

**Liberating Culture:  
The Museum as Weapon, Discourse, Medium.**

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## **Abstract**

This research report explores a museum's moral and ethical responsibility to address the continuing colonial legacy enforced through White biased curation, representation, and narratives, resulting in a museum's responsibility to use their institution for the education and reconnection of cultures and their artworks. The report discusses 'Weapon', 'Discourse', and 'Medium', as three ways the museum communicates cultural narratives, examining the way these are employed, and the consequences on the communities represented. These are communicated through various case studies by Native, Indigenous, and Black artists who each address the oppression of the White narrative and Western aesthetic in the hegemony of Eurocentric museology.

This study finds that the museum is not a historical environment or an emblematic and static preservation of history, but a transformative apparatus that must continue to evolve to reflect the current sociocultural climate. The consideration of the museum as a 'Weapon' exposes the ongoing cultural violence extended by the institution that maintains colonial values by following a White monolithic frame of reference. The museum as 'Discourse' recognises the benefits of cross-cultural collaboration in communicating multiple narratives and the curatorial benefits of decentering the curator. Examined in its final form, 'Medium' evidences how museums can adapt for the future by giving up institutional power and control to liberate culture from its existing biases and become a palette for cultural sustainability. These findings conclude that the museum has exponential potential in terms of equitable cultural redevelopment, to secure its future the museum is urged to embrace it.

## **Important Note**

The author of this report identifies as White British, and all information and experiences are recorded from second hand sources. If you have anything you would like to add or amend, or any insight you would like to provide on the cultural issues and artworks discussed in this essay please don't hesitate to contact [katiechennells27@gmail.com](mailto:katiechennells27@gmail.com).

All comments and additions will be welcomed.

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## Introduction

*'The museum's position is no longer seen as transcendent. Rather, it is implicated in the distribution in wealth, power, knowledge and taste shaped by a larger social order.'*

Neil Harris, (1990).

In *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* by Tony Bennet (1995, p. 104), he notes the largest differential variable in museum visitors is cultural; 'those sections of the population which make little use of museums clearly feel that the museum constitutes a cultural space that is not meant for them.' This is enforced by assumed museum behaviour where 'you have to choose wilfully to ignore what you know you know'; where the money came from, acquisition methods of objects, privilege barriers, market manipulation behind the collection of White (male) contemporary artists, and so on, resulting in the paradox 'where [in the institution] you are asked to be aware of every detail, you in essence have to desensitise yourself to the world as it is' (Esche, 2017, pp. 212, 213). For cultural community members who directly face these challenges and continue to be institutionally viewed as an object of inquiry over a member of a living culture, this is even harder to ignore. Therefore, the institution must adopt a responsibility, both of the objects it possesses and the cultures, identities, and histories it should be compelled to unbiasedly display and connect with,

fostering a cultural sustainability to address the colonial debt. This research report extended essay will analyse the museum's relationship to cultures in three modes: Weapon, Discourse, and Medium.

*Chapter I – Weapon*, challenges the traditional colonial institution, analysing it as a form of containment, control, oppression, violence, and absence, questioning the relationship between acquisition, power, and subject. '[Museums] are both places that instruct us and enforce silences, both reveal and conceal' (Karp & Wilson, 1996, p. 263), resulting in communities existing as a present absence within the institution that displays the cultures of the demographics it subtly rejects. *Weapon* recognises that colonial legacy is an ongoing violence and continuing event.

Museums are not historical places that hold the material culture of the past, but a historical construct that contains a collection of individual living experiences. This is the transitional institutional mode *Chapter II – Discourse* discusses. The museum as Discourse champions institutional cross-cultural conversation by acknowledging that modernity and coloniality 'cannot be named, discussed, or thought without the other' (Esche, 2017, p. 216). Discourse marks the beginning of the cultural institution by recognising the extent that an object's meaning is dictated by its contextual surroundings; 'the identity and meaning of material things is seen to be constituted in each case according to the articulations of the epistemological framework ... [including] power practices' (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, p. 191). This chapter readdresses points of the 'new museology' movement including decentring the curator to platform cultural collaboration and lived experiences.

The third chapter, *Medium* exists as a manifesto for museum reformation. Medium is the museum in its optimal cultural form as a palette for cultural communities to access the institution without biased narratives or barriers. It acknowledges museology predominantly exists on the Western knowledge system which is oppressive when applied to cultural contexts. Medium is a museum that embraces institutional change, recognising it is a human right to access, control, and curate the narrative of your own culture. Its goal is not just to decolonise, but to re-indigenise by 'being willing to let go of a canon by not enlarging it, but rather rebuilding it from the bottom up'

(Esche, 2017, p. 216). Medium is the antithesis to Weapon; it is an institution that recognises its cultural responsibility and is willing to give up control in exchange for authentic cultural education and access.

Weapon, Discourse, Medium, exist as agents of responsibility and change; transitions the museum must make to address the existing colonial legacy that is present through oppressive curation, White narratives, and Western aesthetics that conform cultures to the unnatural but dominant Western lens that furthers colonial violence and cultural oppression. To survive, the museum must strive for cultural sustainability by addressing its flaws and being open to change.

