandate **personal learning plans** for all middle and high school students. Educational services like Khan Academy and ClassDojo offer tools for tracking the performance of individual students, enabling teachers to provide personalized attention and feedback. At the intersection

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**Museum Examples**

The Yerba Buena Center for the Arts offers **YBCA:You** in which, for $15 a month, participants are assigned their own personal art coach to help them “navigate the myriad programs and events taking place each month at YBCA and elsewhere in the Bay Area” (along with discounts, access to exclusive events and various social meet ups). One staffer described the program as “a little like a gym membership with a dash of case management and counseling.” A participant in the program wrote: “The YBCA:You program has been one of the best investments I’ve made. I feel like it’s a combination of continuing education, social hour, and life coaching—like a really good gym, but for art. I love it!”

A group of museum enthusiasts has created **Art-o-mancy**, an activity that turns any museum into a “personal oracle.” Participants formulate a serious question related to their life, then are blindfolded and led through the museum by a guide. When they feel inspired to stop, the blindfold is removed and their guide helps them explore how whatever they are looking at (a painting, sculpture, even a blank wall or a fire extinguisher) sheds light on their inquiry. Art-o-mancy has been conducted at the Walker Art Center, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and the Phillips Collection, among others.

For several years, the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam worked with Eindhoven University of Technology and the Telematica Institute to experiment with personalizing how Web users experience the museum’s collections. The **CHIP project** let visitors build profiles by logging their art preferences and related cultural activities, and used this data to design personalized virtual and museum-based tours. One of the premises of CHIP was that a compelling personal experience would motivate more frequent use of the museum’s online and onsite resources.
of personalized medicine and education, one body of research suggests that the efficacy of childhood interventions in socialization and learning may be predicted by a child’s genes. But despite the potential power of such approaches, parents are concerned that the same data that enables schools to personalize instruction may be used to stigmatize children, or may be vulnerable to breeches of privacy.

Inevitably, personalization has a dark side as well. “Personalization” of social networks, tailored newsfeeds and search engines can create homogenous communities in which no one is challenged by countervailing views. And personalization can be misused: in November 2010, political scientists messing about with Facebook proved that they could alter users’ feeds in a way that manipulated their voting behavior. This led to one fictional scenario, dubbed “digital gerrymandering,” in which Mark Zuckerberg personalizes the content delivered to users likely to vote against his favored candidate in a way that makes them less likely to go to the polls. “This is possible,” the author notes, “on any service that personalizes what users see or the order in which they see it, and it’s increasingly easy to effect.” This potential for abuse challenges society to develop ethical guidelines and/or regulations that prevent companies that collect and care for personal data from using that information to advance ideological agendas.
What This Means for Museums

People are becoming accustomed to personalized service from public institutions as well as commercial companies, giving rise to some creative responses. Reference librarians at the Seattle Library offer individually tailored recommendations to patrons via the “Your Next Five Books” service. The Nieuwe Bibliotheek in Almere, Netherlands, has created “personal shops” for customer groups defined by “interest profiles.” For the library, this meant overturning traditional classification schemes to group books by area of interest, combining fiction and nonfiction, as well as training staff in marketing techniques. (The library also provides the S2M Serendipity Machine to encourage users to create personal profiles and connect people sharing similar interests.)

Personalized messages break through the noise of e-communications. An e-mail or text clearly geared to a user’s actions or preferences is more likely to be opened than generic content, and can ensure a museum’s messages to members and donors get read.

Mass personalization requires lots of data, which is a challenge for museums individually and collectively. As museums build the technological capacity to generate personalized recommendations, they will have to convince people to contribute enough information about themselves and their preferences to jump-start the process. Many museums are just beginning to collect even basic data on how individual users interact with the organization. However, the IMLS-funded project to pilot a version of the Dallas Museum of Art’s DMA Friends program at three other museums in the U.S. may help the field develop systems for compiling, sharing and analyzing information about visitor participation.

Museums Might Want to...

Restructure membership programs to create relationships that respond to individual preferences, or (as with the Nieuwe Bibliotheek) learn how to assign users to groups that reflect their behavior and preference, and offer each group a meaningful set of rewards.

Consider how to customize their offerings. As Kate Tinworth asked in a recent post on Expose Your Museum: Who are your biggest fans and how do you involve them to create? What could customization look like in your
space? How might you balance what’s personal with what can be shared?

Tackle the “cold start” challenge of recommendation algorithms. There are several ways to approach this. To generate a big enough mass of data to detect patterns in what kind of museum user is likely to enjoy what sort of experience, museums may want to pool their data sets. Are there companies working with multiple museum clients that might integrate such functions into the services they provide? Museums can also keep it simple: use an individual visitor’s past interactions with the museum to suggest similar events or products they might like, rather than trying to understand, and extrapolate from, their inner psyche.

Further Reading


Several museums are official “hotspots” for Miranda July’s Somebody messaging service, including the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, the New Museum, the Walker Art Center and the Fundacion Jumex Arte Contemporaneo.


A Custom Fit: Personalizing Experiences Using Technology, Emily Schuster. This blog post is an extended version of an article that appeared in the May/June 2013 issue of ASTC’s Dimensions magazine. It shares examples of how museums are using technology—including smartphones, barcodes and radio-frequency identification (RFID) tags—to personalize the visitor experience.

The “Open” Economy: filling the data pipeline
The open culture movement in all its permutations—open source, open software, open government—calls for a fundamental cultural shift from the assumption that information should be tightly controlled to the presumption that content should be made available to everybody, absent a compelling reason to keep it locked up. Open content licensing and Creative Commons copyrights encourage people to reuse, remix and redistribute material. Open source software invites programmers to mess with the underlying code. And the open data movement is racing to get information out in the world, where it can do some good. Governments are adopting open data policies and pouring money into creating open data infrastructure; companies are springing up to exploit these new resources; individuals are exploring how access to data sets empowers them as individuals, citizens and entrepreneurs. Museum data—cultural, scientific, especially operational—has traditionally been closely controlled. In a world pivoting towards open, can museums afford to be left behind?

Open data is **FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) on steroids**. Back in the 1990s, we made a quantum leap towards openness when floppy discs supplanted poor-quality photocopies as a format for obtaining government records. Now, four years after the federal government created data.gov, that open national data repository contains more than 400,000 datasets from 175 agencies. Last fall, when Minneapolis became the 16th U.S. city to pass an open data policy, one city council member explained the action by declaring, “It’s the people’s data, and it should be out there.”

