

(In Researching Visual Arts Education in Museums and Galleries:  
An International Reader, edited by Les Tickle, Veronica Sekules, Maria  
Xanthoudaki, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003

---

DOUGLAS WORTS

## ON THE BRINK OF IRRELEVANCE?

*Art Museums In Contemporary Society*

Abstract: Traditionally, art and visual culture have provided opportunities for individuals to connect to the deeper cultural reality of a group. By living with and reflecting deeply on the symbols of culture, individuals developed more or less of a personal consciousness of the world in which they lived. As our modern world of specialization evolved over recent centuries, art has been increasingly housed in museums - largely because of its objectified value, both economic and intellectual, which had to be protected - thus removing the art from any integrated form of symbolic experience in the lives of individuals. Today, there is a profound public need and desire for symbolic experience that can re-connect individuals at a deep level to nature, to other people and to the past. Museums have the potential to play a part in responding to this public need, yet they have not assessed how to balance their custodial responsibilities for material objects with their cultural facilitation role in the realm of symbolic experience. Museums are hampered by a tradition that honours intellectual knowledge about objects over the more irrational and creative experiencing of cultural symbols. This chapter explores some of the many issues related to this topic, within a framework of understanding the role that culture plays in the sustainability, or unsustainability, of human life on our planet. The Canadian Museums Association and LEAD International and LEAD Canada provided support for this work<sup>1</sup>.

### INTRODUCTION

"Development divorced from its human or cultural context is growth without a soul."  
(UNESCO, *Diversity*, 15)

Today, virtually all museums consider that they exist for public educational purposes that contribute to our collective cultural well being. However, it is one thing to declare a commitment to the service of public education and another to demonstrate that such a goal has been met.

Through the past several decades, there has been increasing pressure both from within and outside the museum profession to see these cultural organizations become effective and relevant for the general population. In the United States, for example, a series of developments at the American Association of Museums provide evidence of

this trend. First was the release of *Museums for a New Century*, in 1984, providing a new vision for understanding the potential of museums to be vital agents in the cultural well being of communities. *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums*, which was published and widely distributed in 1992, offered a new framework of principles for the operation of cultural organizations that would be engaging and meaningful to the public. Co-incidental with *Excellence and Equity*, the AAM launched a heavily subsidized, nation-wide, self and peer assessment programme the MAP 3 (Museum Assessment Program - Public Dimension) that would help museums to review and improve their public dimension activities. Other countries, including Britain and Canada, also have developed interest in and mechanisms for addressing public cultural needs (Anderson 1999; Canadian Museums Association 1992). In all, these constitute examples of how the profession has itself tried to develop its ability to play a meaningful and relevant role within our communities.

Despite all the efforts to become more significant players in the life of society, art museums continue to struggle with the challenge of cultural relevance. Part of the challenge is in understanding how one judges relevancy. What are the performance measures for such assessment? Should these be measured at the individual level, the community level or a larger collective level? Visitor learning is one aspect of the museum experience that has undergone considerable development in recent years. George Hein, John Falk and Lynn Dierking, all authors in this volume, have made significant contributions in this regard. Their focuses on individuals, both at the time of a museum visit, and the longer-term impacts, have become foundation blocks of our emergent field. However, educational work of this type still remains the exception. And there is a deeper concern.

The vast majority of museum visits occur without human mediation. From my research at the Art Gallery of Ontario, and from observations at art museums across North America, a ten percent rate of visitors attending some kind of programme (gallery talk/tour, lecture, workshop, etc.) is considered high. Most people 'graze' through exhibits, spending only seconds looking at any individual works. The more ambitious educational initiatives, such as those experiments in constructivist learning, usually occur with human mediation that helps to establish focus and generate reflection and dialogue. A cynic might question the use of exciting programmes that accommodate a very small and select audience and which are laid on top of exhibitions that, on their own, are poor communicators and facilitators of individual reflection and public dialogue. One can even see that successful educational programs might play a compensatory role that enables a sacred cow of traditional art museums (i.e. the art exhibit) to be preserved in a form for which there is little evidence of significant visitor-based outcomes and might even be considered largely dysfunctional.

My contention is that human communities have cultural needs that are not necessarily being addressed by the existing strategies of our cultural institutions - especially art museums. I would go further to suggest that our current preoccupation with building, preserving, exhibiting and marketing collections of objects, has not evolved from an awareness of the cultural needs of the population. In fact, my

twenty years of experience in the field suggests that within museums there is little knowledge of, or interest in, the cultural needs of communities. Rather, most art museum collections are assembled through opportunistic exchanges with collectors/donors - since few art museums have large acquisition budgets. The place of new individual objects in institutional collections, and any new directions in collection building, are then rationalized into institutional frameworks using discipline-based approaches to the objects (e.g. art history). Rarely is there research into the cultural needs of community and a proactive use of institutional resources to address those needs. I know of some cultural organizations that have attempted to follow such a path (e.g. Indianapolis Children's Museum, Chicago Historical Society, and Ecomusé de Haute Beauce), but the results are mixed and it is rare in art museums.