## Chapter I

# Weapon

*'The aesthetic role of the Museum is thus enhanced since it becomes a single viewpoint (cultural and visual) from which works can be considered. An enclosure where art is born and buried, crushed by the very frame which presents and constitutes it.'*

Daniel Buren, (1970).

There exists a certain White cube stillness to the museum. A dense silence that suffocates the displaced cultural object behind the glass panes of a vitrine. This stilling is not a neutral or natural occurrence, rather a chosen consequence of the legacy of collection under colonial violence and domination. This silencing of objects echoes the silencing of cultural communities who grapple to recontrol their displaced cultural history under the institutional oppression of colonial legacy and the canon of the White narrative. This is the museum's first mode of being, Weapon.

First, we must acknowledge the enabler of weaponisation, the penitentiary, the controller of narratives and aesthetics and therefore people and objects. In Bennett's (1995, p. 87) response to Foucault's writings on state control he describes the museum and the prison as 'the Janus face of power', this is reiterated by Grewcock (2014, p. 4) – 'the museum is an environment to be controlled

and its boundaries patrolled against unwelcome invaders'. Institutional awareness of this is shown through state responses to historical political movements such as the marching of the working-class Chartists in 1848 to present the People's Charter to Parliament; 'the authorities prepared to defend the [British] museum as vigilantly as if it had been a penitentiary' (Bennett, 1995, p. 70). Elitist authority over culture through museum control was also performed after the French Revolution where the French Republic prioritised collecting art as a form of propaganda; 'France will possess inexhaustible means of enlarging human knowledge and of contributing to the perfection of civilisation' (Wittlin, 1949, p. 233). Although this was guised as liberating art from the private collection of the king, Hooper-Greenhill (1992, p. 174) notes the Republic's 'education of the population through 'museums' emerged as a new form of population management, targeted at the collective good of the state rather than for the benefit of individual knowledge'. Collecting for state narrative also fed the colonial museum; the control of culture was used to create an idealised image for the White imaginary during the Age of Enlightenment, an ignorance that generated Western entitlement over imperial material culture under the guise of discovery. The state's treatment of the museum as a penitentiary, population management, and propaganda through enforced access barriers, controlled education, and colonial collecting has resulted in the Weapon museum that enforces colonial legacy. This '[works] not only to mask diverse approaches, but also to undermine the rights of other people to exercise control over the management and care of their own cultural heritage' (Kreps, 2003, p. xiii).

The Weapon museum maintains its derivative colonial practices, 'for through the museum's internal codes and conventions, its modes of classification and display, hierarchies are affirmed and systems of thought and interpretation articulated' (McClellan, 2008, p. 111). Embedded in the foundations of Western museology, they manifest in oppression through the dominance of White narratives. This is seen in the presentation of living cultures as historical or anthropological, a default method of the Weapon institution when curating communities linked to colonialism, presenting coloniality as past. These institutions fail to recognise 'violence is not some past act', rather 'an



enduring brutality that is refreshed every day' (Hicks, 2020) by cultures who continue to live with colonial consequences. Hicks (2020, p. 180) describes the normalisation of the display of these human cultures in material form as 'an act of dehumanisation in the face of dispossession'.

Native American artist James Luna communicates this through his performance of *The Artifact Piece* (1985-1987) by using his own body as an exhibit in San Diego's Museum of Man (Fig. 1). Luna laid in a display case surrounded by personal objects representative of the modern Indigenous American including his degree, divorce papers, photos, and favourite music (Luna, 2008). His presentation as a modern Native man was juxtaposed by curating himself as the Weapon museum does – as a historical artefact and anthropological object, mimicking other items in the museum. During the performance Luna asked viewers to take a picture with "a real live Indian" which acted as an agent of conversation as viewers debated the ethics of becoming an active participant (Luna, 2008), sparking conversations that the Weapon museum fails to include, if not disregard in avoidance of responsibility. Speaking in an interview with the Smithsonian Magazine, Luna (2008) explains why he objectifies himself – 'I'm talking about something I know because I've lived it',



