

Possibilities of an Anarchist Museology: How do Museum Workers Reconcile Personal and Workplace Politics?

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Museum Studies, Information Studies, University of Glasgow.

16,442 words



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Acknowledgements

Thanks to Brian, for all of his feedback, and support in supervising this research.

Thanks to Jade, Luci, and Rowan for their keen editorial insight.

Thanks to the museum workers who generously shared their time and knowledge, and worked with me to create new possibilities.

Thanks to my comrades and fellow organisers for helping me learn to understand the world, and fighting for a better one.

A final thanks to my partners for their ongoing support, without which this project would not have been completed.

Abstract

This research applies the methods and ethics of anarchism to museums in a UK context, in order to arrive at an anarchist museology. It first reads anarchist texts diffractively through museum studies ones to find points of resonance and contradiction between the two. Having derived a framework from literature in this manner, a questionnaire was used to gather preliminary data and recruit museum workers for one-on-one interviews. Six people were interviewed about their experiences navigating their politics and values while at work in museums. Their testimony revealed how small museums are already operating on an anarchist basis, and how individuals are undertaking insurrectionary work in larger institutions, albeit at the cost of experiencing significant stress. The framework was revised following interviews, which clarified that an anarchist museum is an unresolvable contradiction and cannot exist. Nor will an anarchist museology be truly embodied by an organisation still functioning as a museum, as they are understood to work in contemporary UK society. At the same time, it is a necessity to start building anarchist cultural and heritage organisations out of that which already exists, so an anarchist museology operates both within and outwith museums to transform them into something else entirely.

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1. Introduction

The UK is undergoing a cost-of-living crisis, and the government is restricting striking and protesting. In turn, the anarchist staple of autonomous direct action has become more prolific in the last few years, from resisting immigration raids (Salih, 2021; Badshah et al, 2022) to community kitchens¹ providing food to those who need it. Museums too have had to reckon with economic issues, with plans to provide warm spaces threatened by rising commercial energy bills (Weaver, 2022). Simultaneously, they are exploring new possibilities, given the opportunity for a pause to think by sector-wide closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. As anarchist methods of making change and supporting each other are becoming more widespread, it is an apt time to ask whether museums could adopt these methods too.

I have made it clear why museums should care about anarchism; why should anarchists care about museums? In short: museums can provide a base for community organising (as a way of gathering people and through providing resources such as physical space), they provide free and lifelong learning, and are sites of cultural power and production, which means they possess resources that could be redistributed in a more horizontal, equitable manner.

That museums are political is widely accepted in the sector today, though it is by no means a recent contention (Bennett, 1995; Naidoo, 2004). Absent from many formulations of the statement 'museums are not neutral' is a statement of what the inevitable politics of museums *should* be. In a country where electoral politics provides no answers for the crises

¹ For example, <https://cckitchen.uk/> or <https://www.instagram.com/glasgowfoodnotbombs/> (Accessed 24 May 2023)

many face, I contend it is time to explore the possibility of an anarchist museum; not (necessarily) a museum about anarchism, but a museum that operates according to an anarchist museology.

This is a somewhat contradictory proposition. Anarchist values of self-determination, consensual association, and eradicating hierarchy directly oppose the ideologies of nationhood, colonialism, and permanence present in museums (Bennett, 2017). While these discourses have been critiqued within museum studies, there are few examples of the more academically common (Graeber, 2004) Marxist analyses, let alone anarchist ones. Having identified this gap, I aimed to answer the question: is an anarchist museum possible, or does anarchism necessitate working outside and beyond the museum? This was broken down into constituent sub-questions:

- What ideological tensions exist between anarchism and museums, and (how) can they be resolved?
- What does an anarchist museology look like?
- Is it possible to enact it in practice?

To answer these questions, I synthesized an anarchist museological framework through literature analysis, then explored the possibilities of putting it into practice in the current UK museum landscape by surveying museum workers about their experiences: 'resistance begins by occupying and controlling the terrain upon which one stands, where one lives, works, acts and thinks' (Critchley, 2007: 114). To obtain an appropriate scope, I focussed solely on museums, rather than the entire GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums) sector². I define a museum to be an organisation that possesses a physical collection, housed in specific

² One anarchist contention on what to do with museums is that they should operate more like libraries (Milstein, 2007)

premises, and facilitates public access to its collection. This definition mirrors the one used by the *Mapping Museums*³ project, with the notable omission of requiring collections to be permanent – it will become apparent why in Section 4.

Following this introduction is a literature review that establishes a working definition of anarchism, and provides an overview of anarchist writing on museums, and of museum studies literature about politics and community-based work. This outlines the current extent of political analysis in museum studies, and identifies which concepts are left unquestioned and naturalised. The third chapter covers the methodology, which operates within anarchist and agential realist frameworks. Following that is the creation of an anarchist museological framework through theoretical analysis. I then discuss what the questionnaire and interviews uncovered about putting the framework into practice. Finally, I conclude with whether an anarchist museum is possible, and what the consequent aims of an anarchist museology are. I address sites of difficulty and contradiction, and possible directions for both future practice and academic inquiry.

3 <https://museweb.dcs.bbk.ac.uk/glossary#Museum> (Accessed 4 June 2023)

2. Literature review

There is a dearth of literature on how museums and anarchism interact. Much anarchist engagement with museums focusses solely on art (Milstein, 2007; Graeber and Dubrovsky, 2019), or sustaining archives of anarchist material (Moran, 2016). There is little on how anarchists might run a museum, or how anarchism could shape a museological approach. There has however been work on anarchist methodologies within related disciplines, such as art, history, and anthropology.

Where museum studies invokes the term 'anarchism', it is often without a definition or specific politics, but rather as a synonym for chaos (Pearce, 1995). While it has failed to make a dent in its own name, anarchism appears implicitly around issues such as participatory practice and decolonisation. Indigenisation is especially resonant with anarchism, though Indigenous methods and theory are in many cases not appropriate to the context of a former imperial metropole such as the UK (Garneau, 2018). Additionally, there have been studies of the values and attitudes of museum workers, and the interactions between politics and museum work. Their methods provided a basis for my research.

2.1. Anarchism

Anarchism encompasses a diverse set of practices (Berkman, 1929; Graeber, 2004), but they share a set of core values: mutual aid, self-organisation, voluntary association, and rejecting the state and structural violence (Graeber, 2004; Franks, 2006). Anarchist thought challenges not only class hierarchy but multiple, intersecting power imbalances, incorporating feminist, anti-racist, and post-structuralist scholarship

(Rafael, 2018). In the UK, feminist organising and critique have been particularly influential in the development of anarchist organising practices (Franks, 2006). In his history of 20th century British anarchism, Franks identifies four core values that distinguish anarchists from other groups: total opposition to capitalism; total opposition to state power; pursuing egalitarian, non-hierarchical social relations; and 'a recognition that means have to prefigure ends' (Franks, 2006: 8). I have additionally included Bookchin's (1986) concept of an 'ecological community' that intra-relates (co-emerges through interaction) with the land and life around it as a key feature of anarchist organising.

Opposition to capitalism stems from anarchism's roots in the broader socialist movement. Capitalism presents competition and domination as natural parts of human existence. Anarchists broadly view 'the abolition of capitalism as key to human liberation' (Milstein, 2010). This has been more recently extended to a 'multiplication of class actors in society' (Critchley, 2007: 97), particularly on a global scale, where different formations of ruling class interests (pastoralist, capitalist, vectoralist) interact (Wark, 2004). Anarchism diverges from other strands of socialism in its additional opposition to state power. The state is the 'political, legislative, judiciary, military and financial institutions' that have:

'powers to make the laws for everything and everybody, and to oblige the people to observe them, if need be, by the use of collective force'

(Malatesta, 1974)

Thus the state, like capitalism, is a socially dominating structure that monopolises power and cannot be balanced or reformed.

This anti-state, anti-capitalist orientation is part of a commitment to eradicating hierarchy and domination. This includes forms beyond the state or capitalism, such as new class structures as explored by Wark (2019). While capitalism and the state are dominant forces that restrict autonomy and self-determination, anarchism opposes other systems of oppression such as racism and misogyny⁴, including their interactions with and co-constitution of other systems of domination (Shannon and Rogue, 2010). Understanding these systems as intra-related reflects a broader ecological mode of thought, heavily influenced by Bookchin (1986). Identifying the climate crisis as an immediate issue, anarchists seek to reorganise social relations into more sustainable forms that exist with(in) the world, dissolving the divide between nature and culture. This becomes key to organising against extractive and exploitative practices, capitalist or otherwise.

Last is prefiguration, which demands that means and ends align: anarchist organising is non-hierarchical and formed through voluntary association, as a first step towards creating a world that works on this basis. This constitutes a 'lived political project' (Milstein, 2010: 25) that extends through political and interpersonal relations. Anarchists experiment with new forms of organisation, such as federations, communes, democratic assemblies, and ecosystems, among other models (Bookchin, 1986). Requiring voluntary, consensual relations positions anarchism against vanguardism: revolutionary subjects must be agents of their own liberation (Franks, 2006).

4 This is not to suggest anarchist organisations do not perpetuate these systems of oppression; they can and frequently do (Warburton, 2021; Tuck and Yang, 2012). I characterise opposition to systems of oppression as a core anarchist principle, in order to define what anarchism means in the context of this research.

Experimentation with social forms requires criticality of the contemporaneous circumstances to avoid reproducing extant hierarchies. Critchley (2007) refers to this task as an 'infinitely demanding ethics' (p. 130). He advocates an *anarchic meta-politics: working 'within the state against the state in a political articulation that attempts to open a space of opposition'* (p. 114). This has been applied within the museum (Mahony, 2017), which will be subsequently discussed. Working from within while avoiding co-option requires constant vigilance, hence the ethical demand is infinite.

Any attempt to summarise the contents of anarchism must be tempered by an awareness that:

'Anarchism's constant evolution, its suspicion of universal tenets and its localist philosophy risk making any gauge for one epoch or region seem wholly inappropriate to another'

(Franks, 2006: 11)

Consequently, this outline has centred the values that drive anarchism and inform how anarchists may organise in a given context. Action on international issues aside (Lindsay, 2023), contemporary anarchist organising in the UK mostly focuses on caring for local community and creating support networks. This aligns with, but extends beyond, much of the outreach work museums already do.

2.2. Anarchism and museums

Anarchist writing on museums typically focuses on the arts more generally. Graeber and Dubrovsky (2019) use their own experiences with contemporary art as a starting point to examine historical uses of art in

protest, and the Soviet arts collective *Proletkult*. They draw a provocative parallel between the historical relationships between police and populace, and those between the museum and art, asserting that 'museums are there to teach one one's place' (Graeber and Dubrovsky, 2019). In contrast to the Soviet state's use of the museum as an instrument of cultural power, they observe *Proletkult's*

'active educational component ... which attempted to collapse the boundaries between academia, popular education, science, and the arts'.

(Graeber and Dubrovsky, 2019)

This provides a starting point for a more holistic approach to culture and knowledge that an anarchist museum might take. While the paper identifies the regulatory function of museums within a specific historical context, it does not explore the present-day positionality of museums.

