

Emily Pringle: The Art Museum as a Creative Space for Learning and Research

Conversation with artist, museum educator, and researcher Emily Pringle about the criticism of art museums and paths for change on September 5, 2024. Part of the Arts Administration, Education and Policy Lecture series.

This transcription is provided as a record of the live conversation, for educational use. [Read more about the Wexner Center for the Arts' Mission, Vision, and Values.](#)

Transcript

Emily Haidet (00:00:00):

Hi, everybody. Good afternoon and welcome to the Wexner Center for the Arts. I'm Emily Haidet, curator of public programs in the Department of Learning & Public Practice, and I'm pleased to welcome you to today's public program featuring Emily Pringle. She's an artist, museum educator and researcher who will speak to us today about the criticism of art museums and paths for change. This talk is part of an annual series co-presented with OSU's Department of Arts Administration, Education and Policy through an ongoing partnership between that department and the Wex.

(00:00:40):

This lecture series brings thinkers, scholars, and practitioners in our field to Ohio State's campus, aiming to support the community of AAEP and enhance academic excellence for emerging arts education practitioners. I'm thrilled to be able to work so closely with our colleagues in AAEP, including Dr. Dana Carlisle Kletchka, associate professor and graduate studies chair, and Dr. Joni Acuff, professor and department chair. In addition to tonight's program, I want to personally invite you all to our next exhibition opening on Friday, September 20th. We're excited to celebrate the opening of two photography exhibitions. One, the first of the work of Rotimi Fani-Kayode.

(00:01:24):

That exhibition is titled *Tranquility of Communion*. And Ming Smith, that exhibition is called *Wind Chime*. We'll have free hors d'oeuvres, a cash bar, a food truck, a DJ. Ming Smith will be here for an artist talk at 5:30 with curator Mark Sealey, and we'll open the galleries at 6:15. It's free. It'll be a great time. We hope to see you there. I also want to invite you all to be in dialogue with us as we continue to plan programming in the future. If you're a student, I want to invite you to just... Let's see. Did that work? Take your phones out for a moment. It's the only time you're allowed to take your phones out.

(00:02:08):

That's not true, also at Q&A. You're welcome to scan this QR code or pop into your browser, go.osu.edu/wexstudentsurvey. This link will take you to a very short Qualtrics survey to anonymously tell us what you're interested in seeing at the Wex. You can let us know your

major, what brought you here today, and what kind of programming would bring you back. You can be as broad or specific as you'd like. Maybe you want more artist talks. Maybe you want more movies with free popcorn, maybe more dance parties, hands-on art-making nights, possibilities are endless. Let us know. We're listening and we're here to enrich your experience while you're at Ohio State.

(00:02:54):

Before we begin, I'd like to acknowledge and thank our supporters, including our co-presenters in the Department of Arts Administration, Education and Policy. Learning & Public Practice programs are made possible by the American Electric Power Foundation, CoverMyMeds, Huntington, and the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation. I'd also like to thank our members for their continued support of the Wex. Being a member will give you special benefits while helping to give others access to multidisciplinary arts experiences. If anyone is interested in considering to be a member, there's some information at the back of the theater or you can speak to any staff member. Okay, let's jump in.

(00:03:37):

Following Emily's presentation tonight, I'm happy to share that Lingran Zhang, a PhD student in AAEP, will join Emily on stage for a short conversation before we open it up to audience questions. We'll have a mic in the audience. Jess will be here, so just raise your hand and she'll find you with the mic. If you're not comfortable asking a question, you can also text our hotline. The number for that hotline, I'll read it once now and then it'll be on the screen later. It's 614-813-3416. And again, we'll share that number during Q&A. Now I'm going to just quickly introduce and welcome Dr. Dana Carlisle Kletchka to introduce Emily.

Dana Carlisle Kletchka (00:04:30):

I love the introduction to introduce. It's my favorite. All right, so I am so excited to see this many wonderful faces in the audience. I am Dana Carlisle Kletchka. I'm an associate professor of art museum education and the faculty director of the museum education and administration specialization in the Department of Arts Administration, Education and Policy, which we lovingly refer to as AAEP. I am delighted to be speaking with you from the stage, and I'll give a little overview of who I am and where I am because this will be being filmed for people to see it later. And so, as part of our accessibility efforts here at OSU, we do a little intro.

(00:05:12):

So I'm on the stage of the film and video theater here at the Wexner Center for the Arts. My pronouns are she, her, and hers. I have red curly short hair, black cat eyeglasses, pale white skin infused with a ton of freckles. And this afternoon, I'm wearing a black dress with a patchwork of orange flowers. Before we begin, I wish to acknowledge that the land that the Ohio State University occupies is the ancestral and contemporary territory of the Shawnee, Potawatomi, Delaware, Miami, Peoria, Seneca, Wyandotte, Ojibwe, and many other Indigenous peoples. Specifically, the university resides on land seated in the 1795 Treaty of Greenville and the forced removal of tribes through the Indian Removal Act of 1830.

(00:06:01):

I first want to thank the chair of AAEP, Dr. Joni Acuff and the director of the Wexner Center for the Arts, Gaëtane Verna, for supporting this ongoing partnership in our Ohio State community. I especially want to thank Emily Haidet and Dionne Custer Edwards for their work in bringing Emily here all the way from across the pond to speak with you. I won't take too long, I promise, but I'm thinking about coming here as somebody who worked in museums for a very long time as a museum educator for a very long time. And as a Midwesterner who went to museums often, my family took me often. They had no idea what I was doing. They knew I worked in an art museum, they knew I wasn't a director.