**Figure 1**, James Luna, *The Artifact Piece*, first performed in 1985. Image via CanadianArt.ca.

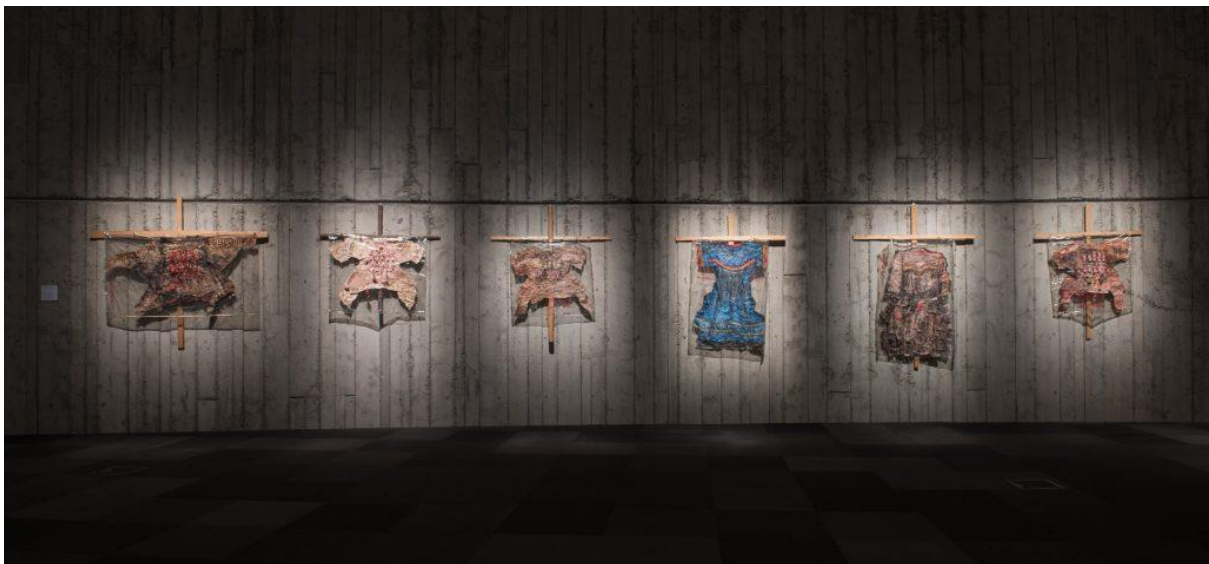
describing how the only representations of himself in museums is curated as past; 'we were simply objects among bones, bones among objects, and then signed and sealed with a date.'

'Do Native people have to be dead to be in museums?', this is the question McMaster (1996, p. 192) asks. *The Artifact Piece* is representative of the objectification of cultural experiences by the White imaginary that confines representation to display cases in areas such as 'Natural History', extending the violence and dehumanisation of colonial legacy. It exposes the way the primarily White art world projects a historical narrative that 'excludes, ignores, and re-imagines Native culture' (Caldwell, 2015). Here, the museum is a Weapon of erasure. Luna defies this by using his own body as an intervention within the gallery space, the presence of a Native person being considered 'an intervention' is telling of the state of representation in museums. His work calls for a resistance to whiteness to 'expose the violence in display practices and critique the transformation of humans into objects' (Bowles, et al., 2001).

Weaponised culture can also be seen in Joane Cardinal-Schubert's *Is This My Grandmothers'?* (1988) (Fig. 2). Cardinal-Schubert presents the Weapon museum's narrative in visual form – Indigenous culture displayed as a scientific object of inquiry. The work was curated in the exhibition *The Writing On The Wall* (2017) at Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Ontario, a gallery specialising in the work of contemporary Indigenous artists. *Is This My Grandmothers'* is part of a number of works using found cultural objects with sacred ceremonial significance (Fig. 3), presented in plastic they reference her experience with objects from her culture being clinically and systematically 'catalogued, tagged, wrapped in plastic, and stored improperly within museum collections' (MacRae, 2017). The objects are splayed out on wooden crosses like deceased carcasses, or skins, as an extension of the objectified control and violence the museum maintains over her people and material culture. The cross also alludes to the colonial dissemination of Christian doctrine enforced upon Indigenous communities, to which these objects are displayed as cultural sacrifices.



**Figure 2,** Joane Cardinal-Schubert, *Is This My Grandmothers'?*, 1988. Image via shepaintsred.com.



**Figure 3,** Joane Cardinal-Schubert, *Remnant Birthright; Museum II; Remember Dunbow; Is This My Grandmothers'; Remnant; Then There Were None*, 1988. Image via Thunder Bay Art Gallery.

Curated by Lindsay Sharman, the works were displayed under aggressive clinical spotlights that exposed the objects to scrutiny, presenting them as scientific inquiries that strip them of their depth of cultural meaning. Here, they lose their identity and personal connection (is this someone's grandmother's?), becoming 'other'. The Weapon museum's oppressive storage of these objects is often for 'preservation', a dated notion that diverts from the present 'and the value of living culture and the forces that sustain it' (Kreps, 2003, p. 11). 'How can organic relationships, histories, and links to people be shown in display cases?' (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, p. 204). *Is This My Grandmothers'* and its accompanying works are presented as both artistic and anthropological responses. Where anthropology museums present historical objects, art museums present aesthetics; 'both offer only Western points of view' and 'very often [Native artists] are caught in between these two representational apparatuses' (McMaster, 1996, p. 195), enforcing Western values onto objects and artworks not made to conform to them.

When museums portray themselves as an accumulation of history through 'preservation' it distances cultures to historical narratives; 'this alignment makes it possible to think of historical development as complete, ... [it] is here conceived as a cumulative process which has delivered the nation into the present as its manifest accomplishment' (Wright, 1984, p. 52). This is fundamentally wrong. As shown many of these living cultures lack representation and access to correct the institution because of a White imaginary that views colonialism as a past act. Hicks (2020, p. 234) refers to the ten-thousand objects looted from Benin as 'ten thousand unfinished events', therefore the understanding of 'the museum as process, not an endpoint' is essential for viewing and processing objects to recognise them as continuing events (Hicks, 2020, p. 240). Challenging the museum as Weapon is recognising this by giving curatorial control back to cultural communities through collaboration and discourse so they can begin to reclaim both their historical and present narratives.

## Chapter II

# Discourse

*'What they put on view says a lot about the museum, but what they don't put on view says even more.'*

Fred Wilson, (1996, p. 255).

