

Whose Power?

Ep 1 - New Perspectives on Participation in Museums

SPEAKERS

Jordan Keighley, Abigail Harrison Moore, Esther Amis-Hughes

Abigail Harrison Moore 00:01

Welcome to Whose Power? a podcast exploring the power of participation in amplifying the voices of young people to create new knowledge and understanding. I'm Professor Abigail Harrison Moore from the University of Leeds. And together with the Preservative Party, an inspiring group of young curators based at Leeds City Museum, we've been exploring how best to empower young people to break down traditional barriers to influence and drive the way museum exhibitions are curated and presented.

Group members 00:28

Give them a chance to make themselves heard. They have so much to say that's so valuable. Give everyone a voice. Give everyone a chance to pick up the slack of other people, work in their own way. It is good for young people to be in an environment where they are used to being listened to.

Abigail Harrison Moore 00:45

In this our first series, we're in conversation with members of the Preservative Party, to find out what participation means to them, what barriers and challenges they've faced along the way, and how they've helped to create new knowledge, bring about meaningful change in their own lives and in the lives of others. In our first episode, we're joined by Jordan Keighley and Esther Amis-Hughes. Esther set up the Preservative Party 13 years ago. And when Esther was promoted to Community Engagement Manager, Jordan was appointed as Youth Engagement Curator, and Jordan's role is to facilitate the Preservative Party. Hello!

Esther Amis-Hughes 01:22

Hello, what an introduction!

Abigail Harrison Moore 01:26

So, when I first approached you, Esther, about my plans for the AHRC fellowship project, originally titled in the snappy way 'Empowering women: co-producing histories of women in energy in the home', what was your first reaction? And why, most importantly, did you say yes?

Esther Amis-Hughes 01:42

I didn't say yes. I have a long history of not saying yes to projects, because it's not really my position, my power to say yes to projects. So, I actually approached the group and spoke to them about it and spoke about how I felt it fitted in with some of the other things they were doing and the other things that

they cared about. And they said yes, so that's definitely how we work. In terms of the other half of your question, what did I like about it? I liked this idea of discovering new histories, I felt that really fitted in with what the group were trying to do. But what's quite difficult about agreeing to projects like this is that the group members that agreed to it change, grow up, leave, get jobs. So actually, it was a completely different generation that you had to then resell it to once you got the funding.

Abigail Harrison Moore 02:38

No, absolutely. And it was really important part of my learning process for you to not immediately say yes, but say we'll take it to the group and then work it out. So, I was very grateful for that. Thank you very much. And of course, by the time we started the work, by the time the AHRC said yes to the funding, you've been promoted - Hurrah! And Jordan, you are now in charge of facilitating the group. So, you were kind of presented with me? What did you think when you first heard about the project?

Jordan Keighley 03:04

Well, I inherited you I think you could say it's kind of the more accurate term? Well, I remember we first met and at that time, the Preservative Party were just sort of finishing or even installing a major exhibition that they spent two years working on called Overlooked. So, my head was very full of other things let's say, and we sat down, and you kind of gave me a 20-minute, passionate pitch of the project. And I just thought that seems really big and very complex, but also something that I'm sure that the group would engage with really well. But I also, I remember kind of trying to or hoping to explain to you that this is something that may likely change and that the group will shape. And especially with the title at the time, I was thinking that's going to change straight off with just how the group kind of work and what they may want to latch on to. Yeah, I think we kind of understood that quite quickly in how we were working together. And you learning that the group actually are the ones that shape these things and move forward with it.

Abigail Harrison Moore 04:05

Absolutely. And we're going to come back to Overlooked, because that was really, really fundamental for me. You were absolutely, both of you were brilliant in helping me think about how we were going to start this, but Overlooked really showed me the way and got to where we are where we are now, which we will talk a little bit more about. So, Esther, I want to go right back to the beginning. Why did you start this amazing project called the Preservative Party, and what were your ambitions for the group? And how do you think this has changed over the last 13 years?

