

## **Radical Museums Podcast - Zandra Yeaman**

**Sharon Heal:** Hi, I'm Sharon Heal, the director of the Museums Association, and I'm presenting the third episode of our radical museums podcast. At the Museums Association, we've been exploring what radical practice and activism means for museums for a number of years now. We're a campaigning values-led organisation, and our current campaigns include decolonisation, anti-racism, climate justice and wellbeing. We know that museums can make a real positive difference to people's lives. And throughout this podcast series, we'll be talking to museum activists and those that are striving for and driving change. Today, I'm delighted to say that our guest is Zandra Yeaman. And let's go with and meet her. Welcome to the Radical Museums Podcast.

**Sharon Heal:** Please, can you introduce yourself and describe your role and let us know what your job title is - because it's fascinating.

**Zandra Yeaman:** Okay, so I'm Zandra Yeaman, and I am the creator of discomfort at the Hunterian based at University of Glasgow, and to describe my job role is quite interesting, because I was asking my colleagues, you know, how would they describe my job role, and there was various comments that you should just write agitator. So, I think I'll stick with that. But to be fair, and I am actually an activist, and an activist is someone that campaigns for social political change. And I feel that there's a need in museum spaces for us think about that, and to think about the social changes that we need to do.

**Sharon Heal:** Amazing. I think we need more curators of discomfort without a doubt. So Glasgow is a very high profile city, can you tell us a bit about the city and what makes it so special?

**Zandra Yeaman:** Obviously, I'm from Glasgow, my father was from India, the Punjab, my mum, Scottish Irish, but I was born in Glasgow, a long time ago. And I love it. And I love when people come to visit my city. And I think it is special. Everyone who lives in their city, I'd like to think that they feel that their city special, you know. It's changed so much, even in my lifetime of over 50 years. I think that's part of its specialness. I think the people, and how diverse the city is, makes it special, because it's such a diverse city, and areas of it are pretty diverse. And I was fortunate enough to live in a very multiracially diverse part of the city. So you were exposed to everything. The other thing for me about Glasgow is about class, actually, it's something that we don't like to talk about much these days, but you know, growing up from a lower working class, really we were all kind of thrown together when it literally is that living cheek by jowl in the tenement buildings. And I think that's another thing that makes Glasgow look special. So, I'm a Glasgweigan, and I'm going to say it's the best city.

**Sharon Heal:** So, I jumped in a taxi this morning when I got to Queen Street. And of course, the cabbie struck up a conversation and I mentioned that I'd come in from Edinburgh. And his summary of the difference was, oh, yeah, Edinburgh people just a wee bit more reserved. They're not like us in Glasgow.

**Zandra Yeaman:** I think the thing about Glasgow, and I love this, is you literally can stand at a bus stop, and someone will tell you your life their story. And I do feel that the people of Glasgow are genuinely interested in people, you know. Some people might think it's kind of noisy, but it's not about being nosy, they are actually genuinely interested in people and they are genuinely interested in finding out what connects us. You know, I mean, there's also a dark side to the city as every city

has, and you know, even as a Glaswegian I have been on the receiving end of that, but overall, there is something about it being a friendly city.

**Sharon Heal:** Definitely. There's a lot of people around who like people's stories. So you work at the Hunterian Museum that's part of the university. I'm interested in looking at whether activism fits into the mission and vision of institutions. So where does the radical practice fit into the overall mission and vision of the Hunterian?

**Zandra Yeaman:** Well, as I said, Sharon, I grew up in Glasgow, and a lot of the activism that I witnessed as a child came from, you know, students, you know, came from Glasgow University, you know, you would see anti-racist activism going on in the city, you would see a lot of the kind of protests that would be set up, you'd see a lot of the kind of students being involved in that – that still happens. So I think it's not a surprise to think that an activist has a professional role within a university museum. If you think about all the radical thinking, the radical protests and ideas that come out of the student population. So, I suppose to some people may see it as unusual, I really don't, even when I think about all the old polytechnics and, you know, different colleges, it was always students that mobilised, so I don't think it's that usual.

**Sharon Heal:** No, but was there any commentary or narrative that was negative around the idea of a curator of discomfort? Was it well received in the sector?