Museum objects are not static, they are an amalgamation of developing cultural contexts and interpretations that exist as larger social meta-narratives. Historically, collection through violence and fetishism created a social narrative of colonial complacency. What mass-social narrative does an institution convey that maintains this legacy in a time of progressive social change? Discourse is an institutional transition that takes accountability for its disposition as Weapon by approaching cultural democratisation through participatory practices that question the Western museum model, recognising cultural heritage is a combination of material culture and collective memory and experience.

Many claim institutions rightfully possess contested objects, James Cuno (2009, p. 27) advocates it contributes to cross-cultural evolution; '[objects are] enriched by their centuries of contact with other cultures'. Others take a more truculent approach:

‘... the British were the legitimate authority in the land at the time and therefore anything they did was in accordance with that legitimacy.’ – Jean Rankine (1981), Deputy of the British Museum.

For the progression of the museum, it is imperative to challenge these views through institutional discourse. Cuno (2009, p. 27) claims cultures are monopolising history; ‘Modern nation-states claim culture for themselves. They nationalise it. They say it is important to their identity and try to police it’, commending that ‘encyclopaedic museums, like the British Museum ... encourage tolerance and inquiry’. He retains traditionalist Enlightenment views, and therefore historical societal standards that do not acknowledge modern-day experiences of colonial consequences. Former British Museum director Neil MacGregor (2009) claims objects belong to ‘one world culture’, emphasising the importance of collections ‘[speaking] about the oneness of the world’. Cultural possession conveying acceptance and unity may feel true for those that impose and benefit institutional power systems, but for those continually affected by their oppression through possession and narrative control, it reaffirms cultural superiority through institutional ignorance.

‘World museums’ are a common argument against cultural recontrol, but displaying multiple cultures under a Western framework enforces White dominance over their interpretation, making museum vitrines a window into colonial control, projecting racism and violence. The illusion of ‘one world culture’ reflects Benedict Anderson’s (1983) notion of ‘imagined communities’ where different people are brought together over common ground. The institution views its imagined community of world culture as being innately democratic, but this carelessly converges diverse histories into one singular point of view and display. According to Bennett (1995, p. 149):

‘Often with a consequence that the histories of specific social groups are depoliticised as their relics come to serve as symbols of the essential unity of the nation, or to highlight its recently achieved unity, by standing for a divisiveness which is past.’

The justification of 'world culture' is used as a façade of unity to mask contemporary institutional issues; '[museums] while existing in a frame which separates it from the present, [are] entirely the product of the present practices which organise and maintain that frame' (Bennett, 1995, p. 130).

The intricacies of human culture are beyond the museum's linear classification abilities; therefore, it is imperative to include multiple perspectives. Hooper-Greenhill (1992, p. 210) proposes 'decentring the curator' to accommodate other cultural voices; curators should be 'the possessor of a technical competence whose function is to assist groups outside the museum to use its resources to make authored statements within it' (Bennett, 1995, p. 104). African American and Native American artist Fred Wilson's collaboration with the Maryland Historical Society, *Mining the Museum* (1992) (Fig. 4 & 5), rewrote curational narratives simply by rearranging and retrieving objects from the basement. Creating juxtapositions in the museum's existing collections exposed previously hidden narratives and connections by creating object dialogue. In *Metalwork (1793-1880)* (Fig. 4), Wilson displayed collections of repoussé silver beside slave shackles, revealing 'the production of the one was made possible by the subjugation enforced by the other' (Karp & Wilson, 1996, p. 256). Similarly, in *Cabinetmaking (1820-1960)* (Fig. 5), baroque chairs are arranged surrounding a whipping post used until the 1950s (Karp & Wilson, 1996, p. 258).

Hidden in the museum's basement since 1963, the whipping post is an object of institutional critique; surrounding chairs force an audience to confront a violent object originally hidden from view. Its exhibition is controversial, many feel displaying a violent history repeats it; 'museums are devices for extending events across time: in this case extending, repeating and intensifying the violence' (Hicks, 2020, p. 218). This is executed when curation is biased by power imbalances and White aesthetics; 'I feel that the aesthetic anesthetises the historic and keeps this imperial view within the museum and continues the dislocation of what these objects are about' (Karp & Wilson, 1996, p. 253). However, through institutional discourse and curational liberation to people



Figure 4, Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum*, 1992-1993. Image via bmoreart.com.



Figure 5, Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum*, 1992-1993. Image via Maryland Centre for History and Culture.



like Wilson, cultures can display contested objects on their own terms. McClellan (2008, p. 107) describes *Mining the Museum* as 'deeply informed by a postmodern awareness that all systems of classification are constructed, not neutral or natural', Wilson's conceptual curation shatters the White narrative by questioning the narratives institutions fabricate, creating juxtapositions that highlight the potential of alternatives.

