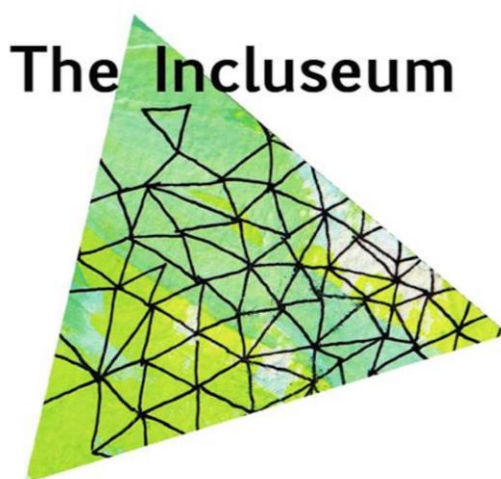


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The Inluseum Metadata Schema: An Ongoing Learning Journey

Rose Paquet

Founded in 2012, The Inluseum (<https://inluseum.com>) is the first and longest-running collaborative grassroots project focused on understanding inclusive practices and possibilities for structural changes in museums. The Inluseum has functioned as an innovative, international "collaboratory" with the mission to advance new ways of being a museum through dialogue, community building, and collaborative practice. The cofounders and codirectors—Aletheia Wittman, Dr. Porchia Moore, and myself, Dr. Rose Paquet—consider ourselves museum practitioners and scholars. Our backgrounds span many disciplines—history, art history, library information science, information science, and design—and our practice has been cultivated across a diversity of museums and cultural-heritage organizations for over twenty years.



We launched The Inluseum to fill a gap and provide a centralized location to share examples of inclusive practices in museums. From the beginning, we wanted this project to combine both online and offline engagements, to serve as a creative space for experimentation, and to gather people and ideas to reimagine what museums can be and for whom. A key activity of our project has been to coordinate and edit a multivocal blog where we publish examples of practice, thought pieces, and research. Our goals in amplifying this type of practice are threefold: 1) to support connections among museum practitioners; 2) to grow momentum for inclusive transformation and structural changes in museums; and 3) to nurture collaborative inquiry into the landscape of inclusive work in museums.¹

It has been an ongoing learning journey to create metadata information for this born-digital content that fits within The Inluseum's greater focus on the power of words. We believe words and language have the power to either reinforce or negate the social value of museums, as well as to perpetuate biases and render certain realities, bodies, and experiences invisible.² This understanding stems from one of our foundational premises: that museums, along with all their activities, are not neutral.³ Creating an exhibition, cataloging collections, or developing marketing materials reflect the values and beliefs of the era in which they are taking place, the institution overseeing these activities, and the people conducting them.⁴

These core understandings are exemplified in our activities over time. For instance, our 2014 digital art exhibition *The Power of Labeling* highlighted the many ways in which labels and labeling pervade our human experience, including our experiences with museums.⁵ Later, at the 2015 American Alliance of Museums (AAM) annual meeting in Atlanta, Porchia Moore, Inluseum advisor Margaret Middleton, and I gave a presentation titled "Using Our Words: Inclusive Language and Social Value," which we expanded into our article "(Re)Frame: The Case for New Language in 21st Century Museum." In both, we argued that, although museums strive to be welcoming places, the way they communicate in their exhibitions, catalogs, tours, and more can alienate and exclude visitors.

The Inluseum's concern with the power of words and the unneutrality of museum activities is aligned with the lens and practices of critical cataloging. As I explain in my 2024 report "Addressing Harmful Content in Collections," critical cataloging aims to interrupt harmful legacies of hegemonic cataloging practices and is the foundation from which remedial and reparative interventions can take place.⁶ Although neither Moore, Wittman, nor I are metadata professionals, we see it as our responsibility that The Inluseum's content be organized in a way that is congruent with the project's mission. This has been an ongoing learning journey that led to the development, publication, and adoption of "The Inluseum Metadata Schema: Controlled Vocabulary for Tagging v.1"⁷ in 2015 and to the upcoming second version (v.2) of this metadata schema in summer 2025.

