Positive Policy Pressures for Social Inclusion in Public Art Galleries: A New Zealand Case Study

The above artwork was chosen in 2014 as a finalist for New Zealand’s major contemporary art prize ‘the Walters prize’. It is called All You Need Is Data - The DLD 2012 Conference REDUX’. The Digital Life Design Conference is one of Europe’s leading conferences on innovation, and it’s an invite only event. Artist Simon Denny translated the content of this conference into digital “paintings” and hung them as though you are waiting to pass through customs at an airport – another exclusive activity requiring tickets. The above contemporary art was displayed at the Auckland Art Gallery with the other Walters Prize finalists for the public to see. This presentation of art meant the DLD conference no longer appeared as an exclusive event. Denny is talking about access, and non-access, challenging surveillance and advocating for human freedom.

Simon Denny was also chosen to represent New Zealand at this year’s Venice Biennale. He presented computer server display cabinets that contained interpretations of digital documents and slides from United States National Security Agency material leaked by Edward Snowden. Through Creative New Zealand, the government injected $700,000 into New Zealand’s participation in the Biennale.
Creative New Zealand’s purpose is to “encourage, promote and support the arts in New Zealand for the benefit of all New Zealanders”\(^1\). How does the purchase of Denny’s artwork benefit New Zealand? Well, our very own Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand (known as Te Papa) has announced it will buy these four works for $750,000.\(^2\) This is a quarter of Te Papa’s annual acquisitions budget – not much when you compare it to $26 million that the government spent on hosting the 2011 Rugby World Cup.

But New Zealanders are not nearly as understanding of government investments in visual arts as we are with money spent on sports. How will New Zealand measure the impact of Te Papa’s investment in Denny’s artwork?

Measuring the benefit of New Zealanders’ engagement with contemporary visual arts in our public art galleries was topical when I started by Master’s research in 2013, and continues to be an issue of importance. In this presentation I will outline the key findings of my dissertation as part of my Master of Museum and Heritage Studies.

During the presentation I will move through these topics:

- The case study I used for my research
- International theory about social inclusion in museums
- Results from my research about engagement with contemporary art, as well as policy and evaluation surrounding social inclusion in the museum sector
- Learning from key international developments in cultural policy
- My proposal for policy developments in New Zealand that I hope will challenge and improve social inclusion in our local public art galleries.

The main objective of my research was to explore the social inclusion policy, evaluation and practices of New Zealand’s public art galleries in relation to international developments. To do this I used a case study of Wellington City Council’s local public art galleries: City Gallery Wellington and Toi Pōneke Gallery. My primary research question was: How do major and minor local public art galleries in Wellington work towards and evaluate social inclusion for enhanced community wellbeing? More specific aims of the study were to:

- Assess how government policy and Wellington City Council’s strategies for arts and culture are expressed in the galleries
- Analyse and contrast how social inclusion is currently practised and evaluated in the galleries
- Identify challenges and consider how the evaluation of social inclusion in local public art galleries could be developed.

I researched strategies, reports and legislation and conducted face to face interviews with eight professionals from the Council or Council owned entities (officially called Council Controlled Organisations or CCOs). The interviewees worked across the following teams and organisations:

- The City Arts team and the Research, Consultation and Planning teams of Wellington City Council
- Toi Pōneke Gallery, which is located in the Toi Poneke Arts Centre, and is directly managed by the City Arts team of the Council
- Wellington Museums Trust, a Council Controlled Organisation, which manages five museums and galleries in Wellington
- City Gallery Wellington, a Council Controlled Organisation, managed by the Wellington Museums Trust.

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My literature review covered three main areas. I researched how the term ‘community’ is applied to museums in a general sense, and how social inclusion and community engagement is worked towards. I read about art and the public interface. I also read about local government cultural policy and evaluation of social inclusion in museums. I discovered a substantial amount of literature on community engagement and not nearly as much literature on the connection between art, the public and cultural and social inclusion policy. I wanted to fill a small part of this research gap.

Museum Studies professor Richard Sandell explains social inclusion as combating social inequality and disadvantage. He argues that for museums to achieve social inclusion, they need to have goals to improve people’s wellbeing and be reflective about their effects on people. The literature clearly argues that for museums to have inclusive practice, they must be relevant to the public.