Once data is “out there,” people find all sorts of wonderful ways to connect, analyze and mash it up to serve a variety of goals. Open data fuels civic activism and civil rights, as when the New York State Civic Engagement Table merges voting history data with data on public housing to empower community organizers. It supports scholarship and exploration, as when MapStory enables anyone to access, manipulate and annotate public domain map data to “improve our understanding of global

“Open is already on track to supplant ‘participatory’ as buzzword of the year, with good reason. The proliferation of groups supporting and encouraging openness in the cultural/creative sector is impressive. Wikimedia, Creative Commons, the Open Knowledge Foundation, free software advocates, open-source software advocates: the list gets longer all the time.”

—Ed Rodley

**Previous pages:** Chicago: City of Big Data at the Chicago Architecture Foundation highlights how city planners, architects, designers and citizens use open data to design for the future. Photo: Ann Evans, Chicago Architecture Foundation
dynamics, worldwide, over the course of history.” It transforms city planning, as when the Denver Regional Equity Atlas layers data about education, income, health and other measures of equity on plans for the new transit network.

“Open” comes at a cost, of course. Building the infrastructure to support publicly accessible databases isn’t cheap. Last year the European Union announced it was sinking the equivalent of nearly $18 million into three open data initiatives—an open data incubator, a Web data research network and an academy to train data scientists. But although the major impetus for open data is government transparency and accountability, open data systems can save money as well. City governments, for example, can use open data to monitor compliance with regulations or respond to citizen concerns in cost-efficient ways.

As the Open Knowledge Foundation points out, “Open Knowledge is what open data becomes when it is useful, useable and used.” Many barriers stand in the way of converting data to knowledge, the foremost being compatibility. Interoperability is chimerical if data sets aren’t configured to talk to each other. To this end Code for America is promulgating recommended formats to make data easier to access and use. Another thorny issue is “gray
data”—data that is only half open, redacted or partially released. With so much data backlogged, and with more being generated at an astounding rate, there is also the question of what to prioritize.

What This Means for Society

Open government data facilitates transparency, accountability and participatory democracy. But progressing from data to knowledge is not enough—we have to use knowledge wisely if it is to make the world a better place. Open data could be a force for good, as individuals and civil society organizations use public data to improve their communities, and it could be an impetus for government officials and contractors to self-censor, obfuscate or falsify information.

Open data, like digital fabrication, is a technology with the potential to catalyze economic growth, spawning jobs that replace those lost in dying industries. A growing list of private companies are building their businesses around public data, working in the realms of business data, health care, energy, education, transportation, real estate and more.

The current focus of the Open Data movement is government data since we (the public) already “own” this information. Now foundations are driving openness as well—recently the Gates Foundation announced that all the research they fund must meet the standards of open access publishing, including the requirement that all the data underlying published research results be accessible and open immediately. However, many private companies (e.g., Facebook, Google) amass and monetize huge databases culled from users’ online behavior. Will we come to expect that this data (which is, in some sense, ours) be made open as well?

As we push towards “open,” society has to grapple with what data can or should remain veiled. Edward Snowden’s theft of data from the National Security Agency dramatized this issue: on one hand, the information he leaked sparked a much-needed debate on appropriate limits for covert monitoring of U.S. citizens. On the other hand, many maintain his actions seriously damaged U.S. security and strengthened world terrorism. The debate about when data should be open or closed is playing out across the country on smaller stages as well. In Honolulu, two public officials resigned...
Museum Examples

The Smithsonian Cooper-Hewitt has made its entire collections database available on Github (a public database repository) using a Creative Commons “no rights reserved” license. They even wowed the Maker community by making the 3D scan data of Andrew Carnegie’s mansion (the building they inhabit) free to download, remix and reuse. Also in the spirit of “open,” the museum is giving away the “Cooper Hewitt” typeface it commissioned to mark their reopening after three years of renovation—not just the font, but the source code, so designers can mess with it.

The entire digital collection of the Tate Modern is available on GitHub as well, and the museum has fostered playing with open data. In June 2014 the museum hosted “Hack the Space,” inviting participants to camp out in the museum overnight with the assignment “take any form of data and transform it into a creative digital artwork.” The winning project used a database from Chinese artist Ai Weiwei that contains the names of 5,196 children and young people who died in an earthquake in 2008. On a lighter note, a team dubbing itself the Pharmacologically Active Crustaceans used data on how antidepressants in the human waste stream find their way into sea life, programming plush lobsters to tweet about their mood.

In December 2014, staff of the natural history museums of the University of Colorado-Boulder and Florida State University helped organize the CitStitch Hackathon, sponsored by iDigBio and the Zooniverse Notes from Nature Project. The hack promoted public participation in the digitization of biological collections, and was characterized as “a ground-breaking citizen-science endeavor with immediate and strong impacts in the areas of biodiversity and applied conservation.”

The Institute of Museum and Library Services’ Museum Universe Database File (MUDF) has been pulled into Github. Patrick Murray-John at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University used MUDF to create the US Museums Explorer, using a Linked Open Data connection to pull in text and photos from Wikipedia entries about museums. This application demonstrates both the power and limitations of open data: Murray-John evidently found it pretty easy to prototype the ultimate online index to browsing and searching for U.S. museums, but the results are muddied by the imperfections of the MUDF database, which is still being edited and proofed.
because of a bill that required them to submit asset disclosures online—believing that their right to privacy trumped the public’s right to know. Recently the startup Hipcamp protested an RFP by the U.S. Forest Service for management of the Recreation.gov website, arguing that the terms of the proposal let the service provider keep too much commercially valuable data secret. When does too much openness threaten an individual’s right to privacy, or a company’s need to protect data from competitors?

What This Means for Museums

In “The Virtues of Promiscuity,” an essay for the Code|Words project, Ed Rodley observes that a “central part of the missions of successful museums in the present century will be, as Will Noel puts it, ‘to put the data in places where people can find it—making the data, as it were, promiscuous.’” Museums already hold their collections in trust for the public, both from an ethical and a legal perspective. Should the same principles apply to associated data? In that case, building digital infrastructure to support data sharing is as fundamental as creating exhibit galleries and collections storage facilities.

