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Extending the Frame: Forging a New Partnership with the Public

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INTRODUCTION

It is not news to anyone that museums everywhere are suffering as a result of intense pressures that are changing the ways in which our cultural organizations operate. Serious staff layoffs, deep cuts in programming budgets and heightened expectations for relevant cultural programming are now part of everyday reality for virtually every museum professional. Clearly, some of the pressures we are feeling have their source outside the museum, largely in the form of scarce financial resources. By forging partnerships with corporations, schools, universities and other cultural organizations, museums can help to achieve economies of scale while maximizing their human and financial resources.

But not all of the forces of change within the museum world are based on the scarcity of money. There are also significant pressures being applied from within museums – pressures to bring about serious changes in the way we understand and carry out our institutional missions. Reform-minded museologists around the world are doing what they can to redirect museums towards becoming hubs of cultural activity that play a vital role in the living identity of their community. Many new partnerships are being formed between museums and other cultural groups within society with the goal of making museums more relevant for people. From my perspective, this more philosophical reason to forge new partnerships is at least as important as the economic-efficiency rationale. In this paper, I want to discuss a particular kind of partnership which can help museums to relate better to their communities – specifically, I will address the benefits of an honest and respectful partnership between museums and the public.

I will preface my remarks by saying that this period in the

evolution of museums is both extremely exciting and extremely frustrating. It is a time of great uncertainty, and great insight. This paradoxical aspect of professional museum life is unnerving, yet I believe strangely appropriate for the dramatic changes that we have yet to live through. If all of this is vague and abstract, I apologize – I will become concrete shortly – but I want to make clear that this paper reflects both my great hopes for important advances in the museum world, as well as my enormous frustration at the inertia that I often feel is working against positive change. Please keep in mind that I am optimistic – there are a lot of great advances occurring in our field. *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums* (published by the American Association of Museums (AAM)); the Museum Assessment Program III: Public Dimension (which is a peer review programme sponsored by the AAM to help museums develop their public dimension in a forward-looking way); and the expanding interest in the theories and practice of 'ecomuseology' are three examples of significant forces within North American museums. But as our profession travels further down these various roads, I would not be surprised if museums look increasingly unmuseum-like – and that's OK.

Over the past decade, I have been involved in developing some non-traditional interpretive techniques in our museum. I and a small group of reform-minded individuals at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) began using interactive labels, computers and audio in special 'education' exhibits almost 10 years ago. In concert with these initiatives we also developed a range of audience research techniques to improve our understanding of visitors and their reactions to both the traditional and the newer displays. Today, the whole institution is thinking more seriously about visitors and is attempting to relate to the public in sensitive ways. The AGO seems committed to both an expanded use of interpretive strategies in exhibitions and to an integration of audience research into planning processes. But now, more than ever, I feel the need for the Gallery to shift, in a fundamental way, the kind of relationship it has with the public – to become true partners with our visitors and to share authority over the experiences which happen in the galleries.

Museums have long been considered special places where the authoritative insights of trained experts are shared with members of the public. It is true that we as an institution have something unique to offer the public – the collections we amass and our

intellectual insights into the creativity of artists. However, to paraphrase Picasso (and many other artists for that matter), in producing an art work, the artist carries the creative process *half* way – it is the responsibility of the viewer to complete the process. This visitor-centred half of the creative process is based on the personalizing of symbolic objects. This process is not prescriptive, so institutions cannot control how the personalizing occurs. Museums can, however, be supportive of visitors as they personalize their experiences with the art works.

What does the visitor side of creativity look like? This creativity is idiosyncratic – sometimes tentative, sometimes dogmatic; at times it is intensely moving, other times shocking, while at other times it is insightful. To this writer, visitor-based creativity provides a powerful complement to the intellectual insights of the museum experts. Accordingly, I submit that one of the core partnerships that needs to be fully developed in museums (and particularly art museums) is an honest and respectful relationship between the public and the institutions – a partnership in which the many meanings of art can be explored and honoured.

ABOUT THE ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO

As a backdrop to the visitor-generated material that will be discussed later, it is useful to provide an idea of the museum at which I work. As a result of a recent expansion project completed in January of 1993, the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in Toronto is now one of the ten largest art museums in North America. The capital project occurred at the same time that the museum witnessed the retirement of its Director of 30 years, the development of a new strategic plan, massive organizational restructuring and the surfacing of serious financial problems amidst a world-wide recession. In light of all this, the new AGO has emerged in remarkably good shape.

In describing its mission, the AGO uses all the right words – we are educational, we build, conserve and research collections, we even aim to meet the needs of our extremely multi-cultural population. But the more of my life I spend at the Gallery, the more I wonder what our mission actually means. I ask myself what insights and knowledge we really have, and how that relates to visitor needs. And, for that matter, how do we understand the needs of the public?