Graeber and Dubrovsky's use of case study centres the 'immediately significant issues' (Adams, 2013) facing the people from whose work they derive anarchist methods. This contextualist approach is a necessary part of an anarchist historiography. Adams argues that addressing only the *ideas* of anarchism leads to a shortfall in understanding its history, when compared to considering the 'day-to-day activities' of anarchists (Adams, 2013: 46). This aligns with Graeber's (2004) anarchist anthropology, which considers anarchism to be 'primarily concerned with forms of practice'. He observes that resemblance to the nation-state is taken to be a measure of cultural 'progress', an ideology often present within museums (Bennett, 2017), which precludes anarchist possibilities if left unquestioned. Graeber argues that the role of the anarchist intellectual to:

'look at those who are creating viable alternatives, try to figure out what might be the larger implications of what they are (already) doing, and then offer those ideas back, not as prescriptions, but as contributions, possibilities—as gifts'
(Graeber, 2004)

He posits ethnography as a tool to elucidate anarchist futures from observing and analysing anarchism already in action.

Writing from a sociological perspective, Rafael (2018) proposes that anarchist research should ask how freedom is defined, and how domination and control are resisted. Concurring with Graeber, Rafael asserts that 'things can become, and in many instances are already, otherwise' (2018).

2.3. Museums and politics

With notable exceptions (Graham, 2017; Mahony, 2017), writing on politics within museums has often centred around the discourse of activism (Hollows, 2013; Janes and Sandell, 2019). In considering the 'activist museum professional', Wood and Cole (2019) directly link activism to advocacy. To achieve progress, advocacy relies on seeking changes that 'do not permanently alter the relations of power' (McAlevey, 2016). While activism encompasses multiple tactics and theories of power, many discourses of activism, including those invoked by Wood and Cole (2019), focus on advocacy and mobilising, and do not target the structures of power and authority themselves.

Despite this divergence from anarchism, literature on museum activism can still prove informative. Wood and Cole (2019) identify that the

museum often exists at a distance to its public, to its detriment. This is echoed in accounts of museums failing to adequately co-produce with various communities, ultimately retreating to the power they already held (Lynch and Alberti, 2010; Hollows, 2013). Wood and Cole identify the importance of 'the understanding of power structures' (p. 40) in enabling museum workers to create social change. This points towards the benefits of an anarchist museology, which would be foundationally oriented to be critical towards structures of power. Although Wood and Cole found that a critical museum pedagogy course positively impacted participating students, whether these changes were put into practice in subsequent work was not studied. This leaves the interactions between individuals' views and the museums they work for as an unknown to be investigated.

Closer to an anarchist approach is Mahony's (2017) analysis of *Liberate Tate* and the *Art Not Oil* coalition's actions in opposition to BP's sponsorship of The Tate. Mahony critiques corporate sponsorship of museums, which stifles cultural institutions in favour of the interests of capital. While not explored as extensively as elsewhere (e.g. Morse, 2019), the relationship between declining state funding and the need for private sponsorship is touched upon, alongside the convergence of government policy and the logics of capital in valuing cultural institutions by numbers. Mahony refers to Critchley's (2007) anarchic meta-politics, explicitly applying anarchist political strategy to the work of museums.

The actions Mahony covers resulted in a victory: BP ended sponsorship of The Tate in 2017. However, there is not a considered analysis of the line between institutional critique (which can be co-opted, and then conducted on the institution's terms) and oppositional action from within. While the actions in protest were not sanctioned by The Tate, it cannot be taken for granted that the institution did not set the terms of engagement. It is a

possibly insurmountable challenge 'not to focus solely on the weaving of these invisible threads into the existing texture' (Kazeem-Kaminski, in Bayer et al, 2018: 35).

The most thorough and explicit application of anarchism to museum work comes from Graham's (2017) exploration of horizontality in participatory practice. Graham uses anarchist understandings of power to link the struggles of museums to successfully co-produce to their focus on working 'on behalf of everyone in the present and future' (p.76). This prevents museums from focussing on the ethics of their current interpersonal relations. Graham advocates for museums to explore alternative, horizontal models of forming relationships. Particularly challenging to the "'forever for everyone" thinking' (p. 78) that museums often operate on is the idea of the freedom to *disengage*, equally important to the freedom to engage. This is illustrated through Graham's earlier (2016) work on co-production, which describes the dilemma experienced by Tyne and Wear Archives and Museum when participants wished to alter and potentially retract testimony given to the museum as part of *Culture Shock!* (2008-10). Engaging with consent to care for an object as a continuous relationship (as opposed to the finite nature of transferring ownership) is a key part of an anarchist museology.

2.4. How museums are run

Beyond objects, there is the question of the ownership and management of the museum itself. The Association of Independent Museums has published guidance to support community groups in taking over a museum previously run by a local authority (Rex, 2018). Community ownership is a structure in which anarchist principles of autonomous, consensual organising can operate more easily. Case studies of small UK

museums indicate that more horizontal modes of organisation already exist, by nature if not by name (Candlin et al, 2022). These organisations operate in ways quite unlike larger institutions, such as Manchester Museum (Lynch and Alberti, 2010). However, Candlin et al only interviewed founders of the museums they studied. The views of those higher up in the organisational hierarchy are not representative of the rest of its members.

Morse's (2019) policy genealogy of UK museums indicates that while they can be community organisations, they are under pressure to fill gaps in the social safety net created by the state deliberately cutting public services. Rex (2019) also emphasises that the creation of resources for community asset transfer needs to be understood within the context of austerity. What were previously state responsibilities are now falling upon community shoulders. While anarchists prefer communal care over state provision, the receding of the state under austerity is not a context in which people are equipped to care for each other, or where there are resources to provide alternatives (hence the cost-of-living crisis). Museums' provision of social and community care is a complex balance between their aspirations, and the financial pressures operating across the whole of British society.

Though not in the UK, Bertacchini et al (2018) provide some insight into how effective different ways of managing a museum might be. Researching in Italy, they found that public museums (state-run by culture departments) performed worse than public museums with financial autonomy, and private museums. While the history of Italian museums and their relationship to the state differs to the British context, this indicates the potential benefits of an anarchist museology, and evidences

potential benefits of increasing museum autonomy and de-coupling from state control.

2.5. Museum workers

Research has indicated some distance between workers and museum policy. The impacts of cultural policies at a local level were studied by McCall (2016) through interviews with 'ground-level' workers (p. 99) and direct observation,. A variety of workers were interviewed, including volunteers and retail staff, alongside curators and managers. Local policies and concerns were found to be more influential than national-level policies. This suggests extant seeds of an anarchist museology, in the concern with locality and immediate community issues. The finding that museum workers are 'quite politically aware' (p. 107) suggests that while anarchism is fringe and poorly-understood in the UK, museums may be a site in which it is better understood.

Also utilising interviews was a labour market study into the 'attitudes, behaviours, and skills' of the UK museum workforce (BOP Consulting, 2016: 2). While the aims of this research differ significantly from my own, it used mixed-methods, including questionnaires and one-on-one interviews, making it a useful methodological precedent. It used an expansive definition of museum work, including 'marketing, finance, HR, catering, digital or facilities management' (p. 8) as well as volunteer-work. The questionnaire received over 2000 responses, providing a demographic reference for the composition of the museum workforce and museums themselves in the UK.

While there is a body of literature on political change and action in museums and a precedent for the usage of survey methods to study the

experiences of museum workers, there has been less investigation into what those workers think museums should be doing, or their experiences in trying to embody their own politics and values at work. It is from this gap that my research stemmed, trying to map out an anarchist museology not only in theory, but through exploration of extant practice.

3. Methodology

This was an exploratory study into what an anarchist museology constitutes within UK museums. Taking the museum as both an assemblage in-and-of-itself, and part of other assemblages (Bennett, 2017), I used mixed-methods to illuminate how (and whether) the museum can embody 'knowledge's revolutionary and emancipatory potential' (Rafael, 2018).

The first stage was the construction of an anarchist museological framework, based on existing literature. This was necessary because many who put principles of anarchism into practice do not consider themselves anarchists (Graeber, 2004). A questionnaire was used to identify potential interviewees in museum workers who expressed agreement with the framework. Additionally, the questionnaire aimed to identify broader trends in how museum workers navigate interactions between their values and their work. The interviews were the focal part of the research, intended to explore what an anarchist museological framework looks like in practice. Interview data was analysed diffractively (Barad, 2007), putting the insights of different methods (questionnaire, interview, and literature analysis) together dynamically, both where they concur and contradict.

My approach was (as far as possible) itself anarchist: context-specific, critical of power and how it is defined, and understanding an anarchist museology as existing only to the extent it is practised (Adams, 2013; Rafael, 2018; Graeber, 2004). Anarchism is prefigurative; I can only arrive at an anarchist museology through anarchist research practices. Academic research is enmeshed in hierarchical, distinctly non-anarchist traditions,

making this a difficult task. Nonetheless, the aim was to explore existing practice and to 'offer those ideas back ... as gifts' (Graeber, 2004).

This research was conducted within an agential realist framework, as outlined by Barad (2007). This is most relevant to the interviews. In general, an anarchist museology is taken to emerge out of collaborative exchanges between myself, existing literature, and my participants. This is *not* a methodology, but a philosophical framework informing how this research seeks to understand the world (St. Pierre, 2021). The section concludes with a summary of the limitations of this research.

3.1. Theoretical analysis

As previously discussed, anarchism and museum studies have seldom crossed paths. An anarchist museology must be identifiable to be investigated, including (and perhaps especially) where it is enacted by people who do not consider themselves anarchists. The theoretical analysis aimed to provide an overview of what anarchists want from museums, with some aspects of museum work explored in greater detail. However, it was not exhaustive.

Starting from key themes that arose during the literature review, I read museum studies texts through anarchist ones to construct a framework appropriate to UK museums. I focussed on areas of work – such as community engagement, social issues, political activism, and workplace organising – that straddled both resonance and dissonance with anarchist approaches. Some of these areas' aims and values are oriented towards dismantling hierarchies, but museums' understanding of power often pushes anarchist possibilities awkwardly aside. Taking a diffractive approach was useful in dealing with this oblique type of disagreement.

As anarchism builds from what already exists, the framework is not just about ideals, but how to operate within the current UK museum landscape. Theoretical work alone cannot address this, and the framework was revisited and revised following subsequent stages of research.

3.2. Recruitment and questionnaire

The questionnaire was primarily a recruitment tool for interviews, so it needed to identify participants who were practising an anarchist museology. However, it was also intended to investigate potential differences between those who did and did not align with the framework. I anticipated that a significant number of participants would not agree with the framework, but that differences between (for example) their feelings about their workplace, or the type of museum they worked in, could provide useful insights. This required that I collect information on the participant's workplace, how they interacted with their workplace (structurally and affectively), and their alignment with the framework. One section of the questionnaire was dedicated to each of these three areas.

The first section collected demographic information about the participant and their institution. Freelance work is common within museums (BOP Consulting, 2016), but including experiences of multiple workplaces in a single response would have been too complex to analyse within the research timescale. Participants were instructed to respond with respect to their current and primary workplace. Given how small the sector is, I was conscious of concerns around identifiability, even though responses were anonymous. I resolved to exercise judgement in asking for the minimum possible information to answer my questions while maintaining research efficacy (De Vaus, 2013). The demographic questions were modelled on

research undertaken by BOP Consulting (2016) and Bertacchini et al (2018), and revised for clarity following pilot testing with two former museum employees and a sociologist.

The second section concerned the participant's alignment with the politics of their workplace. This utilised a series of agree/disagree statements on five-point Likert scale. Some concerned direct interactions between participants' politics or values and their work, while others were broader statements of opinion about the workplace. Agreement with the anarchist museological framework was covered by the third section, using the same statement and Likert scale format as the second. In order to avoid the effects of social desirability, statements were equally split between what agreement indicated with regards to the topic of the section (De Vaus, 2013). Statements appeared in a random order to mitigate potential bias, but the sections always appeared in the same order: demographic information, workplace political alignment, and finally anarchist museological framework alignment. The questionnaire was open for four weeks across June and July of 2023, and received 27 responses.

