Mediating queer controversy in Australian museum exhibitions

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Abstract

The phrase ‘museums are safe spaces for unsafe ideas’ (Gurian 2006b: 99) belies the reality that museums are often wary of discussing unsafe ideas, not to mention queer ideas which often fall under this classification. Yet the phrase follows from the aspiration that museums can do better—that they can be socially responsive and responsible, and that they can seek to include the diversity of the communities they serve. The three exhibitions discussed are moments where their host institutions provided safe harbour for unsafe ideas leading to queer inclusiveness but also to controversy: Mapplethorpe at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, in 1995; Becoming Visible at the Constitutional Museum, Adelaide, in 1982; and Prejudice and Pride at the Australian Museum, Sydney, in 1994. Controversy almost inevitably follows from unsafe and queer ideas, the issue becoming how to mediate rather than avoid it. The above museum moments together suggest directions for best museum and heritage practice based on progressive organisational cultures, strong leadership and openness to experimentation. In actively encouraging these three elements, museums can reaffirm and defend themselves as safe spaces for unsafe ideas.

Introduction

When museum theorist Elaine Heumann Gurian (2006b: 99) wrote that ‘museums should become safe spaces for unsafe ideas’ she was writing in an aspirational sense: museums are not always safe spaces for unsafe ideas but should become such spaces. The controversial exhibitions that I examine in this paper presented such ideas that publicly acknowledged the diversity of sexes, genders and sexualities (‘queerness’). Rooted as they are in public history and memory, I contend that these case studies present directions for future practice in both the areas of museums and heritage. Beginning first with the controversy surrounding Robert Mapplethorpe’s art in both the United States and in Australia as perhaps the most well-known subject of controversy around queer content in museums, I will go on to discuss two other relatively unknown Australian cases. The first surrounded the exhibition Becoming Visible: Lesbians and Male Homosexuals – From Oppression to Liberation at the Constitutional Museum, Adelaide, in 1982. The second centred around Prejudice and Pride at the Australian Museum in 1994. In examining and comparing these three cases, I suggest that progressive organisational cultures, strong leadership and openness to experimentation at these sites led to exemplary examples of engagement with queer heritage. Courting controversy brings matters of political importance up for discussion and can ultimately expand the limits of what is deemed worthy of inclusion.

The Australian Research Council funded study ‘Exhibitions as Contested Sites’ is an important study of controversy in Australian museums. This three year investigation starting in 2002
involved telephone and exit surveys that gauged attitudes towards 16 topics that Australians might consider controversial including indigenous issues, immigration, population levels, asylum seekers, terrorism, treatment of prisoners of war, war atrocities, drugs, sex, religion, racism, social justice, globalisation, environmental sustainability and genetic engineering (Cameron 2006). Fiona Cameron (2003: 7), one of the project investigators, provides a useful definition, characterising controversial subjects as those including ‘taboo topics, sensitive issues, a particular historical interpretation or an artwork that embodies an idea, or questions that have a divisive dimension, raising alternative answers while challenging an individual’s or group’s values, beliefs, ideologies or moral position.’ ‘Alternative answers’ provided by queer communities, cultures, identities and ideas are often at odds with those of the bearers of Australian heterosexuality, masculinity and good citizenship embodied in constructions like the ANZAC and ‘Aussie Battlers.’

