

An interview on museum and society with Richard Sandell

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Abstract

The study focuses on the theoretical and practical meaning of the museum as an institution that has influenced and been influenced by social relations since its foundation. The interview with Professor Richard Sandell is based on the question "what is the social role of the museum from past to present?". In this context, current museological approaches, social inclusion, access to culture and the museum's relationship with universities and other institutions are discussed. Concluding the interview, Professor Sandell, who is one of the directors of the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries at the University of Leicester, expounds on the initiatives and projects undertaken by the centre, underscoring the societal advantages that emerge from the symbiotic relationship between academic institutions and museums.

Keywords

contemporary museology, museum and society, access to culture, sociology of art

Richard Sandell ile müze ve toplum üzerine bir söyleşi

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Öz

Çalışma, kuruluşundan bu yana toplumsal ilişkileri etkileyen ve bu ilişkilerden etkilenen bir kurum olarak müzenin teorik ve pratik anlamına odaklanıyor. Profesör Richard Sandell ile yapılan söyleşi, "geçmişten günümüze müzenin toplumsal rolü nedir?" sorusuna dayanmaktadır. Bu bağlamda söyleşide güncel müzecilik yaklaşımları, sosyal içerme, kültüre erişim ve müzelerin üniversiteler ve diğer kurumlarla ilişkileri ele alınıyor. Son olarak, Leicester Üniversitesi Müzeler ve Galeriler Araştırma Merkezi'nin yöneticilerinden biri olan Profesör Sandell, merkez tarafından yürütülen girişim ve projeleri anlatarak, akademik kurumlar ve müzeler arasındaki simbiyotik ilişkiden doğan toplumsal faydanın altını çiziyor.

Anahtar kelimeler

çağdaş müzecilik, müze ve toplum, kültüre erişim, sanat sosyolojisi

Introduction¹

Since the early 1990s, the idea that museums should be accessible and open to all social groups has been much discussed both in academia and in museum practice. The relationship between museums and society represents the central topic of discussion. This relationship encompasses a range of issues, including museum management, curatorial policies, the relationship between visitors and objects, the working conditions of experts, access to culture, and the profile of museum visitors. The necessity for museum administrations to develop inclusive policies has arisen as a consequence of the transformation of museological approaches and the emergence of criticism from the grassroots. The question of the purpose of museums, and the question of who museums are for, has become one of the most significant issues in the development of exhibition policies. We engaged in discourse with Professor Richard Sandell regarding transformations in the museum paradigm, the significance of inclusive museology, the decentralisation of museums and current projects at the University of Leicester.

What is the social role of the museum from past to present?

This interview was conducted with Professor Sandell, a globally renowned academic figure in the domain of museology, whose research has spanned three decades, encompassing the study of museum and social relations. The objective of this interview was to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the historical evolution of the museum and its contemporary implications for social inclusion practices. The findings presented in this text were derived through the implementation of a semi-structured interview, a qualitative research technique. Prior to the interview, I attended Professor Sandell and Professor Suzanne MacLeod's Designing for Creative Lives course at the University of Leicester Museum Studies and I read Professor Sandell's texts on the subject and researched his projects. I asked the open-ended questions I had prepared in advance during the face-to-face interview, and I transcribed the audio-recorded interview. I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Sandell for taking the time for the interview, answering my questions sincerely and sharing his inspiring ideas.

The museum has been a subject of interest not only in the realms of art and aesthetics but also in the fields of sociology and politics for a considerable period. In this regard, the museum is approached from various disciplines and contexts, encompassing aspects ranging from architecture to modes of exhibition, from representation policies to the demographics of visitors. For instance, when viewed through a socio-political lens, art historian Carol Duncan suggests that museums were designed until the mid-20th century in

¹ This study was conducted as part of a project supported by TÜBİTAK (The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey) 2219 International Postdoctoral Research Fellowship Program.

a manner akin to ceremonial monuments. These institutions were seen as part of a series of secular rituals, making social positioning visible within them. Has the museum, which was previously associated with a "temple" impression, managed to emancipate itself from such connotations in contemporary times? What are the current functions and roles of museums?

