Framing Diversity: Policy Rhetoric and the Cultural Supply of Modern Art Museums

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ABSTRACT

This research explores how modern art museums conceptualize and operationalize diversity within their policy documents and strategic plans. Although museums are facing increasing pressure from political and social justice movements to change their collections and curatorial practices, their approaches to diversity are often inconsistent and largely symbolic. To examine this discrepancy, the study draws on cultural economics, decolonial scholarship, and Andrew Stirling's (1999) multidimensional diversity framework, which encompasses variety, balance, and disparity, to evaluate how museums frame diversity within their cultural supply (i.e., collections, exhibitions, and other cultural offerings). A qualitative comparative content analysis was conducted on institutional documents from ten modern museums across the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Canada, Spain, and France. The findings show that museums primarily identify diversity through the presence of variety, as shown by the wide but uneven use of diversity descriptors (e.g., BIPOC, queer). Stirling's second dimension, balance, appears in limited forms and is often focused on correcting underrepresentation in siloed and temporary initiatives rather than as structural integration throughout the collection. Finally, the degree of difference between diversity descriptors (i.e., disparity) is absent; instead, most museums frame diversity using broad umbrella terms such as "non-Western" that flatten meaningful differences and risk reproducing Eurocentric logics. This study is the first to use Stirling's model within the museum (and thereby fine art) industry, and ultimately reveals that diversity is often reduced to symbolic or siloed initiatives to correct absence rather than achieve systemic transformation. It also underscores the need for clearer definitions of diversity and the establishment of measurable goals that use concrete data and move beyond tokenistic inclusion. While the research sample is limited to Western institutions and based solely on public-facing documents, the research provides a framework for evaluating diversity that could be further developed in future studies to assess and operationalize diversity directly within art collections.

Key Words: Diversity Management, Modern Art Museums, Collections, DEAI, Policy Analysis.

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1 Introduction

Museums occupy a dual role as both custodians of cultural heritage and as arbiters of cultural value (Bennett, 2006). Characterized by their neutral white walls and educational responsibility, museums are widely perceived as impartial institutions despite their active role in selecting artworks worthy of preservation and public display. By legitimizing some artists while marginalizing others, their choices reinforce hierarchies of visibility and shape how culture is remembered and valued. What was once a quiet and largely unquestioned role has, in recent years, become the subject of mounting criticism and public debate. The disruptions of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as heightened attention to global challenges such as climate change, democratic fragility, and the digital divide, have intensified expectations for museums to act as socially responsive institutions (Nightengale, 2021; France Muséums, 2022). These increasing pressures culminated during recent surges in social justice movements such as #MeToo in 2017, but especially Black Lives Matter in 2020, which prompted an organizational awakening to endemic social injustice and equality (Miller and Davis-Howard, 2022; Daniel, 2024).

Museums have responded by embracing diversity in various degrees, with some offering only superficial statements and others introducing concrete changes to acquisition practices in recently issued policy documents. Despite these different intensities, the issue gained significant momentum: international initiatives such as *International Museum Day 2020: Museums for Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion* (ICOM, n.d.) signaled the growing institutional recognition of diversity. This trajectory was formalized in 2022, when the International Council of Museums (ICOM) adopted a new definition of museums for the first time in 15 years: “A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society [...] Open to the public, accessible, and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability.” (ICOM, 2022). The approval process lasted 18 months due to several committee members rejecting terms like “inclusive” and “diversity” because they were considered overly ideological (Dolák & Večeřa, 2022). Although these developments mark a significant shift, they also illustrate how diversity remains a complex and contested concept.

The current visibility of this tension is perhaps strongest in the United States, where diversity initiatives have recently faced significant political resistance. In January 2025, the Trump administration issued an executive order requiring federal agencies to dismantle their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs (Executive Office of the President, 2025; Green, 2025). Several federally funded museums, such as the Smithsonian Institution, were directly affected. Within days, the museum closed its DEI office and revised part of its mission statement from "diversity, equity, access, and inclusion" to "welcoming and accessible" (Boucher, 2025). While the Smithsonian's commitment to equal employment opportunity remains unchanged, the incident illustrates how quickly diversity can be reframed or curtailed under political influence.

While this political backlash is currently most acute in the U.S., European museums are not immune to similar pressures. A 2024 study by the Network of European Museum Organisations (NEMO) found that 89.5% of national museum organizations across 31 countries in Europe reported political influence on their budgets (NEMO, 2025). They also found that more than seven in ten museums perceive a rise of polarisation in their countries. NEMO cautions that such developments are leading to increasing pressures on museum operations that ultimately threaten their ability to function impartially (NEMO, 2025, p. 2). This vulnerability reflects not only the current polarized climate but also how closely diversity is tied to ethics, politics, and legislation.

It is worth examining the evolution of the term diversity to understand how the concept's position came to be today. Coming from the Latin *diversitas*, the terms originally meant "difference" or "variety," and simply referred to the presence of difference, or unlikeness of things (Thompson & Cusseo, 2014). In organizational contexts, however, the modern use of the term took shape during the Civil Rights Movement. In the U.S., early legislative mandates such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 legally obligated organizations to prevent discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin (Nkomo & Stewart, 2006). In Europe, the Treaty of Rome in 1957 first introduced provisions on gender inequality (Schiek, 2005). Within this legal framework, diversity efforts were primarily located in human resources (HR) departments, where they are still treated primarily as a specialized and administrative function rather than a core business strategy (Roberson et al., 2017; Cho et al., 2025). Much of this work focused on representational diversity, where the primary effort is to increase the number of underrepresented

groups in the workforce through affirmative action programs and non-discriminatory policies (Roberson et al., 2017).

The turn of the 21st century marked a conceptual expansion of diversity, where scholars emphasized the distinction between diversity (in terms of composition) and inclusion (the experience of belonging) (Pless & Maak, 2004). This era was often described as the "business case for diversity," and it was argued that a diverse and inclusive work environment could generate greater innovation and improved problem-solving (Kochan et al., 2003; Roberson, 2017). While much of this discussion remained rooted in HR management, cultural economists gradually began to ask related questions from a different angle. They examined how the diversity of cultural goods could similarly increase innovation, as well as expand consumer choice and strengthen market resilience (Benhamou & Peltier, 2007). This perspective extends diversity beyond the internal workforce and towards the external outputs of organizations. Essentially, cultural economists consider diversity where it is most visible and financially consequential: in the supply of "product" available for public consumption.

Despite these developments, most museums have only just begun to address the diversity of their collections, and they do so more like an HR manager than a cultural economist. This limited approach is compounded by the absence of standardized frameworks and shared definitions, which leaves policies and strategies surrounding diversity efforts vague and difficult to evaluate. This research examines *how modern art museums' institutional documents conceptualize and enact diversity within their cultural supply.* The study analyzes ten modern art museums across the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Canada, with a particular focus on recurring patterns, ambiguities, and inconsistencies in how diversity is addressed in relation to the collections, exhibitions, and other cultural offerings available to visitors. Rather than examining the actual composition of the museums' collections, the research analyzes how museums present their past, present, and future diversity commitments to reveal the underlying beliefs guiding their collection practices. Through a qualitative content analysis, the research paper aims to identify the conceptual and structural frameworks surrounding diversity and how they support and hinder structural improvement. The analysis is conducted using the multi-dimensional framework of diversity by Andrew Stirling (1999). His framework distinguishes diversity across three dimensions: *variety* (the number of categories present),

balance (the relative distribution among the categories), and *disparity* (the degree of difference between categories). This model is particularly useful because it conceptualizes diversity beyond simple counts of representation, and instead captures both the breadth and depth of differences. By offering a more systematic and comparable method for evaluating diversity across different contexts, cultural economists have used Stirling's Model (1999) to analyze diversity in film, music, and publishing.

This study is the first to examine how museums articulate diversity in their policy documents, reports, and strategies using Sitrling's Model as a reference point. As such, the research fills a gap in the existing literature by contributing to ongoing discussions about diversity in the museum sector and offering a policy-based critique of current institutional approaches. The research ultimately argues that without clear definitions and measurable criteria, museum diversity policies risk becoming symbolic commitments rather than effective tools for change. Ultimately, the findings aim to provide a critical perspective on current museum diversity work and to propose ways in which institutions might adopt more rigorous and transparent approaches to assessing collection diversity. The application of Stirling's model, combined with insights from decolonial scholarship and cultural economics, provides a structured method for analyzing collection diversity beyond rhetoric and towards more concrete institutional change.

2 Theoretical Framework

Diversity is approached from many different angles across cultural policy, economics, and museology. This theoretical framework synthesizes these perspectives to establish a foundation for analyzing how modern art museums can frame and manage diversity more effectively. The first section reviews definitions of diversity within the cultural and creative industries (hereafter CCIs) and the challenges that come with the term's conceptual ambiguity. The second considers diversity in cultural economics, particularly in relation to welfare theory and cultural supply. The third outlines Stirling's model of variety, balance, and disparity, which serves as the methodological framework supporting this research. Finally, the last section looks at museums' engagement with diversity, beginning with the arrival of new museology and more recent

decolonial critiques. Although previous studies have shown the significant lack of diversity in collections, current research and institutional efforts continue to concentrate on workforce and audience engagement, rather than on the collections directly.

2.1 Defining Diversity

The term "diversity" has become a central concept in the formulation of international cultural law and legal rulings within the CCIs (Ranaivoson, 2020). Despite this central position, many academics agree that the concept and definition of diversity remain "analytically neglected" (Stirling, 2007), "contested" (Chopin & Germaine, 2024), and "yet to be fully understood" (Ramirez, 2001). Even with the recent increase of diversity in mainstream discourse, scholars argue that the term serves as a "catch-all" and lacks a clear and shared definition (Verkuyten & O'Brien, 2021). In 2005, the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions defined cultural diversity as "the manifold ways in which the cultures of groups and societies find expression" (UNESCO, 2005). The association of diversity within CCIS (i.e., cultural diversity) with "cultural expressions" (UNESCO, 2005) was a strategic decision to accommodate diverse national and ideological perspectives on the issue (Isar, 2005). However, scholars agree that UNESCO's inclusive approach resulted in a polysemic definition that fosters inconsistent and sometimes contradictory applications in policy and practice (Isar, 2005; Ranaivoson, 2007; Benhamou & Peltier, 2010). This does not imply that cultural diversity should have a single, fixed definition. On the contrary, scholars emphasize the need for researchers to clearly define cultural diversity to ensure a transparent foundation for the assumptions underlying their analysis (Ranaivoson, 2020; Benhamou and Peltier, 2007). Benhamou and Peltier (2007) further argue that a precise definition is essential for objective measurement. This clarity also allows for meaningful comparisons between countries with different cultural and political contexts and enables proper evaluation of diversity policies (Ranaivoson, 2007).

2.2 Diversity of Cultural Supply

Diversity entered cultural economic discourse through the Welfare Theory, which emphasizes not only the total amount of output in an economy but also how that output

contributes to overall social welfare (Blaug, 2001). When cultural economists began applying welfare theory more explicitly to the production and distribution of cultural goods in the 1970s, they considered it primarily in relation to the heterogeneity of preferences within society. They saw that a single standardized cultural product may satisfy some audiences while leaving others underserved (Towse, 2010). By contrast, a culturally diverse supply increases profit and overall welfare by allowing more groups of consumers to find works (i.e., products) that align with their tastes and preferences. Furthermore, cultural economists also observed how diversity increased innovation and increased the likelihood of breakthroughs since a plethora of creators inevitably pushed the boundaries of standard cultural production (Peterson and Berger, 1975; Lopes, 1992). This also reduces the risk of a cultural "lock-in", where a narrow set of producers or styles dominate the market (Peterson and Berger, 1975). Ultimately, by sustaining a varied supply, cultural economists argue that the CCIs are less prone to homogenization and become more resilient to changing consumer demands.