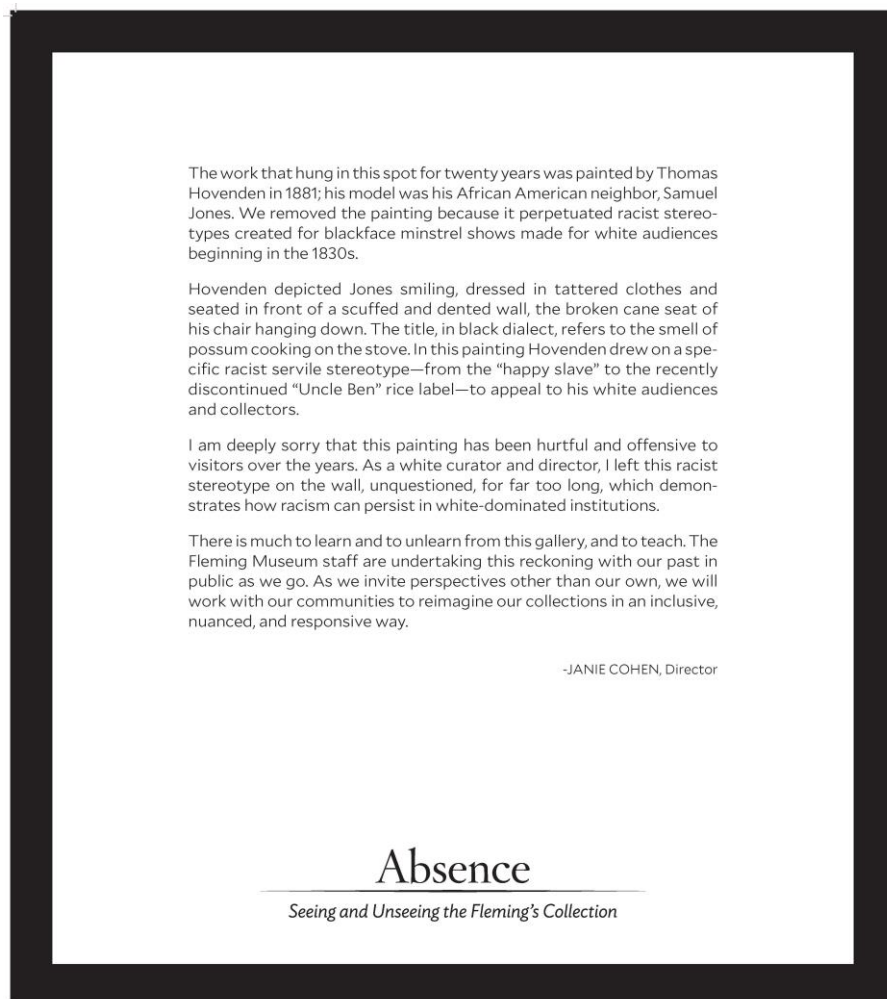
The 1970s movement 'new museology' rejected traditionality in favour of an active social museum; 'conventional museums are seen as object-centred whereas the new museum is people-centred and action oriented' (Kreps, 2003, pp. 9-10). The movement called for Western museums to view cross-cultural understanding and participation as fundamental objectives to abandoning monocultural perspectives (Mohammed, 2006, pp. 93-94). Despite institutional acclamation, the continuation of White interpretation via tokenistic approaches and dismissal of institutional inquiry means its ideals have not been realised. 'New museology' must be readdressed by reclaiming the museum's function as a site of conscience through institutional discourse. As Bal (1996, p. 214) states:

'A museum is a discourse, and exhibition an utterance within that discourse ... such a perspective deprives a museal practice of its innocence, and provides it with the accountability it and its users are entitled to.'

The Fleming Museum of Art, Vermont, exhibits this through their project *Absence* (Fig. 6), challenging museum status quo by deinstalling works community members consider harmful. They erect signage expressing the museum's commitment to transparency and accountability as part of *The Fleming Reimagined* project exposing unethical, racist, and colonialist museum practices (Fleming Museum of Art, 2023) (Fig. 7). 'In the past, the object on display was accompanied with a label that fixed it in a monolinear frame of reference' rendering the human, social, and cultural contexts invisible (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, p. 204), thus limiting visitors' ethical awareness by biasing the information they most depend upon. *Absence* highlights problematic histories by starting



**Figure 6**, Fleming Museum of Art, *Absence*, 2021-Present. Image via Fleming Museum of Art. 'Labels with personal reflections are displayed in the "absences" where we have removed artwork whose subject matter or background is harmful to members of our community.' – Fleming Museum of Art.



**Figure 7**, Fleming Museum of Art, an *Absence* label replacing an 1881 painting by Thomas Hovenden. Image via Fleming Museum of Art.

conversations and initiating collaborative processes of rethinking narratives. Some *Absence* labels are alongside exhibited works admitting gaps in understanding by the predominantly White staff, making room for new voices by acknowledging past failures (Fleming Museum of Art, 2023). This challenges the common institutional neutrality of avoiding curational changes in fear of offense, a lack of action that enforces Whiteness under the guise of impartiality. Visible transparent communication with communities creates an honest discourse and sustained listening by publicly discussing the problems the museum faces. They recognise an object is not a singular narrative, but a conversational triangle of public, community, and institutional voices.