While we don't have the answers to such questions, I do feel that the Gallery is becoming more sensitive to the needs of visitors.

This most recent phase of the museum was designed, both externally and internally, to feel friendlier and more accessible to visitors. For example, the new building provides at-grade access, rather than the old entrance which required visitors to climb imposing stairs and cross over the moat-like, sunken driveway. The old building had a cold, white stucco facing, which has been replaced by warm, red brick. Passers-by are more effectively invited in, not only to visit the exhibits, but also to shop in one of the large retail spaces which make up most of the building's facade. It is hard to make a city-block-sized building approachable, but efforts are being made to do just that.

Once inside the building, after navigating through the somewhat austere entrance hall, visitors encounter an introductory exhibit that discusses the many meanings of art and which encourages visitors to explore their personal reactions to the works. This installation reflects the new general attitude of the museum regarding the visitor experience – that the personal perspective, whatever that may be, is important. The exhibit itself will benefit considerably from further planned development, but the general direction reflects a positive, new attitude towards visitors at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

All of the new and refurbished galleries were developed by teams of professionals, with curators, educators, designers and conservators making up the core teams. Wide-ranging discussions within these teams led to a new institutional commitment to creating exhibit spaces that are modulated in scale, colour and atmosphere, which is a major departure from the normally white-walled, scarce-seating, everything-looks-more-or-less-the-same kind of art gallery which the Art Gallery of Ontario has been in the past. So, we now have many types of spaces for visitors to explore: some exhibit halls are dramatically lit and intimate; the elegant old master galleries now have vibrantly coloured walls and comfortable seating; the contemporary galleries take a variety of forms, some large, others smaller, but with a traditional austerity to them (some things are hard to change); and many new spaces are intimate, domestically scaled rooms for lingering and exploring.

Seating has never been more abundant – even though we can always use more. And now, every gallery space offers at least some form of interpretive material, with some exhibits containing a wealth of materials for visitors to use. A new print and drawing

centre has opened which provides the public with access to any of the works on paper that are in the collection. Additionally, a new 'hands on' gallery has been built for visitors of all ages to explore many different creative processes, as well as aspects of the collection. All of this has led to high levels of satisfaction amongst our visitors.

ABOUT THE CANADIAN HISTORICAL GALLERIES

Much of the initiative for the progressive approach to the new AGO evolved from work done by the team responsible for the Canadian Historical Galleries. In 1988, this team of educators, curators and designers was the first such group in the Gallery to form a partnership that was dedicated to improving exhibition techniques, based on visitor experiences of the exhibits. As part of this undertaking, the team developed, for the first time, audience research projects dedicated to exploring the complexities and variations of visitor experiences in exhibits. Based on research results, many interpretive strategies, such as the use of computers, audio and interactive labels, were fully integrated into the displays, with the aim of supporting visitors in focusing on, enjoying and making sense of the displays. The results were very positive and have been summarized in several publications (Worts, 1990a; 1990b; 1991a; 1991b; 1991c).

In 1991, the Canadian Historical Collection team understood that most of its efforts at improving the visitor experience up to that point had been geared towards making it easier for people to be more focused with the art works and to help them to explore contextual or analytical issues related to the art. Still, the team wanted to improve the interpretive systems it had developed and extend its understanding of the nature of symbolic experiences with art works. One of the leading areas for the team to explore was how personal meanings related to viewing an art work – ones that do not necessarily fit into the critical framework for understanding objects – functioned in an art gallery setting.

With funds received from the Government of Canada, the Canadian Historical Collection team hired three consultants to assist in exploring three areas of psychology that were felt to be important to understanding how people make meaning with art works in museums. These areas were environmental psychology, cognitive

science and depth psychology. The team met regularly with the consultants for a period of about a year, working through a set of exhibit-related issues and strategies that was to become critical to how the new Canadian Historical Wing would be developed.

As for the Canadian Historical Collection galleries themselves, they developed as fifteen uniquely designed rooms that are varied in scale, colour and lighting. They range from the intimate to the grand, and virtually all spaces have seating. The purpose of this diversion from the art gallery tradition of white-walled spaces with even lighting is to keep the visitors' senses engaged so that museum fatigue does not set in. In addition, this approach offers the chance to use space to create something of an historically appropriate context for the art works.

All of the new galleries in this wing reflect our visitor-oriented philosophy that there are many meanings associated with a work of art. This approach is manifested in several ways. One is the use of binders in which questions are asked concerning, for example, the importance of an artist or his/her art work, and for which responses are provided from many different and often conflicting perspectives. By offering a range of plausible reactions to an issue, it is hoped that visitors will feel more comfortable that there is no 'right' answer. This tactic is supplemented with a request for visitors to reflect on what the art work(s) mean to them. 'Share Your Reaction' cards are dispensed in about two dozen locations throughout the Canadian Historical Wing for written and drawn responses to the exhibits. Additionally, audio programmes, computers, visible storage, wall signs and text panels have been added to the displays to encourage more focused exploration of the art works.

