**How responsibility and ethical issues of museums impacted by activism**

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**SYNOPSIS**

This essay explores how activism helps to deal with the social responsibility and ethical issues of museums in contemporary settings. Museums, as kinds of cultural institutions, have the necessary responsibility and ethical concerns when educating the public and advocating culture.

As one of the mechanisms to drive change in museums, activism can help museums to solve some ethical and social responsibility challenges. Based on two specific cases, this paper discusses the effective role of museum activism and on the other hand points out the limitations of this approach. Firstly, in the case of the repatriation of cultural objects, activism was able to correct some of the misconceptions about colonial history, leading to the repatriation of the Beninese Bronzes. In the second case, the construction of Ground Zero in the United States, where over-commercialization led to dissatisfaction of the victims' families with the organization of the museum, the activists were able to influence the attitude of the museum.

To summarize, in these two examples, conclusions about museum activism are drawn. It is an effective solution, but there are still limitations, and the success of the action depends on multiple reasons and requires the support of external forces.

# Intro

Activism as a solution can help museums deal with social responsibility and ethics in contemporary settings. Museums, as public cultural institutions, need to consider ethical issues. They also take on the social responsibility of cultural transmission and public education. This paper will demonstrate the challenges of ethical and social responsibility in museums and the impact of museum activism through two specific case studies. Meanwhile, the paper also discusses the enlightening and corrective role of activism as a mechanism for change in practice. Firstly, in the case of the repatriation of cultural objects, the museums are in ethical controversy over colonial looting and have not fulfilled their social responsibility in terms of history education. In response to these issues, the actions of some museums and stakeholders have clarified the history of colonization and looting, corrected some misconceptions about history and led to the return of some objects. But the debate still continues. The second is based on the problem of over-commercialization and ethics in the construction of Ground Zero in the United States. When there was a conflict between commercial benefits and ethics, Ground Zero chose to prioritize the economy. The families of the victims were dissatisfied with the museum organization and took a series of actions to change the museum's attitude, however, many claims were ignored.

Based on these two case studies, this paper analyzes the limitations of museum activism as a solution. For example, when the subjects of action are small-scale or non-authoritative, they have limited influence to take action. Even with the e participation of expert groups and large-scale organizations, It is also still necessary to have the support of other external forces to solve the deep-rooted and fundamental conflicts.

# Definition

## 1. Ethics and social responsibility of museums

Museums show the multiple perspectives in the history and civilization of humanity and play the role of advocators of cultural concepts. This led to the prioritization of their moral and ethical stance compared with other institutions.[[1]](#footnote-1)As an important institution for cultural communication, the museum is not only a space for display, but also a platform for promoting culture communication. Its social responsibility is mainly reflected in the objective presentation of historical events, the neutrality of its position, as well as the inspiration and education of its audience. It is a catalyst for social change.[[2]](#footnote-2)

## 2. Museum Activism

## Activism is a way of pushing for social change that involves bottom-up actions by individuals or groups to protest against public institutions, pushing them to make changes by organizing group protests, breaking rules, and leading public opinion. The goals of activism cover a wide range of topics, such as eliminating inequality, anti-colonialism, and environmental protection.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Museum activism is a series of practical activities around cultural institutions such as museums, which are usually launched by people or relevant cultural organizations, but also with the participation of authorities. It is the use of museums as a public platform for activism through public media propaganda, legal action, and occupation of spaces. Activism is a force independent from rules, economics, politics, etc. Its goal is usually to monitor and criticize the behavior of cultural institutions, to use museums as public platforms to spread ideas, to change museum behavior, and to arouse the moral and ethical awareness and social responsibility of museums.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Cases of repatriation of cultural objects**

Many museums in bcontemporary settings have ethical and socially responsible controversies over the repatriation of cultural objects. Various groups, from individuals to institutions, have acted to demand that these museums, which were involved in colonial looting, return artifacts to the countries to which they belonged. The issue of repatriation of cultural objects was pointed out as not being a legal issue, but a moral issue concerning the injustices of European colonization, and a call was made for museums to take their social responsibility as public institutions.

In the case of the repatriation of the Benin Bronze, for example, activism has, on the one hand, raised public attention returning the cultural objects, and pointed out the inescapable social responsibility of cultural institutions like museums, in the case of colonial plunder. On the other hand, it also pointed out that the artifacts in the museum collection originated from the looting by the colonizers, and that there is an inescapable social responsibility for museums, as cultural propagators, in spreading and interpreting controversial historical cases.

