

Why is the declaration on the value and importance of universal museums so contro...

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Why is the “ Declaration on the Value and Importance of Universal Museums” so controversial?

Universal design envisages a world where shared involvement is possible, where special effort to have full access to facilities and programming is never needed. As stated by the National Endowment for the Arts, universal design goes past the mere delivery of special features for various sectors of the population. Instead it highlights a creative approach that is more comprehensive, one that asks at the onset of the design process how a graphic communication, product, landscape, or building can be made both artistically pleasing and functional for the greatest number of users (Flynn, 2011). Designs ensuing from this approach are more likely to serve a wider range of people: people with permanent disabilities, individuals who have temporary disabilities and everyone whose abilities change with age.

As public art transfers into the twenty-first century, the message universal design advocates would like to send is that far from a restraining burden, its principles offer an unparalleled creative opportunity for the advantage of the broadest audience (Flynn, 2011). Ominously, universal design goes well outside providing mere access. When it works, it does so through well-conceived buildings and spaces, easy for all to use and stunning to behold. According to Flynn (2011), one of the most persistent problems in the world is the need to create and promote universal normative values which protect persons and communities from oppression, enabling them to comprehend as much of their potential as possible, while at the same time respecting certain cultural traditions. Despite the fact that for most of their being the participants to the universal museums Declaration have fed the justification

for colonial authority, their great collections do present unequalled opportunities to uncover the relationship of the universal and the particular. If they were to hold rather than ignore the fact that the superiority of white, male, Western, academic viewpoints is being challenged, predominantly in their authority to speak about and on behalf of 'the other', they might be able to contribute to this exploration. Displays could begin to redress the essentialist propensities of museums and recognize the importance of interactions between cultures as well as their uniqueness. This would include interactions involving armed conflict and takeover as well as trade. They could characterize in the galleries historical and contemporary voices from the cultures being interpreted and the setting of the production and use of the objects. They could draw on the powerful analytical notions and inspirational values of the Enlightenment to promote a common understanding and respect amongst peoples, rather than use them as a teleological justification for the disparities of the status quo. And perhaps above all they could put the collections in their Imperial as well as their Enlightenment contexts. Meanwhile the displays continue to communicate their old message - the dominance and untainted goodness of the collecting, appreciating, displaying, judging civilization (Flynn, 2011). McGregor makes an ethical argument based on the practical value of the greatest good, achieved in this case by comparing cultures, but there is no epistemological basis put forward or implied to support this. What are the benchmarks of comparison? What is the basis for the kind of history which faults modern Greeks for their slave-owning past, but absolves Britons? How are the benefits of objects being reserved in large western conurbations to be

measured against the loss to their instigating cultures? How are historic collections and the power relations they personify to be related to contemporary international issues? What ideologies can be derived from cross-cultural comparisons which could help solve current cross-cultural conflicts and misunderstandings? What is the foundation for claiming that universal museums promote tolerance when their display philosophy, underdetermined and shaped by a modernist Euroamerican aesthetic which still views the objects as 'speaking for themselves' and areas open to a BNP as to a liberal understanding (Flynn, 2011)? What universal values can be signified by a museum when the whole point of its existence is 'that high rational one of showing that truths are always relative' (Flynn, 2011)? A universal museum would, by definition, create displays which addressed the realities of power relations, past and present.

Without facing up to human harmfulness in displays, 'seeing the world as one' achieves little more than a Coke or Benetton advertisement, describing humanity as one big happy family. The world is haunted by terror and violence because there are many bad as well as good ways of shaping society. Nor is there any clear connection between those cultures which were good for people and those which were good at art. But none of the universal museums recognizes that, in the words of Walter Benjamin, the great artworks in museums owe their actuality not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the unspecified toil of their generations.

Works Cited

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