The relations between demographic variables and opinions expressed by participants were taken to be mutually co-constitutive, in line with anarchist and agential realist approaches. Rather than understanding them as causal in a traditional sense, relations were interpreted as symbiotic co-emergences of workplace characteristics and individual politics and experiences. The nature of this co-emergence can vary between specific instances, which is what I aimed to investigate. To analyse the data I used Qualtrics' inbuilt utilities, and computed additional statistics in LibreOffice Calc.

Recruitment was conducted via pre-existing connections to both individuals and organisations, and reaching out to potentially receptive groups. As the primary focus of this research was exploring anarchist museology in existing practice, I prioritised reaching museum workers who were likely to at least partly agree with the framework. I contacted liberation networks, cultural sector unions, and other groups who were by virtue of their purpose more likely to have memberships aligned with anarchist sentiments. Consequently the sample was deliberately unrepresentative.

3.3. Interviews and interview analysis

I took an ethnographic approach to interviewing, in line with Graeber's (2004) anarchist anthropological methodology. While my intent was to interview people who expressed a strong alignment with the framework, the actual responses received necessitated relaxing this condition. When interviewing those less aligned with the framework, I sought to understand the character of their workplace, their values, and how those interacted, in order to understand how the framework could be applied within their museum context.

The aim was to have a co-productive exchange between myself and participants, in which both parties exited with new knowledge and understanding of their experiences. This fits within a postmodern or transformative interview framework (Brinkman and Kvale, 2018), of which an agential realist approach can be considered a subset (Murriss, 2018). Rather than taking a 'mining' approach, the interviews explored current practice to bring an anarchist museology into being.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with six participants. Four were recruited from the questionnaire, while two contacted me expressing direct interest in being interviewed due to pre-existing anarchist commitments. Since interviews were not correlated to questionnaire responses, this did not pose a methodological issue. I wanted the ability to pursue matters that might arise unpredictably during interviews, which necessitated the semi-structured format, and a sufficiently small sample to allow for detailed exploration and analysis. The interview framework (Appendix B) was pilot tested with a former museum employee. In order to be critical of the operative definitions of freedom and power during research (Rafael, 2018), I occasionally utilised a confrontational interview method, which

'may thus approximate a mutual and egalitarian relationship where both parties pose questions and give answers, with a reciprocal criticism of what the other says'

(Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018)

Interviews were analysed through *bricolage*: a mix of methods chosen to suit the nature of the testimony gathered (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018). I established a method in advance:

1. Before conducting interviews, generate sites of analysis based on the anarchist museological framework and the process of synthesizing it.
2. Make notes during interviews on anything that might be lost during the transcription process, such as interviewee affect.

3. After each interview, make additional notes about emergent knowledge, feelings, thoughts: any points where I have been 'interpolated' by the interview (Bozalek and Zembylas, 2017: 119). Identify new sites of analysis on this basis.

4. Transcribe interviews and undertake thematic analysis. Additional modes of analysis (conversational and linguistic) may be useful in examining how conflicts between individuals and their work are discussed, and the extent to which the interview process was productive.

I coded transcripts using QualCoder. Truly diffractive interview analysis involves imagining into the multiple worlds made possible by the interview testimony (Lenz Taguchi, 2012). The length of this project necessitated limiting the detail to which this was done, but I have tried to emphasize the multiplicity and ambiguity present in participant testimony where possible.

3.4. Limitations

Through the methodology outlined above I aimed to explore the possibilities of an anarchist museology. To do so effectively it is important to outline what was *not* investigated, and the limits of the methods used.

This research focussed on the experiences of current museum workers trying to engage in their work in anarchist ways. It did not explore how those with different relationships to museums experience such work and its results. It became apparent while writing the framework that an anarchist museology demands that anyone who might be affected by a museum's decision should be able to influence it. However, this research

did not examine the experiences of museum users, beyond how they are perceived by and overlap with staff.

The time-frame of this research and the nature of its methods (a small-scale, snapshot ethnography) meant it was not representative of museums in the UK, and could not draw empirical or larger-scale conclusions. The sample size for interview was as large as practically manageable while allowing for detailed, contextually grounded analysis. The conclusions were consequently suggestive of possibilities for museum practice, rather than definite rules. The other side of this trade-off emerged during analysis of the questionnaire data. While the sample size was bigger, the detail and richness of context available were necessarily limited. Because the aim of the questionnaire was to recruit interviewees who were aligned with the framework, the sample was not representative. As a result, it is not possible from this research to estimate how common various anarchist values or beliefs might be within the sector.

Finally, the theoretical analysis beginning the research was not able to explore every facet and consequence of an anarchist museology. Since this is largely unexplored territory, I took an overview of museum operations, while considering some specific issues of contemporary importance to UK museums in detail, to balance the need for a general exploration with the contextually-informed nature of anarchist study.

4. Theory of an anarchist museology

Identifying an anarchist museology in action is hindered by the fact that anarchism is often not thought of as such by its practitioners. In addition, any given iteration of an anarchist museology will have unique characteristics dependent on the context of its practice. The following analysis and synthesis uses existing literature on both museums and anarchism in the UK to form a basis for the subsequent parts of this research.

Anarchists embody that which they seek to create in their practice – ‘to the degree that this is possible today’ (Bookchin, 1986). This analysis thus begins by exploring two major challenges that anarchism poses to museums. It then examines how an anarchist museum worker interacts with UK museums at present, covering differences between large and small museums, unionisation, and repatriation. At the close, this section proposes a set of principles that constitute an anarchist museology. The use of theoretical methods alone to do this will lead to gaps and oversights; these will be explored in later sections.

4.1. An anarchist museum

‘Organisations do not exist for the sake of it, they exist to do something’

Quail, J., *The Slow Burning Fuse: The Lost History of the British Anarchists*
(2019)

An anarchist museum exists to foster a free society through cultural production. It takes the functions of the museum – learning, enjoyment,

remembrance, community-building – and facilitates them through egalitarian self-organisation. By unpicking the ideologies that underpin the museum's foundations and functions, it is possible to suggest what an anarchist museum would do differently, and how.

4.1.1. Preservation and ecology

Some organisations explicitly state that museums should care for their collections permanently⁵. Even for those that do not, there is a sense of obligation to 'everyone of the present *and future*' (Graham, 2017: 76, emphasis my own): posterity is priority. An anarchist museum breaks from this orientation toward stasis and perpetuity.

The immediate objection to this ideology of permanence rests on ecological grounds: the energy consumed by strict temperature and humidity regulation. Museums have recognised the destructive impact this has on the environment, and are adjusting their practices in turn (National Museum Directors' Conference, 2009). However, an anarchist response to the climate crisis is structural, involving the reconfiguration of communities as ecosystems that exist with(in) the planet, and the dismantling of extractive, exploitative practices of capital (Bookchin, 1986). This is incompatible with the *permanent* care of objects; long-term ecological stability derives from ongoing dynamic interplay between different forces in an ecosystem. An anarchist museology rejects that it is even possible to preserve something 'exactly as is', instead caring for the object (which may not be the same as preserving it) during the time that it is in the museum.

5 For example, <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/> (Accessed 2 June 2023)

This prompts opposing the duality not only of nature/culture, but also of subject/object. Subject/object implies a passive thing that is changed by an external actor, rather than understanding all things as constantly undergoing processes of change, influenced by their own and other agencies (Quijano, 2007). This shifts the goal of the museum to the continuing practice of culture, rather than the permanent preservation of cultural objects.

This is already in practice outside of the UK, in examples of what Garneau (2018) refers to as *non-colonial* practice, where 'preservation is second to use'. Examples include multiple collaborations (with varying degrees of community satisfaction) between museums in Alberta and the Blackfoot Confederacy (Onciul, 2015), and the practice of *mana taonga* at Te Papa, New Zealand (McCarthy, 2018). These approaches, where successful, centre Indigenous expertise and practices. To find an ecological approach suitable to UK museums, I look for 'equivalents that will be symmetrical with indigenous thinking' (Garneau, 2018). Bookchin's (1986) ecological anarchism provides a general framework; in a museum-specific context, Shanks (2021) articulates something similar in her case for a 'transient museum', which 'embraces impermanence' (p. 50).

UK museums operate in ways that limit their ability to foster living cultural practice. For the Museum of Transport in Greater Manchester, the need to maintain a 'robust' display closed off the possibility of actually driving the restored vintage buses (Williams, quoted in Candlin et al, 2022: 47). The community that founded the museum gathered around restoring and driving the buses; its character was changed by the process of becoming one. However, there are examples of museums using their collections to build new communities around vehicle restoration. Glasgow Vintage Vehicle Trust (GVVT) operates a scheme for people recovering from

substance addiction to network and learn metalworking skills, through restoring old vehicles in the collection⁶. This demonstrates the possibility of orienting museums towards community-building and ongoing cultural practices. However, this project still centres the restoration and preservation of museum objects, so it does not question the primacy of permanence.

The London Science Museum's music collection provides an example of the problems that arise when preservation of the object is the primary goal. Old synthesizers used in the production of electronic music have lost their value due to these 'traditional forms of making things "objects"': because they are not played (Graham, 2016). It is in their playing that they relate to the cultural phenomenon of electronic music. If they are stored to primarily maintain their condition, the knowledge of how to play them may be lost, leading to the loss of a cultural practice. Avoiding this requires 'an alternative reading of care' for museum objects and 'the careful use and enlivening of collections' (Graham, 2016). Caring for collections in perpetuity, holding the physical characteristics in stasis, cannot be the priority for an anarchist museum.

Re-framing the museum around facilitating cultural practice also proves useful when de-accessioning. This is essential for UK museums, which possess many items taken through colonial exploitation and violence. Their return is not only a healing process, but allows for the renewal of cultural practices that were violently interrupted and repressed by British colonialism. An example of this is the University of Aberdeen's repatriation of a split-horn headdress to the Kainai Nation (Curtis, 2010). To eradicate hierarchy within the cultural sphere, the museum must facilitate cultural production without claiming ownership of the process. Rather than monopolising cultural practice, it must encourage its proliferation and

6 <https://backontheroad.org.uk/abouts-us/> (Accessed 24 May 2023)

multiplicity, within and outwith of the museum. This could be implemented through anarchist organising structures such as federation (Bookchin, 1986).

4.1.2. Community, participation, and co-ownership

Free and voluntary association is a core principle of anarchist organising: people should be able to participate (or not) as they see fit. Anarchist organisations often employ consensus decision-making, with variations in exact process to account for factors such as group size (Graeber, 2004). Everyone involved in a project should be involved in decision-making, and it should be 'possible for anyone who might be affected by a decision to get involved' (Graham, 2017: 85). The idea of 'free' association must be understood critically by anarchist organisers in order to avoid reproducing the oppressive systems they aim to move beyond (Warburton, 2021): societal position and material circumstances mediate how 'free' someone's choices are.

The clearest path to enacting this in the museum is community ownership with a horizontal decision-making structure – for which there is precedent through community asset-transfer (Rex, 2018). This does not automatically lead to a horizontal organisation: intentionality is also required. Truly horizontal decision-making would at minimum incorporate museum workers of all kinds, people who have made and contributed to objects within the museum, and museum users with an interest in its ongoing activities. This invites a reconfiguration and equalisation of the value of different forms of labour (e.g. curation, janitorial work, front-of-house) that contribute to the museum.