Esther Amis-Hughes 04:36

That's a great question. And it presumes a lot on my part in terms of strategy, knowledge and experience, all of which I had and still probably have very little of. I'm going to regale you with a brief anecdote about a music band in Leeds that I recently found out. The Gang of Four used to rehearse in the building next to the Fenton and one day The Gang of Four went to the Fenton for Paint, and all of their mates picked up their guitars and decided they would call themselves the Mekons. And that's how the Mekons was formed. That's how I formed the Preservative Party, by pure accident. Someone said, you need to do youth engagement. And I thought, I don't know what that is. And they said, you need to do co-curation. And I thought I definitely don't know what that is. So, I feel like that ignorance allowed me to be led by the group, that very first group, they were only going to meet for six weeks, they were

just going to come in every night for six weeks. And at the end of that time, they all said Well can we just keep coming? And I was just too embarrassed to say no. So, they kept coming. And 13 years later, they still meet on a Thursday night. I think that lack of knowledge and finding my way, at the same time as the group members were finding their way, was the key to it being properly participatory and co-curated. So, I feel really glad that I didn't have that knowledge or experience that I didn't go away and read a load of books, or look at how other institutions did it, because it was a privilege to learn together.

Abigail Harrison Moore 06:03

Yeah, no, I think that's absolutely the key. And I think I've already learned that from you, is you just try, and you work it out. And you work it out together. And that's one of the wonderful things about participation when it goes right. But that's a skill. And I think we've kept talking throughout this about the fact that I'm learning from these experiences. There's also yourself within it all the time. And I think that's why it's really important to talk about participatory research and understand what it is because we're doing it all the time. But we don't know. We don't know what we're doing. So, coming back to that history, because that's really important. Because Jordan, you were a member of the Preservative Party 13 years ago?

Jordan Keighley 06:42

Yeah, I was there week number 1.

Esther Amis-Hughes 06:42

One of the original members

Abigail Harrison Moore 06:44

Week number one - that's amazing. So how do you think having been a member of the party has influenced the way that you work with the group?

Jordan Keighley 06:54

Oh, yeah. So it feels very kind of strange and full circle in a way that I now facilitate a group that was so kind of important to me, growing up and, you know, I remember joining that when I was 15 years old, and Esther kind of just approached me because I was just that kind of kid that was still hanging around after the year 10 work experience trying to find something to do. And Esther was like., I'm starting this group. Do you want to, want to come down? I was like, right, yeah. Okay.

Esther Amis-Hughes 07:17

Not in the street!

Jordan Keighley 07:18

Yeah, it was all safe and above board. Yeah. And so being a participant, and a member of the group for what was probably like nine years, really showed me the potential of kind of youth engagement and the potential of participatory work in this way, I would not have this job 100% If it wasn't for being a member of the Preservative Party, and that's because it gave me the opportunity and the space to kind of learn what is out there in museums and heritage. And I had all these opportunities to shadow, other curators

and other people at work, but also just learn from other group members. And so, it really allowed me to kind of shape my career, really my progression moving forward, because I could kind of try out lots of different things and learn what it was to be a curator, or was it to be a conservator or to be a researcher. But it also like I always felt empowered, as a group member, I always felt like the decisions we made mattered, and that when Esther gave us a question and said, you know, do you want to do this? If we said, yes, it would really happen, you know, and we felt, therefore, that we had the power to make change. And that's something that I've, it's really important to me that we continue with the group and that they have the space to challenge narratives and to reform how museums are, because it's always been that from the very beginning.

Abigail Harrison Moore 08:41

Yeah, and I want to pick up that in the next question. This is very much for both of you. Because you've both been involved over the last 13 years in curating a wide range of projects, both as facilitators, , but also as a member of the group. And we've realised together after Overlooked, this exhibition that you've talked about, Jordan, there's a lot of people interested in what you've done with the Preservative Party, what the Preservative Party have done, themselves, you know, you've been asked to attend conferences, you've been asked to advise, and that's fantastic. But I think it's this opportunity, we've been thinking about the opportunity to really reflect on what it is about your process that's different and what it is about your process that works. So, what do you think, you know, is there any way that you set up the way you do the projects? Are there any specific rules? Is there anything that we can take from it and give as guidance to others? It's a question for both of you.

Esther Amis-Hughes 09:42

I think that again, it's easy for me to say that that presumes a lot of knowledge on my part, or on Jordan's part, and it's easy for us to pretend that we are winging it, because it looks like that. But actually, I've been reflecting on this recently and I think it's a lot deeper than that. I think the crux of the Preservative Party is about relationships. I'm not particularly keen on person first or person centred as a phrase, I think it's, it's much better to think about it as relationships within the group, with the museum, with the staff, all of it is about relationships. Now, when I think about that, in my out of work life, I don't sit down and come up with projects with my friends or my partner, they organically happen out of conversations. Whereas in a museum or a professional setting, often the balance of power means that projects are come up with or they are determined and set, not necessarily through conversation, but through strategy. And through power. What we tried to do with the Preservative Party, or certainly what I tried to do, was to allow those conversations to happen. So, to just trust that even if someone is talking about Netflix every week, or even if someone is talking about anime, or if someone is talking about school and the frustrations there, that slowly we will see the threads of commonality that's within the group. And that will itself organically emerge as a project. Now, that is really difficult to go to conferences and talk about, because it sort of sounds like you're winging it. It means you have to completely trust and commit to that process; you can't half do it, you can't have a project in your head, that you said you'll do just in case nobody has a discussion, you've got to really invest in the relationship. And I think that is crucial, and really difficult.