(00:06:47):

They knew I wasn't a curator, but they really had no real sense of what I was doing in a museum. So the idea that we're bringing in someone who is a museum education scholar and practitioner and researcher to Ohio State in this very specific realm of knowledge is so exciting to me. Of course, I wish to thank the students in the museum education and administration specialization for inspiring me to build the best program that I possibly can, filled with meaningful and precious opportunities for development, growth, and advocacy. Dr. Pringle has a robust and rather lengthy CV, which I will parse from carefully, but you do owe it to yourself to Google her and search her work because she shares her research freely online.

(00:07:35):

She's currently a researcher and consultant based in London who worked in various learning and research positions over the last 15 years at the Tate Museum, including establishing the Tate Research Center and has written extensively about education and public practice in gallery spaces. She is co-chair of the Independent Research Organization Consortium, an associate professor at the University of Nottingham, and a research fellow at the School of Advanced Study University of London. Her most recent book, *Rethinking Research in the Art Museum*, was published by Routledge in 2019, and it's available as a digital text from our fantastic Ohio State library system.

(00:08:13):

I first heard of Dr. Pringle's work this spring through Amanda Tobin Ripley, who is a PhD student in our department, currently living in Berlin. And you might not know about this, but writing about research in the art museum is not as popular as, say, writing a murder mystery or a romance novel. As a matter of fact, this is the first scholarly text that I can recall dedicated to conceptualizing, describing, envisioning what research in art museums is and what it may become. Suffice it to say that Emily's work is important and invaluable to practitioners and scholars who wish to think about practice in their museums otherwise.

(00:08:50):

That is envisioning new ways of being and knowing in art museum spaces. Today we will hear from Dr. Pringle and then be joined by Lingran Zhang, which Emily talked about a little bit, but I hope that you will join me in welcoming Emily Pringle.

Emily Pringle (00:09:17):

Thank you so much. Honestly, I feel so honored to be here, and I've been so warmly welcomed, so I'm not going to go through a long list of thank-yous right now. Just take it that you are

heartfully thanked by me, but I've got a lot to say, and I don't think I've got a lot of time. But no, it's really great to be here and let's get going. So I'm going to start with two quotations. One, I have to say I took from the video of the wonderful lecture that was given last year by Syrus Marcus Ware. I just love this quote, "You're not in a perfect world, you're in a museum now." If we didn't already know that, I think we need to bear that in mind.

(00:10:12):

But I think the other quote, the one below that that is really important, is this really urgent call for museums to transform themselves or to become obsolete. And it's really this idea which informs what I'm going to talk about today, but a lot of people call on museums to transform themselves. Museums receive a lot of critique at the moment, particularly. Justifiable critique, but radical transformation in well established organizations is never easy. What do you change first? What should you keep? What interventions are going to help shift entrenched and perhaps really unhelpful structures and processes?

(00:11:08):

And what I want to talk about today is thinking about first, what are the characteristics of the art museum that makes, but also prevents it from being a rich and inviting place for learning and research? But then I want to move on from just that position of critique to think about how those who work in art museums can maximize the potential for their institutions to be creative spaces for themselves and also for everyone who is either visiting or working with them in their organizations. And really, without this being too much of a spoiler, the argument that I'm going to put forward is that if the art museum is going to be inspiring for visitors, it has to be an inquiry-led, reflective, and a creative environment for the people who work within it.

(00:12:07):

So I'm going to start right at the basics. What is an art museum? Well, most obviously, if we think about it, it's an institution where art is held, conserved, in most cases, displayed, and interpreted. It's a place where different art objects are juxtaposed, where narratives are told through visual storytelling, where complex problems are addressed, and ideas are made visible. It's a site where diverse identities can be presented and contradictory ideas explored. And at the same time, the art museum especially—but not necessarily exclusively contemporary art museums or museums who show contemporary art—It's a space where visitors can encounter living artists and their practice.

(00:13:02):

Here is a place where creative processes can be examined and experimented with, and artistic motivations and decisions can be illuminated and engaged with. So these characteristics mean that the art museum is and should be an incredibly vibrant place for learning, not least because the institution, the art museum, manifests all the incredible expertise of the people who work within them. The experience of the visitors coming to the museum is shaped by the knowledge held within the organization. And that's knowledge about art history, about curatorial and art practice, about conservation, about the care of art objects, about teaching and learning, and overall visitor care.

(00:13:55):

And that's just some of the breadth of expertise that the people who work within art museums hold. So under the right conditions, art museums can be really fertile spaces for those who want to create new knowledge and gain fresh insights. For, I think if you're here, you probably know this already, art has this incredible and extraordinary capacity to change people's ideas about themselves, about art, and about the world itself. And the art museum can and should occupy this unique position in being able, in theory, to support that transformation. To provide the space where people can undergo that incredible process of change within themselves.

(00:14:46):

But, and this is the but, the art museum is also a place where power and knowledge are inextricably intertwined. Since the late 1960s and very noticeably in the last 10 years, art museums have been subject to critical analysis, particularly regarding whose narratives are being told through their exhibitions and displays, whose identities are being presented through art museums, most definitively and often. I am a huge fan of the French philosopher Michel Foucault and his ideas of discourses of power, which I think are incredibly relevant and helpful here. And they really help demystify for me, anyway, why some interpretations and representations dominate in the art museum while other people's representations and narratives seem to be entirely absent.