There is potential to cause controversy in any site of cultural dialogue. Therefore, I consider many insights to be gained in looking to other fields that have provided ‘alternative answers’ to dominant narratives. Witcomb and Buckley (2013) looked to the development of the ‘new museology’ as a critical response to the challenging of museum authority in order to draw a parallel with similar debates within heritage studies. In a similar move, I see heritage studies as offering museums ways to embed themselves in ‘place’ and the communities attached to them. Rather than rigidly exercising their ability to decontextualise objects and abstract themselves from their surroundings, museums might further immerse themselves in their social and urban environments (see Gurian 2006a: 52; MacFarlane 2015). Bridging museums and heritage, the literature on historic house museums suggests that they generally present narratives that deflect questions of queerness (Adair 2010; Oram 2011, 2012). This supports the influential notion of an ‘authorised heritage discourse’ that masks the cultural and political dimensions of heritage work (Smith 2006), in this case the capacity of public displays of queer heritage to bring about positive effects for queer communities. Nevertheless, encouraging examples of heritage practice can be found. Outside Australia, the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, Chicago, explores the relationship between Jane Addams and Mary Rozet-Smith while historicising understandings of such intimacies (Lee 2011). Another significant development overseas has been the LGBTQ Heritage Initiative of the United States National Park Service (2015). Started in 2014, the initiative aimed to involve scholars and communities to document sites of LGBTQ importance and add them to the National Register of Historic Places. In Australia, acknowledgement of queer heritage is limited, with an exception being the listing of Oxford Street in Sydney as a heritage conservation area ‘because of its ongoing associations with Sydney’s gay community since the 1960s’ (NSW Government Office of Environment & Heritage 2012). Most heritage activities are instead conducted by queer communities, for example, the history walks organised by the Pride History Group and the reclaimed homosexual history of the Hyde Park Barracks (Hay 1991). The exhibitions that will be discussed, however, were opened before the wider public. It is in the broader public sphere where queer ideas often generate controversy and the lines of conflict and compassion are drawn.

Mapplethorpe: Art Gallery of Western Australia

Controversy registers as a temperature from white hot fury to a blush of embarrassment. The events surrounding the presentation of Indigenous history when the National Museum of Australia opened in 2001 was of the former sort (Casey 2003), as was the removal of the works of Bill Henson from the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in 2008 due to claims that he had indecently photographed children (Marr 2008). To find a queer case of the same temperature, however, we have to look to the United States and to the artist Robert Mapplethorpe. In 1989, Mapplethorpe’s exhibition The Perfect Moment started touring with the support of a $30,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), similar to a grant from the Australia Council for the Arts. It included several homoerotic and sadomasochistic images that drew the ire of Reverend Donald Wildmon, founder of the American Family Association that is known for its condemnation of queer communities. Wildmon protested to Senator Jesse Helms, leading to a major debate in Congress and in the arts community around the funding
and practices of the NEA. The opponents were divided on issues of artistic freedom, censorship and the use of the arts to promote differing values. Within a year, many politicians had added to the heat, a museum cancelled its leg of the tour but subsequently apologised, funds were cut or threatened, and a director resigned (McLeod & MacKenzie 1998). The Mapplethorpe controversy sets the upper bar in terms of queer controversy in museums.

Some of the infamy of this episode may have accompanied the exhibition *Mapplethorpe* when it toured to Australia in 1995. Curated by Germano Celant for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, it toured to ten major cities around the world and was viewed by more than 700,000 people before coming to Australia (Celant & Museum of Contemporary Art 1992). Like the United States exhibition *The Perfect Moment*, it was a retrospective of his primarily photographic works, displaying 200 photos of subjects including flowers, portraits, nudes and sexual practices. While there was no repeat of the controversy while the same exhibition was in Sydney and viewed by 50,000 people, the show divided the citizens of Perth (Westside Observer 1995). It was revealed preceding the exhibition that the state government-funded organisation Healthway had refused a request for $42,000 against the recommendation of its own arts advisory panel (The West Australian 1995c). Following a tense period, the host institution, the Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA), decided to risk underwriting the show. 5,000 visitors attended the show during the first four days as the temperature of the debate escalated (X-Press Magazine 1995).

