Old Habits Die Hard: The Bumpy Road from "Arts" to "Industries"

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Abstract
Although the rhetoric of cultural policy has been strongly influenced by broader conceptualizations of 'culture', the influence of the 'lofty approach' to art and culture remains apparently unshakeable. The programs and funding patterns of many cultural institutions and arts funding agencies serve to illustrate this tension, bespeaking a faith in the traditional 'arts', and often betraying little or no real involvement – or, indeed, cognizance – of the full range of cultural activities implied by the cultural and creative industries. In the face of sweeping contemporary changes – cultural, social, technological – a continued adherence to the 'lofty approach' to the arts seems, at best, charmingly naïve, at worst, insultingly elitist. In this paper, drawing on examples and case studies from the contemporary gallery and museum sector, I explore the bumpy road from "arts" to "industries", suggesting the need for a radical reassessment of the status quo in cultural policy.

Keywords
Cultural policy, arts funding, social changes, cultural and creative industries, galleries and museums.

The modern conception of art is one that has a relatively brief history, stretching back little more than 250 years – less than four average life spans. Yet the hold that this conception has on the field of cultural policy remains apparently unshakeable. Across a wide range of programs and disciplines, a lingering faith in the autonomy of art, in the isolated genius of the artist, and in the superiority of traditional high art forms over those of popular culture, is still, I would argue, clearly evident. This is a perhaps a little surprising, given that, over the last few decades, a disparate group of Marxists, cultural sociologists, and historicist philosophers have been hard at work in the academy exposing the fundamentally social nature of all artistic and cultural production,[1] leading to much talk about the blurring of cultural hierarchies and the two-way cultural traffic that now flows, apparently freely, between the previously isolated categories of 'high' and 'low'. Similarly, given the extent to which the term 'cultural industries' has become common currency in the arts world – a term which suggests a considerably broader conceptualization of art and culture than that previously connoted by 'the arts' – one might assume that such hierarchies had, indeed, been blurred, or that such traffic was,

indeed, now flowing freely. But, as I suggest in this paper, one would be sorely mistaken in making any such overly hasty assumptions.

The conception of art that I am choosing to label as 'modern' has its roots in the development of eighteenth century aesthetics. Constituted as a new sub-discipline of philosophy, this field of inquiry finds its generally agreed inaugural moment in the publication of the two volumes of Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* in 1750 and 1758, and its subsequent elaboration in the work of Burke, Schiller, and Kant. From these early writers, and more specifically from Kant, have come some of the basic principles which, to a large extent, continue to inform philosophical aesthetics, namely notions of beauty and the sublime, of the 'disinterested' nature of aesthetic appreciation, and of art's universal, autonomous, transcendent qualities. The 'discovery' of these apparently natural qualities – and their endless debate – has continued to exert a considerable hold over the theory and philosophy of art, although the influence of aesthetic idealism can be perceived far beyond the disciplinary boundaries of philosophy, playing a major role in the development of a traditionalist, formalist art history, and ultimately serving to inform the development of arts and cultural policies, which have often found expression in the language of what Ronald Dworkin characterises as "the lofty approach" (1985: 221).

By the 1980s, however, the 'lofty approach' to arts and cultural policies was being challenged both by the rise of the economic perspective on art and culture and by the development, primarily within the field of cultural studies, of a conceptualization of 'culture' which subsumed 'the arts' as only one element of cultural activity within a broader 'social' definition. (These are issues I have summarized elsewhere – see Stanbridge, 2002). By the mid-1980s, partly in response to these challenges, the term 'cultural industries' had become well-established, suggesting an understanding of cultural activity which complemented and augmented the more traditional notion of 'the arts', encompassing film, broadcast media, the recording industry, publishing, design, fashion, and architecture. More recently, the term 'creative industries' has suggested a further elaboration – now often encompassing the heritage and museum sectors – although this new term has been fraught with its own definitional difficulties, ranging from the overly arbitrary and eclectic to the ideologically narrow and selective. (See Cunningham, 2002, for a useful summary of the current debate).