(00:15:49):

And I'm giving you a really short version of this about Foucault's ideas, but basically he argued, and I put it here, that knowledge is intrinsically linked to power and formed within practices of power. So from this position, he identified that "the knowledge held by the powerful develops and refines discourses that then determine social and cultural practices." So in other words, "powerful discourses legitimize certain knowledge while excluding the voices and views of the less powerful." And certainly I think we can agree that in the art museum, the foremost discourses have historically been shaped by cisgendered, white, middle-class, heterosexual adults who recently have been disproportionately well-catered for.

(00:16:48):

So from this position, I think it's clear that art museums are never neutral. Museums can be exclusionary, intimidating, uninspiring, and/or irrelevant to those who do not see themselves represented or do not feel that the questions that they bring or the issues that are really important to them will be addressed within the art museum. A further problem—so I'm really going right in with the critique here, as you can tell—is that art museums are spaces of ritual and tradition. Where behavioral codes, operational conventions, and epistemological hierarchies are very well established.

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Roles and protocols, in some cases dating back to the origins of art museums in the 19th century, continue to exist in institutions that are simultaneously seeking to address the complexity of the 21st century society. So I would argue that for these reasons, although art museums can inspire and engender learning for some visitors, this potential is not necessarily realized for many. So, given this multidimensional scenario that art museums find themselves in, how can those working in these institutions enable the museum to be a creative learning environment for themselves and for others?

(00:18:27):

One argument that's been put forward by the British museologist, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, is that the art museum has to consciously surface the conflicts and contradictions implicit in the presentation of culture and the interpretation of culture and acknowledge that these processes are biased. She refers to these institutions as the "post-museum." And to achieve this transformation, she argues that those working within the post-museum need to engage in critical investigations with their visitors, sharing their knowledge and power. And through this, this will enable their institutions to become more transparent and equitable.

(00:19:21):

The reason I'm drawn to this idea of collaborative critical investigation is that I believe it offers multiple possibilities for positive transformation within and beyond the art museum itself. If we situate the art museum as a space where questions can be explored by staff and visitors, where problems can be interrogated and where knowledge can be generated individually and with others, there is within that idea the opportunity for institutions to radically change. It's a shift not only in how museums operate, but also how they can be experienced. Such an environment, an environment of this collaborative questioning, signals and enshrines an inclusive culture that welcomes curiosity, learning and change.

(00:20:25):

So I'm going to talk a bit about what research now, the whole role of research. So I've kind of talked about questioning, talked about what we need to do to shift the institution. As Dana said, I spent some time, and this was particularly in 2018, researching arts organizations to gain a clearer picture of how research, "research," can be understood and undertaken within art institutions because a lot of research happens. But what I found when I was interviewing, I interviewed a lot of people, I went and did a lot of reading. And when I was interviewing people, what I discovered was actually the term "research" was widely, not misunderstood, but a lot of people were very nervous about the term.

(00:21:22):

They found it really intimidating. They didn't really understand, they thought it was perhaps a bit exclusionary. Research in the art museum was a kind of elite thing done by a few folks. So I actually then spent some time really drilling down into what research is. What are the elements of research? And having again done some reading around the subject and talked to people, what I discovered is that research is fundamentally can be broken down into three things. That within any discipline, if you're doing research, essentially what you do is you ask questions, you then follow a structured process of inquiry.

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And through that structured process of inquiry, you generate new knowledge that goes out into the world. And if you take this broader understanding of research, it just becomes a much more kind of democratic way of understanding how research is a process that can be employed within the museum. And I'll come back to why that's significant. But having gone through this process of then sort of identifying what is research, I then wanted to look at what conditions support a thriving culture of research. And within that research process, essentially what helps support reflective practice.

(00:23:04):

And I'd looked at literature on organizational change and this led me to the concept of the learning institution, not learning as in an institution that has a learning or an education department, but an institution that basically sees the institution itself undergoing a constant process of learning. And within this, it basically situates itself as starting from position of wanting to know more and better rather than assuming it has the answers to everything. And in order to occupy that position and to be genuinely wanting to know more and better, anyone who works within a learning organization must feel free to be able to take risks and experiment.

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And in order to be able to take risks and experiment, employees need to operate in a supportive environment where they are trusted because you can't take risks in an experiment if you don't feel you're trusted. Because if you take risks in an experiment, things might not work out how you thought they might. And if you then get completely slammed down, that will make you feel you're never going to do that again. So there has to be this sense of trust and this sense that you're able to express ideas openly and question and disagree with colleagues including your senior colleagues when that's necessary.

(00:24:33):

But crucially as well, employees and staff, within the context of the art museum, must also trust and be open to the views of visitors. So there is this sense that everything has to become a bit epistemologically more porous. So the idea that you've got to allow different expertise to permeate the art museum, that is crucial if it's going to become essentially a learning organization. Now, already there are mechanisms that exist by which diverse ideas and experiences inform the art museum. I mean, most obviously I think the art museum can feel comfortable with artists and their practice shaping institutional workings and instigating change.

(00:25:33):

And similarly, the views of powerful stakeholders, including funders, donors, and trustees, inevitably have a profound impact on museum practices. And just to give you a couple of examples, I think perhaps one of the most high profile recent examples of an artist changing institutional practices is the photographer Nan Goldin's campaign to persuade art museums in the USA and elsewhere to decline funding from the Sackler family because of the family's links to the manufacturing sale of the opioid Oxycontin. But in the UK, there's been a recent example at the Barbican museum in London where artists and donors withdrew their works from an exhibition called *Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art*, in protest at the Barbican's decision to cancel a talk on the situation in Palestine by a writer, Pankaj Mishra.