During my research, I could not find a definition of social inclusion specifically for public art galleries, so I drafted this definition of audience inclusion in the cultural sector:

Enhancing public participation from all areas of society with the aim of improved wellbeing both for the individual and the broader community.

I am aware it is extremely difficult to include all people in public art galleries, therefore realistically; inclusion involves keeping traditional/committed audiences engaged, while strategically diversifying the audience. The ideal outcome is that the new visitors return and in time, become committed audiences.

Professor Graham Black of Nottingham Trent University claims that retaining and developing new diverse audiences are contemporary museums’ biggest challenges. Typical audiences of public art galleries are educated, Caucasian, and more often than not, female. Around the western world, museum audiences have increased in numbers, but not in diversity of visitors. Museum researcher Philip Wright argues that art museums should provide more information about the art and institutional background (especially those with collections) so that visitors are equipped with more knowledge to get the most out of their visit. This means curators need to share their worldviews and biases, and be openly self-reflexive. This also means sharing their power.

The study’s results take the form of quotes from participants. These quotes are powerful and back up the museum literature and theory. A research participant from the Wellington City Council thought galleries were challenged in the area of social justice. He said:

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4 This literature included: Bourdieu, Darbel and Schnapper, Grenfell and Hardy, Whitehead, Wright, Cuno, Maleuvre, Duncan, Hooper-Greenhill, Anson & Garrett, Silva, Black, Jermyn.

5 This literature included: Weil, Wright, Black, Sheppard, Selwood and Davies, Ander et al, Davies, Reeve and Woollard, Whitehead, Hooper-Greenhill, Thompson, Davidson and Sibley, Kelly, Martin.


7 Sandell. "Museums and the combating of social inequality: roles, responsibilities, resistance."

8 Ibid.; Coxal, "Open Minds: Inclusive Practice."; Anderson, "The role of the public: The need to understand the visitor’s perspective."

9 Black. The engaging museum: developing museums for visitor involvement.

10 Wright. "The Quality of Visitors’ Experiences in Art Museums."
Art really has that potential to change societal views or influence thinking and I don’t think we do see as much of that as we could...The potential for social justice I don’t think is being exercised.

About City Gallery Wellington, participants made the following comments:

The fact that they’re an art gallery, a contemporary art gallery at that – for lots of people it’s a huge barrier, straight off the bat.

Not everyone wants to go to City Gallery... because they see it as a “bastion of the elite”.

There is evidently a problem with public engagement of contemporary public art galleries. A significant number of museum researchers and scholars believe any substantial development requires internal attitudes within museums and galleries to change.11

My research suggested that Wellington’s public art galleries acknowledge the difficulty of developing public engagement, but do not see it as an institutional problem. A participant from City Gallery commented:

For some reason, despite considerable effort on the part of galleries over many years, it is a profile that doesn’t seem to change. City Gallery, like other galleries, wants to attract and engage as broad and diverse an audience as possible.

Most Council staff who participated in the research believed that City Gallery should focus more on social inclusion and social outcomes. From the interview with this participant, I understood that City Gallery did not wish to prioritise social inclusion at the same level as the artists they represent. In other words, for City Gallery, social inclusion and experiences of excellent art could not go hand in hand. It seems to me that, underlying this narrow understanding is the traditional culture of public art galleries, which gets in the way of including the non-art-literate public. The ‘new museology’ appears to still be in its early stages in Wellington’s public art galleries.12

A change to social inclusion policy and evaluation might influence socially inclusive practice in our public art galleries.

As part of my research I looked at international examples of cultural policy that have helped to shape art museums’ engagement with the public. I found that social inclusion in museums and galleries has been more of a priority in other Western nations, especially in the United Kingdom and the United States. In 2002, Australia’s Liberal government established a Social Inclusion Unit but did not connect museums and social change through national policy.13 The United Kingdom has a different story. The UK implemented social inclusion strategies into arts and culture and this made a long-lasting impact.

In 1997, the UK government set up the Social Exclusion Unit to develop social inclusion across all sectors. Following this, it established the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. This Department advocated for social inclusion in museums and encouraged them to include community initiatives in

11 Nightingale and Mahal, "The heart of the matter: integrating equality and diversity into the policy and practice of museums and galleries."; Black, "Building a 21st Century Audience."; Golding and Modest, "Introduction."; Davis, "Museums, Identity, Community".