The rarefied and often arcane nature of these theoretical and definitional debates should not be allowed to obscure their contemporary relevance, however, given that they address a range of social and cultural issues which are of crucial importance in the future development of cultural policies. In only the last two decades, the vast expansion of leisure activities engendered by the digital revolution (CDs, DVDs, digital cable, pay per view, MP3 technology, digital cameras, interactive software, the internet, etc.) has offered a significant challenge to the determinedly analogue 'arts'. The concept of the 'creative industries' both acknowledges these contemporary trends and attempts to theorize them as part of the 'new economy' – as Stuart Cunningham has suggested, "technological and organisational innovation enables new relationships with customers and the public that are not reliant on 'mass' models of centralised production (media) and real time public consumption (the arts). Interactivity, convergence, customisation, collaboration and networks are key" (2002).

There is little doubt that, since the 1980s, the language and rhetoric of cultural policy have been strongly influenced by the developments highlighted above. Even the most cursory glance at the UNESCO Culture website suggests a broad understanding of culture, encompassing diversity, dialogue, new technologies, and cultural industries (although UNESCO has apparently yet to grapple fully with the concept of the 'creative industries').[2] My concern here, however, is with the gap between rhetoric and reality – between the brave language of cultural policy statements and the quotidian application

of cultural policy programs. The programs and funding patterns of many cultural institutions and arts funding agencies serve to illustrate this tension, bespeaking a faith in the traditional 'arts', and often betraying little or no real involvement – or, indeed, cognizance – of the full range of cultural activities implied by the cultural and creative industries. In the face of the sweeping changes identified above – cultural, social, technological – a continued adherence to the 'lofty approach' to the arts seems, at best, charmingly naïve, at worst, insultingly elitist. In this paper, drawing on examples and case studies from the contemporary gallery and museum sector, I explore the bumpy road from "arts" to "industries", suggesting the need for a radical reassessment of the status quo in cultural policy.

Text and Context in the Contemporary Art Museum

The tension I have identified above – between a universalist understanding of 'art' that views it as autonomous from social forces, and a broader view of 'culture' that regards 'art' as simply one social activity among many – is no better illustrated than in the now infamous controversy over the American artist Barnett Newman's *Voice of Fire* at the National Gallery in Ottawa. The painting – a large abstract-expressionist canvas consisting of three vertical stripes of colour – became a *cause célèbre* in March 1990 when the National Gallery announced it had purchased the painting from Newman's widow for $1.76 million. In the months that followed, the painting and the gallery became the subject of much media attention and political debate. But perhaps the most striking aspect of the controversy was the extent to which the gallery – apparently failing to grasp the nature of public anger over the purchase – 'defended' the painting on purely aesthetic grounds, employing the language of a formalist art history.

The first press release issued by the gallery's then Assistant Director, Brydon Smith, gives some idea of the tone: "*Voice of Fire*'s soaring height, strengthened by the deep cadmium-red centre between dark blue sides, is for many visitors an exhilarating affirmation of their being wholly in the world and in a special place where art and architecture complement each other" (quoted in O'Brian, 1996a: 19). Similarly, in his contribution to a public symposium held at the gallery in October 1990, Smith suggested: "I now see *Voice of Fire*, with its sheer perpendicular colours, human proportions, and bilateral symmetry of three equal parts reaching all the way out to the stars, as a beacon that affirms and inspires each person's being and freedom in the world" (Smith, 1996: 179). In response to such extravagant claims, the art historian John O'Brian has suggested that "at the heart of the *Voice of Fire* controversy was a profound questioning of elite accountability in the public sphere… In the minds of audiences, the high arrogance of Barnett Newman's *Voice of Fire* was matched by the high arrogance of the institution that had purchased the painting" (1996a: 20-21).

In the discussion following the public symposium, Brydon Smith again invoked an understanding of the painting that stressed its apparently inherent and autonomous value. In response to a question from the floor – "if you came across a baffled viewer in the gallery, who was trying to make sense of these three bands, what words of encouragement or insight could you offer them?" – Smith replied:

It's a matter of getting people to slow down enough to really look at the painting. And to, in fact, trust their own feeling about it. That's how I approach it. I mean there's no one way… there are obviously many coordinates that cross in terms of the painting, and there are just as many thoughts and feelings about it as there are people who see it. But, it's really to get people to slow down and look.
(quoted in Barber *et al.*, 1996: 191)