One of the biggest challenges in the reinstallation of the Canadian Historical Collection was deciding how to organize the overall hanging. Eventually the team decided on a chronological organization, but with four considerations:

1. Although the chronology would be evident, it would not dominate the interpretive strategy. Rather, the interpretive emphasis would be placed on local foci in each area (e.g. a specific theme, an artist, etc.), leaving the chronology as a backdrop;
2. No assumptions would be made about visitors having a clear association with any given period of Canada's history;

3 We would provide a visual sense of what life was like in Canada during these periods, using images from popular culture. These installations would be called 'Signposts'; and,
4 That we would encourage visitors to relate the personal associations they had with the time periods, using 'Share Your Reaction' cards.

In this way, visitors would be able to keep track of where they were in the chronology of the overall display, build/reaffirm/challenge their sense of Canada's histories, relate the art works to the life of Canada (or question the lack of any clear relationship), and bring their own knowledge/associations to bear on the visiting experience. All of these strategies were new dimensions in the AGO's way of installing its permanent collections.

'SHARE YOUR REACTION' CARDS

One of the most interesting outcomes of the reinstalled galleries relates to the use of the 'Share Your Reaction' cards. Over a period of about nine months, approximately 12,000 cards were used – and at least 5,000 of these were left in the drop-off bins in the galleries. The cards have proved to be quite remarkable for their diversity of form and content. We are finding that comments are not superficial judgements, such as 'loved it' or 'hated it', which often characterize comments books. Instead, the bulk of comments are personal and reflective. Many provide insight into how visitors are interacting with particular objects or groups of art works. Often there is great sensitivity and intensity in the responses. A large number of visitors who use the cards choose to draw imagery of one kind or another. Some people copy pictures on display. Others adapt images on display to their own creative ends. Still others will create wholly new images, presumably inspired by their time in the gallery, or which reflect what is on their mind at the moment. Often, people seem to want to see themselves reflected, either literally or symbolically, in their imagery – and in their writing for that matter. This has been an important psychological phenomenon for Gallery staff to become aware of – people want to see themselves reflected in their visits to museums. This has the potential to affect dramatically the way in which art displays are conceived and installed.

The following visitor responses (1–11) (see Plates 8–15) present some of the public's written and drawn responses to their experiences in the galleries, as reflected in the 'Share Your Reactions' cards. This idiosyncratic material provides a glimpse into a powerful area of creative meaning-making that is part of the potential of every visitor. It is most easily approached through a plate-by-plate description.

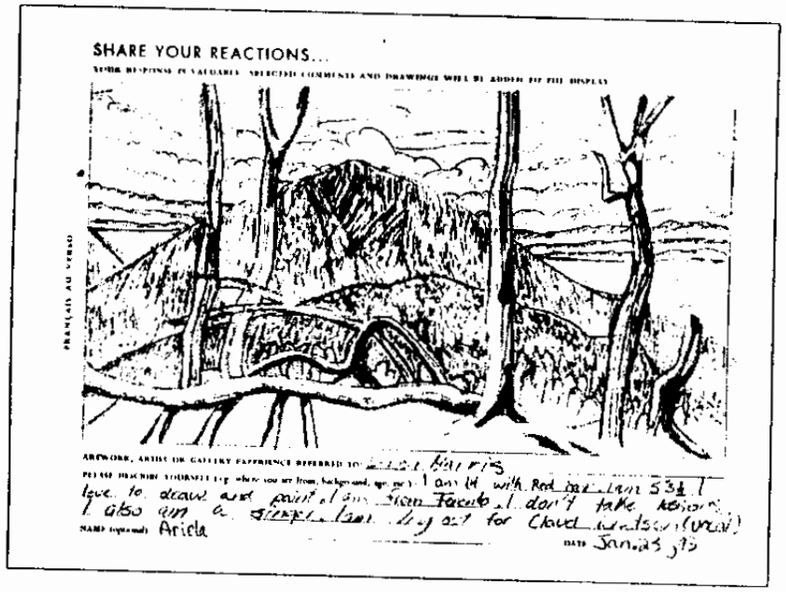
Response 1 (Plate 8): A copy of Lawren Harris's *Above Lake Superior* by a 14-year-old girl. The fine detail of this image suggests that the visitor had a deeper than average level of experience with the painting (research has indicated that visitors in the past spent an average of 7 seconds with paintings that they stopped to look at). Also, the detailed description of herself suggests that she felt quite comfortable during this experience.