This is a fantastic question, and it really got me thinking. So, your question is about whether or how the museum has emancipated itself from the idea of a temple, and what might be the current functions, roles and priorities of museums. I think museums still have wide ranging roles depending on a whole range of contextual factors. If you ask people in different museums, some of them might emphasize tourism and, cultural regeneration whilst others might point to education and learning, social cohesion or the advancement of inclusion and equity.

So I think there are wide ranging and continually evolving roles and this is one of the things that makes museums so interesting. My interest, of course, and it has been for over 30 years, really, is in the role and potential of the museum as an active agent in shaping society. There has been a growing body of research and scholarship exploring how museums reflect norms and values in society. My primary interest is in how they can not only reflect societal norms but are also be active in shaping ideas, shaping meanings and shaping the kinds of conversations we might have as a society. One of the things that has been exciting for me, working in this field for over 30 years, is seeing that notion –the idea that museums are active in shaping society– as it has migrated from the margins of museum thinking and practice and perhaps where it has been viewed as a function which only certain kinds of museums have attended to (such as sites of conscience or human rights museums) to really be at the heart of museum thinking and practice.

So, today we find very mainstream and quite conservative organizations talking about their potential to be active in shaping more inclusive or equitable societies. This has not been a linear or uniform transition across all museums, but I think, in broad terms, we can see growing recognition of the museum as an active agent in society, which I think is exciting and, I would say, we need that more than ever before. I am less familiar with Turkish society and politics, but I know in the UK and certainly many parts of the world, we are fearful of a sort of polarized world, of a world where there is division and uncertainty and a lack of humanity in many ways. I am 57 this year and I have lived in the UK most of my life and I have never felt that I have worked or even lived in a world that has felt like basic ideas about human rights and democracy are being challenged like never before and so I am more and more interested in what contribution museums can make to the good society, a more progressive society.

The dual process of development you mentioned is making its presence felt in museum practice in Turkey, albeit slowly. Museum workers are also pushing

institutions to make museums more inclusive. In addition to exhibitions, public programmes also contribute to this process. Before moving on to the other question, and actually in connection with it, I would like to say that I find the case of the British Museum interesting: The *Desire, Love and Identity* project of the British Museum, which is both a mainstream museum and tries to produce inclusive policies, is quite remarkable. This is a project that explores LGBTQIA+ histories. It is also very valuable to see the continuity of queer experiences in different parts of the world from thousands of years ago in the ordinary course of history?

That is such a lovely example to bring up, because, of course, as you say, the British Museum stands for so many things. It is such an iconic, large institution, and yet and I sometimes use this case with students here because –especially students from outside the UK– perceive and understand the role of the British Museum as very conservative. I like to point out that, even in those mainstream organizations, this idea of inclusion, equity, social cohesion, social progressiveness, is shifting from being something that only campaigning or social justice museums do, but increasingly now you see these practices in museums of all kinds and even in museums that have not necessarily been at the forefront of that work. Today, you could visit museum in the UK and I think you would be hard pressed to find one that has not been influenced by this turn towards telling more diverse and inclusive stories. 30 years ago, when I started here at the University of Leicester, it was possible you could find museums that were quite resistant and, impervious to some of those changes. They held on to something quite traditional. And, of course, those forces are still at play, you go to lots of museums where there are elements of traditional thinking and practice. But today, it would be hard to find a museum that has not in some way either changed its displays, who it works with, the kinds of stories it tells to try and be more relevant, more inclusive, more equitable, more diverse in what it does.

Speaking of the Leicester Museum, it could also be described as a relatively traditional museum. However, the *Casta: The Origins of Caste* exhibition, curated by Tara Munroe, took place there from September to December 2023. This was an exhibition that examined racism based on social stratification in relation to art and society. This multifaceted exhibition can also be seen as a kind of social history narrative. The statement "a picture tells a thousand words, but who controls the narrative?" on the door at the entrance to the exhibition invited viewers to engage with social history?

