

Is Protest Really the Problem in Museums? (Imagine) Museums as Places of Dialogue, Collaboration, and Disruption

Pinar Durgun

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Is Protest Really the Problem in Museums? (Imagine) Museums as Places of Dialogue, Collaboration, and Disruption

Pinar Durgun

Vorderasiatisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, P.Durgun@smb.spk-berlin.de

Whether the cake on Mona Lisa's "face" at the Louvre [1] or a Trojan Horse with oil company BP's logo in front of the British Museum [2], recent art news consists of climate change, restitution, indigenous rights, transparency, representation, and fair employment protests in museums. But protest in museums is not new: In 1914 the Rokeby Venus painting by Velazquez was sliced as a protest against the arrest of a suffrage leader. In 1974, Picasso's Guernica was spray painted in an act of protest against the perpetrators of Vietnam War massacres. More recently, "Just Stop Oil" protests have raised awareness of climate change issues, which stirred up new controversies around protests in museums.

Protest is a form of disruption, it interrupts the "normal." When a protest takes place in a museum, it breaks the artificially created and strictly maintained order in the museum space. It challenges the status quo that museums hold onto so tightly. Protest is also a way of starting a dialogue and coming together around ideas and actions. In a recent interview, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez said: "Sometimes people ask, 'Oh, what's the point of protest?' The act of protest creates community." (Lowery 2022). If the primary function of a museum is to create space for questioning, speaking out and listening (dialogue), and working together and learning from each other (collaboration and creating community) – and as a museum professional, I argue it should be – then museums need to approach protest differently.

Museums are not neutral (a statement coined by La Tanya Autry and Mike Murawski, also see Raicovich 2021). However, many museum leaders still make decisions that support the museum's mission to be places to appreciate art, science, history, and culture, and only that, and avoid "getting involved" or "being political," as if the objects on display can be separated from their histories, the collectors'/artists' backgrounds, hiring practices, the work-place conditions of the staff who care for them, and the funding bodies that support their creation and exhibition. As places of critical thinking, learning, and questioning, museums question their own practices not nearly enough, at least not in their public platforms and exhibits. It is almost as if museums are stuck in the denial phase of Kübler-Ross' five stages of grief, grieving that we are finally reckoning with their/our problematic pasts. Acceptance seems still a couple of stages away.

But let us accept this: Museums *are* political; they have always been. What is changing is that more of us expect museums to acknowledge this and be active players in fighting against the injustices that enabled the emergence of museums in the first place, such as colonialism, imperialism, racism, xenophobia, inequality, ableism, and elitism, which continue to affect museum practices today. As a reflection of the society they are situated in, museums cannot separate themselves from what is happening around them. If museums want to justify their existence to their various publics (and with support and funds becoming scarcer every day, they have to), they need to take protest as a genuine form of feedback. The public is telling museum leaders what they want from their museums, whether this is in the form of petitions, social media comments, or protests. And museum leaders need to listen, acknowledge, consider, and reevaluate. If museums do not provide space for discussions that the public¹ wants to hold, ideas they want to explore, or practices they want to put in place, they will be met with protest. Worse, they will become irrelevant.

1 The "publics" of museums are, of course, not monolithic in their expectations, priorities, political agendas, backgrounds, or ways of engaging with museums. Museums should thrive to serve everyone, all publics, but this is the ideal mission, whereas in reality, every museum has to prioritize some of its communities over others, whether this is a result of the museum's location, mission, type of the collections, or resources.

Admittedly, museums are easy targets for protest and critique. The problematic, unethical, and sometimes violent past of museums is a burden on those of us who work in museums and visit them. It is a burden on us as a society. This shared burden – and it has to be shared – requires working together. Museums and their visitors, participants, and communities (these may or may not be the same publics) need to inform each other and keep each other accountable. They need to be collaborators. This idea of mutual learning goes against the traditional historical role of museums as places that “teach”, because mutual learning requires sharing authority, unlearning, and transparency (Freire 1970). Ironically, it is in fact this position of authority that makes museums ideal platforms for protesting and challenging authority.

Museums have been defined as “contact zones” (Clifford 1997), bringing together and connecting different people, cultures, and ideas. Museums are also “conflict zones” (Løgstrup 2021), because traditional museum practices often bring the museum institution face to face with their current publics. Many have condemned the recent protests involving attacking or gluing oneself to (the frames of) famous artworks, calling it “vandalism” [3]. After the recent “Just Stop Oil” protest, where a tin of tomato soup was thrown at van Gogh’s Sunflowers in London’s National Gallery [4] or mashed potatoes at the Monet in the Museum Barberini in Potsdam [5], many more have expressed their skepticism (especially in social media) around the act of putting artworks in vulnerable situations to raise awareness of climate change. Yet, many have also talked about climate change as a result.

Some of this criticism comes from the museum world. As museum professionals, it is our responsibility to care for the objects and artworks we steward, so when objects are harmed, threatening their preservation (although what is and should be “preserved” by whom and where is another topic of discussion), some may feel that we are not doing our jobs right. But objects are only one aspect of museum work. “*Quieren el arte, no a la gente* (they want the art, not the people)” was a gentrification protest banner in the Brooklyn Museum in 2018 by the “Decolonize This Place” movement [6]. “Just Stop Oil” protesters cry out a similar sentiment: “What is worth more, art or life? ... Are you more concerned about the protection of a painting or the protection of our planet?” [7]. If museums “protect” artworks but fail to actively serve the people and protect the interests of their communities, they are not doing their jobs right either.