Museums traditionally regard some categories of data as secrets to be kept rather than as knowledge to be shared. For example, in natural history museums it has long been considered appropriate to redact data on collecting localities for sensitive, rare or endangered species. A recent paper in Collections Forum (see Further Reading, below) challenges this convention, arguing that all collections data...
should be freely accessible unless such release contravenes applicable laws or regulations; is prohibited by an agreement with the collector, donor or landowner; or is justified in restriction by “very specific circumstances” (their emphasis). What circumstances warrant exemptions to a general commitment to “open?”

For museums, one important manifestation of the open culture movement is open authority, which Lori Byrd Phillips has defined as “a mixing of institutional expertise with the discussions, experiences, and insights of broad audiences.” Museums are deconstructing, piece by piece, the authoritarian model that presumes control of what people see, what they learn and how they learn it. Open data vastly accelerates this trend, vaulting us into a world in which users bypass museum controls and filters and go straight to the source. That prospect can be pretty scary. Will open data deprive museums of income streams that come from mediated access? Will it mean that museum curators don’t have first crack at publishing on collections they study?

On the other hand, when museums put their data out there for users to play with, they may learn a tremendous amount about what people value about their work, and how people want to work with them.
Museums Might Want to...

Audit their data, decide what should be made “open,” and create a timeline and budget for doing so. This audit should include an assessment of the challenges inherent in this process: What is the quality of the collections data? Are there legal restrictions on what can be released? What data should be prioritized, and why? Create policies regarding what data will be made public, and how. Consider what data, if any, will be kept confidential, and outline a rationale for those exceptions that is itself made publicly available.

Treat data as an asset to be managed, tracked and (when appropriate) monetized. Compiling data isn’t cheap, whether it is an image bank created via digital scanning or information on visitor behavior amassed from a program such as the DMA Friends. To create a balanced economy of data, museums need to invest in infrastructure and ongoing costs, and this may be supported, in part, by the sale or licensing of data, to underwrite the portion that is provided in a free and open manner.

Invite users to play with the museum’s data. In February 2013 the White House held its first Open Data Day Hackathon, inviting programmers and technology experts to work with White House staff to build tools using the newly released We the People API. (API stands for Application Programming Interface—a set of protocols and tools for building software applications.) Data Jams, Hackathons and Datapaloozas are becoming common, and museums can instigate their own, encouraging scientists, artists, students, technologists and the general public to mess around with the museum’s data, or play with data related to the museum’s work and share the results.

Publicize the open data available about the museum’s collections, research and operations and encourage individuals, companies and government entities to use it in their own work. This is one way museums can contribute to civic planning, community activism, entrepreneurship and self-directed learning.

Identify what public open data could be harnessed for the museum’s own purposes—for example, city demographics, use of public

This Rosa Bonheur sketchbook from 1847 is one of 100,000 digitized images and associated metadata the Getty Research Institute has made available via the Digital Public Library of America. Photo: Getty Institute 850837(f.5)
and private transportation services, and school performance.

Further Reading


**Beautiful Data: A Field Guide for Exploring Open Collections** is a Web-based compendium of resources based on a workshop held June 16–27, 2014 at metaLAB (Harvard), supported by a grant from the Getty Foundation. The site includes a summary of the outcomes of the workshop, a prototyping game, “provocation cards” to prompt adventures in museums and case studies in the use of open data.

**Policy guidelines for the development and promotion of open access**, UNESCO, 2012. (PDF, 76 pp.) UNESCO’s basic text on Open Access (OA), with recommendations for formulating OA policies. Includes nonprescriptive guidelines to facilitate adoption of Open Access.

Ethical Everything: managing the moral marketplace

“To give real service you must add something which cannot be bought or measured with money, and that is sincerity and integrity.”
—Douglas Adams

Increasingly the press and our peers remind us that each purchase we make and each bite we take has ripple effects on the world. The fact that, in this Internet age, we could research and vet the entire life cycle of a product or service, creates an expectation that we should. And this, in turn, leads to increased demand for transparency and accountability in behavior, sourcing and production. United and empowered by the Internet and by social media, today’s consumers wield unprecedented power, and woe betides any company that crosses the invisible ethical line. And nonprofits, traditionally assumed to be on the side of angels, don’t get a free pass in this era of soul-searching.

On April 24, 2013, a garment factory housed in the eight-story Rana Plaza collapsed in Bangladesh, killing 1,129 people and injuring over a thousand more. Echoing the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911 and its aftermath, this event triggered nationwide protests among workers and sparked global soul-searching over the role that consumers and the fashion industry play in creating exploitative, dangerous, low-wage jobs in the third world. The fashion industry is responding in a variety of ways, from startups emphasizing ethical sourcing and recycled materials and durable goods, to Vivienne Westwood, the progenitor of punk fashion and now a major force in fashion design, declaring “we might be able to save the world through fashion.”

Social justice concerns are becoming a mainstream part of retail branding, as 32 percent of Millennials have stopped buying from companies they feel fall short when it comes to ethics and social practice. Food has become an impossibly fraught ethical minefield. Eat beef and fuel global warming; eat quinoa and contribute to the collapse of traditional farming in Bolivia. Buy tomatoes in the winter and support slavery in Florida. Scientists are even creating yeast that synthesizes milk so
we don’t have to exploit cows. Whole Foods, long dogged by its image as a purveyor of luxury foods to the elite (“Whole Paycheck”) is rebranding itself around values, positioning its choice of what to sell, and at what prices, as being about responsibility. “To us,” WF declares, “value is inseparable from values.”

These scruples apply not just to purchasing decisions, but to broader expectations of corporation citizenship. A recent survey of Millennials by Deloitte showed that a majority feel that business can do more to tackle resource scarcity, climate change and income inequality. Pay equity is ballooning into a huge issue, whether it focuses on providing a living wage or reining in CEO salaries. And ethics get personal when the public feels that a company has violated ethical norms regarding their personal data—see, for example, the firestorm

Left: The Swiss manufacturer Freitag has designed a line of clothing that is 100 percent compostable, and is woven from low water-usage crops. Photo: Oliver Nanzig

Above: “Shop Infographic” Image credit: Elizabeth Stilwell, thenotepasser.com
when it was revealed that Facebook allowed researchers to tinker with users’ newsfeeds to see if they could manipulate their moods. Incidents like that pave the way for startups like Sgroules and Ello that promise to provide “ethical social networking”—ad free and without the pervasive data collection and surveillance that characterize the big players in this field.