Empirical studies have illustrated these dynamics in different creative and cultural industries. Peterson and Berger (1975) were among the first to explore the relationship between market structures and diversity in supply and demand by showing that periods of greater competition in the U.S. recorded music industry were associated with higher stylistic variety, while concentrated markets led to more homogeneity. Lopes (1992) expanded on this research by investigating the rise of an "open system", where major labels adapted to consumer preference through establishing sub-labels and niche scouting strategies to maintain market dominance. Research on other sectors remained limited until Napoli (1997) examined program diversity in three major U.S. television groups. Napoli argues that regulatory policies should address not only supply-side diversity (the amount and variety of available content) but also exposure diversity (the extent to which audiences actually engage with diversity). As such, these early studies did not explicitly define diversity, but understood and measured the concept mainly in terms of product variety, such as the number of genres, styles, or producers available (Peterson & Berger, 1975; Lopes, 1992). Napoli (1997) expanded this by distinguishing source from content, as well as highlighting the consumers' perception of variety in available goods. As diversity has grown into a normative concept in contemporary discourse, cultural economics, and policy have also increasingly framed the concept more in terms of representation and inclusion. It is not only

about how many genres or producers exist, but also whether cultural supply reflects the voices and identities of different social groups. As such, diversity has shifted from being a largely structural measure of product variety to a broader normative goal that connects cultural production to democratic discourse and social justice.

This conceptual shift has broadened significance but also complicated evaluation. On the one hand, linking diversity to values such as representation and inclusion makes the concept more socially and politically relevant, aligning cultural economics with policy frameworks like UNESCO's 2005 Convention. On the other hand, ideals such as justice and democratic discourse are far more difficult to capture in clear indicators than counting genres or producers. As a result, diversity has become more ambiguous and inconsistent for evaluation across and within cultural industries.

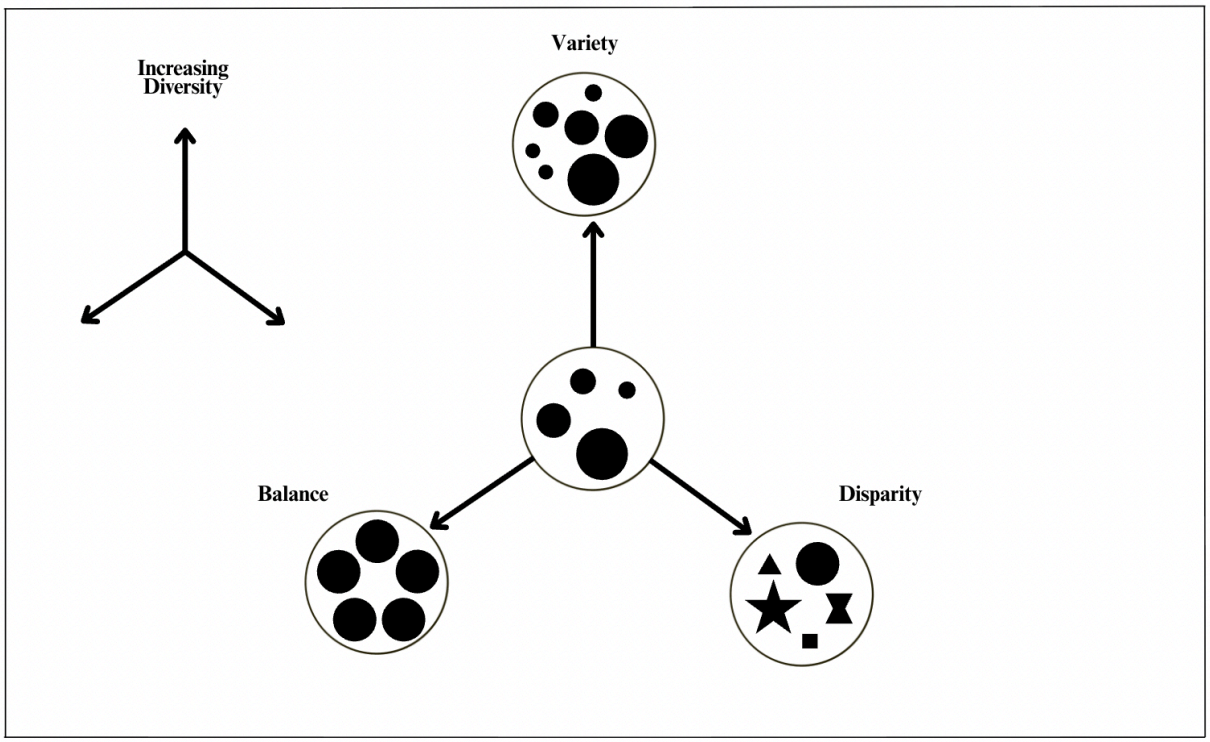
2.3 Stirling's Model

At the turn of the millennium, Stirling (1999) introduced a groundbreaking multidimensional framework for analyzing diversity. Stirling (1999) observed that although the concept of diversity appears across vastly different disciplines such as ecology, technology, and cultural economics, it is consistently defined by three interrelated properties: variety, balance, and disparity. Variety refers to the number of distinct categories or types within a system, while balance describes the distribution of elements across these categories (Ranaivoson, 2007; Dam, 2019; Stirling, 2007). A high balance indicates an even distribution, whereas a low balance signifies concentration in only a few types. This can be determined by comparing the proportion of each type relative to the total. Disparity accounts for the degree of difference between types by considering how distinct or similar they are in terms of their specific characteristics (Dam, 2019; Runnegar, 1987; Stirling, 2007). Systems with high disparity include categories that are fundamentally different, whereas low disparity reflects similarities between them.

Figure 1

The Relationship Between Variety, Balance, & Disparity

The Relationship Between Variety, Balance, and Disparity



Note. This figure is reproduced from "On the Economics of Diversity" by A. Stirling, 1998, SPRU Electronic Working Paper Series, p. 41. Minor stylistic adaptations made for consistency.

The application of Stirling's (1999) diversity framework in cultural sector research remains limited, with only a handful of studies utilizing its three-dimensional approach. Moreau and Peltier (2004) were the first to explicitly reference Stirling's model in cultural economics by applying his framework to assess film diversity across six national markets. Their study emphasized the role of production nationality in shaping diversity outcomes. Peltier and Benhamou (2007) went on to apply this model to examine diversity in the French publishing industry as well as UIS cinema data (2010). Lévy-Hartmann (2011) employed the framework to study diversity in the film market and video recordings in France and Europe, while Bourreau et al. (2011) used it to assess trends in the French recorded music industry between 2003 and 2008. More recently, Bello and Garcia (2021) adapted the model to analyze patterns in music consumption on Spotify. Across these studies, Stirling's model is useful because it separates diversity into three distinguishable parts: variety (how many types there are), balance (how

evenly they are represented), and disparity (how different the types are). This helps reveal cases where there are many types but one or two still dominate, or where supply is varied but not drastically when compared to each other. The main limitations are, however, that results depend on how different types are defined (e.g., nationality, genre, format), and how far apart these categories are from each other.

The use of Stirling's model remains relatively scarce and concentrated in the film and recorded music industry (M'Barki, 2024). Nevertheless, the framework offers a relevant and timely approach for the analysis of collection diversity described in museum documents. It organizes qualitative, strategic, and policy language into clear and comparable indicators. In this context, variety corresponds to the number of distinct artists identified through diversity descriptors (e.g., Black, queer); balance reflects the distribution of representation of these artists across a collection; and disparity concerns itself with the degree of difference between artists. Presenting these three components side by side supports cross-museum comparison and creates the theoretical foundation on which future analysis could build to directly analyze collection compositions.

2.4 Current Museological Diversity Management

The application of Stirling's model to the fine art sector remains notably absent. As institutions that collect, classify, label, and interpret cultural artifacts, museums have long operated as "differencing machines" (Bennett, 2006) in which they not only reflect diversity but actively produce it. However, as Ross (2004) notes, it was not until the emergence of the new museology movement in the 1970s that museums began critically reflecting on their positionality. This was largely due to political and economic pressures, such as the Thatcher-era policies in the 1980s, in which market-driven reforms forced museums to justify their public funding by demonstrating broader societal value (Coffee, 2008; Ross, 2004). This shift marked a move away from object-centered institutions toward more visitor-centered and socially reflexive spaces (Ross, 2004).

Much of the subsequent literature on cultural diversity in museums has since centered on diversity within the workforce and among audiences, rather than directly on the collections themselves (Werner et al., 2014). A research study from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation,

Association of Art Museums Directors (AAMD), and the American Alliance of Museums (AMM) revealed a significant lack of diversity throughout the demographic makeup of employees in U.S. art museums (Westermann et al., 2024). Similarly, museum audiences are disproportionately White and highly educated (Werner et al., 2014). Scholars argue that museological workforces lacking diversity cannot accurately represent the cultural heritage of a multifaceted society (Ali & Byrne, 2022). As such, employment practices are positioned as a prerequisite to curatorial practices, which would explain why much of the literature continues to focus on this.

It was the arrival of decolonial scholarship that most closely considered itself with the diversity of cultural supply (i.e., collections, exhibitions, acquisition practices, educational programs, etc.). Literature on decolonization gained traction in museum discourse throughout the 1990s, when critiques on the overwhelming presence of Eurocentric biases in ethnographic museums' curatorial displays began to emerge (Wali & Collins, 2023). It took another twenty years for scholars and a select few museum professionals to begin to place greater emphasis on building meaningful and sustainable relationships with the communities whose cultural heritage was and still is represented in museum collections (Boast, 2011; Wali & Collins, 2023). While these debates began in ethnographic museums, recent developments have pushed modern art museums to also recognize their colonial histories and biases. The modern art canon grew in the same imperial networks that idolized European heritage while often excluding, and at best misrepresenting, that of the Global South. Modern and contemporary art museums are also uniquely positioned to engage with current social and political issues, such as diversity (Alvau & Stolyarova, 2021). They have become spaces where questions of representation and equity are increasingly visible and contested, which in turn positions them as publicly expected to grapple with diversity as a central institutional concern.

Overall, the literature and theoretical frameworks surrounding diversity demonstrate that museums have consistently fallen behind diversity discourse. Among the limited publicly available statistics on the diversity of art collections, a 2019 study of major North American museums reveals disparities that exemplify patterns visible across the broader Western museum sector. A team of researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds surveyed the collections of 18 prominent U.S. museums to determine the gender, ethnicity, and race of the artists

represented. Its findings were based on a thorough examination of these museums' public online catalogs, which included crowdsourcing 10,000 artist records containing over 9,000 unique artists. They also analyzed 45,000 responses to infer artist genders, ethnicities, geographic origins, and birth decades. With all statistical caveats in mind, the study's findings paint a bleak picture of the demographic disparity in museum collections; White artists account for 85.4 percent of works in major US museum collections, while men account for 87.4 percent. African American artists account for only 1.2 percent of all works, Asian artists account for 9 percent, and Hispanic and Latino artists account for only 2.8 percent (Topaz et al., 2019).

This study, along with the public's pressure following BLM in 2020, has contributed to the institution's growing awareness and desire for change, even though systematic approaches to measuring diversity within museum collections remain rare. Implementing diversity and inclusion policies continues to pose challenges for many organizations (Meijer, 2020). Research examining how diversity manifests in collections themselves remains limited, particularly regarding the diversity of artists represented. Museums continue to engage with diversity primarily at the levels of workforce and audience, aligning with broader equity and inclusion initiatives, yet the question of how to conceptualize and measure collection diversity remains an underdeveloped area of study.

