The Canadian Museum: Building a Nation with Open Doors

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Abstract

This paper explores some of the challenges that cultural institutions face in trying to stay relevant, integrated, and sustainable in an art world that is increasingly influenced by trends of rapid globalization and change. Where museums are publicly funded, there remains pressure to serve as national symbols, but such institutions are also increasingly held accountable to an ever more global and privatized art world and economy. As a forum for public debate, cultural institutions are under pressure to answer to an increasingly diverse public. Combining academic research and anecdotes from practical experience, this paper evaluates recent strategies in art curatorship and museology. It looks at recent projects that dematerialize cultural activities through Internet technologies or temporary displays, and concludes that such worldwide ephemeral activities may be useful, but must remain grounded in a local community and meaningful national identity.

Introduction

Traditionally, Canadian museology has contributed to a process of nation building that sought to solidify and define Canadian identity. Art museums were considered to be important because they both protected and displayed representations of what it meant to be Canadian. While the role was tenuous during the postcolonial nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it seems to be even more difficult to justify in the global and transnational art world today.

Yet there are still ways in which contemporary art centres and curatorial developments might still contribute to a process of nation building. At the heart of this rather unwieldy claim lies the issue of discrete national identity, or, Canadian culture. If museums are defined as fundamentally cultural institutions, with a responsibility to a specific cultural heritage - and not every curator or museums worker will do so - then it follows that we must hold an understanding of culture. Museums specialist Douglas Worts points to Edgar Schein’s definition as one that is particularly useful for museum professionals, and is especially poignant in today’s rapid globalization and technological growth. Schein (as cited in Worts, 2006) 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 (p. 163).” This definition invites us to think about culture as evolving within a changing environment. It indicates many of the challenges that Canadian museums and cultural institutions worldwide are facing in staying relevant, integrated, and sustainable in an art world that is increasingly influenced by trends of rapid globalization and change.

Historically, the museum was seen as a sanctuary and safeguard for culture and national spirit, and it was thought that through such institutions Canada would form its cultural identity. As Duncan Cameron (2004) has emphasized, the museum increasingly serves a dual function as both temple and forum; it is a purveyor of National identity and simultaneously a place for confrontation, experimentation and debate. Often publicly funded, Canadian museums remain under pressure to serve as National symbols, but are also increasingly held accountable to an ever more global and privatized art world and economy. As a forum, museums are under pressure to answer to a more diverse public through acknowledgement of diverse immigrant populations. They are also held accountable for the colonial history from which they arose through increasing demands for agency and representation of contemporary Aboriginal cultures. Many of these concerns apply to a variety of cultural institutions in other countries, particularly modern colonial countries such as the United States, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Ghana. In this paper, I investigate what makes Canadian museology distinct; in what ways does Canadian museum practice reflect an inherently Canadian cultural and economic pattern?

**The Global Art Scene: Democratization vs. Popularization**

Perhaps most prevalent in museological discourse today is the discussion concerning trends inherent to globalization. In the art world, globalization has manifested itself in a number of ways: in the explosion of biennales over the past 20 years, in the rise of the globe-trotting independent curator who organizes such events, in the proliferation of the commercialized blockbuster exhibition or festival, and in the “Bilbao effect.” The Bilbao effect describes the model of branding a city as prime real estate for cultural tourism through the erection of a building designed by a globally recognized architect – the benchmark for which is, of course, Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim in Bilbao Spain.

On the one hand, these developments represent a positive and healthy democratization of the art world. Many cultural marketing ploys may very well have begun with the genuine intent of a liberal politician to support tourism and foster local identity in their city. One common reason for initiating a biennale art event - particularly in Eastern European cities devastated by war - is to rejuvenate the city through commemoration of painful events, while simultaneously improving cultural identity and morale. Such biennales were vehicles through which the city could both rebuild itself and project a specific image of the community into the world at large. Earlier in the twentieth century, when the art world was centralized in such cities as Paris, New York, Vienna, and London, this would not have happened. Globalization
also provides an unprecedented arena for the exchange of knowledge and ideas. Biennales and world art events are amazing opportunities for cultures to come together, to reflect, and to express opinions on global issues such as ecological degradation, social injustice, and unsustainable technologies. In this context, art can be seen as a possible tool for peace. On the other hand, globalization and commodification result in some rather sinister effects on artistic production. The increased pressure of the global market and biennale circuit on artists and cultural workers can result in the dilution of the value of intellectual property, the co-option of cultural resistance, and the commodification of critical theory and cultural relativism. The impulse to make art consumable, accessible, and visible can lead to a loss of intellectual refinement and cultural diversity.