While 40,000 would eventually see the show, three times the number predicted, condemnation of the exhibition came from both members of the public, religious figures and from politicians (Warnock 1996). The success of the exhibition in terms of visitation supports the curator Germano Celant’s comment on the attempted censorship of the show: ‘it’s an incredible form of advertising. They don’t realise that they give a huge push of curiosity and seduction’ (Dawes 1995). Whether audiences came inclined to like or dislike the show, and the figures suggest that audiences received the show more favourably than did politicians and theologians, opinion was divided (see Figure 1). Representing one end of the standpoint spectrum, Dwight Randall, Director of the Christian organisation Life Ministries ‘found the Mapplethorpe display gut wrenching and repulsive in the extreme’ (News Chronicle 1995). The conservative Liberal member of the Legislative Council called the exhibition a ‘manifestation of our descent into a pit of moral decay’ (Tickner 1995). And astoundingly the Liberal Health Minister Graham Kierath, whose portfolio supported the organisation that was asked for exhibition funding, said that ‘[a]t best, some of them could be called blatantly pornographic…. At worst, they are nauseating, perverse, sleazy and depraved’ (O’Malley, 1995b).

**Figure 1:** Cartoon on the differing response of politicians and the public to *Mapplethorpe*. Source: Dean Alston.

**Becoming visible: the Constitutional Museum**

The second Australian case, *Becoming Visible: Lesbians and Male Homosexuals – From Oppression to Liberation* opened at the Constitutional Museum, Adelaide, in 1982 (see Figure 2). The Constitutional Museum was a museum of political history managed by the History Trust of South Australia (now History SA), which operated from 1979 till 1995. The exhibition is probably the first queer exhibition that was opened with the support of a public museum.
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in Australia (Anderson 2011: 4). Moreover, it was displayed within the first community gallery in Australia, the Speaker’s Corner, where the content of the exhibition is developed by a community group and where the museum lends gallery space and other resources. In contrast to the international touring exhibition *Mapplethorpe*, it stood in closer relationship to the local queer community. Despite its small size, the exhibition was ambitious: outlining the history of homosexuality in South Australia including the infamous murder of Dr George Duncan at a beat along the River Torrens; dispelling myths about homosexuality; defining terms such as ‘sex’ ‘gender’ and ‘homophobia’; and giving an overview of the critiques of the Gay Liberation Movement including ‘ending the assumption of heterosexuality, the oppression of women and an end to the sex role stereotyping based on rigid ideas of masculinity and femininity’ (Gay Display Collective 1982). The displays communicated to both straight and non-straight visitors alike, neutralising prejudice by challenging myths about homosexuals, and connecting homosexual Adelaideans with community organisations and encouraging them to ‘come out.’ While South Australia became the first state to decriminalise sex between men in 1975, the queer community and activists in 1982 were still combatting numerous institutionalised forms of discrimination, and were turning to public cultural institutions to do so.

The organised voice of opposition to *Becoming Visible* came from the Australian Festival of Light (now FamilyVoice Australia), a Christian organisation started in Adelaide in 1972 that defends its version of family values based on married, heterosexual and procreative coupledom. According to the Education Officer Mark Blencowe of the Constitutional Museum, the organisation ‘took the bait by criticising it before they saw it’ (Dare 1982). One complaint letter read, ‘I would like to register my disgust at our museum being used to promote this deluded, sick practice.’ Another anonymous caller describing himself as a counsellor protested, ‘I work with homosexual hang-ups and I realise they can’t help it but I’m tired of them flaunting their problem’ (History SA, emphasis in original). In common with the controversial Mapplethorpe exhibitions above, a conservative interpretation of Christianity is invoked to rebuke the right of queer communities to public displays of their heritage. As the author of the complaint letter implies, it is their museum, a heterosexual one. Before discussing how the Constitutional Museum anticipated and responded to objections, I will discuss a final case of controversy around queer inclusion in an Australian museum.