The response to Smith's remarks by the art historian Serge Guilbaut represents a penetrating critique of the notion of aesthetic autonomy – both discursively and institutionally – and stands as an emphatic rejection of textual formalism, in any field or discipline. His comments are worthwhile quoting in full:

I'm afraid I will be the voice of dissent again. I really think that Western museums have totally failed in their role as contemporary institutions. They have not progressed with the times. They are still stuck in some nineteenth-century time capsule where there was a belief in one proper way to experience art: religiosity. Art and artists were removed from everyday life, connected to higher spheres of cognition. Modern museums (despite some rare exceptions) have not changed their mode of thinking. Museums are still presenting aesthetic objects completely divorced from any kind of reality. Meanings carried by works of art are evacuated as soon as they enter the great white castrating cubic space of the gallery. To say that the public has only to look hard and closely to understand the painting is to negate the role of modern museums. Paintings don't talk. They don't tell us anything. They give us clues which have to be connected with history in order to make some kind of sense, to be interpreted. To say that just by looking at a picture anybody can deal with it – without any kind of idea about the reason behind its production, without knowledge of the conditions of production and a description of the aesthetic and political culture out of which the image came – is wrong. I think that as long as our museums are basically formalist institutions, dedicated to pure form, they will be unable to avoid misunderstandings. But more sadly, they will perpetuate the cultural alienation which transforms our past into repressive monuments.
(quoted in Barber *et al.*, 1996: 191-192)

Arguably, the type of change that Guilbaut advocates is already underway in many contemporary galleries and museums, and the revisionist scholarship of the 'new museology'[3] has undoubtedly had a considerable impact in this wider institutional context, significantly influencing curatorial practice and the politics of museum display. Furthermore, an ongoing series of high-profile public controversies over the last two decades or more – Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*; Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*; Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* and Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs; and the exhibitions *The Spirit Sings*, *Into the Heart of Africa*, and *Sensations*[4] – has clearly had a galvanizing effect (for better or worse) on cultural policy, encompassing issues in public art, gallery acquisition, cultural pluralism, and exhibition design.

Yet, on the evidence of many contemporary art exhibits and displays, the formalism that underlies Brydon Smith's 'defence' of *Voice of Fire* is still clearly evident within the world of the art museum, which clings to a textualist autonomy while denying broader questions of context and history. Such a critique begs some interesting questions about how the National Gallery might have responded more effectively to the *Voice of Fire* controversy, and points to potentially new modes of gallery display which reject the fetishized sanctity of the art object. Issues of cultural nationalism played a major role in the controversy over the purchase of *Voice of Fire* – Newman was, after all, an American artist – but in remaining solely wedded to formalist explanations of the painting's value, the Gallery missed significant opportunities to clarify the nature of the painting's – and Newman's – relationship to Canada: clarifications that, while perhaps unlikely to have defused the controversy entirely, might have offered disgruntled Canadians an explanation of the significance and value of the painting that went beyond reassuring them that it offered an 'exhilarating affirmation of their being wholly in the world'.

Voice of Fire's most obvious link with Canada is the fact that it was commissioned by the United States Information Agency (USIA) for the American pavilion at Expo 67, the world's fair held in Montreal in the summer of 1967. The painting joined over 20 other

large, banner-like canvases by contemporary American artists in a display entitled 'American Painting Now',[5] housed within the futuristic geodesic dome designed by the architect and visionary Buckminster Fuller. The overall theme of the pavilion was 'Creative America', and in this crowded and colourful context *Voice of Fire* jostled for elbow room not only with the other paintings in the exhibit, but also with Apollo space capsules and parachutes, various automobiles (including a Model-T Ford and a New York taxicab), photographs and life-size cut-outs of famous movie stars (including Carole Lombard, Clark Gable, and Marlon Brando), a monorail, and the "longest escalator in the world"[6]. Hence, as John O'Brian has suggested, "In that psychedelic-cybernetic space, *Voice of Fire* was just one more highly coloured commodity clamouring for the attention of viewers" (1996b: 129).[7]

Notwithstanding the manifest seriousness of Newman's intent – indicated in the Biblical allusion of the work's title[8] – and despite the fact that the conditions of display may, indeed, have resulted in the work being "trivialized" (O'Brian, 1996: 128), I would argue that the history and original context of the work are of crucial importance in any contemporary assessment of meaning and value. In light of Newman's self-confessed anarchism, the terms of the original commission – from a U.S. government agency for a 'large', 'vertical' painting to be exhibited in the American national pavilion at a world's fair – indicate a paradoxical tension between the ideology of the artist and the cold war agenda of the USIA, which, in competition with the Soviet pavilion, chose to emphasise American superiority in entertainment, culture, and technology. Against this background, I want to suggest that any purely formalist reading of *Voice of Fire* can be nothing other than problematic.