3 Methodology

3.1 Study Design

The central research question of this study investigates how modern art museums conceptualize and operationalize diversity within their policy documents, reports, and strategic plans. To answer this effectively, the study employs a qualitative comparative content analysis of documents published by ten different modern art museums. Rather than directly evaluating the effectiveness of diversity efforts or quantifying diversity within collections, the research focuses on these museums as case studies for how diversity is described and operationalized in policy and strategy discourse. The analysis acknowledges that how museums frame their efforts in official documents may differ significantly from what happens in practice; the findings, therefore, capture institutional self-representation and management strategy, rather than direct measures of

enacted change. This approach allows for an examination of the frameworks and institutional logics that guide diversity, rather than reducing it to numerical representation.

Each document was published by the museum and intended for public audiences. The comparative analysis allows for the identification of patterns, omissions, and contradictions in how diversity is conceptualized and operationalized throughout the different museums. Stirling's three-dimensional model of diversity (1999) serves as the analytical lens. This framework has primarily been applied in cultural economics and media studies, and this research applies it to museum collections, programs, and other initiatives intended for public consumption. As such, it combines the sociological understanding of diversity with the economic understanding of a diverse cultural supply. Here, Stirling's Model provides a structured and systematic approach to interpreting complex discourse around diversity, identity, and representation.

This study analyzes institutional documents from ten modern art museums that were selected through purposive sampling. Modern art museums were defined as institutions whose collections comprise works from the 1860s onwards, although most of the museums' collections also included a significant selection of contemporary art. This typology is appropriate because modern and contemporary art institutions are more likely to engage with current social and political issues, such as diversity (see section 2.4)(Alvau & Stolyarova, 2021). They also often aim to represent the societies in which they are located, which is why the museums chosen as samples for this research are located in large, diverse cities such as New York, London, Barcelona, and Amsterdam. Additionally, the sample reflects a balance of institutions from different Western national contexts. The selection of case studies intentionally avoided overrepresentation of any single country; for example, only three U.S.-based museums were included despite the availability of more. The focus on Western museums is deliberate. Modern art museums in Europe and North America occupy a historical position shaped by colonialism and canon-building that continue to influence collection policies today. Furthermore, these major institutions have often sanitized this colonial past by filtering uncomfortable narratives and presenting a selective version of cultural heritage. Now, facing mounting pressure to confront these legacies, diversity policies, reports, and strategic plans have become the place where these considerations and reconciliations are most visible. As such, the final selection of museums part of this study are: The Guggenheim Museum (NYC location), the Brooklyn Museum, the Textile

Museum of Canada, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona (hereafter MACBA), the Reina Sofiá Museum, the Tate Modern Museum, the Kunstmuseum Den Haag, the Stedelijk Museum, and the Museum of Modern Art Paris (hereafter MAM Paris).

The selection process involved both targeted and exploratory searches. Because museums describe diversity using a wide range of terms, this approach was necessary to avoid the risk of overlooking relevant documents. Museums were identified through direct search queries combining institutional names with terms such as “diversity”, “DEAI”, and also by systematic reviews of modern art museums by country. In some cases, terms were translated into local languages to expand search results. Document selection was mainly guided by two criteria: relevance to the research question and public accessibility. These criteria were chosen because the study examines how museums definitively conceptualize and manage diversity, rather than how they may describe it internally. As a result, only museums with self-published, publicly available documents that extensively addressed diversity were included. General web page statements were excluded unless accompanied by a downloadable document. These documents had to meet a minimum word count of ~2,000 words to support a meaningful qualitative analysis.

The initial search identified 14 museums with potentially relevant material. Four of these were excluded because they did not meet the criteria or disrupted the balance of countries represented in the research sample. For example, one American museum was excluded to avoid overrepresentation in the research sample since three U.S.-based museums were already included and provided more extensive information. Another museum wrote extensively about diversity, but only on their webpage, which had no attached documents. The two other cases were excluded because their available information was below the minimum word count. The final pool consists of ten museums, each represented by at least one substantive policy, annual report, or strategy document. One non-English document (from MAM Paris) was translated using a combination of the researcher’s language skills and translation tools such as Google Translate and DeepL. If there were any doubts about the document's length, Google Docs’ word count tool was used to verify the 2,000-word minimum. Eight of the ten selected documents were read in full. In cases

where a document exceeded 20k words, such as two museums' multi-year strategic plans, the sections explicitly addressing diversity were prioritized.

Table 1

Overview of Selected Museums and Documents

Overview of Selected Museums and Documents

Museum Name	Location	Publication Year	Type of Document	Word Count
Stedelijk Museum	Amsterdam, The Netherlands	2023	Policy	3095
Kunstmuseum Den Haag	The Hague, The Netherlands	ND	Strategic Plan 2021-2024	106K
Guggenheim Museum	New York City, USA	2020	DEAI Action Plan 2020 - 2022	3419
Brooklyn Museum	New York City, USA	ND (≈ '22/'23)	DEAI Plan & Report 2019 - 2022	4831
Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum	Boston, USA	2024	DEAI Report July - Dec. 2024	2917
Textile Museum of Canada	Toronto, Canada	2021	EDI Plan	3168
Modern Art Museum Paris	Paris, France	ND (≈2022)	Strategic Plan 2022-2026	29.6K
MACBA	Barcelona, Spain	2017	Strategic Plan 2022	3268
Reina Sofía Museum	Madrid, Spain	ND	Strategic Plan 2023 -2028	10462
Tate Modern	London, England	ND	Strategic Plan 2020-2025	6437

The types of documents varied across the different institutions. They included a diversity and inclusion (D&I) policy document, an action plan, a diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI) report, an equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) plan, a DEAI plan and report, and multi-year strategic plans. While all museums were analyzed equally and read in full, the depth of analysis varied slightly depending on the volume and scope of the content related to diversity. Some documents, such as the Brooklyn Museum's DEAI Plan, for instance, focused

exclusively on the composition of the museum's workforce, despite the document's title suggesting a much broader scope. This variation was retained in the sample (and results) as it offered insight into how diversity is defined and where diversity is deemed most important to museum professionals.

3.2 Data Collection Procedures

The data for this study consists of institutional documents self-published by the ten modern art museums. These documents were collected through a manual search process conducted between February 2025 and May 2025. All documents had to be publicly accessible, self-published, and downloadable from the museum's official website at no cost. This approach reflects the study's emphasis on understanding how museums self-present their diversity efforts through transparent and accessible communication. Texts on webpages and other site content were excluded unless linked to a formal document.

Searches were conducted using Google and began with broad keyword combinations such as "museum diversity," "museum collection diversity", and "museum inclusion". After reviewing the initial results, a more targeted strategy was employed. Western countries were systematically reviewed to identify major cities with modern art museums. For each city, museum names were searched alongside English diversity-related terms. If this did not yield relevant results, the word "diversity" was translated into the country's official language (e.g., "diversité" in French, "diversiteit" in Dutch) and used in combination with the museum's name. This strategy helped identify diversity-related materials even when documents were available in English. For example, the MACBA documents only appeared in the search results when using the Spanish term for diversity, but upon clicking the website page, they were also available in English. The only non-English document included in the analysis was from the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, which was translated using a translation software called DeepL. Ultimately, using this multilingual search strategy revealed documents that would otherwise remain undiscovered.

Documents were downloaded and manually stored. In cases where museums had multiple documents, the most diversity-relevant source was selected. For example, the Stedelijk Museum had both a multi-year strategic plan (in which diversity work is included) and a dedicated

diversity policy; the latter was chosen for its more dedicated and direct relevance. For four museums, such documents were not available. Here, there was often a notable quantity of information on diversity on a webpage where the broader strategic plan was attached for further reading.

3.3 Variables and Data Analysis

The analytical framework for this study is based on Stirling's (1999) three-dimensional model of diversity, which includes variety, balance, and disparity. These three dimensions were used to guide the content analysis of the museum's documents. Each dimension was utilized conceptually to identify relevant terminology and indicators within the texts.

Variety refers to how many categories exist and was assessed by identifying and recording all explicit identity-related descriptors (e.g., queer, BIPOC, bi-cultural) used in each document. This included adjectives and phrases used to describe artists, audiences, and other target communities within diversity initiatives. Rather than relying on fixed typology alone, the analysis considered the full range of terms used. This included broad phrases such as "underserved neighborhoods" or "international artists," as well as more specific categories like "Black," "transgender," or "socio-economic". Only the term "diverse" (e.g., "diverse artists") was excluded when no further details were provided. All unique identity descriptors were counted per document, and recurring terms across the research pool were also noted. This allowed for a comparative assessment of linguistic variety and thematic emphasis across the museums.

Balance is concerned with the (un)equal distribution across different categories and was evaluated interpretively by examining whether museums acknowledged imbalances in representation or articulated goals related to equitable inclusion. This included both the explicit statement about underrepresentation in the collection, as well as implicit references to more inclusive acquisition strategies. Rather than quantifying balance, the analysis focused on whether and how institutions recognized or addressed the proportionality of representation.

Disparity refers to the degree of difference between categories and was therefore considered present if a document acknowledged degrees of difference between identity categories or referred to the complexities of intersecting social identities. While none of the museums explicitly considered this dimension, there were a few isolated references to intersectionality.

These mentions were recorded and interpreted as a partial recognition of internal variation within identity groups.

The coding process was conducted manually using Google Sheets and supplementary handwritten notes. Data was organized to compare the number and type of diversity descriptors used, as well as the presence of balancing strategies, and any references to variation within diverse groups. This structured and interpretive approach enabled a comparative analysis grounded in the institutional language and priorities articulated by each museum. The coding sheet was structured to record both identifying and analytical information for each museum. Core categories included: Museum name, location, document title, document type, publication year, authorship (when available), and thematic focus. Analytical variables included the focus of the document (e.g., collections, programming, workforce), variety, balance, and disparity. Additional categories were added to capture emerging themes across the data, such as degree of vagueness or specificity, the presence or absence of key performance indicators (KPIs), and whether any academic disciplines or concepts were referenced.

For variety, all explicit descriptors of artists and audiences were listened to and compared across cases. For balance, notes captured whether museums acknowledged historical imbalances or, more importantly, set acquisition goals to improve representational equity. Disparity was assessed through references to intersectionality or degrees of difference between identity categories. While no formal coding taxonomy was applied, a consistent structure was used throughout the dataset to enable comparison and identify patterns across institutions.

3.4 Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the research was informed by a perspective shaped through the researcher's lived experience in culturally diverse, albeit exclusively Western cities. The decision to focus exclusively on museums located in the West was intentional and grounded in the fact that there would be significant limitations in analyzing diversity discourse in contexts outside the researcher's own. Nevertheless, due to a background informed by multiple cultural reference points and experiences of marginality, there was a certain level of sensitivity towards issues of representation and accessibility that would have otherwise been absent.

Furthermore, efforts were made to ensure a balanced representation of Western countries in the selection of case studies. For example, while several eligible Dutch museums were identified, only two were included to avoid overrepresenting one national context. This may have led to the exclusion of other relevant institutions.

Another limitation included a non-English document that was translated using Google Translate and DeepL, which could have affected the interpretation (or lack thereof) of nuances in tone or meaning. Other limitations were the wide variation in the availability of public documents across museums and countries. Some institutions provided extensive diversity policies and/or plans, while others offered briefer statements within broader strategy documents. As a result, the depth of the analysis differed depending on the volume and quality of information provided by the museums. Closely related is the fact that the scope of museums also differed. While the research aimed to analyze diversity in collections, programming, and research, some documents (such as the Brooklyn Museum) focused solely on staff and internal operations. This presented interpretative challenges but also revealed important gaps in how museums define and dedicate their diversity efforts.

Finally, the study relies exclusively on publicly available, self-published documents. No internal reports or interviews were included, meaning that the analysis reflects only what museums choose to communicate publicly. While this supports the study's goals of assessing public transparency, it likely does not capture the full extent of diversity-related work.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Since the research relied exclusively on publicly available documents published by modern art museums on their websites, and thus, no private or confidential data was accessed, issues of informed consent and anonymity were not applicable. All documents analyzed were self-published by the museums and intended for public audiences. The names of the museums have been included throughout the analysis to ensure transparency. This approach was intentionally made as this study is concerned with how museums publicly communicate their diversity strategies. As such, naming the museums also supports institutional accountability and future research. When translations were necessary, they were made using a combination of the researcher's own language skills and previously mentioned digital translation tools. Care was

taken to preserve the integrity and tone of the original text during interpretation. The research complies with institutional guidelines for ethical conduct in qualitative research and poses no harm to individuals or organizations.