Community work in museums is often oriented around co-production and participation (Graham, 2016; Simon, 2010), though not always successfully as shown by the example of the 2007-2009 exhibition *Revealing Histories: Myths about Race* (Manchester Museum). A Community Advisory Panel existed for several years prior, inputting into museum decision-making. The project's planning group aimed to give 'individuals from within and outside the museum with equal authority from the outset' (Lynch and Alberti, 2010). However, non-museum participants were sceptical that their contributions would be equally valued, and staff proved unwilling to directly address conflict, ultimately retreating to their institutional power without challenging the museum they worked for. An anarchist analysis of this situation considers prejudice and the 'reluctance to relinquish institutional authority' as 'inextricably bound' with each other (Lynch and Alberti, 2010).

A community-owned organisation provides a good alternative, because of its materiality. The accompanying decision-making power granted to all involved with the museum, even if they do not exercise it, levels the power dynamics involved in co-production. Involvement does not have to be long-term or intensive. Graham (2017) advocates such an approach, conceiving of a network of relationships with no one organisation at the centre. Whether the museum can abdicate authority in this way, or whether the organisational identity of 'museum' prohibits this, is what subsequent stages of research aim to investigate. At minimum, sharing power requires acknowledging and negotiating its presence explicitly (Lynch and Alberti, 2010).

Operating through free and voluntary association radically impacts how museums relate to their collections. The case of *Culture Shock!*, where participants wanted to alter and withdraw testimony given to the museum,

is useful to return to. In an anarchist museology, the museum's possession of an object, digital or physical, is an ongoing relationship of consent, as opposed to traditional notions of property which inform current museum attitudes to ownership, evident in the somewhat contradictory guidance for the management of digital cultural heritage (National Initiative for a Networked Cultural Heritage, 2003). In highlighting these contradictions, a digital object is a useful example⁷ for building a case for more 'responsive and reciprocal' (Graham, 2017) approaches to ownership, but this can and should also be applied to non-digital objects.

It is important to consider these implications of this approach on repatriation, due to the violence and intergenerational trauma often associated with such items. An anarchist approach can be explored through the example of the Ghost Dance shirt repatriated by Glasgow Museums. Equal participation and decision-making power comes with an understanding that people's circumstances are often different and *unequal*, in the extent of needs, harms, benefits, and consequences (Milstein, 2010). Communities of origin are part of a museum's network: regardless of whether they have ever visited the museum, they are still affected by its decisions and should be able to influence outcomes (Bennett, 2015).

When Glasgow Museums repatriated the Ghost Dance shirt to the Lakota nation, the decision-making process was notable for its consultation of the public of Glasgow, alongside museum workers and Lakota representatives. This was conducted out of a 'cultural as well as legal sense that Glasgow Museums' collections belong to the people of Glasgow' (Curtis, 2010:

⁷ There are existing frameworks for navigating the conflict between consent to publish personal accounts, and publicly available knowledge within the field of research ethics. Comparable frameworks for physical objects are less common.

240). Nonetheless, it provides an example of an instance where several parties who would be affected by the decision were able to input into the decision-making process.

The public consultation showed 'the vast majority in favour of return' (Glasgow City Council, 2000). Suppose it had been otherwise: the differences between the situations in question would need to have been evaluated in order to arrive at a just outcome between conflicting perspectives (Milstein, 2010). The Lakota nation sought to heal from intergenerational trauma through their material cultural heritage, while those wanting retain the shirt argued on the basis of the cultural enrichment of those visiting Glasgow museums (Curtis, 2010). The case of the Lakota nation involved more serious needs and consequences. Returning the shirt would also have culturally enriching benefits, as one public commenter noted:

'More Glaswegians will have learned something of the reality of Sioux⁸ history even through publicity of the debate than through anything undertaken by the city museums ... More Sioux people will know where Glasgow is and, more importantly, what kind of place its citizens think it is.'

(Beers, in Beers et al, 1999)

In the hypothetical conflicted case, it would have been necessary to advance this position and make a claim about what the right thing to do was, rather than retreating to majority democracy. It may be necessary to do so in explicitly politicised terms, and thus for the museum to take a political position. The importance of taking a position potentially

8 The shirt was repatriated to the Lakota nation, who are part of the Sioux group of tribes. Sources contemporary to the repatriation use both terms, or sometimes Lakota Sioux, hence the use of Sioux in this source.

antagonistic to museum users has already been identified as necessary for decolonial and anti-racist work (Bayer et al, 2018), both of which are essential to anarchist approaches (Shannon and Rogue, 2010; Rafael, 2018; Warburton, 2021).

Beyond changing current practices, envisaging the museum as a horizontal community organisation opens up new possibilities, such as suggestions of how museums can provide support during the cost of living crisis⁹ (Adams, 2022). Physical spaces can be used by community groups, as is the case at Linlithgow Museum¹⁰. Beyond this, museums could house communally-owned specialist tools, in a similar manner to tool libraries. This is something museums have done (and continue to do) in some communally-oriented settings (Kreps, 2011). Allowing the use of its resources is not *prima facie* an anarchist thing for a museum to do, as the recent hosting of the National Conservatism Convention by the Natural History Museum demonstrates (PCS Culture Group, 2023): it needs a code of ethics for the uses of its spaces and resources.

This is a recurring theme: anarchist methods cannot be 'values[*sic*]-neutral' (Innuendo Studios, 2018: 9:32-10:26). They require not only processes, but principles¹¹. This is particularly relevant to work with(in) communities, which invites multiple, potentially conflicting agencies to contribute to the museum. Instead of being treated as a 'black box'

9 See also <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1PCdd3cPjgXH-Wd85TEXZBfqw2-ay7VjokTi1ekwHSMo/edit?usp=sharing> (Accessed 5 June 2023), compiled by multiple museum workers in a grass-roots fashion. This goes beyond Adams' (2022) advice, including suggestions to raise awareness of tenants' and trade unions, and undertaking broader political education.

10 <https://www.linlithgowmuseum.org/about> (Accessed 1 June 2023)

11 Not to imply that processes and principles are separable features of an organisation, but rather that it is possible for an organisation to be led by adherence to process rather than ethical principles about what is and is not right.

(Graham, 2017), communities need to be understood as existing through the active efforts of their constituent members (Gleeson, 2021). An anarchist museum is part of that active effort and must be intentional about how it cultivates that community. This requires principles about what the museum will do, and what it will 'refuse to cater to' (Bayer et al, 2018: 19).

4.2. Building an anarchist museum

A failure attributed to previous anarchist movements in the UK is a lack of pragmatism (Quail, 2019). A *successful* anarchist museology must navigate museums as they currently exist. While each museum has its own unique context, there are trends across certain kinds of museum, and it is worth establishing an anarchist approach to them as a group. How can anarchists identify useful sites of organising and practice in museums? Where can allies be found, and where are contradictions with anarchist methods simply unresolvable?

4.2.1. Big museums and small museums

Many of the examples I have used come from large museums that receive state funding at a local or national level. The majority of UK museums are rather dissimilar: more museums lack accreditation than have it, most museums are independent from the state, and most are small (under 10,000 visitors per year)¹². These small museums need to be approached differently by an anarchist museology. The commonality of 'a do-it-yourself approach' (Candlin et al, 2022: 3) reflects that interpretation and implementation of the law and other stipulations is often up to authority

¹² As reported by the Mapping Museums Project: <https://museweb.dcs.bbk.ac.uk>
(Accessed 3 June 2023)

figures within the museum (McCall, 2016). This distance from the state and regulatory bodies makes small museums strong candidates for anarchist organising, though they can be limited by a lack of resources.

Approaching larger museums is more complicated. Holding more resources, they are slower to change and have closer relationships to state and capitalist power. There is an obvious antagonism between anarchism's anti-state position and national museums (Baker, 2019). One approach would be exodus: never get involved and let national museums wither away on their own (Graeber, 2004). This is both overly optimistic and entails walking away from the potential to do good: the move toward greater social inclusion in museums that occurred during the 2000s was implemented more successfully in some museums than others due to the actions of individuals within institutions (Morse, 2019).

Critchley's (2007) metapolitical approach is more useful, suggesting something closer to a controlled dismantling through insurrection, accelerating repatriation cases¹³, diverting resources to anarchist work, and undercutting the institution's power. Caution needs to be applied in ensuring that structures are not dismantled before they have finished serving their purpose, or are at least suitably replaced (e.g. the records that museums hold on their objects make it easier to identify where, when and how an object was obtained, and thus where it might be more appropriately cared for).

Some anarchists may prefer not to engage in this type of work for a number of reasons. Whether an institution is worth attempting to salvage its positive aspects or whether it is better to start something new, is a difficult strategic question. For those who attempt radical work at large

¹³ <https://www.theemptymuseum.info/> (Accessed 3 June 2023) provides a speculative exploration of what it would be like if the British Museum was 'emptied'

institutions, there will always be a tension between their aims and the limits of their work place, running the risk of energy being invested in maintaining the organisation, rather than doing the radical work (Bayer et al, 2018).

The museum may be 'to the Art World as Prisons Are to the Police State' (Graeber and Dubrovsky, 2019, capitalisation in original), but whether (and how) working for a large or national museum aids the state and capital is far less clear-cut than in law enforcement, and the stakes correspondingly less mortal. The anarchist case is to abolish national museums, but there is room for a diversity of perspectives on how to accomplish this. One person may feel their time is better spent at a large museum, and another at a smaller one; both can operate within an anarchist museology provided their goals are aligned.

4.2.2. Workers' rights

At present, many museum workers move between institutions and/or work freelance (BOP Consulting, 2016). Funding cuts and a corresponding reduction in the size of the sector¹⁴ have increased the economic instability experienced by museum workers. This adds the pressure of maintaining a stable income into decision-making about what kinds of work are (or are not) worthwhile. This makes it harder for individuals to enact their principles in the workplace, particularly when expectations of professionalism are leveraged to exercise authority (Lynch and Alberti, 2010).

A solution to this predicament is unionising, which would allow workers to have more confidence taking stances oppositional to their employer. The

¹⁴ <https://museweb.dcs.bbk.ac.uk> (Accessed 3 June 2023)

anarchist position on unions has varied throughout the history of British anarchism (Quail, 2019). Most anarchist critiques of unions lie with the leadership not supporting or representing the interests of most workers (Bookchin, 1986). Currently, unions are some of the strongest forces of political opposition in the UK (Topping, 2022). Their current antagonism to ruling and electoral politics means that, while old anarchist criticisms of 'bourgeois unionism' (Bookchin, 1986) still hold water¹⁵, trade unions are a useful form of organising for anarchists, having recently won improvements in museum working conditions¹⁶. In line with a communal ethic, improvements need to come for *all* workers, regardless of the kinds of work they may do in the museum. This requires solidarity and coordination between unions.

4.2.3. Social change

Anarchism is predicated on the need for a social revolution that undoes all forms of oppression and injustice. It understands that oppressions are intertwined and co-constitutive yet simultaneously each uniquely socially located: decolonisation cannot be likened one-to-one to queer liberation and vice versa (Shannon and Rogue, 2010; Tuck and Yang, 2012).

Up to this point, this analysis has focussed on running the museum in a generally anarchist way. This *is* important: it is necessary to 'rethink the building-blocks and foundations of the rest of our knowledge' (Naidoo, 2004: 34). In exploring new possibilities for forms of social relations and organisation, anarchist groups are constructing these new foundations.

15 For instance, https://twitter.com/NotesFrom_Below/status/1627728733216952320 (Accessed 13 June 2023)

16 For example, <https://www.pcs.org.uk/news-events/news/scottish-sector-members-vote-accept-improved-pay-offer> (Accessed 5 June 2023)

But beyond practising anarchism throughout daily operations, it is worth considering how a museum can contribute to active agitation for social change. What are the potential roles of the museum in resisting the state, capitalism, and oppression?