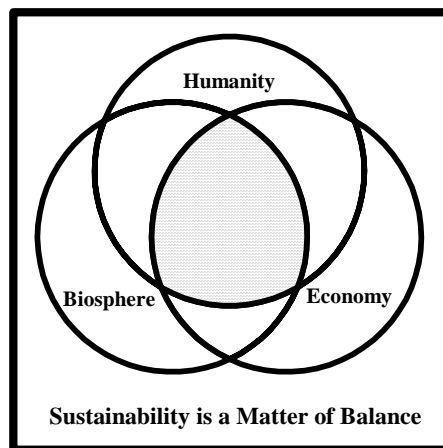
The relevancy of art museum operations needs to be judged by assessing outcomes in community, and requires pertinent feedback loops. Traditionally, art museum feedback has taken such basic forms as the balancing of the corporate books, meeting projected attendance levels, publishing for academic and public markets, loaning and borrowing significant art objects, meeting membership targets, corporate donations, column inches in the press and minutes of TV and radio coverage. Very little focus is placed on understanding the quality of visitor experiences or on the needs/wants of those who do not tend to visit. By using a traditional approach to feedback and assessment, art museums have tended to maintain the institutional status quo - e.g. attracting audiences that are comprised largely of tourists, the well-educated and the relatively affluent (Department of Canadian Heritage, 1992; Ernst and Young, 1990, 1991, 1992). If art museums want to move towards being relevant in a changing society, they will need to create mechanisms for relating to the larger population in meaningful ways. Current internal and external pressures for museums to succeed within the spheres of entertainment and tourism seem to be taking art museums more towards would be 'blockbusters' and further from fulfilling their potential as cultural facilitator within community. Part of this pressure seems to come from an economic imperative to generate revenue and drive numbers of people through the doors. The rhetoric of 'quality' and the reality of passive viewing experiences have become hallmarks of much within the art museum world. The resources already allocated to our cultural institutions could be redirected towards addressing community cultural needs, but would need a new framework. I propose that the lens of sustainable development provides a way to re-frame the role that art museums play in our society.

The following sections of this paper will explore the concepts of sustainability, culture, art and creativity, with a view to envisioning a refreshed way of imagining the goals, methods and assessment of the art museum.

#### CULTURE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT - AN OVERVIEW

Sustainability is... "meeting the needs of today's world without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987)

The concept of sustainability has evolved from a realization that the well being of humanity relies upon a dynamic balancing of three major and interdependent systems - humanity, the biosphere and the economy. The classic model, seen below, helps to differentiate these three elements.<sup>2</sup> As a system, the natural environment is made up of ecosystems that function locally, regionally and globally. Biodiversity is an important factor in the health of the environment - with interdependent plant and animal species maintaining their cycles of life. Humanity too is complex in the varied ways that groups have learned to live within the dynamic balances of local ecosystems, but also in the many ways it has created balances of roles and interactions within the human community. As the human community has evolved, with its unique potential of conscious functioning, it developed economic systems to help manage and mediate the relationships between humans and the natural environment. These systems now are so interwoven in the values and operations of the human enterprise, that they have become a third factor in the model of sustainability.



**Fig. 1 - Classic model of sustainable development**

Culture is not often considered in discussions about sustainability. Generally when people think about culture, it is common to hear reference made to history, art, music, food and practices of an ethno-cultural group. When seen in this way, culture is usually considered an important, but essentially non-critical element within the social dynamics of our global interactions -- hardly a make-or-break dimension of securing a livable and sustainable future. Science, economics, law, policy, regulation and enforcement are all considered to be of more immediate consequence than is culture. Recently, some progressive thinkers<sup>3</sup> are understanding culture to play a

foundational role in the very value systems of our societies – societies which are embracing globalization, while holding onto a range of cultural traditions and uniqueness. My evolving understanding of culture is the sum total of all values, collective memory, history, beliefs, mythology, rituals, symbolic objects and built heritage which reflect the manner in which a people relate to both those aspects of life which: a) they can know and control; as well as, b) those they cannot fully understand or control, but to which they need to have a conscious relationship. In this context, knowledge of the past is essential for living culture, but is insufficient. The past must be brought into a meaningful relationship with the present and with a mindfulness of the future. And it is the second part of this definition of culture which may be the most important - the way in which we develop a conscious, respectful and humble relationship with the mysterious, unknowable and uncontrollable aspects of life. Seen in this way, culture can be understood as a system by which individuals are connected through a dynamic balance to the values and behaviours of the larger collective and to the economic and natural systems of our world. It is true that these connections exist regardless - humanity is woven into the fabric of life on Earth. But these connections can be either conscious, or largely unconscious. At this point in time, with over six billion people sharing a planet that has a limited capacity to support the population of this size, consciousness will be necessary if we are to avert a re-balancing of the Earth's systems through means such as war and disease.

Values are exceedingly complex, layered and often conflicted phenomena. How an individual consciously embraces a set of values and beliefs that support sustainability is made all the more complex and layered with the habits, expectations, attitudes and prejudices of their society, all of which have evolved over long periods of time. For example, in Western societies, extraverted, rational pragmatism, largely channeled through one's ability to acquire material wealth and personal power, is a favoured mode of relating to the world. One of its core beliefs is that humanity can dominate and control the natural world. On the other hand, in some Eastern societies, more introverted, spiritual approaches have held sway in the past - based on a belief that people must live in harmony with the nature that surrounds us. All systems of values have their strengths and weakness. Our future may depend on integrating these approaches both at the collective level and at the individual level.

