



Building Diversity in Museums

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“... identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past.”

Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” In Williams, Patrick & Laura Chrisman eds., Colonial Discourse & Postcolonial Theory: A Reader. Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993.

We work in the Education Department of the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), located in the diverse and multicultural city of Toronto. The AGO is a large institution, with a collection of mainly “Western” art. The Gallery recently underwent a Frank Gehry designed reconstruction. While under construction AGO staff strategized to transform the institutional vision alongside the physical changes to become truly relevant in the 21st century. To this end all initiatives across the institution - from exhibition planning to gallery acquisitions to public programming - follow the guiding principles of diversity, relevance, responsiveness, creativity, form and transparency. The new overarching mandate of the AGO is that the visitor experience is paramount. We wish to experiment with new ways of working to engage the broadest audiences possible, realizing that this will necessitate systemic change.

We define diversity broadly, including but not limited to: ability; age; culture; education; economic status; ethnicity; gender identity; immigration status; religion; sexual orientation etc. Although a great deal has been written about diversity in the museum context, the work generated on the subject is not yet significantly reflected in practice. To quote Mark O’Neill, Head of Museums and Galleries, Glasgow City Council: “Relevance, accessibility and inclusiveness are ‘vacuous slogans’.” (*The People Versus* in Engage review issue 11, Summer 2002. editor Karen Raney)

The language around diversity is shifting and often contested. Terms like 'social inclusion' and 'community cohesion' are currently favoured over 'diversity' and 'new internationalism' is steadily replacing 'multiculturalism'. Language is an interesting indicator of evolving and complex cultural shifts. It is at best a guide for communication and understanding, and at worst something that limits our thoughts and encourages stereotyping. It is informative to reflect on the effect of language on our thoughts. For example, what do we think when we hear the words: senior, minority, 'at risk' youth, ethnic, disabled, elderly etc.? What labels would we choose to describe ourselves? What are the challenges in creating open and flexible, evolving museums for the vast range of individuals in the communities and societies they serve?

In 2008 the AGO initiated a 15 member cross-departmental Diversity Advisory Group. Its mandate is described as follows:

To advocate for an inclusive AGO and advise Leadership Team of opportunities for, and obstacles to, the AGO's commitment to diversity in its visitor base, and, ultimately, its staff and volunteer ranks. As a resource to the AGO the advisory provides research on best practices in the public art museum sector to inform training, policies and programming toward greater inclusiveness. It also monitors applicable federal and provincial policy and legislation.

So far we have conducted an internal institutional scan of current programs and services and held numerous community consultations. Currently the advisory is focusing on implementing the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act which has a goal of making Ontario fully accessible by 2025. As founding members of the Diversity Advisory Team, we both have a keen interest in substantial and measurable systemic change.

In this issue there are essays from Britain, Canada and the United States with a balance of theoretical and pragmatic work on a range of topics including such issues as: rethinking notions of diversity in the 21st century; inclusion and diversity in collections and programming; accessibility/disability in museums; LGTBQ issues; and web accessibility.

Jessica Harrington at the Institute of International Visual Arts (Iniva) in London challenges us to consider 'the diversity of diversity now'. Iniva is an institution where the very founding rationale, in 1994, was to help diversify mainstream institutions and challenge the monocultural conception of

British art and culture. Harrington discusses the important issues to consider as Iniva strives to remain engaged and relevant in a changing cultural and artistic environment. We hope that large museums can learn from smaller, and possibly more nimble institutions like Iniva and reposition themselves as sites for social engagement rather than elitist repositories of culture.

Gerald McMaster at the AGO in Toronto talks about the curatorial challenge of reinstalling the Canadian galleries previously hung as a linear art historical progression from 18th century colonial times. Using the AGO's guiding principles these galleries now honour 11,000 years of culture on this land and include First Nations' and women's art previously missing from the story. To explore the potential of engaging broad audiences, and allowing for the past to be reviewed through the lens of the present, the art is linked through the universal issues of power, myth and memory.

Eithne Nightingale at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London describes an ambitious cross departmental three year initiative focusing on cultural diversity with an overarching aim to contribute to change in the V&A's policies and procedures. This three strand program involved researching, developing and mining the collections for hidden histories in relation to culturally diverse communities; programming to attract diverse audiences and encourage interfaith and intercultural understanding and developing partnerships and training aimed at institutional capacity building. Her concluding statement is: "What is self evident is that we are on a journey where diversity becomes central to all that we do".