Climate change protesters can and perhaps will continue their protests in museums, as they have an important message and the attention of the public. They don’t need museums to support them, really. On the other hand, museum leaders are anxiously making plans to prevent possible attacks. Here is a thought for museums: Would people be protesting to raise awareness of climate change in a museum that treats climate change as a serious matter and hosts an exhibit on climate change? Imagine if one of these big art museums that are targets for protests had an exhibit on climate change curated by climate change activists, created with sustainable and reused materials, supported by ethical donors. If the museum acknowledged and aimed to lower its carbon footprint? If public forums were held at the museum, where people could express themselves, make their voices heard? If the museum then integrated these ideas and criticisms into the exhibits? One may argue that protest will always happen, no matter how the museum changes. And it should. Protest is an essential part of progress and should be seen as a stimulator for dialogue and change.

But protest can also happen in collaboration with museums if museums allowed for sharing authority. Ideally, the very confrontation of conflicting positions could be an essential part of museum practice and exhibits. Museums are (or at least they should be) safe spaces to explore different ideas and perspectives. Why can’t these ideas include protested subjects and protester voices? What could change in museums if their response to protest was to increase the visibility of the issue rather than increasing security?

When I was writing this piece, a piece of protest art appeared in the Guggenheim New York in support of Iranian women and their freedom [8]. Red banners with images of Mahsa Zhina Amini were hung down the iconic balcony, a commonly chosen platform for protest. Without affecting the artworks on display, this protest intervened in the space, disrupted its normalcy, and used that space to communicate the message. Museums can and should enable these interventions and disruptions. Protest art in itself is an artform and therefore it also belongs in a museum [see 9].

In a recent panel at Futurium’s “Shaping Futures in Museum Communities” [10], curator Maria Isabel Garcia at the Mind Museum in Manila, discussed the importance of “ragency;” the anger and agency we carry within

ourselves and bring with us to the museum. There are many issues to be angry about in our world and in museums. Garcia argued that as curators we need to allow this rage in the museum space as a means of dialogue. Our exhibits should talk about it, because it gives visitors and museum professionals a way to collaborate by talking to each other about issues that concern our lives and our shared futures.

Every museum professional and visitor can do something to intervene. Speaking the non-dominant language in the museum space is disruption. Laughing and crying is an intervention. Bringing yourself, your friends, children to the museum is participation. Having discussions, questioning the exhibit is an interaction. Writing a critical reflection, a complaint, or a social media comment is an intervention. So is becoming a member or a donor, joining a museum tour or event, asking for accountability, supporting the good work and condemning the bad. But change and action also needs to come from within the institutions and for this to be set in motion, the “normal” or the “traditional” has to be challenged. When left alone to their own pace, change in (especially encyclopedic) museums will come very slowly, if at all.

Modern museums emerged about two hundred years ago. The dismantling of the deeply rooted power structures and unethical practices in museums, therefore, may take another two centuries. But we can’t throw our hands up and say nothing is fixable (even though some days I do feel this desperation). We need to start somewhere, however imperfect the starting point is. And there are glimmers of hope for better things in museums. ICOM’s new definition of a museum underlines the importance of ethics, communities, accessibility, inclusivity, diversity, and sustainability [11]. Slowly, more museums are embracing “interventions” into their exhibits, bringing in voices that have been excluded from museum spaces. They have been highlighting indigenous voices, inviting artists from heritage communities to reinterpret objects, asking museum security staff to reflect on artworks, increasing their accessibility features, and offering tours in many languages, including those used in areas where the objects come from. They have started to hire more diverse staff than ever before, mostly thanks to the protests and work by indigenous communities, museum professionals, and activists advocating for equity. This means that the difficult work of changing museums from within will be put increasingly on the shoulders of museum professionals who come from historically underrepresented backgrounds into these positions, who will take the work of changing museums upon themselves. But they shouldn’t bear all of the responsibility; again, the burden needs to be shared. To continue to push museums towards becoming more welcoming, inclusive, ethical, and community-centered, we are all responsible for disrupting, intervening, listening, speaking up, and taking action. Part of this is supporting the good work and collaborating to make the good work better.

The “we” here includes archaeologists. Museums are one of the most public platforms for communicating archaeological research and information. However, archaeologists working in universities have rarely made use of this platform. Academic colleagues often use the museum to extract information from the museum’s collection for their own research, however, they have not fully explored its potential as a place to reach, connect with, or give back to their non-academic communities. Collaborations between university archaeologists and museum archaeologists for public outreach projects are increasing, but more can be done and is certainly needed. Archaeologists working in universities may have more academic freedom to criticize museums than their museum colleagues, but museum archaeologists are the ones who can do the work of putting this criticism into practice. Collaborations between archaeologists working in universities, museums, research centers, libraries, schools, and beyond, then, can only benefit activist museum work.

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Links

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- [2] <https://bp-or-not-bp.org/2020/02/07/breaking-weve-snuck-a-huge-trojan-horse-into-the-british-museum/>
- [3] <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/disguised-protester-smears-cake-on-the-mona-lisa-protective-glass-180980172/#:~:text=On%20Sunday%2C%20a%20man%20disguised,the%20painting%20was%20not%20damaged>
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- [9] <https://www.guerrillagirls.com/> and <https://whitney.org/exhibitions/an-incomplete-history-of-protest>
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- [11] <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>