Response 2 (Plate 9): A child's adaptation of Tom Thomson's painting *The West Wind*, in which she has replaced the central tree in the original painting with an image of herself. She declares that she wants to be an artist when she grows up.

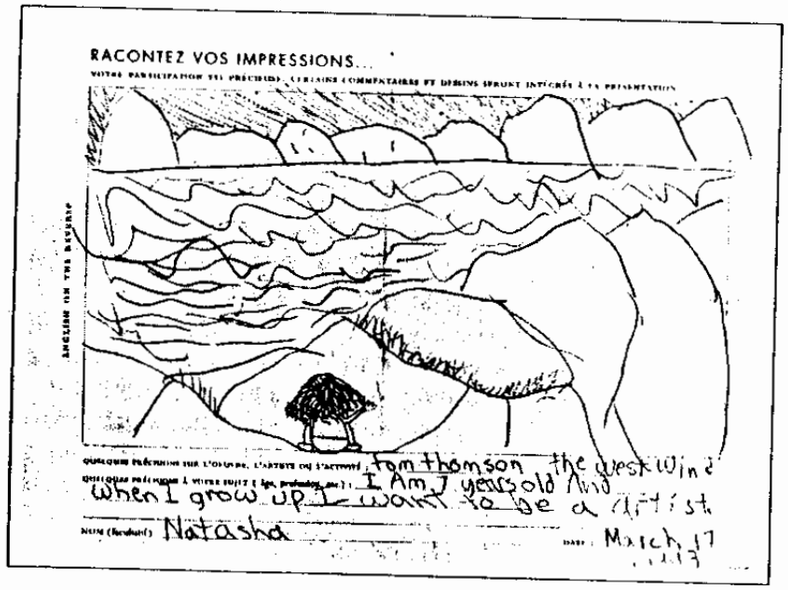
Response 3 (Plate 10): An adaptation of a landscape by Arthur Lismer, *Sand Lake, Algoma*, in which the visitor has turned the original waves into 'sad fish'. This seems to be another clear instance in which the mood and identity of the visitor is projected into their reaction to the art. I feel it is important that the institution understand that this kind of experience exists and that it must be acknowledged and respected. Trying to 'teach' visitors about the historical dimensions of the Group of Seven would be largely pointless for visitors having this type of experience.

Response 4 (Plate 11): An image that bears no resemblance to any painting in the collection. It is a powerfully drawn image that seems to have come from the visitor's imagination. Being in the gallery seems to have inspired not only the image, but also the emotionally charged text which speaks of the Canadian landscape as the basis of the soul of the Canadian spirit.

Response 5 (Plate 12): An adaptation of a Lawren Harris painting in which the exquisitely drawn image has an additional element – a



8 Reaction card: Copy of Lawren Harris's *Above Lake Superior* by a 14-year-old girl.



9 Reaction card: Adaptation of Tom Thomson's painting *The West Wind.*

stylized dead figure hung from the tree. It is hard to know what this means, but I feel the institution needs to understand that some visitors make very powerful, idiosyncratic meanings with the collection.

Response 6 (Plate 13): A visitor's reflection on a painting that depicts the town in which her grandmother was born. The experience has filled a gap in an important personal relationship.

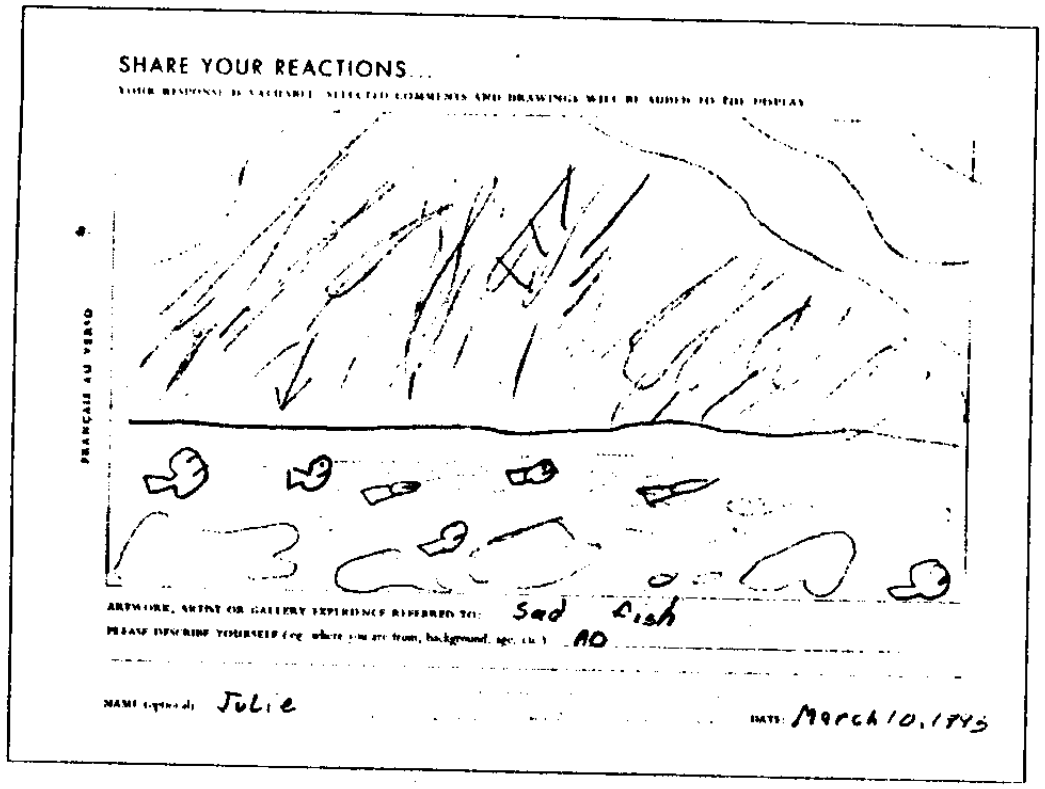
Response 7 (Plate 14): A competently drawn image by a visitor during one of the AGO's free-admission evenings. The powerful imagery of the broken dollar sign and the derelict on the sidewalk is supplemented by a strong endorsement of the Gallery's commitment to providing at least limited free access to the collections. This is another strong image in which the visitor's own (symbolic) image is included in their reaction.