(00:26:35):

So these are just evidence of how institutional practice can be radically shifted by powerful stakeholders. But then, what of the situation where museums are working with people who perhaps historically have not been so powerful? And in the case of museums working with local community members, for example, and implementing modes of collective knowledge generation to help the museum in their collective decision making. And it's here in particular

where research and specifically participatory action research methodologies can make a valuable contribution. So here again to take you back to that definition of research.

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So we're not talking about research as being a discipline-specific thing. So, for instance, research only happens if you're doing art history. We're talking about a form of research, participatory action research, which is centered on addressing questions and issues that are significant for all the people taking part in the research process. And it involves a cycle. I don't know how many of you are familiar with action research, but it's based on a cycle of you ask a question, you do an intervention, so you do an action or an experiment and then you come together, you reflect, decide, or come together and get a sense of what have you learned through that action.

(00:28:11):

And then you plan a subsequent action on the basis of what you've learned. So it's a kind of do-review-learn-apply model of research. And it's an amazing process, and I think it is a way that art museums can collectively solve problems whilst inviting greater audience involvement in learning. And I know I'm really kind of scooting through, these are quite significant big things, but maybe we can kind of bring them up again or return to them in questions later if there are things that you're going, "I have no idea what she's talking about." I think the other thing that...

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I mean, for example, when you're talking about participatory action research, one of the ways that this has been employed in museums is to bring community members into the museum to work with staff to do what can be called "correcting the record," whereby dominant narratives have been told throughout a particular, in relation, to say a historical collection. And then you bring in folks who will then research with you about how you tell a different narrative. Or some museums have employed youth participatory action research where, for example, you work with a group of young people to create spaces within the museum that are for young people.

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But they're created with the young people rather than just done with no sense of what those young people actually might want themselves. And it is in situations like this where situating an intervention like that as a research process can become a really open and liberal space where people feel able to contribute their knowledge because in a sense it's a problem that you are collectively working together to solve. But, and there's always a "but." I'm sorry, there is always a "but." Collaborative action research or participatory action research operates in, has to be said, complicated and sensitive territory.

(00:30:43):

Museums can often voice their desire to be more inclusive, but it can clash amongst other things, institutional anxieties about letting go of its authority. And also things that I've often brought up when I've been doing this work is that, but what about issues of quality? Where's the quality? Is it going to be good enough? And so these are things that really have to be negotiated if you're going to do this work. And one thing that also came up for me when I was doing my research that can really make doing this kind of labour intensive, time intensive work is that museums themselves are working with competing agendas of the things that they need to do.

(00:31:40):

And this was revelation to me when I finally realized this, having worked in art museums for nigh on 25 years because I couldn't understand why I'd be sitting in meetings and we'd be talking about doing an education intervention, and all of a sudden it would be, "That's great, that's great. No, we can't do that. We can't do that because we've got a big show coming in and we need that space." So I was like, "Oh, right. So we've made this commitment to being really inclusive, but this has now just been kind of erased because there is this other agenda which is about we've got a big show to put on."

(00:32:29):

And I started thinking about how these competing agendas can be understood as different discourses. Back to my favorite word, discourses. And I did this kind of model just to sort of simplify it. And I think I did this model now six years ago, and I think there are probably more discourses now that probably need to be factored in. But the main discourses that I think really shape what museums can and can't do is there's first of all the discourse of artists and the collection. So it's like, we are an institution that's about looking after artists.

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And if you've got a collection, looking after that collection. And we can be an institution that needs to maintain a big international or national profile. We need credibility; we need to be speaking to our peer group in the art world. That is really important. At the same time, we are an institution that needs to be making money. So this is the discourse of financial sustainability. So we need to be having a really good café; we need to be selling our spaces; we need to be having ticket sales; we need those blockbuster exhibitions that's going to bring everybody in.

(00:33:48):

And particularly post Covid, where most museums have been struggling financially, the discourse of financial sustainability becomes very, very powerful. Then there is what I call the discourse of democratic participation, which is all the stuff around we want to be inclusive; we want to work with our community. We don't just want to be this elite organization, but we do want to be this elite organization, but we also want to be this incredibly inclusive institution. How do we do that? And then there's the discourse of academia, which is particularly relevant. Here we are in a university setting, which is that we need to be absolutely intellectually credible.

(00:34:29):

So everything we need it to be, this is where quite often the quality thing comes in. It's like if we are not intellectually rigorous, if we're not creatively, artistically rigorous, again, if we're not speaking to our peer groups in academia... We can't do that. No, no, no, no. So this goes on, and what I find incredible about people who work in museums is they do this, they do all of this, and they keep doing all of this. It's like they manage to juggle all these different things all the time. So it's no wonder that everyone is out. We can't do anymore, we're exhausted; we have no time, and we're under incredible pressure.

(00:35:13):

I have to say, Emily showed me the program for the Wex today just before I came in and I'd looked at it and thought, "Oh yeah, so you've got about 480 events happening over the next

month.” I mean it’s wonderful, but it’s like you’re doing a lot and museums are always doing so much. So these can create pressure, huge amounts of pressure on time and resources. And when you’re trying to do collaborative research with folks, which takes a long time, it can often mean that collaboration is more in theory than in practice, in my experience. Because genuine participatory research requires all those involved to be involved right from the beginning.

