

4. “Words are even more powerful when set to music.” Neiman’s point is that national anthems express its people’s best hopes and suggests rewriting America’s.
5. The final point is more of a question “What about things that are less symbolic: hard, cold things like prison cells and cash? Here she addresses both bringing perpetrators to justice and reparations. The latter extensively implemented in Germany and even now, at the margins of conversation in the U.S.

It is with Neiman’s overall narrative as a backdrop, and her position that museums can play positive roles in affecting attitudes, that the collection assembled by Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell, discussed next, should be viewed.

ROBERT R. JANES, RICHARD SANDELL (Eds.): *Museum Activism*. Routledge. 2019. 436 pp.

For well over a decade, Robert Janes, an independent scholar-practitioner, and a former museum director (Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Canada) and Richard Sandell, a professor of museum studies and director of a research center for museums and galleries at the University of Leicester,

have interrogated and challenged the (conservative, tradition-bound, risk-averse) ‘best practices,’ and ‘sacred’ beliefs of museums, and vigorously promoted social responsibility and a more humanized *gestalt*.

The messages of this book? First, disregard a vision of ‘activism’ as the use of confrontational public methods — protests, placards, marches, pamphlets, sit-ins, disruptions — as instruments of change. Janes and Sandell launch us with a more benign definition: “... museum activism, in the sense of museum practice, shaped out of ethically-informed values, that is intended to bring about political, social and environmental change.” Their basic assumption is that, in the early 21st century, the mission, role, values, and responsibilities of museums require radical rethinking. (I would go further and state that museums’ time for reflection and rethinking has expired, as I discuss in a recent publication (2020). Whether academician or practitioner, this volume is your handbook for addressing the racial and social injustice, violations of human rights, and environmental degradation facing us. Why? Museum activism is the

ethical and moral responsibility of museums and it must become their *raison d'être*.

First, let me acknowledge ancestors: this is not the first book to call for museum activism in the 21st century. Since 2014, Kylie Message, of the Australian National University, has written extensively on both protest and activism (2014, 2018 and 2019). Maura Reilly (2018) promotes “curatorial activism” as a practice dedicated to organizing art exhibitions so as not to exclude or ghettoize artists who are non-white, non-Euro-American, women, feminist, and LGBTQI-identified.¹ And, as a reminder that museums have a history of protest, Kirsty Robertson’s provocatively named book, *Tear Gas Epiphanies*, focuses on the tension and friction museums experience as they occupy the “uncomfortable space between the state, the private sector, the arts, and the economy, while also being both targets of, and occasionally providing encouragement for, contentious politics (2019, p. 5).”

The Janes and Sandell collection is unique and timely in its heterogeneous selections, geographical coverage, range of voices, and variety of settings and subjects. The volume contains the reflections, experience, successes, and mishaps of more than 50 contributors, who describe techniques, experiments and approaches to harness museums to promote social, political, and environmental change. The introductory chapter, *Posterity has arrived: the necessary emergence of museum activism*, sets an affirmative tone and maps the terrain; the subsequent 33 chapters do not disappoint.

The first ten articles, Part I. *Nurturing activism*, explore the prerequisites for an activist practice to flourish. The roles and staff and outsiders (Sara Wajid and Rachael Minott in Chapter 2; Victoria Hollows in Chapter 3), staff training (Elizabeth Wood and Sarah A. Cole in Chapter 3) and “viewpoints of American grassroots museum practitioners, researchers and individuals entrenched in the front lines of social justice advocacy” are given respectful attention (Laura-Edythe S. Coleman and Porchia Moore, Chapter 8). The definition of activism is also more grounded than in Chapter 1, and more operational, as best stated by Harwell (Chapter 7, p. 86):

1 An early entrant in this discussion was a volume edited by Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski (2011), which contained articles by two dozen authors about sharing historical authority in a user-generated world.

Activism doesn't necessarily mean conflict or protest; it can be on a small as well as a large scale. It does not have to be conducted by someone who identifies themselves as 'an activist', or who holds a particular position in society or within an organisational structure. Activism doesn't belong to 'other' people; we all have agency and therefore we all have the capacity to make change. Recognising and owning our agency is the first step towards making change; then it is about what we do and how, and equally what we don't do.

