

Transformational Encounters: Reflections on Cultural Participation and Ecomuseology

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Abstract: This paper explores the relationship between cultural participation, community wellbeing and global sustainability. By reframing notions of cultural participation within a perspective that stresses interconnection and deep reflection as key to wellbeing, the author questions the core values that guide, govern and fund cultural organizations, policies and practices. The paper presents ten quasi-fictional scenarios that explore the dynamics of meaningful participation. They creatively illustrate the importance of an ecomuseological perspective in which culture is understood as the foundation for increased human consciousness and responsible action to share limited planetary resources.

Résumé : Cette communication explore les rapports entre la participation culturelle, le bien-être de la communauté, et la viabilité globale. L'auteur remet en question les valeurs fondamentales qui guident, gouvernent et subventionnent les organisations culturelles, les principes de fonctionnement et les pratiques courantes. À cette fin, il utilise une tactique qui consiste à reformuler les notions de participation culturelle à partir d'un point de vue qui met l'accent sur les liens étroits et la réflexion profonde afin de favoriser une situation de bien-être. On y retrouve dix scénarios quasi fictifs qui explorent une dynamique de participation impliquée. Ceux-ci illustrent l'importance d'une perspective écomuséologique selon laquelle on voit la culture comme étant la base d'une connaissance humaine accrue qui nous permettra de partager des ressources planétaires limitées.

Keywords: Ecomuseology; Museum; Audience research; Culture and sustainability

Introduction

In many parts of the world, artists, policymakers, and academics are exploring the relationships between cultural participation and the health and well-being of communities. In the process, questions are being asked about the nature of culture and its role in the lives of individuals and groups. Among these questions, a crucial one—and one that is central to this paper—is whether our current cultural institutions (museums and art galleries in particular) are in fact serving the cultural

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Canadian Journal of Communication, Vol 31 (2006) 127-145

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well-being of our evolving, pluralist society, or if, in spite of their good intentions, they are falling short of both acknowledging and meeting our individual and collective needs.

The reflections that follow are shaped by my 25 years of experience as an educator and audience researcher in a major art museum (Worts, 1989, 1990, 1995, 1998). Throughout this time I have been drawn to non-traditional museum work—especially ecomuseology and other forms of “new museology” (Galla, 2002; Rivard, 1990; Sandell, 2002; Silverman, 1998). Ecomuseology, which was created by George Rivieres and Hugues de Varine in France in the 1970s, has always approached culture as an interrelated field of actions, objects, places, memories, and consciousness that involves whole communities. In embracing the material culture, spiritual beliefs, civil processes, and heritage of communities, this perspective takes as its starting points the individual and collective needs in which a museum is situated. These are also its first criteria for measuring the success of an exhibition or institution. This perspective has led to my most recent interest in the challenge of global sustainability and culture. My research in the latter area explores how culture provides society with its foundation blocks of values, beliefs, and behaviours. If, as I argue, it is through participating in some form of cultural life that this sense of well-being becomes attainable to us, then it is essential that we work toward an understanding of how individuals and groups forge meaningful connections to each other, as well as to the natural systems of the Earth (Worts, 1998, 2003, 2004; Worts & Sutter, 2005).

This paper offers a series of reflections on these issues so that we may better understand how governments and cultural institutions can effectively support the healthy cultural life of individuals and communities. I begin by questioning the notion of “cultural participation.” I then present ten scenarios that fictionalize my observations on the transformative potential of a cultural encounter to deepen the notion of cultural participation. The scenarios allow for a nuanced exploration—beyond museum marketing data—of how subjects may engage and transform themselves, each other, and the world by participating in cultural events and activities. In my concluding remarks, I turn to the example of the Ha Long Bay Ecomuseum, Viet Nam, an institution that is actively re-imagining what can be done to enhance this process of cultural participation within a framework oriented toward environmental sustainability.

Cultural participation

Traditional museological approaches to understanding cultural participation often focus on calculating the value of our leisure-time experiences in cultural institutions like museums, art galleries, theatres, and opera houses. Within this framework, cultural participation typically entails attending a public program in a designated location and paying a fee. In this paradigm of participation—attending exhibits in museums and art galleries, watching theatrical or musical performances—the most that is expected of participants is appreciation. Participation is assumed to be passive. Although a deeply engaged, highly reflective, and profoundly meaningful experience can be had by a visitor/patron, the assumed

norm is that you pay your money and catch the show. Troubling questions arise if one probes these assumptions a little deeper. Take your typical museum, for instance. One might well ask what, exactly, is the ultimate goal of having millions of people ambling by millions of displayed objects during leisure time? Who actually benefits from having members of the public read text panels, for example, in exhibits? Does this type of experience change how people see the world and/or live their lives? Unfortunately, the responses to such questions, which are difficult to measure or calculate, are not asked often enough by museums themselves. Even when visitors to museums generate insights that might shed light on such questions (Worts, 1995; Worts & Sutter, 2005), it is rare that these comments and ideas are fed back into the institutional machinery responsible for the exhibits and collections.