(00:36:08):

So you can’t design a research project and then go, “Oh my God, I need a community group. Yeah, you’ll do. Come on, come on, we’ve got great questions. We want you. You tick all our boxes for the kind of group we want to work with.” No, no, no. You need to have sat with that community and gone, “What are the questions which are really important to you?” And that is tricky sometimes. And you also need that community once you’ve established trust with them and you’ve decided they need to be involved in every aspect of that research process. So you don’t research on them, you research with them, and you involve them in the writing up of the findings.

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So everything is written up according to what they think has been found, not just what you think has been found out through a process. And even more, you then don’t just canter off to your conferences and talk about it. They have to have some say in how that research is presented to the wider world. That is a lot to be doing. So as I say, it can be a tough gig, but in my experience, if you do it, it absolutely transforms the way institutions work. And I put this up, this slide, and I’ve actually put the website here because this is an example, the “Tensions of Belonging Project,” which is at a museum in Cambridge, the Fitzwilliam, which I think is an extraordinary example of where this work has actually been put into practice.

(00:37:51):

And I’m really happy to share my presentation so you can have that website, but I would urge you to have a look at this project because with all the messiness and difficulties of doing this kind of work, they have persisted with working with a group of community members to think about what works are brought into the collection, what works are displayed, how they’re displayed, how they write their interpretation panels. It really is an amazing example. So I’ll give you that as an example, but I just... How am I doing for time, Emily? I’m good. All right. I haven’t got that much more to say, actually.

(00:38:43):

I now want to talk about, so this participatory action research where you’re working with your communities, which I think is an incredible way of transforming the museum and making it much more open and much more democratic. But reflecting, questioning, experimenting and evaluating is not just about how you work with others, in my experience, it’s a way in which staff can enhance their own practice and just understand better what they’re doing, why they’re doing it and what the changes come about through their work and how I and others, it’s not just me, have thought about how valuable it is to situate your work as a museum professional, as a form of practice as research.

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And practice as research, I don't know how many of you're familiar with this as a term, but it is this idea that it's research where practice the thing that you do is the core method of inquiry. And it is the form by which your research findings are made public. So you don't just do something and then you write it up in a peer-reviewed journal article and that's your research findings made public. The actual thing that comes out of what you've done is your research. It's how you manifest and make your research findings. So in the art museum, these practices that we're talking about that could be framed as research, include exhibition curation, education, conservation, visitor care.

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And when I was working at Tate, we had staff working in the administration and finance departments who were framing that practice as within the context of practice as research. And again, going back to the definition of research, how we did it is start with a range of questions, which I'll come back to. No, I won't. I'll do it now. So just to give you an example, I used to work directly with the folks in the education department, and I would go to meetings and say, "If we're going to frame your practice as research, what's the question? What's the question that's going to underpin this research process?"

(00:41:33):

And I'll give you one example. So the team that was working with families and children under five, their research question was, what happens when you bring children under five into direct contact with contemporary art? So they had that as their kind of underlying question. And then everything they did, which resembled what folks programming in museum do. So they ran workshops, they produce resources. It was mainly resources and workshops actually for that team. They would do that, but instead of just doing it, they would be exploring that question through the doing of those activities.

(00:42:23):

So that was always in the back of their minds, what happens? So we've done this workshop, we're bringing these kids into the museum, what happens? So in some respects, their practice didn't shift enormously, but what shifted was by framing it as a question, they would then afford themselves the space to then reflect on what was happening as they were doing it and they would then change their practice almost continuously as a result of what they learned through the doing of it. So it became this incredible process whereby the whole programming process became a very dynamic experience, not only for them but also for the people, the visitors who were coming in.

(00:43:16):

And what they learned through that process was then shared through the practice itself. So through the workshops that they then were doing with the families subsequently, but also they did then also give talks; they wrote papers; they did do the whole go to conferences thing. So I'm not saying that practice as research means you only ever manifest your findings through the doing. You can spin it out and present your findings so that the wide world can learn what you've done. But I think one of the... Just coming back to my key thing is that it is this incredible way whereby staff can dynamically develop and change and learn through doing of it with the people that they're doing it with.

(00:44:18):

So I've kind of described what practice as research involves, but that only really partially answers the question that I posed at the beginning, which is, "How can museums become more creative spaces for staff and visitors?" How practice as research operates is as important as what is taking place. Because, as with any research process, the rigor and the value of practice as research relies on the quality of the inquiry and the depth and extent of the reflection and analysis and evaluation of the findings that emerges during the process. You can pose a great question, but if you haven't got time to think about what you've learnt as you go along, it's not going to help.

(00:45:09):

And time becomes this absolutely key thing, time and the desire to do this kind of thing, because I will be honest that not everyone wants to work like this. It can be hard, it can be... Some people just want to do stuff. They don't just want to be sitting around.... Staff used to say to me, "Oh God, are we going to talk about it all again?" And I'd be, "Yep, we are. We really are." And they just wanted to be doing, which I think is sort of okay, but I sort of don't because I think if you are going to be a professional in a museum, you need to really be able to know what you're doing and why you're doing it. Anyway, that's my own view here.