4 Results and Analysis

4.1 Defining Diversity

As cultural institutions increasingly engage with diversity, how they define and articulate the term plays a crucial role in shaping their practices and accountability. While diversity does not require a single or fixed definition, museums claiming to prioritize diversity should clarify how they understand the term within their own institutional setting (Ranaivoson, 2020). This not only provides clarity around an otherwise ambiguous term but also ensures that diversity-related goals can be effectively implemented and evaluated (Benhamou and Peltier, 2010).

Table 3 *Museums and Diversity Definitions*

Museums and Diversity Definitions

Museum Name	Definition	Origin	Location
Stedelijk Museum	"We use the term diversity to indicate that people differ from and are similar to one another with regard to a range of visible and non-visible characteristics. The Diversity and Inclusion Code initially focused on cultural diversity, but has since been expanded to also apply to differences in other areas, such as gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion, socio-economic status, level of education and age."	The Cultural Diversity and Inclusion Code	Policy Document
Kunstmuseum Den Haag	Definition Missing*	The Cultural Diversity and Inclusion Code	N/A
Guggenheim Museum	Definition Missing	N/A	N/A
Brooklyn Museum	Diversity is the range of human differences, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, class, ability, religion, and cultural practices.**	N/A	DEAI Plan & Report 2019 - 2022
Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum	Definition Missing	N/A	N/A
Textile Museum of Canada	Diversity recognizes our individual differences. Diversity may include gender, disability, age, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, and sexual orientation. Within cultural institutions, diversity encompasses differences in perspectives, opinions, disciplines, skills, and learning opportunities. The Museum supports and encourages diversity by confronting barriers and biases and creating workplaces, and exploration and learning environments free of harassment and discrimination.	Original	External but directly referenced with an in-text attaching document titled 'EDI Principles'
Modern Art Museum Paris	Definition Missing	N/A	N/A
MACBA	Definition Missing	N/A	N/A
Reina Sofía Museum	Definition Missing	N/A	N/A
Tate Modern	Definition Missing	N/A	N/A

Note. *Explicit Definition is missing; however, the museum does state that it adopts the Cultural Diversity and Inclusion Code's definition. **Explicit Definition is present, but the document focuses exclusively on workforce diversity rather than on the cultural supply.

4.1.1 Explicit Definitions

Out of the ten museums analyzed, only the Stedelijk Museum and the Brooklyn Museum explicitly define diversity within the main body of their documents. A third museum, the Textile Museum of Canada, refers readers in the introduction of its EDI Plan to a separate glossary of working definitions (accessible through an in-text link). As such, the museums' definitions vary not only in content but also in form, underscoring that diversity is a heterogeneous concept shaped by each institution's distinct framing.

The Stedelijk Museum adopts its definition from the Dutch Diversity and Inclusion Code (DIC), describing diversity as "a given" where people are different from one another through a range of visible and non-visible characteristics (Stedelijk, 2023, p. 8; Diversity and Inclusion Code, 2019). This definition emphasizes intersectionality and social context for identity formation, where "differences are never absolute or isolated, occurring in unique combinations to form what we know as identities" (Stedelijk, 2023, p. 8). Notably, the document also includes a list of identity markers outlined by the DIC, including gender, socio-economic status, and religion. At the Stedelijk, diversity refers to the extent to which societal diversity is reflected across the four pillars of the DIC framework: Program, Public, Personnel, and Partners (Stedelijk, 2023, p. 8). This approach creates a hybrid framing of diversity where the museum acknowledges the dynamic and relational nature of identity, while also organizing differences into fixed and recognizable categories.

By adopting an external definition from the DIC, the Stedelijk aligns itself with a widely recognized sectoral standard in the Dutch cultural field. The Code itself was developed collectively by several major cultural sector associations under the umbrella of the Culture and Creative Inclusion Action Plan, with Bureau & MAES commissioned to draft it (Diversity and Inclusion Code, 2019). Rather than developing an internally tailored definition, the museum uses an external, established framework that enhances credibility and perceived accountability. This approach can be understood through the lens of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), where organizations operating within a shared field begin to resemble one another due to normative and mimetic pressures. The Stedelijk's adoption of the DIC's definition reflects the tendency to conform to sector-wide expectations and perceived best practices. This is further

exemplified by the other Dutch museum part of the research sample, Kunstmuseum Den Haag, which also claims to adopt the DIC definition (but fails to restate what that is).

The Brooklyn Museum defines diversity similarly as "the range of human differences", followed by the most extensive list (out of the three museums providing an explicit definition) of diversity descriptors (Brooklyn Museum, 2023). By using ten different identity markers, the museum reflects what scholars identify as a functional framing of diversity, where it is designed to create internal cohesion rather than challenge systemic inequities (Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013; Ahmed, 2012). By breaking down an abstract concept like diversity into observable components, the definition functions as a practical tool where diversity is achieved when all the listed diversity descriptors are accounted for. This framing aligns with the scope of the Brooklyn Museum's document, which focuses exclusively on the museum's employees and staffing practices. The document's somewhat misleading title, "EDI Plan & Report," suggests a holistic overview of diversity-related practices throughout the museum's staffing, collections, programs, and research practices. Instead, the document focuses solely on creating a more inclusive and anti-oppressive work environment. Although the information discussed in this EDI Plan and Report is not directly relevant to this study's research question, it is an interesting finding because it reveals that some museums either do not prioritize diverse collection practices at all or choose not to disclose such information publicly and transparently. This context also helps to explain why the Brooklyn Museum chose to define diversity as a list of identity/diversity descriptors rather than a catalyst for real epistemic change.

Compared to the Stedelijk and Brooklyn Museums, the Textile Museum of Canada adopts a broader and more value-driven approach. While all three institutions include diversity descriptors in their definitions, the Textile Museum expands its definition to include "differences in perspectives, opinions, disciplines, skills, and learning opportunities" (Textile Museum of Canada, 2022b). For this museum, diversity is framed not just as a matter of who is present, but as a question of how different forms of knowledge and experience are valued. This moves the concept beyond identity politics and grounds it in an epistemological and structural framework. While the Brooklyn and Stedelijk Museums take a more consensus-driven, managerial approach, the Textile Museum places diversity in an ethical, justice-focused context by emphasizing participation and the need to address invisible structural barriers.

4.1.2 Implicit Definitions

The remaining seven museums in this research sample do not define diversity explicitly. Their conceptualization of the topic can only be inferred from their broader institutional narratives, where the choice in language, stated values, and initiatives must be used to infer meaning. Their approaches span a spectrum from operational to highly theoretical. The rest of this section continues to examine the rhetorical and ideological implications of these implicit framings.

At the pragmatic end of the spectrum are museums like the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris and the Kunstmuseum Den Haag, where their conceptualization of diversity is embedded within their diversity-related projects and commitments. Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris (MAM)'s strategic plan references post-colonial narratives, geographic and gender diversity, and even intersectional identities within its curatorial work. The document also details several initiatives, such as "champ social", an outreach program created for structurally marginalized groups such as migrants, (formerly) incarcerated individuals, people with disabilities, and residents in impoverished areas (Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, 2022). Although no formal definition is provided, the emphasis on people affected by different forms of marginalization suggests a framing of diversity that is rooted in access, representation, and social inequality.

Similarly, the Kunstmuseum Den Haag frames diversity through their plans and objectives, rather than an explicit definition. In their multi-year strategy plan, diversity is linked to representation and public engagement. The outlined initiatives emphasize gender (particularly women artists' representation), age, people with disabilities, sexual orientation, and educational background (Kunstmuseum Den Haag, 2020). Similar to the Stedelijk Museum, Kunstmuseum Den Haag adopts the DIC's definition of diversity, but notably, it does not include it in their document. This forces readers to leave the document and consult the Code itself. Notably, the museum does emphasize a specific kind of diversity: "We consider all dimensions of diversity important, but in the first few years we are choosing to focus on cultural diversity, given its relevance to The Hague's society" (Kunstmuseum Den Haag, 2020, p. 26). This focus is likely referencing the Hague's status as one of the most culturally diverse cities in the Netherlands, where 58% of the population has at least one parent born outside the Netherlands (Statistics Netherlands [CBS], 2025). The Textile Museum of Canada also prioritizes a specific aspect of

diversity based on their local environment, "[We] prioritize the increased representation of BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and People of Color] communities in the collection, reflecting the diversity of the communities we serve." (Textile Museum, 2022a, p.8). The Guggenheim is the third and final museum that also emphasizes a specific type of diversity. "We aspire to center the voices of our BIPOC communities because, historically, they have been the most marginalized and disenfranchised. We must reflect the plurality of our culture and our global audience." (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Foundation, 2020, p.1). As such, this statement reveals that the Guggenheim conceptualizes diversity primarily in terms of racial and ethnic equity. The emphasis on increased representation of those faced with systemic injustice signals a shift toward a justice-oriented framing. Yet framing diversity this way also raises questions about whether the museum acknowledges its own role in perpetuating the exclusions it seeks to address.

4.1.3 Active and Passive Language within Implicit Framings

While the Guggenheim Museum aspires to frame diversity through a lens of systemic redress, a recurring issue in their and several other museums' documents is the use of passive and depersonalized language. Phrases like "historically marginalized" or "harm was caused," and vague references such as "throughout the museum sector," risk positioning inequity as a problem that only exists "out there," even though museums have played a significant role in elitist and exclusionary cultural representation (Brooklyn Museum, 2023; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Foundation, 2020). Research has shown that using passive voice can reduce how much responsibility is attributed to the actor, which makes it easier to obscure who is accountable (Platow & Brodie, 1996). Only three museums make an effort to confront their own role in exclusionary practices using active and self-implicating language. The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum offers a partial step in this direction, stating: "Given the overall Eurocentric focus of the Collection, non-Western objects have historically been understudied." (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 2024). While this statement suggests the restrictive scope of the museum's collection, the phrase "have historically been understudied" shifts into passive voice, leaving it unclear who was responsible and thus blurring institutional accountability. In contrast, the Textile Museum of Canada offers a clear acknowledgment of its institutional complicity by stating, "[...] Some mainstream museums in Canada are beginning to recognize the need to

address the Eurocentric and colonial nature of museum collecting. Our collection is no exception" (Textile Museum of Canada, 2022a). Perhaps the most explicit self-implication statement comes from the Stedelijk Museum, which acknowledges that its collection is marked by "subtle and not so subtle expressions of sexism, racism, ableism, and other forms of exclusion" (Stedelijk Museum 2023). Considering that the Stedelijk Museum is one of the few museums in this study to commit to increasing diversity in its acquisition practices (see section 4.2.2), this example suggests that active and accountable language can lay a strong foundation for meaningful and structural change.

The Tate Modern provides the most expansive understanding of diversity without explicitly defining it. From its stated values, initiatives, and future goals, it is evident that diversity is grounded in diversity descriptors such as race, gender, (dis)ability, class, cultural background, and Indigenous identity. Its Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (hereafter DEI) goals in the strategy plan for 2020-2025 focus on access, increased representation, and audience diversification (Tate, 2019). Statements such as "we believe access to art is a universal human right" and commitments to racial equality and inclusive hiring practices suggest that diversity is rooted in democratic access and restorative justice (Tate, 2019). Nevertheless, this broad language remains unanchored by a formal definition, which can leave the museum's commitments vulnerable to inconsistent implementation and ineffective results.