An alternative approach, based on the principles of adaptation and integration, allows one to reflect on what cultural institutions, and by extension cultural participation, could be. In the American Association of Museums publication *Mastering Civic Engagement* (2002), psychologist Edgar Shein defines “culture” as “a basic pattern of assumptions invented, discovered or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration” (Kertzner, 2002, p. 40). In sharp contrast to more common museological notions of culture that are linked to the display of the material and performative vestiges of past ways of life—through fashion, art, artifacts, food, music, theatre—Shein integrates culture into the nexus of evolving value-laden assumptions that underpin human relationships in and to the changing world. An example of one such assumption, germane to my own interest in ecology, sustainability, and cultural institutions, is that increasing wealth and consumption are desirable goals. As Shein suggests, though the process by which we *internalize* these assumptions and the relationships they engender has not been sufficiently explored, it remains that just by thinking about cultural initiatives as complex responses to problems of adaptation and integration, we can start to conceive of cultural participation otherwise. Although our own society has created institutions and organizations to manage certain *leisure* aspects of culture, what this alternative approach to cultural participation suggests is that everything we do—from the food we eat to the clothes we wear to our spiritual beliefs, and especially to the relationships we cultivate—can be seen as transformative, life-enhancing, and interconnected. It can bring people together and generate a sense of collective understanding. This is particularly crucial as Canadian civil society continues to become ethnoculturally diverse. Pluralist communities are not mosaics of distinct ethnocultural systems. The cultural framework of each group begins to transform as it is influenced by other imported and resident cultures to create an emergent metaculture. Within the institutions established to address the cultural needs of our society, there seem to be few mechanisms for understanding, engaging, and fostering a healthy culture of pluralism and active participation.

In order to ground and animate this discussion of cultural participation, as well as to provoke further reflection on how we might begin to re-conceive of it, ten scenarios are offered. They are assembled out of personal primary research

conducted in art museums, museological studies undertaken in other parts of the world, and fictitious situations that I base on experience. These are meant to illustrate how meaningful and transformative cultural participation may take place both within—and beyond—the framework of traditional cultural institutions. Using the device of quasi-fictional scenarios provides an alternative means to reflect upon the limitations of such an expert-driven, object-centred, entertainment-oriented, and institutionally driven approach to measuring cultural participation.

Scenario 1

In a large American city, one of the local art museums decides to mount a provocative photographic exhibition of lynchings. The museum professionals see in it the opportunity to generate meaningful dialogue between and across segments of the community. These extremely sensitive images, created in the early to mid-twentieth century, stand as a testament to the unspeakable horrors that human beings are capable of inflicting on one another. The museum, which has traditionally run exhibitions and related programs that are fairly innocuous, hence relatively “safe,” realizes that this project requires an entirely different approach if it is to gain the support of the community. The museum professionals have to re-define their objectives to incorporate the impact that this exhibition will have on individuals and groups, and not simply see its “success” in terms of how many bodies pass through the exhibition turnstiles. Organizers have come to terms with the reality that although the national constitution guarantees equality to all citizens, the city’s large Black population continues to experience disproportionate levels of poverty, crime, underemployment, and other forms of systemic inequity that many citizens would prefer not to think about. As a result, the museum must create advisory groups from the local Black communities and work alongside a wide range of agencies that represent different constituencies. It is only by engaging a cross-section of citizens in open discussions that address issues of relevance to the population at large that the museum is able to both provide public access to material culture and foster a creative dialogue around a powerful contemporary cultural reality.

Racism remains a force in societies, even ones that are increasingly based on a pride of pluralism. In the U.S. today, average incomes, education levels, access to health care, and infant mortality rates indicate that the playing field is anything but level (Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, 2004). When the Andy Warhol Museum mounted *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (2001) the historical photographs detailing the brutal and systemic dominance of one cultural group over another brought the past into the present, prompting a re-assessment of current race relations. Unlike many institutional approaches to cultural material, which employ an intellectualized, rearview-

mirror approach, the Warhol museum understood that the link between past and present is a living one. Through an extensive consultation with community members, the museum shared authority and responsibility for how the material would be presented and processed in the community. The exhibition's success was indicated not just by revenues from the box office, but by the nature of the conversations and relationships nurtured across the community. (American Association of Museums, 2003).

In this scenario, a museum recognizes that culture is more than objects and academic expertise. It is clear that values held deep in personal and collective psyches are linked not only to our here-and-now, but across time. The museum acknowledges that equality rights and equity clauses enshrined in legal statutes and other frameworks of civil society do not, in themselves, even begin to address the complex historical relationships that underlie the social and political realities of today. By engaging a diverse public in the exploration of historical images that continue to stir up powerful emotions, stories, and associations, the museum creates the conditions for a cultural engagement that demands personal reflection and discussion.

