

Tweets, Representation and the Veil of Diversity

(thoughts on the panel - To Tweet or Not to Tweet: Social Media from a Collections Point of View presented by Danielle Currie, Amy Gibson, Travis Puterbaugh, Erin Robin and Bianca Ruthven

When considering the implications of social media on museums, the concept of representation can serve as a node from which different levels of connection and causation can be analyzed. Most immediately we may consider questions such as how to most effectively represent a museum within digital platforms. Also, how do the opinions of individual staff members impact the way a museum as an institution constructs a representational identity? Or, how can we directly engage visitors in ways that align with collection policies and administrative visions? Each of these queries contains vast potential for discussion and yet, they only scratch the surface of the forms of representation as related to the world of museums. Take for instance the configuration of most major museums today. Do these arrangements represent collections of the world's greatest artworks and artifacts, or taxonomical trophy cases in publically subsidized pirate dens? Do the names of our institutions represent benevolent social patrons or robber barons and exploitation profiteers? Does the major modern museum represent education and aesthetic appreciation, or are they monuments to capitalist consumption and cultural hegemony? Or both?

It is with these questions in mind that ideas of social media and community engagement can most productively be assessed. The ARCS 2017 Conference session titled "To Tweet or Not to Tweet: Social Media from a Collections Point of View" began with a tweet from Kilolo Luckett, art historian and one of the few (possibly only) Black art commissioners in Pittsburgh. Ms. Luckett tweeted that "The Carnegie Museum of Art has over 30,000 objects in its collection and less than 1% is by Black artists." Next, the session's moderator displayed the response, posted on the Internet, by the Carnegie Museum of Art (CMOA). In the response, the CMOA acknowledged the disparities and outlined plans currently underway to rectify the museums lack of diversity. The moderator highlighted this response as an exemplar case of how museums should engage with public criticism. I wondered about Ms. Luckett's tweet, what may have inspired it and what may have been her ultimate goal in offering such information.

I contacted Ms. Luckett, who was surprised and intrigued to learn how her tweet was being used at the conference. She was even more intrigued when provided with a demographic summary of conference attendees and presenters. Ms. Luckett shared a few vital background details that subsequently lead to her tweet, including her time spent studying collections at the CMOA and her relationships with the staff. We discussed what possible remedies to the lack of diversity in the world of museums would look like, the viability of the concept of

diversity and the space this concept creates for misapplication and the enabling of 'business as usual.' Ms. Lockett explained that there was a stark difference between the internal administrative reaction to her tweet and the publically presented response highlighted by the session moderator. In these machinations we see another form of representation at play.

This session was quite helpful, in the sense that the goal of any professional conference is to bring colleagues together, facilitate introductions, build relationships and spread occupational knowledge. As a result of my attendance I was able to exchange ideas with an experienced and deeply knowledgeable museum professional whose insights and opinions have already made an immeasurable impact on my perspective.

Submitted by Sterling Warren