If we examine North America's general approach to culture, we often encounter an institutionalized and discipline-based approach to understanding human life that carves our world into small pieces of academic specialization. Thus specialized organizations have evolved to manage specific 'cultural functions'. Ballet, theatre, opera are three manifestations of the performing arts, while museums have their own special discipline-based focuses, such as history, art and science. Creating such silos of specialized functions is characteristic of the modernist era, and like most aspects of western life, culture has been subjected to this process. Whether culture is considered a set of separate functions that warrant discipline-based isolation, accompanied by institutionalization and commodification, or whether culture demands being understood as woven into the fabric of everyday life is a very important question for art museums to sort out. An interesting aspect of this question

pertains to the place of 'popular culture'. It is common for those who value 'high culture' to also spurn 'popular culture'. The latter most often is seen as being controlled largely by corporate interests and usually geared toward influencing (i.e. increasing) consumption patterns that support the economic foundation of our society. The former tends to be ghettoized into institutions of higher knowledge that attract elite publics and have very questionable links to the cultural fabric of peoples' lives. Neither is particularly geared towards facilitating the development of a conscious awareness of humanity's relationship with nature and economy in ways that link to sustainability and survival. In order for that to happen, a much better system for providing meaningful feedback to individuals and collectives is required. Within a framework of sustainability, these feedback loops need to provide individuals with insights about their personal relationship with the evolving realities of society, biosphere and economy.

If culture is linked to human values and is to be considered a foundational element of achieving a sustainable future, then a major reassessment of our infrastructure of cultural activities and agency must take place. Regardless of how good our environmental science becomes, how effectively our regulatory systems operate, or the impressiveness of our 'blue box' recycling programmes, sustainability will likely not be possible unless there is a shift in the core values of civilization. Individuals need to feel that they are both empowered and responsible participants in achieving a sustainable future. It is not enough that citizens drag a portion of their recyclable materials to the curb once a week, especially if there is no change in consumption patterns. Educational strategies regarding the interconnectedness of environmental, social and economic systems will be important in informing the public about the possible outcomes of staying our current course of development. But people also will have to experience these possibilities through more than intellectual arguments. Our natural and human environments need to be experienced through the senses, the emotions, human spirituality, as well as by the intellect. Only then, will our efforts at 'sustainable development', whether it be in Toronto, Sao Paulo or a rural village in China, have what the World Commission on Culture and Development called 'soul'. It is my firm belief that art museums are capable of contributing in a meaningful way toward this process, but will require a wholesale re-thinking of all aspects of current operations.

#### WHAT ROLES HAVE ART MUSEUMS PLAYED IN THE PAST?

Apart from royal and religious collections of precious objects, which have been assembled for hundreds of years, the history of museums really began with private collections of curiosities. Largely consisting of exotic materials from around the world, these collections provided a link to how other people lived - often with the purpose of academic study, within the framework of imperialistic ideologies. Later, the idea of museums as public institutions with educational missions emerged, complementing the learning environments of schools. Over the years, museums specializing in art, science and history emerged. Art museums would collect what

was considered to be the highest 'quality' objects of visual expression, and then display them for the benefit of viewers. It was through public exposure to these symbolic objects that a viewer was supposed to gain insight into the archetypal and timely human experiences that have inspired human creativity in the past<sup>4</sup>. How this process was supposed to work or how it was to be facilitated was never made terribly clear within the art museum world, but it was clear that artists had a special ability to create images that carried the emerging insights and themes of their times. But instead of exploring the psychology of creativity and symbolic experience, art history developed as the discipline considered the core expertise for assessing, collecting and discussing artworks in the museum context. Art historians then became responsible for building collections, conducting research and preparing interpretations designed to decode the significance of the works. It is important to remember though that collector/donors are perhaps the most significant factor in the building of public art museum collections. Because our public cultural organizations have relatively few funds for acquisitions, there is a reliance on donations. Therefore, it is the relationships that are created between museum curators and collectors that determine in large part how the collections grow. Carol Tator (1998), in her book *Challenging Racism in the Arts*, discusses how power structures in the society at large can affect the fundamental operation of our cultural organizations - frequently perpetuating problems of systemic racism. To further complicate matters regarding collection building, the art market mushroomed through the 20th century as a significant influence on the designations of quality, value and importance of artworks. Thus, the art market enabled dealers, agents, auction houses, collectors and art specialists to affect what objects are considered valuable and collectable. The question that remains is how much does the collecting practice of art museums truly reflect the cultural realities of the larger society?

Historically, of all the various forms of museums, art museums tended most to believe that a viewer needed to experience the object directly, unencumbered by interpretation. It was believed that by providing little more than the artworks, a source of light and a contemplative space, the viewer would participate in the living mystery of the creative process. Discussions about the meanings of the works were generally reserved for publications. Today, art museum officials continue to believe in the primacy of the art object. And although one encounters considerably more interpretive materials in art museums than was the case some decades ago, art museums are still characterized by rooms full of paintings or sculptures that are supported by little more than 'tombstone labels' and introductory, declarative text panels. Part of the reason for this is the ongoing belief that the real value of an artwork is derived from experiencing it directly, so visitors are left to make their own way with the objects. There may be some validity to this belief; however, the museum-viewing environment can actually undermine such behaviour. An average art museum exhibition contains approximately 60 to 150 artworks. Normally, seating is at a premium and rarely placed where someone needs it in order to spend extended time with any particular work. Moreover, the rationale for an exhibition of a group of artworks is usually based not on the depth experience of individual objects, but rather on an art historical thesis that is argued only in a catalogue. Given

the leisure time context of most visits to art exhibitions, individuals will spend an hour or two trying to take in as many individual works as possible and glean some sense of meaning – whether or not it relates to the organizing theme or thesis. But audience research across the field commonly reveals the characteristic behaviour of 'grazing' - or wandering slowly past many artworks, spending only seconds looking at any work in particular. It is relatively rare to watch a visitor spend more than a minute with any individual artwork. Within this reality, it remains unclear just what the expected or desired outcomes of art museum experiences are - from a visitor point of view. Increasingly I believe that one of the core issues for art museums is differentiating its outputs from its outcomes. It is all too clear - even clichéd - that what art museums do is what they always have done - produce exhibitions. This is their major output. Minor ones, as gauged by the resources committed to them, include educational programmes, publications, events, etc. Often these try to compensate for the inability of the core to achieve a significant public outcome. Oddly enough, it is quite unclear what art museums believe their public outcomes should be.