It is another brilliant example. I like that you bring that in, and I am thrilled you spoke to Tara because her exhibition practice vividly embodies this idea of an inclusive methodology. There is no doubt that that exhibition would not happen without the outside grassroots influence and agitation of Tara and her team. But I think it is often coupled these days with a kind of growing recognition inside the museum that this kind of work needs to happen and that maybe we need to work not with closed walls and boundaries, but we need to reach out and work differently. We need to work with organizations that bring rich professional and disciplinary knowledge, but also lived experience, that might be the lived experience and expertise derived from being part of a racially minoritized group or a member of the queer community or whatever, but that it is that methodological turn away from museums doing things in isolation, in recognition that we need to have a flow of knowledge in and out of the museum. I think one of the questions that remains live for me around that would be, when is it necessary and appropriate for the museum to hand over power and allow other people to be in control of their own stories and their own narratives?

Then what should an inclusive museum methodology entail? Currently, it is observed that museums are approaching their archives within the context of critical historiography. What are your thoughts on this matter?

I think there are many, many situations where that leap towards giving up power is really important but I am also interested in the other situations where the museum stays at the table. Rather than handing over power, it stays close to the practice and works differently, works to be more humble, works to be more empowering of others, and also cultivates a willingness to look in on the museum and change things and learn from that process a more inclusive way of working. The reason I say that is that you can see examples of museums that, in response to social change, realize they need to program differently or give an artist a platform to say something. But often that giving up of power or handing over of a platform is quite temporary, and it leaves the museum unchanged. So sometimes that is necessary, but I am equally interested in what happens when both parties come together in a more equitable, less hierarchical, more mutually learning relationship. What can happen then? I am interested in that too.

I would like to ask you this in connection with your last statement. It can be asserted that a museum is a living institution. While the exhibited objects may pertain to the past, the manner in which they are displayed carries societal and political implications for the present and future, even if these objects are historical artifacts. In this context, how are curatorial policies that take into account issues such as class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and other forms of inequality generated?

The question of how curatorial policies might address issues of class, ethnicity and gender is also a highly pertinent and current one. In the Research Centre for Museums

and Galleries, we increasingly use what we call ethical frameworks to do this kind of work. There are many examples of these frameworks available on our website. The point of working ethically is because we now know from numerous studies that when we tell a story in a museum or when we present a history (so if you take the *Casta* exhibition, for example), you can not only look back and try and present that history by looking back - you have to understand that the story is encountered in the present day. The visitors come in and find that exhibition. They may have been reading the news that morning around Black Lives Matter. They may have experienced or observed, racism in their own lives. All of those things change the way that narrative is encountered.

We have to understand contemporary inequalities in order to understand how to tell those stories in ways that are experienced well or in ways that try and tackle those inequalities and not pretend that they do not exist. I think there is something really important there, and that is why we use these ethical frameworks. The frameworks are comprised of different ethical principles or coordinates, they might say things like, 'you need to work in full awareness that the stories you tell will have effects today'. We developed an ethical framework for a project –*Everywhere and Nowhere*– which explores how to ethically research and publicly present histories of disability. This is the first time the National Trust had sought to tell stories of disability in a substantive way. We worked with a group of disabled experts to create this ethical framework, which is free to download and access. The framework is comprised of a series of coordinates that can help ensure that when we tell those stories for the first time at the National Trust, they do good, not harm. For example, if you look at the archive, if you look at the collections in the National Trust in relation to disability and in any museum, you typically find many, many stories of oppression and discrimination and prejudice, and those stories are important. They need to be told publicly. But if you are the National Trust, so you have millions of visitors, you have 500 sites. You are recognized as a major storyteller of British heritage. If in 2024, you tell disability histories for the first time and the only stories you tell are stories of prejudice and oppression and discrimination because those are the ones that appear easily in your archive, what does that do today for disabled visitors, for non-disabled visitors, for constructing the kind of narratives and discussions we want to have about disability today? There is a danger that that could be really harmful. So in our ethical framework, we urge a prioritizing of stories of joy and affirmation, not to negate the importance of telling all the stories and a richness of stories, but it recognizes that if you are a member of the disabled community and you are excited to learn the National Trust is telling those stories today, if they are all negative or if they reinforce negative stereotypes, you are left feeling, you are you have been erased the fullness of your life is not present. So these kinds of coordinates help us work differently, help us make sure that we make the right decisions about the stories that get told. And that way, we can disseminate stories like the *Desire, Love and Identity* at the British Museum, like the *Casta* project, like *Everywhere and Nowhere* that can accomplish certain things.