Response 8: A visitor wrote:

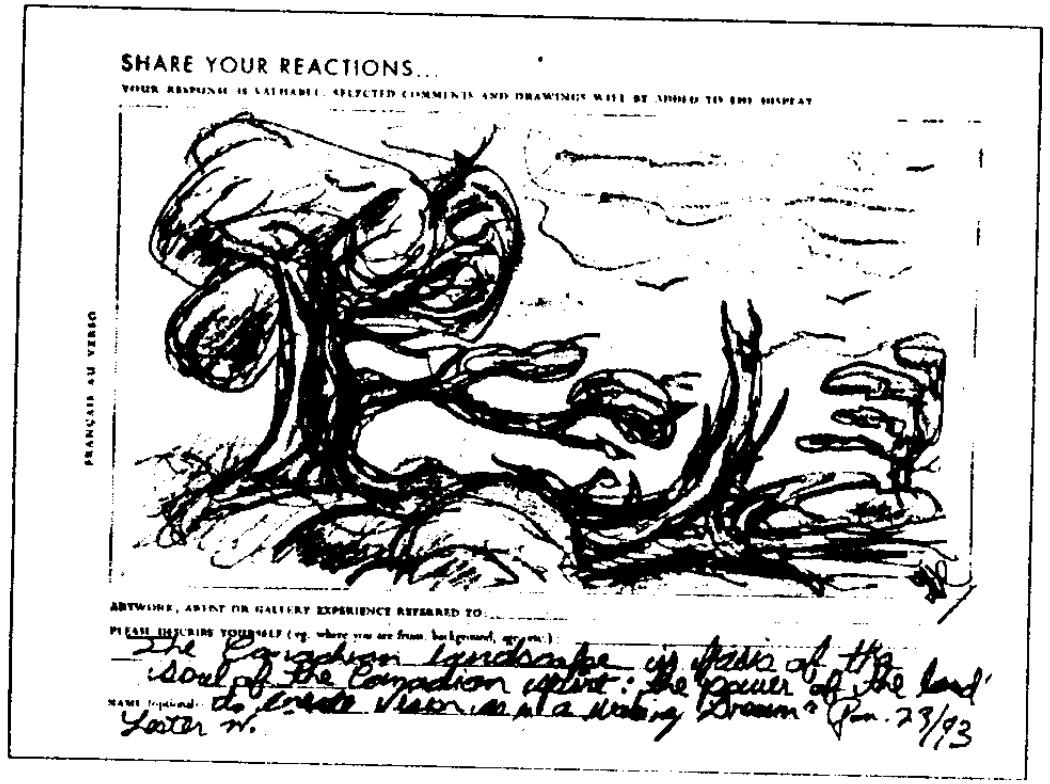
> I would like to know why in this entire Art Gallery, people of colour are not represented. I would like to see more art about the Indian culture and also art on the Black race. I am really disappointed that in a city where we are so multicultural, only European cultures are seen in the art gallery. I would not bring my child here, because we are not represented. We are not recognized for any of our talents – I am a black woman, who is a Canadian (born).

This critical attack on the institution results from this visitor not seeing herself or her race reflected in the exhibitions. She forcefully raises an issue that the institution needs to address if it really wants to be an art gallery for the people of Ontario. She makes it clear that there is a problem, and that the solution must be negotiated between the public and the institution.