On August 13, 2014, the value of Sea World stock plunged 33 percent in one day after the company announced a 5 percent decrease in attendance and an 8 percent drop in revenue even as attendance at other attractions increased by 5 percent. PETA and other activists had been picketing Sea World for years, but the ethics of keeping whales in captivity was catapulted to national attention by the documentary film Black Fish. The accompanying storm of social media (hashtag #Blackfish) paved the way for a bill in California that would have banned killer whales in captivity. The bill didn’t pass, but Sea World’s reputation took a heavy economic hit. This demonstrates how ethical concerns that may have previously been confined to fringe groups can spread like wildfire via mainstream and social media either spontaneously or through orchestrated campaigns.

What This Means for Society
Our heightened attention to ethics is driven in part by emerging technologies. We didn’t worry about manipulating the genome of our food until we started doing so in the lab, rather than the old fashioned way. The current debates over net neutrality are as much about the ethics of equitable access to a resource that has become as basic as water or electricity, as it is about economics. We didn’t debate whether robots guided by artificial intelligence should be allowed to wage war on our behalf until we created functional prototypes that can do just that. As we gain the capacity to screen the genome of embryos, disability rights activists are arguing it is unethical to choose not to have a child with Down’s Syndrome, or dwarfism, or a host of other congenital “abnormalities,” tagging the practice as “the new eugenics.”

Corporations big and small are rethinking how to manage their reputations, realizing they can’t control their public image solely through advertising campaigns. When a single tweet, like #DeleteUber, can amplify to reach millions, individuals have the power to call
companies on errant behavior. Social media specialists are on the front line of reputation management—navigating when to delete, respond to or simply endure critical comments. Many industries are proactively adopting Corporate Social Responsibility policies to self-regulate compliance with ethical norms (and fend off legislative oversight).

What This Means for Museums

Nonprofits aren’t exempt from the ethical lens being brought to bear on the world, and museums can’t take for granted that people think they are the good guys. Concerns about animal rights, for example, are triggered by various aspects of museums’ work. This past year an installation by artist Cai Guo-Qiang at the Aspen Art Museum triggered protests when he glued iPads displaying video of local ghost towns to the backs of three African tortoises. A museum spokesperson’s response (“It is not the Museum’s practice to censor artists”) didn’t quell concerns of people who felt the work of the artist was itself ethically questionable. Similar protests led to the cancellation of an art project funded in collaboration with the University of Kansas’s Spencer Museum of Art, which would have ended with the slaughter of chickens to provoke debate about the ethics of food and farming. (#Ironic.)

Ethical fastidiousness about respecting animal life can spiral to extremes (as in an essay in the New York Times advocating the extinction of all carnivorous species, and the firestorm of Internet hate unleashed on a researcher at the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology who blogged about collecting a single Goliath birdeating spider). However, it manifests itself in more mainstream forums as well—see, for example, the recent spectacle of scientists scolding other scientists for killing animals as voucher specimens. Both the Boston Aquarium and the Georgia Aquarium have come under fire for their proposals to keep whales in captivity—in the eyes of the general public, the line dividing commercial aquariums/theme parks like Sea World from their nonprofit kin is already thin (if not invisible). It is imperative for both living and nonliving collections to set forth clear and compelling ethical rationales for the taking, and holding, of life.

Labor rights groups have staged repeated protests about the work conditions of migrant laborers building the Guggenheim’s branch in Abu Dhabi, orchestrating campaigns designed to influence the museum’s trustees and donors. This dramatizes museums’ need to examine not only their own practices, but those of their subcontractors and partners both at home and abroad.

While the laws regarding unpaid internships are quite clear for for-profit companies, nonprofits exist in a grey area “awaiting clarification” from the Wage and Hour division of the U.S. Department of Labor. However, unpaid internships are increasingly being cast as a moral issue for nonprofits. In the past two years, both the British Museum and the Serpentine Gallery have been subject to protests regarding their use (or proposed use) of unpaid labor. In a field that relies heavily on volunteers (a typical ratio being 6:1 unpaid:paid staff) the issue of distinguishing among various types of unpaid staff therefore becomes very fraught.
At the other end of the pay scale, there is also increasing concern in both the for-profit and nonprofit realms about the ethics of the ratio between a leader’s salary and that of the lowest-paid worker. In the past few years, janitorial and food service employees of the Smithsonian have repeatedly gone on strike, demanding a wage that would enable them to live in or around the nation’s capital. Last fall, as a union made the same demand of the U.K.’s National Trust, a spokesperson declaimed, “These are the guardians of our national heritage, yet they are left to struggle on with wages from a bygone era.”

There is growing skepticism about the efficacy of the firewalls museums create between major donors or corporate sponsors and the museum’s research and interpretation. Last year, in conjunction with the People’s Climate March in New York City, the artists’ collaborative Not An Alternative debuted a pop-up, “the Natural History Museum,” at the Queens Museum. That project questions what they are for. Graslie helps the entire sector when she explains in a compelling, personally engaging way why a museum might want to skin a wolf or stick a pin in an insect.

Last year the Museum of Modern Art organized a panel on synthetic biology and design, “Synthetic Aesthetics: New Frontiers in Contemporary Design,” which explored the “notion that imagined realities might give birth to material realities imposes serious ethical questions on artists who use synthetic biology in their work.” Museums can play a role in helping the public work through issues related to choices raised by emerging technologies. Art is an engaging and nonthreatening platform for asking questions like: Just because we can do something like manipulating our own DNA or bioengineering our environment, does that mean we should?

Museum Examples

The Royal Museums Greenwich have committed to purchasing for their retail outlets only goods that have been produced under fair labor conditions and have been selected for minimal impact on climate change. Their publicly available commitment to values governing both labor and environmental standards is clear about the fact that this promise not only protects their brand and reputation, but adds to the perceived value of their offerings and builds “an Audience which is interested in ethical, recycled, UK-made and hand-crafted product.”

In 2013, the Field Museum of Natural History hired Emily Graslie, a creator of the popular YouTube video series The Brain Scoop. In a time when, as noted above, natural history museums are subject to heightened scrutiny about killing animals, it is important to educate people about what research collections are and
whether museums like the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) and the National Museum of Natural History have softened their message on climate change as a consequence of receiving significant gifts from billionaire David Koch (who also sits on the board of AMNH). In the U.K., Liberate Tate has staged a series of interventions protesting the ties between cultural institutions and the oil industry.