Scenario 2

A woman and her teenage daughter are visiting an art museum when they encounter an unusual installation consisting of a single painting, seating for two, and an audio program—all within a booth that is separated from the other exhibits. They both sit down and listen to the 13-minute tape, which each of them experiences as a personal meditation on a painting of a beaver dam in northern Ontario. After discussing their experiences, they jointly write on a “Share Your Reaction” card: My daughter and I both listened to the 12 min. [sic.] female commentary about MacDonald’s The beaver dam. By totally focusing on the painting, we were amazed at the mysterious shapes, movements, and colour patterns in the work. It was a thoroughly enjoyable experience, and a unique one for me—a student of Art History (a while ago!). [The daughter adds] ART = VIOLENCE—RELEASED AND UNDAMAGING.

Reflecting upon a work of art can be a powerful point of connection across generations, even if experiences differ. For the mother, a former art history student, viewing this painting was, in part, a trip down memory lane. While she does not elaborate on her past, the painting instigates a reminiscence that allows her to share a moment of her personal history with her daughter. The daughter reveals very little of her experience with the landscape painting, providing only the statement that “Art = Violence—released and undamaging.” While seemingly cryptic, it is an insightful musing on the transformative potential of art. The daughter distills her experience into a personal statement that initially equates the painting (art) with violence. However, after the dash, she adds that the artwork offers a release of energy that renders such violence “undamaging.” Their jointly authored comment card provides an example of how the bond between people can be

strengthened when their individual experiences of symbolic material can be acknowledged, shared, and valued. Both felt the intimacy and power of what the painter had created; however, each brought to the process her own creative imagination that crafted different meanings.

Scenario 3

A visitor to an art museum sits in front of a landscape painting of a beaver dam and a pool of water, set deep in a remote wilderness location. After several minutes, the viewer's imagination begins to generate a series of associations and feelings. Fifteen minutes after this meditative experience began, the visitor writes about her experience: A range of feelings and ideas that startle me!—very erotic and sensuous—a fear feeling related to that dark still water, death, cruelty—a yearning in me and tears—to touch the earth, to feel the coolness, to be held and caressed by this place. There is power and spirit in this painting that I never even glimpsed before sitting down. Communion.

When an individual enters into a deeply reflective state, in this case instigated by an encounter with a painting, very powerful emotions, images, and associations can surface, compelling that person to develop a new perspective. In this case, the visitor's relationship to nature, indeed, her own "nature," is questioned. The energy of the written response to this rather banal landscape suggests that in viewing art, an individual can connect to a deeper set of psychological forces than those of the day-to-day ego position—potentially stimulating a profound relationship between the individual and the world around him or her. Such individual experiences of transformation are the promise of a cultural encounter. Deep reflection can open up a portal into the personal unconscious that creates awareness within individuals of forces bearing down on them that warrant their attention. In the larger world, we are surrounded by complex systems and forces capable of overwhelming human beings in the blink of an eye. Creating the conditions for deep reflection can help individuals forge a conscious link to the forces that are significant in their lives and important to their well-being—both in the larger world and in their inner world.

Scenario 4

Sometime between 100 and 1,000 years ago, a family of Inuit lived at the edge of the sea. A storm had been raging for several days and all attempts to catch a seal through a hole in the ice had failed—leaving everyone hungry. While they sat sheltered from the blizzard by their snow house, one of the adult women told the children that Sedna, the powerful goddess who rules the sea and all its animals, was angry. The children's aunt explained that when Sedna is happy, there is plenty of seal and fish to eat. But when Sedna is angry, the weather gets bad and she withholds food. During these times, a shaman must use his or her powers to visit

Sedna at the bottom of the sea to comb her hair. This calms her and she restores balance in the world.

The telling of mythic stories from generation to generation is one way that human beings have passed on wisdom about how the world functions. Drawing on my experiences with Inuit elders and artists over the past fifteen years, this scenario opens up a number of issues, including the relationship between fact and fiction. Myths are not just fanciful stories from the past: they contain fundamental truths that help people interact in the present. Nature in the Arctic is complex and diverse: at times it is spectacularly beautiful, subtle, and awe-inspiring; at other times it takes the form of violent, cataclysmic expressions of raw energy. Myths help people to develop a relationship with these forces. Humans do not control the sea goddess, but as the story of Sedna tells us, it is possible to consciously navigate her unpredictability. Perhaps most important is that each person affirm that the forces of nature are beyond human control and complete knowledge, thereby establishing the need for respect, humility, and reciprocal exchanges. Storytelling, itself a cultural activity, connects each of the family members to a tradition of living in the world—essentially linking each person to an archetypal pattern of life that has been lived by forebearers. Sharing mythical tales grounded in their cultural history and spiritual worldview allows elders in a community to build intimacy and relationships with the next generation. As such our attention is drawn to the threats, and to the power of nature, that our own urban lifestyles often allow us to ignore. Through conscious links to the forces of nature made possible by myth, Inuit have adapted and thrived in the Arctic for millennia.