The museum's location within British society is deeply embedded in colonialisms past and present (Bennett, 2017; Lynch and Alberti, 2010). It is for this reason that decolonisation has a persistent relevance to how museums function. Capitalism and the state, in the forms they presently exist (particularly in the UK), were developed as 'technologies of colonialism' (Tuck and Yang, 2012: 4). To decolonise necessitates dismantling them, but that does not mean that an anarchist approach is by default a decolonial one. On the contrary, anarchist organisations frequently reproduce colonialist social relations (Warburton, 2021). Given the deep entanglement of UK museums and colonialism, an anarchist museology needs to prioritise decolonisation work as an especially relevant fight with its own unique character and aims that are not interchangeable with others.

Museums' role in social change has been written about previously within the framework of activism (Hollows, 2013; Janes and Sandell, 2019). This operates on broadly representational terms; much of what the museum does and perceives itself as being *for* is representation. While representation is not without benefits, its ability to enact social change is limited and it can be easily co-opted to the interests of capital and state (Rossi and Táíwò, 2020). Representational approaches also lead to the pitfall of treating different oppressions and the fights against them as interchangeable: decolonisation is treated as representational of social justice more broadly, erasing its specific demands (Tuck and Yang, 2012).

There is not much anarchism in how museums currently approach social change. What methods could museums adopt from anarchism? One leading method is 'propaganda by the deed': self-organised acts against capital and/or the state, considered the most effective form of enacting social change, rather than written materials or verbal agitation. Direct action is a more general term that denotes doing something *actively* resistive: showing up to a peaceful, legally-sanctioned march may or may not be direct action depending on the context, but forming a human blockade or occupying a building definitely are. Anarchist approaches to achieving social change generally exhibit a diversity of tactics (Franks, 2006).

Involvement in such actions is generally outside the realm of possibility for museums at present, as they must operate within the bounds of the law. This requirement is also what gives them access to funding and resources that other groups can struggle to access. There is a balance to be struck. As one example, organising groups typically aim for group dispersal at the end of an action in order to protect the safety of those involved¹⁷. Given that museums already use their opening hours to provide warm spaces, they could also coordinate opening hours to support nearby actions by providing a public, sheltered space for anyone who might need somewhere intermediate to disperse to.

In addition to navigating social change that occurs outside the museum (which is necessary to engage with social change meaningfully at all), museum workers may also have to contend with direct actions taken within the museums they work for. Sometimes these are organised wholly or in part by museum workers (Mahony, 2017); it is important to not treat those taking action and those working at the museum as necessarily

¹⁷ See <https://right-to-protest.org/protect-your-protest/> or <https://www.instagram.com/p/CoCarWjq9MO/> (Accessed 9 June 2023)

separate. However there are distinctions to be made. The actions of *Art Not Oil* and *Liberate Tate* (Mahony, 2017) follow the power structure of a workplace dispute more closely than an external group going into a museum to protest; artists occupy a somewhat interstitial position between insider and outsider to the museum, but they are closer to being within it than for instance, Extinction Rebellion are to being part of the Science Museum (Mills, 2021). This is shown by *Liberate Tate's* choice of tactics, which spoke to the institution in its own language. Operating unauthorised art installations occurs in the same sphere of labour that workers would perform for the institution. This distinguishes their actions as closer to industrial action than external protest.

UK museums that are the site of direct action are generally not operating on an anarchist basis¹⁸. Workers following an anarchist museology would need to assess what the best course of action is to assist in change-making, including the option of leaving the museum¹⁹. There are less harmful responses that museums can take when they are the site of protest and dissent, which individuals may have the capacity to influence. Excepting cases of criminal damage, they can choose to allow certain actions, such as overnight occupations (Mills, 2021), and not escalate the situation by involving police. This should not be credited as anything *more* than harm-reductive: it is in the institution's interests to be seen as friendly and reasonable, and the lack of escalation does not significantly aid the cause of those taking action (bar allowing them to avoid contact with law enforcement).

¹⁸ Direct action can come from a variety of political perspectives, including ones anarchism completely opposes such as fascism. At present, the majority of actions taken in UK museums are done by climate groups who, with some exceptions, form a broadly liberal movement.

¹⁹ As previously discussed, the material possibility of walking away from a job on ethical grounds in the current museum landscape is going to be different for different individuals and cannot be assumed to always be a reasonable option to take.

An anarchist museology, while not opposed to the representational work museums do, does not consider this an acceptable horizon for social justice work. It requires that museums also contribute to actions external to them, and understand that they may have access to resources that can be used in support of actions, even if organisations themselves are restricted in what they can do or actively endorse. This returns to the impact of individual discretion (McCall, 2016): policy interpretation can be a deciding factor in how actively museums push for social change. Museums are already better equipped to provide socially supportive, enriching functions. It is much easier for individuals and groups to undertake difficult work if their baseline well-being is taken care of. However, an anarchist museology still requires museums to take values-based stances, including on social issues. Recognising their limited capacity to participate in certain activities does not absolve this responsibility.

4.3. Summary and framework

What follows are principles of an anarchist museology for UK museums. They are not universal, but aim to synthesise anarchist methods, museum studies literature, and the current context that UK museums exist in.

- Museums should not be oriented around the housing of permanent collections of objects, but rather caring for objects in service of facilitating ongoing cultural practice.
- The primary use of museum objects is not necessarily display or long-term preservation, though these may be part of their function.

Objects need to be individually considered in how they could best be used in creative expression, cultural production, and learning.

- Museums are well-placed to house specialist equipment and technology for communal use, and thus should do so.
- The goal of facilitating cultural production also means facilitating that production elsewhere, where it is possible for the museum to do so. Resources held by the museum may be needed or better able to fulfil their potential elsewhere. This is as important as the effective allocation of resources within the museum.
- Anyone who may be impacted by a decision the museum makes should be able to have a say in its making. This is best facilitated by re-configuring museums as community-owned organisations that operate through free and voluntary association. Contributing to a museum encompasses many activities, from providing objects to visiting the museum.
- Beyond not being neutral, museums should have explicit values, including ones expressed in politicised terms that concern ethical principles.
- The museum should use its position and resources to fight for societal change on the basis of these values. Given their own history with and contributions to colonialism, decolonisation (inside and outside the museum) is a particular priority in the museum context.
- The nature of what constitutes museum work should be considered holistically; janitorial staff are just as essential to keeping the museum open as curators.
- National museums and similar large institutions should ultimately not exist. An anarchist museological approach has to remain oppositional to such museums, including when in operation within them.

- Museums should exist within the communities that enable their operations, rather than viewing their work as 'on behalf of' people or groups. This is necessary to avoid vanguardism, and requires building connections out of existing resources and relationships.

Many of these principles are not controversial at first glance. Critiques of failed co-production attempts, the divide between 'high' and 'low' culture, and the slowness of museums to repatriate, to name but three, have been made before in museum studies literature. What the framework does is follow these principles through to their logical conclusions. If museums are not neutral, then they must have a political aim of some kind. If culture produced in museums is not inherently of greater value, then museums should be invested in supporting other forms rather than monopolising resources. Having constructed this framework, two questions remain. What happens when it is put into practice? And does it still describe a museum, or is the anarchist museum something else altogether?

5. Survey research

5.1. Questionnaire responses

I compared my sample to that in the research conducted by BOP Consulting (2016). While their sample was not necessarily representative, and sector demographics have likely shifted over the last seven years, it is the largest dataset for the demographics of UK museum workers currently available. As anticipated, my sample was comparatively unrepresentative (fig. 1). University museums were over-represented, and every other type under-represented, except central and national authority museums, which were approximately proportionately represented (BOP Consulting, 2016)²⁰. No participants worked in a regimental or private commercial museum. Comparison on the basis of time spent in the sector proved challenging: the BOP report used overlapping time brackets (e.g. 1-3 years and 3-5 years), whereas I did not (e.g. 1-3 years and 4-6 years).

The average alignment score for the anarchist museological framework (possible range 0-48) was 27.3 ± 7.0 : overall participants were neutral – erring on slightly positive – towards the framework. The average score for alignment with workplace politics (possible scores 0-40) was 28.4 ± 5.1 , so respondents generally felt their values were in harmony with those of their workplace. I was surprised to find no relationship between the two scores, as I had expected those more aligned with the framework might experience more workplace friction. This suggests politics may influence workplace selection among museum workers.

²⁰ As the BOP report listed more types of museum, I computed the percentages given in the BOP report to correspond to the categories that I used. The additional categories used by BOP all fell within 'local authority', or 'other'.

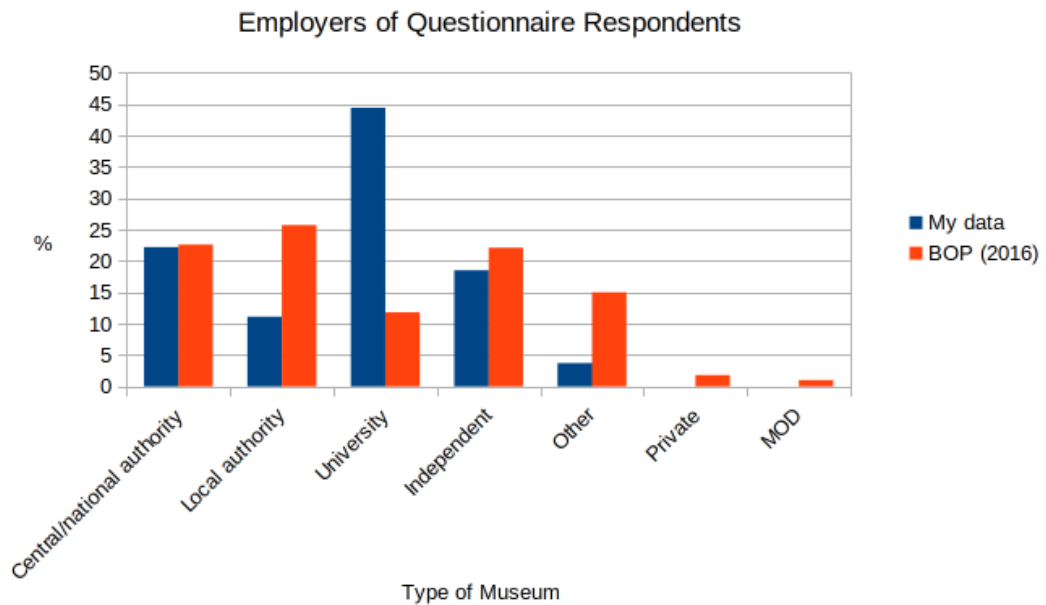


Figure 1: A graph comparing the employers of my participants versus those surveyed by BOP Consulting (2016)

There were few relationships between responses to different questions. With only 27 participants, one response accounted for just under 4% of the data, which may be why. The only potential relation was between the scores for Sections 2 and 3, and workplace power (fig. 2). Participants were grouped based on their responses to Q.1.7 (Appendix A): 13 reported two or fewer responsibilities and were placed in the low power group. This group were on average less aligned with their workplace' politics and had a higher framework alignment score. The averages for each group were within a standard deviation of each other, so the difference was not significant. However, given McCall's (2016) conclusions about the importance of local authority figures in policy application, this statistic may merit further investigation.