Given its distinctive – and distinctively Canadian – provenance, it is therefore somewhat surprising that the National Gallery resorted solely to the formalist discourse of aesthetic autonomy in justifying the purchase of *Voice of Fire*. Rather than becoming embroiled in an aesthetic, ideological, and nationalistic controversy from which, it might be argued, it has never fully recovered, the Gallery had the opportunity to contextualize the painting in a rich and meaningful fashion – indeed, as John O'Brian argues, the acquisition could have been represented as "a homecoming of sorts" (1996b: 134). Furthermore, the gallery might have stressed Barnett Newman's involvement with Canadian artists – he led the Emma Lake Artists' Workshop in Saskatchewan in the summer of 1959, and also had a significant influence on several Montreal-based artists. But in failing to acknowledge fully the painting's history, and in similarly failing to make the relevance of this history known to a largely hostile public, the National Gallery simply succeeded in further alienating a large percentage of the Canadian population from any critical engagement with contemporary art.

Beyond the confines of the art museum, in the broader museum sector, a focus on history and context is a more fundamental aspect of exhibition practice. As noted above, however, the 'new museology' has had a significant impact on the politics of museum display, and the notion of the 'postmodern' museum has generated much debate in recent years. In the following section, I address the populist practices of the 'postmodern' museum, assessing its strengths and weaknesses.

The Populist Perils of the 'Postmodern' Museum

A spectre, it would seem, is haunting the contemporary museum world – the spectre of populism. Although there has been much talk in recent years about the 'postmodern' museum, the exact nature and definition of the institution remains unclear. But it's perhaps safe to say that the idea of the 'postmodern' museum revolves around notions

of populism, communication, interactivity, and a non-hierarchical 'democratization' of the previously authoritative modernist museum, with the rather ugly neologism 'edutainment' serving to describe its approach. Sadly, however, the debate over the 'postmodern' museum has most often succumbed to the stereotypes which Geoff Mulgan has identified in the debate over 'quality' television: on the one hand, a crude populism ('a million viewers/visitors can't be wrong') and, on the other, an equally crude elitism ('a million viewers/visitors will almost certainly be wrong') (Mulgan, 1990: 6-7).

In the case of the latter argument, in McLuhanite fashion, the message of the 'postmodern' museum is regarded as inevitably compromised by the populist leanings of the medium. However, denying the determinism implicit in McLuhan's famous dictum, and invoking a critical understanding of cultural populism which moves beyond ritualistic denunciations of 'Disneyfication', in this section of my paper I want to argue that the 'postmodern' museum necessarily occupies a 'mixed economy' of the didactic and the entertaining, from glass cases to bells and whistles. Perhaps it is time, I suggest, to find the 'postmodern' museum compelling and interesting *because* of its populist orientation, not in spite of it.

After three days of talks and discussions involving a distinguished group of academics, museologists, artists, curators, and cultural bureaucrats, I left the 'Museums After Modernism' conference (held in Toronto in April 2002) with the wistful feeling that museums after modernism might look a lot like museums during, or even before, modernism. Although not wishing to invoke an unsophisticated periodizing conceptualization of postmodernism, I attended the conference with the thought that the 'postmodern' museum might be a hot topic for debate. On the contrary, I heard a series of papers in which modernist, avant-garde art and curatorial practices held centre stage, and in which any talk of populist strategies soon revealed a thinly-veiled disdain for the mass audience. In the closing discussion session, the term 'Disneyfication' – another ugly neologism – was thrown around freely, but always pejoratively, and with no critical discussion of what that term might actually mean.

