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## Museum Talk: Conversations Regarding Art Museums' Practices and Policies

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*MUSEUM TALK*: CONVERSATIONS REGARDING ART  
MUSEUMS' PRACTICES AND POLICIES

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## Background Information

According to the International Council of Museums, a non-governmental organization that works to establish professional and ethical standards for museums, a museum is defined as the following:

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.<sup>1</sup>

Art museums, therefore, fall under this definition and should meet—and ideally exceed—these requirements. While art museums appear and typically promote themselves as inclusive institutions, they are often seen as exclusionary and intimidating because there is a lack of strong social networks that promote museum-going across any identity lines.<sup>2</sup> For instance, art museums have a history of excluding BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) individuals from their spaces and place priority on white male artists. According to a 2019 study conducted by the Public Library of Science, 85% of artists in U.S. art museums’ permanent collections are white identified.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, 2020 Census data reports that only 57.8% of the U.S. population identifies as white and this number will continue to decline in coming years.<sup>4</sup> As cultural institutions, art museums are professionally obligated and funded with the intent that these institutions will serve as neighborhood spaces: a socially inclusive space that serves to educate

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<sup>1</sup> “Museum Definition.” International Council of Museums. International Council of Museums, September 1, 2021. <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>.

<sup>2</sup> Bailey, Dina, Chris Taylor, and Elizabeth Pickard. 2016. "Incorporating Diversity and Inclusion into Young Adult Programs." *History News* 71, no. 2: 1-8. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44605929>

<sup>3</sup> Topaz, Chad M., Bernhard Klingenberg, Daniel Turek, Brianna Heggeseth, Pamela E. Harris, Julie C. Blackwood, C. Ondine Chavoya, Steven Nelson, and Kevin M. Murphy. “Diversity of Artists in Major U.S. Museums.” *PLOS ONE* 14, no. 3 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0212852>.

<sup>4</sup> Bureau, U.S. Census. “The Chance That Two People Chosen at Random Are of Different Race or Ethnicity Groups Has Increased since 2010.” United States Census Bureau. USA.gov, October 15, 2021. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/2020-united-states-population-more-racially-ethnically-diverse-than-2010.html>.

and act as agents of social change.<sup>5</sup> These spaces are meant to represent, support, and educate the community they are located in and that visits these spaces. Unfortunately, the United States has historically been dominated by white, cis, straight, able-bodied men in positions of power and the collections and artists showcased in art museums reflect the ideologies of this group. Over the past few years, attention has turned to our art institutions and their history of exclusion of BIPOC individuals.

In May of 2020, I was named a BOLD Scholar under the BOLD Women's Leadership Network at the University of Connecticut. BOLD, funded by the Helen Gurley Brown Foundation, gives women in their undergraduate career the opportunity to create and lead an independent research-leadership project in their desired field of study. With this opportunity, I decided to take on the question of what art museums are doing, or need to do, to make their spaces more welcoming and comfortable to individuals of all backgrounds. To investigate this, I made site visits to four art museums in New York City to evaluate these institutions' diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI) efforts. Simultaneously, New York City is home and workspace to some of the most famous art museums that influence and support galleries, schools, and the arts community across the country. Additionally, New York City is home to a population of diverse families, communities, and cultures. Ideally, the art museums in New York City should represent the diversity of its population and also serve to educate the public on these different communities and cultures.

The institutions I chose to examine are four well-known art museums in Manhattan that are collectively visited by 3.3 million people annually. These museums host important

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<sup>5</sup> Booth, Kate. 2014. "The Democratization of Art: A Contextual Approach." *Visitor Studies*, 17:2, 207-221, DOI: 10.1080/10645578.2014.945353

exhibitions and programs, but also have a history of racial controversies. After spending two months visiting these spaces daily, I created a website, *AMD: Art Museums & Diversity*, that details my experiences considering the diversity of these spaces and provides resources for those looking to participate in art museums and continue the conversation regarding art museums and their DEAI efforts.

While I am proud of my project and website, the dialogues regarding this topic are something that continue to evolve and grow each day. Therefore, I decided that my Honors Thesis project would be an excellent opportunity to extend the work of my BOLD project and take a deeper dive into how art museums are operating in this current social and cultural moment. Since my BOLD project was personal and a product of my own thoughts and opinions, I wanted to use my Honors Thesis to add in the voices, opinions, thoughts, perspectives, and personal experiences from those who work in the museum and art fields. Thus, the podcast *Museum Talk* was born.

The goal of the podcast was to speak with different scholars, museum employees, and all-around art lovers who are involved in the world of art museums and are both interested and concerned about their future. The conversations that came from interviews with these individuals aimed to add insight to how museums have operated in the past, how they are currently operating, and the things that need to be changed if art museums hope to have a future. Overall, *Museum Talk* is a small contribution to the larger discussions about art museums, and their diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion efforts, while also creating a space for these conversations to occur. When it comes to changing museums to make them more open, accessible, and welcoming to all, museums are motivated to respond to the voices of the general public and criticism from those who care about these spaces. Art museums are wonderful places

for education, dialogue, and forming connections, and, as a result, it is up to those who care for these institutions to be critical of them for the good of their future.

### **Project Process**

Once I decided my thesis would take the form of a podcast, the first step in my process was to listen to various podcasts to decide what styles of podcasts I did and did not like. I knew I wanted to produce an interview-based podcast where I could ask my guests their thoughts and opinions on art museums, their history of racism and exclusion, and their futures. To get an idea of what an interview-format podcast sounds like, I listened to a range of different podcasts—some interview-based, some not—to get an idea of what shows kept my attention that I could use as a model when recording my podcast. After listening to episodes from shows like *Butt Dial*, *The Art Angle*, and *Serial*, I determined I had a preference for podcasts with shorter episodes and ones that sounded more like a conversation or story than someone talking at you for 30-40 minutes. Based on this information, I was then able to formulate about 40 general questions I used to structure my podcast and guide my conversations with my guests.

After developing general questions, I then began to reach out to various individuals to see if they would be interested in being interviewed for my project. The goal was to hear perspectives from a range of professionals, so I contacted various scholars, museum employees, artists, and activists. I contacted some individuals affiliated with the University of Connecticut, employees from the Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry, the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, and the Florence Griswold Museums, as well as activists and curators I follow on social media. I mainly focused on reaching out to individuals from smaller institutions who work outside of New York City, not only to get a variety of perspectives, but also to learn how these smaller establishments have dealt with racist incidents in the past, how they have evolved,

and what programs they have implemented to make their spaces welcoming to everyone. I believe that these smaller institutions may be able to offer insight into how larger art museums can improve their diversity and inclusion efforts and, therefore, these stories can be valuable for thinking about the problem as a whole. Once I began to hear back from potential interviewees, I researched their backgrounds to learn more about where they went to school, what they studied, and how they got to their current position. Based on this information, I then wrote individual scripts for my seven confirmed guests to use as a general outline when conducting interviews. For these scripts, I selected five to seven questions from ones I had previously brainstormed to guide the conversation with my interviewees, as well as keep us on track in case we got carried away during the interview.

In terms of recording the podcast, I used Zoom so that I would be able to record the meeting and pull the audio to edit later. For each episode, I began by welcoming my guests with a short introduction and then asked them my pre-determined questions. Rather than strictly sticking to the script, I let the conversation flow and came up with questions on the spot in case the conversation took a different path than I anticipated. Each recording lasted anywhere from 20 minutes to nearly 45 minutes, giving me a lot of material to work with. After each interview, I pulled the audio from the saved Zoom recording and uploaded the file to Shotcut, an app for editing audio and video. Shotcut made it easy to edit the episodes, as well as finalize the recordings and publish them. When editing the episodes, I removed any moments where my guest and I strayed from the main topic of the episode, but I was able to leave most of the recordings untouched. After editing the recordings, I then uploaded the finalized versions to Happy Scribe, a website that transcribes and adds subtitles to audio and video recordings. I was

able to use Happy Scribe to transcribe each episode and then I went through to edit any grammar or spelling errors.

With each episode edited and transcribed, I then used Anchor, an application for creating and publishing podcasts, to create cover art, organize the episodes, and upload *Museum Talk* to Spotify and Apple Podcasts. Anchor was a beneficial tool in this process as it made it easy to finalize the last steps needed to complete and publish the podcast. From brainstorming interview questions and potential interviewees to the final editing and publishing of *Museum Talk*, the entire process was both time and labor intensive. Due to this, the project and its process made me consider the variables in the creation and distribution of *Museum Talk*: labor, outreach, and audience. As someone who wants to go into the museum field and work on outreach initiatives to bring diverse groups into these spaces, thinking about these factors will be vital in my future career. Through this, I learned that art museums contain the potential to change and listen to its community, but that it depends on the kind of work and work ethic these institutions are willing to dedicate themselves to, what form their outreach programs will take, how they will reach certain audiences, and, most importantly, the ways in which they will listen to and work with their communities.

### **Outcomes**

I am very pleased with the results of my interviews and my podcast. The overarching goal of the project was to add to the current conversations regarding art museums, diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion, as well as hear the perspectives of people who work in and in relation to this field. By interviewing these individuals who hold various positions, it was helpful to get a wide range of opinions and views on the topic. As someone who wants to work in art museums and believes in the future of art museums, I enjoyed hearing my interviewees'

suggestions of what art museums can do to be more inclusive and welcoming to people of all backgrounds. While some of my guests believed in the future of these institutions and some did not, each of my guests also provided personal experiences of working in and around museums and the exclusion they may have witnessed or experienced themselves.

Conducting this project also allowed me to gain certain skills I did not expect to learn. From recording the podcast episodes to editing and producing the final project, I had to teach myself how to do all of it. It took some trial and error, but I am glad I was forced to learn these skills as we live in a technological and social media-based society. I did not think these skills were ones that I would ever learn, or need to learn, but now I am glad I have this experience with recording, editing, and producing audio—skills that can be applied to video and other media-based projects. Additionally, I was able to work on my professional skills including sending professional emails, hosting interviews, and coming up with ideas on the spot. I found that through this process I became less nervous with each interview I conducted and was more comfortable speaking with the professionals. This, in turn, has helped me become more confident when I interview for future fellowship and job positions. In this way, this project had multiple positive outcomes, for both life skills and goals for the podcast and the future of art museums.

Since *Museum Talk* is an extension of my research and observations from my BOLD project, the podcast will be available on my website, *AMD: Art Museums & Diversity* (<https://artdiversity.wixsite.com/bold>), as well as on Spotify and Apple Podcasts (<https://open.spotify.com/show/12fFHAa87IwE896jh1O2MM> & <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/museum-talk/id1616561377>). By bringing together the final products of my BOLD project and my Honors Thesis, *AMD: Art Museums & Diversity* will act as a multidimensional website that offers observations, resources, and personal anecdotes

about the current social and cultural climate surrounding art museums. As these conversations about art museums and their DEAI efforts continue to evolve and expand, *AMD: Art Museums & Diversity* and *Museum Talk* will serve as a toolkit, as well as a source of inspiration, for those looking to get involved in these discussions.

In conclusion, I hope that any potential listeners will learn a little more about the current state of art museums and what can be done to change them from my podcast, as well as be able to hear a perspective on the topic they may have not considered before. I want my podcast to inspire audiences to be more critical of art museums and institutions and feel inspired to participate in these spaces, so that we can transform them into the community spaces they are meant to be. On the following pages, you will find the transcripts for eight podcast episodes: one introduction and seven interviews. I hope you enjoy and learn something new!

## All Transcripts (in order of episode)

### Introduction

#### Eva

Hello everyone! My name is Eva Solano and this is my podcast *Museum Talk*. In the following episodes you will hear conversations with scholars and museums professionals about their thoughts and opinions on art museums, their history of racism and exclusion, as well as what the future of these institutions look like. These conversations are all in effort to add to the larger dialogues occurring about this subject given our current social and political climate. I hope you enjoy and will learn something new!

### Interview With Dr. John Bell Transcript

#### Eva

Hello everyone and welcome back to *Museum Talk*. I'm your host Eva, and with me today I have Dr. John Bell from The Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry. Dr. Bell has served as the director of the Ballard since 2007, and prior to that was a member of the well known, politically-driven puppet theater known as Bread and Puppet. So Dr. Bell, can you tell me a little bit about your role at The Ballard?

#### Dr. John Bell

Well, I'm the director of the Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry, and we are a unique institution. We're the only puppet museum connected to a University and, in fact, we're one of the few puppet museums in the United States. There's one at the center for Puppetry Arts in Atlanta. There's one in Seattle. There are museums like the Bread and Puppet Museum in Northern Vermont. And what we want to do is to think about the past, present, and future of puppetry as a global performance practice that, you know, goes back thousands of years and sort of appears continually in the present; kind of ironically because oftentimes as puppeteers from Jim Henson to Peter Schumann to Sherry Lewis and everywhere, you know, puppetry has this interesting connection or reputation, especially in the US of being a children's entertainment form when in fact, the larger history of puppetry is about the ways that it connects to major belief systems and culture and social systems and political systems around the world, from Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas.