**Zandra Yeaman:** I think it was well received. But what happens is people focus on the media and the dissenting voices. So there's always that kind of risk averse. So there is that experience that when I took on the role and chose that title, you know, people were nervous, because big institutions, like a university are very risk averse. I mean, they have to be honest about that. And in fact, museums,

large museums are very risk averse. And they worry about what the media, they're gonna approach roles like this, or work that they're doing. And I think that's quite sad, really, because the people on the ground, ie the audiences who actually visit these spaces, the general public, are fine. It's not them that actually have a problem with a changing museum, or, you know, the direction that even society has gone, opening up our stories around the Empire, and colonialism and slavery. There's a there's a want for that from the public. I think the other thing about the University of Glasgow that I should mention is that they did do the slavery report. That report that was conducted by Dr Steven Mullen, with Professor Simon Newman, and that really highlighted where a lot of the money came from, you know, money that is still involved in endowments today. And I think that's interesting, because people always think this is the past, but actually, I think Glasgow University is more radical than it probably even thinks itself.

**Sharon Heal:** That actually leads me to another question, which for a lot of people who work in museums, it kind of looks like Scotland is ahead of the curve on issues like decolonisation and repatriation and looking at the links and the legacy of slavery and empire. Why do you think that is? Where does that come from?

**Zandra Yeaman:** I feel strongly that the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights, that is a strategic, anti-racist organisation based in Glasgow, but it's a Scottish wide strategic organisation, they started a Black History Month programme of events in 2001. And part of the programme was doing walking tours around the built heritage of the city, linking stories around the enslavement of African people around issues around empire to that tour. And so we had it 20 years ahead, I think, so well, a lot of people are seen in larger institutions engaging with these narratives and, you know, trying to kind of

bring to the forefront to the public, these past studies that have always been there. They've never been hidden. It's all on our plate, in plain sight. It's come through the grassroots anti-racist movement, and it's been black minority and ethnic minority-led always, so I think, because we've been doing that in Scotland for so long, we were preparing, you know, the public for this.

**Sharon Heal:** And preparing the ground as well.

**Zandra Yeaman:** Absolutely, preparing the ground. You know, in 2007, the Coalition for Racial Equality rights has actually employed Steven Mullen, who is know Dr, Steven Mullen, to write a book. It was not us. And so this is like a non academic institution that does that. And then he goes on to do the research ,becomes a doctor, and then he goes on does the research for the university. So, I think these things are connected.

**Sharon Heal:** Yeah. Can you just explain a little bit more about that idea of it wasn't us and what that means in Scotland?

**Zandra Yeaman:** So, it wasn't us. And to see it as like Glaswegian, you would say wasnee us, which is the same thing. So, we had nothing to do with the complicit in the enslavement of African people, or the slave trade in the way that Glasgow, Liverpool, London were. But through all the work that we've been doing here, we've been scratching that surface, and all the information is there. So, it's been a long, hard slog, really, to get Scotland to wake up and take notice of our complicity, and the enslavement of African people and our complicity and empire. So, I think we're really ready for it, the public is ready for it. You know, it's kind of exciting to see. Black History Month isn't just an October, it's actually to 365 days a year which is always what that work was about.

**Sharon Heal:** Absolutely. And there are a lot of eyes on what's happening in Scotland and I would say in Wales as well in terms of the work that's been done with communities. And it's really interesting to me that it comes from grassroots and then it's the long haul as well. This is not just something that's a flash in the pan, just you know, a project-based thing. This is something that's got to be embedded in institutions as a way of working in a way of thinking, actually, it's much more than just a project. So, I've asked you, Zandra, and I know this is difficult ask of any curator, to choose one objects that exemplifies your brand of activism. Can you tell me what you've chosen and why?

**Zandra Yeaman:** Okay, so there's one object that I found really interesting, and it's a sign, a metal sign that used to be down in the shipyard down the Clydeside, and it is in the collection of Glasgow Glasgow Museum's collection, but I'm, I'm a Glaswegian, so it's my collection, too. And it's called, it actually says on it "Lascars only". And it's also in Bengali too.

**Sharon Heal:** So, they actually translated the segregation.

**Zandra Yeaman:** Yes. And the reason I picked up on that is the first time I saw it as part of an exhibition, the label was very kind of positive, as if, you know, we had Lascars coming here and working on the ships, and they were given their own space, and I was appalled, because, actually, it is segregation. And also took me to the story of the first recorded race riots that started in Glasgow before they went down all the other ports, Liverpool and so on, and 1919 that name, because we always talk about Glasgow, from the perspective of the great Clydesiders, you know, a working class city, but actually the first recorded race riots happened in January 1919. And this was where Manny Shinwell and the likes were basically saying British jobs for British workers.

