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Election Special: Body Languages

BY SAM KORMAN

In part two of our special series, Sam Korman argues why the educational responsibility of museums resonates with election issues around race

On 8 November 2016, the United States will go to the polls to vote for their 44th president, choosing between the Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton, and the Republican candidate Donald Trump. This election cycle has been more divisive and toxic than any other in living memory in the US; it has widened old conservative and liberal fault lines, and created new, even more dangerous ones with the potential to effect not just the US, but the whole world. In the run-up to the election, we will be running a series of short opinion pieces by artists, curators and writers, each one invited to address a different key election issue.

'We are here in solidarity with the Lenape tribe, whose land New York currently occupies,' explained an organizer of Decolonize This Museum, an anti-Columbus Day tour and protest that took place at the American Museum of Natural History on Monday, 10 October.¹ Demonstrators laid out three clear demands for the most famous scientific and anthropological museum in the US: (1) appoint new curators from "'exhibited" populations' and repatriate their objects; (2) remove the racist statue of President Theodore Roosevelt on horseback, flanked by a Native American and African man; and (3) rename Columbus Day as Indigenous Peoples' Day. The tour led more than 200 attendees through ten galleries, as guides read brief passages decrying the museum's colonialist history, and its leading role in the development of eugenics, and racist stereotypes and legislation. 'Where is the Hall of European Peoples?' they frequently asked. The tour concluded on the museum's front steps, where protesters covered the Roosevelt statue with a parachute, and representatives spoke from the Lenape tribe, Native American organizations, Black Lives Matter, as well as Puerto Rican and Palestinian liberation movements.



Protest outside the American Museum of Natural History, 10 October, 2016. Andrés Rodríguez

'We are here to decolonize this museum with our bodies and our voices,' said the Decolonize demonstrators. Combined with their utterly reasonable demand for adequate and equal representation, the action offered insight into the rhetoric of this election, and its stakes. Toward the end of the tour, an Anishinaabe woman called to the crowd, 'This is not a metaphor,' and explained that traditional handcraft facilitates a historical conversation between grandmother, mother, and child. A culture under threat from occupation finds its *raison d'être* in the sanctity of the body, imparting social responsibility to children. This condition becomes a significant challenge particularly to the American Museum of Natural History, and other encyclopaedic museums, which, like the presidential candidates, uses and idealizes 'youth' to justify its public mandate. It literally puts bodies on display, in naturalistic, surreal or moralizing scenes and education programmes for kids. But by placing bodies, and the violence which occupation enacts upon them, at the centre of the protest, Decolonize supplants metaphor with accountability. These are the stakes: the language of the next administration will be responsible for the bodies it appropriates, violates, and begets. Throughout the protest, the crowd chanted, 'Respect. Remove. Rename.'

Overall, the tour was peaceful, and organizers assuaged unwarranted tensions, having instructed participants that 'We are not here to make children afraid.' (The Museum never fails to make local, national, and international lists of top family attractions, and is always packed with kids.) The statement reminded me of the first question of the second presidential debate (held the day before on 9 October), about how the country's youth are impacted by the candidates' conduct. In response, Hillary Clinton explained that the US is great because its citizens are 'good,' and that she will enlist children in furthering this ideal. Surprisingly, Donald

Trump agreed with his opponent about the importance their campaigns possess for children, though both quickly used the subject to bolster other, broader policies. Neither Democrat nor Republican would pin an election on cultural funding, even at the local level; nevertheless, resources aimed at children are synonymous with this type of spending, and politicians and institutions alike invoke children as a basis for public service. Since the Enlightenment, the presumption of a child's 'goodness' has pervaded modern democratic, judicial, and educational institutions. The last question of the town hall style debate asked both candidates to name something they respect about each other, and Clinton, in the unfortunate position of going first, complimented Trump's sons and daughter. Concluding on the 30 years she has spent helping kids and families, she again reinforced the role of children to her presidential bid, and the production of an exemplary public.



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1) The tour was held in relation to Artists Space current exhibition program, Decolonize This Place, a series of talks, workshops, screenings, meetings, and public actions that seeks to 'liberate art from itself...not to end art, but to unleash its powers of direct action and radical imagination', and will 'prioritize the presence and work of people of color and will be inclusive of queer, immigrant, and disabled participants – challenging the white supremacy that continues to characterize the economies and institutions of art.'