At the end of this section, a subliminal question, 'can [this] be done here and by me?' propels the reader to continue. The next section provides ample answers.

Part II, *Activism in practice*, includes several dozen case studies. The museums range in size (e.g., a *favela* museum Rio de Janeiro and the Tate Modern in London), are both discipline-specific and encyclopedic (e.g., Bluecoat, Liverpool's center for the contemporary arts and the Royal Ontario Museum in Canada), and span the globe (Norway, Zimbabwe, and Australia, among others).

The topics addressed by the case studies are remarkably varied, as well. For example, Njabulo Chipangura and Happinos Marufu (Chapter 14) describe *Diamonds: the Wealth Beneath Our Feet* at the Mutare Museum in eastern Zimbabwe. This exhibition development began with a conscious agenda of moving Mutare from 'museum as educator' using traditional methods (read: 'rooted in colonialism') to a public platform that makes space for multiple voices and for civic and public debate. Sean Curran (Chapter 24) writes about Sutton House, a Tudor house and National Trust property in East London, that is best described as hovering somewhere between a community center and a house museum. He persuasively shows that Sutton House has evolved a framework for collaborating with marginalized communities (e.g. LGBTQI people) to celebrate their narratives. Moya McFadzean, Liza Dale-Hallett, Tatiana Mauri and Kimberley Moulton weave the story of four projects at Museums Victoria in Melbourne (Chapter 22). This contribution adds another dimension to the definition that "activism requires the museum to be open to acting as both *change agent* and *change recipient*: that is, to effect community and society change, a museum must also be open to change within the institution" (p. 256).

The last part of the volume, III., *Assessing activism*, reiterates some of the thematic thrust of the initial chapters: the criticality of museums to act as change agents now. Chapters emphasize the inherent difficulties in undertaking this role (Kevin Coffee, Chapter 26), the impact of activism museums (Jennifer Bergevin, Chapter 30) and Holocaust museums (Diana I. Popescu, Chapter 28), social media as a tool (Jennie

Carvill Schellenbacher, Chapter 33), and the press's approach to activism (Jenny Kidd, Chapter 34) among other related topics. These papers and the cautions they contain, however, will not deter most readers from joining the momentum and thinking 'Yes, I can be part of this.'

For me, however, two critical and intertwined questions remain. First, as was (and still is) the case with "visitor centeredness," will "activism" become performative? And, how can the museum community be motivated to critically assess the impact of 'museum activism'? Bernadette Lynch (Chapter 10) tackles performative vs. operational activism and encourages museums to 'do something.' Diana I. Popescu (Chapter 28) would undoubtedly support me in urging the museum community to take the risks inherent in any critical exploration of impact as a necessary step in moving forward.

A colleague's recommendation, the unusual title, and familiar authors motivated a reading of the next book. It is also an international selection of case studies.

ADELE CHYNOWETH, BERNADETTE LYNCH, KLAUS PETERSEN, AND SARAH SMED (Eds.): Museums and Social Change: Challenging the Unhelpful Museum. Routledge. 2020. 190 pp.

In the introduction, Bernadette Lynch lucidly explains the title, and the premise of the book "that the role of the museum is not to be *helpful* – by 'doing for' or 'on behalf of', which turns out to be markedly *unhelpful*. Rather, it is to help create the circumstances by which people can help themselves." Lynch makes a persuasive case that museums now practice a (decidedly ineffective) theory of change, based on a 'therapeutic model' that people who visit them are somehow defective and need help. Instead, she presents the useful museum in action as an approach that "is about promoting people's freedom to choose, fostering their resilience and capability – not 'aid', but self-help, self-empowerment, the empowerment of group solidarity and action towards bringing about change." (p. 3).

The case studies used to illustrate this proposed shift are from Denmark, the UK, Norway, Netherlands, Taiwan and Australia. As in the Janes and Sandell volume, the authors either have key roles or are participant observers in the case studies. Consequently, they are realistic about challenges, roadblocks, and the fatigue that often result from