In the rest of this piece, following archivist Jessica Tai's recommendation to center transparency as a guiding value in critical cataloging work, I reflect on our ongoing learning journey of creating metadata information for The Inluseum content as an example of critical cataloging in practice.⁸ To date, The Inluseum archive contains 234 posts contributed by nearly two hundred unique individuals. We acknowledge that this is a relatively small archival corpus compared to other online repositories, and we embrace the nimbleness this size has afforded us. Our platform, Wordpress, offers two options for metadata fields: categories and tags. Our understanding of how to use these fields for both accuracy and discoverability has changed over time and can be mapped according to three phases discussed below.

2012–2015: Discovery

When we launched The Inluseum in 2012, we had a sense of purpose and general ideas about what we wanted to feature on the platform. We also had much to discover. What is the scope of inclusive practices in museums, and where do they take place? Who is involved in this work, and how do *they* understand their work? These questions guided us

as we searched for examples through research and dialogue with colleagues. Additionally, we adopted free tools to support connection and community building—a Wordpress site, along with Facebook and Twitter accounts—through which museum practitioners shared numerous examples of inclusive practice with us. Our archive of published blog posts grew rapidly over the first three years, and our approach to creating metadata information for these posts was more organic than systematic, reflecting a case-by-case approach that lacked consistency across posts.

2015–2021: The Inluseum Metadata Schema v.1

In 2015 we decided it was time to adopt a more systematic approach to how we categorized and tagged the examples of inclusive practice on the blog. We aimed to develop an approach aligned with our mission and vision; in other words, one that would rely on “examining the descriptive language we use through a social justice lens.”⁹ To do so, we collaborated with two master’s students in library and information science from the University of Washington (UW), Gabbie Barnes and Becca Fronczak. They aggregated the tags we had utilized so far, analyzed them for patterns, and then researched best practices and preferred terminology in the fields of education and social work. Much like we embraced the fact that museum activities are, by nature, not neutral, Barnes and Fronczak also understood that any metadata schema would be equally political. They questioned, for example, the appropriate level of granularity for the concepts, how sensitive concepts should be phrased as concise tags, and how to balance the representation of the “aboutness” of the content versus the reader’s information needs and interests. As such, they understood they would be creating a taxonomy that would reflect terms from walks of life that they did not necessarily embody.

They conducted interviews with student leaders at the D-Center on the UW campus, a center “committed to fostering a safe space for folks of all abilities to learn, socialize, and celebrate pride in community with each other.”¹⁰ Through dialogue, a collaborative card-sorting session, and several iterations, the process resulted in the publication and adoption of “The Inluseum Metadata Schema: Controlled Vocabulary for Tagging v.1.”¹¹ Version one of the tagging taxonomy has seven broad categories spanning a variety of concepts. These include: 1) “Inluseum Specific,” intended for administrative metadata, such as “Contributor Name”; 2) “Culture, Heritage, and Identity,” such as “Families Today”; 3) “Best Practices,” such as “Labeling and Signage”; 4) “Life Stages,” such as “Senior Citizens”; 5) “Educational Environment,” such as “K–12”; 6) “Information and Technology,” such as “Online Exhibits”; and 7) “Type of Institution,” such as “Art Institution.” All content published between 2012 and 2015 was recategorized and retagged according to this metadata schema.¹²

For the next six years, we utilized this schema when publishing new content. Over time, however, we began to note limitations. For example, we often found it challenging to best match newly published content with options provided in the schema. We leaned into Barnes and Fronczak’s precept: “A good controlled vocabulary is never truly finished. Organizations and individuals continue to learn as they are exposed to more ideas and research.”¹³ Our understanding of the landscape of inclusive practices in museums, along with the intricacies involved in this work, had become richer, which was reflected in the

way we wanted to describe it. The initial version gave us a solid foundation to consider a future iteration.