Told, well, told ethically, they can challenge people's negative views. They can open up people's minds to new ways of looking. They can foster empathy and understanding. They can be affirming for groups that are traditionally left out of the national story. They

can do all of that good stuff and still be historically accurate and authentic and deeply researched but told in ways that have positive effects.

Thank you. I have downloaded the ethical framework and other reports from the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries website. Very insightful and inspiring publications for researchers and museums interested in the subject. How do you develop the framework?

Each framework is different, bespoke to the context. For example, the one we developed for Trans-Inclusive Culture is different to the one we developed around disability and ant-ableism, although there are similarities in our approach. We have developed them around all sorts of other projects, and they are particular to the time and the place and the issue. So what is ethical for disability in the National Trust in 2024 is different to what is ethical with another issue or another organization. We believe that these ethical principles, can work more widely than the context in which they were developed, they can work in Turkey, they can work in China, they can work in Latin America. This does not mean that they can be directly transplanted from one context to another but –by centering lived experience and bringing it into conversation with ethics scholarship– they hold ethical insights that have a wider relevance. Although they are rooted in a particular context, they can also speak to and, stimulate thinking in other settings and other contexts.

Literally just this morning with this project, we did a webinar with NEMO, the Network of European Museum Organisations, and we had people from all over Europe exploring our work on trans-inclusion. We explained that the ethical framework that lies at the heart of this project definitely has relevance wherever you are in the world. There are some ideas in there that will be relevant, but they might also need adapting and embedding and changing. We were joined by a colleague from ICOM Italy who was saying, yes, this is really relevant to Italy. Even though it was generated in the UK, it has relevance to Italy, but also some things need to be adapted, it needs to have a life of its own. For example, because Italian language is gendered, because you have a different legal context or different equality legislation, adaptations will be required, but the ethical framework at the heart of the project still holds. We are not precious about keeping them fixed. We try and give them life so they can go out and be adapted and used, more widely.

What kind of collaborations with which stakeholders do inclusion require? At this point, what kind of responsibilities fall on educational institutions especially the museology departments of universities?

We would describe them as non-hierarchical. We know that there are often hierarchies between museum and community, between university and museums, or where different forms of knowledge, different forms of expertise are given greater weight or lesser weight. Of course, it is easy to say collaborations should be equitable, it is easy to say they

should be non-hierarchical. What we have to do is work quite hard to make those relationships work in these ways. How do you ensure a non-hierarchical relationship? For example, again, in the *Everywhere and Nowhere* project, you have got views from experts in disability, and then you have got the university researchers, and you have got the National Trust, we say we want everyone to input, we want to cocreate and coproduce these guidelines, but this requires us all to work differently to ensure diverse forms of expertise are genuinely brought together we you have to hold. The power of the organization is so strong that you have to work very hard to foster a non-hierarchical relationship. You have to ensure disabled peoples' voices are prioritised in all ways and at all stages of the project. There are lots of methods you can use to really destabilize hierarchies of expertise and work very, very hard to ensure that the power shifts. So that is one of the things we are interested in, and we work quite hard on, in our projects. The other thing you can do is to ask which stakeholders are most heavily impacted by the work of the museum, and ensure their perspectives are centered.