So that's super interesting, and we have a collection of over 3000 puppets, which was started when Frank Ballard was the head of the Puppet Arts program. Ballard started the Puppet Arts program at UConn in the late '50s. And then we do a lot of guest exhibitions, so we just finished

*Puppetry's Racial Reckoning*, curated by Dr. Jungmin Song. And then right now, as I speak, we're installing a new exhibition, *Hecho en Puerto Rico: Four Generations of Puerto Rican Puppetry*. So it's exciting because we're dealing with a form that people kind of know, like everybody knows, you know, a Sesame Street or the Muppets or something. And then they don't necessarily know about Javanese shadow theater or, you know, avant-garde political experimental theater or puppetry in street performance or Latin American puppetry or European puppetry, African puppetry; so it's always exciting to sort of expose people to what's out there.

### **Eva**

Yeah, definitely. I've been to the Ballad a few times, and it's always interesting. I love seeing what's going on down there, and I do want to ask you about the exhibition that just closed: *Puppetry's Racial Reckoning*. So it looked to examine the role of race, prejudice, stereotypes and racism in the world of Puppetry, and so, in your opinion, how does racism and discrimination kind of affect how people view and participate in our museums? And what did this exhibition kind of look to educate visitors and what it looked to do?

### **Dr. Bell**

Right, good question. This was one of the most challenging exhibitions we've done because it's, first of all, talking about race and identity—is really complicated. I feel it's a language that one needs to learn and have experience using in order to think about it because it's difficult to talk about race and especially in the United States with our own history of racism. In 2019, we did an exhibition, *Living Objects: African American Puppetry*, which was really the second exhibition of African American puppetry in the United States.

And that was super interesting because it was another way that we could—or it was the first time we were able to kind of look at the situation of race and puppetry, which is deeply interconnected since puppets are sort of like the ID, or the subconscious, of a culture that emerges automatically in a way. So that was an interesting precedent for this one. We wanted to do an exhibition during COVID of work from our own collections which tend to focus on United States puppetry from the mid-20th century onward, which is mostly white puppeteers.

So we wanted to look at that and then also, as we looked around at what we have, think about the responses, especially puppeteers of color, of Asian American puppeteers, African American

puppeteers, and others, to the situations of race and identity. So if I can talk about the structure of the exhibit, should I explain what we have there?

**Eva**

Yeah, definitely.

**Dr. Bell**

Well, Dr. Jungmin Sung, who teaches in the Theater–Dramatic Arts Department here and has a history in performance and performance art and curated a *Shakespeare and Puppetry* exhibition that we had here; I guess it was last year, she assembled the exhibition and it was really in three different sections. One was about Orientalism and the way that people from the vague and fantastical and imaginary worlds of Asian people from the Middle East to China and India, all of South Asia—the sort of mythical imaginary world—how that is presented through puppetry.

The second part was called “Minstrel Sea and its Legacy,” which as one can imagine, was about the legacies of blackface minstrelsy, which was the most popular form of entertainment in the United States and the 19th century, including the sort of legacies of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was the most popular novel and the most popular drama of the 19th century in the United States by Harriet Beecher Stowe.

And then a third section was really kind of interesting and equivocal in a way, “Identity and Identification,” which explored how other cultures, like in Asia, for example, have represented other people. So how Black people or African Iranian people were represented in mainstream Iranian puppetry, how Javanese Rod Puppet Theater represented Africans or Europeans, sort of things that complicate the situation. One of the responses we got from a kind of, I would say, conservative or if not right-wing media site was someone who actually didn't see the exhibition, but they said the gist of this exhibition is the history of puppetry is the history of racism, which is sort of not too wrong but actually not what we were saying.

And I think the complexity of the situation, which is one thing we were thinking about and how to talk about this. The complexity is the complexity of the history of the United States, and it does happen to be the case that racism and slavery, the legacy of slavery, is very much a part of our own history and those histories and racism are reflected in our culture; in minstrelsy, which gave rise to vaudeville and all sorts of other remnants. So I would say we weren't saying that all puppetry is the history of racism, but that puppetry insofar as it reflects mainstream culture.

When things appear as objects, sculpted or created objects in performance, they reflect what people are experiencing.

In the section about minstrelsy and its legacies, we had kind of the most expressly racist puppets. We had a warning sign at the entrance to the museum: “some of these images might be disturbing,” but they were called jig dolls and it was a form of popular puppetry—little wooden puppets with a horizontal bar that the performer would hold and then loosely attached legs and arms, and you would have a piece of wood on your knee that the puppet would rest on and you'd bang on the piece of wood and that piece of wood would make the legs dance—like dance like a jig. And those puppets were painted in kind of minstrel exaggeration, so blackfaces and this sort of racist representations of Black people—big lips and teeth and big eyes—pretty clear what that was representing. Next to it we had some sculptures, jig dolls by Garland Farwell, who's an African American sculptor who studied at Rhode Island School of Design and then got involved in performance, moved to, I want to say, Alabama, down to the south to get in touch with African American folk culture.

And he does painting and set design and theater work in his community. And he made some dolls that are pretty much that jig doll form, but unpainted and with a very different—so just unpainted wood—in that African American folk tradition with sort of interestingly characterized features made with little round pieces of wood for the hat and metal things for the ties. And in a way, what he is doing is reacting against the stereotype, the racist stereotype of the jig dolls that we placed right next to each other so you could see them.

But it's complicated because some people said, “Oh, it's all racist. That's all bad.” Well, no, actually, what Garland Farwell is doing is thinking about this history of racist imagery in American puppetry and popular culture and responding to it the way the filmmaker Spike Lee in a film he made called *Bamboozled*, about minstrelsy, blackface minstrelsy, Garland Farwell's responding to it in his own way with his own sculpture, his own movable figures. So it's interesting because it's not like everything's, either black or white—excuse the pun—but there are different degrees of representation. There's ambiguities in representation. You don't know what the intention of people was in representation.

So to me, it's super fascinating. And it offered us a chance to look at our own collections, the way that puppets and our collections have been identified, sometimes in a less than accurate fashion, where we'll have an Asian puppet and someone 30 years ago said, “Well, that's gotta be

such and such,” and actually, it's not what they thought it was. Or we had some puppets and someone said, “Well, those are from the Mikado.” And actually, as Jungming realized when she looked at these puppets, the Mikado said, in Japan, the costumes in these marionettes by a guy named Donald Cordy, who was active in Detroit in the '30s, they're not Japanese at all. They're representing Chinese costumes. So in our own collections, it's like, oh, we kind of need to do some more work here to figure out what we've got.

### **Eva**

And you mentioned a little bit earlier how poetry, kind of, it reflects what is happening in society at the time of the social climate, and I think that's the same for art museums and these art institutions, is that they're reflecting kind of what's going on in the social climate but they're not always super inclusive, and they don't always promote kind of like their spaces for everyone. And you were just saying how, like the Ballard with, like, this one show that you had how you put warning signs and said this imagery may be offensive and how you're juxtaposing the two puppets; and just in your opinion, what do you think museums can do to dismantle racism and be more open and welcoming to kind of people of all backgrounds, of all identities? Kind of dismantle this idea of, like, art museums are only kind of for certain people.

### **Dr. Bell**

That's a super important question, it's like the question in a way. One great advantage of puppetry is that already our field is, by definition, global. So if we want to really talk about puppetry, we have *The World of Puppetry Exhibition* in our lobby, and it has work from Asia, Africa, Europe, the Americas, and then North America, the United States. So as a puppeteer, you're always needing to kind of navigate multicultural and international traditions. So that's good, because just by paying attention to what puppetry is, you're automatically dealing with different ethnicities, races, traditions, religions.

I think when we did *Living Objects: African American Puppetry*, to a certain extent American puppetry has been kind of a white oriented tradition, is changing in part because of what, of our exhibition, actually. But there's more awareness of puppeteers of color, bringing in curators representing those perspectives, or different perspectives, it seems to me interesting or important. With this exhibition, we realized—Dr. Jungmin Sungrealized—and we all realized that it wouldn't be so good just to present puppets made by white puppeteers, which is the majority of our collections.

But to bring in puppeteers of color who are doing fascinating work; like Kimmy Maida, whose work about the Japanese internment camps in the United States during World War Two was part of a show she did called *Bend* which we included, bringing in different perspectives from artists, trying to bring in different perspectives from curators. We do a lot of programming with puppet forums, which are discussions with artists and scholars; puppet performances where we bring in puppeteers—well, mostly from New England. So we're trying to think about who we bring in.

One thing we realized, or we discussed, with our advisory board of African American Puppeteers and our co-curator, Paulette Richards, who is a scholar who's working in the field of African American puppetry. One of the questions was, well, “Can white puppeteers perform puppets that represent Black folks or people of other cultures?” And the provisional answer we came to, or they came to was, yes, if respect is part of it, if there's respect there, which I thought was really interesting. I don't think these things are figured out and to my mind they're being negotiated and discussed and argued about as we speak. But this idea of respect, doing work that respects others is a way to, I don't know, to move forward, to be more inclusive, to try to understand the whole range of, in our case, puppetry out there.

### **Eva**

Yeah, and just one last question that I have is looking forward, kind of as we're figuring this out, what do you think that the future of art museums and art, like cultural institutions, look like? And how does art play a role? Like, why is there this power behind art to make these changes and make these spaces more inclusive?

### **Dr. Bell**

Wow, that's a good question. Yeah, I don't know. I think when I was a kid, I'd go to the Museum and you'd see like the European Masters and then modern art, which was most also like European or Picasso and stuff, and I think of necessity and responding to our global culture and multiethnic society, it has to open up and we're seeing how curators and collections are trying to say, “Oh, wait a minute.” First, it was like as the Guerilla Girls said, what about women artists and women artists weren't really represented, so okay, and artists of color or women artists of color.

So I think there's this realization that a wider range of art needs to be included. Also, you know, who comes to the museums? Museums want people to come to see the work, so who do you attract? It's good to include work by a wide range of different people so that your audience

reflects the community in which you live. So I don't know, I think it's really exciting because people are aware that we need to change our perspective or our definitions or the range of works we include.

**Eva**

No, I agree that these spaces need to—that's like one thing that I'm looking at kind of with the research I did this summer as well as looking forward to my Honors Thesis—is what can these spaces do to reflect the community? And who is the community that they are trying to reach? And what ways have they helped this community? What ways have they failed this community? And really like, what can be done better?

So I don't think there really is a straightforward answer. It's kind of like you said it's figuring it out along the way and just kind of holding these spaces accountable for any instances of racism and just looking at what they're doing and how they're trying to promote these values of diversity and inclusion in their spaces.

**Dr. Bell**

And I think keeping in mind that it's complicated and, for me, nobody has the right way of looking at it and people are going to make mistakes. I think that's important. As I was saying earlier, how to think about that or how to think about your own history is complicated—and a lot of people don't want to think about it.

Like these reactions to what's called Critical Race Theory is sort of like, “let's not talk about it,” when in fact when you look at the history of art or the history of culture, the history of theater, the history of puppetry, there it is.

**Eva**

It needs to be talked about.

**Dr. Bell**

I think one thing I'm thinking about museums, some of the museums you mentioned at the outset, the Museum of Modern Art, for example, and the Whitney—I don't know if you mentioned the Guggenheim—there are these high level cultural institutions and some of the—like my background comes from working with the creation of the Bread and Puppet Museum in Northern Vermont which is in an old 1860s post and beam barn, and it's a sort of home built, DIY museum

with thousands of puppets that's really kind of amazing. And a colleague of mine, Claire Dolen, started the Museum of Everyday Life, the Museum of Everyday Life, also in Glover, Vermont, which is focused on everyday objects in different sorts.

So I think there are interesting possibilities to go out and make your own museum or, you know, to create and present art that's not necessarily coming from these gigantic, well funded, traditional institutions; but maybe museums are something that people do in their neighborhood. Or maybe art can be accessible to a lot of people. Maybe you don't necessarily need to start off with a huge foundation of millions of dollars in your institution, but maybe people can create their own artwork themselves. That's kind of another aspect that's interesting to me.

What is art, who is art for? Who has access to art? Can we make art ourselves? Yes. Can we in our community make art and show art and perform art or puppets?

**Eva**

And even just the shifting idea of what exactly an art museum is. Does it have to be an institution that has these million dollars worth of backing? Or can it just be something that you put on in your backyard for your neighborhood? So, yeah, it's definitely very interesting. It'll be interesting to kind of see where museums continue to go into the future and what, kind of, the role that art will continue to play in our society.

I really appreciate you sharing your thoughts and your opinions on this topic.

**Dr. Bell**

Thank you so much. I appreciate it.

## Interview With Dr. David Embrick Transcript

### Eva

Hello everyone and welcome back to *Museum Talk*. I'm your host Eva and with me today is Dr. David Embrick. Dr. Embrick holds an associate professor position in both the Sociology Department and Africana Studies Institute at the University of Connecticut. Dr. Embrick's research focuses on the impact of contemporary forms of racism on people of color and his work has been published in a number of journals. In an art history class I took at UConn, we read "White sanctuaries: race and place in art museums" written by Dr. Embrick and his collaborators, which examines the role of race and racism in art museums. Hello Dr. Embrick, can you tell me a little more about your article "White sanctuaries: race and place in art museums"?

### Dr. David Embrick

Sure. Thank you for inviting me to this very important podcast. Yeah, I have to be honest with you, this was a project that kind of fell into our lap—into my lap. I had always been interested in racism and space and place and it's a topic, at least in sociology and some of the social sciences, that I think is getting a little bit more visibility in terms of sort of understanding how to interrogate dominant spaces that we live, right, and how everyday racism kind of works.