In this ideologically-charged context, and with no little trepidation, I made the point that if 'Disneyfication' meant attracting large numbers of people to your institution, where they had a good time, spent money in your facilities, and went home happy, then perhaps this wasn't necessarily a bad thing. My intervention was, of course, deliberately provocative, and prompted a series of largely predictable responses, from cursory dismissals to well-argued rebuttals, most of which involved lectures on the evils of capitalism. But my intervention was more than simply provocation for its own sake: rather, I felt the need to challenge the term 'Disneyfication', and to explore its broader implications.

The first point of clarification is that 'Disneyfication' must surely be understood as a *concept*, and its use – in any non-pejorative sense – need not connote support for the Disney Corporation and all its works. As a major international conglomerate, there is, indeed, much to criticize about the policies and practices of the Disney Corporation. This is a critique that will have to be left for another day. But if Disneyland, in the theorizing of Umberto Eco, Jean Baudrillard, and others, has become the central metaphor for postmodern hyperreality and the notion of the simulacrum, then the question is whether the term 'Disneyfication' serves any useful analytical purpose when applied to the contemporary museum. My own feeling is that the term is profoundly unhelpful, since, in its now common usage, an unthinking critique of mass culture comes built-in, as a standard feature.

In this sense, the term has much in common with the sociologist George Ritzer's notion of the 'McDonaldization' of society (1993). On first encounter, this concept perhaps appears to offer a persuasive diagnosis of our current 'fast-food' society. On further

reflection, however, Ritzer's all-encompassing use of the term becomes highly problematic, succumbing to Frankfurt School orthodoxies, and pining for a idealized social Golden Age which probably never existed in the first place. Implicit in the concept of 'Disneyfication', then, is the notion that museums and exhibition practices 'Before Disney' were exemplars of a somehow pure and commercially unsullied didacticism. While I may stand accused of trafficking in stereotypes here, the argument is instructive, nevertheless. It forces us to reconsider our assumptions regarding earlier museum models, and to reassess both the claims and the efficacy of these models.

To suggest that the Crystal Palace Great Exhibition of 1851 was simply the 'Disneyfied' museum exhibit of its day can be understood to have much in common with the architect Robert Venturi's claim that "Amiens Cathedral is a billboard with a building behind it" (1972: 105) – both suggest alternative, populist readings of previously 'sacralized' cultural texts. In her review of World's Fairs and International Exhibitions, Penelope Harvey (1998) has highlighted the extent to which issues of nationalism, consumption, and commodification have been central to these events,[9] which tends to suggest that any 'neutral' reading of their educational potential would be woefully misguided.

Although World's Fairs and International Exhibitions may seem to be rather specialised instances of exhibition practices, the point is, I feel, more broadly generalizable. Glasgow's famous Burrell Collection springs readily to mind as a further example. The Collection comprises 8,000 artifacts which Sir William Burrell offered as a gift to the City of Glasgow in 1944, at the end of his life. In this case, the highly eclectic – some might say highly idiosyncratic – personal collection of a millionaire shipping magnate is presented to the museum visitor as a series of aestheticized, decontextualized artifacts, each dutifully labelled, but with little or no understanding of why this particular group of objects is held to constitute a coherent museum exhibit. Were the collection not now under public ownership, housed, categorized and catalogued in its own purpose-built building, Burrell would be read simply as a wacky Scottish version of William Randolph Hearst, and a visit to the collection would be as bizarre as the trip to San Simeon.[10]

My point here is that the decontextualizing urge of the museum – or what Serge Guilbaut has characterised as "the great white castrating cubic space of the gallery" (quoted in Barber *et al.*, 1996: 192) – serves to disguise the fundamentally contingent nature of all artifacts, whether categorized as 'anthropological' or 'aesthetic'. And this is a contingency which goes far beyond the forms of 'contextualization' that can be offered by interpretive labels: rather, this contingency must be understood as a fundamentally systemic aspect of *all* museums and galleries. The contingency was one that Jeanne Cannizzo understood well, in her role as curator of the now infamous exhibition *Into the Heart of Africa*, held at Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in 1989-90. Working with a highly compromised collection of artifacts – primarily the spoils of Empire – Cannizzo's curatorial decision in *Into the Heart of Africa* was to make the very contingency of the artifacts the guiding principle of the exhibition. Although there were many other reasons implicated in the exhibition's spectacular failure – a story which has been well told elsewhere[11] – I would argue that, in attempting to challenge the 'castrating cubic space' of the ROM – from *within* the ROM – Cannizzo encountered not only a series of ideological problems, but also the systemic ones which I have identified above.