Today, collectors constitute a cornerstone of the museum world. Directors and curators actively woo donors for their stuff, largely because they don't have the discretionary funds to purchase what they want to acquire. It is no surprise then that museums often reflect the values of the collectors, within the setting of a shrine to the acquisitiveness of rich individuals. This is not to disparage either the collector/donor or the curator/director, only to point out that our system of museum building has certain inherent peculiarities.

Within the framework of their educational missions, museums have offered individuals a host of experiences that they otherwise would likely not have had. Through the great range of museum types (history, art, science, etc.), it is possible to examine the material culture from countries around the world, as well as historical materials that are significant to local communities. However, the art museum as a public education or cultural model has proved to be questionable. Visitation to art museums is sporadic at best, when examined from the point of view of individuals. Most people tend to visit museums primarily when they travel, not as a way of establishing or maintaining connection with the cultural collective of which they are a part. Also, art museum experiences are frequently characterized by authoritarian and paternalistic messages and tones, in which experts tell visitors the meanings of cultural objects selected by the museum. In this environment, it is unclear for most visitors what role they should play other than that of passive recipients of expert knowledge. Art museum practices are not oriented toward engaging the public in reflective practice or participatory exchanges, with some exceptions that have emerged more recently<sup>5</sup>. Rather they tend to reflect North American ideals of specialized centres of expert knowledge that is imparted to the non-expert. Increasingly, there are pressures both from museological and non-museological sources that are challenging museums to develop more holistic public engagement models to guide our cultural organizations toward a more relevant and integrated role in society. It goes without saying that the traditions of the museum will resist this type of fundamental challenge - but perhaps no more so than the for-profit, corporate



sector that also must reassess and reformulate its value system if it is to survive into the future.<sup>6</sup>

### THE CHALLENGE OF CULTURE IN PLURALIST ENVIRONMENTS

Globalization is currently changing the very nature of human life on this planet. Technological advances in communication and transportation, made over the past century, have effectively shrunk the world. Simultaneously, populations of urban centres have been growing at record rates, and will continue to grow in this way over the next thirty years (UN, 1999). Our current population of 6.1 billion is projected by the United Nations to become 8.1 billion by the year 2030, with the growth of 2 billion being all in urban centres. In addition to simple growth of numbers in cities, current trends towards pluralization through immigration are expected to intensify.

Changes in demographics do not manifest only at the global level, but also locally. As the accompanying table indicates, the demographics of Toronto have changed dramatically over the past 30 years.

<p><b>Toronto in 2000</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• more than half of Toronto's population was born outside Canada</li> <li>• almost half of the population was non-white</li> <li>• over 70,000 immigrants come to Toronto (each year), from over 160 countries, speaking over 100 languages</li> <li>• over 40% of new immigrants speak neither English nor French</li> </ul>
<p><b>Toronto over 30 Years</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• in 1961, non-whites comprised 3% of Toronto's population</li> <li>• in 1991, non-whites made up 30% of the population</li> <li>• before 1961, about 92% of immigrants came from Europe</li> <li>• today, less than 17% of Toronto's immigrants are from Europe</li> </ul>

Fig. 2 - Population Trends in Toronto, Canada (Lastman, 1998)

Toronto proudly lays claim to being one of the most multi-cultural cities in the world. Like many cities in the western world, Toronto's cultural mosaic is perhaps most evident on the downtown streets, in schools and when riding the public transit. People whom once were referred to as 'visible minorities', now constitute the majority. With wide-ranging ethno-cultural and religious backgrounds, Toronto has evolved over the past 50 years to be a city that is rich in its cultural diversity. The question that emerges from this scenario is "what constitutes the culture of pluralism?" Individuals who seem to be associated with a particular ethno-cultural group do not live in isolation from those outside that group. Rather, these people live within the political, social and economic context of a complex civil society. Differing ethno-cultural world-views dynamically mingle within the pluralist

community, creating hybrid perspectives and actions within the population. What seems important here is that, despite the survival of aspects of imported cultures, a new framework is created that constitutes the culture of our civil society.

In pluralist cities, individuals abide by laws that apply to all. Citizens share civil rights, including access to education, fair treatment in employment, housing, health care and more. But it is important to note that the infrastructure that is put in place to support the cultural diversity of cities exists to address the needs of a pluralistic 'civil society'. Although there is still room for improvement in ensuring complete social justice and equity, Canada's civil society framework does reasonably well in recognizing and responding to the civic needs of the whole society. Building a civil society framework is critical for the success of pluralism, but it may be insufficient. Geared toward the pragmatics of life in a secular world, our frameworks for civil society provides little focus on how human beings relate to the mysterious, unknowable and uncontrollable dimensions of life. It is exactly this relationship to those things that we can't control that offers the potential of finding our values related to sustainability. Global warming, loss of biodiversity, diseases, famine, pollution, and systemic hatred all speak to the problems of a world in which humanity has mangled its relationship with the larger natural systems of which we are only a part. But such matters are not high on the list of priorities of politicians and policy-makers - or on the minds of most citizens. And, to be fair, there is no history of such focuses in public life, nor is there an expectation that leaders will have the necessary competencies to grapple with such issues. Cities, at least in recent times, have not evolved for cultural reasons, but rather for pragmatic, civil ones.