**Prejudice and pride: the Australian Museum**

*Prejudice and Pride* opened at the Australia Museum in 1994. Unlike *Becoming Visible*, it was developed more conventionally through internal processes, though with consultation with Sydney’s queer community. The exhibition coincided with the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras (Mardi Gras), a month-long cultural festival that culminates in an extravagant parade and party. While the exhibition opened a year before the Perth Mapplethorpe retrospective, the contexts in which both exhibitions opened were markedly different. Annual festivals like Mardi Gras in Sydney and PrideFest in Perth are focal points for queer programming: they are periods in the year where queer culture is tolerated or perhaps even celebrated. The continuous
operation of Mardi Gras since 1978 compared to PerthFest from 1993, decriminalisation of homosexual sex in 1984 and 1990 respectively, as well as the openly homophobic comments from the Western Australian minister responsible for responses to HIV/AIDS, indicate the level of resistance to queer diversity in Western Australia. In Sydney, however, the Liberal politician Chris Puplick opened Prejudice and Pride with no objections. While this seems to indicate that political standpoints do not necessarily correlate with acceptance of sex, gender and sexual diversity, gains have always been hard won and usually resisted by social conservatives regardless of their political stripes.

The museum’s stated aims were to promote understanding of Sydney’s gay and lesbian culture as part of the diverse culture of the city, and to assist in the ‘struggle for acceptance and public acknowledgement of their human rights’ (Australian Museum 1994). To achieve these, the exhibition covered four themes: first, the history and politics of the legal, physical and cultural violence against gay and lesbian communities; second, gay and lesbian media, marketing and education programmes like the radio programme Gaywaves; third, community support organisations like the AIDS Council of NSW and the Anti-Violence Project; and last, the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. Each of these themes was illustrated using material including posters, video segments from Queer TV, images from magazines, and Mardi Gras costumes (Still 1994: 7-8) (see Figure 3).

As with the Mapplethorpe controversy, a disconnect existed between audience responses and those of vocal, opposing politicians. While 72% of visitors reported enjoying the exhibition—20% did not—critics like the Reverend Fred Nile were unequivocal in their denunciation (Kelly 1994; Nile 1994). A member of the NSW Upper House since 1981, Nile’s protests against queer people in Sydney include praying for rain during Mardi Gras each year and organising a march of 1,500 Christians through Darlinghurst (the historic gay centre of the city) in 1989 to end the ‘obscene, indecent, blasphemous, offensive homosexual and lesbian marches through the streets of Sydney’ (cited in Willett 2000: 202). In response to the exhibition, Nile asked the Minister for the Arts in Parliament:

Is it a fact that the Australian Museum has an offensive, explicit homosexual and lesbian mardi gras [sic] parade exhibition?... Is it a fact that this offensive exhibition
alongside a children’s family display which is being viewed by visiting school groups, by primary and secondary school children? Will the Government immediately order the Director of the Australian Museum to remove from that museum this offensive exhibition, which has no part in the Museum’s historic charter? (Nile 1994)

Prejudice and Pride did not generate the same degree of heated debate that Mapplethorpe did in Perth, but the antagonism displayed towards both was articulated through the same institutions that historically have had an oppressive impact on queer lives, ‘the law, the Christian churches and the medical profession’ (Wotherspoon 1991: 21). The criminalisation of sexual activity between men in New South Wales and Western Australia until 1984 and 1990 respectively, the national organisation Festival of Light led by Nile, and the sterilisation of intersex people in Australia revealed in a Senate report, illustrate some of the ways discrimination has been institutionally articulated (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2013).

Culture, leadership, experimentation

Having described the three queer exhibitions that embroiled their host institutions in controversy, I turn to the question of how these museums mediated the conflict through their progressive organisational cultures, strong leadership and openness to experimentation (see Figure 4). In courting controversy, these museums have engaged with and included queer communities, and have been socially responsive and responsible, exemplifying elements of the best museum and heritage practice. Cultivating an environment where important social issues can be discussed—a ‘safe space for unsafe ideas’ does not then happen by accident but is an area where practitioners can play an active role.