(00:45:58):

But this whole thing of time is so important and therefore the priorities and values of the organization have a huge part to play. And this is why I talked earlier about the idea of the institution needing to be a learning organization. If the institution itself isn't committed to this way of working, it becomes much harder to embed these set of principles and values. And that goes right back to the four discourses thing. If the museum is hell-bent on just desperately trying to keep itself financially afloat, it's not going to have the commitment and desire to say to staff, "Nope, we all need to really pause and slow down and go, what are we doing? Why are we doing it?"

(00:46:43):

It's like just get the money in the bank so we can keep the doors open. But when I was doing the research, what became so apparent is that institutions that value depth over quantity of activity and valued reflection as much as the instigation of programs, these were the institutions where creative learning was most likely to be taking place. And these are institutions that this Graham Black, the guy who actually said the quote right at the beginning. He talks about them as being idealistic, which I really like, except that idealism sometimes can be thought of as divorce from reality, but I don't think this is divorce from reality.

(00:47:33):

This is about thinking as he says, "Thinking about the way things could be rather than simply accepting the way things are." So I'm going to come to an end now. I am just going to say that hopefully what I've tried to do is outline a situation to avoid that kind of oblivion that I mentioned right at the beginning. And the way to avoid this oblivion is to embrace this idea of collaborative, inquiry-led approaches to community engagement and institutional learning. And I would say that, and it's probably occurred to you that I've not focused on research on museums by academic researchers.

(00:48:22):

And that's not because I don't think there is value in that kind of academic research. And I think it's really important within the kind of overall landscape to help practitioners to understand and improve their work and also to raise the intellectual status of art museum practice within the academy. But I would just say that in my experience, academic research of that kind alone cannot on its own, help the art museum to address these deep-rooted cultural and organizational barriers that prevent the staff and visitors from fulfilling their potential as creative learning practitioners and visitors, and also supporting the museum to reach the widest number of people.

(00:49:15):

Because I really think it's embedded and genuine participatory, practitioner research-led activities working within this idealized institutional culture that offers the most compelling ways forward. So thank you very much.

Lingran Zhang (00:50:01):

Well, I'd like to first say thank you so much for this amazing presentation and thank you all for coming here and joining our discussion after the lecture. I would like to say your work and the book about rethinking research in the art museum has been really inspiring for me for my own research purpose. And I think a lot of us today in this lecture hall will feel the same because most of us are viewed as practitioner, researcher, and practice as a huge part of what we do in our research. I'd like to start asking by... You talk a lot about the importance of co-research with community members and academics or those of us as graduate students, as well.

(00:50:50):

As graduate students, we often straddle this line between academia and professional practice because we, a lot of the time, work with museums for our own research, but we're not part of the institutions, so we cannot really realize the change we want to have through our research. So I'm wondering how can we effectively position ourselves in these collaborations and how can we avoid the lab rat situation that you described in your book and ensure our research contributes to the institutional change.

Emily Pringle (00:51:25):

I know, it's great. It's a really good question and obviously it's again another one that's super relevant in the context of an institution like this, that's within the university context. I think one of the things that is really important is to be mindful of different types of knowledge and to try and break down the hierarchies of knowledge that can exist, particularly what I understand is the difference between know-what and know-how. And know-what can be understood as kind of theoretical knowledge, so the knowledge that academia kind of really understands.

(00:52:21):

It's generalizable, can be written down often, theory in other words. And know-how is knowledge that practitioners often employ, which is very much informed by that theoretical knowledge, but is really only evident in the doing of stuff. And it's often very embodied knowledge. You learn it through doing and you manifest it through doing. And in my experience has been a real difference between those two knowledges. So know what is up here, know how

is like... We don't really understand, that's down here somewhere. But what practitioners often have in the museum is huge amounts of know-how and it's about validating that know-how in a research context.

(00:53:16):

So that's my first thing. More practically just as guidance, I think if you are going into any kind of collaboration between practitioner researchers and academic research, it's really important to establish a research agenda at the start and to work out what are the desired outcomes for all involved. Because most practitioner researchers that I know what they want is research to improve their practice first and foremost. Whereas, for academic researchers, it's quite often that they want to get that knowledge out into the academic community, but practitioner research may not necessarily want that.

(00:54:02):

They want research that's going to help them do what they do better, but unless you kind of get that really clear at the start, it can get very messy later on. So I think you need to do that, and I think you need to come back to this whole thing of time. You really need to make sure there's enough time so that museum practitioners can genuinely participate in the research. Because again, in my experience with things like this, museum professionals really want to be involved in a research process, but they just don't have the time. So all the juicy research ends up being done by the academic researchers and the museum professionals just end up getting really frustrated.

(00:54:49):

So you've got to negotiate time and finally you've just got to pick your academic partner really carefully so that all this is established, so you trust, build a relationship over time. Don't just leap into a partnership.

Lingran Zhang (00:55:06):

Thank you so much. So my next question is actually connected to this importance of leaving time for the research to happen. You've talked multiple times about the importance of having this reflective time and also talked about how the change needs to come first from the institution somehow in order for all the employees to be able to have the opportunity to really do research-related events. But we all know, given the really slow pace or the generally slow pace of a huge institutional change and the busy nature of museum professionals, or as graduate students or researchers working in this field, what initial steps would you recommend for individuals to create this critical reflective time at the beginning?

Emily Pringle (00:56:00):

These are really good questions. I would go back to that thing about leadership. If you have a supportive leadership, these things happen so much more easily. You can do it without supportive leadership. But when I was doing the research, those institutions where the directors were themselves really committed to research and did research themselves, it was a different environment and it made it much easier for staff to say, "I really want to be able to do this

stuff.” So I think really supporting leaders or encouraging leaders to see the value of this work is really helpful. I think that it’s also really important that it is enjoyable.