**Canada on the Global Market: Toeing the Commercial Line**

While it is easy to become paralyzed by the contradictions of the global art world, it is futile to retreat from the dual mechanisms of globalization and commercialization that are now acting on museums and artistic production. Walter Benjamin (1969) thought long and hard about this situation well before the rise of the Internet, concluding that mass culture and new technologies of production had the potential to democratize not only access to culture, but cultural production itself. As Susan Buck-Morss observed in an interview with Grant H. Kester (1997), “museums today are conserving not only art objects, but the art idea, past its time (p. 38).” Meaning, that it is logically untenable for museums to claim status as sanctuaries of preservation elevated above the world of commerce, while still participating in the engines of the art market and cultural tourism.

This is precisely what is happening in Canada in particular, possible more than in European contemporary art centres. That is to say, many European galleries seem either to embrace the commercialization and popularization of art as inevitable - Tate Modern in London, for example - or to move away from exhibition-based curation to discourse-oriented strategies aimed at a global audience - for example, Kunstverein München in Germany. Meanwhile, many Canadian institutions purport to preserve national identity; they are seen as safeguards of objects that represent an ideal of Canada’s cultural identity. That they project this image is evidenced by a recent study conducted for the Canadian Museums Association, which states that 97% of those surveyed believe museums play a critical role in preserving objects and knowledge of Canada’s history (Teleresearch Inc., 2003, p. 3). At the same time, institutions across Canada, such as the Art Gallery of Alberta, the Royal Ontario Museum, or the Canadian Museum of Nature, are presenting sparkling new feats of modern architecture to a tourist market both at home and abroad. Questions abound: what idea of Canadian cultural identity are museums presenting? Is it actually representative of the local and national populations that make up our country? Or is it simply reinforcing romantic notions of Canada churned out for global tourism and cultural marketing strategies, with architecture to match?
Nowhere do these issues come to light more than in the controversial and much written about transformation of the Art Gallery of Ontario. As Daniel Baird (2009) writes, “the experience of the building is not only the art but also the city, country, and continent that it is in, part of being immersed in a North American landscape and history” (p. 65). The landscape Baird references is typical of iconic Canadian paintings such as Emily Carr’s Indian Church (1920), Lawren Harris’s Beaver Swamp, Algoma (1929), and Paterson Ewen’s Cloud Over Water (1979). And while exhibition titles such as “Remix: New Modernities in a Post-Indian World” are encouraging, the continued romanticization of Canada’s natural landscape as the stand-in for all Canadian experience is disappointing - it is a romanticization that, according to Baird and other reviewers, is at the heart of the renovation. It remains to be seen whether the transformed AGO will actually connect to diverse audiences or represent a genuine Canadian experience, but the transformation raises uncertainties: how do Toronto’s working- and middle-class populations feel about the new AGO? Is the new AGA in Edmonton relevant to Alberta’s growing Aboriginal population? How are such institutions helping current Canadian artists? Are they fostering the exchange of ideas and professional growth of Canadian artists and cultural workers on a global level? If institutions such as the AGO and the AGA are meant to be signifiers of a healthy cultural community, then why are so many Canadian artists moving to cities such as Berlin or Amsterdam? Could it be that such cities offer the kind of intellectual freedom that comes from operating outside of mainstream culture or national stereotypes?

Meanwhile, privately sponsored festivals such as Toronto’s Scotiabank Nuit Blanche, Hydro-Québec Nuit Blanche à Montréal, or the Vancouver Cultural Olympiad raise questions about the relationship of Canadian art to global commerce: what is the cultural value of these events to local and national audiences? When it comes to the cultural events that we present to the world, is Canada simply toeing the global commercial line?

Canadian cultural workers should aspire to do better than to simply create a cultural branding scheme from the work of Canadian artists. There are encouraging new models of global interaction that are not based on global commerce and cultural tourism. Our living Canadian artists are our best ambassadors, as evidenced by the fact that artists such as David Rokeby, Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, Germaine Koh, Jeff Wall, Ian Carr-Harris, Rodney Graham, and Rebecca Belmore, like much of our exported cultural talent, are recognized more for their conceptual impact and rigour than because they represent Canadian identity. On the other hand, many international institutions seem to be contributing to the diminishing value of intellectual property as they compete for internationally operating curators and distinctive conceptual positions. In this realm, new countries are explored and forgotten, concepts come and go, but it is hardly the answer to stay fixated on our somewhat inchoate national identity for the purposes of nation branding, as such a strategy stunts cultural growth. Alternative structures are needed.
One common strategy of global interaction with which we are already familiar is the production of publications. Publications can be an effective approach to countering the loss of intellectual freedom and sophistication that can arise from globalization. However, such production must be grounded in local dialogue. One example of a publication highly effective in connecting local issues to an international discourse is Making a Noise! Aboriginal Perspectives on Art, Art History, Critical Writing and Community, produced in 2005 by The Banff Centre Press and the Banff International Curatorial Institute (or BICI). Making a Noise! reexamines the role of Aboriginal art and curatorial practice in contemporary culture, and features fourteen essays by leading Canadian and international curators and artists. In a sense, it is a record of many discussions held at The Banff Centre around issues of Aboriginal practices, and reflects Alberta’s prominent and growing Aboriginal population from which many important artists and curators hail, Adrian Stimson being perhaps the most visible. That Making a Noise! is one of BICI’s best selling books both in Canada and the United States is a testament to the power of publications as a curatorial strategy.

