ICMEMO Webinar “The Role of Museums in Times of Civil Unrest”

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Suay Aksoy’s Introduction of Spencer Crew

Good day to all! I am so delighted to be with you today. Thank you, Ophelia, thank you ICMEMO for allowing me, allowing us to speak out our belief in museums’ capacity to change lives for the better.

Museums are among the most trusted institutions in the society as surveys show year after year. Just by this attribution, if not for anything else, museums rank as public spaces where people can actually get involved in politics and take part in policy- making processes in order to define their collective future.   
  
The increasing pressure put on museums by communities and various community groups stress well the notions of accountability and transparency. Museums have a great potential in facilitating or supporting democratic hearing processes.

I would therefore say that beyond being spaces of memory, museums serve, have to serve as maintainers of social consciousness because it is this consciousness that bridges memories to each other and to the current time and motivates us to act.

One may ask, do we, as museum professionals, have the necessary competences and skills to tackle this? With the growing awareness about the social role of museums, our work now requires more than what it used to require in the past. Today we talk about defining new participatory and decolonial methods, restorative justice, creative problem solving, mediation, conflict resolution… All complementary to museums' main functions. Not in contradiction to our traditional collection-oriented duties but providing them with a meaningful context to work in and making museums relevant in this era.

In order to assume this responsibility, we need to build trust with our diverse communities. This trust is only possible if we can find the right balance between organisational professionalism as solid centres of evidence, knowledge production and research on the one hand and our activist efforts to uncover the hidden and often unspoken contested realities and dynamics of the past and present including the ever growing inequalities and exclusion on the other hand… through community resilience and solidarity with civic movements and struggles.

And this latter is only possible if we regard these issues not as external to our organisations but as integral issues that we need to face, first within our internal structures such as our human resource policies. We should not forget that without having a clear diversity and inclusion policy at our museum workspaces, we cannot claim that we are contributing to remedying the challenging issues about and around diversity and inclusion within the broader society.

This is exactly why we need organisations like the Smithsonian that act as role model by representing a perfect balance between these two complementary characteristics of what a museum is in the 21st century.

So today I feel especially fortunate and honoured to introduce to you the esteemed veteran, the Acting Director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture: Spencer R. Crew. A remarkably well-rounded person of an academic as well as curatorial background and an author of many books on African American and Public History. He will talk and inspire us about the “Role of museums in the time of civil unrest”, an unending, universal condition that communities face also today. We will be lucky if we hear him tell us also about his museum’s outstanding programme entitled “Talking about race”. So let us start and enjoy this treat. May I give the floor to Professor Spencer Crew? With thanks…