AGWA was bold in underwriting the Mapplethorpe exhibition despite being denied funding and receiving severe criticism from the State Government. According to the chairman of the gallery board, Lloyd Guthrey, ‘[t]he decision was resolved quite firmly that the show should go ahead’ (Butler 1995). The Opposition arts spokesperson Diana Warnock (1995) congratulated the Gallery on ‘showing the courage and sound artistic judgment in opting to exhibit the photography of… Robert Mapplethorpe.’ The Gallery also allowed space for critical reflection in the accompanying series of talks addressing questions such as ‘when does art become pornography?’ (The West Australian 1995a). Though the Gallery is commendable in proceeding with the exhibition given the political circumstances, it arguably lost an opportunity to disrupt the conservative framing of the debate. Indeed, it gave no firm reasons for proceeding with the exhibition other than wanting to be at the “cutting edge” of modern art’ (The West Australian 1995b). Additionally, instead of questioning the assumption that everyday life should be de-eroticised—especially of queer eros—the Gallery deflected the accusation of displaying pornography while leaving that moralising category unquestioned. This also leaves unsettled the pervasive and acceptable erotics of heterosexuality represented by images of heterosexual marriage, couples and families. Indeed, in 1990, this conservative framing led to the passing of unequal age of consent laws in Western Australia which additionally made it illegal to ‘promote or encourage homosexual behaviour,’ developments called ‘one of the few unequivocal failures of the Australian gay movement’ (Willett 2000: 231). Rather, both the Gallery and curator responded to criticisms by reiterating the place of Robert Mapplethorpe within art history.
downplaying the sexuality of the works and citing the recommendation of parental guidance. The curator Germano Celant writes, ‘in Robert’s work I see the neoclassical approach… His work is very conservative, very classical’ and further that ‘[t]here are only five pictures out of 120 which deal with sexual imagery’ (Dawes 1995). The Deputy Director of AGWA Seva Frangos similarly emphasised the artistic merit of the works and recommended ‘parental guidance,’ another heteronormative construction that addresses the reproductive ‘family unit’ (O’Malley 1995a). Art galleries can deflect questions of politics in their appeal to aesthetics, just as museums can call upon the supposed ‘innate’ characteristics of their objects to do the same. The Constitutional Museum and the Australian Museum avoided this depoliticisation and engaged with these debates.

The Constitutional Museum and its parent organisation, the History Trust of South Australia, have a long history of engaging with difficult and often controversial subjects. In particular, the Migration Museum and Viv Szekeres are known for their curatorial activism. For Szekeres (1992: 18-9) ‘[m]useum exhibitions tend not to challenge visitors with critical perspectives, contradictory points of view or subject matter which is controversial,’ suggesting that redressing this will require museums to ‘accept the highly political nature of their role.’ In response to complaints against the *Becoming Visible* exhibition, both the Director of the History Trust, Peter Cahalan, and the Director of the Constitutional Museum, Suzanne Brugger, wrote a well-balanced brief to the South Australian Minister for the Arts in defence of the exhibition, however they also foregrounded the separation of exhibition material from potential access to children (Cahalan 1982). Despite this, the Museum and Trust publicly supported the exhibition with the Education Officer Mark Blencowe telling the media ‘[w]hile we don’t go out of our way to offend any group in society, we aim to present some controversial issues in an historical light’ (Dare 1982). Between 1980 and 1995, some of these controversial issues included; class struggle, nuclear power, immigration, animal liberation, animal experimentation and Indigenous self-determination (History SA). Of all the museums discussed, the Constitutional Museum was the most public and confident in responding to critics.

The Australian Museum under the directorship of Des Griffin readily participated in social justice projects. Griffin in his capacity as Director of the Australian Museum for 22 years (1976-1998), Chairman of the Council of Australian Museum Associations (1988-1993) and as the first President of Museums Australia (1993-1996), oversaw the greater inclusion of Indigenous history and people at the Australian Museum and beyond. At a national level, he advocated for the adoption of *Previous Possessions, New Obligations: Policies for Museums in Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* which struck a new relationship with the First Australians based on ‘the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to self-determination in respect of cultural heritage matters’ (Griffin 1996: 60). During the conference session when this policy was adopted, it was decided that similar policies were needed for other marginalised groups, leading to the *Women’s Policy* and the *Gay and Lesbian Policy* (Museums Australia, 1999, 2000).