Response 9 (Plate 15): A graphic image of 'shit' on a large dollar sign is one persons's way of questioning the value of contemporary art. The card shows clearly that at least some visitors are mystified about the function of such art, and are angry that museums do so little to rectify the problem. Comments like this, which challenge the museum to bridge the communication gap between contemporary art and the public, are common in art museums. But the visceral



10 Reaction card: Adaptation of landscape by Arthur Lismer.



11 Reaction card: Image of Canadian landscape.

and judgmental tone of the card, coupled with its non-specificity, suggests that the problem itself is serious and wide-spread, yet not clearly understood or articulated. Perhaps the dilemma springs from people not being able to see themselves reflected in contemporary art – either through the experience of recognizable collective symbols in the works, or through the evocation of personal meanings. In any case, the museum must take more responsibility for this problem than it has in the past.

Response 10: A visitor wrote:

> For me, the most evocative painting in the AGO is the *West Wind*. I come to see it regularly because I am immediately transported back to my childhood and early teens and the pleasures of childhood summer holidays on the shores of Georgian Bay. All the paintings in the Group of Seven speak to me of my Canadianism, but it is the *West Wind* that speaks to my heart – I am 64 years old and live in London, Ontario.

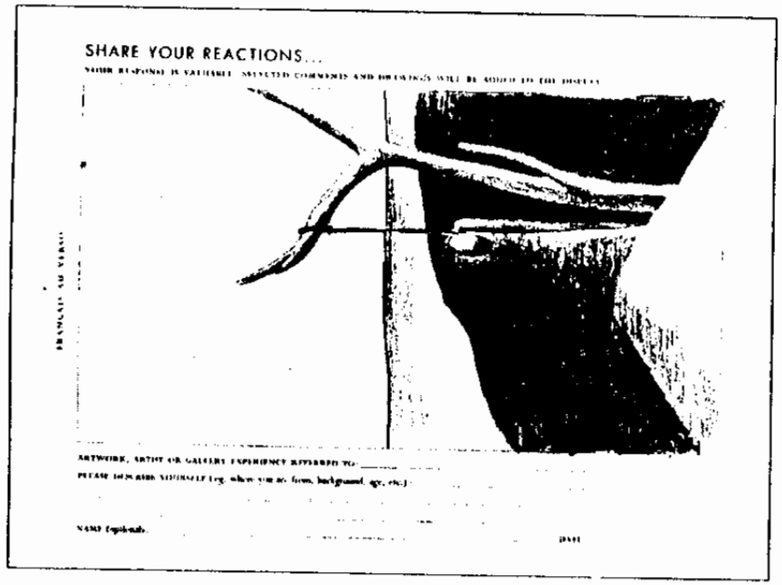
This reflection on Tom Thomson's painting *The West Wind* shows how one visitor differentiates identity-related meanings associated with Group of Seven paintings. Most of the paintings speak to his/her sense of nationalism, but *The West Wind* evokes special memories from youth and is associated with the personal 'heart'.

Response 11: A visitor wrote:

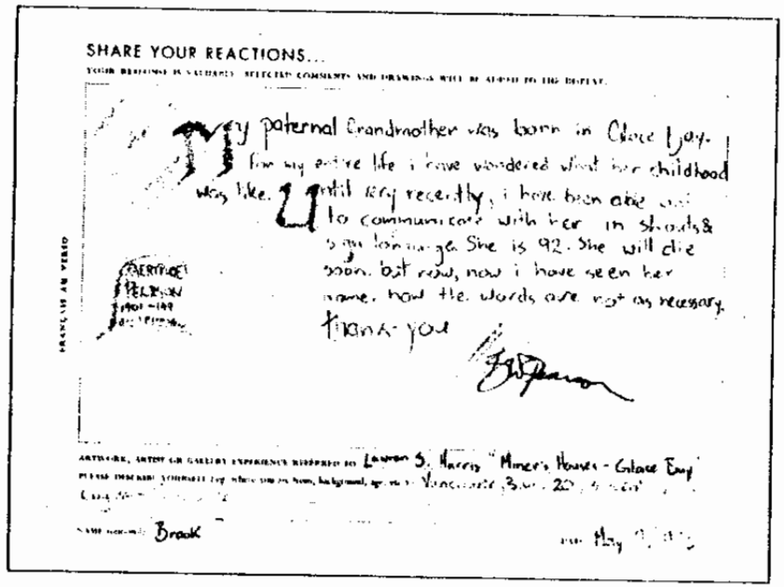
> The 'new' galleries are a tremendous improvement over the old. Coming here is now an engaging and intimate experience. One feels able to concentrate more clearly on works of art or particular periods without feeling overwhelmed or alienated. Coming here is now a joyous experience, whereas before it felt like a duty! Thank you. – I am an illustrator and painter, living in Toronto.