In this sense, neither the museum nor the gallery can offer – nor, indeed, has ever been able to offer – an educational or aesthetic experience which is anything other than contingent, compromised, and provisional. Let's be clear on one point, then: there was no didactic Golden Age of museum display 'Before Disney'. And if museums 'Before Disney' were hardly 'neutral' cultural technologies (to borrow some language from Foucault), then I would argue that the 'postmodern' museum is hardly as compromised as its critics would seem to suggest. There is clearly a need for a case-by-case appraisal

of the claims and practices of individual exhibitions – an approach which simply denies blanket condemnations of 'Disneyfication'.

In January of 2002, I made a trip to New Zealand for the Second International Conference on Cultural Policy Research, held at Wellington's Te Papa Tongarewa, the national Museum of New Zealand. Te Papa is an excellent example of the 'postmodern' museum: bold, bright, interactive, and noisy. The natural history section of the museum includes an interactive exhibit on the birds of New Zealand, in which the visitor is encouraged to press various buttons to hear more information. Upon doing so, rather than hearing the typically well-modulated tones of someone who sounds like an out-of-work BBC news reporter, the visitor hears instead the slightly over-enthusiastic voice of a nine-year old girl, the story of the Kiwi's plumage ending with nervous giggling. It was fascinating to watch the lively responses of the children in the exhibit to the fact that the various voices emerging from the speakers were those of their peers, and not those of those smart, but rather dull, old guys. This, it seemed to me, was interactivity at its best – educational, and fun too. Or, perhaps, fun, and educational too. It would only be an elitist curmudgeon who could hear the story of the Kiwi's plumage and not be amused, charmed, *and* informed.

My other favourite memory from Te Papa is the manner in which the news that the costumes of Xena and Gabrielle from *Xena, Warrior Princess* were on display on the fifth floor spread like wildfire through the sophisticated group of cultural academics and policy makers attending the conference. Even some dour English sociologists were sighted sneaking upstairs for a peek. This enthusiasm to see costumes from a popular television show suggests that such exhibits need not be seen as pandering to 'the masses', unless, that is, we accept that we ourselves are part of this much-maligned group. As Lawrence Grossberg has suggested:

We are always and already one (if not many) of the masses. Consequently, we cannot start by dividing up the terrain according to our own map of tastes and distastes (although our travelogues are always contaminated by them), or our own sense of some imaginary boundary which divides a mythic (and always dominant) mainstream from a magical (and always resisting or reflexive) marginality, or our own notion of an assumed gulf between our intellectual self and our popular-media self.
(Grossberg, 1988: 385)

One of the more recent shows at Te Papa was on *The Lord of the Rings*, featuring props, costumes, jewellery and weapons from the trilogy of films, directed by New Zealander Peter Jackson, and shot in the countryside just north of Wellington. In common with the *Xena* exhibit – Ms. Lawless is a proud Kiwi – the *Lord of the Rings* exhibition therefore harks back to some of the themes of nationalism, consumption, and commodification identified earlier in the brief discussion of World's Fairs and International Exhibitions. However, rather than condemning such exhibitions for their populism and crass opportunism, perhaps we should be celebrating them for their topicality and their genuine relevance to people's lives.

A further argument often heard in relation to populist exhibitions such as these – and an argument commonly invoked by sympathetic critics of blockbuster exhibitions – is that they serve to attract 'the masses', who, having been drawn into the institution, might then be persuaded to enjoy a more 'real' or more 'significant' cultural experience. Such arguments, of course, are nothing other than old-fashioned elitism with some populist window dressing. Although it's easy to scoff at the tee-shirts, the mugs, the pens, and the key rings that accompany the typical blockbuster, it's perhaps harder to scoff at the attendance figures, which, again, should surely be a cause for celebration. In an era of increasingly sophisticated home entertainment – as highlighted in my introductory

remarks – the willingness of large numbers of people to leave their homes and go to a museum or gallery to see a blockbuster exhibition should not be taken lightly. Furthermore, the often-heard argument that the art itself is somehow being 'compromised' under these conditions is an idea which has yet to be satisfactorily explained to me.