**Museums Might Want to...**

Review and revise their ethics statements to address emerging issues. Traditional areas of concern like conflict-of-interest and provenance research may need to be expanded to include sections on internships, privacy of digital data and the ethical provenance of art displayed in the museum. Policies on individual and corporate support may need to be updated and strengthened, and museums working in the global arena may want to take a proactive stance on ethical concerns related to that work.

Commit to ethical sourcing of inventory offered in the museum shop and food sold in the museum food services. (This has the added benefit of tying the retail aspects of the museum to the organization’s mission, and potentially folds retail into the overall interpretive framework.)

Review policies about endowment investing and corporate sponsorships. There is a national trend of universities and other nonprofits engaging in fossil fuel divestment. Union Seminary characterized the act of pulling their investment from fossil fuels as “a bid to atone for the ‘sin’ of contributing to climate change.” Now might be a good time to discuss what investments are consonant or inconsistent with the museum’s mission and values.

Debate the pros and cons of having people on the board who publicly and professionally advance causes antithetical to the museum’s mission, whether that be science, sustainability or children’s health. As Chris Norris has pointed out on the Prerogative of Harlots blog, on one hand museums need to protect the trust the public places in our independence, on the other hand it may be “better to have [people with divergent views] at the table than to exclude them.”

Review the museum’s policies regarding compensation, and hold open and frank discussions about issues including unpaid internships, highest-to-lowest paid worker ratio and paying a living wage.

**Further Reading**

The Ethical Trading Initiative promulgates the ETI Base Code, an internationally recognized code of labor practice founded on the conventions of the International Labour Organisation (ILO). “Adhering to this code helps improve working conditions in global supply chains.” http://www.ethicaltrade.org/eti-base-code

**A Discussion Guide for Executives about Communications and Ethics.** (PDF, 15 pp.) This guide from the Ethics Resource Center provides an introduction to the value of publicizing an organization’s commitment to ethics, strategies for making the public case for integrity and key messages for consumers. While designed for for-profit companies, it may be useful to nonprofit organizations as well. http://www.ethics.org/resource/building-corporate-reputation-integrity
Sloooow: better a tortoise than a hare

“Anything worth doing is worth doing slowly.”
—Mae West

In the past few decades, there’s been a growing awareness that while “fast” may look efficient, in the end it may not be effective. The Slow Movement, composed of distributed, disaggregated individuals and groups advocating similar principles across a range of sectors, represents a cultural shift towards a slower pace of life. It came to world attention in the 1980s when Carlo Petrini founded the Slow Food movement in Italy (now it is international), in large part to fight globalization of food and agriculture and the destruction of local economies and traditions. Now (ironically) the movement is gathering speed, and “slow” is being applied as a business strategy and life philosophy to everything from food to travel to health care, as we rediscover that doing something quickly doesn’t always mean doing it right.

In 2013, the Peabody Essex Museum was one of over 200 museums participating in Slow Art Day. Shown here: Geisha: Beyond the Painted Smile, Courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts.
Technology is being widely blamed for shortening our attention span. The median length of a book is 64,000 words; the optimal length for a blog post is 1,600 words (which takes 7 minutes to read); tweets are capped at 140 characters, but do even better if they slim down to a mere 100. The site Long Reads was founded to push back against the ultra-short form of typical Web content. (And if you don’t have that kind of time, you can compromise with the blog platform Medium.) Slow Reading clubs bring people together to provide mutual support of simply curling up in a cozy chair for an hour of sustained attention. We even have Slow TV:

in one example, 1.3 million people watched 4 hours of people talking about knitting, then 8-1/2 hours of actual knitting, during Norway Public Television’s “National Knitting Evening.”

Slowing down takes conscious effort because our internal clocks have been reset by over a century of technological advances aimed at doing things faster. In 1873 Jules Verne envisioned Phileas Fogg speeding around the world in 80 days by rail and steamship. Now engineers are working on hypersonic aircraft that could make the trip in 6 hours. The acceleration of travel is eclipsed by the speed
of communications, which, on earth, is near instantaneous. (Even sending messages to the Philae lander, as it hurtled towards Comet 67P, 673 million kilometers from the sun, took only 28 minutes.) But there is growing awareness that speed comes at a cost. A 2012 study by Pew Research showed that 87 percent of teachers feel technology is creating an “easily distracted generation with short attention spans.” At the same time we are beginning to document that “slow” has health benefits—for example, increasing well-being and reducing stress in children.

This realization is leading to changes in a whole slew of sectors as people strive to apply a slow approach to improve quality of life and capitalize on new business opportunities. Slow Medicine seeks to redress what’s been lost in a health care system that gives a doctor 15 minutes to see a patient and no financial incentive to talk things out. Slow Travel encourages people to connect with their surroundings and local culture, sometimes through literally traveling slowly (e.g., via a canal barge), or engaging in inherently slow activities like cooking or truffle hunting. At the extreme of slow travel is Luis Simoes, who is taking five years to travel the world, documenting the trip by sketching. Two years into the journey, he has visited 29 countries and filled around twenty 60-page sketchbooks. Says Simoes, “With this slow travel I feel I can connect with people, cities much more intimately.”

A lot of “slow” is also about creating healthy, sustainable systems. In 2013, the Vermont Sail Freight Project kicked off, aiming to reopen a historic trade route between Vermont and New York State to deliver local food without using oil, reducing the carbon footprint of transportation. Slow Flowers was founded to reduce “flower miles” by connecting buyers with local sources. The gloss is even off fast food, as sales of McDonalds fell 3.3 percent in the last quarter of 2014. Parents are being pressured to make time to make sure kids sit down to family meals, which have been shown to reduce truancy, obesity and drug use, and improve academic performance. The Cittaslow (slow cities) movement, which, like Slow Food, started in Italy and now has three accredited cities in the U.S., is dedicated to improving the quality of life in towns by slowing down the overall pace.

There is a long tradition of Slow Art, but it is being revised and refreshed in imaginative ways. In a world where many buyers choose instantaneous one-click delivery to their Kindle reader, Scottish artist Katie Paterson has unveiled the Future Library project: commissioning 100 stories, one per year, that will only be printed and read when a forest Paterson’s team planted in 2014 matures and is harvested, pulped and turned into paper a century from now. Or Slow Art may co-opt technology, as in Rob and Nick Carter’s Transforming Still Life Painting (2012), an animated interpretation of Ambrosius Bosschaert’s Vase with Flowers in a Window (1618), which consists of a looping, 3-hour animation that simulates the passage of time.