Economic efficiency of providing services to people, which accompanies the concentrating of populations in cities, continues to be a strong argument for urbanization. But urbanization has many costs. For example, in large cities, individuals have a difficult time establishing a personal relationship with the forces of nature and forging a set of values that is fully conscious of the intimate way in which each of us is a part of nature. Beyond this problem, alienation and anonymity, which can thrive in cities despite the large numbers of people, can hamper one's ability to live successfully. It is easy to see how one's individual need to survive in the city (e.g. housing, food, social acceptance, etc.) can over-shadow one's consciousness of the relationship we each have with the environment and other people. However, our individual and collective relationships with nature and with other human beings are essential if the goal of sustainability is to be achieved. In order to develop a conscious relationship with the environment, humans need to have meaningful feedback concerning the relationship. People who live in rural settings may have an easier time of maintaining their relationship with nature. Weather, topography, rhythmic changes within ecosystems and such all are more evident within a rural setting than in the paved and built environment of cities. Building a relationship with nature is difficult in the city. Some of us are lucky and rich enough to be able to visit wilderness areas. But for many people, experiences of nature are limited to such activities as the use of local parks during our leisure time (when the weather is nice) and balcony or window box gardening. If we limit our relationship

with the larger forces of nature to contact only during leisure-time or entertainment activities, do we not seriously minimize our relationship with nature?

Being aware of our relationship with nature is getting harder, but this is not our only relationship challenge. For example, purchasing goods made in developing countries by slave or child labour makes us active players in social injustice and exploitation. Yet our values in this consumer culture propel us towards ‘bargains’, regardless of the hidden costs. It can be argued that, despite the cultural values that have existed in our personal or ancestral pasts, the pressures and norms of our contemporary urban culture become dominating overlays that steer our behaviour. And this urban culture is geared towards unconscious consumption – at least not consciousness related to sustainability.

And the issues become even more layered. David Goa, a Curator at the Provincial Museum of Alberta sees a strong emphasis in today’s society on the creation of a level playing field for all citizens - specifically in terms of social justice, equal access to opportunity and distribution of wealth. It seems obvious that such a leveling of the playing field is absolutely necessary for sustainability. It may, however, not be sufficient. Goa suggests that a major shortcoming of our civil society agenda is that it doesn’t nurture a soulful connection amongst individuals, between people and the environment, or linking citizens with the mysterious realm of the spiritual. The civil society is governed primarily by rationality and ideals of fair treatment, but doesn’t have much capacity to privilege the irrational dimensions of life (e.g. spirituality, creativity, emotion) – which may be the most powerful forces that humans experience. Goa claims that a cultural framework for a sustainable world needs to include spiritual dimensions. Since these dimensions are difficult to control, and since our culture favours those things that it can control, spirituality will have a difficult time finding an honoured space in our contemporary world. Generally, the messiness of a constantly evolving culture is not well tolerated in our society – and especially in our cultural institutions.

We are currently in need of good mechanisms that connect our values, beliefs and lifestyles to our sustainability. With such mechanisms, organizations like museums, can re-assess their functions in relation to current realities and desired futures. From this point, museums could contribute in a more substantial way to our living culture. But, in order for museums to go down this road, they will have to re-frame their terms of reference for judging their successes and failures. It is my hope that art museums will increasingly take their lead for public programming from the pulse of the community, not simply continue to invent an ongoing stream of exhibitions that have unclear, or even questionable, outcomes.

#### ART MUSEUMS AND PERFORMANCE MEASURES

Like governments that need to expand their assessment of public well-being beyond the traditional, one-dimensional method of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), art museums too need to develop effective feedback systems that enable them to understand the cultural needs and experiences of individuals within evolving

communities so that museum programmes can be responsive and relevant to the public. Traditionally, art museums have been sensitive to a couple of different types of feedback; the most obvious one is economic. As publicly accountable organizations, art museums have had to balance their books. But keeping income in line with expenses only reveals a very small part of the fiscal picture. The average cost per visit to an art museum is very high - in fact, for Canadian organizations, it is \$35.88 (Statistics Canada, 2001). In individual institutions across the country there is wide variation in the per visit cost, ranging from about \$10.00 to over \$100.00 for one visit (Fenger, 1994). Some might argue that art museums do much more than offer access to visitors - like research, acquisition and conservation of collections. However, since all museum functions ultimately are geared toward public accountability, the outcomes are largely reflected in visits, which have both quantitative and qualitative dimensions. If our art museums were facilitating truly amazing cultural experiences that had significant impacts on community, that would be one thing. But to the best of my knowledge, few, if any, art museums attempt to measure their cultural impacts and outcomes. If they were to do so, it would be an obvious next step to analyze the relationship of expenditures to outcomes and begin planning towards the optimization of cultural well being within the community. The distinction that is being made here is between outputs, (those activities that museums are identified with such as exhibitions, lectures, catalogue production, etc.), and outcomes (the net effect on the larger public to whom the organization is ultimately responsible). Stephen Weil, the noted museologist from the Smithsonian, recently discussed this problem, distinguishing between the means and ends of museums (Weil, 2000). Museums, Weil suggests, are on a means-oriented treadmill that produces what has always been produced, specifically exhibits, programmes and publications. When it comes to grappling with the 'why' of their operations, most museums are extremely unreflective about why they do what they do and never effectively gear their operations to the cultural needs of human community. In some respects, this unfortunate situation, which creates operational costs in the vicinity of \$35 per visit, is a minor part of the problem. The more serious issue relates to the opportunities for truly vital cultural activity for which there has never been sufficient funding - because the large institutions always consume the lion's share of the cultural funding.