And so I've been involved in that kind of research for many years and one of the things—this was prior to me being at UConn—I was a faculty in the Sociology Department at Loyalty University of Chicago. And one of the great things about being in the city of Chicago is that you sort of have a wealth, a trove of not just cultural sort of things to engage in, but the city itself. Right. And so one of the things that I sort of enjoyed was easy access to the Art Institute of Chicago in a way in which on certain days of the week, I could just go there.

And so it was really there that the project kind of fell in my lap as I kind of watched and tried to best understand who was frequenting these museums and who was not, right, and what was happening in terms of the long history of at least the Art Institute of Chicago serving or being profoundly publicized as a museum for the people, for the people of Chicago. Right.

So that led to sort of questions about is this really a museum for the people of Chicago? After a bit of time, I said, "there's definitely a project here." I'm here anyways. I was joined by one of my collaborators, Simón Weffer, who is at Northern Illinois University, and we decided to do sort of like a nifty sort of collaborative ethnography project, which is really it's not difficult, but

it's unusual in the sense that most ethnographers kind of enjoy doing ethnography solo, right, or they have a team of ethnographers that sort of go out there, but they train them in sort of a way that kind of like allows them—the folks to go out and kind of envision or get an understanding of what they're looking for through the lens of the researcher.

And so the great thing about our partnership was we went in doing the same project—but separately—so that we would have multiple views and perspectives so that we can sort of thwart any kind of misunderstandings, or we would have great conversations. And since then we've added a third collaborator, a co-conspirator, Silvia Dominguez, professor at Northeastern University, who's been doing some of the same stuff that we've been doing in the Boston Fine Arts. Yeah, so the article is really about how the Art Institute of Chicago maintains kind of this White space by race and class.

What are the sort of racial and class mechanisms that are embedded within the institution of the museum that allows it to sort of be exclusive? And what does that sort of exclusivity mean? Right. And we know that museums are colonial projects. And if you sort of look at the Art Institute of Chicago as a colonial project, you kind of understand, like these mechanisms serve to sort of maintain the perspectives that they've already written into and institutionalized at the museum. Right. And there's many facets. I'm not an anthropologist, but I certainly have read up widely on sort of the anthropological research of museums as colonial projects, the use and abuse of artifacts, the placement of artifacts and artwork in museums that are strategically placed.

So we weren't really trying to sort of reinvent new research around that terrain. But we were trying to look at other things, such as mechanisms that sort of deny people access to museums and how they do that and the ways that people are exposed, how they travel through museums and how they come to sort of see or have a perspective about things at the museum, which for the regard as high art, right, as fundamentally civilized art. Right. The idea of museums is to showcase the sort of greatest contributions of humanity. Right.

But in reality, it only showcases kind of like in a very White way, certain groups that are held high on a pedestal while sort of demeaning other groups are rendering them invisible or rendering them marginalizing them or exposing them as sort of exceptional—maybe exceptional pieces to a particular culture. Right. Yeah. That's pretty much, in essence, what the article is really about is those mechanisms, right. How do museums police people going through the museums? And one of the things that we're really itching to do, and we haven't had a chance to

really do it yet is we would love to GIS map emotions onto museums where we can lead a group of students or a group of respondents through the museum and record as they go through each of the exhibits, record their blood pressure and record cortisol levels, and have them take sort of diaries of their feelings and emotions, of what they're thinking about when they're in those exhibits.

For a lot of museums, you speak to just about any person of color that's going through them; they don't see themselves represented in museums—and if they do, again, it's a misrepresentation or it's a representation that's marginalized or it's a symbolic representation of something that the museum is trying to sort of bandage because of any number of things—protest or the moment, or they're trying to capture something. But the realities of everyday life of the museum is to sort of center a particular group in Whiteness and sort of expose that.

So for the piece itself; having been a scholar of sort of White spaces and places, we sort of see museums as kind of on one end of the spectrum an extreme—and we call it White sanctuaries because they are White spaces. But they're fundamentally, they serve to not just maintain the status quo, which I think is sort of important to know, but to offer kind of sanctuary for the dominant group, who might find themselves in a society where their perceptions that they're losing power or that minorities are taking—or marginalized groups—minorities are taking over, that they can sort of reaffirm their position in society through museums. That's only one example of a White sanctuary. There are others. We can talk about the educational system as a White sanctuary, but these are places that reaffirm dominant status in society. So, yeah, that was long winded, but it's out there.

### **Eva**

Yeah. Well, it's like what I did this summer, like my project. I went into art museums in New York City, and I tried to assess kind of their diversity and inclusion efforts, like what exhibitions they were holding, like how they were set up, and, like you mentioned, how there are certain mechanisms that these institutions are using to kind of maintain these dominant narratives, like you said. So kind of where the artwork is hung, where kind of like how you navigate yourself through the room and especially a big thing, too, is like what the label—like the wall label—says that has a lot to do with how you perceive an artwork, how you take it as the truth, if that's what you want to call it.

So you mentioned these mechanisms. So what do you think can be done? Like what actions and policies should museums kind of take on going forward to kind of like dismantle to become these spaces—these neighborhood spaces—that are like for everyone and are not seen as these White spaces?

**Dr. Embrick**

Yeah. That's hard, right. Because as a sociologist, think about it right now, rethinking how museums are structured and who they actually serve. Right. And if you think about the way that museums are structured, you really have to think about dismantling and starting from scratch. I mean, honestly, to be community, to have community led or organized museums, as opposed to for museums that are set up top down, that are highly influenced by a very small, select group of people, right, that have vested interest based on their positions in society, but based on sort of how they can use museums not as a footprint, but as an end to sort of the means to getting at issues of promotion of high culture as White dominant high culture or something like that.

If you look at some of the things that we've sort of uncovered and we already knew this, but that journalists have uncovered, we could see the boards of a lot of these massive museums—the transnational ones, but definitely the national—they're mostly White men, right, with a few exceptions. And I know that MoMA, for example, has gotten into a lot of heated problems with the chairperson that they don't want to talk about was funneling money to and where that money was coming from and those kind of like the so-called 'philanthropy' that museums kind of engage in on both sides. Right.

Who they promote, who they give money to and who they receive money from. We know that a lot of the galleries, I mean, if you go to the Art Institute of Chicago, like the galleries are named after people who are the major donors right now, you could say like, well, "we don't have major donors. We don't have money coming in and we can't sort of back," but is that necessarily true, right? I mean, is that always the case? Right. But you go in there and you sort of look at who's donating money.

And then how is that gallery influenced? In what ways is that gallery influenced by the donation itself, by the money itself, the philanthropy itself. Right. I think that the whole idea of these museums being a part of a White supremacist society, a racialized social system. It's part and parcel like a major problem. Now there are low hanging fruit. Like, if you want to be like, we're not going to dismantle museums and start from scratch, that's not going to happen. What can you

sort of do? Well, there are a few things again, I don't necessarily think they're going to lead to major changes, but I think museums have a problem with docents, right. I don't know if they still call them docents, but I call them docents. Some of them are volunteer, some of them are not as well as the security to hire. Now, there's two problems. I think one of the things we pointed out in the Art Institute of Chicago was here's a very interesting case in which majority of the security and docents are people of color. And so there are people of color policing people of color and working class folks and making them feel uncomfortable as if they don't belong in the museum; attached with all the stereotypes that you can attach to it to make it a safer place for the patrons who are overwhelmingly middle class and White to enjoy spending time reaffirming their position in society.

But you have a lot of other museums that have the opposite problem, which the majority of the docents are White and they haven't really been trained. On the one hand, you're like, well, some of these are voluntary, right, so I guess they get training—in a sense of training, some of them in terms of understanding art, but they really are understanding a very small part of art and that is sort of a dominant art. Right. So when it comes to sort of major events that happen in society in which museums kind of scrambled to talk about sort of Black Lives Matter, George Floyd or racism in general, like the docents aren't really prepared to deal with that because there's no guidance in terms of really understanding legally understanding kind of like institutionalized racism in the US, right.

And they're still strapped, right. They're still strapped with kind of the stereotypes that were socialized into thinking about people of color or even working class people, right. Squares of racism and classism—intersectional kind of issues that happen at these museums. My colleagues and I wonder often about, at least in terms of the low hanging fruit, is there a way to kind of do more training to security, to do some to folks that provide the outside appearance that promote the outside appearance of the museum, because those are the people you see, you don't really see the curator and you don't really see, right.

You don't see the board. Those are the folks that you see on everyday basis, the people that run the front desk and the people that deal with the galleries themselves. Right. What does that training sort of look like at the Art Institute of Chicago? It was just very glaring. It was very matter of fact. And in your face, the Museum, again, is constantly touted as a public Museum for the people—but the free days, at least the last time I checked pre-COVID, was Thursday. What a

two hour block, like a two hour block, right. I mean, it was like from five to seven. Right. Who can actually use that on a Thursday?

**Eva**

Exactly.

**Dr. Embrick**

Right. One day a week on a Thursday, five to seven is Free Day. And there's a longer history like it used to be by donations. And then over time, as a museum has sort of increased invisibility, they've decreased the window of who's able to actually access the museum. Right. So you added these built in mechanisms that sort of ensure that they're going to limit and control. Right. So they could still make the case that it's for the people, but they can limit it and control it in a way that will be considered sort of, I guess, acceptable for folks who really belong in a museum that really can use that sort of space.

Is there a way for museums to say, "hey, let's go the other opposite. Let's go the other direction. Let's train our staff. Let's train our doses. Let's talk about issues of racism. Let's talk about sort of culture. Let's talk about class sensitivities. Let's talk about really being a museum for the people because we want them to sort of see the art be exposed much like anybody else can be. Let's put it on. But let's open up the window. Let's not put it on a weekday. Let's put it on a weekend, right. Let's really be sensitive to those kinds of things."

And that's, in addition to all the other anthropological kind of studies that suggest we should pay attention to the art itself, who's represented and who's—I mean, we haven't even got to that part yet. We're just talking about access now. But then what happens when you deal with access? And maybe there could be conversations with—deep conversations—where the museum can put its foot down in terms of negotiating with donors for galleries about what they're willing and not willing to do for that money.

There's a couple of curators that I talked to from the Smithsonian and I remember this conversation, I don't want to go too off topic, but I remember this conversation about sort of the great news, the great celebration that we should have about the African American Museum, the Smithsonian Museum for African Art. Right. And on the one hand you want to say "yes. Absolutely. This is powerful. This is so necessary to take the time and energy and resources." But the reality is that the reason those museums exist. The reason that the Dasabo Museum exists

for African Americans in Chicago is because there's no access. There's no access in sort of nationally recognized mainstream museums in the first place. Right. I mean, it's like Historically Black Colleges and Universities. People are like, “why do we have we have Historically Black Colleges and Universities?”—because people weren't allowed into White institutions. Right.

And so you create other institutions. So we create a Mexican American Museum and a Black Museum and create an Indigenous Museum. And we create these museums to allow access, but the ways in which they're created still put museums like the MoMA and Art Institute of Chicago on the highest pedestal of this is high culture and they still place these other museums as secondary and tertiary places that if you're invested and you want to see “Other” art, you can go to those museums. Right. You can play that kind of game.

**Eva**

So you mentioned community-led efforts, and I think recently a big thing has been protest and art activism at institutions, specifically in New York City, at Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of [American] art, and do you think these kinds of community driven efforts like these protests and these art activism efforts are effective at getting these art museums attention and actually getting them to institute some sort of change? Because instances of racism happen in these institutions, and it's an apology post on Instagram and it's like “we've kind of, like, done our job.” And I think the protesters try to get these museums to do more, but is that effective? Is that a way that we can kind of outside the museum, get it to change inside?

**Dr. Embrick**

It's always effective. Right. The question is to what degree? And in what ways? Right. And then what happens? Here's the reality: yeah, absolutely these things matter. They matter because they constantly put pressure on these institutions to let them know that they can only go so far. Right. And so what they're constantly doing, what museums and other institutions are constantly doing, is they're constantly moving the goal post. They're constantly reinventing, like they're constantly rethinking and restructing. Is it effective? It's effective in the sense that I don't think if the protest didn't happen, if people didn't constantly put the institutions on alert, then things would be probably far worse.

That's just mine—I think they would be much worse. But again, because we're part of a larger society and structure matters, right, it's not about whether museums will change for the long term or for even the better, it's will they take a moment to even have a symbolic gesture to deal with

the moment? And they have, but it's short lived. I mean, artists have always been in the forefront of thinking sort of radical—and I hate to use the word radical because radical just simply means change but we sort of have turned into a bad word—but always pushing for inclusiveness, really, right, and access. And I think that scares people—and I think that's what art does and I think artists do a really good job of trying to fight back. And I think we saw it you had mentioned on this set of questions, is it the Whitney, and the Whitney sort of claim to fame in the last few years. What really came out of the whole thing was using artists of color, right, taking folks work, I think in this case, if we're talking about the person I think that just happened recently, who basically was part of an art collective that was selling art for some progressive projects and taking that art without really paying real dues. I think they basically was like, hey, we'll give you a membership or something like that if we use your art to fundraise for something else.

**Eva**

Yeah. Fundraising. I think they were fundraising for COVID-19 relief efforts.

**Dr. Embrick**

Yeah. And it's just so vile, right. Because the ideas like this brings up—and what's not said or at least what I haven't read—and I think we should be talking about sort of the inherent ways in which this is sort of using both women and people of color in those kinds of ways are sexist and racist, at the very least. Right. Because it's like you wouldn't do that in the ways that you sort of celebrate or promote White artists, right, but you're able to say, hey, we'll give a gesture to sort of artists of color and promote the work. We're trying to do something else, but that's not what they're really doing, right? That's not really what they're doing.