The return of the Beninese Bronzes was the result of joint action by several organizations and international institutions. To this end, an international agency called the Benin Dialogue Group was established by stakeholders, including representatives of European museums with Beninese collections, members of the Edo（An Empire of Nigeria）royal family, Nigerian scholars and legal experts. Since 2010, there have been frequent meetings to discuss strategies for the repatriation of Beninese cultural objects.[[5]](#footnote-5) Besides that, there are some small museums in the United States that have started to act aggressively and make attempts in favor of returning objects. The Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design, for example, began work on the restoration of the Benin Bronze Head after recognizing that the bronze statues in its collection came from looting. It has also taken the initiative to communicate with the National Museum of Nigeria and the relevant committees.[[6]](#footnote-6) This change shows that it is possible to change the perspectives of museum workers and provide more ethical guidance through the actions of cultural organizations. It has further inspired action in museums, such as in the wider context, where some museums have begun to make changes. For instance, the Penn Museum uses labels when displaying Beninese artifacts to indicate that they are from colonial looting. The National Museum of Scotland has also acknowledged on notice boards that part of the collection in the museum was acquired through looting. In addition, the Horniman Museum in London also explained at a public event in 2016 that artifacts in the museum were partly from colonial looting. These initiatives are common museum activism in contemporary settings.[[7]](#footnote-7) Through these actions, the museum has demonstrated a change of perspective. By taking an active role in recognizing the historical facts of colonial plunder, they are fulfilling their social responsibility to educate the public about history and disseminate culture. These activisms from museums are more influential and can lead to a wider discussion, so that the public can be properly educated and recognize unfair behaviors. Audiences are inspired to think critically about issues of ethics and social responsibility in museums. From viewers to museums, the activism of some of these organizations put great public pressure on museums, and the Horniman Museum began to return cultural objects. However, there are still many cultural institutions that choose to avoid and ignore this history and escape responsibility, including many high-authority museums, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Museum of Natural History, to avoid responsibility and moral controversy. Thus the debates over the return of cultural objects continue to this day. For instance, the debate between the national government, state governments and the royal family over the restitution program has continued to be reported in the Nigerian national media, with opinion leaders involved in the debate including Folarin Shyllon, a Nigerian law professor, Kwame Opoku, a journalist, and Prince Akanzua, a member of the Edo family. They disagree on specific issues such as whether the return of artifacts should be permanent or short-term, conditional or unconditional.[[8]](#footnote-8) It follows that the effectiveness of activism as a solution is still limited, and that even actions initiated by authoritative scholars, those in power, or institutions that generate sustained attention and wide-ranging discussion still do not fully solve the ethical challenges of museums.

In short, activism and protests have made people aware of the importance of the return of cultural heritage by museums, pointing out the ethical issues that museums need to deal with as public platforms. This has led to a number of restitutions through a variety of practices that have put public pressure on museums. However, the return of cultural objects as a historical legacy is challenged by diplomacy, the cultural property act, international regulations, and other barriers, and these objective issues are difficult to solve through activism.

**The case of Ground Zero**

In the construction of Ground Zero in the United States, the development sector targeted economic needs and there were ethical problems of over-commercialization and consumption of the disaster. As a memorial to the disaster, it did not prioritize its social responsibility to memorialize the victims. It triggered protests from groups such as survivors and families and gained legitimacy through actions like lawsuits, which prevented some of the commercialization by the developers.

At the beginning of the planning for Ground Zero, the heritage management of the site planned to make the memorial a tourist space to attract a wider public. Therefore, Ground Zero needed to balance the needs of the investors who provided the funding with the needs of the relatives of the deceased to reach a consensus among the stakeholders. Hoping to attract a wider audience for the development of the tourist attraction, the heritage agency set up the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) to work with the private investor and also to act as a medium to convey the voices of the bereaved and survivors.[[9]](#footnote-9) However, while institutional managers recognize the importance of reaching a social common ground, there is still a conflict between, for example, ethical issues of respect for the victims and commercial interests. Moreover, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) has apparently prioritized the interests of its investors in the planning of Ground Zero, prompting protests from the families of the victims and survivors.

