There is a back story to this presentation arising from a series of conferences I attended in short succession a few months ago. The first was the American Alliance of Museums in New Orleans. Among the many sessions and events, I attended a session which featured a talk about an exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, Canada.
Titled ‘Anthropocene’ it used large photographic images, film and augmented reality to reveal the irreversible marks of human activity and the scale and gravity of that activity on our planet.

At the same conference, and as a guest of ICOM US, I experienced a compelling exhibition called (Per) Sister about the incarceration of women in Louisiana prisons.
A week later, I attended the MuseumNext Conference in London where the subject was ‘All about Change’.

Titles of papers and sessions went something like this: ‘Taking Risks’; ‘Take small steps then LEAP’; ‘Be more Pirate!’; ‘Embracing Change (by finding bigger problems); ‘A mix tape of museum change’. You get the picture. If we were in any doubt that there is a groundswell movement within museums to embrace change and often to do so through addressing unresolved social issues and confronting controversial subjects, I would point to the evidence in these last two conferences.
The issues is- are the public with us on this one? What do the public think? What are the implications for marketing?

To answer that question, we need to address the issue of Trust. Why Trust? Because Trust is one of the major reasons that the public values museums and the nature of that trust is somewhat complex.
Wood (2018)* has undertaken some recent research on this subject. In her review of the literature, she found that a 2001 AAM survey showed that 87% of the public viewed museums as one of the most trustworthy sources of information. A 2008 IMLS study found that both visitors to museums and online users rated the ‘trustworthiness’ of information at 4.62 and 4.54 respectively out of a possible 5.00. The reasons for this trust were varied: they included that museums deal in historical facts; that the authenticity of artefacts conveys authority and; as ‘public’ institutions museums are subject to public scrutiny and accountability. But the most important aspect is museums’ perceived neutrality.

What does ‘neutral’ mean?

Museums:
1. Do *not* interpret objects; they provide direct; unmediated encounters with them (Rozensweig and Thelen 1998)-or-
2. *Do* interpret objects but the interpretation is limited; so you can ‘make up your own mind’ (Conrad et al 2013)-or-
3. Do interpret objects but the interpretation is balanced and unbiased (Sandell 2007).

So what does ‘neutral’ mean in the minds of the public? It means various things. It means that museums: Do *not* interpret objects; they provide direct; unmediated encounters with them (Rozensweig and Thelen 1998)-or-they *Do* interpret objects but the interpretation is limited; so you can ‘make up your own mind’ (Conrad et al 2013)-or-they *Do* interpret objects but the interpretation is balanced and unbiased (Sandell 2007).

Really?!
Museums may present information in an even-handed way but the trajectory to the final narrative in an exhibition is a pathway of choices, selections and decisions based on values.

**Trust and reality**

...Rosenzweig and Thelen explain that the public feel they can go to museums and interpret artifacts as they want, unmediated, without concern that ideas are being interposed between them and the objects. And that means the public really don’t get what museums do, that *we too have perspectives, make choices, present arguments*, just like our colleagues elsewhere in the profession. (Gardner 2004, 13)

**Britain Thinks**

... museums are seen as one of the last vestiges of trust (particularly in comparison to the government and the media which are seen as untrustworthy and agenda driven). The public *want to keep their trust* in museums by *believing* they are being given unbiased and non-politically driven information (Britain Thinks 2013, 6).

This perception of museum-neutrality is so strongly held by the public that it has achieved the status of an overarching normative belief about museums. And it may go some way to explaining this response from public respondents when the UK Museums Association undertook research in 2013 which was seeking endorsement for a more socially active agenda.
‘Trust’ is based on notions of neutrality. Museums are perceived to present an unbiased, unmediated and balanced presentation of information from museums compared to other sources of information. But, the key sentence in this quotation is the last one: The public want to keep their trust in museums by believing they are being given unbiased and non-politically driven information. And that may go some way to explaining why the respondents to the Britain Thinks study thought that museums should not be involved in presenting political and social topics.

More recently, MuseumNext has done some research on this subject (2017). Participants were directly asked whether museums ‘should have something to say about social issues’:
- Yes- 28%
- No- 31%
- Maybe- 41%
- Frequent visitors were more likely to say ‘yes’
- Under 30’s were more likely to say that museums should engage with social issues.
This picture presents museums with something of a dilemma. At best, the situation is equivocal: at worst it is divergent.

Question
How Do Museums Present Social Issues And Maintain The Trust Of Their Audiences?