(00:57:04):

She says in a very low tone of voice, “It’s got to be fun.” It has got to be fun, honestly. So I would really recommend that you do this work with others. Reflection through dialogue is wonderful. So I think it’s definitely, do it together. And the only other thing I think was a revelation again when we were doing this at Tate was don’t create another meeting because that’s the worst thing you can possibly do. Build it into your existing meetings. So when you’re doing... When we used to have team meetings and instead of just having the agenda of “What are we doing? This, this, this, this.”

(00:58:00):

It used to be, “What have we done, what have we learned, and what are we going to do on the basis of what we’ve learned?” And that was the agenda. And so you were doing the reflection in the meeting rather than then thinking, “Right, we’ve got to have another one.”

Lingran Zhang (00:58:20):

Thank you so much for those really practical suggestions. So I saw that I have time for one more question. So I would like to ask, we did some homework. So we read your book and we looked up your CV a little bit, and we saw that your research also explores a lot of complex concepts like how people feel supported, how art can change people’s life. Those are really broad themes, I would say.

(00:58:49):

So I’m curious to know more about how did you and your team approach developing metrics or establishing evaluation standards for your research process and outcomes? As graduate students, we’re also preparing or planning to conduct similar projects, and this is a really challenging step that I found in my process. So do you have any advice for how we can set this out in the beginning?

Emily Pringle (00:59:17):

It’s always a million-dollar question, isn’t it? Evaluation, whew. I don’t have a kind of easy answer to this, but I think again, it’s worth kind of digging a bit deeper rather than thinking, “Oh, I just need to just develop the metrics for this.” For me, I think it’s really helpful to go, what are you trying to evaluate and who are you doing the evaluation for? Because again, if you’re doing a... We do evaluation for loads of different reasons and loads of different people, usually we do it for a funder or someone who’s given you lots of money and quite understandably wants to know, “Well, has it made any difference?”

(01:00:12):

So you then are frantically trying to find ways of evidencing the change that’s happened. And I think there’s a whole conversation that could so usefully happen around genuinely when a funder gives you money being really upfront about going, what is the evidence that you think would convince you that your money has made a really big difference? Because I think quite

often we run around trying to do quantitative evaluation when actually what we're trying to find out is never going to be found out through that kind of data collection. But we feel like, "Well, the funders, that's what they want, so we've got to do it.

(01:01:03):

We've really got to do it even though we don't think we're going to find that evidence. And even if we find that evidence, ooh really, does it really show what we know happened in that space?" So I'm not giving you the easy answer, but I think there is a really important role for a kind of upfront conversation around, if you want to know this then we'll do it. But actually it would be so much better if you came into the room with us and had a look at what's going on, or we filmed it and we showed you the film so that you could have a sense of what actually happened. Sorry. That's just one part of the thing I want to say.

(01:01:55):

And the other thing is if you're doing evaluation because you want to improve your practice, then everything that I've talked about in terms of more cyclical forms of working where you're building in your reflection will probably do that job for you.

Lingran Zhang (01:02:16):

Determines a lot about how we approach this question or what question we have in mind then.

Emily Pringle (01:02:21):

And it is that thing of what are you doing the evaluation for? And if it is really that actually we just need to get a set of quantitative data, that's fine, then just do it. Do the questionnaires, do millions of questionnaires and then run them through a program.

Lingran Zhang (01:02:39):

Hopefully that's not always the case. Thank you so much for allowing me to start with my questions. I would like to open up the floor to the public as well. We do have, very soon, the number. Here we go. If any of you want to just ask a question, we do have a microphone here as well, so...

Jess Xiao Long (01:03:04):

Feel free to raise your hand or text it in. Yep. Thank you so much.

Noor Murteza (01:03:14):

Thank you. Hi, Noor Murteza, former, very proud advisee of Dr. Kletchka. I was very, very excited to hear you speak. It was very heartening to see two things from my own educational past come together. Co-design participatory work with people is what we call it in the discipline of design, we call it co-design, and museum education. And so I wanted to ask you because

there was a comment from Dr. Kletchka that there's not that much written on this and not discussed that much. Do you have an insight as to why?

Emily Pringle (01:03:52):

Ooh...

Noor Murteza (01:03:56):

Sorry. Maybe kind of left-field question. We can hold it until later, but—

Emily Pringle (01:04:01):

That is such a good question. I think it's because on one hand I don't think people really realize how much research does happen in museums. I think there was this preconception that there's research that happens in the curatorial department. So there's kind pre-exhibition research and then there's research that is kind of done on museums. And then there's obviously all the really amazing research that's done around audiences. But what I think has really gone under the radar is the kind of community participatory research. I just don't think, certainly when I was speaking to academic colleagues that anyone had any idea that this stuff was going on, to be honest.

(01:05:05):

And I think that museum education in my experience, is a very poorly recorded discipline. Particularly art museum education history has this incredible history, but it's very badly documented. So I think in general, the practice is not well understood, let alone the fact that all this research has been going on. So I think it's partly that. I think it's partly that everyone's too busy so they just don't get a chance to write about it. I mean, I was only able to write the book because I managed to get a year's funded sabbatical to do it.