Scenario 5

Toward the end of the twentieth century on the East Coast of Canada, there is a huge commercial fishery. For centuries, people who have lived in the vicinity have benefited from an extraordinary abundance of cod. Fishing has long been a central component of the local cultural life—both before and after the arrival of Europeans. The seemingly endless supply of cod has helped to create a huge consumer demand for the fish not only locally, but also globally. In time, industrial fishing vessels flying flags of distant countries start coming to this area to extract cod that is then sold in markets around the world. It seems that this extremely productive ecosystem would keep producing more than enough fish to satisfy the insatiable appetite of a multitude of commercial fisheries. However, marine biologists and other scientists discover that this is not the case, and they start sending out warnings that the whole enterprise will collapse if too much of the cod population is harvested. In response, governments develop treaties that limit the size of catches—but these are frequently violated, and the commercial fishing operations continue to extract as much as they can for world markets. In the early 1990s, the cod fishery collapses. Fifteen years later, cod have still not regained their previous position in the rich ecosystem of the area—and some scientists

say that they never will. As a result, the local culture of Canada's East Coast communities is dealt a harsh blow, leaving inhabitants with few means of supporting themselves. Around the world, consumers of cod from the Grand Banks are also affected, but less so: they have to adapt, but finding a cod substitute in the global food market is a relatively simple adaptation that requires little consciousness, compared with losing your entire livelihood and way of life.

If we choose to ignore what we know because we want the world to be other than it is, then calamity can occur. A conscious position allows us to respect and to relate to what is not known. The collapse of the East Coast cod fisheries was not only an economic catastrophe: with it came the demise of whole communities and a way of life. Culture is, in this respect, deeply connected to environmental issues. The problem is not only local. In the early twenty-first century, there are few parts of the world that are not linked to the global community. With the global population nearing 6.5 billion, nature's systems no longer have endless capacity to accommodate the effects of a lack of awareness or conscious irresponsibility. Scientists provided ample insights into the dangers of overfishing the East Coast cod stocks, but these warnings were not heeded. Instead, consumer unconscionability, shareholder demand for relentless growth in corporate profits, and the irresponsibility of governments and individuals in positions of power led the world to turn a blind eye to the approaching threat (Mason, 2002).

On the surface, this scenario plays out like a battle between government bodies, the scientific community, large corporations, and local inhabitants—at least, these are the main players involved here. However, it is equally significant that globalization has linked individual consumers all around the world to ecosystems far removed from their immediate surroundings. Those who buy and eat food from distant places may not be conscious of the devastating effects that their epicurean proclivities have on both the larger ecosystem and on a specific locale, in this case Canada's East Coast fishing communities. Being unaware, however, does not lessen the side effects. In this case, unscrupulous corporations, weak regulations, poor law enforcement, and unconscious markets have all led to a situation whereby the ability of local communities—and their cultures—to adapt to changes in the environment has been severely compromised. Fifteen years later, the cod stocks do not show significant signs of recovery. In fact, it seems that the ecosystem has been so thoroughly transformed by the overfishing that it may never support the return of the cod to its previous levels.

Scenario 6

It is December 2004. MW is a 17-year-old who has been attending high school and holds down a part-time job. Christmas has come around again. During his childhood years, he did not attend church, and he does not consider himself to be religious. But Christmas is an important time for MW—a time when he feels close to his family. He loves all the gatherings at which he gets to see his cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandpar-

ents, as well as hang out with his parents and older siblings. Now that MW has a regular part-time job, he wants to buy gifts for his immediate family and closest friends. To him, finding the right gift is a gesture that shows that he cares for others. This year, he plans to spend about \$300 on gifts for the 7 people who are on his list. Based on past experience, MW anticipates that he will receive gifts worth about \$600—he does not talk about this with anyone, but he does acknowledge it to himself. This differential is not especially important to him, but it is the pattern that has been established, based on past Christmases. For MW, this holiday season will feel like he has left his childhood behind and like he is participating in this celebration as a young adult.

MW, like many people, picks up on both Christmas past and present: celebrating those early Christian values by offering gifts that express his feelings of connection to others. Purchasing goods is one expression of our culture. The teenager described above develops his relationship to Christmas by engaging actively in a number of expressions of cultural values: in the ritualized bonding with family members and the exchanging of gifts. However, among the less conscious dimensions of this seasonal activity are the unintended impacts of commercial consumption and the personal responsibility that is attached to the making, selling, and buying of products. Prodded on by relentless advertising, citizens spend money, and in so doing, play out their role in the economy—a role that has, at times, even been referred to as their patriotic duty. Moved by a desire to acknowledge the importance of others in their lives, many consumers have little idea of the far-reaching impacts of their purchases—for example, on working conditions in developing countries, on non-renewable resources, on waste levels, and on the global climate (Atkisson, 1999; Venetoulis, Chazan, & Gaudet, 2004). MW does not know that 90% of manufactured goods do not exist one year after they are purchased, nor that more is spent on packaging and advertising than on most goods themselves (Boyd, 2004). The volume of waste produced through contemporary consumption is every bit as powerful as the wrath of Sedna and capable of striking a deadly blow to humanity's smug feeling of well-being (Rees & Wackernagel, 1995). The symbolic, cultural core of Christmas not only serves to forge personal relationships between the people who give and receive, but also serves the corporate interests of economic growth. A poignant irony accompanies the cultural scenario of a well-meaning gift-giver, unconsciously contributing to the crippling of the biosphere that is the foundation of life itself.