Stephen Brown, Director of Knowledge Media Design at Du Montfort University, Leicester England, discusses the importance of museums making their contents and services widely available, relevant and useable through Web delivery. Accessibility for Brown refers to the ease with which a wide range of users, including those with disabilities, can use museum Web sites. Brown encourages us to go beyond Internet access and instead focus on issues of usability. He offers theoretical and practical suggestions including a set of simplified accessibility guidelines.

Nancy Arms Simon in San Francisco talks about the project she is working on as she explores the role museums play with individuals of Lesbian, Gay, Transsexual, Bisexual, Queer or Questioning (LGBTQQ) and mixed cultural heritage. Simon suggests strategies for museums targeting these specific individuals as either potential staff or audience members.

Elizabeth Sweeney explores the creation and implementation of accessibility programming at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. Sweeney

illustrates how to work with communities to develop relevant programming, and how to work with museums and galleries to adapt programming in a way that meets both public and conservation interests alike. Sweeney highlights the benefits of engaging artists who have created work that is accessible from the outset. Her essay is grounded in disability theory and contemporary art practice.

Tara Turner offers a useful list of diversity resources for further reading on this vast and vital subject.

So where are we going and what will it look like when we get there? Who is currently excluded from our museums and what will it take to make our institutions more democratic? Will greater accessibility lead to a 'dumbing down' (a detestable expression) of scholarship or will standards go up with the resulting plurality of voices and challenges to notions of so-called expertise? How will we achieve systemic change and ensure that diversity issues—or whatever they are called when this happens—are automatically considered at the outset of any planning? One thing is for certain, if we get it right the audiences will follow.

Gillian McIntyre has a B.A. in Art and Art History ('94) and an M.A. in Museum Studies ('96) from the University of Toronto. Her Masters' thesis explored the relationship between the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) and so-called minority communities. McIntyre's responsibilities as Adult Program Coordinator at the AGO have included interpretive planning and community consultation for a new African gallery, installed in 2008. McIntyre also designs and coordinates the AGO's adult public programs. She is a founding member of the AGO's Diversity Advisory Group.

In 1997 McIntyre initiated *Teens Behind the Scenes*, a youth volunteer program at the AGO. Between 1998 and 2001 she served as Executive Director of Oakville Arts Council. Amongst other projects during this time she designed and coordinated *Telling a Different Story*, a three-year on-line anti-racism project. At the same time McIntyre served as President of Community Arts Ontario, an arts service organization. During her tenure she chaired a community arts conference *Kicking it up a Notch: Animating Communities in Toronto* in 2002. In 2003 she initiated the *Cultural Mapping Project*. The objective of this project was to diversify the membership and programming of Community Arts Ontario. Between 1991 and 1995 she Chaired Oakville Galleries Board of Directors and is currently a member of the Acquisition Committee.

Syrus Marcus Ware is a researcher, visual artist and educator. He is the Program Coordinator of the *Teens Behind the Scenes* program in the education department at the Art Gallery of Ontario. At the AGO, Syrus creates programs for youth under 24 that aim to connect relevant social issues with artistic practice and expression. Syrus has a Hon. B.A in Art History and Visual Studies(2001) and an M.A from the University of Toronto (2010). His Masters thesis explored the experiences of Transsexual/Transgender students at U of T and the diversification of gender within educational settings.

Syrus has worked several years in the fields of education and advocacy, HIV/AIDS prevention and community education. He is the author of the study "Assessing the HIV/AIDS Service Needs of Trans Communities in Toronto", published by the AIDS Committee of Toronto in 2004. He is a founding member of the Gay, Bi, Queer Trans Men's HIV Prevention Working Group at the Ontario AIDS Bureau, which produced the groundbreaking resource "Primed: The Back Pocket Guide for Trans Guys and the Guys Who Dig 'Em" in 2007. He co-created the *Trans-Fathers 2B* course at The 519 Community Centre, the first course in North America for Trans guys considering parenting, which first ran in 2007.

Syrus is a program committee member for *Mayworks Festival* in Toronto and is a past board member of the *FUSE* magazine. Since 2004, Syrus has been the visual art programmer for the *Blockorama Stage*, part of *Pride Toronto*.