During the development of the *Prejudice and Pride* exhibition, Griffin was proactive in keeping the NSW Minister for the Arts informed of developments. In a letter justifying the exhibition to the Minister before it opened, Griffin cited articles from the UN *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, and then outlined ways in which the law, the Christian churches and the medical profession had unjustly sought to control homosexuality (Griffin 1994). The Minister’s office responded by calling the programme ‘a commendable initiative for the interpretation and presentation of such contemporary social issues’ (Williams 1994). In replying to Fred Nile’s condemnation in Parliament, however, a ministerial representative was more circumspect, detailing the lack of explicit materials and presence of content warnings for the exhibition (Hannaford 1994). Similar to the defence of the Perth *Mapplethorpe* exhibition in downplaying the sexuality of the works and referring to the recommendation of parental guidance, the figure of the child whose innocence must be protected from (queer) sexuality is reaffirmed to quell objections. Queer theorist, Lee Edelman (2004: 2) sees this as reinforcing ‘reproductive futurism’ that ‘impose[s] an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable… the possibility of a queer resistance.’
We see in all three cases that political support is an important factor influencing how museums manage controversy. Both the Australian and Constitutional museums had the support, however tacit, of the governments in power. In contrast, AGWA only had the support of the Opposition. It has been suggested that the Liberal Party of Western Australia passed censorship laws in 1996 as a result of the Mapplethorpe exhibition, showing that sanctions often follow controversy without a broad base of political support (Laurie 1995).

Alongside strong leadership and progressive organisational cultures at the Constitutional Museum and the Australian Museum, both museums had established innovative and experimental structures to allow these exhibitions to take place. As mentioned previously, the Becoming Visible exhibition opened at the first community gallery in Australia which intended to ‘[p]rovide a forum for the airing of important current political issues’ (Constitutional Museum 1986: 2). It allowed community and political groups to submit exhibition proposals which, if accepted, would allow the group to produce the exhibition with minimal intervention by the museum staff. In this case, the Gay Display Collective provided the content obtained through their access to the gay and lesbian community, and the museum provided the space free of charge as well as curatorial, design and promotional support. These different exhibition development processes led to a key difference between the cases: while Becoming Visible could be said to be ‘by and for’ the local queer community, Mapplethorpe (an international touring exhibition) and Prejudice and Pride (developed internally but with consultation) could not claim such a close relationship. This does not imply that community galleries are necessarily the most productive way of engaging with and representing communities. While recognising that the ‘community gallery remains an indispensible space within the museum,’ O’Reilly and Parish (2015: 310) conclude their analysis of community galleries in Australia by asking the following questions: ‘Is the community gallery actually emphasising that the community is not part of mainstream culture and Australian society? Are museums in fact essentialising communities by using the community space? Would they be better off expanding ideas of community within the whole space?’ Others at the History Trust of South Australia have acknowledged that these community displays tend to emphasise celebratory narratives and, furthermore, have been reluctant to ‘talk about the gays and lesbians who are amongst them’ (Szekeres 2007: 240; 2011: 5). Community galleries should then be taken as one of many exhibitionary strategies, one that produces displays ‘by and for’ queer communities, but one that has other effects that should be considered.

The Australian Museum had different innovative structures in place that also had the effect of being responsive to the communities it served. The Prejudice and Pride exhibition was produced under the Rapid Response Program, a programme to produce exhibitions on topical issues with a lead time of four to eight weeks instead of up to three years for a major exhibition (Field & Howie 1994: 23). These rapidly developed exhibitions allowed the museum to ‘[p]resent up-to-date information on topical issues to show the museum’s responsiveness and relevance’ (Australian Museum n.d.: 3). Other exhibitions opened under this programme included those on the High Court’s Mabo Decision, ozone depletion and international trade agreements. With the support of museum management behind them, the coordinators of the programme, Mike Field and Janice Howie (1994: 23) could say that ‘[w]hen dealing with controversial issues, universal praise from audiences is not to be expected or necessarily desired.’ This is a surprising statement coming from a natural history and anthropology museum. This period was marked by a notable degree of experimentation by the museum including not only the Rapid Response Program but also the djamu Gallery (1998-2000) that displayed Indigenous works outside of an anthropological and colonial lens (Barrett & Millner 2014: 59-63).