A few other institutions have undertaken similar initiatives, such as the closure of *Medicine Man* – a collection of ‘scientific’ objects that exoticised and marginalised disabled, Indigenous, and Black people – at Wellcome Collection to pursue more inclusive projects. In a 2023 lecture at Norwich University of the Arts, Director Melanie Keen educated students such as myself on the challenges of creating institutional discourse amid the media backlash it often receives. Keen’s admittance of the aestheticisation and decontextualization of the collection by spectacularising objects spotlighted on velvet was refreshing for a colonial British institution. Embracing the discomfort of their collection’s legacy is an attitude all institutions should adopt.

Museums are spaces that legitimise knowledge; in 2022 museum curators were voted the sixth most trusted profession in the UK (Ipsos, 2022). They have a duty of truth to execute the multitude of narratives in their collections (both present perspectives and past dispositions), through transparency and conversation to create a socially engaged viewer. By acknowledging that ‘how things are displayed in galleries and museums makes a huge difference in how one sees the world’ (Karp & Wilson, 1996, p. 256), Discourse prioritises communication and collaboration in accountability for the cultural erasure by the linear White narrative.

## Chapter III

# Medium

*'Those who have been marginalised as 'the other' are central to the formulation of new museological paradigms.'*

Christina F. Kreps, (2003, p. xiii).

Institutional self-reflection is not a cancellation of outstanding colonial debt. Narrative equality is not institutional equity. Brian O'Doherty's (1986) essays describe the 'white cube' gallery as a space of eternity and unchangingness that censors social variation. White cube aesthetics are chosen for their subtraction of all distraction and intervention through artistic isolation, but what if interventions are necessary, distractions welcomed? Isolation creates echo chambers that maintain Eurocentric ideals, for minorities forced to exist in the gallery through intervention (see Fig. 1-7), looking for access into the white cube is like looking for where the door isn't. Despite being conceived as the answer to elitist ornate display, it is a side of the same coin. The museum as Medium possesses not only self-awareness, but prioritises radical change through education and social practice, denouncing traditional White-based museological practices by becoming an open-access canvas for marginalised groups to access without existing barriers.

Modernity as coloniality is engrained in museum culture, initiated through the curation of the original 'world fairs' according to Western world progress, it constructed juxtaposing ideologies

between 'primitivity' and 'modernity' that founded modern knowledge systems. As a place of trust and truth (see p. 18), the museum's conformity to this is perceived as inherent rightness. For this reason Elena Filipovic (2014) proposes the Global White Cube exists as the culmination of the Enlightenment project; as Sheikh (2009) comments on O'Doherty (1986), '[the white cube] is not a neutral container, but a historical construct'.

A wall has no intrinsic aesthetic, but a white cube wall does through pre-existing Whiteness; 'the space offers the thought that white eyes and minds are welcome, space-occupying bodies are not' (O'Doherty, 1986, p. 15). Contemporary aims at inclusivity continually present cultures as foreign bodies through 'othering', fed by tokenism and institutional guilt. In 2007 on the two-hundredth anniversary of the abolition of slavery, the government made sweeping statements in comparison to modern racial inequality, '[inflicting] the same narrative of victimhood on a contemporary diverse population simply on the basis of racial difference' (Dewdney, et al., 2013, p. 67). Defining people by oppression only enhances marginalisation as seen through criticism of Tate Britain's approaches to cultural diversity; 'in targeting this category and further combining it with agendas of social inclusion and social marginalisation, a model of minority audiences emerged as one defined by cultural deficit' (Dewdney, et al., 2013, p. 73). Combining institutional post-colonial guilt with contemporary representation is contradictory as it defines cultures by a violent White past instead of a culturally inclusive future. Mike Phillips (2008), former Tate Britain curator of cross-cultural programmes, urges redefining the terms of reference in which cultural diversity is understood, transitioning focus from reception to cultural production.

Inclusivity starts with institutional language. Hooper-Greenhill (1992, p. 211) proposes a transition from addressing 'others' as 'visitors', to 'clients'; ' 'visitors' are present in a space by permission; they enter an alien space, akin to someone else's home' whereas 'the 'client' demands active rights ... and is in a negotiated situation where he or she has an equal position of power.' This summarises the hostility of museums towards those not traditionally in the space; 'visitor' implies

passive temporary allowance, whereas a 'client' is active and equally involved. *Wood Land School* (2017) (Fig. 8), an initiative held at the SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art, Montréal, prioritised this by relinquishing institutional authority to Native art and voices during Canada's one-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary. Where the state celebrated colonialism, the gallery centred indigeneity through a year-long exhibition titled *Kahatenhstánion tsi na'tetiatere ne lotohrkó:wa tánon lotohrha/Drawing Lines from January to December*, initiated through a series of gestures starting with the gallery being rebranded to *Wood Land School* (SBC, 2017). The gallery's renaming is particularly important in its reallocation of identity, Pearce (1992, p. 22) notes 'the naming of things [is] the crucial act which brings them into being, and which retains power over them by acting as the referent to which objects relate'. Their rejection of default descriptions such as SBC 'invites', 'hosts', or 'gives over', rejected temporality by respecting their position on Native soil (Day, 2017, p. 97). This is recognised again in the title's use of line as symbolic of time and history, 'proposing lines without beginning or end as a way to imagine Indigenous futurity' (SBC, 2017).