For example, it matters to trans communities that they have the agency to tell the stories on their own terms. And so, identifying people from those communities who have not just lived experience, but professional expertise because they are the ones that are most closely affected. That is why it is important that their voice is particularly strong, how can museums ensure that they working with and do not speak for communities. If you want to delegate power and delegate responsibility, for example, to an, disabled artist to come in and disrupt and, challenge and critique, that's great. That does something really important. But when the exhibition finishes, how is the museum changed? And that's been our big concern. What we try and do is center and prioritize the knowledge, experience and perspectives of marginalized stakeholders, but we also insist that the museum is part of that process, that it makes changes, that it reflects on its own working practices at the same time.

There is a link between the decentralisation of museums and the functioning of participatory practices. How do you adapt your projects to this perspective?

Museums typically see themselves at the center of things, reaching out to communities around them. To deeply understand what you mean to a community and how you could work differently, you have to work to decenter the institution and its internal priorities. You have to work nonhierarchically. We put methods and practices and principles in place to guide a project as it progresses. We try to attend very closely to those principles, and you are continually checking and reminding and observing and reflecting as you move forward so that you do not slip back to institutionally centered ways of working and you strive to maintain a decentered philosophy and practice.

What strategies and initiatives do museums employ to ensure accessibility and inclusivity for various demographic groups, and how do these efforts influence social cohesion and diversity appreciation?

My thoughts here are around how accessibility is still quite widely viewed in cultural organizations and in universities and in society more generally as the need to make a series of accommodations which you add on to make something accessible. You add subtitles. You add large print. You add on different accessibility features. And I think the kinds of work we are interested in is moving away from this kind of bolted on access to work in ways where fully equitable experiences are non-negotiable. They are the starting point and the end point of everything you do.

You do not create something and then make it accessible. You deeply commit to accessibility from the start. And I think that also involves another kind of decentering because I think museums still think about their audiences as a sort of idealized typical regular audience, and then you have got your different audiences which you need to accommodate accessibility for. To challenge this way of thinking you need to decenter all sorts of norms. You need to fully recognize differences, they might be around disability or ethnicity or sexuality or they might be economic –that they are part and parcel of every life. So why would you have a kind of center– an imagined, idealised norm , and then set this up in relation to all sorts of peripheries, a kind of us and them which is very othering and harmful another. When you decenter that, really interesting things happen.

We worked with the Wellcome Collection in London on their exhibition called Being Human, and it is an exhibition about health and medicine and well-being in the world today. But we brought in a group of disabled artists and thinkers and activists to help us shape that gallery, and we moved away from simply adding in the perspectives of disabled people to completely rethink our approach. So there are the perspectives of disabled people in there, but they are not held up as an addition or a critique. They are just there, and they are part of the society, part of the whole society and part of the story that gets told. It's an approach to decentering which proved to be very powerful and we used it in terms of the objects we selected, the interpretation, and the stories we told. But there is also this wonderful example I like to share. As we had developed this gallery, we started to look at the design of the physical space, and Tony Heaton, who is a disabled artist and activist, he is part of our group. He said, one of the things I despise about art galleries in particular, is if you are watching a video on the wall, you have a bench in front of it that is perfectly centered. And if you are a wheelchair user, you can only see that screen from the side, because the gallery is designed with the bench for people who can walk in and sit down right in the middle and get the perfect optimal view of that artwork. Tony said –as a disabled person– I am physically and symbolically pushed to the side. The Wellcome Collection, working with their designers, just moved the bench. And now if you are in a wheelchair, you can sit with your disabled or nondisabled companion, and you can both enjoy the perfect view. It is a really subtle but very powerful shift in design, which means that you are not privileging one body and one form of experience over another. You are genuinely creating fully equitable and accessible experiences for everybody, whether you are disabled or not. That shifts everything.

How does the economic sustainability of museums impact their ability to serve and engage with society,

and what models or practices are being employed to ensure their longevity? Could you give an example of this?