The Museu d'Art Contemporani De Barcelona (hereafter MACBA) and Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (hereafter Reina Sofía) represent the more theoretical end of the spectrum. At MACBA, diversity is not represented as a measurable institutional goal, but as part of a broader ethos grounded in pluralism, hospitality, and critical engagement with hegemonic narratives. Diversity is implied through the museum's decentralization of curatorial authority and focus on audiences from Latin America and the "Arab world" (Museu d'Art Contemporani De Barcelona, 2022). Similarly, Reina Sofía embeds diversity within dense theoretical language and concepts such as polyphony, hauntology, and interdependence. Rather than offering a definition, the museum treats diversity as a condition that is already present but can be further amplified through artistic and curatorial practices (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2023). As such, both museums conceptualize diversity as something embedded into the philosophical and curatorial DNA of the institution rather than treating it as a bureaucratic checkbox. While it

allows them to approach diversity in a way that is more flexible and expansive, this framing risks making diversity a symbolic ideal that lives mainly in discourse rather than practice.

Regardless of these different approaches, all these implicit framings suggest that the majority of museums understand diversity as a flexible and ideologically agreeable term rather than a precisely defined institutional principle. And whether they intentionally avoid defining diversity or not, this approach offers advantages by being adjustable and cautious. Gray (2015) claims that museums often avoid polarizing stances to appear neutral in order to maintain the broadest possible audience. This raises important questions about where institutions draw the line between what is considered "safe" and what is deemed too controversial. Many museums, for instance, discuss certain identity groups such as BIPOC or queer artists, but do not mention other forms of diversity. The reason for this may simply be due to the fact that racism and homophobia are broadly condemned in Western mainstream discourse and are therefore relatively uncontroversial for institutions to discuss. In contrast, other forms of exclusion (e.g., neurodiversity, migration background/status) that are less discussed or contentious are omitted from policy documents and strategic plans. As such, museums frame diversity as safe and normative, where mainstream values are upheld rather than challenged to confront structural inequalities. Ahmed (2012) cautions that when this kind of consensus-driven and surface-level diversity is treated as an unquestioned institutional good, it risks self-affirmation where institutions ignore that these complex forms of diversity are affected by cultural representation. In this context, the implicit and vague framing surrounding diversity allows museums to present themselves as inclusive without committing to structural and impactful change.

4.2 Stirling's Model

4.2.1 Variety

To further unpack how diversity is addressed across the documents, this section will shift from examining the conceptual framings of diversity to employing Stirling's model to analyze which dimensions of diversity are actually addressed. The first dimension of the model, *variety*, refers to the number of different categories represented. This lens is used to examine how the

presence and absence of diverse identities reflect but also complicate the museum's aim to increase diversity.

Diversity descriptors are presented as lists, simply named, or used within described initiatives. Often, however, the different descriptors are not adequately accompanied by concrete strategies for increasing representation. These structural mechanisms will be further explored in the following sections on *balance (4.2.2)* and *disparity (4.2.3)*, two equally important dimensions of Stirling's model that help diversity's position move beyond an aspirational concept and into a structural practice.

Across the ten modern art museums analyzed, a total of sixty unique diversity descriptors were identified. This number reflects not only broad descriptors such as "gender," "religion," or "migration background," but also a wide range of specific national and ethnic identities such as "South Korean," "Haitian," "Palestinian," and "Indigenous." The most frequently cited descriptor was "age," mentioned in all ten documents. This was followed by "non-Western" and "cultural" identity, which both appear in six documents. As shown in Figure 2, only diversity descriptors that were mentioned by at least two museums are included, with "1" indicating presence and "0" indicating absence. Orange '1s' were used to indicate cases where a descriptor is used but not in relation to the museum's collection or program. This visualization makes visible that only a small set of terms, a total of 17, are shared across institutions, while the majority of descriptors, such as "Euro-centric," "linguistic," "local," and "intersectional," appear in only one museum's document and are therefore absent from the graph. Ultimately, the results reinforce that museums tend to share only a narrow vocabulary of diversity descriptors despite the many that exist.

Table 3

Diversity Descriptors Used Across Ten Modern Art Museums

Diversity Descriptors Used Across Ten Modern Art Museums

Diversity Descriptors	Stedelijk Museum	Kunst-museum Den Haag	Guggenheim Museum	Brooklyn Museum	Isabella Gardner Museum	Textile Museum of Canada	Modern Art Museum Paris	MACBA	Sofia Reina Museum	Tate Modern
Age	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Non-Western	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
BIPOC	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Specific Ethnicity/Nationality	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1
Cultural	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1
Gender	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0
(Dis)ability	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1
Sexual Orientation	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
Religion	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
Women	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1
Migration Background	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1
Region	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	1
Queer	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
Socio-Economic Class	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1
Race	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0
Education	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
International/Global	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0

Note. Diversity descriptors listed are mentioned by at least two museums. “1” indicates the presence of the category in a museum’s document (also shaded darker for greater visibility), and “0” indicates absence. Orange numbers indicate cases where a descriptor is used but not in relation to the collection, program, or other offerings.

The frequent use of the term “non-Western” warrants closer attention. As a negative prefix construction, “non-Western” identifies a group of people by what they are not, rather than affirming any specific cultural, racial, or geographic identities. Scholars note that this catch-all term reinforces colonial binaries that center the West as normative and everyone else as ‘other’ (McClain, 2017). While the term is used to gesture towards inclusivity, “non-Western” flattens

the global majority of people into a single conceptual category. Notably, it appears more frequently than the term "BIPOC" when discussing artists and collection practices. While the term BIPOC is also a broad umbrella term, it differs in that it affirms identity by naming who is being referred to, rather than defining people by what they are not.

A second tier of recurring descriptors, each mentioned across four museums, includes gender, women/female, (dis)ability, sexual orientation, religion, class/socio-economic status, migration background, queer, and geographic region. Descriptors that were mentioned in at least two museums were "racial," "educational level," and "international/global" diversity.

The uneven distribution of depth and range of the vocabulary used to describe diversity further confirms that museums conceptualize and describe diversity in a multitude of ways. Several institutions rely on broad, umbrella terms like "diverse communities" without naming who those communities are. MACBA, for example, only mentions 4 types of diversity: "age," "cultural", "international/global", and refers to three regional places, including "Europe, and the North Atlantic axis, Latin America, the Mediterranean basin, and the Arab World" (Museu d'Art Contemporani De Barcelona, 2022).

While the documents reference a wide range of diversity descriptors, several dimensions of diversity are notably absent in relation to artists and collections. Drawing on recent frameworks that emphasize overlooked dimensions of diversity and inclusion, such as neurodiversity, educational background, and language, this research found that these descriptors were addressed only four times when discussing matters related to cultural supply (Park, 2025; Smeathers et al., 2025). Neurodivergent perspectives, variation in training and professional access (such as artists who develop outside of traditional academic institutions), and language play a fundamental role in shaping cultural identity, creative expression, and access. Religious identity and class background appear sporadically and only in the context of audience development, rather than collection practices. These missing descriptors are but a few examples that reflect a contemporary understanding of diversity informed by recent academic and policy discourse (Hutson & Hutson, 2022). It is important to acknowledge that these diversity frameworks are historically and culturally contingent and will inevitably shift over time. Their omission does not necessarily imply institutional neglect, but it does reaffirm that museums are operating within a selective and idiosyncratic framing of diversity. As such, the boundaries of

diversity are shaped not only by what and who are named, but also by the unspoken representations of artistic diversity.

4.2.2 Balance

Balance, the second dimension of Stirling's model, refers to the proportional distribution of different identity descriptors within a collection. While variety concerns the multitude of distinct descriptors, balance evaluates how evenly those types of diversity are represented. Simply, it evaluates how much of each category is present. The presence of balance was determined on two levels: proportional representation *within* identity descriptors (where different artists are equally represented amongst each other across a particular category), and *across* identity descriptors (ensuring that attention to one identity category does not disproportionally outweigh others). In this broader sense, balance assesses whether institutional diversity efforts are equitably distributed across multiple axes of identity, rather than concentrated narrowly on a single identity descriptor.

All of the museums in this study implicitly recognize that balance is a fundamental dimension of diversity. This recognition becomes visible in the language they use to describe their collection strategies and diversity goals. Terms such as "balance," "redress," and "reverse" appear throughout the documents, all pointing to a desire to correct uneven representation and striving for more proportional inclusion (Guggenheim, 2020; Tate, 2019; Stedelijk Museum, 2023). This is further evidenced by the 60 unique descriptors, which clearly show that museums recognize diversity to be a multi-dimensional concept. The main issue, however, is that most of the museums acknowledge the importance of equal representation across the collection, but not *within* diverse groups (identified through descriptors). Instead, nearly all of the museums rely on affective and symbolic terminology like "horizontal exchange" or "balanced representation of gender in contemporary art" (Reina Sofía, 2023; Tate Vision, 2019). Notably, in some museums, such as the Tate Modern, the opposite is true, where restoring a singular, categorical kind of imbalance (i.e., gender representation) is prioritized. As previously mentioned, the Textile Museum, the Guggenheim Museum, and the Kunstmuseum Den Haag also explicitly state that their diversity work is (currently) focused on a singular aspect of diversity. For example, the Guggenheim's DEAI Plan considers the dimension of *balance* within racial diversity, where they

individually address different ethnic and geographical groups, but not *across* other descriptors (such as economic background, gender expression, etc.). As such, they implicitly recognize the importance of *balance*, but do not fully embrace it. Despite this narrow focus, the Guggenheim is one of the few institutions that provides quantifiable data to support its balancing efforts. According to their document, since 2017, over 75 percent of acquisitions have been made by artists of color, and 100 percent of deaccession-funded acquisitions have also gone to this group (Guggenheim, 2020). While these figures reflect a growing awareness of the need to correct imbalances, they are only concerned with racial diversity. The museum does not provide any other data across other diversity descriptors, such as disability, economic background, or migration status.

The Stedelijk Museum also makes a concrete commitment to balancing its collection, stating that "at least 50 percent of the acquisition budget will be devoted to non-Western artists or designers and/or artists and designers who identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color," adding that there is also "consideration of overlapping forms of exclusion such as gender," (Stedelijk Museum, 2023, p. 5). While this last phrase gestures towards intersectionality, it remains vague and aspirational. The museum does not break down how and who they acquire within these broad descriptors, nor does it clarify how overlapping exclusions are being tracked or addressed in practice. This information might be available in other sources, such as annual reports or multi-year strategy plans, but its absence from the official policy document limits the transparency and evaluability of the museum's commitment.

The Kunstmuseum Den Haag adopts a similar benchmark, stating that "half of our acquisitions are by female artists." This straightforward statement suggests a targeted effort to improve gender representation within the museum's collection (Kunstmuseum Den Haag, 2020, p. 26). However, as with the Stedelijk and Guggenheim museums, there is no indication that the museum tracks or reports representation across any other dimensions of diversity, nor *within* the category (i.e., different kinds of women artists). None of these three museums provides baseline data to contextualize these efforts, nor do they outline operational mechanisms for the compliance and evaluation of their goals. While such numerical commitments are far more actionable and structural steps towards *balance* than any of the other museums, they fall short of fully engaging with the concept as outlined by Stirling.

Stirling's model emphasizes that without *balance*, diversity becomes superficial, as excessively represented diversity descriptors can crowd out the visibility and impact of others (Stirling, 2007). This insight is particularly relevant when examining rare cases where numeric goals are set: even when institutions commit to acquiring a certain percentage of works by underrepresented artists, these efforts are framed in binary oppositions that obscure differences within groups. Rather than engaging with the full complexity of diversity, terms like "non-Western", "non-white", "non-European", and "BIPOC" are used. Using such terms risks suggesting that the goal of diverse representation is achieved once any "non-dominant" identity is present, even when that representation is unbalanced. Ultimately, addressing the dimension of balance requires acknowledging that diversity *within* diversity involves more than simply adding underrepresented groups to existing structures.