**Figure 8**, *Wood Land School: Kahatenhstánion tsi na'tetiatere ne lotohrkó:wa tánon lotohrha/Drawing Lines from January to December*, second gesture, 2017. Image via Wood Land School and SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art, Montreal.

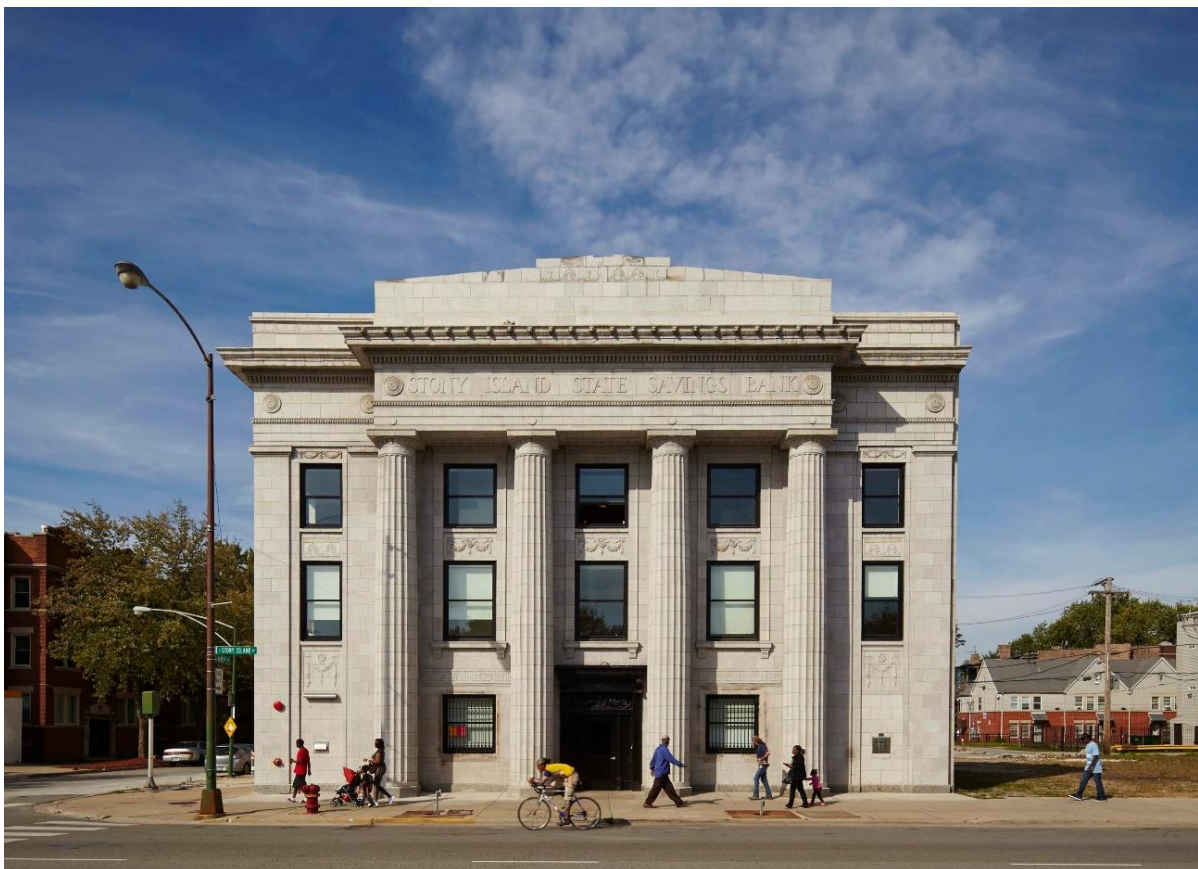
The gallery describes its submission to Native voices as a continuing conversation of new relationships that create Indigenous self-determination (SBC, 2017), enabled by institutional awareness of both its nurturing and destructive capabilities, its role in dispossession and potential for new relation. By moving beyond passive guilt to active reformation, *Wood Land School* embodies the importance of giving labour, space, and funding to those the institution disadvantages by supporting their ideas, objects, and beliefs. This benefits marginalised communities and creates a space for critical reflection and institutional re-imagining for all peoples. Viewing ‘others’ as ‘clients’ supports the centralisation of Indigenous objectives by prioritising other knowledge systems which can facilitate a larger institutional change. ‘What does it mean for a settler-colonial state to unknow its power?’ this is the question Day (2017, p. 98) asks of the initiative. I propose it’s losing the democracy of choice; where ‘Weapon’ chooses who enters the space and the cultural visitor has no authority over their institutional existence, ‘Medium’ transitions this control to the groups it previously denied. As Pethick (2017, p. 184) comments, ‘WLS can choose when they want to have contact and contract with the system, and can retain their autonomy and coopt without being coopted themselves.’

