




MUSEUMS, EQUALITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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EITHNE NIGHTINGALE

 MUSEUM MEANINGS

ROUTLEDGE

14

MUSEUMS AND THE HUMAN RIGHTS FRAME

Richard Sandell

Museums and the human rights frame 199

A new direction for GoMA

Around 2001, Glasgow's Gallery of Modern Art began to develop a programme of biennial exhibitions, public events, and education and community outreach activities which sought to deploy contemporary and modern art to directly and explicitly engage visitors in debates pertaining to different human rights issues.³ The 'social justice programme' emerged out of what Mark O'Neill, then Head of Museums and Galleries, describes as a 'combination of opportunism and principle' (Sandell, Dodd and Jones 2010: 14). Glasgow City Council (of which GoMA was then part)⁴ had recently agreed to take around 10,000 asylum-seekers as part of the UK government's dispersal programme to relieve pressure on the south-east of England (Bruce and Hollows 2007: 8), a controversial decision which led to criticism of the way in which new arrivals were integrated into areas of already high deprivation. Growing political concern over social unrest and negative perceptions of asylum-seekers in both local media and amongst Glasgow's communities reached a peak following the high profile murder of a young Turkish refugee, Firsat Yildiz, in the Sighthill area of Glasgow. The City Council subsequently asked its various departments, including Culture and Leisure Services of which Glasgow Museums was part, to consider how they might both develop services targeted at new arrivals to the city and address negative public attitudes towards these groups (ibid.). At around the same time, Glasgow Museums was approached by Amnesty International about the possibility of an exhibition linked to their activities and discussions began around the possibilities of partnership. These events fitted well with the ethos and practice of Glasgow Museums that had, for many years, pioneered museum developments that sought to extend access to new audiences and to address social issues but posed particular problems for the Gallery. For many years, GoMA had had a difficult relationship with the thriving Glasgow art scene and had come to be viewed, by both local artists and the art world more broadly, as populist and

lacking credibility as a venue for showing quality work. So, despite a framework of institutional commitment and prior experience within Glasgow Museums as a whole, the idea of an exhibition that explicitly addressed political and social concerns represented an entirely new direction for GoMA's practice and one of which staff were initially very wary. As Victoria Hollows, Museum Manager, explained:

We had been suffering in the early years at GoMA in terms of its reputation and credibility as an art gallery. To be absolutely honest, when we were first asked to do something about asylum seekers and refugees we thought 'do we have to?' We were just starting to get support in the arts community and we thought it would be perceived completely wrong. We didn't want this to be the final nail in the coffin. I think it's fair to say that the staff had a very strong belief that we can have good quality art and embrace current contemporary practice *and* we can still have strong audience support. So this was our moment to prove that can happen. It was a huge gamble in some respects.

The project nevertheless gained momentum and a philosophy of practice emerged which centred on the use of art as a platform for engaging audiences in debate and dialogue around a series of human rights related topics – a philosophy maintained through all four biennial programmes. The first programme to be launched in 2003 entitled *Sanctuary: Contemporary Art and Human Rights* sought to raise awareness of the plight of asylum-seekers and refugees worldwide and to redress negative media portrayals and local public perceptions. It featured work by 34 artists from 15 different countries including established names such as Bill Viola, Louise Bourgeois, Leon Golub and Hans Haacke (Bruce and Hollows 2007). Since *Sanctuary*, three further programmes have been delivered, each with the same strapline, 'Contemporary art and human rights'. The second programme, *Rule of Thumb* (2005), explored the issue of violence against women with a range of activities based around a solo exhibition of work by American artist Barbara Kruger. The third programme, *Blind Faith* (2007), explored the sensitive issue of sectarianism, again through a range of outreach and education projects and a public events programme built around a high profile exhibition, this time of specially commissioned work by Glasgow-based artist, Roderick Buchanan. The fourth programme – *sh[OUT]* – opened in 2009 and explored rights issues pertaining to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex communities. In common with the previous three programmes, *sh[OUT]* was presented in partnership with Amnesty International and developed through collaboration with an advisory group comprised of representatives of a range of community based agencies in Scotland.⁵

At the heart of the programme was an exhibition featuring work by 18 artists including Patricia Cronin,⁶ Robert Mapplethorpe (Figures 14.1 and 14.2) David Hockney, Nan Goldin, Sadie Lee and Grayson Perry (Plates 14.1, 14.2 and 14.3) and, in a small adjoining gallery, visitors could find out more about the struggle for LGBT rights and examples of rights violations from around the world through a documentary exhibition developed by Amnesty International. In a further space, a resource area (with books, leaflets, oral history material and so on) featured a wall on which visitors were invited to share their responses to the programme through comments cards. Accompanying the main exhibition was a series of smaller, changing exhibitions including work produced by participants in LGBT community groups (developed with support from professional artists and gallery staff). A series of striking posters, featuring quotations related to the programme's central concerns and selected by the advisory group, were used to promote the programme across the city (Figure 14.3).



FIGURE 14.1 Patricia Cronin, *Memorial to a Marriage*, 2002. Bronze, 17 × 26.5 × 52 inches. Collection of Glasgow City Council. With kind permission of the artist and Glasgow Museums.

- 6 *Memorial to a Marriage*, a large bronze sculpture (based on the marble version permanently installed in Woodlawn Cemetery, New York) was frequently referred to by visitors to *sh[OUT]* who found the combination of personal and political themes in Patricia Cronin's work highly affecting. As Cronin states in the exhibition catalogue; 'Deborah (my partner, the artist Deborah Kass) and I have all the legal documents one can have to try to simulate the legal protections of marriage, but they are wills, health care proxies and power-of attorney documents. They are so depressing because they are all about if one of us gets incapacitated or dies. I wanted something official that celebrated our life together and if all I will be officially allowed is death, I decided to make the most elegant and dignified statement I could about the end of our life together. In 2002 I created *Memorial to a Marriage*, an over life-size three ton Carrara marble mortuary sculpture, which is a double portrait of Deborah and me. It is permanently installed on our actual burial plot in the Woodlawn Cemetery, in New York . . . The statue addresses issues of lesbian invisibility, gay marriage, love and loss, power and status. In this sculpture I chose a nationalist form – nineteenth-century American neo-classical sculpture – to address what I consider a federal failure. In death I make official my "marriage" which is still not legal while we are alive'. The political timeliness of Cronin's work and the contested nature of the rights issues which *sh[OUT]* sought to highlight were subsequently underscored when same-sex marriage was eventually legalised in the state of New York on 24 July 2011.