Even when specific identity groups are highlighted, it is often through temporary, siloed initiatives rather than integrated collection policies or curatorial strategies. The Stedelijk Museum, for instance, in addition to its acquisition objective, commits to one major annual exhibition from a "non-western and or BIPOC artist", while this is a clear commitment to greater visibility, nowhere is it mentioned what curatorial practices are applied to the permanent collection. According to the Stedelijk 2024 report, the museum hosts around 21 exhibitions and collection presentations per year; thus, dedicating a single annual exhibition to these artists represents a small proportion of overall programming. At the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, community-centered projects such as the *Theater Offensive* drag performance and temporary exhibitions like *Waters of the Abyss* by Haitian artist Fabiola Jean-Louis offer visibility to historically marginalized and underrepresented perspectives. A critical aspect of *balance*, however, is not only who is represented, but how their stories are told. The research offers only a select few examples that foreground self-authored perspectives or outline how artists influence display decisions (see section 5.2.2). This suggests that thematic representation is an underdeveloped component of balance.

As such, museums recognize the second dimension of Stirling's model, where diversity involves not only the inclusion of different identity groups (variety) but also their relative presence within the collection (balance). However, while institutions express a desire to create

more “balanced” collections, it is typically only framed as a supplemental correction rather than addressing the proportional distribution within underrepresented groups.

Many of the museum’s diversity-related initiatives involve exhibiting artists who exist outside the status quo. While it can be expected that museums would use exhibitions (a massive part of museum work) as an opportunity to showcase new artists, this practice is not without constraints. While exhibitions offer greater flexibility and topical relevance, they are often short-lived and operate in isolation from the museum’s permanent display and acquisition practices. In some cases, artists are selected based on their ability to tell unconventional stories, even though they’re not always self-authored. As a result, the representation they provide is episodic and risks reinforcing marginalization by situating certain identities, artists, or stories as exceptional or “other”. In this sense, balance is not just concerned with who is proportionately represented, but how they are represented and by whom. Temporary exhibitions that focus on struggle, marginality, or trauma, particularly when curated by those outside the communities that are depicted, can reaffirm a representation imbalance even as museums claim to correct it. This siloed approach echoes critiques in the literature on tokenism and representational politics, which argue that diversity initiatives often inadvertently reaffirm dominant cultural norms unless they are structurally and permanently integrated (Ang, 2018). A diverse collection must go beyond surface-level markers of inclusion and instead, attend to the balance of voices, perspectives, and artistic agency.

This omission is important because temporary exhibitions often come with an additional charge that discourages visitors from attending (Museum Association, 2018). According to research by the UK’s Department for Culture, Media, and Sport (2020), many first-time visitors prioritise the permanent collection over temporary exhibitions due to travel costs, general entrance tickets, and incidental expenses like food or gift shop purchases. Even when high costs are not a barrier, factors such as time constraints, museum fatigue, or personal preference can lead visitors to focus on the permanent collection. This is often tied to perceptions of value, where the permanent collection is regarded as the essential ‘museum experience’ because it often contains the most important or famous artworks (Falk, 2009). Ultimately, the artworks on permanent display most strongly influence how the public perceives a museum’s identity (Huo et al., 2024). If diversity is only visible in a select few galleries, visitors may not encounter it at all,

or at best, they may experience it inconsistently across the museum. This kind of visibility can unintentionally reinforce the idea that these artists and their stories are peripheral to the institution's core identity. Without embedding diversity into both acquisitions and long-term curatorial strategies, even thoughtfully designed exhibitions risk marginalizing these artists by presenting their contributions as exceptional and temporary rather than integral parts of the museum's narrative (Ang, 2018).

In short, the current institutional tendency to approach diversity as a checklist of underrepresented identity descriptors misses the complexity of balance as a concept. Stirling's model suggests that without proportionality and thoughtful integration, diversity lacks depth. Balance is not about correcting for one or several kinds of absences. Instead, it's about cultivating representational equity across a matrix of overlapping identities and narratives. Future diversity efforts must move beyond binary frameworks and towards intersectional strategies grounded in transparent definitions and measurable goals.

4.2.3 Dispartity

Disparity is the third and final dimension of Stirling's model of diversity. It refers to the degree of difference between the identity categories present within a collection/supply. While *variety* evaluates how many different categories are present, and *balance* focuses on how evenly representation is distributed across those categories, disparity concerns how different categories are from one another.

Disparity is the least addressed dimension among the museums studied. This finding aligns with previous research that identifies disparity as the most conceptually complex and methodologically underdeveloped element of diversity measurement frameworks (Stirling, 2007; Farchy & M'Barki, 2024). Across the ten documents analyzed, not a single museum explicitly recognizes disparity as a relevant or desired aspect of collection development. While 60 distinct identity descriptors were identified, these references are typically presented as isolated labels rather than considered relationally in terms of the degree of difference between them.

The absence of disparity across museum documents reflects a broader challenge in diversity work, where it is difficult to conceptualize and measure the extent of difference. As Stirling (1999) argues, disparity involves assessing how far apart represented identity descriptors

are, rather than simply counting or evenly representing them. The findings reveal that different kinds of diversity are not examined in relation to each other but treated as separate units. This is likely because disparity has been addressed most systematically in ecology, innovation studies, and other scientific research, where entities such as species and technologies can be compared adequately using taxonomies or distance matrices (Stirling, 2007; Pavoine et al., 2009). In contexts where the identity profiles of artists are being considered, quantifying disparity is more challenging due to the fluid, intersectional, and socially constructed nature of human identity.

The two institutions that come closest to approaching disparity, albeit in a limited and implicit way, are the Kunstmuseum Den Haag and the Guggenheim Museum. The Kunstmuseum Den Haag mentions artists from geographically and culturally disparate regions and countries such as Armenia, South Africa, China, and Suriname (Kunstmuseum Den Haag, 2020) Similarly, the Guggenheim Museum references a range of regional initiatives, including the Global Arts Initiative (focused on South and Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East and North Africa) and the Chinese Art Initiative. While these statements do not explicitly conceptualize disparity, these museums make a modest move towards acknowledging the value of including diverse worldviews and cultural frameworks, rather than treating non-Western art as a monolithic category.

Nonetheless, across the dataset as a whole, disparity, just like variety and balance, remains overshadowed by binary framings of diversity. A particularly revealing example of these issues is the use of the term ‘non-Western’, which was one of the important findings of this study. While the term is often deployed with the intention of signaling inclusivity and introspection, it ultimately defines groups of people by what they are not, rather than affirming who they are. As a negative prefix construction, the term ‘non-Western’ reinforces a Eurocentric worldview in which the West remains the implicit norm and everything else becomes a residual “other” (Ang, 2018). This framing flattens an enormously diverse global majority into a single, undifferentiated category. Though the use of this term may be expedient, it risks grouping artists with vastly different lived experiences under one flattened umbrella identity that may fulfill representational goals but does little to challenge prevailing curatorial logics. The absence of a disparity-conscious approach risks favoring artists who are institutionally accessible or canonically adjacent over other artists. Diversity policies and plans that do not account for

disparity may therefore reproduce existing hierarchies under the appearance of inclusion, where difference is reframed in non-disruptive terms.

5 Reflection on Findings

In light of the previously presented results, this section offers a reflection on their theoretical and practical implications and situates them within the broader debate on diversity in museums. The study examined how modern art museums conceptualize and operationalize diversity in policy documents, reports, and strategic plans, using a qualitative comparative content analysis to analyze ten institutions across six Western countries. The findings were evaluated through the lens of Stirling's multidimensional model of diversity, which distinguishes diversity as variety, balance, and disparity. In doing so, this chapter directly addressed the study's central research question: *How do modern art museums' institutional documents conceptualize and enact diversity within their cultural supply?*

5.1 Diversity as Variety

It wasn't until the late 2010s, with a sharp peak in 2020 following the Black Lives Matter Movement, that museums were under significant pressure to represent more diverse programming and inclusive practices. Whether it came from sponsors or the public advocating for social justice, museums felt pressure to take action. The findings suggest that in the absence of a clear conceptual framework, institutions fall back on what feels visible and measurable. Without a shared definition of what diversity is and how to operationalize it, museums are left to interpret the concept pragmatically. As such, the most intuitive and surface-level interpretation of diversity is simply to include those who are not already present. The logic here is straightforward: absence is the problem, and presence is the solution. Adding more diverse artists satisfied external expectations quickly and visibly. This results in a focus on symbolic presence (e.g., showing a Black and/or female artist in an exhibition) rather than structurally investigating and changing how Whiteness, colonialism, and cultural elitism shape institutional values and practices. Essentially, their objective is to "fill the gaps" rather than question why the gaps existed in the first place and how they are maintained.

This is visible in many of the diversity-related initiatives described throughout the documents. They are often short-term and siloed, such as temporary exhibitions and outreach programs. Even when initiatives are permanent, such as changes to acquisition practices, there is no discussion of how these works will ultimately be displayed in the museum's galleries. In fact, none of the museums address the presentation and curation of their permanent displays. One reason museums may be that artworks are often moved around the galleries, loaned to other institutions, placed in storage, or under conservation. Under these unpredictable conditions, museums may simply want to avoid making any definitive commitments about displays that cannot be guaranteed over time. As such, they focus on acquisition practices and other peripheral programming, such as creating special exhibitions and short-term projects that feature diverse artists from underrepresented groups. However, their disengagement with permanent collections ultimately limits the transformative potential and economic benefit of diversity because it prevents these initiatives from reshaping the museum's structural narratives and hierarchies. This dynamic also holds in reverse: spaces where diversity is most often seen shape the way it is understood. Because diversity is more contained within temporary and peripheral programming, adding more variety becomes the default focus since success is measured by how many more groups can be visibly included. This finding is also reflected in the tendency for museums that claim to prioritize diversity to enumerate a greater number of diversity descriptors. The concern becomes how many more artists can be included, rather than how the institution might address their representational proportion to the rest of the collection, or how different these diverse artists are from each other. This points to perhaps the most fundamental finding: museums largely conceptualize diversity as variety.

While museums concentrate their efforts on preventing absences (variety), they miss consideration for culturally adjacent or over-represented groups (balance). The findings point to an understanding of diversity where it functions as an axis between those who are already present in the collections (predominantly White, heteronormative male artists) and those who are not. They define variety as anything that deviates from the status quo. It is also easier to operationalize diversity in this way because counting diversity descriptors is simpler to manage as a numbers game. It allows museums to produce statistics, satisfy funders (as many of them are supported by public funds), and present a narrative of professionalism without having to confront

the more difficult concerns that come with other dimensions of diversity, such as balance and disparity.

5.2 Intersectionality and Recommendations

The way museums define and approach diversity by naming as many identity descriptors as possible also suggests that they see each identity as an individual unit. But all people, including artists, have intersecting identities that are shaped by a combination of factors such as race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, cultural background, etc. These overlapping dimensions are not extractable and singular; instead, they influence each other and shape the artistic themes, perspectives, and opportunities that inform an artist's practice. Disparity moves beyond variety by concerning itself with how these different dimensions of identity relate to each other in both their similarities and differences. Scholar Crenshaw (1989) first introduced and defined the concept of intersectionality as a way of understanding how people's identities interact with systems of power and oppression that ultimately create unique experiences of marginalization. For example, the experience of a Black woman is simply not the sum of being Black and being a woman. It is shaped by the specific social dynamics that occur at the intersection of race and gender. Despite its importance, intersectionality is rarely addressed in museum policy or practice. This is likely due to the challenges of these cultural institutions to go beyond visible inclusion and address structural issues such as curatorial biases, funding priorities, and organizational hierarchies. Intersectionality is difficult to measure and certainly cannot be captured by demographic checklists that museums embed within their conceptualization and definition of diversity. However, if museums utilized resources and available frameworks, they could create a more meaningful approach. For instance, the UN Women Intersectionality Resource Guide and Toolkit (2021) provides a comprehensive framework of action that includes four interconnected domains: individual agency and skills, access to resources, social norms and exclusionary practices, and formal laws and policies. This framework encourages museums to reflect on both formal and informal systems of power that affect the diversity of their institution. If museums were to adopt this approach, they would move from symbolic inclusion to structural change because they would address not just who is represented (variety) but what internal systematic barriers prevent meaningful participation.