Where the Weapon curator is aesthetic arbiter, the Medium curator is a cultural mediator: ‘it is to the diversity of each group’s experience, in its contradictory stances and multiplicity of approaches towards art, that curators must turn their attention’ (Ramírez, 1996, p. 34). This is accomplished by African American social activist artist Theaster Gates who transforms disused buildings into cultural centres like *Stony Island Arts Bank* (Fig. 9) – an abandoned bank refurbished by Gates into a hybrid gallery, media archive, library, and community centre for the Black community of an under-resourced low-income Chicago neighbourhood. *Stony Island Arts Bank* is a future museum; a grass-roots institution focused on local communities without the barriers of traditional colonial museums, allowing People Of Colour to create their own histories and futures from the ground up. Programs at *Stony Island* include exhibitions by local artists, *Arts Bank Cinema* – a weekly free screening and discussion of Black films, as well as its archival collections of books, vinyl, and the

*Edward J. Williams Collection* of four-thousand ‘negroabilia’ objects containing harmful Black stereotypes, displayed ‘as a reminder of history and a catalyst for ongoing examination’ (Gates, 2023). Gates used the collection in the performance *Plantation Lullabies* (2017), where he and other interdisciplinary artists responded to the collection through music, dance, and chant, bringing new life to the objects by reclaiming the stereotypes:

‘[It] reexamines the negative imagining of black bodies and black lives, bringing intelligence, creativity and humour to these objects and songs of disgrace to demonstrate their relevance to the present moment.’ (Gates, 2017).

Gates (2023) states ‘Black Autonomy alone is too Radical for the current America’. So rather than battling the current establishment he has created his own institution through social engagement and cultural reclamation of collections, allowing him to bridge the gap between the Eurocentric contemporary art world and local Black community experiences. This gives him the



**Figure 9**, Theaster Gates, *Stony Island Arts Bank*, established 2015. Image via Theaster Gates’ website.



unique position of both community curator and curator of communities, resulting in a practice of 'driven actions that transform the fabric and physical location of buildings into sites of agency' (Cotter, 2022). *Stony Island Arts Bank* is created to be a Medium, a safe haven for communities to share, gather, and create, a space communities can enter with full acknowledgement of their narrative control.

Museums bring time to a halt; in this way they are the antithesis to change. Medium is that change, a reformation and colossal institutional shift. It practices complete institutional submission to the communities it has affected and under-resourced by defying the singular knowledge system of contemporary museology as one dictated by European colonial understanding. It acknowledges its authority, and it gives it up. Through this, Medium ensures contemporary cultural conservation where Weapon perpetuated past preservation, becoming a site for conserving living culture as well as past. This both platforms the marginalised and socially engages the viewer beyond label information to a higher institutional awareness. 'Authority is to be shifted from curators to native communities. Exhibitions serve not just to educate museumgoers but also to redefine the way they relate to the hemisphere's Indigenous peoples' (Brown, 2009, p. 156), securing the cultural sustainability of the museum's future.

## Conclusion

# The Radical Potential of Museums

*'A culture can never be reduced to its artefacts while it is being lived.'*

Raymond Williams, (1968, p. 310).

Museums create societal perceptions of what is deemed valuable, and so the societal climate of our time is reflected in the display and interpretation of objects. For people facing violence and disconnect to their ethnic identities, the museum continues to be an oppressor of colonial enterprise enforced through blanket Whiteness. The museum's potential lies in acknowledging it is not a storage unit of traditional culture, but a meeting ground of living cultures waiting to be liberated from its carceration and hegemony. Institutional progression through the modes Weapon, Discourse, Medium, exposes its narrative dominance by acknowledging alternative methods of representation of the cultures it houses. Navigating its coloniality lies in denouncing its agency in White supremacy by supporting institutional democratisation through cultural connection and participatory approaches. By enabling and submitting to other cultural forms, the museum can become a space of community connection and narrative reclamation.

A quarter of the most visited institutions worldwide are in the UK (Statista Research Department, 2023), therefore British institutions have among the highest responsibility to execute this. Current ethnicity attendance statistics show that 52.5% of White people visit museums or

galleries compared to 27.7% of Black people (GOV.UK, 2023). To create a sustainable future for museum culture, institutions must pursue cultural connectivity to create a greater environment for inclusivity. The museum must assess all aspects of its existence; its audience, workforce, artists, and collaborators, to identify areas where groups hold sovereignty over another. The institution tends to address this through 'target audiences', but this stereotypes cultural identities and interests and does not deliver adequate institutional interpretation. Instead, it should turn to institutional representation through cultural narrative control; where a White curator portrays a White narrative that attracts a White audience, so too can a cultural curator convey cultural narratives attracting more cultural audiences. Currently 'museums know so little about what they hold, and they share just a fraction of what they could know' (Hicks, 2020, p. 152), this can begin to be rectified through cultural outreach that acknowledges the advantage of human experience over professional.

'The fragmentation of monolithic messages' is an essential trait for the modern museum to have (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, p. 198). Its function must transition from contextual control to cultural liberation through an awareness that objects are a 'potent force in forging self-consciousness' and conveying notions of cultural identity (Kaplan, 1994). Equitable cultural growth for museums lies in their ability to oscillate between these ways of knowing; by accepting a state of not knowing they can accommodate for others. Through acute awareness of authority, active cultural mediation, and legitimacy of cultural self-determination, the culturally liberated museum can sustain its existence and abandon historicised preservation for cultural conservation. The potential of a socially responsible museum lies in the understanding that meanings, relations, and interpretations are not constant; 'the radical potential of material culture, of concrete objects, of real things, of primary sources, is the endless possibility of rereading' (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, p. 215).

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