So we see that at Art Institute of Chicago. I remember something will happen. Kind of a racial fissure will erupt and they'll have a few exhibits that come out talking about racism, but those exhibits will be like they won't be placed in well lit places that are heavily trodden by patrons. Right. They're in the middle of nowhere, right. They're like, at the edges and people kind of go in and out.

Are you doing that just so you can say, on paper, check a checklist, that okay, well, the museum has institutionalized, but we put up some of these exhibits because we care about racism without really training the docents to interact with the public, to really get into a discourse about how racism operates in Chicago or in the nation, or is it something else, right? I mean, that's just the

answer to your question, which was really long winded was like, I think there are things that we can do.

Are they really sort of effective? I think they're about as effective as we can sort of get without really truly dismantling things. Right. Do I think that the board is ever going to change? It's like asking the board of directors for a complete overhaul in the Fortune 500, Fortune 1000 companies, right, the corporate world—and museums are part of the corporate world, right. They're institutions, like anything else. They make the decisions and they fund and they get the money. We talk about individuals—there is sort of some intention that's there in their favor for maintaining these museums the way they are.

The great thing. The great thing is the one thing we're going to do this summer if it happens, fingers crossed for COVID, but Silvia—Dr. Dominguez—and I are going to go to—we have some things we're doing in Barcelona. And one of the things that we're going to do there is do some ethnographic work in the international museums. Like I said, museums in Spain and the museums there they operate completely different, but they're still colonial projects, very much so, very, more glaringly. But in a different way. And the comparative kind of look at how space is done and these sanctuaries are done on a global level is going to be quite interesting—so kind of excited about that.

### **Eva**

I'm definitely interested in that, too. I've done so much kind of looking at art museums here, but also, like you said, art museums are transnational. They're all over the place. This is a problem across the entire world. And I just have one more last question for you. And so you mentioned how artists are kind of like at the forefront of this. So why do you believe art is powerful enough to help kind of make these changes and either dismantle these institutions or somehow make them better?

### **Dr. Embrick**

When you say art, I mean, art can be many things. Right. So art doesn't have to be visual—it can be music—but I think one of the things that we sort of forget historically is like art is a way to communicate, right. It's a way to communicate between people, right. Within, kind of like within a group of people and also to communicate to sort of the outside world. Right. And if you think about—I always think about W.E.B. Du Bois who we, as scholars, we sort of focus on the academic kind of typical research articles and books that he may have written.

But Du Bois had many vehicles for pushing out his ideas and thoughts through poetry and through stories like narratives and the kind of short stories that we sort of hear nonfiction—I mean fiction, as well as nonfiction. But there's more to the reasons why he sort of engaged—partially, right. I mean partially—but partially—the other partial is that at the time, in order to get sort of messages out to the people who, one, in sort of dangerous terrain, writing about sort of issues of racism and White supremacy in a time in which legally that was sort of forbidden and there were consequences, how do you sort of convey those ideas in other ways?

Right. You can do it through other vehicles, right, whether it's music, whether it's visual. I mean, every day, you can sort of look at the way that music conveys debates and language and discourse to sort of people. The question is whether people get it right. I mean, you have an industry that takes protest music or takes serious music—art, music—and then repackages it as entertainment, right, and then you hear people singing songs that they don't know anything about. So there is that right. But again, that's not what I was saying. Unless we dismantle there's always going to be, like in a capitalist society, how even protest gets repackaged as sort of entertainment, then it does become effective? But then again, new people step up to the challenge and challenge that, right. That's my two cents.

**Eva**

Thank you so much for your time today, Dr. Embrick, and good luck. Fingers crossed that the summer works out.

**Dr. Embrick**

Oh, yeah, it'll happen. But, yeah, I'm kind of itching to go out sooner than later. Safety first. Alright. Thank you.

## Interview With Ms. Anne Rice Transcript

### Eva

Hello everyone and welcome back to *Museum Talk*. I'm your host, Eva and with me today is Anne Rice. Ms. Rice is the Director of Education at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art located in Hartford, Connecticut. She has previously worked at institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Brooklyn Museum of Art in New York City. So, hello Ms. Rice and thank you for joining me today. Can you tell me a little bit about your role as the Director of Education?

### Ms. Anne Rice

Hi, Eva. Thank you for having me. Yeah, I've been Director of Education at the Wadsworth since 2016, but I've been working at the Wadsworth—I ran public programs—and I started here in 2005. So I've been here a while. In the Education Department, we run programs for students: PreK-12, college students, like you, and faculty: both, PreK, higher ed, and PreK-12. We run public programs, so programs for all audiences, community programs, programs specifically for family groups, and we have a docent program as well, so we have about 85 docents who are doing a lot of our school tours and visitor services is also with the Education Department.

### Eva

Awesome. Thank you for that. So to kind of get just into the nitty gritty just overall, how do you think racism and discrimination affect how people view and participate in art museums?

### Ms. Rice

We have been thinking and talking a lot about that question. I think museums have historically been places where marginalized voices and people don't feel as welcome as museums would like them to feel and need them to feel; they've felt, or believed, museums to be spaces where they're not welcome all the time. So we're doing all we can to make our museum a place where everyone feels welcome through the front door, in our exhibition spaces, and in our programs, so we're thinking very proactively about how to change that feeling of a barrier for entry in many different ways.

### Eva

Looking at those barriers, what kind of policies or plan has the Wadsworth, or specifically the Education Department, implemented to kind of break down these barriers and as well promote diversity and inclusion?

### Ms. Rice

Yeah. So this past, let's see this past about a year and a half, we've been working on strategic planning alongside diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility plan. So kind of marrying those

two plans together and thinking of them as part and parcel of each other so that we're not like trying to think about DEAI separately from our strategic goals in the museum. So we're talking about everything from staff: from recruiting staff, retaining staff, sustaining staff of color. We're thinking about our collections and collecting practices where, again, historically marginalized artists were not always included.

So thinking about our exhibitions and collecting and also thinking about programming. So when we think about programming, we work very closely with the curatorial team, and we have done and will be planning to do more of creating community advisory groups around exhibition development so that we're reaching out and including people not just in across the nation, but in our local communities, to think about how to make exhibitions more relevant, more inclusive, more accessible, so that we're responding to a variety of needs, of age, of ability, of community, of perspective, a variety of voices.

**Eva**

Why is it important that, specifically, the Education Department is looking to implement these policies and these efforts—especially since you said it ranges from visitor services to the work that you do working with the curatorial staff? Does it start with the Education Department? Do these policies kind of, like, bloom out from there?

**Ms. Rice**

I think that's a really great question. I've been in museums and you found my bio, I guess before we talked, I've been in museums my entire adult life and I do think that these efforts often start in education departments because we are working so closely with the public, and that is the space that we thrive in. It's the space we want to be in. It's the space where dialogue and conversation are happening, so art is the catalyst for these conversations, and it's our job. It's what excites us about doing this work that we're able to promote these dialogues and support these dialogues through the vehicle of art.

So it's not always necessarily about learning about history, but using art as a space for dialogue—and that's just something we love to do. So I feel like it's built into education departments, built in a way that it has been maybe for longer than in curatorial departments, but I think that curatorial staffs are also recognizing how critical it is to be creating exhibitions and exhibition spaces that promote these conversations that reflect current events, that reflect what's impacting people's lives today. In order for museums to stay relevant in the future, we have to be a place that people want to come.

**Eva**

No, I agree. And you mentioned the vehicle of art: why do you believe in this power of art to help kind of facilitate these changes? What is so important? What is so prominent about just art

in general that can help kind of shift and shape these museums into what we want them to be in the future?

**Ms. Rice**

Yeah. Well, art has always been an expression of its time where humans are creatively expressing what they're experiencing; and I think in the past there was a selection of voices that represented that history and we're thinking more proactively now about whose voices were represented in museums and how we can change that narrative so that we are including in our spaces a variety of voices and thoughts and opinions.

Art, especially you think about art from the 60s as being a little bit more, it started showing a little bit more activism. Art is a time capsule of what we, as human beings, are feeling and being able to look at art together from the past and from the present. We're able to appreciate each other's perspectives more.

**Eva**

Especially with the recent rise, I want to say of art activism. Art activism, I feel like it's always been prominent, especially like you said in the 60s, but I feel like now kind of with everything that has happened in the past couple of years there is this rise. There are a lot of different protests happening at organizations like in New York City that are kind of challenging the way that these museums operate.

And just my last question for you today is, what do you think the future of art museums looks like? How do you think they're going to operate? How are these changes that are being made now? How is it going to change how and if people feel welcome in these spaces who may not have felt welcome before?

**Ms. Rice**

Yeah, that's a great question, and I think we're taking this time to be really reflective and think about who we are. What do museums and what can museums mean for their communities? I think a lot of museums have international reputations, and they're always going to have collections that people want to come to and see. But in terms of programming and also exhibitions, I think that museums can be spaces that promote and encourage these conversations about our lives. And in order to have a future, I think museums need to find themselves in that space and think creatively about including everyone. So it's a super exciting time, it's a challenging time as we think more creatively about programming and expanding the narrative.

**Eva**

It makes sense. What have you been working on—just one more last question—what have you been working on directly? Like, what changes that are being made in the Wadsworth that you are seeing are being successful and are kind of like moving towards this future of art museums?

**Ms. Rice**

Well, I think we talked, I mentioned advisory groups, and I think that as we develop exhibitions and think about ways of connecting with arts and culture organizations and communities that are around us, bringing in more people at the outset as we develop together is a wonderful way of building relationships and thinking about the multidisciplinary spaces that art museums can be. So we're not just about the art on the walls: we can be about dance and music and poetry and song and performance. So we've always been working in the Education Department and throughout the museum with community and culture organizations, but I think leaning into that even more in the future it's a very productive and wonderful way of becoming a bigger place for everyone.

**Eva**

Makes sense. Thank you so much for talking with me today, especially as a hopeful future museum educator. I really appreciate you sharing your thoughts and looking forward to kind of seeing what's going to come from the Wadsworth in coming years.

**Ms. Rice**

Thank you.

## Interview With Dr. Xiao Situ Transcript

### Eva

Hello everyone and welcome back to *Museum Talk*. I'm your host Eva and with me today is Dr. Xiao Situ. Dr. Situ is an independent scholar and teacher who received her Master's and her Ph.D. from Yale University in the History of Art. Her work focuses on art, spirituality, and the aesthetics of everyday life. As a woman of color who has worked in the museum setting, Dr. Situ has experienced firsthand the gaps between these institutions' claims of diversity and inclusion and their actions. So hello, and thank you for being here with me today. And can you just explain to me a little bit about how you think racism has become ingrained in art history?

### Dr. Xiao Situ

Well, art history as the discipline began as, well, there are some differing scholarly opinions. Some would say that it started in Italy during the Renaissance with Vasari, and others would say the German discipline that arose in the 19th century. So as disciplines, that began in European disciplines, ingrained in that are the histories—the context in which those places are wrapped up in. So I think from the beginning it's sort of the discipline itself focused on the Western Canon and has people who studied art history who are the shapers of that discipline, depending on the period, has certain ideas of different regions, works of art, different cultures, works of art.

So it's largely European centered. Not that other places didn't have aesthetic ways of studying aesthetics, but it just wasn't called art history, and it wasn't sort of established as a field of study. But within University systems, universities as a discipline, art history is a European discipline. I think within it, racism is a part of global history, and it's a part of colonialism and imperialism. So it's kind of embedded in that larger history.

### Eva

How has this become embedded in our art museums and our art institutions? Since there is, like this Western Canon, kind of already embedded in the discipline itself. How has this translated into these institutions that are supposed to reflect and show different cultures, different styles, different techniques from supposed to be all around the world, but oftentimes is more Westernized and Western focused?

### Dr. Situ

Well, I mean, the museum as an institution, as an institution is embedded in colonialism and you started as sort of a venue or a place or an idea that collects and educates the public about other cultures. So as a definition, like within its own history, the museum as a kind of institution began out of the colonial context. So in that sense, it has that embedded in sort of the principle of racism, although at that time they might not have thought of it as racism. It's got that embedded in it.

And in different histories of the museum, like within its development, museums were used to educate the populace, in how, in civilizing frameworks or educating the working class to have ideals of behavior, how to behave towards art, and how to be a member of a civic society—and it kind of is not just about race, but it's also about class. So, for example, in the 19th century, some British museums would be open on Sundays to the working class, so that people who worked during the week would be able to visit the museums on Sunday, a day off, as a way of civilizing them, but also as a way to give them aesthetic space: space to think and look at aesthetic and experience aesthetic objects, almost as a way of countering the labor intensiveness of the work week or as a way of opening up their horizons in terms of the manner in which they're thinking, not just working with their hands, but also being able to engage in almost like an aesthetic consciousness.

So I mean, in some ways that's looking back at it, that's just really well intentioned, but it's also at the same time a means of shaping a working class or lower class population to be in a certain idea—to fit a certain idea—of what civility is. Yeah, so I feel like it's very complicated in that way and that's continued, I think.