12 Whitehead, Interpreting art in museums and galleries; Duncan, ""The art museum as ritual".; Grenfell and Hardy, Art rules; Bourdieu, Darbel, and Schnapper, The love of art: European art museums and their public; Silva, "Distinction through visual art."; Anson and Garrett, "Encounters with Contemporary Art."; Karp, "Museums and communities."; Wright, "The Quality of Visitors' Experiences in Art Museums." Vergo, The new museology; Stam, "The informed muse."; Macdonald, "Introduction.".

13 Message, "Slipping through the cracks: museums and social inclusion in Australian cultural policy development 2007-2010."
their practice.\textsuperscript{14} Practical successes include the four Contemporary arts and human rights exhibitions (2001–2010) at Glasgow’s Gallery of Modern Art.\textsuperscript{15} Another later example is the Happy Museum project, a museum that has community wellbeing as its main driver. It actually lobbied for public participation in museums to be included as contributing factors to Britain’s national happiness.\textsuperscript{16} Overall, UK developments demonstrate the impact that a national mandate can have on museums’ social inclusion practices.

Although New Zealand does not have a government wide social inclusion strategy, we are making progress in the area of cultural evaluation. The Ministry for Culture and Heritage’s Cultural Indicators Programme, established in 1993 in partnership with Statistics New Zealand, has been refining the measurement of culture as a contributing factor to New Zealand’s social and economic wellbeing. The “Cultural Indicators for New Zealand” breaks cultural outcomes down into five themes: ‘engagement’ (including access), ‘cultural identity’, ‘diversity’, ‘social cohesion’, and ‘economic development’.\textsuperscript{17} Internationally influential, Australia used the Indicators to help develop “Vital Signs: Cultural Indicators for Australia.”

Participants of my research were asked which policies they thought were influential of social inclusion in City Gallery and Toi Pōneke Gallery. The participants mentioned local and national policies that help to drive social inclusion by the galleries.

Local government policies (Wellington):

- Accessible Wellington Action Plan
- Arts and Culture Strategy

New Zealand government policies:

- Local Government Act 2002
- New Zealand Disability Strategy

Surprisingly, the Cultural Indicators for New Zealand was not mentioned by the participants. Neither was the Arts for All handbook, written by Arts Access Aotearoa and published by Creative New Zealand, nor the Ministry for Social Development’s handbook Social Inclusion and Participation: A guide for policy and planning. Given this information, I wondered what the impact might be if New Zealand’s government departments joined forces to improve social inclusion in the cultural sector.

The participants believed a difference could be made with more integrated local government policies. Almost all participants said that communication about the Council’s priorities needed to be clearer. One Council participant said:

\begin{quote}
We could do better at working with our CCOs [Council Controlled Organisations, such as Wellington Museums Trust] to ensure their work is more closely aligned to our strategies and priorities. We should be able to exert more influence on them than we currently do.
\end{quote}

A City Gallery participant commented:

\begin{quote}
14 Selwood and Davies, "Policies, frameworks and legislation The conditions under which English museums operate."; Anwar, Gewirtz, and Cribb, "New Labour’s socially responsible museum." West and Smith, "We are not a Government poodle: Museums and social inclusion under New Labour."; Scott, "Museum measurement: Questions of value."
16 Thompson et al., "The Happy Museum."
17 Ministry for Culture and Heritage, "Cultural Indicators for New Zealand Tohu Ahurea mō Aotearoa."
\end{quote}
The lines of communication [between the Council and City Gallery] could be improved enormously. There are too few, and they are not as robust as they could be, and are not necessarily the right kind.

Some participants thought that a mandate or policy is essential to make change, especially in large organisations like local government. One of the two participating City Councillors stated:

If you don’t have a framework, in a bureaucracy like Council, then things don’t get their due worth.

A project evaluation Manager for the Council suggested qualitative measurement would help to evaluate the impact of an exhibition on visitors. This participant said:

What you could measure quite readily is a change in people’s understanding or awareness of an issue... then ask people what they might do as a result.

So how do we emphasise social inclusion and improve communication about its development between local government and local public art galleries? Museum professionals Celine West and Charlotte Smith propose that “a singular, sustainable methodology for measuring impact needs to be promoted so that museums can put it into practice.”