Firstly, after the reconstruction work was completed in July 2002, and in order to start the construction of the museum as soon as possible, the authorities planned to clean up Ground Zero in a very rude way. They transported human remains and relics, which had not yet been finished being categorized, by truck to the Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island. The action by the authorities subsequently triggered an angry reaction from the families of the victims because of the discovery of 4,257 human fragments in New Kilns. More importantly, many families are still unable to find the remains of their dead family members.[[10]](#footnote-10) As a result many of the families who lost families on 9/11 have been objecting to this cleanup. Horning, whose son was killed in the disaster, has questioned the way the remains have been handled, she said “They still put them on top of garbage. ”[[11]](#footnote-11) So she began protesting the actions of the site manager and the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation. Horning took legal action, appealing the decision by asserting a property right, but ended up losing the case. Because the court found that Horning had no evidence that her son's remains were in the dust, it did not constitute a claim of property rights.[[12]](#footnote-12) This type of fighting injustice through legal means is a form of activism. However, the activism dominated by the individual in this case tried to stop such harm, but this type of extraordinarily disrespectful harm to the deceased continues. In a subsequent plan to rebuild the site, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, the builder of Ground Zero, declared in a press release that the goal of the museum's construction was to be driven by the economy and infrastructure needs of the marketplace, in partnership with the private sector. The feelings and needs of community groups, survivors and families of the victims were completely ignored. This led directly to the formation of the 9/11 Victims Organization, which formed the 9/11 Family Coalition, initiated rallies such as “Make Your Voice Heard” and “Take Back the Memorial,” And brought together many stakeholders to gain a voice through legal recourse, it became a legitimate organization with the power to monitor and advise on heritage site development. This is one of the more positive cases of activism. The action against Ground Zero effectively corrected the ethical problems that existed in the management. However, it still does not solve the fundamental conflict between economics and ethics.[[13]](#footnote-13) Ground Zero was planned as an important attraction for dark tourism. Thus attracting tourists became one of the goals of the management, and they built a new platform at the edge of the site to attract tourists to take pictures. In the year that this platform was opened, 3.5 million tourists have already visited the site.[[14]](#footnote-14) This meets the needs of economic development, but it also leads to a lack of moral and social responsibility on the part of the museum at Ground Zero. For the families of the deceased, the site is an open grave, and such photography is a desecration of the dead and their remains. The mother of one of the victims commented “this should be a sacred place ...... My child's body is all over that place.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

In sum, activism around Ground Zero occurred frequently during the construction of the site, sometimes through activist lawsuits that forced the museum to change its unethical behavior and defend the interests of the community, survivors, and families of those who suffered. But more often than not these voices remain ignored. This shows the limitations of museum activism as a solution. Especially when there is a conflict between ethical issues and financial gain. The moral issues that arise when museums develop into dark tourism attractions and derive moral issues due to the lack of funds and other reasons are no longer a single issue of social responsibility. These aspects of the conflict cannot be resolved directly through activism.

# Limitation

As public cultural organizations, the actions of museums and galleries are influenced by multiple factors. Therefore, if the problem of ethics and misconduct in museums needs to be solved, it is necessary to take into account the multifaceted conflicts and the fundamental causes that affect their behavior. In the case of repatriation of objects, activism can help people, cultural institutions and organizations to understand the colonial history correctly and to avoid unethical positions such as inequality and colonialism. During the construction of Ground Zero, activism attempted to correct ethical problems caused by the over-commercialization of the museum, such as the desecration of the victims and the injury of their families. Although this evidence suggests that museum activism is an effective solution. However, activism still has its limitations in terms of solution effectiveness and outcomes.

Through the case study of Ground Zero, the success of activism largely depends on how much social impact the organization initiating the action can make, or how much power they have. For example, concerning the cleanup of the remains, Horning, a family member of the deceased, had protested through a lawsuit, but was still unable to change the developers' behavior.[[16]](#footnote-16) And with regard to the goal of the museum's construction, the 9/11 Family Coalition rallied many of the families of the victims and organized several rallies that finally led to a compromise by the developer and a legally supported voice.[[17]](#footnote-17) Comparing these two examples can conclude that the success of activism also depended on the compromise of the museum institution. For example, in the case of the over-commercialization of the museum after it was built for economic development, the voices of the resistance were ignored. Activism did not work when the museum refused to compromise in the conflict between economic interests and moral responsibility.

The case study of the repatriation of cultural objects shows that protests are not always successful even when the organization initiating the action is authoritative enough and the impact of the action is wide enough. In the case of the return of objects, the main actors included authoritative scholars, authorities, members of the royal family, museums, and other people in positions of power, and the event was discussed internationally by people of different nationalities and widely disseminated through the television media.[[18]](#footnote-18) But the debate remains without a conclusion. This means that there are still many ethical issues that cannot be resolved by activism only. This is due to the fact that museums are still faced with multiple obstacles in terms of diplomacy, the concept of cultural property, and legal regulations that make it difficult for them to fully return artifacts to the museums. These multiple barriers require more external support, such as public support, political will, laws and regulations.[[19]](#footnote-19)

# Conclusion

Using two specific cases, this paper discusses the moral and ethical positions that museums need to consider and the social responsibilities they should assume. The actions of institutions such as the Horniman Museum on the issue of the restitution of the Benin bronzes exemplify the corrective role that activism can play in the social responsibility of museums. In the case of the construction of Ground Zero, the action of the families of the victims is a moral and ethical position that criticizes the institutions concerned. In terms of results, these positive initiatives can help the public and the administration to recognize problems, but when it comes to other kinds of deep-rooted problems can't be solved directly by activism. Though the activism actors are independent, their approaches are flexible and multifaceted. It can penetrate all aspects of cultural communication in museums, and monitor and urge changes in the ethics and responsibilities of museums. However, the success of activist practice depends largely on the influence of the activist subject and the willingness of the institution to compromise. It is important to note that this limitation is rarely mentioned in articles about museum activism. In dealing with complex problems that result from multiple causes, activism requires the support of other external forces.

