

Museum Discourse: Exploring relations of power and knowledge

Dr Emily Pringle



Photo © Mark McNulty

WHEN MUSEUM DEPARTMENTS GO ROGUE



Michel Foucault's framing of 'discourse'

- Knowledge is intrinsically linked to power and is formed within the context of practices of power
- Dominant discourses define and legitimise certain knowledge whilst excluding other forms of knowing

Discourses in the museum shape how institutional resources and time are prioritised, what activities and knowledge are seen as more important and what messages the museum seeks to communicate.



Four discourses of the Art Museum

Discourse of artists and the collection

Discourse of experience/
entertainment



Discourse of financial
sustainability

Discourse of democratic participation

The Discourse of artists and the collection

The art museum's primary responsibility is the growth and care of its collections with artists at the centre



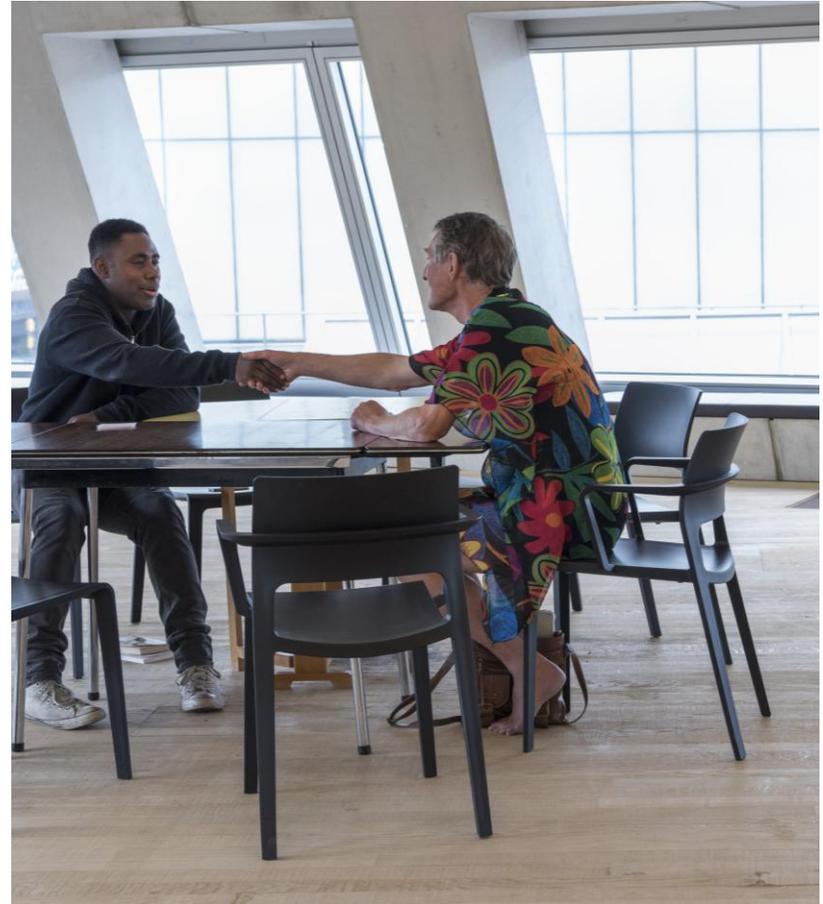
The discourse of financial sustainability

The art museum needs to provide exhibitions and activities that will attract the maximum number of visitors to generate the maximum amount of income



The discourse of democratic participation

The museum needs to act as a change agent and become more inclusive and participatory, reaching out to diverse audiences and embracing forms of knowledge co-production and learning



The discourse of experience and entertainment

The museum is a space of entertainment and experiences



Situating the museum as a space of collaborative enquiry

- **The importance of questions** – Make questioning central to all practices in the museum. Questions are located in practice; they emerge from practice and the knowledge that comes from the process of enquiry feeds back into practice.
- **Follow a process of enquiry** – Questioning is accompanied by a structured and collaborative process of enquiry. Practice becomes a cyclical form of enquiry that involves questioning, interrogating and reflecting on actions. It involves learning in and about practice and acting on that learning.
- **The generation of new knowledge** – New knowledge is generated that is made public through practice, through exhibitions and programmes and/or more conventionally recognised academic research outputs

Situating the museum as a space of collaborative enquiry – *Art in Action* at Tate Modern

- Can art act as a catalyst for social and political activism?
- What is the role of the viewer of and/or participant in a live art performance?



What is needed?

- Time
- Senior Management buy-in
- Effective communication
- Trust and respect
- Openness to risk and experimentation