Developing new or revised economic feedback loops can help art museums plan and carry out their work more effectively. But it will be in the development of meaningful feedback loops related to the mysterious power of art and creativity that offers art museums the greatest opportunities for development. Over the past few decades, the field of visitor studies and audience research has helped provide greater professional awareness of the need for outcomes-based approaches to museum programming (e.g. Falk and Dierking, 1992). By creating a focus on the physical, intellectual, emotional and social interactions between visitors and exhibits, researchers have done much to help exhibit and programme planners to create more effective educational strategies. However, much of what has been done in this regard has been quite narrowly focussed on concrete educational activities that are prescribed by the museum. To date, audience research has not shed much light on

how to best understand the cultural needs of communities. In my view, progress on this front will demand that art museum professionals actually grapple with several important considerations: the nature and significance of symbolic experiences with objects; the fundamental place of culture in the lives of individuals and groups; the potential of museums to be truly neutral, safe spaces for the negotiation of issues within the public sphere; and, the building of community.

Culture is by its nature contentious and messy - with every cultural group having numerous factions that are in conflict/negotiation at any given time. It is ironic that art museums - one of our society's chosen mechanisms for facilitating culture - never feel messy. Instead, art museums present very tidy reflections of culture. Characterized by precious objects and text panels that make authoritative, declarative statements about what is believed to be true about the objects, from a discipline-based perspective, art museums have a very low tolerance for living culture. And the pluralization of society poses difficult questions that most art museums would rather avoid. Whose precious objects are to be collected? Whose history, values and perspectives will be included? Is there unlimited room for storing collections which grow to reflect the shifting profile of society? Should art museums place so much emphasis on the traditionally central role of art objects, or should the focus become more balanced with the staff and public creativity that constantly reinvents and rediscovers meaning in objects? What skills, expertise and wisdom is required to operate a cultural facility that balances the history and tradition of people with the emerging present of cultural dynamics? And, if adequate answers to all of the above questions are forthcoming, there is still the question of what is to be done with the collections. Are exhibitions of art objects that are viewable only behind plexiglass barriers very effective at encouraging personal experiences of symbolic significance? If not, what alternative strategies would be required to rectify this situation and maximize the public resources dedicated to cultural facilitation in a pluralist society? If these questions are addressed, it should become obvious that seeing art museums as instruments of cultural tourism, highbrow entertainment and economic engines is to fundamentally misunderstand the potential of art in living culture.

Joseph Campbell, the noted mythologist, reflected in a 1989 interview that humanity has a colossal challenge on its hands in order to make the leap from traditional life in communities/nations to mindfully and responsibly occupying the planet in a globalized world (Boa, 1989). Individuals have enough difficulty becoming conscious of their inner selves and relating successfully to a complex day to day world. But cultivating the ability to stretch one's consciousness to include the rest of Earth is exceedingly difficult. Certainly news, books, internet, and even travel for the privileged few, provides a partial awareness of the invisible relationship we all now have with the global community. However, the complexities of these relationships are daunting. Do we really understand how each of us constitutes a contributing unit within the Western economy? How many are aware that our lifestyle is predicated on the inequitable consumption of resources, which, in turn robs billions of their fair share of the Earth's productivity? Increasingly, we in the West are becoming aware of issues associated with burning fossil fuels, relying on science or politics to solve our problems, as well as the unsustainability of our

growth and consumption-based economy. But the gap between rich and poor is widening. The polar ice caps are melting from global warming, Our culture(s) within the Western world are slowly adopting the meta-values of civil society that are shaped primarily by the dominating force of globalization -- economics. But sustainability is only achievable if balance is secured within the spheres of humanity, environment and economy - applied mindfully to the lives of individuals, communities, nations as well as the global population. If we are to find a way to balance a global population of more than six billion people, with equity and social justice for all, as well as develop a respectful relationship with the other species that share planet Earth, then our cultural perspectives must shift. One of the best feedback mechanisms for developing consciousness of this situation is through the Ecological Footprint (Rees and Wackernagel, 1995).

The calculation of our 'ecological footprint' suggests that each person living in a city, like Toronto, requires the equivalent of a plot of land over seven hectares large in order to support their consumption and waste-production patterns. Rees and Wackernagel make the point that if we divide the amount of productive land by the population of the earth (i.e. six billion), the sustainable footprint is a mere two hectares per person (allowing a tiny slice of the biosphere for the other species that we share the planet with). In Toronto, on a per capita basis, we demand use of more than three times our 'fair share' of the productive capability of the Earth. How many people are truly conscious of this reality, let alone committed to minimizing their impact and adjusting their lifestyle to become more sustainable? We turn on a tap and water appears. Food is always available at the local store. Soiled water disappears into the sewer. Our garbage is whisked away by city workers, and we never see where it goes. Life in urban settings has been designed to remove these worries from our daily reality. Wackernagel and Rees provide an analogy to help clarify our situation. If a frog is placed in a pot of boiling water, it will immediately hop out and save itself. However, if the same frog is placed in a pot of cool water that is then placed on a stove, the frog will not realize that the temperature is rising and will eventually perish. Our blindness spot is part of our cultural reality - a fairly worrying part. Many of our contemporary artists attempt to address these issues in their work, however, art museums seem to do little to use these artworks as catalysts and focal points in the stimulating of public discussion and dialogue.