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BBC. “Outrage at Ground Zero Visitor Platform.” *News.bbc.co.uk*, January 17, 2002. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/1766687.stm>.

Reports on relatives and survivors of the 9/11 victims and their views on the construction of a museum at Ground Zero.

Bulut, Diren, and Ceren Bulut Yumrukaya. “Corporate Social Responsibility in Culture and Art.” Edited by Tarja Ketola. *Management of Environmental Quality: An International Journal* 20, no. 3 (April 17, 2009): 311–20. <https://doi.org/10.1108/14777830910950702>.

This article, which documents Bulut's 17 interviews in Turkey, raises the issue of funding for arts organizations such as museums galleries, and how to reconcile social responsibility with the availability of funds is a matter for discussion. This is also a limitation that exists for museums, as private funding often has an impact on their cultural expression.

Ciraj Rassool, Evren Uzer, and Feras Hammami. “The Epistemic Work of Decolonization and Restitution: A Critical Conversation.” *Palgrave Studies in Cultural Heritage and Conflict*, January 1, 2022, 213–30. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-77708-1_10>.

This essay offers scholarly and activist perspectives by documenting a number of critical conversations about perceptions of decolonization and restitution of cultural artifacts.

Kelly, Lynda. “Measuring the Impact of Museums on Their Communities: The Role of the 21 St Century Museum,” 2006. <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=2eed1a137651637c86f9a7093ce0bffe6f167bae>.

This article documents two of her projects and results, where she demonstrated the value of museums in communities and the impact of museums on local social life through qualitative and quantitative research methods.

Lisle, Debbie. “Gazing at Ground Zero: Tourism, Voyeurism and Spectacle.” *Journal for Cultural Research* 8, no. 1 (January 2004): 3–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1479758042000797015>.

This article provides data related to the Museum at Ground Zero before and after the construction of the viewing platform, such as the number of visitors, trends, and other data about the Museum at Ground Zero.

Macdonald, Robert R. “A Code of Ethics for United States Museums.” *Museum International* 45, no. 1 (March 1993): 53–56. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0033.1993.tb01092.x>.

This article provides a definition of the ethical aspects of museum ethics, pointing out specific aspects and ethical standards for museums to consider.

Mather, Joanne. “From Trauma to Tourism.” *Routledge EBooks*, May 24, 2023, 292–305. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003195870-25.

This article describes the problems in heritage management at Auschwitz and the 9/11 Ground Zero site, as well as the lessons learned.

Konstantinos Pittas, “Artistic Activism and Museum Accountability: Staging Antagonism in the Cultural Sphere,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, January 21, 2023, 194–209, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764221140810>.

This article identifies the social responsibility of museums as public cultural institutions, including the specific why and what.

Shyllon, Folarin. “Benin Dialogue Group: Benin Royal Museum - Three Steps Forward, Six Steps Back.” *Art Antiquity and Law*23 (2018): 341. <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/artniqul23&div=35&id=&page=>.

This article provides a detailed account of the debate on the restitution of bronze artefacts in Benin, as well as of the attitudes and initiatives of various organizations on this issue, and provides detailed information for the case study in this paper.

Smith, Michael F., and Ferguson Denise P. “Activism 2.0.” *The SAGE Handbook of Public Relations*, 2010, 395.

This article provides a basic definition of activism and relevant examples.

Winter, Jay. “Museums and the Representation of War.” *Transcript Verlag EBooks*, December 31, 2013, 21–38. <https://doi.org/10.1515/transcript.9783839423066.21>.

This article explores the purpose of a memorial museum and the key issues that need to be addressed. For example, the principles of choosing what to display and how to engage the public. The complexities of using images and symbols in museums are also discussed.

Zutshi, Ambika, Andrew Creed, Rajat Panwar, and Lyndall Willis. “Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR): Curators’ Specific Responses from Australian Museums and Art Galleries.” *Current Issues in Tourism*, February 24, 2020, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2020.1729104>.

This article identifies how museum administrators view the social responsibility of arts organizations and how museums meet the interests of different stakeholders. And it identifies the dynamics and obstacles that exist in the process of social responsibility in arts organizations.

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