What This Means for Society
Sometimes we forget that technology doesn’t dictate the future—it simply presents us with choices. Society has to decide how and when to apply any technological innovation, and when
to consciously push back against undesirable side effects. We may need to develop Slow Design Principles to help us create places and products that foster deeper engagement with places, experiences and each other.

Many of the benefits of “fast” are easy to quantify, particularly the economic gains, while many of the costs are “externalities”—adverse effects that go more or less unseen, and are not factored into the price of cheap, fast goods and services. Fast food leaves society shouldering the costs of obesity and its attendant health effects. Fast (i.e., mainstream) fashion degrades the ecology by diverting limited water supplies to crops unsuited to their climates, fosters abusive labor practices, and contributes to the waste stream by producing goods and fads that don’t last. We need to create systems of pricing or at least of scoring goods that make these costs explicit. Then “slow” may be able to compete on overall cost as well.

Fostering a slower, more thoughtful pace of life may mean re-engineering our cities. Walkable cities consistently score higher on quality of life than cities designed solely around cars. Cities may deploy design principles like shared space to slow traffic and encourage people to linger at shops, restaurants and museums. The principles of New Urbanism emphasize quality of life over “efficiency,” and in that spirit, may encourage city planners to use public art as one way of tempering the pace of urban life.

Artist Katie Paterson has planted 1,000 trees for the Future Library project, which will unfold over the next 100 years.
Museum Examples
The Jane Addams Hull-House (JAHH) Slow Museums Project re-visions the museum as “a site of recreation, reflection and respite.” An Innovation Lab for Museums grant from the Met Life Foundation enabled Hull-House staff to consider a variety of approaches, culminating in the Porch Project, which involved radical teach-ins on Chicago’s grass gap, a yoga and art-making infused workshop on reimagining community safety and policing, a slow food cookout featuring subversive female cooks from Belize and Nicaragua, and storytelling and art installation about community sex education with the Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health. JAHH’s approach to slowness went beyond intentionality and sustainability to incorporate notions of resistance based on their internal Slowness Principles.

Slow can also mean ethical and sustainable. In 2013, the Paris Cultural Center welcomed four sheep-in-residence outside the Paris Archives to provide quiet, ecofriendly lawn care (a project they dubbed an “eco-mowing scheme.”) By replacing lawnmowers, the sheep not only reduced the lawn’s carbon hoofprint, they eliminated the noise pollution of commercial lawnmowers.

Many museums engage in projects promoting and highlighting slow culture. The Cooper-Hewitt hosted Natalie Chanin, one of the founders of the slow fashion movement, for a three-day residency followed by a two-day design workshop for teens. The first Slow Art Day, in 2009, had 16 museums beta-testing the experience. By 2012, this had soared to 101 venues and as this report goes to press, 28 venues are already signed up for 2015.

What This Means for Museums
As with the growing desire to periodically disconnect from the digital world (which we discussed in TrendsWatch 2013), the slow culture movement presents the opportunity for museums to position themselves as refuges from an often overwhelming world. But:

Our field needs to grapple with what it takes to create slow experiences. Sometimes museums wrongly assume that “slow” is simply part of their DNA. A notorious study of visitors in the Metropolitan Museum of Art published in 2001 reported that the average time spent viewing a work of art was 27.2 seconds. A more recent study at the Indianapolis Museum of Art found median viewing times of 4–31 seconds at different installations. It takes conscious and thoughtful work to create slow engagement, with or without technological mediation.

Different audiences will want to engage with the museum at different speeds. Online, museums can accommodate both browsers
and contemplators without causing traffic jams. One guy may spend 100 hours, over the course of three years, looking at the digital image of a Modrian, while someone else flips through the virtual gallery. But the rare visitor who tries to spend 30 minutes with the Mona Lisa comes off as looking “eccentric, verging on the insane” as the crowds rush by. As the world bifurcates into fast and slow lanes, museums will have to find temporal or spatial ways to accommodate different paces.

**Museums Might Want to…**

Establish a baseline. How much time do visitors spend in the galleries, and what is the average and the range? What spaces, or individual collections objects, support the longest dwell-times? How are visitors’ reported satisfaction, mood and learning outcomes influenced (or not) by the length of engagement with an object or exhibit?

Develop and test strategies to foster slow experiences. Sometimes these methods may be low- or no-tech, human-mediated interactions. Museums might, for example, steal a page from the Human Library, which gives visitors the opportunity to “borrow” a person for a half hour or so of dialogue and interaction. It’s one thing to blow past a painting (or abandon a book), but it’s harder to walk away from a human being looking you in the eye.

Participate in **Slow Art Day**—one day each spring (it will be on April 11 in 2015) when people are encouraged to visit local museums and galleries to look at art slowly, select five works to ponder for 10 minutes each and then discuss over lunch.

**Further Reading**

- **Slow Food Revolution**, Carlo Petrini, Rizzoli, 2006. A history of the Slow Food revolution by the man who built the movement into a global force.
- **The World Institute of Slowness**. A think tank founded in 1999, the institute provides consulting services as well as promoting slow products and brands. Their blog highlights developments in “slow” in a variety of sectors, including research.
- **The International Institute of Not Doing Much**, dedicated to “sophisticated life in the slow lane.” Distributors of the Slow Manifesto and tireless promoters of Slowosophy. Extremely strange, hopefully tongue in cheek, but fun.
The past year has been marked by protests across the globe as communities grapple with issues of race, identity, culture, history and symbolism. People are climbing out of the boxes long used to define and control society—male/female; straight/gay; white/black/yellow—demanding control over their identities and how these identities are represented. These issues have dogged the US since the nation’s founding, but now activists are using the power of social media to ensure they are heard. Objects—powerful symbols of individuals, groups, history and society as a whole—have become explosive points of contention. And museums, as public stewards of our collective history, find themselves enmeshed in the struggle over representation, identity and material culture.

Western society is beginning to acknowledge the complexities of human identity—including race, sexual orientation and gender. Government notoriously lags behind social change, with the US Census perpetually playing catch-up, changing how it collects data to support the way people categorize (or resist categorizing) themselves. The Census Bureau first allowed people to identify as more than one race in the year 2000. In the following decade, the number of people choosing this option doubled, reaching

“Take down the flag. Take it down now. Put it in a museum. Inscribe beneath it the years 1861–2015.”
—Ta-Nehisi Coates

Activist nikhil trivedi on stage during his Ignite presentation at MCN2015. Photo: Morgan Holzer
Towards an Anti-Oppression Museum Manifesto
1.8 million by 2010. New parents are more likely to identify their babies as belonging to more than one race, and grown children are more likely to change the identity assigned by their parents and self-identify as multiracial. Paradoxically, by splitting the categories of race and culture, changes to the Census may slow the apparent rate at which the US approaches “majority minority” status, as many Hispanics choose to self-identify as white.