### **Eva**

I spoke with Dr. Embrick, who is a part of the faculty here at UConn, and he was talking about different mechanisms that art museums use; so the wall text, and like you said, back in the day only having certain days open or when museums have, like, free hours or pay what you want, it's often not at convenient times for just kind of, like everyday people or working class people. So just these little things that people may not recognize as that they're establishing these different social classes. I feel like, I personally think that's one of the ways I've been able to kind of keep—the words are escaping me—but just like, keep that institutionalized, like, “oh, we're just for this one class of people for the majority of the time, but every once in a while, like, you're working class or lower class, you can come into our space.” So just upholding that divide, which is problematic.

### **Dr. Situ**

Yeah and I also feel like it happens the moment you enter into the space because I've seen, well myself when I was younger, too, but more and more as I was working on the other side, less of an audience member and more visitor and more on the side of staff, I've noticed that certain people come in and they feel like they have to act differently. Sometimes I've heard students—they just take on a different comportment—like this is a classy space, but it's also a space where it's like surveilled because there are security guards everywhere, and there's a certain way where rules are established at the beginning.

But you can't touch this art because you don't want to damage it, and you have to be very careful—which is all very useful—but sometimes I feel like it is, it is like a different, like some

visitors coming in already the body language changes in the sense of being surveilled. Surveillance changes depending on how that lobby area is sort of choreographed. If people, even visitor services, even think about that, or even curators or people who are higher up in management, that the space itself from the moment you enter can really affect whether the visitor feels—how they feel in relation to the space. Like, is this a space of surveillance? Is this a space of “do I feel like welcomed in a space, in as much of my wholeness as possible?” So over the years I've noticed this, but it's really been since a child right, there socialized.

**Eva**

Yeah, I've been going to art museums and all kinds of museums since I was younger and, now I haven't thought about it, but it makes sense whenever I would go, my parents would be like, “oh, make sure you dress nicely.” And that's just like, oh, even now, I'm going to go to an art museum I have to make sure I look the part.

**Dr. Situ**

Which is what will happen if you don't?

**Eva**

In reality, nothing. But there's just this little like, oh, you're going to this “classy institution,” if you want to call it that. Do you mind speaking just a little bit more about your own experiences and the gaps you noticed between art museums' DEI efforts and how BIPOC staff and guests have been treated?

**Dr. Situ**

Yeah. I think this is one of the things that concerns me the most, not from the side of the visitors, but on the side of staff, although they are connected. What I've noticed, what I've experienced, is that a lot of on the ground staff—meaning security guards and lower level staff within curator departments, curatorial departments, but also within education departments—they usually are the most ethnically, racially, all kinds of diverse representation and they do a lot of work with visitors. I mean, they have the most face to face time with visitors, but often when exhibitions come on or they explore, like staff, these lower level staff, notice something and they bring it up.

I mean, even bringing it up can become like a frightening thing to do. It's like there's a disconnect between upper management and museum head staff, like directors and senior curators. There seems to be a kind of gap between the higher level and then on the ground staff that actually interact with people. And this is the kind of communication that—and the values—I think seem to me very, there's a huge gap between that, like, either on the ground staff concerns are not really addressed, especially concerns about certain exhibitions that could be offensive or could be sort of exploitative in a way or not really, that it would really the exhibitions, the artwork, the way that it's framed in an exhibition, not sometimes just the art but it's like the lack

of framing or the framing that's unaligned with the visitors to go—who might go—especially school children, that either senior staff do not take that seriously, or they just it's almost like I feel like they don't really respect, recognize, and actually appreciate the resource there and the real life experience that on the ground staff have and share and the knowledge that they have about racial experiences. About experiences that have wider ramifications for the larger population, because many of these people might not be the ones that the museum is thinking about in terms of, like, financial influence or social influence, but they are a large population.

The people who come, you know, like, for one example, is when there's an exhibition on, in one of the museums I worked at, there were a couple of members of staff who raised concerns about how the exhibition was framed because it was an exhibition that showed images of the neighborhood and about of people in the neighborhood. And it just wasn't framed in a way that—was not sufficiently framed because the photograph seemed to show a very bleak, very pessimistic, a very sort of stereotype, you know, typical image of people in the neighborhood of what this neighborhood is like or what the city is like.

I think that it could have used more rigorous framing so that audiences understand better and more clearly what the artists' intentions were and with the work that was made, so that it doesn't come across that these photographs are taken on the sly, to understand where the artist is coming from, so that the artworks themselves are better framed so that people understand. But there was very little text, you know, there was very little explanation, It's just kind of not enough, so that when I did have school groups come, they were kind of weirded out. They were like, "Well, I know this person in this photograph, I know this neighborhood, I know this street," but it wasn't like, "wow, I'm in this Museum. Isn't that amazing?"

### **Eva**

It was more like questioning.

### **Dr. Situ**

Yeah, questioning: "Was this artist watching us? Are we being watched?" And I think there was also misunderstanding, like when I did bring this up, staff members who are maybe less, who never had the experience of being racially stereotyped said, "Well, maybe, but it's wonderful because how cool it is. They're in this world class museum." And I'm like, but that's the issue they're thinking, "why is this white dominant, white, culturally dominant museum, this white space: why are images of people I know in it without knowing they're in it?"

So it was like a different way of looking at it where there was a disconnect—and I wasn't the only one who brought that up. It was brought up several times in the process of the exhibition, and then I don't get to see it until afterwards because I was lower level [staff], but didn't seem to be important enough to whoever makes decisions about exhibitions to listen to us and our concerns.

So that when these groups did come, and it wasn't just the school groups, I mean, people in the city were like, "This is weird. This is such a bleak view of our city."

One of the interns said that, too. She went to the reception opening, and one of the other attendees learned that she grew up in the city in this photographic show, and the visitor learned that she was going to college the next year, and she said to her, "oh, so you got out." And then the intern said to me, "I think that was a microaggression." This is what I mean, like, the damage could be prevented and it could be more, like framed, in a more enriching way. That was like, there's just so much potential there, but there's almost sort of a sense of, like, suppressing that or just not paying attention to that. Well, for me, I can't speak for anyone, I'm speaking for me, but I think that perspectives like mine, it's not our job to do this, but we're doing it as, you know, just because I have that knowledge and that experience, it's not taking anything out because I'm not important enough. I don't know how we got to this point, but that's one of the experiences that I've had quite a few times.

**Eva**

I think sometimes visitors don't realize that when you're entering an art museum, that the exhibition is, more times than not, trying to steer you towards understanding it in a certain way, like there's a certain narrative that they are trying to portray. And when you don't have a diverse upper management, you don't have diversity like your curators and your directors, like you said, the experiences that you have where it completely goes over their head and they're like, "no, this is the way that it's supposed to be." And I think through, kind of, what I've been doing with this project that's what I've noticed is that there's this disconnect because these art museums claim to be so diverse and to work towards welcoming all people and everything. But yet, their boards are, more often than not, just a big group of white men and women. It's like, how can this group speak to the experiences of the art that you're trying to show?

**Dr. Situ**

Exactly, and what is it that is the art really substantively being? Because art has so much potential—it doesn't matter what kind of art—it has so much potential to do lots of great things. But it's the framing, it's how it's framed. Who is it being framed for? Sometimes I feel like even when a museum or curator says that the exhibition is for all these people, do they know people from these communities?

**Eva**

Are they holding focus groups or something?

**Dr. Situ**

Right. Do they have a relationship? It means a relationship from people in these communities. What do you mean, like it's for everybody, like, for everybody and from your perspective? Or really truly doing relationships that are meaningful and genuine. I think there's someone that was talking about security guards and lower level staff—and I include curators, too—curators who are not seniors that don't have as close a tie to the director level and the board level, I feel like they try very hard to really do good things with their work, but it's this disconnect. There's some gap, and then the middle management, often they try to change things, too, but there is something about the very upper level. There are barriers there and the board.

**Eva**

And I just have one last question for you today: what do you think the future of art museums looks like? Obviously, we are in a big, I want to say, time period of social change. There have been a lot of people protesting, putting pressure on these institutions to change in some way. So I guess my first question, do you think what's happening now is successful? And if so, how will these institutions operate in the future?

**Dr. Situ**

I don't know how to answer that question because honestly, I've actually stopped going to museums because I feel like—not that I feel that they're all bad—but for doing a bad job, but because I feel so alienated from them, from my time with them, that it actually hurts for me to go into a museum space. The only time I go is when I have friends or colleagues who work in them and, in that way, I feel like there is a personal connection and there's almost like a level of trust in them and therefore I will go.

Or when I go, I really prepare myself to really be emotionally—distance my own experiences working in them to more of like I'm a visitor. In that way, it kind of decreases the stress of it. But the thing that I do see that's positive that's happening and I have a lot of hope for that I've seen like a lot of my friends, many who are people of color are Black, Indigenous, People of Color, are being hired in curator positions and administrative positions, and I know that they have some perspectives that are critically informed and that they are taking on roles that are increasing—there's more power and decision making power, basically, than what I had when I was working in museums.

So that gives me a lot of hope. And my hope is that they retain those ideals and that critical perspective and vision, because I think sometimes what happens is that the higher up you go, the more power you have, there are more constraints. And to some degree, it's almost like your soul has been given over to the soul of the institution, and I think that—what I hope—is that their integrity and their vision is used in a critical way, where to better the institution, that they remain critical and to hold their institution accountable.

So that is what I'm hoping. So that's just me because of my generation of scholars and curators that I have hope for it. I still think that there's something about, like, boards that really have to change. It has to increase in diversity and maybe even like, if maybe a separation between the money and what the museum is doing, you know, like where the money is coming from, that they don't get to dictate how they want the museum to be necessarily. I don't know if that makes sense, but sometimes I feel like the money can go to the institution, but maybe like the institution itself or the staff. There's a tie between money and how that money is geared towards that particular donor's vision is too closely—the ethics sort of becomes almost like a philanthropic imperialism that happens to the institution.

**Eva**

No, I agree. I think that's one of my biggest issues is seeing, with the boards and the money, it's like, does no one else really recognize—people are recognizing that it is an issue, but it's like, what is it going to take for there to be an actual change—between—with that? And, unfortunately, who knows?

**Dr. Situ**

Yeah. I mean, I don't know what I think future museums will—I think museums will still have a future because they're very used, like, they're so important to culture and to cities, to wherever they are. But I think the potential good that can come out of them really is determined by how willing whoever makes the decision to allow more diverse decision makers, not just workers, but decision makers in higher levels, to have ownership over the content and the way things are framed.

**Eva**

I agree. Well, thank you so much for your time, Dr. Situ. I really appreciate you sharing your thoughts and your experiences with me today.

**Dr. Situ**

Thank you for interviewing me and good luck with everything.

## Interview With Dr. Elena Gonzalez Transcript

### Eva

Hello everyone and welcome back to *Museum Talk*. I'm your host Eva and with me today Dr. Elena Gonzales. Dr. Gonzales is a scholar, curator, and the author of the book *Exhibitions for Social Justice*, which looks at the role of curating for social justice in American and European institutions. She also served as the curator for the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago and has held teaching roles at Brown University and Northwestern University. So hello, Dr. Gonzalez, thank you for being here with me today. To start us off, can you just tell me a little bit more about your book *Exhibitions for Social Justice*?

### Dr. Elena Gonzalez

Of course, and thank you so much for having me. It's my pleasure to be with you today. So my book, excuse me, is all about the ways that we can use the space inside the gallery to work for social justice. That is to say, to work for the equitable distribution of risks and rewards in society. And I look at a few different, large clusters of tactics for doing this: building empathy between individuals and subjects and exhibitions, and then parlaying that into solidarity among groups, helping visitors to create long standing memories that then, in turn, they can draw upon to actually take action in their everyday lives, actually inspiring visitors to take action, whether it be before, during, after, or even long after an exhibition is closed. And then last, but definitely not least, how do we change the institutional culture and the framework within which all of this museum, all this curatorial work, is taking place so that we actually can do the best work that we can. So how do we make our institutions more welcoming, more inclusive, more multivocal, and sort of what are the structures there?

### Eva

What made you interested in this area of research? How did you get into it and kind of find your way to this path?

### Dr. Gonzalez

Yeah, well, I've always loved museums very much. I'm not one of those people who wants to burn all the museums to the ground, even though I am under my sweater wearing my #MuseumsAreNotNeutral t-shirt. I grew up going to museums here in Chicago, where I grew up, and I really always wanted to work in a museum, but I didn't really see for a long time—I didn't see the way that would translate into doing the best work in the world that I could. And as I learned more and started to think about the potential for exhibitions to serve as a vehicle for

social justice work, I realized that maybe I could realize the dream of doing the best work that I could in the world and also working in a museum at the same time—and that's sort of where that came from. I first really dug into museum research as a high schooler, doing a project for the Chicago Metro History Fair on the history of the Field Museum, and I fell in love with that kind of research pretty quick.

**Eva**

That's so interesting. That's definitely what I'm looking to do. I am the same as you: I grew up going to museums, I love art museums, but I do have my issues with them. So just trying to figure out a way to make these institutions better. Can you just tell me a little bit about your experiences serving as a curator for the National Museum of Mexican Art? And when you were doing curating, what did you want to do specifically in your shows to make sure visitors were having a positive experience in taking away just kind of the message that you were attempting to portray?

**Dr. Gonzalez**

Yeah, so my first ever curatorial project was the project that I did for the NMMA, and I did one curatorial project for them, and that was really a very special experience for me for a couple of reasons. One was that the Director of Visual Arts and the lead curator Cesáreo Moreno really taught me how to do curatorial work. I'm very grateful for that. It was part of a larger project called *The African Presence in Mexico*—so this large project was telling the story of 400 years of history that had essentially been swept under the rug and concealed for these racist reasons.