**Ecological Footprint  
Country Rankings**  
(adapted from Wackernagel , 1999)

USA	10.3 hectares/person
Canada	7.7 hectares/person
United Kingdom	5.2 hectares/person
France	4.2 hectares/person
Costa Rica	2.5 hectares/person
China	1.2 hectares/person
India	0.8 hectares/person
Bangladesh	0.5 hectares/person
*****	
World Footprint	2.8 hectares/person
*****	
Sustainable Footprint	2.1 hectares/person

Fig. 3 - Selected Ecological Footprints of Countries

There are an increasing number of feedback mechanisms being developed to help us make the leap towards a global consciousness. The Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) is an example of the kind of approach to feedback that offers ways of gauging changes to quality of life, but which also tracks environmental and economic factors. The great value of the Ecological Footprint analysis is that feedback can be obtained on one's personal, community, national and global relationships to sustainability, since it provides a fairly graphic picture of the relationship between an individual and the larger spheres of identity which that person exists within. The effect, which can be both motivating and paralyzing, is essential if humanity is to stretch its consciousness in a way that enables for responsible inhabitation of the planet.

Art provides for a very different type of feedback mechanism. Since it provides people with access to the mythic and the archetypal, art offers a meaningful counterpoint to our exceedingly pragmatic world. On a personal level, art can draw a viewer into a deep reflection about his or her values. These intensely reflective experiences have a power all their own, and sometimes have meanings entirely independent of the artistic intention (Worts, 1995). By grounding the personal experience in deep reflection, I would suggest that individuals are able to participate more consciously, and hopefully responsibly, in the shared use of the planet. To work towards such an approach to art is a profoundly challenging situation for art museums. It demands that our cultural agencies become committed to functioning in a purposeful manner that is not simply oriented toward the rear-view mirror of traditional exhibits and programs, but which enables the public to become more reflective and which provides vehicles for democratic, public engagement in contemporary issues.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

We are living in a world that is experiencing many 'firsts'. Population has never been so high and is climbing exponentially. The gap between 'have's' and 'have not's' is

wider than ever. Global travel and communication is almost instant because of technology. Natural resources can be extracted from the earth in ways not even dreamed of a short time ago. Urbanization is bringing together people in all sorts of new ways. Species are becoming extinct at an unprecedented rate. The polar ice caps are melting because of global warming. These and other phenomena are part of our age. As individuals and as communities, we try to find a way to relate to these developments – but it is difficult to stretch our consciousness in a meaningful way to embrace the world. Thus far, globalization has been driven by the pervasive reach of economic thinking that believes that growth is always positive and can continue forever – a belief that is hard to defend. Because globalization principles have not been applied to the environmental and human dimensions of the sustainability model, there are no counterbalancing forces to challenge the dominance of economics. We don't have to look very far to find evidence that this imbalance is not only capable of negative repercussions but that they are already here. September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 is an example. Somehow, at individual and collective levels, humanity needs to become conscious of and committed to creating balance.

Art museums have the potential to become effective 'places of the muses' in which our place as individual human beings within a complex set of systems can become more conscious. Much more than being simply the repositories of material culture that 'experts' agree are important, these organizations can honour the role of creativity and the symbolic in human experience. Never has there been a time in which humanity has been more in need of the wisdom that comes from a conscious relationship with the mythic and the creative in order to provide a perspective that is humble enough to understand our situation and smart enough to act effectively. An historical view will be essential, but it needs to be placed in the service of the present and with a view to the future. Through the creativity of artists, individuals can engage in the images that connect us with the archetypal patterns that are at play. But, as Picasso said, the artist creates material that enters the public sphere, only to begin a new creative process with the viewer<sup>7</sup>. Each form of creativity provides links with potential awareness. The art museum occupies a unique position between the artist and the public, and is capable of facilitating human consciousness. If the widespread institutional commitment to the expert/novice paradigm as our dominant way of understanding the meaningfulness of art can be released from the core values of art museums, new possibilities for reflection and responsible living can ensue. Much change within art museums will be necessary to promote the importance of creativity amongst both artists and non-artists, and to find ways to give it a place of honour in everyday life. But by doing so, perhaps art museums may step back from the brink of irrelevance.

*Douglas Worts is a museum educator and audience researcher at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, Canada.*