Another argument commonly invoked in relation to blockbuster exhibitions is that they drain much-needed resources from smaller, more challenging, exhibitions. My first reaction to such claims is to make the modest suggestion for the need for some empirical research to substantiate these assertions – the overall persuasiveness of the argument has little to do with how often it is repeated by rote. My second reaction is to observe that the equation often works in exactly the opposite direction: having been the Director of a major international jazz festival in a previous life, I can attest to the fact that large-scale, popular events can often function as enabling devices, serving to secure the long-term financial stability of the organisation or institution, and allowing – not blocking – the support of smaller-scale activities. And my third reaction is to query the nature of the 'challenging' alternatives invoked in any critique of populist or blockbuster exhibitions. More often than not, it seems, 'challenging' connotes a return to a rather tired notion of the modernist avant-garde. This was certainly the case at the Museums After Modernism conference, which, for me, simply reinforced the stereotype of an elite group, speaking in highly specialized codes, to a largely uncomprehending public, then blaming the public for the problem: "The fault, dear visitors, is not in your stars, but in yourselves".[12]

And finally, to address one of the most often-heard criticisms of the 'postmodern' museum. The charge goes something like this: in their pursuit of entertainment, the fun-filled, interactive permanent exhibits of the 'postmodern' museum often fail in addressing the museum's educational mandate, offering histories which are partial and comfortably uncontroversial. This is perhaps one of the most convincing and compelling critiques of the 'postmodern' museum, and one that needs to be carefully considered – the Canada Hall exhibit which forms part of the Canadian Museum of Civilization's permanent offerings is a case in point here, presenting a 'happy' vision of Canadian history which excluded, for a number of years, any significant reference to the controversial expulsion of the Acadians from Nova Scotia in 1755. But the critique is also one that I find potentially problematic, in that it presupposes an entirely uncritical audience, incapable of 'reading' the exhibit at anything other than a superficial level.

As a final, highly revealing, example it is instructive to turn to Sharon Macdonald's review of *Food For Thought* at London's Science Museum (Macdonald, 1998a). Opened in 1989, *Food For Thought* is a permanent exhibition sponsored by the charitable trust of the Sainsbury's supermarket chain. The stated intentions of the curatorial team responsible for the exhibition were that it should be 'accessible', 'democratic', 'fun', and 'entertaining', while also introducing the museum visitor to the science and technology of food consumption. If Tony Bennett has argued that the early museum was a cultural technology designed to produce good citizens (Bennett, 1995), Macdonald suggests that the *Food For Thought* exhibit simply delivers good consumers, and she is highly critical of the manner in which the complexities of food production are either sidelined or sanitized throughout the exhibition.

These are fascinating issues, not least in terms of Sainsbury's involvement, but my concern here is to highlight another aspect of Macdonald's work: namely, the ethnographic research she conducted as part of her year-long project. The curatorial team's ambition to make the exhibition 'democratic' involved non-prescriptive displays, especially with regard to issues of diet and nutrition, presenting these as scientific debates, rather than scientific assertions. As Macdonald explains: "The original intention

of this representation to redistribute some of the authority to determine a proper diet from nutritionists to the lay public could be regarded as empowering of lay people – and this is how the Team saw it" (1998a: 125).

One of the most intriguing points to emerge from Macdonald's interviews with visitors to the exhibition, however, was that rather than feeling empowered, many museum-goers simply felt confused. As Macdonald suggests, "many visitors read the exhibition through a lens of expecting, and even perhaps desiring, prescription and authoritativeness from the Science Museum" (1998a: 133). Thus, while revisionist academics, curators, and museum professionals have been busy confronting and challenging the authoritative voice of the modernist museum, there is something richly ironic about the fact that many members of the museum-going public have been quietly pining for just that sort of authoritative voice. Perhaps, once again, we are simply confronting one of the systemic features of the museum as institution, and perhaps, in turn, this begins to highlight some of the limitations of the fun-filled mandate of the 'postmodern' museum.