Scenario 7

A couple enters a permanent-collection wing of a major art museum. They are tourists who are in town to spend a week relaxing, taking in cultural events, and shopping. They have checked the tourist literature for available "cultural sites" of interest and have decided to visit the art museum. This couple has no particular expectations for their visit, other than to see what the museum has on display. They have allotted two

hours of their time to the museum and want to see everything on exhibit—as well as have a break for coffee. When they enter the Canadian-art wing, an audience researcher begins to collect data on the couple's behaviour. Of the approximately 300 artworks on view, 12 objects are sufficiently compelling to cause these visitors to physically stop and take a closer look. Of these 12, the couple stops together at 10, and each individual stops at two artworks or text panels on their own. The rest of the artworks are viewed in transit, as the couple walks slowly through the wing. When they do stop to look at something, the average amount of time they spend in front of any individual artwork is eight seconds. The maximum time of any stop is 22 seconds. The minimum stop is two seconds. The one who stopped to read a text panel only stayed for five seconds (a text which requires, on average, 45 seconds to read completely). Periodically, the couple chats as they wander through the collection—the researcher overhears parts of their conversation, which ranges from the lunch they had earlier that day, to people they both know, to a few quick references to works that they passby. The total time they spend in the entire Canadian Wing is 14 minutes and 35 seconds.

This is a description of a “typical” visit to an art museum, based on museum studies of participant interactions. The way this couple moves through the art museum is often referred to as “grazing”—that is, they wander slowly past hundreds, if not thousands, of artworks, contained in dozens of rooms. Stops to look at specific artworks are usually very short—lasting only a few seconds. It is unclear just what people get from these encounters, yet this is a situation that is subtly encouraged. As museums grapple with the reality of reduced public funding, many are turning to what they see as the easiest form of cultural engagement—infrequent visits to exhibits by tourists and locals. Depending on the museum, tourists can make up a large portion of the audience—sometimes well over 50% (Ernst & Young, 1990, 1991, 1992). Because tourists are on vacation, they have available time, motivation, and cash to spend. Visits to museums and other cultural institutions—especially to the large museums—have become synonymous with tourist activities. Many tourists want to gain a sense of the local culture and frequently feel that museums offer insights into the history and culture of the area.

What are the limits of catering to tourists in cultural institutions? The behaviour of tourists can frequently be seen as a kind of “cultural consumption” (of the fast-food variety) that is designed to favour superficial visual experiences over relationship-building. Some of these encounters may well be memorable, but it is unclear what value springs from looking at hundreds of objects for just a couple of seconds each (Falk & Dierking, 1992). The fact that tourists are a key market of museums, requiring targeted marketing campaigns, is testament to the absurdity of the situation—since tourists do not contribute to the cultural well-being of communities, except in an economic sense. Even that argument is tenuous given the actual “cost per visit” of operating existing museums (Anderson, 2004). It is

worth asking what opportunities to engage local audiences in ways that are relevant to cultural issues are lost when there is an institutional focus on tourism. The bigger issue relates to the opportunity cost of creating the types of museums we tend to create. Once museums collect the cultural material they feel is important to amass, there is often a fairly fuzzy sense of how the community benefits culturally. There are few, if any, mechanisms to judge whether such activities address the cultural needs of either individuals or communities—or the clientele of tourists that they are meant to serve.

Scenario 8

It is 1993. A visitor enters a provincial art museum in Canada to see what it has to offer. She has not visited the institution before, but she is proud of her Canadian heritage and wants to see how she is reflected in this public collection. After spending over an hour exploring the many galleries in this large institution, she becomes increasingly angry and writes the following comment: I would like to know why in this entire art gallery people of colour are not represented. I would like to see more art about the Indian culture and also art on the Black race. I am really disappointed that in a city where we are so multicultural, only European cultures are seen in the art gallery. I would not bring my child here, because we are not represented. We are not recognized for any of our talents. I am a Black woman who is a Canadian (born).

In this scenario, a member of the community spends her time and money to visit the provincial art museum. She expects that her reality will be reflected in the experience, but she finds that she cannot easily link her cultural reality to the objects that are collected and honoured within the museum.