2021–Present: The Inluseum Metadata Schema v.2

As part of my doctoral dissertation in 2021, I conducted a content analysis of The Inluseum archive as a whole, investigating its insights on the state of inclusive practices in US museums. Through dialogue with Moore and Wittman, four main themes emerged—relationships, social justice, representation and access, and institutional change—each holding various insights of their own. Taken together, these four interconnected themes affirm the commitments of critical cataloging and encourage a move from power-over to power-with modes of relating: inclusive practices center *relationships* and *social justice* to increase *representation and access* to museum resources and facilitate *institutional change*.¹⁴

After publishing these findings in our book *Transforming Inclusion in Museums: The Power of Collaborative Inquiry*,¹⁵ we decided to use the themes and subthemes derived from the analysis as our new metadata schema, since they are comprehensive of the archive as a whole and emphasize the mechanisms and intricacies of inclusive work. We are currently in the process of making this shift—the themes are becoming the categories into which content is organized, and the subthemes the tags—and are leaving behind terms from the first version. We will soon formalize this metadata schema into a published second version of our controlled vocabulary in consultation with Fronczak, who became a professional taxonomist and has now ten years of data modeling experience.

An Example Across the Three Phases

Danielle Linzer's blog post "Making Contemporary Art Accessible at the Whitney Museum of American Art" (March 19, 2013) is a good example to illustrate the changes in categorizing and tagging overtime.¹⁶ In this post, Linzer discusses the rationale and approaches to making the Whitney Museum more accessible to people with disabilities, highlighting the intricacies involved in forming external partnerships and cocreating and assessing outputs. The table below presents how the post was categorized and tagged in each phase.

The post was initially categorized according to museum activity (namely, "Programming") and tagged based on other salient attributes included in the post. Later, the museum activity became a tag under "Best Practices," and the museum type was featured as a category. The latest iteration of the Inluseum Metadata Schema is more specific and allows us to highlight intricate features of each category. For example, from studying a decade of published blog posts, we found that relationships were a major aspect of inclusive work in museums and that authors shared rich details about the attributes and qualities of these relationships. As such, tags under the category "Relationships," such as "Establishing Partnerships and Building Trust," bring forth these aspects, honoring the important subtleties of these authors' practices.

Phase	Categories	Tags
Discovery	Programming	Art, Museums; Partnerships; Disabilities; Accessibility
Inluseum Metadata v.1	Best Practices	Facilitating Access; Programming; Partnerships
	Institution by Type	Art Museum
Inluseum Metadata v.2	Relationships	Establishing Partnerships; External Partnerships; Prioritizing Collaboration and Co-Creation; Values; Trust Building; Authenticity; Listening; Long-Term Commitment
	Representation and Access	Physical Access; Cognitive and Intellectual Access
	Institutional Change	Strategy; Assessment

Reflections and Conclusion

Like other organizations that host collections and archives, we strive for The Inluseum's content to be discoverable, each piece as a unique contribution and part of larger conversations and scholarship. Moreover, given our focus on inclusive practices and possibilities for structural changes in museums, we have been especially concerned with developing an approach to managing the blog and its metadata that is congruent with our mission. This has been a source of experimentation and constant reassessment.

As Tai emphasizes, critical cataloging is supported by iterative, flexible, and process-oriented approaches.¹⁷ Like other organizations practicing critical cataloging, we have found it helpful to remain adaptable and responsive, and to work collaboratively. We will maintain this focus moving forward, periodically reviewing our metadata usage and its alignment with the landscape of inclusive practices in museums as it keeps unfolding. We aim to be transparent in the process of creating our metadata practices, and framing this process as a learning journey embodies vulnerability. It has not been perfect, and we could have made different decisions along the way, but we are always learning and growing and so will The Inluseum.¹⁸ This learning journey is ongoing.

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Notes

Much gratitude to Becca Fronczak for her insightful feedback and comments on this piece.