Jordan Keighley 09:50

And just picking up from that really is why that can happen with the Preservative Party, is because they exist, irrespective of the project, the Preservative Party will meet every Thursday, even if we don't have anything currently to do. That means that people still come to the session, they still socialise, they still talk about their lives. And you know, they begin working on things that are important to them, they have the space to build something, and then we as facilitators react to that. And we kind of provide the scaffolding and the support and the frameworks around their ideas. But that, like, as you said, is a big risk. Because, you know, what, if they don't come up with anything in ages, but they always do come up with something and the museum is, you know, with this group so been established for so long, trusts the group and allows them to have that freedom. And I think when others come and say, oh, what's the success of the how, you know, how can I have a Preservative Party, you know, and then they'll say, oh, we've got a project, we need a young group to deliver and like, well, straight off, that's the wrong way around. You need the group before you have the project. And that is just quite a difficult thing to justify to funders or to large museums, you know, to, to put the money there. But that's the how to do it authentically. That's what co-curation is.

Esther Amis-Hughes 12:45

It's the only way to do it.

Jordan Keighley 12:47

Yeah.

Abigail Harrison Moore 12:48

Absolutely. And trust. I want to pick up on that, because that's been my learning about this project and about participation more generally about how important, think I guessed it was there, I think it was a natural thing. But there's something very specific about trust within, as you both say, institutional settings. And that also brings in funding and project development. Could you say a little bit more about how do you think, I know it was organic? But how do you think you enabled the wider museum service to trust the group?

Esther Amis-Hughes 13:26

I think I was very lucky. So that the first project that the group did, still remains, I think one of the greatest co-curated projects. And that happened because Jordan, who was in the group at the time, and the others came to look around the Discovery Centre, and said ah this stuff, how did you get it? So being young in my career, I gave an uncensored answer about how museums acquire objects. And the group said, let's do an exhibition on that. And then did an exhibition that explored those stories, but in a really creative, engaging, family friendly way, which are not phrases I would put together with, like colonialism and things like that. And that project, the museum, let us do that project. And it was a success. And I think that we were the product of circumstances, it was the Cultural Olympiad, we were part of the Cultural Olympiad. We'd promised to do an exhibition, we couldn't not do an exhibition. And fortunately, there was enough trust within the senior management at the time that they said, Yeah, let's see this one through. And because they were so brilliant and successful at that project, I think we've been very, very fortunate to, to have reaped the rewards of that. How would you do it if you've not had that? I think you build up the relationship with museum staff. The relationship shouldn't just be with myself or with Jordan. You know, every time that one of our group members comes into the museum,

they should be greeted by the staff. And they are. Someone said to me this morning, where were the group yesterday? I didn't see them last night. That's just someone that's on the door that was waiting for them to come in because they know that's the time. So, I think it's about relationships. And it's about trust. And it's also about taking on the risk as staff, not as the young adults. So, thinking as staff, if this project doesn't happen, that's on us, I will figure that out. This is not on them. And I think that helps to build the trust.

Jordan Keighley 15:18

Yeah, and I think it's about, like you said, breaking down those boundaries between the group members and other staff, so that they kind of know the processes of the museum, but then also sort of the staff members kind of know what the group are doing. They know what the group's about; they know how the group work. And that means, for example, if I have to, if we need to negotiate a deadline, on like the print for an exhibition, and that's because a particular member of the group, it's really important that they write this panel, right, it's essential that they write this panel. And let's say that member doesn't come for three weeks, because they've got their A levels or something's really stressful happening in their life, although they may end up coming to a session, but they're just having a really bad day. And the last thing they need is me sitting down with them and being like, just so you know, there's a deadline next week, and we need to crack this out. Me going to the kind of, you know, design team and saying, is there some flexibility here? I think it's really important that this person isn't pressured and that this happened organically and authentically, because the last thing that's happening is I am writing that panel, that's absolutely never going to happen. So there needs to be some flexibility kind of in the kind of structure and the processes. And I will say at Leeds there is because there is an understanding of what the group are and how we do co-curation. And I'm not saying those conversations are always easy, because we can't just have unlimited, never ending time frames to do things. But there is an understanding that happens because there's trust in the group and that they've been here for a long time.