Systemic discrimination continues to be a fact of life in our society, and these exclusions are often reflected in museological display (Sandell, 2002; Tator, Frances, & Mattis, 1998). Unfortunately institutions can defend their narrow collecting and exhibiting activities as a reflection of their legal, organizational mandate and never feel compelled to measure their mandate against the cultural needs of the changing community. After a donated piece of “cultural property” undergoes the required documentation of stylistic sources, provenance, and physical condition, and once the donor has been provided with a certificate for significant tax relief, the rationale for how this object has an impact within a community is all too frequently left unstated and unproven. The question of relevance is all the more difficult to answer and defend if the material collected reflects the cultural heritage of the dominant culture. Such a situation can make one wonder whether the existing core competencies of cultural organizations are appropriate or sufficient to navigate the increasingly challenging waters when the demographics of the community are shifting toward pluralism. When pressure builds for museums to be more accountable in terms of how their operations actually contribute to the well-being of cultural life, it becomes clear that there are major gaps that require bridging. For example, how does a collection of objects, amassed by a particular

donor, serve the cultural needs of community? What constituencies and whose values are being served? Unless there is a clear framework for continually assessing how public-engagement activities (in this case collecting, preserving, and exhibiting art) link to the cultural well-being of a changing population, cultural institutions can become extremely self-referential in their operations and end up maintaining the status quo.

There are many powerful forces working to maintain the status quo within institutions of culture. Experts and others in traditional positions of institutional authority and influence will not readily give up their control in order to accommodate emerging constituencies within a changing society. Collectors, donors, academics, and business interests that may be represented on boards of directors and have influence with senior staff often see themselves as protecting a cultural foundation-block of society against the shifting political and social forces of the day. Unless those in power believe that cultural organizations exist first and foremost to address the needs of a living culture and have ways of assessing the community-based outcomes of their programmatic outputs, there is little to motivate such organizations to adapt and change.

Scenario 9

JT is an artist and a curator. About twenty years ago, he felt the need to find out more about his ancestry, which is Iroquois/Onondaga. Like many people of Aboriginal background, JT grew up with little sense of his own history. In the process of trying to gain some insights that come from a Native perspective, JT discovers that there are very few Aboriginal curators or historians out there who can help him. Realizing that he must do this foundational work himself, he begins visiting archives. There, he finds a wealth of information in textual and photographic form—but almost all of it has been created by Europeans who settled in North America. He greets this material with mixed emotion—grateful that it provides insights he did not have, but resentful that Aboriginal voices and perspectives are completely missing. Regardless, JT finds in this material many insights into the individuals who came before him and the struggles they had in negotiating both their cultural distinctness and some kind of common ground with White society. He identifies historical moments of great pain and great strength that help him to see how he fits into the continuum of time. One of his curatorial projects is to assemble a large collection of photographs of residential schools from across Canada. These schools were a principal instrument for the dismantling of Native cultures and the “assimilation” of Aboriginal youth into mainstream society. Through this project, JT’s burgeoning knowledge of residential schools enables him to tell a new version of the residential-school story in Canada—one, this time, that comes from a Native perspective. But along the way, he discovers that he has been doing more than telling a story. He notices that Aboriginal visitors—a group that is poorly rep-

resented in the demographics of museum visitation—are not only attending the exhibition, but are finding personal links to the photographs. Some have found themselves in the photos. Others have found relatives and friends. Soon there is an outpouring of stories, linkages, questions, and insights. JT finds that the efforts that made him “an expert” in this material have also brought him to the threshold of new insights: insights that, more than anything, confirm how little he really knows. His realization of this, and the accompanying humility it engenders in him, enables JT to see the great value of “meaning-making” that comes from the so-called “non-experts.”

In this scenario our protagonist embarks on a path of personal exploration and discovery to clarify questions and gain insight into his own First Nations ancestry. Although it began as a personal quest, it evolves into social/cultural intervention. As a curator, JT’s personal commitment to listening to and learning from the reflections and interactions of others is an important part of cultural dynamics not found in museums—once an exhibit is created, curators frequently jump into their next project and have little time to see how the artworks stimulate new reflection and dialogue in the community. As this scenario makes evident, cultural participation takes numerous forms—from the intrinsic motivation to investigate deeper aspects of identity, to the crafting of experiences that others can experience symbolically, to the generation of new individual consciousnesses, to the building of a strengthened collective consciousness. In this scenario, issues that revolve around voice, authority, humility, and a relationship to others come together as critical elements in cultural participation.

Scenario 10

DM is an artist who lives with her family in an extremely diverse neighbourhood in an urban centre. A large percentage of the local residents live in rental units, and the homeowners generally have properties that are at the lower end of the real estate market. Over the past five to seven years, the neighbourhood has had a lot of problems with crime, drugs, and other social ills. This, DM notices, has resulted in resident withdrawal. Adults and kids alike stay off the streets—using them, quite literally, to move from the safety of their homes to their work or school and back, but avoiding local parks and other places where community members traditionally gather because these spaces have become a magnet for drug dealers. The whole situation angers DM. She is angry that the city is doing nothing to address the distress within the neighbourhood. When she calls the police while a brutal beating takes place outside her home, there is no response from the authorities. A few days later, an automobile accident and a neighbour illegally chopping down one of the few trees on the block prompts DM to call the police again. She has reached a “dig in or move out” moment. This time, she tells authorities that she represents DIGIN, a local community group that is