So- what can we do? How can museums pursue a social agenda and maintain trust. First of all, let’s learn from examples where presenting a controversial or an unresolved social issue has worked for both the museum and the public. Secondly, what can recent research tell us about visitor reactions to exhibitions about controversial and unresolved social issues. Thirdly, how can the museum market ‘trust’ and ‘change’ simultaneously?
To return to the beginning of this paper. The first thing about Anthropocene and (Per) Sister is that both of these exhibitions were in art museums- and art has more ‘permission’ to be the disrupter, to introduce the new and to challenge. Thus, visitors to art galleries have expectations that this is what they might encounter. Secondly, both exhibitions presented the works of artists – Anthropocene was a photography/mural/installation/podcast collaboration between three photographic artists (Edward Burtynsky, Jennifer Baichwal and Nicholas de Pencier) and (Per) sister paired of former female inmates in Louisiana penitentiaries with artists who used various media to present the women behind the statistics. Individual artistic interpretation is allowable- we expect artists to push the boundaries. The same can often be said of science museums because science is also associated with innovation and invention. But what of social history museums? I return again to the recent research by Wood (2018) which looks more specifically at this area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The study (Wood, 2018)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Exhibitions</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Honoring Our Journey at the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience, Seattle, WA</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Prisons Today: Questions in the Age of Mass Incarceration at Eastern State Penitentiary, Philadelphia, PA</td>
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<tr>
<td>• #1 in Civil Rights: The African American Freedom Struggle in St. Louis at the Missouri History Museum, St. Louis, MO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Criteria for selection</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Content related to one or more contemporary social issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A member of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Recognized as actively engaging with social issues (awards for social engagement, featured in websites or blogs as socially-engaged exhibits)</td>
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</tbody>
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Wood’s research (2018) used the criteria on the right to select the three sites featuring three different exhibitions.
Further, she had two questions which drilled into the nature of visitor trust in museums: (a) What is the nature of visitor’s trust in the information presented in museum exhibits that address one or more social issues? And (b) What aspects of an exhibit on social issues contribute to visitors’ thinking about the trustworthiness of the information in that exhibit?

Visitors’ trust in the information presented in the exhibition was affected by the degree to which they felt that the information was clear, timely, balanced and accurate. Though they cited multiple types of supporting evidence to explain their ‘trust’, a major reason was their trust in the museum they were visiting or in museums in general.
However, even among these visitors who were disposed to museums presenting social issues, those who saw something that they did not expect to see in the exhibit provided significantly lower ratings for the trustworthiness of the information in the exhibit than those who did not.

Of these, four visitors mentioned not expecting to see information about contemporary issues, while the other six visitors mentioned other unexpected elements such as the inclusion of a particular ethnic group or a focus on history (Wood 2018, 34).

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Findings (Wood 2018)

**EXPECTATIONS**
Visitors who said that they saw something that they did not expect to see in the exhibit provided significantly lower ratings for the trustworthiness of the information in the exhibit than those who did not.

**ALLOWABLE**
Perceptions about whether museums should encourage visitors to take action on social issues:

- **Yes**- 54%
- **No**- 26%
- **Uncertain**- 19% (would depend on the type of museum or just unresolved)

Note: the respondents to this study were interviewed having already visited an exhibition dealing with either an under-recognised community, a controversial subject or a contemporary social issue.

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Of these, four visitors mentioned not expecting to see information about contemporary issues, while the other six visitors mentioned other unexpected elements such as the inclusion of a particular ethnic group or a focus on history. Unlike the MuseumNext study in which the question was whether museums should present social issues, this study asked whether museums should encourage visitors to take action on social issues with the results indicated on the right of the slide.
So what are the implications of this body of research for marketing? There are three issues. In terms of audiences, museum marketers need to manage audience expectations by finding out what those expectations are in advance. Whether it is front end evaluation or some other mechanism, it is important to know what potential audiences think about the subject as part of the exhibition preparation. Greater tolerance for social issues is evident among millennials and frequent visitors. Importantly, different audiences will respond to different messages and targeted marketing will maximise impact. When marketing the exhibition itself, the evidence suggests that promoting the sources on which the research is based, witness accounts and the authenticity of the objects will help to consolidate trust. Institutionally, the type of museum matters- there is greater latitude to be the disrupter among some museums than others. Importantly, transparency is important for maintaining trust. When museums choose to do something different, they owe it to their audiences to engage them in the conversation.

Marketing trust

**Audience**
- manage expectations
- find out what those expectations are
- different audiences require different messages
- greater tolerance among frequent visitors, millennials

**Exhibition**
- promote the evidence, the authenticity of the objects, witness accounts
- fact, not fake

**Institutional**
- the type of museum matters
- maintain trust through transparency (we are doing something new, we believe that there are good reasons for doing it, come and become part of the conversation).
But- most importantly, museums need to let their audiences into the secret. Museums may strive to present unbiased information in their exhibitions- but- they make value-based decisions, they choose, they select. Is this neutral?

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THANK YOU