**Sharon Heal:** Interesting, it's so complex, that history of trade unionism, it's not always progressive.

**Zandra Yeaman:** No. And for me, when I see that sign, I think about those race riots, and I think about how, you know, African and Indian sailors, they put a colour bar on the on the sailors union, which is just shocking because these were all men who had actually been fighting alongside the people who were in back in Glasgow, during the First World War. And they were all subjects of the empire, because remember, there was no such thing as a British national from 1944. So, you know, they thought they were fighting for the Empire, and they will equal to these Scottish people, particular Glaswegians. So, when I see that object, and this is where I think there's a responsibility on curators and museums, is using objects like that to actually springboard a story that goes beyond the material culture, and goes beyond where it was positioned and goes beyond the donor.

**Sharon Heal:** Yeah, and the very narrow interpretation, actually misleading interpretation that was in that exhibition.

**Zandra Yeaman:** That was very misleading. And I won't go into the details of it. But actually, to be fair, when people talk about triggers - that for me, you know, that's a trigger. It's not the object that triggers me is the label besides it, and the misinformation, that's what's triggering. So, I really think that's something for museums to think about. It's not displaying, you know, an object, but the trauma that gets displayed is actually how it's written about.

**Sharon Heal:** And I think there's something really powerful in that, about absence. And that's absence in terms of stories, narrative words, language, but it's also absence in who is in the gallery and who is not in the museum space. So yeah, that's a really interesting thought.

Zandra Yeaman: But there's also this other thing about museum space. Many people visit museums and don't really look at the objects, it's the space. I mean, I know myself, you know, as a single parent with two young children many years ago, I would take them to Kelvingrove, not necessarily to look at the objects but just to be undercover and out the rain. So, you know, sometimes I think we do our audiences a disservice, because, you know, they're multifaceted, they are in the space for different reasons. There's people who are there for shelter out the rain, there's people who are there to genuinely look at the displays, you know, and there's people who are there because, for me, it was very much when my children were young, it was like to get them out of the house and have something to do.

**Sharon Heal:** And it's free and it's accessible. I think that's really interesting and all of those usages are legitimate. But I think that's a very current topic of conversation because of the cost of living crisis, inflation, energy price hike, there is this kind conversation and narrative about can museums be warm, safe spaces? And I think we should be, and we should be open to all communities. But there's also a question about crossing the threshold as well. And have we made those communities welcome over the years, I mean, I always feel like Glasgow is a bit different, because people seem to really hold the museums to their heart, you know, and there does seem to be more diversity in museum audiences.

Zandra Yeaman: It a very civic city, Glasgow, well, I think it is, and we really feel ownership of the public museums, and the objects and belongings that they display. Unfortunately, some of the institutions don't understand that. And that that's where you need the activism to remind them, you know, that this is for all of us. And if you think about it, many of museum staff don't even live in

Glasgow. So, I wonder if that has actually something to do with that kind of thinking about the objects and the ownership and who they belong to? I don't know. But I can assure you that Glaswegians do feel very, the ones who genuinely are interested, feel that they own the spaces.

Sharon Heal: And that's a brilliant thing to have for a museum service, and for a city. So, going back to that old track, Zandra, and you say that kind of triggered you and inspired you. How did you take your experience of activism outside of museums into your job as a curator of discomfort in terms of getting those absent voices in thinking and about objects in a different way?

**Zandra Yeaman:** Well, I suppose one of the reasons I targeted culture and heritage, within my anti racist practice, was because of things that I could recognise, and I could look at history, and actually see it being played out in present day. So, it wasn't something from the past, I mean, very much about past, present, and future for me, very much about that. So, bringing all my background around equality and human rights, my background in equality and human rights legislation, and also in all kind of things like the quality public sector duties, bringing all that kind very strategic policy level, and making it practical within these spaces, because well, every museum will have an EDI policy, it's as a piece of paper, but how do we put that into practice. And that's my brand of activism, is bringing that into this institution, and institutions like this, and making it not just a tick box exercise. And part of making it not a tick box exercise means that we have to give up some power as institutions. And that's quite difficult because, I read a report, I think it was from five years ago, where curators were seen as the most trusted profession for telling the truth. And when I read that, I thought, and please remember, I'm not seeing individual curators, but the idea of that responsibility as being truth tellers. I thought, well, you actually need to collaborate. And it's not that actually, every diasporic

community can tell you everything about an object that's in the collection, because that's a nonsense too, we don't all know everything about our history. But what we can do is have conversations and start asking each other different questions, looking at it through the lens of our own lived experience, but also bringing expertise round the table, you need both, you can't just one, you need to have both. So, I suppose my brand of activism is really about facilitating and making sure that the voices of the non-professional museum people is of equal value as the professional museum people.

