

Can everything be displayed?

Museums at the heart of contemporary debates

Wednesday 13 March 2024 - 6pm / 8.30pm (CET)

Auditorium Jacqueline Lichtenstein at Inp and on Digital platform

About the meeting

In 2023, the controversy surrounding the presentation of Miriam Cahn's *"Fuck Abstraction"* at the Palais de Tokyo – Paris, was not the first in the history of arts reception. While it may appear to be yet another in a series of strong public reactions to works perceived as provocative or shocking, this topical issue that fueled strong reactions in the media reveals the evolution in our contemporary society. In a post-#MeToo world that has profoundly been transformed, civil societies feel more legitimate to speak out publicly. Emotions are being expressed more spontaneously in the public sphere.

More broadly, and on a wide range of topics, museums are expected to take a stand on the works and artists they choose to put on display, today more than ever before. Museums are obviously not the only cultural actors to face this situation. Literature, performing arts and cinema are also at the heart of this debate. But what makes museums unique in this discussion is undoubtedly the fact that they are still mostly perceived as places of authority.

Museums are also places where people gather and exchange ideas, and are likely to raise debates. These new and diverse sensitivities being expressed are forcing professionals to question their role in the wider social debate.

How do you put works, objects, themes or artists on display which you know (or assume) will shock and disturb? How do we deal with the risk of self-censorship? What kind of discursive apparatus should museums put in place and offer to the public to help contextualise, explain and respond to contradictions?

This debate also raises the question of who do we give the possibility to speak about arts except the curators and museum professionals? Which voices should museums take into account? In the United

States, new federal regulations, which came into force last January, require American museums to obtain the permission of indigenous peoples before exhibiting human remains and artefacts. The reactions and responses taken to meet the expectations of the public, which are eminently cultural, bear witness to the diversity of possible positions. How should museum professionals position themselves in this context, faced with a form of polarisation?

The new definition of a museum reaffirms that our institutions are at the service of society: museums have a fundamental role to play in this increasingly lively and less nuanced public debate. At a time when some works of art are considered by some to be "inappropriate", "offensive", even "immoral", it is more important than ever to remember that museums have a responsibility to move beyond the merely emotional stand to provide further elements to understand how the world goes and put any discourse into perspective.

Emilie Girard, President of ICOM France,

February 2024

How to participate

Remote access (on-line)

Link Zoom : <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88280906375?pwd=NEY1KzVFZGxLbjM2akUwY2haZ0RxZz09>

ID : 882 8090 6375

Secret code : 220522

On-site access

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