We are also beginning to accept, once we stop forcing people into binary categories, that sexual orientation and gender are both continuums. Sixteen percent of Americans identify themselves as neither fully hetero nor homosexual, but somewhere in between. And some people are able to recognize that their gender doesn’t sync with their genes or morphology as early as age three. Our social and legal systems, as well as our built environment, are slowly adapting to reflect these complexities. (In 2014 Facebook presented users with 58 gender options, as well as three pronouns.) While many universities struggle with how to accommodate students who transition in college (particularly at single-sex universities), the University of Vermont has officially recognized a third gender: neutral. Society pushes off many serious life decisions until a child “comes of age,” but that’s not an option for parents and children planning for gender reassignment surgery. When is it too early or too late? Norway is considering a law that would allow children as young as 7 to legally change their gender, but forbid sex-reassignment surgery until they are 18.

But accepting fluid boundaries can heighten concerns over representation and control. Are there limits to the right to claim one’s own identity? Rachel Dolezal was pilloried in social media and the press for self-identifying as black when her parents and peers experienced her originally as white. Dolezal has repeatedly expressed that she acted on a deeply felt sense of internal identity. But critics accuse her—and other whites presenting themselves as black—of dabbling in an identity they can abandon if it becomes inconvenient. Identity is a matter of personal history as well. Some feminists were furious with the public accolades showered on Caitlyn Jenner. As Elinor Burkett wrote, “People who haven’t lived their whole lives as women…shouldn’t get to...
Are there limits to the right to claim one’s own identity? Who has standing to speak on behalf of a community?

define us.... [B]eing a woman means having accrued certain experiences, endured certain indignities and relished certain courtesies in a culture that reacted to you as one.” Burkett believes that Jenner’s right to identify as female doesn’t transcend an experience mostly lived as male.

The landscape is no less fraught when it comes to groups rather than individuals. Who has standing to speak on behalf of a community? While supporters of the “Change the Mascot” campaign pressure the NFL team based in Washington, DC, to stop using a racial slur (“Redskins”) as its name, some Native Americans rallied in support of the team’s moniker. Further complicating matters, culture isn’t just a matter of parent-age; it is also a matter of heritage. Does an individual have to be raised in a culture in order to represent it? The Navajo Nation recently wrestled with whether to allow a tribal member not fluent in Navajo to hold public office, and eventually decided to amend the election requirements.

The rise of social media has changed the dynamics of these conversations, both accelerating change and amplifying conflict. Twitter is the ultimate megaphone, empowering protesters to take their concerns directly to a massive public, unfiltered by the mainstream press. This amplification can create its own issues regarding representation—a tweet storm may not distinguish between consensus within a community and outlying positions. Social media, especially anonymous platforms, often encourages people to be their worst, unfiltered selves. A student sit-in at Colgate University, for example, was met by a torrent of abusive postings on Yik Yak, exposing a strain of racism that might never have surfaced in civil dialogue (although the protest organizer noted this may be good thing, since at least now the college can’t pretend those attitudes don’t exist on campus).

The increasingly fractal nature of identity can make it hard to moderate competing voices that each claim to speak on behalf of a community. Last summer the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston was the target of a protest instigated by a simple (some would say simplistic) selfie opportunity: encouraging visitors to don a replica kimono and pose in front of Monet’s *La Japonaise*. The protests, in turn, sparked counter-protests, including people of Japanese heritage wearing their own kimonos, and prompted the deputy consul general of Japan in Boston to speak up on behalf of the museum. One Japanese American blogger noted that “the groups most offended by Kimono Wednesdays appear to be non-Japanese Asian Americans and white allies,” and criticized the media as treating “all Asian Americans as a homogenous group.”

Issues of identity and representation not only play out on the individual and corporate level, but also in the public sphere as we grapple with tangible reminders of a painful past. In the US, calls to #TakeDownTheFlag led to the removal of the Confederate battle flag, first from the grounds of the South Carolina Courthouse, and then in a cascade from Capitol Hill in Montgomery, Alabama, to the University of Mississippi and even St. Paul’s Episcopal Church (known as the “Cathedral of the
Confederacy”) in Richmond, Virginia. A statue of Confederate president Jefferson Davis was removed from the campus of University of Texas, Austin, and some students at the University of Missouri are trying to oust Thomas Jefferson. At Yale, student protesters are pressuring the university to rename Calhoun residential college, as John C. Calhoun was a strong advocate of slavery. South Africa is confronting similar issues in response to calls that statues of Cecil #RhodesMustFall, and former Soviet bloc countries wrestle with the choice of saving or destroying statues of Lenin (or, more subversively, reshaping them into Darth Vader, as did one artist in Ukraine).

Now the question becomes not whether to take down a flag or a statue, but where to draw boundaries. Do public monuments perpetuate oppression, or remind us of the history we need to redress? The person or people who defaced the monument to Calhoun in Charleston were drawing a line—geographically and intellectually—from his racist views, across Marion Square, to the recent murders of nine worshipers at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. But as many commentators are pointing out, if we erase tangible reminders of our past, how will we understand how we got where we are?

What This Means for Society

If our communities proactively address social justice issues, we may negotiate cultural/social transformation in productive and equitable ways. Conversely if society resists change until an explosive tipping point is reached, the resulting violence often ends up damaging the very neighborhoods that seek legitimate redress. For example, research suggests that cities damaged by riots following Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination witnessed a nearly 10 percent decrease in the income of black families and higher unemployment among young men.
Our colleges and university communities—often the ignition points for significant social reform—tread a difficult line when they seek to balance respect and inclusion with intellectual inquiry. In the past year, while the University of Missouri and Yale (among others) have struggled to respond to calls for reform, both college authorities and protesters have stumbled. The moral authority of administrators has been undermined by missteps and tone-deaf statements, while the cause of activists has been tarnished by accusations of bullying and suppression of freedom of speech.