## REFERENCES



- American Association of Museums, *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums*, Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1992.
- Anderson, David, *A Common Wealth: Museums in the Learning Age* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), London: DCMS, The Stationery Office, 1999.
- Atkisson, Alan, *Believing Cassandra: An Optimist Looks at a Pessimist's World*, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 1999.
- Boa, Frazer, *This Business of the Gods: Joseph Campbell in Conversation with Frazer Boa*. Ontario: Windrose Films, Ltd., 1989.
- Department of Canadian Heritage, *Canadian Arts Consumer Profile*, Ottawa: Government of Canada, 1992.
- Canadian Museum Association, *Workforce of the Future: Competencies for the Canadian Museum Community*, Ottawa: Canadian Museum Association, 1997.
- City of Toronto, "Coming Together: Executive Summary, Healthy City Toronto", Toronto, Healthy City Office, 1997.
- Daly, Herman, *Beyond Growth*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.
- Davis, Peter, *Ecomuseums: A Sense of Place*, Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1999.
- Dubinsky, Lon (Ed.), Reading the Museum: Literacy Program of the Canadian Museums Association, newsletter, <http://www.nald.ca/rtm.htm>
- Ernst and Young, *Audience Research Consortium of Toronto* (Reports 1 - 3), Toronto: Ernst and Young Management Consultants, 1990, 1991, 1992.
- Falk, John H. and Lynn D. Dierking, *The Museum Experience*. Washington D.C. Whalesback Books.
- Fenger, Anne-Marie, "Performance Measurement for Canadian Museums", unpublished MBA Research Paper, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver 1994.
- Goa, David, "Introduction", in *Cultural Diversity and Museums: Exploring Our Identities*, Ottawa: Canadian Museums Association, 1994.
- Hawken, P., Amory Lovins and Hunter L.Lovins. *Natural Capitalism: Creating the Next Industrial Revolution*, Boston: Little Brown and Co, 1999.
- ICOM, "Museums and Cultural Diversity: Draft ICOM Policy Statement", Working Group on Cross Cultural Issues, 1992, <[www.chin.gc.ca/Application\\_URL/icom/diversity.html](http://www.chin.gc.ca/Application_URL/icom/diversity.html)>
- Jung, C.G., *Man and his Symbols*, New York: Doubleday, 1964.
- Karp, Ivan and Stephen Lavine, eds. *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991.
- Karp, Ivan and Stephen Lavine, eds, *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992.
- Kelly, Robert, "Marketing in Museums", *MUSE*, Journal of Canadian Museums Association, vol. 11, #2, 1993.
- Lastman, Mel (Mayor of Toronto) "A Paper on the Diverse Nature of Toronto", Presented to the G- 8 "Summit of the Cities", Birmingham, England, May 13 - 15, 1998.
- Neuman, Erich, *Art and the Creative Unconscious*, New York: Pantheon, 1959.
- Nickerson, Mike, *Planning for Seven Generations: Guideposts for a Sustainable Future*, Hull: Voyager Publishing, 1993.
- Redefining Progress, *Genuine Progress Indicator*, Oakland, CA, <<http://www.rprogress.org>>
- Rees, W. and M. Wackernagel. *Our Ecological Footprint*, New York: New Society Publishers, 1995.
- Senge, Peter, *The Fifth Discipline: the art and practice of the learning organization*, NY: Doubleday, 1990.
- Statistics Canada, "Profiles of heritage institutions", Ottawa: Statistics Canada, <[www.statcan.ca/english/Pgdb/People/Culture/arts06.htm](http://www.statcan.ca/english/Pgdb/People/Culture/arts06.htm)> 2001.
- Tator, Carol, Frances Henry and Mattis Winston. *Challenging Racism in the Arts: Case Studies of Controversy and Conflict*, Toronto: U of T Press, 1998.
- United Nations, "World Urbanization Prospects: the 1999 Revision", United Nations Population Division, <[www.un.org/popin/wdtrends](http://www.un.org/popin/wdtrends)>
- UNESCO, "Action Plan on Cultural Policies for Development", adopted in Stockholm, April 1998 by Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development
- UNESCO, *Our Creative Diversity: Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development*, France: UNESCO, 1995.

- UNESCO, *World Culture Report 1998: Culture, Creativity and Markets*, Paris: UNESCO World Report Series, 1998.
- Weil, Stephen, "Beyond Management: Making Museums Matter", paper delivered at Canadian Museums Association Conference, 2000.
- Whitmont, Edward, *The Symbolic Quest*, NY: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, United Nations, 1987.
- Worts, Douglas, "Shaking the Foundations: Recent Audience Research at the Art Gallery of Ontario" *Audience Research: Theory into Practice, Part 2*, Proceedings of the 1989 Visitor Studies Conference, Dearborn, Michigan
- Worts, Douglas, "Extending the Frame: Forging a New Partnership with the Public", in *Art in Museums*, Susan Pearce (ed.), London: Athlone Press, 1995, pp. 165-191.
- Worts, Douglas, "On Museums, Culture and Sustainable Development", *Museums and Sustainable Communities: Canadian Perspectives*, Quebec City: ICOM Canada, 1998.
- Worts, Douglas, "Museums and Sustainability: repositioning cultural organizations", in *ICOM Bulletin*, Ottawa: Journal of ICOM Canada, Spring 2000.
- Worts, Douglas, "Art and Sustainability in Nunavut", *MUSE*, Ottawa: Journal of the Canadian Museums Association, June, 2001.

---

<sup>1</sup> LEAD (Leadership for Environment and Development) Canada is part of a cross-disciplinary international network of people committed to furthering the goal of sustainable development on a global level. LEAD International was started by the Rockefeller Foundation in 1992 and is now an independent NGO with associates in over forty countries. LEAD International headquarters in London England.

<sup>2</sup> This model suffers from the illusion that the three elements are somehow separate. In reality, humanity and the economy are not separate from nature; they are part of it. Nonetheless, this model does have value in helping to differentiate aspects of this complex system.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the authors of *Our Creative Diversity*, the Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development, UNESCO, 1985.

<sup>4</sup> The term 'symbolic' here refers to the power of an object to bring a subject into a deep reflective state in which a new insight can emerge, as opposed to an object that stands for, or is equivalent to, something else. This sense of the word 'symbolic' comes from the work of CG Jung, and is explored in depth by Edward Whitmont (Jung, *Man and his Symbols*; Whitmont, *Symbolic Quest*)

<sup>5</sup> Examples of some programs which seem truly committed to engaging the public in meaningful ways are: Dubinsky, *Reading the Museum*; the new Te Papa Museum in Wellington, New Zealand; 'Share Your Reaction' card system at the Art Gallery of Ontario, see Worts, *Extending the Frame*.

<sup>6</sup> Corporations too are slowly assessing their core assumptions and values in relationship to long-term profitability. Some are realizing that the use of non-renewable resources cannot go on indefinitely and that the environmental and social impacts of their operations will have a serious impact on their ability to exist into the future. See Hawkins, Lovins and Lovins, *Natural Capitalism*.

<sup>7</sup> Picasso once said, "A picture is not thought out and settled before hand. While it is being done, it changes as one's thoughts change. And when it is finished, it still goes on changing, according to the state of mind of whoever is looking at it. A picture lives a life like a living creature, undergoing the changes imposed on us by our life from day to day. This is natural enough, as the picture lives only through the man (sic) who is looking at it." From a 1935 interview with Christian Zervos.