Esther Amis-Hughes 16:42

They also need a Jordan, someone who is willing to have those conversations, and has completely got their back in terms of advocating and I think when you immerse yourself in the group, as we've both been privileged to do, you know, the conversations, you know, the pressures, you know, the stresses, then you can advocate really widely for that group across the rest of the service. So, the group know that if Jordan says, I will sort this, so you can write this panel, they trust completely that you will do that. And they equally know that when he says, this is the last chance, we are now at deadline, they trust that he means that as well. So, I think it crucially is about that advocacy role. And Jordan does that brilliantly.

Abigail Harrison Moore 17:21

I want to just pick up on something that you said Esther, around the Discovery Centre, because some people won't know what the Discovery Centre is. But also because we've really benefited from the nature of that, that museum space, that part of the Leeds Museum and Galleries' collections, for our project, Whose Power, I think it's really important to start to think about how though the way those objects are accessed in a different sort of museum space in Leeds has both contributed to the

Preservative Party to the first exhibition, but also has fundamentally contributed to the work that we've been doing together through the Whose Power project.

Esther Amis-Hughes 18:01

So, the Discovery Centre is the kind of open store for Leeds Museums and Galleries. So that's where the objects that aren't on display at the other seven sites are kept. It's an open access store, so people can go and see it. And there's a real privilege, I think, in looking on the museum system, so the cataloguing system, looking for objects, and then going into the Discovery Centre to see those. Now anyone really can do that if they make an appointment. But I think there's a real sense of behind the scenes, and rightly so that really contributes to the creativity of projects.

Abigail Harrison Moore 18:40

Yeah, absolutely. And I think we'll come back over the series to think about the power of objects to enable these sorts of difficult conversations, often between people, you know, who aren't used to working in museums, and the museum staff. Objects can often facilitate those conversations in a really interesting way. And that kind of brings me to my next question, because something that Jordan and I've talked a lot about through this process, is recognising the research part of what we're doing, because quite often in museums, we talk about the work that you've been doing as a practice, as a community engagement practices, as an outreach practice. And then in my world, in the university world, we talk a lot about research. But one of the first things that I realised through this project in having the conversations with you, is how practice is research, research is practice. I thought I should have known that. But actually, this project, and participatory research more generally has really got me thinking about what is the research? So how do you think this project has changed or influenced the way that you think about yourself as a researcher, and do you think it's changed? Or will it change the way that you work in learning and community outreach? Again, it's a question for both of you.

Jordan Keighley 18:40

I will say at the beginning of this project, I wouldn't have assumed that my role as a facilitator of the group kind of crosses over with the realm of research, you know. The group in my head are the researchers. But that was in a very limited kind of view of like, well, they're the ones sat at the computers looking up, and doing research in a very kind of traditional way. Whereas this project has kind of opened my eyes and seeing research as just kind of the production of new knowledge, and the kind of contribution of something new. And I'm like, oh, we do that all the time. So yeah, that has kind of been really eye opening, and therefore has allowed me to kind of reflect as a professional in kind of like, oh, well, how am I researching then, as a facilitator of other people who are also researching, but in a different way? And, you know, we, when you and I have our kind of weekly check ins to say, to plan, you know, we kind of talked many times, like, we should probably record these, you know, because we are having all these conversations about participation and research just in these kind of brain dumps about how to run the group that week. So yeah, that's it has changed my outlook there.

Abigail Harrison Moore 21:01

Absolutely. And I think it's those conversations, it's that space to step back and reflect, because you're always doing, you know, and but research is happening all the time. And, you know, the fellowship has been about me trying to work out what this thing called participatory research is, and right from the

beginning of working with you in the group, I thought, I started thinking, I've always been doing this. Esther?

Esther Amis-Hughes 21:25

That word reflection, I think that's a really important word. And that's definitely what I think the group force us maybe to do, all the time to reflect on what the museum does, reflect on what our practice is, reflect on what our relationships look like with them. Again, I hadn't thought of myself as a researcher. But once I started to watch how you and Jordan were reflecting, so constantly on your practice, I began to realise that that is definitely what this project has brought to the group. And that's been a really positive thing,

Abigail Harrison Moore 21:57

Thinking more broadly, but also maybe picking up on Overlooked as we've started talking about that, I wanted you to think a little bit more about how you think the work of the Preservative Party has changed the way that Leeds Museums and Galleries work. And more broadly, how it's changed the way that you think about how we can empower young people and get over some of those barriers to participation in museums and galleries?