As a society, we need to create an environment (physical and regulatory) that treats people with respect, which includes not presuming they fit into neat categories. As with the civil rights and disability rights movements, restrooms are once again on the front line of social change. While many cities and schools negotiate the reinvention of the restroom (how many, who gets to use them, signage), opponents of Houston’s Equal Rights Ordinance sank the initiative in fall 2015 by inflaming fears of sexual predators lurking in the public loo. (This anxiety is an echo of the past: Phyllis Schlafly invoked the same bogeyman to argue against passage of the Equal Rights Amendment.) By contrast, cities at the forefront of equal access (Seattle, Philadelphia, Berkeley, Santa Fe, Austin, Dallas) have passed ordinances requiring all gender restrooms.

**What This Means for Museums**

Whether they seek an active role or not, museums are being called on to act as cultural hazmat teams. In story after story about taking down Confederate battle flags, or removing statues and commemorative plaques, the writer or speaker concludes with a call to “put it in a museum.” What does this signify? Do people want museums to serve as explosion-proof vaults for volatile social issues? Or do they want museums to bury offensive objects in collections storage, out of sight and out of mind? Or (optimistically), do people trust museums to foster productive debate, dialogue and reconciliation?

With regard to a museum’s own collections, what does “cultural appropriation” mean (beyond the legal issues of cultural patrimony)? When is it wise, necessary or desirable to tell the backstory of colonialism and oppression that lies behind so many collections (whether fine art, decorative art, historic artifacts or natural history specimens), and when is it okay to have a less-trafficked point of access?
Are there subjects that can only be appropriately addressed by people or groups that represent, genetically and historically, the topic in question? In December 2015, John Cummings opened the Whitney Plantation in Louisiana as what he characterizes as America’s first museum dedicated to telling the story of slavery. Cummings is white, and some (even before the opening of the museum) slammed the project as “an example of continued profiteering off the suffering of black people,” while others hailed him as a modern-day John Brown—a white man battling racism and oppression.

Museum Examples

In 2014 the Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS) created a Department of Inclusion and Community Engagement (DICE) to “guide internal and external strategies across all historic sites and museums to embed inclusive practices in our work to ensure the diversity of the state is reflected in all MNHS activities, including collections, programs, staffing, volunteers, historic preservation and governance.” As Chris Taylor explained in a series of posts on the Incluseum blog (see Additional Resources, page 37), one of the goals of the department is to “recognize the expertise within our various diverse communities and use our resources to amplify voices of diverse communities through collaboration and co-creation.” While the Society had a long history of reaching out to diverse constituencies, they created DICE to integrate and elevate these efforts.

In the wake of the murders of nine African American worshippers at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, on June 17, 2015, Fort Sumter National Monument removed the Confederate flags flying over the site. The National Park Service stated that some Confederate flags and banners (but not the most controversial battle flag) would be returned later in the year to a less visible location. “As a focal point of Charleston Harbor, it is important that the only flag seen flying atop Fort Sumter National Monument is the current United States flag,” said Superintendent Tim Stone. “The historical flag display will be in the fort so visitors can learn about the fort’s history and the history of the flags that flew here.” Predictably, this middle course angered people who felt the flags should not be displayed at all, and also those who felt they never should have been removed.

“Investigating Identity,” one of MoMA’s learning themes, uses the museum’s collections to explore how people perceive and express themselves. As the program description notes, “factors and conditions that an individual is born with—such as ethnic heritage, sex, or one’s body—often play a role in defining one’s identity.” Through this constructivist approach to learning, students are encouraged to interpret art through the lens of their own experience.

As it prepared to move to Lower Manhattan, the Whitney Museum of American Art hosted a discussion about what it means for a museum to be a “safe and welcoming space,” including the provision of gender neutral restrooms. Signage in the new building now reads “All Gender Restroom.” The American Folk Art Museum and the Utah Museum of Fine Arts provide all gender (or gender neutral) restrooms for visitors as well.
In recent decades, museums have tried to compensate for the overall lack of racial and cultural diversity among their own staff through the use of advisors and advisory boards. Given the contested nature of identity, it may be increasingly challenging to choose groups and individuals to “represent” the interests of whole cultures, races, etc. Can any individual or group speak for the whole? What validates the approval such groups offer the museum, and who has standing to challenge their input?

Museums Might Want to...

- Take a fresh look at their own environment and the overt and subtle signals they might send about the categories in which they place visitors, potentially signaling who is welcome and not welcome. Adopting the philosophy that “everyone deserves to pee in peace” may be as simple as altering signage, or it may require modifying, adapting or renovating available facilities...and not just the restrooms.

- Create productive ways to navigate controversy within the museum’s own sphere—anticipating and welcoming hard conversations—before the need arises. Recognize that no group is homogeneous, and no one person or set of people inoculates the museum against criticism. There will probably be a diversity of opinion within any given group, and all it takes is a Twitter hashtag to launch a small protest into the national news.

- Realize that people will experience the museum in the context of their own identity and concerns. Guided by its mission, a museum may focus on the aesthetic or scientific meaning of an object—but others may view these collections through the lens of culture and history. How can museums validate and acknowledge these perspectives?

- Decide whether and how to play a role in decommissioning or relocating culturally explosive icons in their states/cities/communities. This may include confronting offensive symbols in a museum’s own historic properties and sites, and memorials recognizing a museum’s founder or donors. In some communities, it may mean wading into issues that have the potential to alienate segments of the museum’s visitors and supporters.

- Consider the opportunity (many consider it an obligation) to play a role in community dialogue: defusing, healing, rebuilding. This might take the form of the museum’s usual core activities: collecting and exhibiting artifacts and oral histories that document conflict and calls for social change. It may extend to being intermediaries, bringing together people of good will to find common ground on contentious issues.

Additional Resources

Museum Hue (www.facebook.com/Museumhue, @museumhue) is a community of practice that advocates for educators, culture workers and museum professionals. It is dedicated to “tackling issues at the intersection of identity, culture, art and community” and “champions equity, agency, diversity and inclusion within cultural institutions.”

The Incluseum (http://incluseum.com) based in Seattle is dedicated to the vision that “inclusion become an integral priority for all museums and flourish through supportive community relationships.” Their resources include an essay by nikhil trivedi on defining oppression in museums. Another resource from trivedi is an Ignite talk for Museum Computer Network 2015—“Towards an Anti-Oppression Museum”—in which he offers some suggestions for beginning hard conversations.

In a series of posts on the blog Japanese-American in Boston, Keiko K. parses the complexities of who has standing to protest in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Kimono Wednesdays controversy.