As discussed in previous sections, such tools would also encourage museums to be more intentional with their terminology when describing diversity-related work. Previous terms such as “non-Western,” “BIPOC,” or “diverse artists” flatten differences and are often used as convenient shorthand. Institutions should instead aim for more precise and relational descriptions that acknowledge both overlap and divergence among artists. Adopting disparity as a dimension of diversity reframes inclusion from a number-based strategy to a deeper engagement with structural difference. It challenges museums to move beyond representational checklists and towards practices that value plurality and cultural specificity. Dismissing the term ‘non-Western’ entirely also overlooks certain positional and historical issues. In some contexts, such as critiquing canonical biases or tracing institutional power dynamics, the term can serve as a useful entry point. The key, however, is reflexivity. Museums must use the term critically, self-consciously, and always in parallel to greater specificity. For example, references to “non-Western artists” should ideally be followed by clarifying which communities, regions, or diasporas are being included. “Artists from the MENAT region,” “South Asian Women Artists,” or “Indigenous Andean visual culture” are all examples that avoid essentialism and offer greater clarity through affirming, rather than negating identity. A balanced recommendation, therefore, would advocate for a careful and limited use of the term, rather than a total abandonment. Museums should treat non-Western as a provisional and transitional label, not as an endpoint. It can be strategically useful for identifying institutional blind spots or structural imbalances, but should never substitute for a more precise and culturally informed vocabulary of inclusion.

Despite these challenges, museums could take meaningful steps towards accounting for disparity. Museums could begin by defining what diversity means in the context of their institution. This should help identify what forms of difference are relevant for their collections. With these insights, museums can develop distance metrics, intersectional mapping tools, and other qualitative assessments that highlight how the various artists’ works, perspectives, and life experiences compare and contrast with one another. Adopting disparity does not require quantification but does ask for reflection and intentionality. Developing such tools would not only advance museum practice but also open valuable directions for future research.

5.2.1 Limitations

To evaluate where museums currently stand, however, this study employed Stirling's model. While this framework provided a valuable structure for this analysis, its application in the museum context also revealed important limitations. Because the framework originates from ecological and technological fields, it has a descriptive logic that does not seamlessly translate to the CCIs. When applied to museum policy texts, this produced a productive but sometimes trained translation since the documents do not explicitly employ variety, balance, and disparity. As a result, there was a risk of imposing categories onto texts that were not written with such distinctions in mind. The model is also primarily descriptive, which made it effective for identifying patterns, but less suited to capture the institutional politics and curatorial practices that shape the current framing of diversity. In particular, Stirling's model does not directly account for power relations, colonial frameworks, or structural inequalities that underlie many of the challenges discussed in this study. These gaps highlight why complementary perspectives such as intersectionality and decolonial critique are necessary to interpret museum diversity beyond the measurable presence of categories.

Ultimately, disparity should be treated as a long-term curatorial consideration. This involves setting internal goals for increasing the depth and complexity of represented perspectives and revisiting these objectives regularly. It also involves expanding who gets to define curatorial priorities by inviting sustained collaboration with artists, communities, and external scholars equipped with different viewpoints. In doing so, museums can support a more reflective and equitable cultural field that centers not only on who is present but also on how their presence contributes to a wider ecology of meaning. This would also help with balance, because as museums move away from vague terminology and towards more specific descriptors, it will naturally become more apparent what specific groups may be prioritized or more present than others. As such, tackling the limitations of managing diversity as merely variety forces museums to consider balance and disparity as well.

5.2.2 Thematic Representation

A compelling example of this more expansive representational approach is the exhibition *Waters of the Abyss* mentioned in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum DEAI Report. The

featured artist, Fabiola Jean-Louis, created works that explored diasporic spirituality, liberation, ancestral memory, and Afro-Caribbean identity using mythic and symbolic imagery to affirm the complexity and sovereignty of Black womanhood. In contrast, another of their mentioned exhibitions, *Mary Ellen Mark: A Seattle Family,* centers on themes of homelessness, addiction, teen pregnancy, and generational trauma, but through the lens of a white, economically privileged photographer. Mark's position outside the communities she documents introduces a representation imbalance: the framing of hardship is empathic, but not self-authored. This contrast reveals how even well-intentioned exhibitions can unintentionally reinforce hierarchies of narrative control, presenting underrepresented communities as subjects of pity rather than agents of meaning-making. This is not to suggest that difficult themes should be excluded, but rather that they should be balanced by a broader thematic range and shaped by those who speak from within the experience. Having a diverse collection is not a surface-level job. Without full integration of diversity into acquisitions and long-term curatorial practices, even carefully curated exhibitions risk reaffirming marginalization by rendering these artists' work and the narratives they aim to inspire as episodic and externally framed (Ang, 2018). This reveals another noteworthy point: thematic representation matters. Diverse programming should not only consist of narratives of struggle and marginalization. Structural inclusion requires that artists from underrepresented groups are not only present, but also able to shape what artists' work is displayed and how it is portrayed.

5.3 Normative Audiences and Institutional Leadership

As Western societies become increasingly diverse, museums are responsible for reflecting the multiplicity of their environments in both their exhibitions and collection practices, and subsequent audiences. Despite this demographic shift, the findings show that some museums prioritize attracting new audiences who are already culturally adjacent to the museums: middle- and upper-class, educated, and often White. "Age" was the most recurring identity category, appearing in all ten museums studied. While museums may not explicitly state that younger white visitors are the easiest group to reach, this finding, in combination with several other choices in programming, language, and marketing strategies, all point to this. As Duncan (1995) argues, museums have historically operated as "ritual spaces" that affirm dominant cultural

values, implicitly constructing White, bourgeois spectators as the normative audience. Within this context, young White audiences are positioned not as newcomers, but as the heirs to an existing cultural tradition. They are already familiar with the codes of conduct, language, and visual literacies that museums presume. As such, museums likely prioritize this group because prioritizing the next generation of visitors is uncontroversial and risk-averse. In contrast, those whose cultural reference points fall outside this context often encounter barriers to access, representation, and belonging. Museums that aim to diversify their collections and audiences must therefore confront not only who is absent, but why certain groups continue to be perceived, consciously or unconsciously, as more "reachable" than others.

Such dynamics include leadership priorities (Shore et al., 2018). When directors and senior staff are personally committed to diversity work, there is often more visible and structured policy engagement. This dynamic is particularly evident at the Stedelijk Museum. In 2022, the documentary *White Balls on Walls* offered a behind-the-scenes look at how director Rein Wolfs and his team navigated the challenge of integrating diversity and inclusion into the museum's institutional framework. The film highlights both the internal tensions and strategic decision-making that shaped the museum's approach and D&I policies and practices. These internal dynamics underscore the importance of organizational commitment in shaping how diversity is defined, conceptualized, and implemented. The contrast between implicit and explicit approaches confirms that defining diversity is not merely a semantic issue, but a political and organizational one influenced by broader sectoral norms and the individual organization's desire to confront the plurality and complexity of diversity.

6 Conclusion

In contemporary museum discourse, diversity has emerged as a central concern, yet it continues to function as a contested and fluid concept (Ang, 2018; Verkuyten & O'Brien, 2021). Lacking a clear conceptual foundation risks making institutional commitments more rhetorical than transformative. This research, therefore, offers insight into an institutional self-portrait: how museums choose to present their engagement with diversity to the public. The analysis was not

about hidden practices within museums but about their institutional priorities in policy papers, DEAI plans, annual reports, and multi-year strategy plans. By examining these sources, the research explores how ten modern art museums conceptualize, define, and work to increase diversity in their collections.

The method chosen was qualitative comparative content analysis. This approach was appropriate because the research question was concerned with meaning rather than quantitative outcomes. Content analysis allowed for systematic coding of terms and references across the documents while also enabling interpretation of implicit assumptions and omissions. As such, the comparative dimension of the method was also crucial. By examining ten museums across vastly different national and institutional contexts, the study was able to identify patterns and contrasts. Ultimately, this method highlighted the absence of a singular method to approach diversity; it is a spectrum of engagement ranging from pragmatic initiatives to discursive reflections.

6.1 Summary of Findings

The central question guiding the research asks how modern art museums' institutional documents conceptualize and enact diversity within their cultural supply. The answer to this question became most apparent in three interrelated findings. First, most museums do not explicitly define diversity. Instead, diversity is presented as a normative value where its meaning can only be inferred through lists of diversity descriptors (e.g., gender, class, ethnicity), programming (e.g., exhibitions and outreach initiatives), and broad statements of inclusion. In the absence of an explicit definition, museums lack a conceptual foundation that can ground all subsequent diversity work. As such, it is difficult to determine the scope and effectiveness of institutional commitments. Second, the museums collectively name a wide range of diversity descriptors. While the scope is large, only 17 of the 60 terms are shared by more than one museum, with "age" appearing in all ten. This suggests that museums frame diversity as presence, where the more descriptors are included, the stronger the appearance of commitment is. Yet the fact that "age" is the only shared category points instead to a cautious consensus that sidesteps deeper questions of exclusion. Third, commitments to representing these diverse artists are siloed and often temporary. The most committed diversity-related work consists of increasing the number of exhibitions featuring diverse artists and changing acquisitions practices to be more

inclusive. Here, a few numeric targets are listed, but baseline figures are rarely mentioned, making it impossible to evaluate progress in terms of equity and proportionality. None of the museums addresses the presence of diversity in galleries showcasing their permanent collection.

In short, the documents reveal that museums are committed to diversity but are not yet equipped with the conceptual or methodological tools to fully assess or implement it. Diversity is understood primarily as presence, rather than as structural balance. The degree of difference within diversity descriptors is not considered, and progress is framed as aspirational rather than evaluative.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

The theoretical foundation of this thesis was Stirling's diversity model, which conceptualizes diversity along three interrelated dimensions: variety, balance, and disparity. This model proved to be both suitable and productive for the research. It offered a clear structure for analyzing institutional texts that not only varied drastically in form (e.g., policy plan vs. multi-year strategies) but also in content. By applying Stirling's framework, it was possible to distinguish between museums that merely enumerated diversity descriptors (variety), those that suggested proportional representation (balance), and the few that address the distance between different kinds of diversity (disparity). The framework's strength lies in its capacity to break down a complex and often rhetorical concept into measurable and comparable dimensions. It made it possible to show that variety is frequently acknowledged, but that balance and disparity remain largely absent from discourse and practice. Ultimately, this framework provided an analytical lens that spotlighted the significant difference between mere inclusion and true diversity.

6.3 Conceptual and Methodological Limitations

Nevertheless, Stirling's model also revealed limitations. The framework comes from the ecological and technology fields, and is far from native to museum practice. This created a productive tension but also risked forcing dimensions onto texts that did not employ them. While the model helped to distinguish diversity into three clear dimensions, it remains primarily descriptive and does not account for the deeper historical and institutional forces that define

diversity within museums. As such, it was less well suited to capturing dynamics such as colonial legacies, curatorial hierarchies, intersectionality discourse, or the symbolic uses of diversity rhetoric. Conversely, it also confirms that museums' engagement with diversity cannot be fully understood without considering the contexts in which the guiding policies and plans are written.