Given the UK policy situation, participants’ comments, and my research, I concluded that a nationwide cultural evaluation model would be helpful to push for the evaluation of social inclusion. Relevant government departments could collaborate to develop a cultural evaluation model. Social inclusion is an ideal that I would like to see influence central and local government, and ultimately, public art galleries. I suggest that if social inclusion is evaluated, it will be more likely to be creatively developed and implemented by public art galleries.

As seen in the United Kingdom, government policy needs to drive the development of social inclusion in arts and culture if a nation-wide response is desired. This is backed up by the UK social inclusion policy experience. Here in New Zealand, I suggest that the Ministry for Culture and Heritage lead the development of a practical arts and culture evaluation model for New Zealand. I propose that the Ministry expand its Cultural Indicators Programme to include research on measuring participation and wellbeing. In time, the indicators could include social inclusion measures. As some participants in my research said, local councils could also choose to impact public art galleries more. For example, local government Key Performance Indicators could be altered to aid in the development of social inclusion in local gallery and museum practices.

To recap, the research for my thesis included a review of international literature and local government policy, and interviews with eight participants. This was undoubtedly a small study. It did, however, present some original results which can assist in understanding the context of New Zealand’s cultural sector. The major conclusions of my research were:

- The transformational potential of local public art galleries is limited by unclear policy.
- The measurement of social outcomes of Wellington’s public art galleries is not currently a priority, echoed by the lack of integration across central and local government on this issue.
- A whole of organisation culture change and imbedded social inclusion policy are required to significantly advance social inclusion in public art galleries.
- Evaluation is necessary not only to justify public funds, but also to provide a measurement framework for a greater range of social inclusion practices within cultural institutions.

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18 West and Smith, “We are not a Government poodle,” 285.
19 Ministry for Culture and Heritage, Creative New Zealand, Department of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Education.
I recommend that future studies are significantly deeper and more extensive than this small research project to give more validity and weight to research about social inclusion in New Zealand’s arts and culture sector. To further examine how the public are involved in developing and experiencing exhibitions, future research could involve interviewing gallery professionals, public programme coordinators, educators and curators around the country about collaboration with the public. Another recommendation for future research is an in-depth analysis of the philosophies, historical practices and perceptions that are likely to underpin public art galleries’ shortcomings in developing social inclusion. Qualitative visitor research is also essential. I would like to see public programme evaluation put into practice by way of focus groups with public programme users. There is also potential for public programme participation to become part of the Cultural Indicators for New Zealand.

I want to end my presentation by imagining the future of our real-life example. I introduced my paper today with surveillance-fascinated artist Simon Denny and his creation for the 2015 Venice Biennale on behalf of Aotearoa New Zealand. With the need for greater social inclusion in our art museums, where does Denny’s _Secret Power_, to be purchased by Te Papa, leave us? Let’s ask:

- How can Denny’s _Secret Power_ be made accessible to the public?
- How can we be sure the public will be engaged with it?
- How will the engagement be measured and which policies will influence this?
- How will we know that the $750,000 spent on acquiring this artwork has benefitted the public?

and...

- Will the engagement look like the image of a gallery full of art but lacking audience?
- Or will New Zealand’s response look more like this:
References


Bio

Claire has a background in local government and third sector policy, social work and community development. She holds a Bachelor of Social and Community Work and a Bachelor of Arts (Language) from the University of Otago. Combining these fields with her passion for art, she graduated with a Master of Museum and Heritage Studies from Victoria University of Wellington in 2014 with a focus on social inclusion in public art galleries (click here to read her dissertation). Claire has since helped to reopen two public art galleries. She was Gallery Manager leading up to and during the 2016 reopening of Christchurch’s Toi Moroki Centre of Contemporary Art (CoCA), five years after the 2011 earthquake. Her next role was Assistant Manager for Anderson Park Art Gallery in New Zealand’s southernmost city of Invercargill, which had closed to the public in 2014 due to the need for earthquake strengthening. Claire contributed to the rebranding of Anderson Park Art Gallery to Invercargill Public Art Gallery and opened a temporary gallery in central Invercargill so that the public could experience the City’s art collection again. Claire is passionate about climate change education by museums and has contributed on this topic to the Tusk Culture blog.