For those who worked on developing these exhibits, this reaction is very satisfying.

The range of responses is quite remarkable – and they display a kind of personal insight into the art experience that the Gallery itself could not articulate. For me, these images and comments need to be seen by the Gallery, so it can learn more about the felt power of the objects in our collections, but these reactions also deserve to be integrated into the interpretive strategy of the exhibits themselves



12 Reaction card: Adaptation of a Lawren Harris painting.



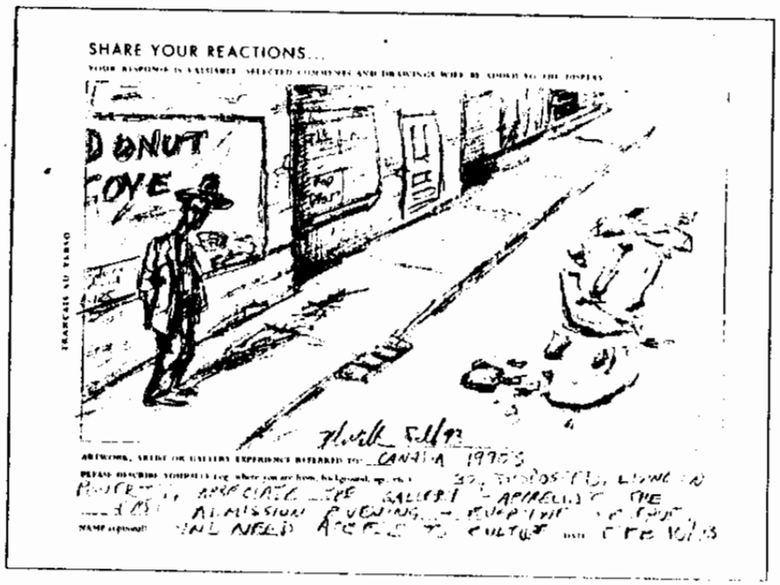
13 Reaction card: Visitor's reflection of a painting depicting her grandmother's birthplace.

and experienced empathically by other visitors. One possible outcome of such an integration is that other visitors may find greater comfort in entering the realm of personal meaning-making in a more conscious way.

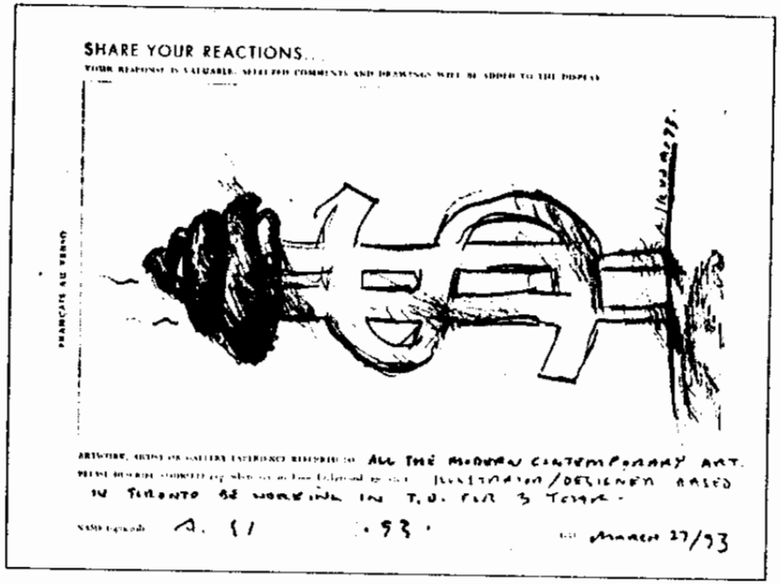
'EXPLORE A PAINTING IN DEPTH'

One particularly exciting installation, called 'Explore a Painting in Depth', models different ways of engaging with an art work – from examining relevant contextual information, to consulting an expert, to eliciting personal and idiosyncratic meanings with the aid of the imagination. This installation contains a single picture by J.E.H. MacDonald, entitled *The Beaver Dam* (1919). The painting is of a wilderness setting with the following components: a still pond to the left, an arcing beaver dam with an empty canoe pulled up it to the right of centre, rushing water in the right foreground, a boulder with latent anthropomorphic characteristics located behind the rushing water, and a backdrop to the entire scene of a dense forest that pushes its way up to the edge of the rocky shore. In many ways, this picture is quite typical of the Canadian landscape paintings that make up this entire area of the Gallery.