**Conclusion: the shock of the few**

The CEO of the Western Australian Museum, Alec Coles, considered the phrase ‘museums as safe spaces for unsafe ideas’ at the 2015 Museums Australia National Conference, reflecting on the asylum seeker boat that was acquired by his museum as an unsafe object mired in unsafe and unpopular ideas. While acknowledging that ‘there has to be some limit to the licence we have to offend,’ he stands by the phrase but is aware that ‘such a commitment may lead us
into some dangerous and uncomfortable places that we might, sometimes, rather not have gone’ (Coles 2015). At moments of discomfort and controversy, it is reassuring for those in the museum and heritage sectors to remember why the programming under scrutiny was envisioned. Queer communities, cultures and ideas have been seen as unsafe and are largely absent from our public institutions; many museums have recognised their obligation to ensure social inclusion and access in their activities; and museums should be safe spaces for unsafe ideas. Of course, this simple argument belies the level of resistance to unsafe ideas, which queer ideas are certainly seen to be.

The three cases at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, the Constitutional Museum and the Australian Museum displayed courage in presenting unsafe queer ideas. I argued that three elements—progressive organisational cultures, strong leadership and openness to experimentation—when they were present aided those organisations to intervene in the public silence around queerness. Controversy to whatever degree it occurs is best managed when organisations consistently work at these three elements, in doing so reaffirming and defending the museum as a safe space for unsafe ideas. The principles underlying this inclusion work apply to supportive members of the public, politicians, queer communities and the media. This work is a constant process with no guarantees and is inextricably linked to the changing imperatives of queer communities and political environments. Indeed, retrograde steps are seen in the suggestion that the censorship laws passed in Western Australia were the result of the Mapplethorpe exhibition, the eventual closure of the Constitutional Museum, and in the extensive staff and budget cuts at the Australian Museum that have impaired its ability to be socially responsive. Finally, no progress has been made in imagining other responses and pedagogies to queer controversy other than invoking the figure of the child whose (heterosexual) development would be disrupted by suggestions of non-heterosexual modes of being.

The museum and heritage sector cannot avoid controversy because it cannot (and should not) avoid unsafe ideas. Mediating public dialogue and presenting a plurality of views will inevitably lead to some degree of controversy. Courting controversy may in fact be a sign that an organisation is doing something right. The Australian gay historian Garry Wotherspoon (1999: 13) writes of the imperative to shock, ‘there is value in that shock. Indeed, the educative process often starts with shock, then moves on to considering the issues, to understanding, to tolerance and then acceptance…. [T]he shock of the few (no matter how few)—that represents such an important step.’ Unsettling the venerable stories we tell about Australian history and society, and its presumed heterosexuality, could be the first of many shocking and unsafe ideas to discuss.

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Endnotes

1 I use ‘queer’ both as an umbrella term that includes but is not limited to LGBTQIAAP (a longer variant of LGBT, LGBTI or LGBTIQ that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans* [transgender, transsexual, agender, genderfluid, third gender, transvestite, bigender, Two Spirit, hijra, sistagirl brothaboy and others], queer, questioning, intersex, allies, asexual, pansexual) and also a term with the political and theoretical inflections of queer theory and queer activism. ‘Queerness’ refers to the cultures, histories, identities and ideas of this diverse group of people. I recognise that there can be significant divergences between queer and LGBT approaches and that they encode unresolvable debates. To mention a few, LGBT is identitarian whereas ‘queer’ involves a critique of identity; ‘queer’ is anti-normative whereas LGBT politics can involve arguable forms of normativity like advocacy for inclusion in marriage and the military; and the inclusion of ‘allies’ is contested. Where appropriate, terminology used in particular contexts is adopted (e.g. homosexual, and gay and lesbian) or when that terminology is a better characterisations of the material (e.g. ‘gay and lesbian’ for material working within male/female, straight/gay binaries).