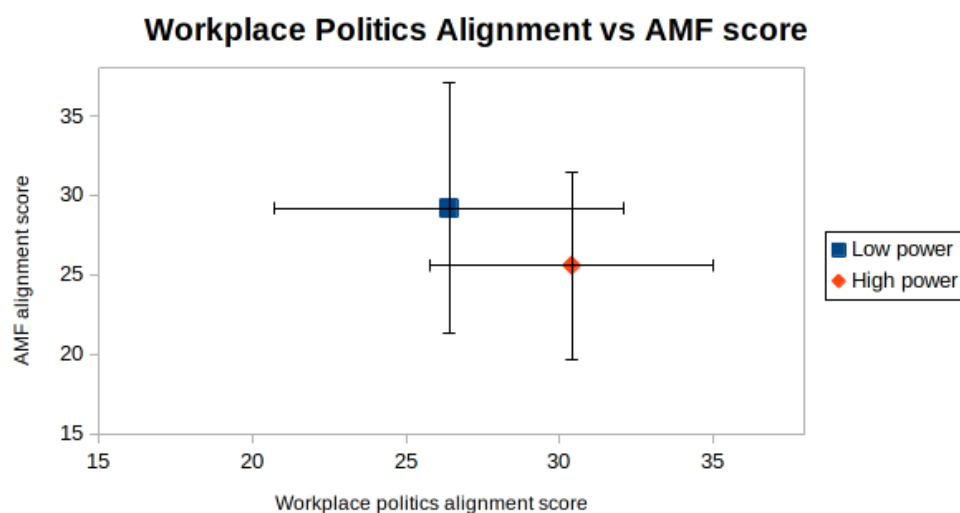


Figure 2: Plot showing difference in scores between the low and high power groups

Some statements in the framework proved more controversial than others. The least popular principles were moving away from permanence and abolishing national museums²¹. Museums’ responsibility in creating social change, valuing different forms of labour equally, and horizontal decision-making received the greatest agreement. This supports the conclusion that permanence is a major ideology in museums, and less frequently questioned than other aspects that the anarchist framework seeks to change. This, alongside the legitimacy of the nation-state, are sites for future critical intervention and museum research.

The statements that prompted the greatest variation in responses were ‘Museums should care for objects on the basis of ongoing consent rather than owning them’ and ‘Museums should not have have explicit political motives or goals’, with standard deviations of 1.4 and 1.3 respectively. They were the only statements with bimodal distributions of responses,

²¹ The only agreement that national museums should not exist came from university museum workers. I felt this was worth noting, though conclusions cannot be drawn from such a small sample

though the average responses for both were slightly aligned with the framework (agreement and disagreement, respectively). There were no relationships between responses to these statements and any other questions. The only responses opposing consensual object care came from participants with seven or more years of experience in the sector. Everyone with six years of experience or less selected either 'somewhat agree' or 'strongly agree'. As this is a snapshot study, this does not constitute a definitive relation, but could be investigated in future.

Some additional statistics are useful to note here. Only three participants disagreed to any extent with the statement 'It is possible for me to choose which museum jobs I apply for based on my personal values'. For my participants, walking away from an institution that acted oppositionally to their values (as discussed in Section 4.2.3) was at minimum possible. This further suggests that the lack of a relation between the Section 2 and 3 scores may be due to workplace selection²². Participants also consistently reported multiple areas of museum work as part of their regular responsibilities regardless of seniority, with the average being four. This aligns with the sector-wide trend in workers being given more duties without financial promotion (BOP Consulting, 2016).

One third of participants reported union membership, which I suspected could be higher than the sector average due to the over-representation of university museum workers, who have potential UCU membership eligibility²³. In fact, their membership was not unusually high compared to

22 Meant holistically, in the sense that over time spent in one museum, someone may be more likely to choose to continue work there due to the museum and worker reciprocally shaping each other's values.

23 At the time of writing, UCU (the University and Colleges Union) are taking industrial action and have done every year since 2018, making them one of the most active unions in the UK at present.

other groups, and the most highly unionised were local authority museum workers (66.7%). Little data is available on unionisation in UK museums, but the most recent statistics report 22.3% of UK workers are union members: 48.6% in the public sector and 12% in the private sector (Office for National Statistics, 2023). Around half of museum workers are part of public sector museums (BOP Consulting, 2016), which can be extrapolated to suggest a sector-wide unionisation of around 30%, similar to my sample. Unionisation in UK museums is a potential site for future research.

Comments left by participants showed how much experiences can vary between contexts. One participant noted that their Section 2 answers would have been quite different for their previous role in an independent museum, while another mentioned the expectation of political neutrality from national museum workers. Another mentioned that mutual aid and campaigning were regular parts of their work.

Overall, participants expressed a slight acceptance of the anarchist museological framework. Some statements were more controversial than others, with the importance of national museums and the permanence of museum collections seeming particularly ingrained. Whether museums should have political aims, and how museums own and care for objects seem to be up for debate. While an anarchist museology is not widely supported, there are clearly potential sites for action: several participants scored strongly in agreement with the framework.

5.2. Interviews

I intended to interview people who were strongly aligned with the framework, but this was constrained by the responses I received. As some

questionnaire statements proved more controversial than others, participants who questioned more ingrained beliefs were prioritised over those who scored similarly, but agreed with only the more widely accepted statements. Perhaps due to this approach, interviews were highly divergent in their progression. The framework provided a useful structure for this analysis, but the sites of analysis that I identified prior to conducting interviews were less separable than anticipated. Accordingly, I first explore examples of the framework in practice, then examine key themes that arose during interview, and what these suggest about the possibilities and limits of an anarchist museology.

Participants came from a variety of museums and expressed differing politics. All identified at least some of their views as left-wing, and expressed dissatisfaction with the current state of electoral politics. Participant One was influenced by anarchism, identifying as a horizontalist. Participants Two and Three did not cite anarchism as an influence, but expressed that the well-being of people (as opposed to large institutions, corporations, and elites) was a core value. Participant Four identified as libertarian, strongly valuing freedom of choice and freedom of speech (also mentioned by Participant Three). They reported that some friends considered them more conservative due to their tendency to make provocative statements. Participant Five used no specific labels but expressed many anarchist values such as a belief in the efficacy of grass-roots work, and in people's capacity to care for each other. Participant Six was an anarchist.

5.2.1. The framework in practice

Participants Five and Six provided the strongest examples of the framework in practice, with Participants One and Three also expressing

more general approaches that aligned with the framework. Participants Two and Four did not describe any work that especially resonated with an anarchist museology, perhaps unsurprisingly given that both were based in national museums. Their testimony will be explored in later sections, but generally proved less relevant to my research.

Participant Five reported political campaigning as a major part of their museum's work, alongside mutual aid (e.g. distributing essential supplies during COVID-19 lockdowns). Their museum notably refuses to take state funding, in order to remain independent. The organisation is small and by their own admission highly unique. Participant Three's museum is bigger and in receipt of government funding, but similarly conducts significant campaigning work. Both museums have been termed 'activist museums' by both staff and external commenters.

Alongside examples of anarchist museology in action at an organisational level, Participant Six provided an example of an individual enacting an anarchist museology within a large institution. Their anarchist politics were 'the foundation' of their work, which they viewed in broadly insurrectionary terms:

'At a big, prestigious university where people are going to listen to what you say because you have this stupid name attached to it ... you think really carefully about how everything you say can introduce complexity, can decentralise'

Participant Six

They enacted this through their work as a conservator by 'exploring new ways to care' for objects that prioritised the exchange of knowledge, such as by inviting priests and musicians to work with the collections.

Participant Three similarly enjoyed having 'researchers and creatives, artists, coming into the stores on a really regular basis'. These dynamic approaches to object care both align with the framework, yet operate within two very different museums.

Participant Five's museum includes a power of veto in their acquisition policy, allowing donors to withdraw objects from display, or from the museum altogether. They described the withdrawal of a guitar from the collection:

'they told me a year later that they smashed it up. It was nothing to do with the museum ... as a museum geek, I'm horrified by this. But also I have to just let it go, 'cause it's not my object'

Participant Five

This demonstrates that museums can accommodate care via ongoing consent into their acquisition processes, and approach objects without a sense of ownership.

More examples of an anarchist museology in action came from Participant One, though they were not as specific as Participants Five and Six. They were focussed on two projects. The first was a cross-institutional project relating to digitisation and linking collections. They described working to establish a federated, non-hierarchical governance structure in the project. Additionally, they aimed to situate UK industrial heritage as 'fully embedded within these global flows of extractive capitalism', providing an example of ecological thinking in practice. Their second project was local, aiming to establish a community-owned neighbourhood utilising heritage and memory alongside alternative economics. The participant considered co-ownership to be essential to self-determination. Participant Five's

museum operated along similar principles, with the distinction between those visiting the museum, working for them, and donating objects, being blurred. They reported that the museum 'feels owned by a lot of people' as a result of this porousness, which may be due to the power of veto that donors have over the use of their objects: they have decision-making power even without being involved with the museum in other ways.

5.2.2. Economics and work

The topic of funding arose in almost every interview, with multiple participants citing it as a practical limitation on what museums can do. This was not only with regards to the resources available for use, but also ensuring smooth relationships with donors. As Participant Two reported, this can require restricting the expression of personal and museum-wide values.

A central issue for Participant Two was the reliance of museums on volunteer work, which they viewed as exploitative: 'what we're doing is we're actually using people for free'. They attributed this to a lack of funding, also linked to the increasing demands on museum workers:

'they deliberately keep salaries low [...] and they deliberately keep the levels of staffing low. So expecting us to do more and more and more for less.'

Participant Two,

Participant Six also believed that gallery and collections assistants were underpaid, while Participant Five reported risking housing instability during the process of establishing the museum they worked at. This reflects the increase in responsibilities and precarity reported in the questionnaire and

in other sources (BOP Consulting, 2016). The commonality of this experience, including at more well-resourced institutions, may be why the valuing of different forms labour was one of the most agreed upon principles of the anarchist framework among questionnaire respondents.

Participant Two felt that funding museums adequately would result in them being able to pay everyone for their labour and employ a full curatorial team. This would improve access to the sector for those unable to accrue experience through volunteering²⁴. However, they doubted that museums would actually implement these changes if given more money: 'they'd probably just badly use it to be honest'. This points towards structural issues that cannot be solved by injecting more funding. Participant Five felt that larger museums often ran exhibits along an extractive 'product line' model, linking exploitative labour practices to the profit incentives museums are subject to. Most UK museums are non-profit organisations, but they still operate within the same economic systems. Again the question of what museums should do given these circumstances arises. I asked Participant Two, given their position within a national museum, but they did not have any concrete suggestions. This again suggests that insurrection and redistribution of power and resources, including money where possible, are the most effective options at present. Participant Six described drawing motivation to do difficult work by considering it their opportunity to use their insider position to access spaces of power that others might not be able to.

Participant Five's museum actively campaigns for wider system change, which is one response to the limitations museums face. They are able to do this due to refusing government funding. This decision could ultimately result in financial instability longer term, but the trade-off seemed worth

²⁴ This is an active issue worked on by organisations such as Fair Museum Jobs: <https://fairmuseumjobs.org/resources/> (Accessed 11 July 2023)

it: they compared their capacity to protest and 'speak out' favourably to that of organisations who received government funding. They also reported not taking funding from any organisations that might cause ethical conflicts for the museum, though they noted that the issue had not yet arisen for their museum due to its relatively recent founding.

Participant One's community ownership project also explicitly aimed to be independent from state funding. They experimented with two alternative economic models: community wealth-building and community economics. The first aims to circulate money within the local economy by having local institutions contract services (e.g. laundry or cleaning) from local businesses. This creates economic and job security, and decreases emissions. It has been implemented with some success in the UK in Preston (Centre for Public Impact, 2018), which Participant One mentioned. Community economics can take various forms, but is aligned with anarchism in its desire to find alternative social-economic configurations using already-existent structures and groupings (Gibson-Graham et al, 2013). As the project is ongoing, the success of these models is yet to be confirmed, but it shows that there are alternatives to be explored.