¹ In addition to our multivocal blog, we organize and hold events and workshops, develop online and offline exhibitions with associated programming, and participate in national and international professional gatherings. We prioritize collaborative methodologies of knowledge production in all we do.

² Rose Paquet Kinsley, Margaret Middleton, and Porchia Moore, "(Re)Frame: The Case for New Language in the 21st Century Museum," *Exhibition* 36, no. 1 (2016): 56–63.

³ The myth of neutrality had already been unpacked in other fields and intellectual traditions for decades, including women and gender studies and anthropology. See, for example, Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99; and Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks your Heart* (Beacon, 1997). The idea that museums are not neutral gained traction in 2017, following La Tanya Autry and Mike Murawski's campaign "Museums Are Not Neutral." See La Tanya Autry, "Changing the Things I Cannot Accept: Museums Are Not Neutral," *Artstuffmatters*, October 15, 2017; and La Tanya Autry and Mike Murawski, "Museums Are Not Neutral: We Are Stronger Together," *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 5, no. 2 (2019), <https://journalpanorama.org/article/public-scholarship/museums-are-not-neutral>.

⁴ Rose Paquet Kinsley and Aletheia Wittman, "Bringing Self-Examination to the Center of Social Justice Work in Museums," *Museum Magazine* (January–February 2016): 40–45; and Rose Paquet, *Addressing Harmful Content in Collections* (Oregon Heritage Commission, 2024).

⁵ See Rose Paquet Kinsley and Aletheia Wittman, "Exhibit Opening: An Introduction to The Power of Labeling," June 30, 2014, *The Inluseum*, <https://inluseum.com/2014/06/30/exhibit-opening-an-introduction-to-the-power-of-labeling>.

⁶ Paquet, *Addressing Harmful Content*.

⁷ Rose Paquet Kinsley, Aletheia Wittman, Gabbie Barnes, and Becca Fronczak, *Inluseum Metadata Schema: Controlled Vocabulary for Tagging; Version 1.0.*, April 15, 2015, *The Inluseum*, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1s0CbMesuXrsmlr2f32HelgevEFZNXMxt/view>.

⁸ Jessica Tai, "Cultural Humility as a Framework for Anti-Oppressive Archival Descriptions," in *Reinventing the Museum: Relevance, Inclusion, and Global Responsibilities*, ed. G. Anderson (Rowman and Littlefield, 2024), 357.

⁹ "Reparative Description at Art Institute of Chicago Research Center: Home," Art Institute of Chicago, last updated September 22, 2023, <https://artic.libguides.com/c.php?g=1325782>.

¹⁰ See "Disability and Deaf Cultural Center," University of Washington, accessed May 13, 2025, <https://depts.washington.edu/dcenter>.

¹¹ Paquet et al., *Inluseum Metadata Schema*.

¹² To read more about the process, see Gabbie Barnes and Becca Fronczek, "The Inluseum's New Metadata Schema: A Controlled Vocabulary for Tagging," *The Inluseum*, December 9, 2015. <https://inluseum.com/2015/12/09/inluseums-new-metadata-schema-a-controlled-vocabulary-tagging>.

¹³ Barnes and Fronczak, "Inluseum's New Metadata Schema."

¹⁴ Rose Paquet, "Cultivating Inclusion in US Museums: Insights from the Inluseum" (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2021).

¹⁵ Porchia Moore, Rose Paquet, and Aletheia Wittman, *Transforming Inclusion in Museums: The Power of Collaborative Inquiry* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2022).

¹⁶ Danielle Linzer, "Making Contemporary Art Accessible at the Whitney Museum of American," The Inluseum, March 19, 2013, <https://inluseum.com/2013/03/19/making-contemporary-art-accessible-at-the-whitney-museum-of-american-art>.

¹⁷ Tai, "Cultural Humility as a Framework," 350.

¹⁸ Porchia Moore, Rose Paquet, and Aletheia Wittman, "The Inluseum Manifesto for the Humanities in the Public Sphere," *Public Humanities* 1, no. 1 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2024.38>.