The research also faces several methodological limitations. Most significantly, it relied exclusively on publicly available documents. Museums may have more internal policies, acquisition data, and other curatorial rationales that are not shared publicly. However, the absence of such detail in public-facing documents is itself a meaningful finding since it suggests a lack of transparency or willingness to be held accountable. Second, the sample was limited to ten museums in Western contexts. While these choices were intentionally made, and there was consideration that some countries' museums wouldn't be overrepresented compared to others, the research cannot capture the full range of global practices. Museums in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, for example, undoubtedly conceptualize diversity in different and distinct ways. Future research could reveal how such different cultural and political settings shape different practices. Third, the reliance on textual sources means that the research reflects institutional discourse rather than practice. What museums say in documents may not align with what they actually do in their acquisition, exhibitions, and staffing practices. Future studies that triangulate documents with interviews, collections audits, and exhibition analysis would provide a fuller picture.

6.4 Research Contributions and Future Directions

Beyond its limitations, this thesis makes several contributions. It is the first to apply Stirling's multidimensional model of diversity to the museum sector, and in doing so, it is also among the first to consider diversity within art collections not only as an ethical imperative but also as an economic concern tied to cultural supply. By applying Stirling's model, the study was able to demonstrate that museums overwhelmingly equate diversity with variety, while balance and disparity remain largely absent from their rhetoric. Ultimately, this approach provided an analytical lens that highlighted the difference between symbolic inclusion and structural change.

Future research could build on these contributions in several ways. One direction could be the development of methodological tools for measuring collection diversity. Creating

indicators, benchmarks, and other protocols for assessing balance and disparity would certainly equip institutions to move beyond ungrounded commitments. Within this research, another priority would be the development of indexes for disparity that account for intersectionality, since it remains the most complex and under-theorized dimension of Stirling's mode. Future research could also compare policy rhetoric with the actual composition of museum collections by highlighting the alignments and disjunctions between stated commitments and curatorial realities. Accessing internal documents and management data would likewise provide more comprehensive insight into institutional strategies than public-facing texts alone. Finally, expanding the sample beyond Western contexts would allow for a more global perspective and further reveal how different cultural, political, and potentially colonized environments shape the framing of diversity and its place in museum practices. Together, these directions would strengthen the conceptual and methodological foundations for studying diversity in museums and help move institutional commitments from symbolic presence toward more systemic and transformative change.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Research Sample

1. **Stedelijk Museum**

Location: Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Year: 2023

Document Title: POLICY PAPER: INCLUSION AND ACCESSIBILITY AT THE STEDELIJK

Retrieved from: 1/9 policy paper: inclusion and accessibility at the stedelijk

2. **Kunstmuseum Den Haag**

Location: The Hague, The Netherlands

Year: ND

Document Title: Meerjarenbeleidsplan 2021-2024

Retrieved from: https://www.kunstmuseum.nl/nl/museum/organisatie/governance-en-beleid

3. **Guggenheim Museum**

Location: New York City, The United States of America

Year: 2020

Document Title: SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM AND FOUNDATION, NEW YORK DIVERSITY, EQUITY, ACCESS, AND INCLUSION (DEAI) ACTION PLAN August 2020 - August 2022

Retrieved from: https://www.guggenheim.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/guggenheim-diversity-equity-access-inclusion-action-plan-2020.pdf

4. **Tate Modern Museum**

Location: London, England

Year: ND

Document Title: Tate Vision 2020 - 2025

Retrieved from: https://www.tate.org.uk/documents/1559/tate_vision_2020_25.pdf

5. **Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum**

Location: Boston, The United States of America

Year: 2024

Document Title: Diversity, Equity, Accessibility & Inclusion Report July – December 2024

Retrieved from: https://www.gardnermuseum.org/sites/default/files/2025-04/DEAI%20Report%20July%20-%20Dec%202024%20RI.pdf

6. **Brooklyn Museum**

Location: New York City, The United States of America

Year: ND

Document Title: Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access Plan & Progress Overview 2019 - 22

Retrieved from: https://d1lfxha3ugu3d4.cloudfront.net/about/images/DEIA_Plan_and_Progress_Overview_FINAL.pdf

7. **Textile Museum of Canada**

Location: Toronto, Canada

Year: 2021

Document Title: Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Plan

Retrieved from: https://textilemuseum.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/EDI-Plan_Jan182022.pdf

8. **Reina Sofía Museum**

Location: Madrid, Spain

Year: ND

Document Title: PROJECT 2023 – 2028

Retrieved from: https://recursos.museoreinasofia.es/project-2023-2028.pdf

9. **Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona (MACBA)**

Location: Barcelona, Spain

Year: 2017

Document Title: 2022 Strategy: Executive Summary

Retrieved from:
https://img.macba.cat/public/document/2019-12/macba-executive-summary-2022.pdf

10. Museum of Modern Art Paris (MAM)

Location: Paris, France

Year: ND

Document Title: Projet Scientifique et Culturel 2022-2026

Retrieved from: https://www.mam.paris.fr/sites/default/files/documents/mam-psc-web_0.pdf

Appendix B: Extract from Full Coding Sheet

Museum	Variety (Identity Descriptors)	Balance	Disparity
Stedelijk Museum (NL)	Non-Western, BIPOC, Gender, Disability, Sexual Orientation, Religion, Class/Socio-Economic Status, Education, Age, Cultural	- Acquisitions: 50% of the acquisition budget is devoted to artists from the named categories. - Exhibitions: One major solo or group show per year with those same criteria. - Inclusion goals are tied to Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and evaluated annually. - Aims to mainstream diversity beyond isolated	- No explicit mention of the disparity or the degree of difference within diverse groups - vague mention of the unique experiences of different identity categories - and also how these overlap, which points to intersectionality

		projects.	
Guggenheim Museum (US)	Non-Western, BIPOC, Gender, Sexual Orientation, Class/Socio-Economic Status, Age, Race, Region, Transgender, Queer	- Since 2017, 75%+ of acquisitions were by artists of color - 100% of works bought with deaccession funds since 2017 were by artists of color - 35% of monographic shows since 2010 featured BIPOC artists - 17 solo exhibitions of BIPOC artists in the 2010s	- Broad mention of different and distinct experiences of BIPOC, but does not go into detail - Mentions some intersectional identities, but is ultimately minimal
Tate Modern Museum (UK)	BIPOC, Disability, Religion, Class/Socio-Economic Status, Age, Women/Female, Migration Background, Cultural, Region, Queer,	- Directional, 'more' but no solid KPIS - Does mention greater diversity for collection displays, major exhibitions, diversifying acquisitions, more diverse research, and provides resources with diverse audiences in mind.	- Mentions several underrepresented groups, but does not mention consideration for the differences in their positioning - Largely binary between what's currently there and not present yet.
Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (US)	Non-Western, Age, Women/Female, Queer, Euro-Centric, Multi-lingual	- Programming includes both racial/ethnic representation (e.g., Haitian, Indigenous, AAPI) and LGBTQIA+ experiences (via The Theater Offensive partnership). Disability and neurodiversity receive less narrative space than race and culture. - Temporary exhibitions and residencies feature a mix of Western and non-Western, white and BIPOC artists	- Implicit recognition of disparity within their initiatives - Initiatives are only siloed; no statements are made about the permanent collection and the diversity within these incoming diverse groups

Textile Museum (CAN)	BIPOC, Gender, Disability, Sexual Orientation, Religion, Education, Age, Cultural, Race, Queer	- Commits to expanding representation of BIPOC, 2SLGBTQ+, and marginalized artists, curators, and makers. - Plans to diversify collection content - Engage with community advisors, - Identify culturally sensitive objects. - Explicitly addresses the colonial and Eurocentric origins of its collection and curatorial practices	- The closest they come to disparity is saying "BIPOC communities", using a plural form. This at most suggests acknowledgement of multiple communities within BIPOC, but it seems rather obvious considering it's an acronym.
Brooklyn Museum (US)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Kunstmuseum Den Haag (NL)	Non-Western, BIPOC, Sexual Orientation, Religion, Education, Age, Women/Female, Bicultural, Migration Background, Intersectional, Cultural, International/Global, Social	- Diverse categories are present, but not yet proportionally integrated into the main narrative or permanent collection displays. Some groups appear more occasionally than others, and central visibility is unequal.	- No direct mention of disparity, - Does mention intersectionality - Within this, they say they want more inclusion of female artists without framing them as 'female artists'. The point they're making here is that they're diverse and strong in their own right without being framed as exceptional
Reina Sofía Museum (SPA)	Gender, Class/Socio-Economic Status, Age, Migration Background, Cultural, Race	- Implicitly implies that balance is already present. - Categories are present, but not yet proportionally integrated into the main narrative or permanent collection displays. Some groups appear more occasionally than others,	- No mention at all

		and central visibility is unequal.	
MACBA (SPA)	Age, International/Global, Region, Local	Terms like “horizontal participation” and “plurality of experiences” remain abstract, with no indication of how underrepresented voices will be included in curatorial decision-making or leadership structures.	- No mention at all
MAM Paris (FRA)	Non-Western, Disability, Age, Women/Female, Migration Background, Region, Underserved Neighborhoods, Refugees	Addresses gender balance: -Acknowledgement that only 18% of artists in the collection are women. - Goal to increase the number of works by women artists to better reflect the museum's exhibition history (which has increasingly featured women since the 1960s).	- When mentioning non-French countries new to the collection, these non-European contexts are bundled under the vague category "non occidental" without explaining their internal differences. - The "otherness" is acknowledged, but not conceptually differentiated

Appendix C: AI Declaration Form

Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication

Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Course Assignments

Student Information
Name: Ella Noor
Student ID: 525468
Course Name: Master's Thesis

Instructor Name: Alessia Crotta
Assignment Title: Framing Diversity: Policy Rhetoric and the Cultural Supply of Modern Art Museums
Date: September 21, 2025

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools
I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works with limited user input.

GenAI use could include, but is not limited to:
- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Quillbot)
- Writing improvements, including grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL)
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding, debugging code, Gemini Deep Research)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books. (e.g. Perplexity AI)
-

For any GenAI task, 1) it must be permitted by the course and 2) you are responsible for verifying the accuracy of the outputs used in any submission. Improper use of sources obtained from GenAI could constitute academic fraud.

Also, 3) the requested prompts/logs (under Extent of AI Usage below) may be either screenshots or textual copies. The appendix can be included as part of the main submission or submitted as a separate document. Check with your lecturer.

☒ I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically Grammarly, DeepL, NotebookLM, and ChatGPT, in the process of creating parts or components of my course assignment. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of the assignment.

☐ I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Extent of AI Usage
☒ I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the assignment were undertaken by me. I have

enclosed the prompts/logging of my GenAI tool use in an appendix.

Ethical and Academic Integrity

☒ I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature: Ella Noor Celebi
Date of Signature: September 21, 2025

Explanation of Use of AI Tools

Grammarly:
Grammarly is not a prompt tool. The free version that I used only checks for spelling and grammar mistakes; it does not suggest improved writing suggestions. I used the Google Docs plug-in to check for any errors since it is more accurate than the Google Docs spelling tool.

DeepL:
DeepL is a translation tool, not a prompt tool. I used it for one source, the MAM Paris Strategic Plan, which was only available in French. While my French reading skills are sufficient, I consulted DeepL (alongside Google Translate) to check for nuances and meanings that I might not have fully captured myself.

ChatGPT:
ChatGPT is a generative AI tool. I used it for practical support, such as refining inarticulate ideas, checking formatting, clarifying feedback notes, and simple grammatical questions. For example, I asked: “Can you make my idea more concise without changing the meaning?”, “How should I cite a table in APA style?”, “Should this word be italicized?” “Should I use ‘;’ or ‘:’ here?”. I did not use this tool to generate substantive content, conduct analysis, or create tables for my thesis.

NotebookLM:
NotebookLM is an AI tool for working with academic texts. I used it to efficiently locate specific information in lengthy sources. For example, I asked: “Where does Towse discuss welfare theory?” and the tool highlighted the relevant sections of the text. I did not use it to summarize or generate new content; I only used it to verify and refine my own writing with reference to the original sources.