And we had a big steering committee for the project that was half mostly Mexican staff members and half African American leaders from around the cultural sector in the area; and this group asked specifically that we curate a second show—and ultimately a third show although I didn't work on that one as much—but that we curate a second show that had to do with the relationships between Mexicans and African Americans in the United States and between African Americans and the country of Mexico. And so that was the job that I took on.

And I took it very seriously. It was a time when these groups were really being pitted against one another around the country, and we saw the potential to sort of counter that with a narrative about collaboration, which has really been like long term over the long history of the last almost 200 years. And so one of the things that I did was—I really started from that point, right—like, how can

we bring these groups together and how can we illustrate this shared history that is productive and helpful? How can this exhibition do real helpful work?

And so I started looking for stories that would help with that, and I found a number of them. One of which was about the underground railroad going to Mexico during the 35 years, sort of generation or so where Mexico was a free country and the United States was not—which makes a lot of natural sense when you think about it. If you're closer to the Mexican border and that's a free space, why would you not go south? But it's something a lot of people don't know about.

And I also talked about people supporting each other's resistance movements and sort of recognizing their shared history in various ways. I talked about political participation, the Rainbow Coalition in Chicago and really collaborations across the country. At that time, the Mayor of LA was being elected with a shared coalition as well. Actually, I was fortunate enough to learn much later on, many years later, that there was a researcher, a sociologist whose work had been influenced by this project in a positive way and I was really, really excited to hear that because those long term stories are really hard to come by.

### **Eva**

That's amazing. Yeah. That's really cool. It's interesting as I've been doing this project, talking to different people and just talking about the mechanisms that art museums employ that visitors may not always realize uphold certain racist views, sexist views, views that may or things that may seem exclusionary towards certain groups. So it is just interesting. It's exciting to hear that there are people who are working and trying to actually make these exhibitions for everyone and listen to the people who will be receiving this information. Since you have worked in an art museum, in your opinion, basically, what are museums doing wrong right now in regards to diversity and inclusion? They seem to keep getting it wrong, and just how's that happening?

### **Dr. Gonzalez**

Oh, my goodness. Well, that is a big question. I did a lot of brainstorming before this talk because I wanted to kind of pin down some of these issues. Let's see here. I'm going back over because it's very big. It is very big. I think that in a nutshell, you asked about some of the roots of the problems in art history, and I think that's really where that conversation needs to go, because basically, we have this art history that is kind of racist at its core that features white, wealthy, male voices who have decided what mattered and who have valued everything according to their own interests over the long course of history and white standards of beauty that have been

enshrined at the highest levels through this process, white art history classes and textbooks, and that all has sort of funneled into creating these white centric museums.

And I should say it's not just about race, right. Like, there are many other directions in which prejudice takes place and is visible inside of the art museum as an institution. So what is the art museum doing wrong? Well, the art museum in a lot of cases—and I should say there are a lot of places that are doing a lot of things right, like, there are a lot of art museums where people really are trying to turn around ships that have been headed in one direction for a long time, or in the case of culturally specific museums like the NMMA, places that are actually doing a great job and have from the beginning.

But when you get sort of historically white, predominantly white art museums and you look at their practice, it is about upholding this long history and not questioning what's going on. So a lot of times, what you need is for these institutions to take a close look at every facet of their operations, from hiring supportive staff, interpretation, collecting, really every part and say, “okay, where is prejudice present here? Where is white supremacist sort of thinking present here? And how can we revise this structure appropriately?” And this is something I'm actively encouraging the Chicago History Museum to do right now, which is where I'm working right now doing a curatorial project for them.

And I realized they're not an art museum, but this is a process that a lot of different museums are going through, and many, many more are avoiding. The MASS Action, Museums As a Site for Social Action, has created a toolkit that's free online that is available to help museums do precisely this project. And it is not a project with a finite endpoint; it's really about a shifting way of life for museum institutions. And so once you start going down this rabbit hole and changing systems, changing policies and procedures, changing, maybe mission statements, maybe big strategic plans, all of those things should be implicated.

And they shouldn't just be implicated, like during, let's say, the 24 month period where you're going through this MASS Action toolkit, they should be implicated down the road permanently. So it's a new lens for really, like, ongoing examination as we start a new project: How can we make sure that this project is inclusive? How can we make sure this project is accessible? Whose voices are in the project? Whose voices are not? Is that appropriate? As we think about partners, like, how do we determine who the partners are? All those things are relevant. I apologize if that was a messy answer. Very tidy question.

**Eva**

You kind of answered my next question because I was going to ask you what can be done to change museums, because, like you said, you're someone who doesn't want to burn all museums to the ground—and I'm the same way. I do think that museums do have this opportunity to change. It's a matter of it actually being implemented and followed through, and like you said, not just like, “oh, we're going to do this for a couple of years” and then revert back.

**Dr. Gonzalez**

I do want to address that question a little more specifically, too, because I think that's so important that there are some specific steps that I just want to highlight. Which is to say, like, hire differently, value expertise differently, staff the board differently. So a lot of times the board is like this excuse for not changing: “oh, the board won't like that,” “oh, there's resistance from the board.” The board needs to be on board, right. If you're going to have an institution that is, not even to say, working for social justice, but that is anti racist or that is inclusive, those things cannot fly under the radar. Those need to be accepted at the highest levels. So then it's about, like I was saying, rewriting the governing rules, the vision, the strategic plan to make sure that those are on target with this agreed upon goal, whatever that may be, however big that may be for the institution reviewing and cleaning up those institutional culture, the policies, the systems, and also collecting differently, interpreting and presenting differently in accordance with those same ideals, top to bottom, side to side.

**Eva**

That definitely makes a lot of sense. It'll be interesting in the next few years to see kind of what's coming out of this moment right now because there have been a bunch of protests happening, especially in the [New York] City, with regards to the Whitney Museum of American Art, also, the Museum of Modern Art—kind of all with this idea of art activism and getting these institutions to recognize the ways in which their shows may even be harmful to some visitors. And my question for you is just do you think that these protests and this sort of art activism is helping in a way? Because oftentimes, there will be these protests and the museums release a statement like, “oh, we acknowledge, we're sorry,” and then that's kind of it.

**Dr. Gonzalez**

Yeah, I definitely think that there is more of this sort of, like posturing that attends scrutiny of a museum where the museum will do some lip service and that's kind of it and they hope that the attention goes away—but I don't think that means that the activism is misplaced or not working. I

do think also that protests of museums and activist efforts to change museums are absolutely working. Think about the efforts of Decolonize This Place. For example, at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, they successfully lobbied for some reinterpretation that did happen.

Likewise, at the Whitney, Warren Kanders did resign after those protests in 2019. And I would say, in my own tiny corner of the world, that's exactly what I'm dealing with in my project that I'm working on. So I'm curating a project about the Latino third of Chicago, the Latinx third of Chicago, and it's a direct response to protests from high school students from a predominantly Latinx high school called Rudy Lozano High School, or IJLA here in Chicago. And the students came into the Museum, they saw that their entire set of communities that makes up a third of the city was not represented.

They protested the museum and the museum, to their credit, said, “We hear you. We want to work with you to make a new project. What is it that you want?” The students responded with desires to undertake this exhibition project—and here we are doing our very best to create it collaboratively with them and other partners. So I don't want to say that would never have happened without the protest, but it wasn't like on the horizon. So I absolutely encourage protest. And I also want to say the students and alumni who I'm working with on this project, their resistance to the museum is going to form the center of the exhibition.

And it's going to be a way of talking about—we're really going to talk about resistance and about the way that their project has built on so many other resistance movements from within different Latinx communities in Chicago. And one of the things that I'd like visitors to come away with is the sense that if they are so inspired to make a difference in their community or in an institution in their area, they can. Change does happen when people come together and speak truth to power, and you can make a change from within. I believe in change from within. I don't know if that makes me overly idealistic, but there you have it. I would be, like, devastated and too sad to work if I didn't believe in that.

### **Eva**

When I've been doing this project and kind of thinking about what I want to do with my future and my career, I also so heavily believe that we can, like, we as a public—those who want to see these institutions change—can work together in some way to make these changes, because the art

museums, museums in general, are supposed to be for the people, for the community. It's how are these spaces going to be for the community if they're actively not?

**Dr. Gonzalez**

And it's important to remember that any museum that takes any government money whatsoever, like state, federal or local money, those are taxpayer funded institutions and those are institutions that belong to all of the folks in a given area. Right. So it's not fair to have a museum take federal dollars and then say, but “ah, we're only going to represent white Americans,” or “we're only going to represent straight male Americans” or whatever it is. That's just not fair.

**Eva**

And then just my last question for you today is, what do you think the future of museums look like? I said, we're kind of going through this big moment of change. So what do you think is going to happen in the future with these institutions?

**Dr. Gonzalez**

Oh, I mean, like I said, I'm an idealist at heart, and I'm an optimist, so I think that the future of museums, if museums indeed have a future—which I certainly hope that they do—is Black, Brown and Indigenous, just like the country's future. I think that the future of museums is less about ownership and less about objects and more about people and relationships. I think it's less about expertise that is academic in nature and more about collaboration and lived experience. And I think history is going to bear me out here, because if we look at the way that the nation is changing and we look at the way that our cities, where we encounter a lot of the big art museums that we're talking about are changing, these spaces are not going to sustain exclusive, white patriarchal institutions. They're just not. Those institutions will absolutely die out if they do not begin to speak to a broader public—and that's just sort of basic dollars and cents. That's not even on ethical grounds, which, of course, ethically—we've already talked about that—but I think that we will see museums change. They have been changing for a very long time, but very, very slowly. And I think we will see in the next 20 years that change pickup.

**Eva**

It's exciting.

**Dr. Gonzalez**

I hope, fingers crossed.

**Eva**

Yeah. I hope in my lifetime I'm able to see some of this change. And like you said, it is happening now, so it will be interesting to see kind of how these institutions progress into the future. But thank you so much for your time. Thank you for sharing your experiences and your thoughts with me. I really appreciate it.

**Dr. Gonzalez**

It has been my pleasure. Thank you so much for having me.

## Interview With Dr. Melissa Crum Transcript

### Eva

Hello everyone and welcome back to *Museum Talk*. I'm your host Eva and with me today is Dr. Melissa Crum. Dr. Crum is an artist, author, researcher, and founder of the consulting company, Mosaic Education Network, LLC. This company infuses the arts, research, storytelling, and critical thinking into professional development, community building, and curriculum development. Additionally, Dr. Crum received her Bachelor's in Visual Arts from the University of Florida, her Master's in African-American and African Studies from The Ohio State University, as well as her Ph.D in Art Administration, Education, and Policy from Ohio State.

So, hello Dr. Crum, thank you for speaking with me today! Can you tell me a little more about your background and what made you interested in this area of research?

### Dr. Melissa Crum

Absolutely. Thank you, thank you for having me. So to make a long story short, I started wanting to be a digital animator and really started thinking about the power of images and how that shapes stories for people who are not like us, but also people who are in whatever identity groups we put ourselves in; and so I started really thinking about what does it mean to utilize imagery to help us rethink what we understand to be true? And so my work has been around thinking about how might that work—how might we utilize critical thinking and storytelling and images to rethink what we think about other groups of folks and how that can be integrated in the work that we do, whether that is what kind of managers or supervisors we are, or what kind of teachers we are, what kind of docent we are—when we're choosing what artwork to highlight in our tour or avoid, so all of those things show up.

### Eva

Thank you. Yeah, that's actually a perfect segue into my next question because art museums are these established institutions and, I've talked about this with a couple of my other guests, how a lot of times art museums are portrayed as being like “the truth” and that we're just supposed to look and understand—and that's completely wrong, that's not what they're there for. So based on your background and how you want to go into this and how art museums can be these problematic institutions, how has, in your opinion, racism become ingrained in our art history? And how has this affected museums? Like, how have you seen this affect museums in the way people approach these institutions?

**Dr. Crum**

Yeah, I think there's a couple of ways we can think about how that works. So I think first we can look at how we even structure museums. So, for example, it's common in museums to separate Egyptian art from African art. Right. But Egypt is in Africa. What is this about separating a country from a continent like, we don't say like, just Congolese art, we don't separate it out. So what is that history that we haven't dug into that is saying that somehow this area of this continent should be elevated in certain kinds of ways—and oftentimes the unspoken justification is what people are saying as Greece's influence. So thinking about essentially the ways in which we can point out certain ideas of Whiteness showing up in this Black space, and often we don't think about North Africa as black, or particularly Egypt as Black, but when we think about Kemet—when we think about what was it called before Greece was involved in that space—but it was the land of the Black, like, that's what that meant. It was still Africa. And so what is the unspoken way in which White supremacy can show up in how we just simply structure a museum?

And I think what's important is how we understand White supremacy, because sometimes we just think about Neo Nazis and Ku Klux Klan and hate hate, and that's the part of it, but that's the extreme version. But it's really when we think about White supremacy and museums, it's about how we are centering whiteness. So I think the physical structure. I think the other thing is how we talk about art; and so I feel like it's particularly in contemporary artwork, as a person of color, you almost have to—the unspoken rule is you have to reference a White artist to kind of talk about your art. So you, Kehinde Wiley, have to reference, like, you have to reference a Eurocentric way of creating or a style or an image to kind of talk about your work. So the ways in which we have to kind of contextualize artwork within the scope of Whiteness, it becomes really important. But what happens when we intentionally reference what else was going on in the world outside of that time period? Right. So we talk about, let's say, what was going on during Romanticism in Europe, but what was going on in Ethiopia? They were still creating. Like, what was going on in Colombia? What were they doing? Can we reference those items? Or what was going on in Thailand? Or what were Indigenous people in Australia doing? Why can't we reference those? Because if we want to reference a time period or a particular style, we don't always have to contextualize it within a Eurocentric lens. But there's an unspoken rule that we have to do that. So I think when we start to interrogate the ways in which Whiteness gets centered and why we do that, we can start to think about is that the only way for us to think about art and think about how to explain it and talk about it in particular ways?