composed of many concerned citizens. This time, the police show up. Now the pressure is on for DM to create a group of real neighbours who will become the organization she had only invented to get a response from the police. To this end, DM starts organizing community meetings, and city officials begin to take notice. Safety audits of the local parks reveal that the majority of people using them are young males who many residents see as threatening. Those who might add to the safety of the parks—dog-walkers, for instance—only use them in a limited way. Led by DM, the community identifies the potential of building a walkway that would connect several of the parks, thereby encouraging local residents to “take back” their neighbourhood green spaces, and in so doing, to breathe new life into the community. With DM’s help, the community creates a plan whereby local residents will contribute artworks to be embedded in the walkways—thus incorporating the talents, skills, vision, and energy of neighbours into the physical landscape. Using principles of environmentally friendly design and with the financial and technical support of the city’s Works Department, plans for the walkway are developed. The first phase of the walkway is built, signalling a new form of “ownership” over the streets. Called the “Walkhere Walkway,” it is adorned with bronze and stainless steel artworks that have been made by neighbourhood children, teens, and adults. At the opening celebration, a city councillor is on hand to make hot dogs, the ceramics museum facilitates a clay-making workshop, and there is a youth/adult soccer tournament. The idea that this unique walkway could emerge from the collective energy, vision, and creativity of the community has galvanized the residents, as well as bolstered their courage and sharpened their resolve to engage proactively in shaping the future of their community. This process of community engagement has also stimulated DM’s own art-making, resulting in the exhibition and sale of her paintings and photographs.

Urban centres and globalizing systems are challenging contexts for individuals to develop and maintain a conscious relationship to the world. As an artist and community activist, DM brings extraordinary creativity to the changing reality of her neighbourhood. She plays a catalytic role in motivating her neighbours to reflect on the value of their community and to strive toward the realization of its potential. In this scenario, individuals begin to recognize that they actually care about their neighbourhood and work to identify ways that an escalation of local crime and drug use can be addressed and faced head on: pessimism is defeated and optimism instilled; resignation is transformed into action. When the walkway and the planned accompanying gardens are completed, they constitute a local asset that gives back to the community a sense of personal ownership and pride because it embodies the residents’ collective vision. Personal investment in building meaningful physical symbols that embody the values of citizens is reflected in DM’s community arts project. Examples such as these should inspire cultural institu-

tions to redefine their mandates, at least in part. Such a vision demands that the resources dedicated to the cultural well-being of society actually succeed within the personal experiences of individuals and in the collective health of the community, rather than just in the corporate book-balancing that generally constitutes “success” in museums.

In conclusion: Ha Long Bay and the ecomuseum model

Museums and other cultural organizations have the potential to help the population at large understand our cultural pasts so that we can live more consciously in the present and work toward a desirable future. At their best, museums have the potential to act as mirrors (both literal and symbolic) that engage us in processes of self-reflection and learning. They can be places that offer fun, social interaction, and meaningful experiences. But how well do our museums fulfill these potentials and help secure a sustainable future? It is interesting that virtually none of the “measures of success” within museum studies of cultural participation address this fundamental question. Attendance, revenue, media reviews, discipline-based publications, collections amassed, donations received, research reports produced, and exhibits organized are some of the many indicators used to shed light on institutional dynamics. These indicators may help a not-for-profit corporation to meet its institutional responsibilities; they do not provide insights into the broader impacts of cultural participation in a community. What, then, might be appropriate models for re-inventing cultural organizations to effectively meet the wide-ranging needs of communities?

The above scenarios provide a glimpse into the complex dynamics of cultural participation from within the purview of a larger ecological perspective that encompasses personal and collective well-being for human and non-human actors. These scenarios demonstrate the complex set of processes that are played out intrapsychically, through the creative internal processes of individuals, as well as through the relationship-building that takes place between people as they participate in culture.

Throughout this discussion, it has been argued that cultural participation is a central and foundational dimension of human consciousness and our ability to relate to others—both within communities and within a natural environment. There is good reason to believe that fundamental shifts in how we conceive of Canada’s urban and pluralist cultures are needed if we are to adequately address the complex sustainability challenges already on our collective doorstep. To better understand what is possible, I turn to an initiative in Viet Nam called the Ha Long Bay Ecomuseum.

The Ha Long Bay Ecomuseum radically departs from traditional museum frameworks, and it has the potential to inspire change across the cultural sectors of the Western world (Galla, 2002). Ha Long Bay, which is located in a spectacular setting on the South China Sea, was designated years ago as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Over time, however, its population grew and its resources steadily declined. Because of its UNESCO designation, tourism had grown—but this carried with it deleterious effects. Characterized by short visits to see the natural

beauties and quaint fishing lifestyles of local inhabitants, tourism had contributed little to a local economy already sagging as a result of a disintegrating infrastructure and widespread poverty.