My colleague Suzanne MacLeod writes about this in her book *Design for Creative Lives* where she discusses the economisation of culture. This has been really transformative for us because she draws attention to the way in which culture is monetized, reduced to the financial and the economic. And, of course, sustainability, longevity, these are important things for museums. But she points to the ways in which that starts to drive unethical decision making, when we start to prioritize money over people. Suzanne points out how that is harmful and damaging and is also unnecessary. You can still have an economically sustainable model, but one which centers ethics and centers humans and centers accessibility and inclusion, these things are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Could you tell me about the modules offered at the University of Leicester, Museum Studies to enhance museum and community relationships? Additionally, could you provide a brief overview of the research activities conducted at the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries?

We have three main programs at the University of Leicester, a master's in museum studies and an MA in socially engaged practice in museums and galleries, and another MA in art museum and gallery studies. One of the enjoyable things about working here is that I am like you - I am a sociologist by background - but I am next door to an expert in paleobiology or over the corridor, there is an art historian, and round the corner, there is a learning technologist and so on. So it is incredibly interdisciplinary, and everyone has their own research and practice to bring. I think Leicester programs are characterized by a progressive concern for the issues we've been talking today and have been a part, a really joyful part, of that shift in museums. I am excited by that. And then there is the research center. We are quite unique in the university environment. We are 25 years old this year, and our unique selling point, is that we research with, not on, cultural organizations. We do not go out and research and come back to the University. We research with cultural organisations. So we build research teams with our cultural partners, and we research together. We think and take action together. As well as coming up with ideas and concepts and publishing, we always do action research. We are changing institutions, we are building projects. We are doing things in and with and for people, and that is very exciting. We would call this collaborative action research and we do this around a whole set of socially engaged themes, and that enables us to get close gets close to the work. We do not have an academic distance. We jump right in and deal with the realities that organizations are facing. That is quite exciting, I think and it has kept me here for a long time. I am very lucky that we get to work with such a wide variety of organizations that are interested in and are open to change, to doing things differently. At the moment, we are working with the National Portrait Gallery to help them, take up their role as a kind of convener of conversations in Britain, conversations about identity

and belonging. We are working with the London Museum on a project around challenging embedded whiteness. We are taking forward the next phase of trans inclusion. It is a busy and lively time, but one that we are really excited about.

Thank you very much for answering my questions sincerely. It was a great pleasure to meet you. Finally, is there anything you would like to add?

I would add that it is really important to us that we make our research outputs publicly available output on every project we do and we make these openly available Thank you for helping us, spread the word about the research center and about Leicester. It has been a real pleasure talking with you, meeting with you. You can stay in touch with us even as you are back in Turkey and wherever your exciting work takes you. Thank you very much.

It seems a bit hard to leave Leicester, you are quite right. The lectures I attended during my year here were very impressive and inspiring, especially your lecture with Suzanne MacLeod. The seminars organised by the department have also been stimulating. I will definitely keep in touch with you.

Conclusion

As with all institutions, the roles of museums have undergone a process of change and development throughout history. While museums were previously at the forefront of educational and informative functions, they have evolved into cultural indicators that also include entertainment. Despite these changes in function, museums remain an institution with direct ties to society.

Nowadays, museums aspire to be accessible to diverse social groups, and in alignment with this objective, they collaborate with numerous institutions, particularly universities, to overcome economic, physical, social, cognitive and psychological barriers. For example, in the museum studies departments of universities, there has been an update of curricula with courses that emphasise the social responsibilities of the museum. In addition, centres such as the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries at the University of Leicester contribute to the development of democratic and egalitarian museology. As Sandell emphasises, the museum paradigm should include making museums accessible as an intrinsic element, rather than it being adapted as an afterthought. This viewpoint has prompted a shift in contemporary museology towards an audience-centred approach, emphasising collaboration with a diverse range of stakeholders.

Teşekkür *Appreciation*

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