(01:05:52):

I would never have had the time unless I'd just spent my entire life outside of work writing, which I was just not going to do. So I think that's another issue is that everyone's just so busy doing what they're doing, they're not writing about it. What do you think? Do you have a theory?

Noor Murteza (01:06:22):

I lost the mic, but I have a teacher's voice... I was recently in a space at the National Art Education Association. We were invited in to do some of this kind of research as practitioner work, but with teachers. So in the classroom, thinking about how you do research as a teacher, teaching as a craft, teaching as a practice. They always are in that cycle of knowing. So I think that it's... Your last comment, I think, about practitioners are busy doing is probably true. In design, it's usually been a combination of that and that people sign NDAs. Because often when they're doing this type of participatory research, they're doing it for Microsoft or they're doing it for Google or Meta or something like that.

(01:07:03):

And it's about what consumers of the future will want. And so McKenzie or something comes in and does that for them and then they sign an NDA. And unless you have a friend that will tell you some stuff over dinner, you're not going to know what's happening. But with the teachers, it's more they're busy doing rather than telling us what they're doing until they retire and they write a book or something. We're lucky you had a year off so we could hear this.

Emily Pringle (01:07:31):

That's a really good point, the NDA point. I would say though that I think there is a real increasing professionalization within the field. It was really evident in the time that I was working at Tate, how the kind of level of academic qualifications of folks coming in raised... that it was started off that you just had an undergraduate and then it was people coming in with masters. And now increasingly it's people coming in either doing a PhD or they've got a PhD. So I think increasingly you've got people who are more comfortable with writing and researching. So I have great hopes for more of this.

Noor Murteza (01:08:21):

I mean I'll say that in our department, at least there's been some PhDs whose work is now this.
[inaudible 01:08:37]

Emily Pringle (01:08:36):

Very good.

Jess Xiao Long (01:08:37):

I saw a question on the side.

Audience 1 (01:08:46):

Thank you so much for your talk and especially your kind of simplifying of research. I think that what... my question really comes from a place of questioning the significance of the university and the concern that when research is used in any sense, like the concept or the practices or these kinds of things, it builds off a conception of the university that just like you've described with the museum, needs to be kind of brought down a few pegs or two because it is bound up on systems of privilege and systems of power that you outlined.

(01:09:32):

So I'm wondering, and this is a kind of flipping it because where we are, where in the academy is this kind of space that you are describing? Because it can't be in research, and I don't know if it can happen in teaching. And I was kind of wondering if it was somewhere that we, in the US, call service. So, for example, you can write your articles, you can write your books, you can write your books grounded in your teaching. But when it comes to service, for example, being on a curriculum committee, or on a committee of certain kinds of things, it's very hard to communicate that type of labor to not only students here but also at the outside world.

(01:10:18):

So how the university actually runs itself. And here in the US we have shared governance where there's a sense of academics are part of the running of the university in theory at least. It's been watered down and really kind of undermined in recent years. And so, I'm just wondering if this idea of research in the working space of the museum actually shouldn't look to the university's classification of research but should look for it to other activities or gestures that are happening within the university that align more with it than this hallowed category of research, in spite of all the kind of ways in which it's done more kind of inclusively, et cetera.

Emily Pringle (01:11:05):

I think that's a really interesting point. I mean, think in the UK, the whole kind of practice as research became an issue when... Forgive me if this is a bit of a long answer, but there was a time in the nineties when the art schools in the UK, which were previously independent, were largely incorporated into universities. And therefore the work that artists and particularly artists who were teaching in the art schools, they had to find a way of articulating that creative practice as a form of research. It focused a lot of attention, then, on the practice of making art and how that practice could be understood as being equivalent to the research practice of say a scientist or a historian.

(01:12:16):

And I think it's been good and bad on lots of... It kind of academized art school practice in a way that I think something has been lost. But the model of practice as research has sort of formulated to kind of resolve that issue. I have found incredibly useful bringing that model back into the museum. But then I also think that... An answer to your question, it is also an interesting moment where it could then go back to the academy and go, "Well, if we have people in finance in the art museum, thinking about that practice as a form of research, what does that look like in the university?" I don't know if that answers your question. Probably not.

Audience 1 (01:13:18):

[inaudible 01:13:19] The research as you just described it with your sabbatical, kind of purifying nature of doing research, within your work is challenging. It's very brute. It's also only in museums you have, people have to work these 425 events. We're at the university doing work that has nothing to do with research a lot of the time. Maybe then it should be some of the places look to translate rather than the research.

Emily Pringle (01:14:02):

I think you're right. But I also think it still comes back to that root thing of... I mean, when I was interviewing people, one person I spoke to said, "Well, there's big R research and small r research." And big R research was like the academic, you get a grant, off you go, very prestigious. It's everything we understand about research. Small r research was all the stuff that I'm talking about. And it was just the fact that there was big and small, it kind of said it all. And to me it's like, "No, it's all research." It's all research.

(01:14:38):

It's all about this idea that you start with a question, you explore it and then you put your knowledge, you generate something that wasn't known before. But I think until that we broaden that notion of what research actually is, it's quite a big hurdle to overcome really.

Emily Haidet (01:15:01):

So I think we are out of time this evening, but I do want to thank Emily and Lingran and Dana and all of you for coming and hanging out with us tonight. It was a fantastic talk, and I know that there's lots of folks with the Wex here, so I know we are all just gathering so much information. So thank you so much Emily, and thank you all for coming. Hopefully we'll see you in a few weeks at our exhibition opening. Thank you.