**Eva**

Yeah, I definitely agree. I've been working on this—I did a research project over the summer, and now I'm working on this as part of my Honors Thesis for my program, and I was looking at the Frick Collection because it's a Renaissance Art Gallery and the Renaissance is very Eurocentric. And I remember looking and I was trying to see any discussions or what people were saying about Black artists during this time, like, where are the Black artists in Renaissance art? And I couldn't find anything. And so then I started looking more and I was looking at the Uffizi Gallery and they are starting a new thing, or I don't know if they're still doing it, but I know at one time they were looking to do an exhibition all about Black artists during the Renaissance and what they were doing. And it's like, why can't they just be included? Why have they been left out: racism and the Eurocentric view of art. But it's just frustrating because, you know, those stories are there; and especially going into Museum spaces and just seeing the way the curators throw it together, it's just like, oh, there's so much more that could be done here, and yet, like you said, they're only referencing Europe. So I guess like a follow up to that is that recently the social climate is changing, and there's been a lot of protests when it comes to art, specifically at the Whitney Museum of American Art or MoMA, the Modern Museum of Art in New York, and do you think these protests are helpful in starting to change the way museums are viewing—how they're presenting their art and how there are any policies that they're implementing?

**Dr. Crum**

Well, first, in general, I think protests can be helpful, but they're helpful when they're a part of other activities. So oftentimes protests in and of themselves aren't helpful. So protests usually bring attention to something and so once attention has been gotten, then there are other things that then happen that are in place. And so if folks who are organizing people to protest also have the ear of people in power or get the ear of people in power, and then they have identified what the policies and practices are that need to be shifted, or they have suggestions or they have ways in which things need to happen and they can identify what those things are, or they can work collaboratively, and then we can think about what that process is. Then that tends to be where we start seeing actual change, but just protest in and of itself: you draw attention to it and like, now what? That's not oftentimes what most people are doing—I shouldn't say most people—oftentimes folks have a set of demands or are clear about what change can look like. And so change can only happen when people in power decide to. And that's one of those inconvenient truths. Right.

So you have to be able to leverage your collective power to influence the power in the space that you're trying to shift. And so when that happens, of course it's beneficial, but that doesn't always

happen. But we have to figure out: what does that look like? And so, when we see things like within Chicago where they're starting to—I believe it's Chicago—they're no longer having docent in the traditional way that we have it. Right. And that brings up this idea of free labor and like, what does that mean? And also, in order for you to move up or get access to the museum world, you have to have a free or unpaid internship and what does that mean? And who has access? And who's able to like, if you get an unpaid internship at the Whitney, who has the money to be able to work for free? You have to have money to work for free, and who is likely to be able to do that? And so being able to kind of think through what that means and larger systemic patterns in making that kind of change, we can see how people—museums are seeking to answer bigger questions in their sphere of influence.

### **Eva**

Yeah. I can definitely relate to the internship thing. I know when I was like a freshman and a sophomore, I was trying to get internships because I want to work in museums. I want to do curating or education or something like that, and those unpaid internships they hurt, because as much as I want to get that experience, it's like I also need to make money—but that's a whole other thing. So when it comes to people participating in art museums and with art, how would you recommend people, like, approach an institution? Because not everyone always feels comfortable in art museums. They can be intimidating spaces at times. So what are ways that we, as a general public, can kind of start interrogating museums, maybe putting more pressure on them, even just like by ourselves?

### **Dr. Crum**

That's kind of tricky, right. Because my perspective is that's incumbent upon the museum to figure out what does that look like to include the community. So I think, I think the onus is on the museum. But if we're talking when we say everyday people, it's important that we are clear on who we mean. So do we mean people who are avid museum goers or casual museum goers or museum goers who only come when it's like a show that connects to their particular identity or folks who are not engaged in the museum at all? Right. And we're trying to get them to be engaged. So being clear about what audience we're talking about. But if we're talking about people who do have an investment in the museum, whatever their museum funding structure is, like, you're a patron in some kind of way, it's important to think about how do you leverage that collective power and think about what are you asking of the museum that's going to increase equity or increase inclusion and being in partnership with that museum? And so I find that it's

best if you do not have a formal relationship with the museum to think about what does it look like to be in partnership in ways that may be nontraditional for that museum.

So in many companies, you have things like ERG, so employee resource groups, for example. And these are affinity groups that people have shared identity within the organization to sometimes offer learning opportunities or to help the organization address whatever that demographic is; so that might be Black, women, LGBT, folks like that. You also have things like diversity councils—and that could be diversity, equity, inclusion kind of councils, DEI—they're there to kind of think through what does it mean to support, perpetuate, continue, create diversity, equity, inclusion practices so that people within the organization can be more successful and then people within the organization and outside have greater access. There's also another way of creating those kinds of groups, and those are external councils. So those are people who are working within the organization and outside of the organization to be a kind of advisory council or group to help think through what does it look like to support the organization. So like the Westminster Center for the Arts has that, there are other organizations that are doing something similar that are connecting to people who do not have a formal relationship with the museum or the cultural institution, meaning they're not paid, they're not an employee, but they have an investment in the organization.

So what does it look like to advocate for something like that? And you're able to influence and support and encourage the museum to do the kind of work that you and the museum are trying to do. And I think when you start creating systems and opportunities for engagement, we start seeing where people can influence change from their spheres of influence and with their skill set.

### **Eva**

And looking forward to the future of museums, do you think that these kinds of groups, these focus groups are like the best way for museums to proceed? Because at the rate they're going, they're not going to last long and they're going to have to make some change. So what do you think kind of that future museums look like and what can they do to kind of catch up with the times and actually listen to what's going on and what their patrons are saying?

### **Dr. Crum**

I think not every museum is ready for something like that, right? Because if you're kind of stuck in your traditional ways, it's going to be difficult to kind of release some degree of power because that advisory group has some degree of power influence. But if you're not ready to let

that go, then it's going to be hard for it to work. So I think museums have to really think through, what are we really willing to do? Because a lot of people say stuff, right. So after the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and others, everybody had a DEI statement, everybody had an equity statement. But when you look at their policies and practices and procedures, nothing necessarily changed. They maybe had a couple of teachings or they had a couple of workshops, but then what of the system has shifted? And when you actually figure out or ask, “what are you actually seeking to do?,” you realize there's nothing you just want to do, it's really performative. I think having that internal assessment and being honest with yourself, I think that has to happen. But when people start to realize like, “okay, we are ready to kind of give up some of this power. We are ready to kind of share power with others,” it's going to be really hard, being honest with yourself—meaning senior leadership and others—that this is an iterative process. Like there's going to be parts of it that's going to work well and some of it you're going to be like, “oh, this didn't work” or “we're trying this out, and like, that didn't go well.” That doesn't mean you stop. That means you figure out, you reconvene and figure out what will work and being okay that it's not going to be linear, that it's going to be iterative, you're going to make mistakes, Some people are going to be offended. They're going to be thinking, so what do you do to repair those relationships? What do you do to continue that engagement? What do you do to have accountability systems? All of those things. And that's the real work. And when people get in it, they realize, oh, this is hard, and then they stop. And so if you're really honest in the beginning: this is going to be super hard, this is probably going to be really uncomfortable, but how do we keep going and that everybody keeps going?

### **Eva**

Yeah, I think too, that's one of the most frustrating things is that when anything happens and museums are like, “we acknowledge and we recognize and we support” and it's like those are just empty words. And it's frustrating because these institutions are supposed to be like these spaces that are open for everyone and it's supposed to be a space for conversation and dialogue and learning. And it's just—I feel like they've strayed away from that for a while now. So as someone who enjoys going to museums, I hope that they are willing to put in that work. But like you said, not everyone does enjoy putting in that work, which is discouraging. But hopefully there's a future for museums and hopefully that future is positive. That's all we can hope for, I guess. And I guess my last question for you today is can you tell me a little bit more about your company and how you've used your background and your goals especially, talking about visual art and how we perceive images and just the goals that you aim to achieve through your company services.

**Dr. Crum**

Yeah so, my Master's is in African American African Studies, and then my Ph.D in Art Administration, Education, and Policy, and so I bring those together to think about researching history and connecting those to using imagery to educate and bringing those together helps really forges, or shapes, my kind of philosophy of approach—has some combination of those two things. And ultimately my goal is to help people understand or center the humanity of folks in ways that maybe they haven't before and check their own short stories for other groups of people. So I say we all have stories for all identities, no matter who you are. You have a story about women. You have a story about Indigenous folks. You have a story about Black people. You have a story about Hispanic folks. You got a story about whatever it is. That story can be really short and simplistic, or it can be really long and complex. Regardless of that complexity, simplicity, or length of that story, we read from it to determine our actions toward those groups of people. So if you have a very short and simplistic story about women in administration or women in leadership, then that is how you're going to think about your female boss. That's how you're going to think about whatever that is.

And so what does it look like to shift what you understand to be gender norms? You have a particular story about Black men, for example, what it means and what it doesn't mean to have that identity, and how can you internally think about shifting that story? So, like, for example, this is one art piece that I use that includes young Black boys in it and there's usually one person, at least one person who will look at that image and say, these Black boys are up or something. Like, you can't have a group of Black boys and something not be up. Right? I said, if they are all 70-year-old Korean women, would you still have that same angst? Right? These are like 70-year-old Asian women in the park instead of like five teenage Black boys, what would you tell by groups of people? I don't know. So there's something about their gender and their race that shifts your story, even though they're doing the exact same thing. They're standing there. And so if you are able to kind of have that internal dialogue: “let me shift something and would I still respond in the same way?” And you're like, “oh, I wouldn't be concerned if there were five groups of old Asian women sitting in the park. I probably wouldn't think of it at all.” Why is that?

And so if I can help people, whether it be through art, through learning, whatever it might be, to have that internal dialogue, the hope is then they're able to shift their actions and that's a little step, little everyday actions that can shift have a completely different shift. What if George Zimmerman had that conversation in his soul? If this was a 17-year-old White girl walking down

the street in the hoodie would I have had the same concern? Yeah, right. He would be like, “no, I wouldn't. So what is it about this boy that makes me concerned?” Anything where you're like, what if I change the gender or the race or the age? Like would I still be concerned? And if your answer is yes, then move accordingly. But there's a good chance the answer is no and when we realize that the impact of our stories and the power that we have within ourselves to shift those stories then I think we can start making significant changes in our sphere of influence. Whether that's in our neighborhoods, if we are a manager or supervisor, a direct report, if we're a parent, if we're Auntie, if we're—whatever it is we can start rethinking what we're capable of doing because sometimes we feel powerless and don't realize we have actually a lot of power.

**Eva**

I think a lot of people, especially these days, could benefit from that and rethinking. I'm going to have to start doing that, I'm going to have to start implementing that to see. But thank you so much for your time today, Dr. Crumb and I really appreciate you sharing your thoughts with me.

**Dr. Crum**

Absolutely. Yeah. I say practice and let me know let me know how it goes.

**Eva**

I will. Well, thank you and I hope you have a great night.

**Dr. Crum**

You too.

## Interview With Dr. Rebekah Beaulieu Transcript

### Eva

Hello, everyone, and welcome back to *Museum Talk*. I'm your host Eva and with me today is Dr. Rebekah Beaulieu. Since 2018, Dr. Beaulieu has been the director of the Florence Griswold Museum, which is located in Old Lyme, Connecticut. Dr. Beaulieu earned her bachelor's degree in American Studies from George Washington University, as well as two Masters degrees, one in Art History and Museum studies from the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee and another in Arts Administration from Columbia University. Additionally, she received her Ph.D. in American and New England Studies from Boston University. So hello, Dr. Beaulieu, and thank you for being with me today, and can you just tell me a little bit about your role as the director of the Florence Griswold Museum?

### Dr. Rebekah Beaulieu

Sure. Well, the Florence Griswold Museum is a twelve acre historic landmark, historic house museum, interpreted landscape and fine art museum in Old Lyme, Connecticut. As you said, I have been there since 2018, and my role really is to be overseeing and facilitating all of our operations, working with our board on determining strategy and leadership of the institution, overseeing our staff, which is usually around 23 members depending on season, and really just thinking about everything that we can be doing to make the Flo Gris as best as it possibly can be.

### Eva

Awesome. So this project that I'm doing is really focusing on how racism and discrimination has kind of affected art museums and cultural institutions and how people perceive these institutions, especially what's been going on in recent years. So just in general, in your opinion, how do you think racism and discrimination affect the way people view and participate in art museums?