Jordan Keighley 22:28

Overlooked was an exhibition that the Preservative Party spent two years kind of creating, and they completely came up with the entire concept, as they often do, you know, they thought of all the themes, they did all of the research, they contacted community partners, they chose the objects, wrote the text, installed, the cases, painted the walls, you know, like the level of their involvement was kind of all encompassing. And it was an exhibition about people who are overlooked, both historic and contemporary. So in that way, it was really ambitious, because in one space you had, you know, that a person who was suspected to be kind of an ancient enslaved person, and then around the corner, you had stories of kind of the contemporary deaf community, kind of in the same space, the only thing that is grouping these people together, is that they have been overlooked, for whatever reason. And the group really wanted to kind of make this the most accessible exhibition possible. It was all about inclusion, it was about providing people a space to advocate for themselves and to, you know, to be reflected in a way where they, they, they don't feel like they've been represented to museums previously. And I would say that it's had a massive impact kind of on Leeds Museums and Galleries more widely. And I guess I can just give an example of this. One day while just working on Overlooked, I'd got an email from a member of the Leeds community saying, I am deaf, I would like to come on Saturday with a group of my deaf friends. Is there anything that the museum has in British Sign Language? Or is there anything about Deaf history? And at the time I've, I've replied, and the answer to both of those questions was No. And this kind of struck me and I ended up just kind of reflecting on this to the with the group. I just brought it up one session. And they turned to me and said, can we involve these people in Overlooked? Do they want to be involved as a kind of community who feel overlooked? So, I reached back, and they said, Yes, we would like to do that. And what we learned really quickly, is why the deaf community are overlooked, which is how expensive it is to engage them meaningfully, because interpreters cost a lot of money, you know, a normal session would be, I would spend 10 pounds with just an average group on custard creams and coffee and tea, whereas it will be two to 300 pounds for the same session with a group of deaf people. And we were kind of initially looking at our

budgets and realised well, we can probably make this group maybe twice, and that's just not good enough. And we took that back to the Preservative Party and they said, that is not good enough. The reason why this group are overlooked is because their access needs are never meaningfully met from a financial point of view. So, the group kind of raised that point, I then therefore I've raised that point. And we got the money to do it, you know, Leeds Museum said, all right. Okay. Let's do it. And let's just see how much it costs and we'll make a case study out of it. And now kind of as a result of that, you know, we produced four films with a local deaf community. That's the first time it's ever been done. looking at deaf awareness, deaf oppression, the deaf community and different technologies. We did deaf-led tours. So, this is where Tor is delivered in BSL, rather than interpreted from a curator, you know, we had 50 People come to those tours, all of them had never been to the museum before. So, it was a huge win. And now the museum is putting BSL in its permanent spaces. And we're finding ways to do that through community consultation. None of that would have happened if the Preservative Party hadn't, for one, been curious about the email that I just happened to mention. And then two really kicked off about the kind of injustice there and the kind of hypocrisy of, oh, well, we want to do an exhibition about Overlooked, but it's too expensive, you know, like, they felt empowered enough to raise that concern and feel like we could do something about it.

Abigail Harrison Moore 26:09

So, lots of really interesting ideas here that we're going to pick up over the series. And it's going to be really interesting listening to the group members and speaking with the group members about their experience of Overlooked, their experience of going to the Discovery Centre, because again, it's as you've both spoken about, it's about how we work together. And that's where our learning is coming from throughout this project. Thank you ever so much. I really, really appreciate you joining in the podcast today.

Esther Amis-Hughes 26:35

Can I Can I just say one last thing. Jordan just said he spends 10 pounds a week on custard creams and coffee. I don't think that's true. Our group is fueled by Pringles and chocolate. So, if you're setting up a youth engagement project, please don't buy custard creams and coffee without first checking. Yeah. That that that wasn't that was a lie.

Abigail Harrison Moore 26:57

And that was one of the first things I learned was that a lot of our funding and I'm very grateful to the AHRC is being spent on Pringles in a really good way. Food is really important in terms of making everybody feel ready and settled and engaged in a participatory project. So, thank you ever so much. Thank you for joining us on this episode of the *Whose Power?* podcast which was presented by me Abigail Harrison Moore in collaboration with Leeds City Museum and the Preservative Party. Music is by Tae and production and editing is by Chris Garrington and Krissie Brighty-Glover at Research Podcasts. Funding comes from the Arts and Humanities Research Council Fellowship Scheme. If you've got a question, or a comment about what you've heard in this episode, then you can find the Preservative Party on X @presparty. We'd really love to hear from you.