5.2.3. Politics, neutrality, and objectivity

Practically, the capacity of museum workers to take politicised stances within the museum is constrained by the risk it presents to their employment. Participant Four had felt able to express their views in the workplace throughout their career, though they could not recall ever significantly disagreeing with the museum's decisions. Conversely, Participant Five censored themselves during previous work at large institutions, as they felt like an outsider due to their class positionality.

Participant Six took the opposite approach and deliberately refused to do so, though they felt as though they had been hired partially because of this: 'I've actually been brought in just to tell them how bad they are because that's what they want'. They sensed their employers were not committed to change, which at times made expressing themselves difficult. Ultimately they took the view that: 'they gave me this spot, so I'm going to do whatever the fuck I want with it'. Participants Five and Six both felt like outsiders in the museum, but Participant Six was able to leverage this positionality to exert agency.

Participants expressed a variety of views on objectivity and neutrality within museums. Participant Four believed that museums should only present 'objective facts', including ones that seemed contradictory to each other, so that people may draw their own conclusions. Participant Three took a different view, exemplified by their acquisition of a sticker that had been put on the museum as a protest against it²⁵. The item's entry in the collections database notes this context. This refutes the idea that museum can look upon the world with externality, and deliberately embeds the museum within its contemporary context by recording an (at least outwardly perceived) political stance. Participant Three agreed with Participant Four that all sides of a story should be presented, but commented that 'it doesn't have to be balanced', because real life is not perfectly balanced.

Participant Three was a social history curator, as opposed to Participant Four's scientific background. However, Participant Two, also a scientist from a national museum, viewed objectivity as a necessary pretence, rather than a guiding standard. They gave the example of meeting a

²⁵ The textual content of the sticker would be argued by some, myself included, to constitute hate speech, but in either case it expresses a stance oppositional to the museum's on what is currently a highly politicised topic within the UK.

museum donor who expressed strong disapproval climate protests, in opposition to the museum's (and the participant's) stance, but: 'we can't tell him that we don't like that [oil] ... at the end of the day we all need funding'. They seemed to accept this pragmatically, yet noted that it was impossible for museums to *not* be political: 'it just drips from every aspect of life'. In addition, they reported not attending protests due to their position at a national museum. Participant Three recounted a similar experience: they were unable to protest the closure of a local school while working for a local authority museum. In contrast, their current museum collected placards from protests attended by museum workers. Participant Five's museum actively attended and organised protests against the government, showing the ability of smaller, independent museums to be 'more nimble, flexible, and agitate more'.

Participant Three's museum is considered a 'activist museum', as is Participant Five's, though their museum is also much smaller. Alongside this politicised designation, Participant Three's museum functions in some unique and positive ways. They described structures that allow all members (including volunteers and regardless of seniority) to feed into the museum's overall direction, such as regular whole-organisation meetings, and smaller focus groups where individuals can pursue areas of passion or expertise. The freedom of staff to contribute to the museum as they see fit was credited as creating an environment in which everyone was constantly learning and sharing their expertise. This resonated remarkably with Bookchin's (1986) ecological approach to social formations, with a diversity and proliferation of interests allowing the organisation to flourish. Participant Three thought that returning to the national or local authority museums that they had previously worked in would be difficult. This supports the suggestion from the questionnaire data that museum workers may choose to work in institutions that match

their own values. Participant Five reported doing just this, leaving their previous work in larger museums to help found their current museum.

These museums may be able to operate in more radical ways *because* they are always already politicised. Some issues are consistently considered 'political' in UK society, but for most topics this designation fluctuates over time. The positive example of these museums suggests that embracing the political may be good for museums. Even on purely organisational grounds, losing the fear of the non/political divide could be beneficial. Participant Five felt that this was currently the case, stating:

'museums need to take a stance on things more ... because I think people are really crying out for that, truth be told'

Participant Five

5.2.4. National museums

Four participants had experience with national museums. Participants Two and Four had spent their entire careers at them. Neither had significant criticisms, though Participant Two seemed less aligned with the institutional politics than Participant Four. The most direct criticism of national museums came from Participant Three, who felt that when it came to repatriation 'they should be at the forefront', but that instead other institutions with fewer resources were frequently doing better. They cited that national museums 'setting an example' could influence the entire sector to do better. Participant Five also acknowledged the capacity of large museums to do good, but shared Participant Three's concerns:

'It doesn't take a lot for you know, things to go wrong and for things to feel a lot less progressive, for the agenda to kind of collapse'

Participant Five

They felt working in a smaller museum was more effective, and reported feeling less detached than in their previous employment.

Participant One provided another perspective from their cross-institutional work with national museums. They were brought in to do work within the normative conception of participation, operating in 'periphery-centre kind of modes' linked explicitly to a liberal museum paradigm. As previously mentioned, they were instead working on establishing a federated model of governance. This aligns with Critchley's (2007) proposal of interstitial action, working 'with' rather than 'for' national museums on the project. Cross-institutional initiatives may be fruitful sites for intervention in larger museums by anarchist organisations. It also further illustrates the benefits of collaborative models.

A central question in Section 4 was how individuals within national or similar large museums can work both within and against the institution without ending up more in service of the institution's continuation than its transformation. Participant Five decided the best option was to leave, but Participants One and Six both navigated staying. Participant Six described their approach as 'infiltrate and destroy'. They compared the museum to 'a piggy bank' that 'needs to be broken open', a metaphor that leaves open the possibility for transformation motivated by both internal and external pressures. This highlights that the internal work of an anarchist museology is not going to transform the museum on its own, returning to the potential of collaborative work such as that described by Participant One.

Both participants experienced a personal toll from working both within and against their respective institutions. Participant Six described motivating themselves by thinking about the people who were not able to access the museum. For Participant One:

'the tensions are lived, they're felt, they're in your gut, they're in sleepless nights'

Participant One

Doing anarchist work while embedded in these institutions seemed to necessitate personal struggle, though the two should not be conflated. Participant Six drew strength from knowing they had personal support if they were to quit, or lose their job. Being willing to give up the institution, as Participant Five ultimately did, seemed key to navigating working within more traditional museums.

5.2.5. Learning from practice

Every example of anarchist work that I encountered during the interviews centred care for people in the here-and-now, from collections users to workers. This opposes the status quo for UK museums, which 'work with example rather than singularity' (Participant One) to make decisions on behalf of people. The need to preserve objects for the future is used to abdicate responsibility for museums' actions in the present. Preservation requirements set by museums as conditions of repatriation are evidence of this (Stimson, 2019): objects become 'cultural properties' (Participant Six) for the museum to pass on. That this occurs despite the consensus that 'present and future users of collections should have equal influence' (Lindsay, 2005, quoted in Taylor, 2013) solidified that an anarchist museology needs to actively prioritise the users of the present. I have

added this principle to the framework, as a grounding ethic from which the rest unfolds.

Support for the efficacy of anarchist approaches came from Participant Three's positive experiences and the unique character of their current museum, contrasting the more compromised account of Participant Two. It seems probable that the pre-politicised character of an 'activist' museum gives it the flexibility to experiment with organisational forms. Participant Five's experiences concur with this. Museums that treat themselves as explicitly political (rather than merely 'not neutral') may find they have more flexibility, and greater motivation among museum workers.

Participant One's cross-institutional work provided an opportunity to experiment with organisational structures, drawing out the deep intra-relation between these structures and the politics of the museum as a whole. Based on interviewees' experiences, museums wanting to do more political work would benefit from trying new organisational and decision-making structures. Testimony from all participants supported the benefits of collaboration, with the caveat that:

'it can't just be an institution standing alone, putting forward its own view. It has to be a collective process.'

Participant Three

Participants Two, Three, and Five all mentioned that financial constraints were a significant issue, at museums with different levels of resourcing. Participant One's work using alternative economics provides a glimpse of possible solutions. Funding and economics are a fundamental part of the museum's politics, and any museum wanting to enact social change will need to have in-depth and potentially difficult discussions about where

their money comes from, as took place in Participant Five's museum. The influence of societal economics on this discussion imposes some fundamental limits on what museums can achieve without additional wider changes.

The smaller scale of the more radical museum work I encountered suggests that working for a national museum long-term is not often compatible with an anarchist museology. Being embedded in a national museum seems to co-exist with at minimum a tolerance of the state's existence. The most effective mode for an anarchist museology in such settings was insurrection, such as Participant One and Participant Five's experiences doing cross-institutional work with larger museums, or Participant Six's use of their individual role: 'lots of people can gate-keep, but no-one fights with the conservator'. Collaboration provides an opportunity for experimentation and exposure of larger institutions to new ideas, which could subsequently cause a change for the better. Evidencing this was the request from one national museum participant for permission share my research with their colleagues if they thought it provided any useful suggestions.

Whether an anarchist museum can exist, and what futures lie in museums, was addressed by more anarchist participants. Participant One's view was that 'there's no reforming that – reform is what it does'. The role of museums in reform and vice versa has been previously observed (Bennett, 2015). Placing reform as the museum's *central* function suggests that more radical impulses and methods will always be tamed during their implementation. Thus, an anarchist museum is a contradiction in terms. Participant Six took a different view, observing the double-meaning of museum as both a colonial institution invented within modern Europe, and a loose set of cultural functions that can be found

across the world, throughout history. They experienced possibility in the concept of museum, perhaps due to their experience working in a wide variety of cultural settings:

'Run with us. I think people have been occupying like about this much [gesturing a small distance between fingers] of the spectrum of what a museum could be.'

Participant Six

Participant Six rarely visited museums outside their work, instead drawing inspiration from religious sites and other examples of 'something that we're all working together to maintain', such as natural spaces or jazz music. While their perspectives diverged from each other on whether the modern UK museum can be extricated from its colonial, liberal character, both participants agreed on the need to create a 'destabilisation' (Participant Six) of the museum itself. Participant Six acknowledged that this would make people nervous, while Participant One described the need to tie this into alternative economic forms for it to be viable.

These perspectives were embodied in Participant Five's museum, from its precarious but principled funding approach to porousness between contributors, workers, and users. Participant Three's museum, while receiving government funding, had explicit political stances and horizontal decision-making structures. These smaller institutions seemed at a greater distance from the dominant ideologies of the museum, allowing them to undertake destabilising practices. Conversely, the testimony of those at larger museums suggested that while individuals (such as Participant Six) can act to destabilise, the institution cannot be moved to destabilise itself. Thus, an anarchist museology can be used by organisations, but should

also be operable by individuals situated within more traditional, immobile museums.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Putting anarchism into (museum) practice

Following the synthesis of an anarchist museological framework, I explored examples of practice through the interview process. These were generally found in smaller institutions, who despite limited resources experienced more freedom in their political expression and organisational structures. Participant Six was an exception to this, having introduced anarchist practices to their university museum, in particular regarding object care, which they felt to be their responsibility, given the power of the institution and their role. Conversely, multiple participants were limited in their capacity to take political action, including outside of work, due to employment at a state-run museum. Participant Four was the exception, but they expressed the least alignment with anarchist politics. Participants across the questionnaire and interviews seemed mostly aligned with their workplace politics, suggesting a degree of self-selection.

Following the questionnaire and interviews, there are some changes to be made to the anarchist museological framework. The most significant change is the addition of a principle prioritising museum users in the museum's present, rather than operating in service of a future audience. The revised framework is in Section 6.3.