### Dr. Beaulieu

Sure. Well, I think that if we take a step back, art museums really are—and most museums, this includes history museums, it can include science museums—are really a mirror for society. They're really there to reflect and speak to what's happening in society, what's happening with culture, what's happening broadly with civilization as it relates to communication, to technology, but mainly about how we relate to each other. We've really seen a lot of the methodologies for museums shift over the past couple of generations. Museums are no longer simply a gatekeeper where it's very insular. It's by the wealthy holding collections of the wealthy and for the wealthy. Right. I mean, I think that we all look at that, and those of us who have been in museums for a

really long time see exceptions to that, but really do view that as historically and conventionally the rule. So what we're seeing happen, and I would say probably over the past 10 to 15 years, it's a really recent development that we're starting to see more of our focus with the work of museums be about the mission and the public trust. And that always has been looked at and viewed through a lens that relates to certain organizational principles, to do with financial management, to do with having a tax exempt status and an educational value.

But instead, what we're looking at right now is a really welcome reckoning, I would say—and I don't think that's too strong a word—for museums to reevaluate what that public trust is and what it means to serve the public. So there's this transition from serving those with the biggest collection or those with the most dollars, the deepest pockets, to moving towards an ideal of trying to find something that is accessible and meaningful to a variety of audiences and that represents, similarly, a variety of experiences.

### **Eva**

Yeah. As someone like, I've been going to museums ever since I was young, and I absolutely love them. And like, I want to go into this field and I want to work in these institutions. But, over the past couple of years, it's been tough seeing how museums have been reacting and responding to kind of what's been going on culturally and in society—and I really don't like that there is this belief that these places are just for the wealthier, the upper class. They're supposed to be for everyone, like they're supposed to be for the community. So that's kind of what I'm trying to interrogate with this. I've spoken with different museum workers and scholars, kind of how museums have somehow gotten to that point where we see them as these high institutions, which they are, but not in those conventional ways. There's supposed to be these community spaces that just kind of show this art for learning, for conversations, for dialogue. So kind of following up on that, what is the Florence Griswold doing in terms of diversity and inclusion efforts and making sure it seems welcoming and it's portraying itself as welcoming and open to everyone who wants to visit?

### **Dr. Beaulieu**

Sure. Well, there is a lot of things that we have been doing over the past few years, and what I think is most important in what the work is that we are doing is that it's multifaceted. So when we talk about accessibility, when we talk about DEAI and diversity, we're talking about physical accessibility. We're also talking about creating a welcoming environment for those who are neurodiverse, for those who have suffered traumatic experiences, for those who may not have

English as a first language. That's what's phenomenal about art—is it is something that is not textual. It is something that is designed to be fluent, no matter what your experience is, to be legible. So for our purposes, we've been focusing on a couple of different angles. We've been looking at, first of all, physical accessibility, which can be really trying with historic sites. Right. Because a lot of times you will have a site that in order to interpret it authentically. And I mean physically authentically, where you are not messing around too much with the visitor experience. A lot of times there are floors that are not accessible to those who can't access them without a wheelchair or walking aid. There can be things where the rooms are small or difficult to navigate.

So for us, we've tried to work with creating more technologically savvy ways of interpreting spaces that may not be physically accessible but can be used through virtual tours and other ways of having an experience and an exploration of our site and understanding that. So the physical accessibility reaching ADA compliance is a major goal of ours. In terms of the work that we're doing in our galleries, both in terms of our interpretive materials that are put out by Education as well as those that are curatorial, we've really looked at having more of an interdisciplinary lens. And by that I mean that we're not just looking at things through a conventional art historical scope, but rather bringing in political historians what was happening in the world at that moment. Politically, where was this work fitting into that? What does it reflect? Similarly, we'll bring in intellectual historians, or we'll bring in those who work with ecology on the ground. So we try to bring in professionals, and we try to bring in academics that aren't necessarily decentering art as something to be studied, but rather bringing in this context where we're looking at it through the human experience.

Why would this have hit someone a certain way when it was painted in 1902 versus how we're looking at it now? I think one of the most important things with art is to remember that it's only historical when we decide that it is. But when the colonists were in the Lime Art Colony, for instance, and they were painting on the grounds of the Flo Gris and staying at the boarding house, they were unconventional, they were Bohemian. They were living outside of the norm. We should not look at art museums as speaking only to a sanctioned few, but rather everybody, no matter what their experience is involved in that creation and that display. We need to recognize that. So that's really kind of the instrumental, methodological shift that we've been making.

**Eva**

Okay. And just out of my own curiosity, what kind of education programs and outreach programs are you guys doing to put your name more out into the community and letting people know that you're there and that you are this institution that is there to serve them?

**Dr. Beaulieu**

Yeah. So when we talk about Education and Outreach, right, that's always been something that's interesting because a lot of times it's offsite or it can be remote, but that's something that's really been enhanced over the past couple of years with the pandemic—as we had to really augment what was happening on site with what people could experience offsite, which can always be a struggle for an art museum because you want people to come in and look at the art. But in terms of the education programs, we really try to have curricular ties, which is looking at what are the necessary tools that we're trying to instill or to give students that are visiting. We look at our education programs as very healthily, yes, acknowledging the needs of children, and that's where we're talking about those curricular ties. But then also doing adult education, making sure that we have opportunities to do things like we're doing right now a series on Black art and talking about the Black art experience in America. That's a great way to use our collection, but then also leverage the skill set of our scholarly environment and colleagues to come in and to get audiences that may not have heard about this before, in Old Lyme comfortable with that.

Our outreach programs are a little bit different. Those are more targeted, those are off site, and a lot of times reach audiences that may not have any history with the fine art museum. So we work with victims of domestic violence. We work with those who are in elderly homes and assisted living. We work with those that are physically and mentally handicapped. We work with those who have English as a second language and are learning their way around. So we have all of these different ways that we're working with, yes, underserved and underrepresented communities, but again, I don't want to decenter those experiences, but rather they're complementary and concurrent experiences for people who are just coming from a totally different angle. So that's what we really want to honor and kind of elevate and create this space for in a lot of those education and outreach programs.

**Eva**

Have you seen these programs be successful?

**Dr. Beaulieu**

Yeah, I think what we always try to highlight—and obviously as a nonprofit we look for funding to support these programs. And what we always highlight to those funders because we always are evaluating them. When we talk about how funds were spent or anything is to really talk to people about the quantitative and the qualitative analysis of these programs. So quantitatively, how many people are engaging with them. But I find much more value for a lot of these programs in seeing where there are stories that come out of individual experiences that would not otherwise happen. We find that it creates a lot of confidence. We find that it creates a voice. Many of the populations we work with struggle with communication. So to be able to find something that is not just benefiting them in terms of yet we're learning about art, but it's giving them a personal skill set to be successful. And that's one of the best things that we can do. We have an absolutely phenomenal education team, and our Director of Education, David Rau, and our manager of Youth Education and Outreach, Julie Riggs, are just a wealth of ideas that I could never come up with. So I just look at my job as being the facilitator for that and making sure that they're not overwhelming themselves. But as long as they have the willingness to serve, there are always audiences that need to be embraced and that's what we try to do.

**Eva**

That sounds amazing and just shifting gears a little bit; so in the recent past, there have been protests at the Whitney Museum and the Museum of Modern Art in New York about certain exhibitions, certain board members, and things like that. Have you seen any of these sorts of tensions at the Florence Griswold Museum?

**Dr. Beaulieu**

Not particularly. We try to keep clean of a lot of this, and so we haven't had too many of those issues in our institution. That said, one reason that we don't have those issues is we certainly received offers of funding or support from those that we find problematic, and we simply don't accept it. So there are ways that you can form terms with gifts. There are ways that you can look at that. But what we're really starting to see in museums is this understanding of mission alignment with funding, meaning those that are putting their names on galleries with very large gifts or are supporting an institution. It can't necessarily simply be all on the terms of the donor—and that's a real shift in philanthropy. Instead, we're looking at a focus on how it reflects and boosts the mission and the nonprofit educational focus of the institution. So funding in a lot of ways has become this new ground for how we're looking at really elevating that mission and making sure that every element of our work, not just the art that we're buying or the ways we're

interpreting it, those are critical pieces, but also essential is the idea that who we are aligning ourselves with and partnering with and bringing that vision to life is reflective of the mission.

So you're seeing that a lot in terms of the donor gifts. That's why a lot of this activity has been spurred by a lot of these protests questioning what we call reputation laundering, which is what money has been made through, maybe unethical means, not necessarily illegal, but unethical, as the case with the Sackler family. And then in order to divert attention away from how that money was made, it goes to a museum, and all of a sudden we're focusing on their philanthropic efforts and how generous they are. So that's where we see a lot of these protests come from. For our purposes, what we try to do is make sure—and this is not super hard because we have a fabulous community—that the people who are investing in us financially or with support are representative of the values that we hold. That doesn't necessarily mean that everyone thinks the same way politically or that everyone thinks the same way in terms of certain social benefits, but rather it's the idea that if you are valuing the Museum, you're valuing the cultural sector and what we stand for. So we expect that to be a trade, in terms of how we look at defining those allies and those partners.

### **Eva**

It seems like a lot of museums could use you guys as an example when it comes to that. It seems like where a lot of the tensions come from is those donations and those gifts and what they are doing with that money. And kind of along the same lines, do you think the protests that have happened at some of these very prominent institutions? Do you think that they have been helpful and kind of changing the narrative and changing the ways that art museums are going to operate in the future?

### **Dr. Beaulieu**

Yeah, I definitely think so. I mean, they represent such a small percentage of the museum field in one regard. Right. These are institutions, many of them who hold billion dollar endowments, who have boards of individuals that represent Fortune's top 100 corporations. That is not necessarily the case with smaller institutions. At the same time, what it shows us—and this comes back to that word reckoning—that if these large institutions are vulnerable to the public eye, it's again coming back to that concept of the public trust. Right. It's again coming back to that idea that the public and the community and the civic world around museums in which they function expect museums to have a high standard of behavior. We are not corporations. We are dependent on public support. And that means that we're not catering to two or three individuals. And we're

also setting a tone that those individuals are no longer going to be successful, those corporations, those families, foundations, whatever, with that reputation laundering. That we expect them if you are going to be giving us money, that this is the standard that we are held to.

So the hardest thing is to turn down dollars when you're a nonprofit. And I can think of a couple of cases where we've had offers of phenomenal support and we look and we say, we see some potential pitfalls for us, and we absolutely focus on transparency. You see that element of not just financial transparency of your tax returns are available, your financial statements are available. But for instance, one area that we're seeing really pick up speed is the idea of mission aligned investing or ESG investing, right, environmental, social and governance focus investing. Where literally not only the direct dollars you're receiving in individual or corporate donations or the grants you're receiving, but where endowment funds are held also benefit either the local economy, the arts sector, or general kind of social and economic health of the society. So that's kind of a fascinating shift that we're also accountable to that—it's not just pointing a finger, it's also making sure it's in a way that is fundamental to every organization of every size.

#### **Eva**

Yeah, definitely. That makes sense. That makes the most sense. And unfortunately, it seems like sometimes things that make the most sense don't always happen in practice. I guess my last question for you today is just what do you think the future of art museums looks like when it comes to displaying art, showing art, being for the community? Because they are changing. So just what do you think that looks like?

#### **Dr. Beaulieu**

I think that we're definitely going to move in the direction of de-siloing. I think a lot of the ways that we've conventionally divided the display and installation of art, it's going to be less about defining things from the perspective of where things were found and more about global navigation patterns—how people migrated throughout history. I think we're also talking a lot about how specific periods of art. You have to remember that's a convention we made up, essentially the idea of Renaissance and it's in Italy. We decided that the world didn't. So for us, I think we're really focusing on the globalization trend that's been happening since about 2000. And I feel like it's finally starting to coalesce in a way that makes sense for different organizations to bring it together. I think that the idea of the fine art museum is something that does not engage with public history, with preservation, or with material culture and artifacts is increasingly a relic itself. I think that we're looking at more understandings and representations

of the human experience, and that's going to be things that maybe weren't always traditionally considered fine or high art forms.

For instance, we have an exhibition right now that we just opened of new London quilts and bed coverings that may sound like, oh, okay, so I'm looking at some comforter that was made in 1820. Well, not at all. When you come in, what you're actually doing is opening the door to understanding Transatlantic trade, to understanding the maritime economy, to understanding the role of domestic arts, the role of the woman, iconography that demonstrates the status of the family, why they were using certain colors that were available to them, and why they weren't able to use others. So there's all these different stories that we can tell with art that are complemented by looking at a loom or looking at an advertisement. And those are kind of new ways of display that, again, focus on this comprehensive and inclusive experience rather than segmenting out an art object and looking at it only through the conventional lens of style and iconography. So it's about how we look at individual works and then how we're grouping them together. That's going through a pretty radical change. That's exciting.

**Eva**

It's exciting that we are making these changes and realizing that some of these conventions we've just arbitrarily established ourselves, and we don't need to keep following them if we really don't want—if we do want to change.

**Dr. Beaulieu**

Absolutely. And I think the most important thing that anyone can do who is in museums or wants to go into them is to really be prepared, that you've got to be ready for the world to change around you. I think that we're increasingly seeing that accountability, that it's not like, well, this is how I learned it when I was in school. I mean, the way I learned art history as an undergrad was very different than the way I learned it 10 years later in my Ph.D. program. So as long as we're all still willing to learn and be open to that experience, the better for all of us.

**Eva**

Fingers crossed. Fingers crossed that way and it keeps forward progress. But thank you so much for being with me today and sharing your thoughts, I really appreciate it.

**Dr. Beaulieu**

My pleasure, Eva. Let me know if you need anything else.

**Eva**

I will. Thank you so much.

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