In order to address this situation, and in conjunction with the local government, the Ha Long Bay Ecomuseum was created in 2002, setting as its goal nothing short of the cultural, social, economic, and environmental well-being of the region. Through extensive stakeholder-engagement processes, the museum identified ways of involving broad sections of the community in learning about, valuing, and preserving their cultural heritage. The unique aspect of this initiative was to link heritage to the region's economic future, and in so doing, to secure a place for this community within an increasingly globalized world. Training and job-creation programs are being developed to foster local businesses in which traditional methods of fishing and mining are learned, preserved, and honoured. This important process of retaining cultural knowledge is then linked to additional training and job-creation designed to develop more efficient, industrially scaled approaches to fishing and mining—approaches that can be sustained through connections to global markets. In such a scenario, the traditional skills and knowledge of the region are preserved not as a museum reconstruction, but as a functioning local commercial operation that continues, nonetheless, to attract cultural tourists. The Ecomuseum is also determined to redefine the whole notion of cultural tourism: ensuring that visitors come away with a more complete, if less romanticized, picture of life in Ha Long Bay. To this end, cultural-exploration packages are not limited to functioning traditional operations, but also include the more modern, more “sustainable” industries and lifestyles, especially related to fishing. Although this project is still in its early stages, it seems that these museum organizers will measure their success in unprecedented ways: local employment figures, the preservation of tangible and intangible heritage, the rebuilding of an infrastructure, the health and happiness of the community, economic well-being, and so on.

Cultural institutions have an important role to play in this transition, but only if cultural participation ceases to be seen as essentially a “leisure-time” activity that revolves around the consumption of cultural and heritage products and is instead seen as part of a process of conscious reflection and responsible action. In order to reach this point, a number of elements in our current cultural infrastructure have to be examined and changed. At a policy level, it seems important that culture be defined as the complex, dynamic, and organic phenomenon that it truly is and that the cultural sector be called upon to both address and embrace the values and behaviours that are constitutive of the full scope of our lives. The latter process requires that a set of indicators be generated (preferably through participatory processes initiated within communities) that will help bring to public awareness the cultural needs and imperatives of our times. This is not to diminish the value of artifact-based heritage; rather, it means seeing the past in terms of how it can help to nurture and shape individuals living in the here and now.

Indicators are essential for cultural institutions, but these indicators must go beyond the well-balanced books and other institutionally mandated activities that do not have reference points in the community. Just as for-profit companies will increasingly be forced to use principles of “full-cost accounting” to stem the tide of systemic destruction of the Earth’s natural capital, so too will cultural not-for-profits have to measure their performance in relation to the health and sustainability of communities (Anielski, 2002; Atkisson, 1999; Wackernagel & Loh, 2004). Along the way, it is essential that current assumptions about necessary and guiding competencies within certain institutional practices, such as discipline-based expertise, be reviewed and either supplemented or restructured. Time-honoured practices of cultural institutions—and this includes some “sacred cow” activities—warrant review. For example, how much sense does it make to continue to build on extra wings to museums and hold ever-expanding collections if both are increasingly alienated from the lives of the people they want to reach? Some of the new capital projects underway in Canada at this time are to house collections of Western European objects that do not in any way reflect the changing cultural realities of our urban centres. It is important to consider not just the actual costs of such building and expansion projects, but what it costs in terms of lost opportunities. One must ask what important cultural initiatives will *not* be undertaken as a result of resources flowing into the acquisition of yet more Eurocentric collections, especially in an environment of profound demographic shifts.

At the individual citizenship level, it is important to foster reflection, creativity, and activity: these may be the central values ensuring that a culture is sustainable. Getting citizens to engage in these activities is not a simple task, especially in a world where it is all too easy to feel overwhelmed, hence disempowered, by the scale of global political systems and transnational corporations. Furthermore, many of us have come to rely on “the specialists” and “the experts” to ensure our collective well-being. Yet as the global population increases and the per-capita carrying capacity of the planet shrinks, widespread collapse can be mediated by a shift in human consciousness and a restructuring of priorities.

New pressures are being placed on cultural organizations to examine their core operating assumptions and make appropriate adjustments so that the full breadth of society is reflected within their walls. This will undoubtedly add many new stresses to institutions that already feel themselves to be understaffed, underfunded, and underappreciated. Stephen Weil, a scholar emeritus from the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, recently noted that museum professionals are generally very good at what they do—it is just that they seem to have forgotten why they do it (if they ever really knew) (Weil, 2000). This situation is rooted in museums having developed around professional practices that are “expert” at traditional, discipline-based, and organizational functions of object-centred research, exhibition development, conservation, and so on. In this context, the links of exhibitions to the healthy cultural life of a community are very poorly defined.

By developing a greater awareness of how our individual and collective values are being translated into ever-more-unsustainable behaviours, it becomes

clear that culture is not just a leisure-time pursuit, but rather a central element of our potential for survival and well-being. In the UNESCO publication *Our Creative Diversity*, there is an assertion that “development divorced from its human or cultural context is growth without a soul” (UNESCO, 1995, p. 1). This statement is a cogent reminder that economic development strategies that ignore culture, and by extension cultural participation, are destined to be soulless.

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