The exhibition catalogue or curatorial publication allows for the most carefully thought out and refined conceptual research, and likely the most longevity. However, one of the most important and, perhaps most difficult, tasks for curators and cultural workers, is the translation of complex ideas to various audiences and public platforms. In a recent lecture Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (2009), curator of documenta 13, mentioned that we have forgotten the politics of language. Along with that, however, we often forget the power of translation: translation from children’s programs to adult classes to academic catalogues to ‘tweets.’ Museum publications, exhibition records, web projects, and blogs must reflect something deeper than commoditized intellectual property or cultural branding by representing exhibitions that have a deep significance to a local or national audience; they must address issues that are important to artists and contribute to advancing cultural knowledge.

Without effective translation, it is not surprising that many institutions are now considered elitist. In a recent lecture given at The Banff Centre, artistic and managing director of Witte de With in Rotterdam, Nicolaus Schafhausen (2010), stated that his institution finds it impossible to connect with the community, whose population is 70% non-western European, contrasted to Berlin, which has an immigrant population of only 10%. The strategy at Witte de With is to focus on discourse and process, to present the latest developments in contemporary art, while simultaneously trying to reach a broad global audience. This strategy might not be as effective for institutions in Canada, many of which are publicly funded. As Canadian cultural workers, we must also ask ourselves whether we want the kind of disconnected, fragmented, and disjointed simulacra of culture that such “floating” institutions create by having no grounding in the community or cultural texture of a city. Certainly Canadian audiences want the art in their cities to be relevant and accessible, and this does not necessarily mean pedestrian. In an unpublished annual
survey conducted by the Town of Banff Community Art Committee (2010, Spring), respondents felt that public art should have a connection to place and meaning in the community, but that it should also take conceptual risks.

One of the most successful exhibitions at The Walter Phillips Gallery in Banff was The End: Ragnar Kjartansson. The exhibition consisted of a single room with five large video projections of Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson and collaborator Davíð Þór Jónsson playing various instruments against the backdrop of Banff National Park. The five-channel video installation was synched together as a single disfigured country music arrangement. The piece was produced at The Banff Centre with the support of the Government of Iceland in February 2009. While it playfully engages romantic stereotypes of the Western frontier and the artist in nature, its success lies in its evocation of both the beauty and melancholy of a specific Canadian location and its ability to incite dialogue. Already the installation has been shown in Venice, Salt Lake City, and Banff. Perhaps most importantly, it was the realization of Kjartansson’s ambitious initiative to try and capture the experience of the Rocky Mountains beyond what is represented in the tourist guides and souvenirs of the region. This was something the Banff community could connect with on many levels. The exhibition had record attendance, drawing people from the surrounding region.

In the lecture previously mentioned, Schafhausen (2010) states “the most successful cultural activities are the ones that compensate for the more complex realities of life without negating the traditional middle-class desire for representation. Any institution that deals with the visual arts has to adapt to these changes if it wants to play a relevant and visible role in society.” This is a poignant and challenging statement. For places like the Walter Phillips Gallery (whose audience consists mostly of artists attending residency programs, and a small, but devoted, following from the Bow Valley representing the middle class) this is not that difficult. Their audience is already sold on experimental conceptual art as compensation for the complexities of life. Toronto, one of the most multicultural cities in the world - in which half the population was born outside of Canada - provides more of a challenge. However, even in communities that are relatively homogenous, there is still the challenge of accounting for Canada’s colonial history and, perhaps even more challenging, avoiding the pitfalls of regionalism and provincialism. John Macfarlane (2010), editor of The Walrus magazine, describes how competition and rifts between Canada’s provinces, particularly along linguistic lines, is harmful not only to our national identity but to our quality of life, stating “Since the outset of the Quiet Revolution fifty years ago, we have been governed by leaders with one agenda: not to increase our… quality of life, or to enhance our standing among the nations of the world; for the past half century… job one has been preventing the country from falling apart” (p. 2).

Indeed, Canada’s cultural identity has been dictated by grand narratives of multiculturalism, regionalism, and the romanticization of the natural landscape for too long. Such packaged Canadian identity is open to passive co-option by the global market and makes active participation in a global community difficult for Canadian
cultural workers and intellectuals. As cultural institutions, museums need to circumvent mythological Canadian history in favour of true connections to local artists, local communities and the aesthetic and conceptual structures that matter to them. Canadian cultural workers must strive to actively situate Canadian museums and cultural events within the global context, or else we risk having our intellectual and cultural properties co-opted by the depoliticized space of global commerce. We have a responsibility to local artists and local contexts. As doorkeepers to this changing environment, we need to provide a critical framework for art and to facilitate active rather than passive interaction with the global art world.

References


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