**Sharon Heal:** That's an amazing goal. And I think it plays into that idea about museums not being neutral spaces, and they can't be and shouldn't be neutral spaces. Was that part of your sort of thought process when you were thinking about curating discomfort in the Hunterian?

**Zandra Yeaman:** For me, there's no way that museums are neutral spaces, and it's hard, actually, if you have years of practice and knowledge and experience and bringing science and, you know, you think you've been neutral, but you're not and part of the issue with that. And what I'd like to think we did with curating discomfort, because it was originally a community engagement exercise, which I felt was the wrong way to go – we had to look internally first, we had to look at our processes our practices, our procedures, our ideologies, you know, everything from the strategic plan to kind of methods of working. You know, curating discomfort really was all about the internal process. The only reason there's a visible output of curating discomfort, ie the intervention, where we did bring individuals in who formed the community group for this project, is because the funders wanted that – it was a commitment. And I'm kind of glad now because what I love about the output as I think you can clearly see that's proper collaboration. I mean, I was get centred on it as though I am this

amazing curator who's done this work. I couldn't have done this without, you know, the community curators, those individuals, their knowledge and experience, and without the staff at the Hunterian both the curators, the collections management, audience engagement, administration, exhibition manager. It was really, curating discomfort was about bringing all those people together and making it, highlighting that each person had a responsibility, and each person had a role to play. And us providing the output that you can no see base that the Hunterian.

**Sharon Heal:** And that's fascinating, actually, because something we're really interested in is how do you embed the change. So much work in the sector is project funded, it's time limited. We all know, we've seen radical projects, radical exhibitions, things that have challenged, things that have shook up institutions, and then the dust settles and you know, a year later, the exhibition is not on, and there doesn't seem to be that change that we've been looking for. So, the idea that you bring about the change internally first, or you look at operations and logistics internally first, and then that is, one of the outputs might be an exhibition, or it might be something else.

**Zandra Yeaman:** I understand that everybody's going to apply for funding for projects. But I think, again, it's about looking at that as a process. Funders have to pay attention to what their systems are, and you know, what the procedures and practice is. One of the issues I have with funders with regards to projects, the decolonisation projects, is they don't want to check. They don't, you know, they don't go and check and find out if everything that that institution said is the truth. They don't, you know, they just want to hear the happy response, they don't really. So there's a change required there for proper checking of what's been done with the money. And also I feel that any project that's been set up that says it's about decolonising, there really should be time for the internal work for the

institution to actually really kind of get the head around, what does that actually mean? What does that mean for us? What does it mean for the staff? What does it mean with regard to our strategic objectives? And if it doesn't fit and you don't, you know, and you don't want to change, then don't it, don't apply for the money. Just be who you are, and stay in the way you and not be relevant in the 21st century? You know, but if you're going to do it, mean it.

**Sharon Heal:** Yeah. And there is no such thing as decolonisation light. Definitely. And it's really interesting that you raise that question of evaluation and rigorous evaluation, because, you know, we've been struggling with that in museums for many years. And if it's external funding, then you want to tell the happy story, don't you, rather than having self-reflection and rigour in the evaluation and looking at what the KPIs are, and I do think there is a role for funders to play in insisting on parts of budget being separated out for external, rigorous evaluation. And also, there's a role for us to play in museums, and being honest about when things don't work, or you didn't get the outcome that you want, or you didn't get the output that you wanted. So Zandra, it's been really brilliant talking to you have you got a last kind of nugget of wisdom, from your experience over the last two years working directly in a museum.

**Zandra Yeaman:** I have to say that, and I think people are really disappointed about this, because I'm an activist – I've had a great time. I feel really privileged that I get to work with my colleagues who have a lot of knowledge and experience. I'd like to think that I've played a part in getting them to understand that the knowledge and experience of people from the outside is really valuable. And I think we have got to that point here, which I think is really good. And the other thing that I think I'd like to mention is I think every museum should have a curator of discomfort. So don't be afraid to use

that title. I think it's a really important title because it has afforded me, to allow me to do my work where I know people are uncomfortable, but because I'm curator discomfort, they can expect it. So, it's actually been quite a valuable title for me to agitate and push and be the activist that I am. So, I think all museums should have a curator of discomfort.

**Sharon Heal:** Absolutely amazing points to finish on. Thanks so much, Zandra.

**Sharon Heal:** You been listening to the Museum's Association Radical Museums Podcast? This episode was presented by me, Sharon Heal. We'd love to hear your feedback and thoughts about this podcast and what museum activism means to you. You can find out all us and our campaigns through our website [www.museumsassociation.org](http://www.museumsassociation.org) Thank you for listening.