6.2. Is an anarchist museology possible?

This research was motivated by core tensions between anarchism and existing ideological trends within UK museums. The questionnaire

highlighted some controversial points in the framework, in particular the idea that museums should approach collections in a more ecological way rather than aiming for permanence, and the idea that national museums should not exist.

The foundation of museums (as they exist in the UK today) is too deeply intertwined with machinery of reform for an anarchist museum to be possible. But as anarchism is about building a new world in the shell of the old, an anarchist museology must do the same within heritage and cultural production. Museums are not the only sites, or even institutional sites, of cultural production, and any of these could operate according to the anarchist museological framework. Where an anarchist museology operates within a museum, it aims to transform it into something else. As Participant Six's metaphor of the piggy bank illustrates, some of the effort to 'break open' museums may come from anarchist work outside the museum, as well as within it. What the museum becomes after that – a library, archive, cultural centre, religious site, or something else entirely – depends on its specific context.

An anarchist museum is an unresolvable contradiction in terms, between an ideology aimed at radical, autonomous transformation, and a set of institutional apparatuses built to reform and modulate. Simultaneously, there is an impetus for the existence of anarchist cultural organisations in the importance of cultural production, preservation, and heritage. An anarchist *museology* thus encompasses two things: a framework for the operation of an anarchist cultural and heritage organisation, and suggestions for how to dismantle a museum while building something new out of it. Whether this can be brought to fruition when starting out within a museum is answerable only by example. The interviews showed it is possible to put it into practice, as an individual or in some cases as an

organisation. Museums are a major part of the existing heritage landscape in the UK; it is hardly possible to start anywhere else.

6.3. The revised anarchist museological framework

- An anarchist museology can be put into action inside and outside the museum.
- Museums should not be oriented around the housing of permanent collections, but rather caring for objects in service of facilitating ongoing cultural practice.
- Museums should prioritise the interests and needs of their contemporary users, rather than those of an imagined future audience.
- The primary use of museum objects should not by default be display or long-term preservation. Each object should be considered in how it could best be used in creative expression, cultural production, and learning.
- Museums are well-placed to house specialist equipment and technology for communal use, and thus should do so.
- Resources held by the museum may be better able to fulfil their potential elsewhere. Recognising and acting upon this is as important as the effective allocation of resources within the museum.
- Anyone who may be impacted by a decision the museum makes should be able to have a say in its making. This is best facilitated by re-configuring museums as community-owned organisations that operate through free and voluntary association.
- Beyond not being neutral, museums should have explicit values, including ones expressed in politicised terms.

- The museum should use its position and resources to fight for societal change on the basis of these values. Given their own history with and contributions to colonialism, decolonisation (inside and outside the museum) is a particular priority.
- The organisational structure and funding of a museum influence its politics and values as much as its stances on specific issues. Museums should be transparent about how decisions are made, where funding comes from, and what they are doing with regards to any issues identified therein.
- The nature of what constitutes museum work should be considered holistically; janitorial staff are just as essential to keeping the museum open as curators.
- National museums and similar large institutions should ultimately not exist. An anarchist museological approach within such museums is insurrectionary and destabilising, opening up room for greater change and more equitable contribution.
- Museums should exist within the communities that enable their operations, rather than working 'on behalf of' people or groups. This allows the museum to collaborate in organic and equitable ways.

6.4. Reflections

This research raised several avenues of future inquiry. In-depth case studies of organisations like those Participants Three and Five worked for could be informative for understanding how to put an anarchist museology into practice on an organisational level, and the actual efficacy and benefits of doing so. How any single principle within the full framework can be put into practice could also be researched. In addition, the unionisation and general labour conditions of museum workers has not been substantially investigated. The questionnaire statistics also indicated

that longitudinal data on how the politics of employees at large museums change over time could prove useful to research.

In retrospect, I would have constructed the questionnaire differently. Two comments indicated that the anarchist framework statements were not understood clearly by all participants. Despite the risk of social desirability bias, asking participants to rate each point of the framework as written in this dissertation would have been a clearer format. The interviews were informative about the day-to-day contexts of a variety of museum workers, but the ability to explore this has been limited by this being exploratory research. Closer, longer-term case studies of anarchist museums and museum workers are needed to understand the full implications and complexities of practising an anarchist museology. This is especially true for experiences like those of Participant Six in order to better understand acting within and against larger, more traditional museums. Participants Two and Four ended up providing testimonies less relevant to the objectives of my research. I think it would have been a better use of time to only interview those who did show a strong alignment, at possible expense of number of participants, rather than relaxing conditions as much as I did.

It would have been beneficial to take a more confrontational approach at times during interviews. An issue mentioned by two participants that I did not analyse was free speech. It was not directly addressed in Section 4, but is an active media and political discourse. 'Free speech' is currently invoked by conservative cultural commentators to oppose liberatory movements (Golby, 2020; Ahmed, 2021). It has become something of a dog-whistle used to defend (particularly in the UK) racism and transphobia. It is a discourse many (myself included) would not usually entertain because its arguments are made in bad faith. I doubt that

participants intended to invoke these dog-whistles, given that they agreed to interview with me²⁶. This could have been a useful avenue to investigate what happens to active political discourses when they enter the museum, and how individuals interpret them. Regretfully, I did not inquire further, due to personal experiences and research inexperience.

I hope this research has successfully applied an anarchist critique to museums, and created a framework for anarchist cultural heritage organisation in the UK. My experiences interviewing those already doing this work showed it is possible to structure cultural organisations along anarchist principles, even within a society that is deeply hostile to such ways of operating, which makes them economically challenging, if not impossible. I have concluded that an anarchist museum is not possible, but smaller organisations can certainly operate as anarchists and may one day redefine what museums are in the UK. Regardless, there is work to be done, and that *is* being done, to open up the museum to future transformation.

²⁶ I am openly trans and included my pronouns in the research call-out

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Appendix A: Questionnaire

Section 1

Please answer the following questions in relation to your **current museum employment**. If you work for multiple institutions, please answer in relation to the institution you feel most significantly involved with.

Q.1.1. What type of museum do you work at?

- Central/national authority museum
- Local authority museum (including Arms Length External Organisations/ALEOs)
- University museum
- Regimental or MOD museum
- Independent museum (non-profit or charity)
- Independent museum (corporate/private)
- Other

Q.1.2. How many people, not including volunteers, work for the museum you work at?

- 0 (volunteer-run)
- 1-10
- 11-50
- 51-200
- More than 200

Q.1.3. How long have you worked at this museum? This includes volunteer work and separate periods of employment

- Less than a year
- 1-3 years
- 4-6 years
- 7-10 years
- More than 10 years

Q.1.4. How long have you worked in the museum sector in total? This includes volunteer work and separate periods of employment

- Less than a year
- 1-3 years
- 4-6 years
- 7-10 years
- 11-15 years
- More than 15 years

Q.1.5. What kinds of work do you typically do in your current role? Please select as many answers as you need to

- Curation
- Education and Outreach
- Collections Management
- Conservation and Preservation
- Front of House and Tours
- Organisational Management
- Marketing and Communication
- IT

- Retail, Events, and Catering
- Facilities Management
- Administration and HR
- Audience Research and Evaluation
- Finance
- Exhibition Development
- Cleaning and Janitorial Work
- Other (text entry field)

Q.1.6. Are you a member of a trade union?

A trade union is an association of workers that provides representation in the workplace and engages in collective bargaining with employers to secure improvements in pay, benefits, working conditions, or social and political status. The UK government certifies unions as independent bodies through the Trades Union Certification Office; this question includes unions that have not been recognised by the TUCO

- Yes
- No

Q.1.7. Are any of the following part of your normal responsibilities at work?

- Line management
- Conducting performance reviews
- Hiring new employees
- Making decisions about about salaries and pay within the organisation
- Making decisions about the overall direction of the organisation

- Making decisions about the direction of one area of the museum's functions (e.g. exhibition themes, outreach priorities)
- None of the above are part of my normal responsibilities

Section 2

Please answer the following questions in relation to your **current museum employment**. If you work for multiple institutions, please answer in relation to the institution you feel most significantly involved with.

Q.2.1. Indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements

[Scale: Strongly disagree, Somewhat disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Somewhat agree, Strongly agree]

- There is no conflict between my personal values and my work
- I consider my work to be 'just a job'
- My workplace structure aligns with the organisation's stated mission and values
- I alter the values I express in the workplace in order to make them friendlier to my colleagues
- I do not feel able to challenge the perspectives of my coworkers
- I do the kinds of work that I think museums should be doing
- The museum I work for has the potential to positively impact or change society
- I make a conscious effort to separate my work from my personal values

- It is possible for me to choose which museum jobs I apply for based on my personal values
- I find it difficult to get the organisation I work for to align more closely with my values

Q.2.2. If you would like to leave any additional comments in relation to any of the questions in this section, you may do so here:

Section 3

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements, **in relation to your overall experiences with and opinions about museums in the UK**

Q.3.1. Indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements

[Scale: Strongly disagree, Somewhat disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Somewhat agree, Strongly agree]

- Museums should aim to preserve their collections permanently
- Museums are able to use and care for their collections better than other kinds of cultural institutions would be able to
- Anyone involved with a museum (staff, volunteers, visitors, producers of objects, local residents, etc.) should be able to have a say in decisions about what the museum does
- Museums should allow their local community to use their space, including for activities not directly related to education
- National museums should not exist
- The primary use of museum objects should be display

- Museums should not have have explicit political motives or goals
- Museums are limited by being required to operate within the bounds of the law
- Museums should care for objects on the basis of ongoing consent rather than owning them
- Museums would operate more effectively if they were networked or confederated with other cultural institutions
- It is not the responsibility of museums to fight for social change
- Curation and conservation are more valuable forms of museum work than cleaning and front-of-house

Q.3.2. If you would like to leave any additional comments in relation to any of the questions in this section, you may do so here:

Appendix B: Interview framework

Indented questions are possible follow-ups identified in advance of the interview

- Could you describe what the museum you currently work for is like?
Aspects like organisational size, funding, type of museum, subjects covered, whatever you think will give me a sense of what it's like

- Follow up details: organisational structure, workforce composition, union presence, overall experience

- What kind of work do you do?

- Have you worked at any other museums before, and if so were they similar or different to your current workplace? This includes volunteer work if it feels significant to your experiences

- How would you describe your own politics and values?

[Clarify if needed: by this, I mean how you understand the world around you to operate and what you think and feel about that, what you think society should look like, causes you strongly believe in, and driving principles]

- Ask for a definition of any labels (anarchist, communist, liberal, left) they use

- How do you consider your views in relation to anarchism?

- How do you find these views interact with your work in museums?
 - If they've mentioned multiple institutions, ask about differences
 - Do you experience any tension between your values/politics and your work within the GLAM sector?
 - If they just say yes/no, ask for an example or an elaboration
 - Does this alter your behaviour at work or how you approach your work in any way
- Do you express or enact any of your politics through your work and in the workplace?
 - Why or why not?
 - If so, how? What examples?
 - Do you feel like this is something you can consciously choose to do or not do?
 - Are there some parts of your work in which its easier to be political?
 - Have you found it easier to do this in some museums/types of work than others?

- If there were a museum or similar project that operated in ways fully aligned with your politics, what would that look like?

- How would it be different to your previous experiences? How would it be the same?

- How are you working towards it in your current workplace? Are you?

- Do you feel like such a thing is possible?

- Would it still be a museum, or do we need something else?

- What changes would need to happen to make it possible?

Is there anything else you would like to say on the overall topic of museums and anarchism, or your own work?