Conclusion

If, as Raymond Williams has suggested, "art is there, as an activity, with the production, the trading, the politics, the raising of families" (1961: 45), then perhaps the art museum needs to begin to view itself not as simply a repository of pseudo-religious artifacts, but as an integral component in the broader cultural and social world. And this, in turn, suggests the need for modes of display that go far beyond the presentation of decontextualized objects, embracing exhibition practices that emphasize history, context, and contingency, thus rejecting the spurious discourse of aesthetic autonomy. One can imagine, for example, a permanent exhibition at the National Gallery in which *Voice of Fire* is presented not as a timeless, sacred object to be venerated (accompanied by extravagant formalist rhetoric), but as a material artifact with a significant cultural and social history, which could be illuminated by placing it in the broader context of the material culture of the period. Far from 'compromising' the artwork on display, as some might suggest, I would argue that such an approach could lend new meaning and importance to otherwise arcane objects, offering contemporary art a social relevance which it has previously been denied.[13]

In the context of the 'postmodern' museum, the conceptualization of the museum visitor as an active – indeed, interactive – participant in the process of meaning-making can certainly be read as liberating and democratic. It can also be read, however, as a fundamental reneging of responsibility on the part of the institution, given that a high degree of cultural authority is as much part of the museum as the bricks and mortar that serve to give it shape. In this sense, the medium does, indeed, have a message, although my central argument here is that the content of the message is always up for debate, and is not determined or prescribed by the medium. Perhaps, then, the role of the 'postmodern' museum need not involve renouncing authoritativeness in favour of entertainment, thereby shifting the responsibility for interpretation and understanding wholly to the visitor-as-consumer. Rather, I would argue, the 'postmodern' museum must accept *even more* responsibility than its modernist forebears for the stories that it tells, ensuring that it tells them in a highly critical and highly self-reflexive fashion. But with some bells and whistles too.

Notes

[1] In their respective fields, see, for example, the work of John Berger (1972), Janet Wolff (1993), and Paul Mattick (2003).

[2] See the UNESCO Culture Portal: http://portal.unesco.org/culture.

[3] See, for example Macdonald (1998), Walsh (1992), Karp and Lavine (1991), and Karp *et al.* (1992).

[4] See, respectively, Griswold (1992); Blake (1993); Dubin (1992); Harrison (1988), Hutcheon (1995); and Dubin (2000).

[5] All the paintings in the exhibit were commissioned by the art critic Alan Solomon on behalf of the USIA – see O'Brian (1996b).

[6] CBC Television News, May 8, 1967. See the CBC Archives: http://archives.cbc.ca/IDCC-1-69-100-552/life_society/expo_67.

[7] For further information on Expo 67, see the relevant pages on the National Library of Canada and National Archives of Canada website: http://www.collectionscanada.ca/05/0533/053302_e.html.

[8] John O'Brian observes that Newman had "lofty expectations about the power of visual art to communicate moral values, and… chose an admonitory Old Testament title for the painting" (1996: 128). Nicole Dubreuil-Blondin notes of the title that it "suggests the voice of Jehovah from the burning bush" (1996: 159).

[9] The relevance of this point to the discussion of *Voice of Fire* in the previous section is worthwhile highlighting at this stage.

[10] For further information on the Burrell Collection, see: http://www.glasgowmuseums.com/venue/index.cfm?venueid=1

[11] See, for example, Hutcheon (1995).

[12] In more recent years, in a wide range of artistic fields, the notion of avant-garde innovation and experimentation has become somewhat problematic, perhaps highlighting the limits of a 'vanguardist' modernism. Often, it seems, the avant-garde slips into something of a self-parody, remaining paradoxically static while new modes of innovation and creativity surpass and overtake it: as the French poet Paul Valéry once said, "everything changes but the avant-garde" (quoted in Epstein, 2003: 17). For an intriguing argument regarding the limits of the modernist avant-garde and the virtual inevitability of a postmodern engagement with the past, see Eco (1985).

[13] The recent exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts/Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, 'Global Village: The 60s', offered a stimulating – and occasionally frustrating – example of the type of contextualist approach I have in mind. The exhibition embraced art, design, technology, and politics in an intriguing manner, although the popular music of the period – surely a defining feature of the culture of the 1960s – was rather poorly represented.

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