The 'Explore a Painting in Depth' viewing facility consists of a seating unit, with sound-proofing material on three sides, and the painting, located directly in front of the seats and surrounded by three walls. Through this design, visual and auditory distractions coming from nearby exhibit areas are minimized. By using the headsets and CD technology provided, visitors can choose to listen to three audio programmes while they focus their attention on the painting. One programme carries the curator's engaging insights into the art work. A second provides several dramatized comments about the artist, by friends and family of MacDonald. The third, which is the most innovative technique currently in use at the Gallery, is a reflective imaging exercise that leads visitors into a reverie with the painting – encouraging their imaginations to create highly personal links with the painting. In it, the 12-minute recording encourages the viewer to relax and enter into a semi-dream-state with the picture. The first task is to establish a strong mental image of the painting. Then the viewer is invited to enter imaginatively into the space of the picture and to experience the sights, sounds, smells and potential of being in the setting. The wide range of response cards filled out in



14 Reaction card: Visitor's reflection on poverty and free access to collections.



15 Reaction card: Graphic image of 'shit' on a dollar sign.

this facility has proved to be a very rich resource that provides many insights into the viewing process, the painting and the visitors. Responses 12–22 illustrate a range of creative visitor experiences relating to this picture.

Response 12: A visitor wrote:

> I enjoyed the sensual journey into the painting. Sight, smell, cool/cold autumn day was evoked. Clear air and water. Loneliness – the empty canoe vaguely depressing. The suggestion(s) of human form in the rocks and sticks of the dam add another dimension of questioning the artist's interpretation of the scene. Thank you for making me enter the world of the Canadian north! – I am 56 years old, WMF, from USA, some art training.

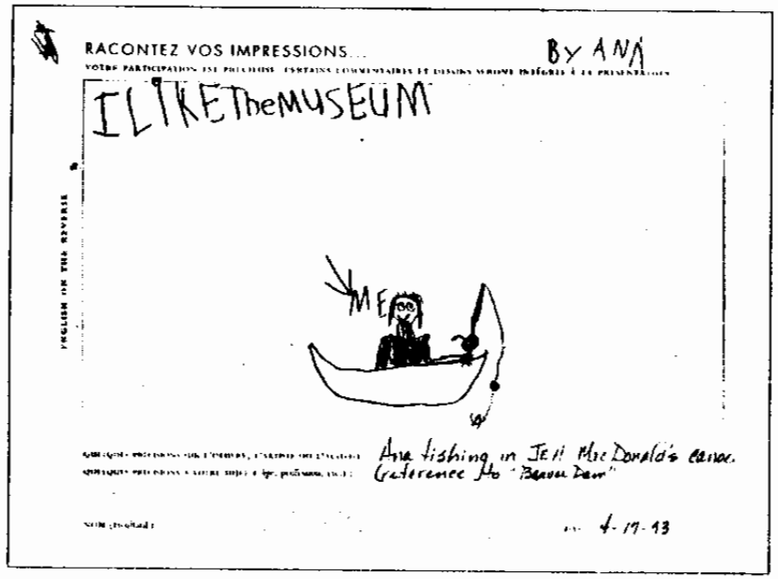
This response demonstrates how some visitors use their imaginations to enter the world of the painting and create personal meanings for themselves. Many users of this facility experience the smells, sounds and textures of nature, as well as other powerful associations with the image.

Response 13: A visitor wrote:

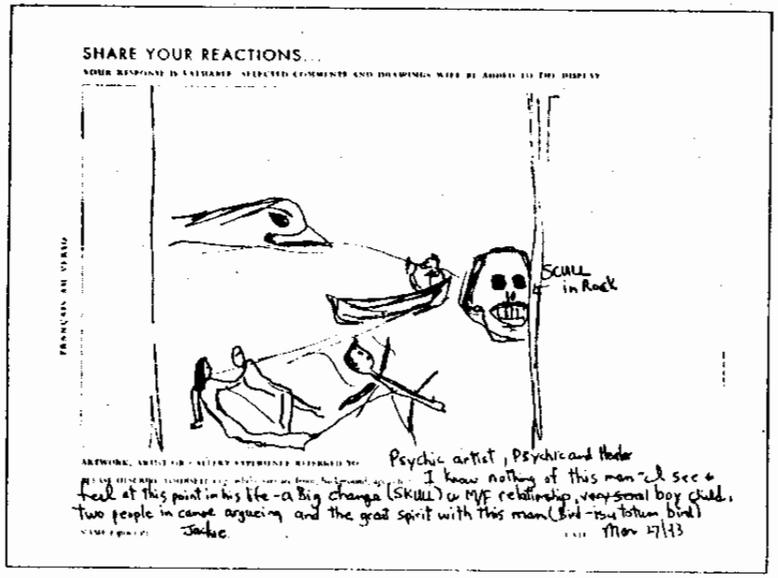
> I hate to be negative, because on the whole the new gallery is wonderful. But program #1, female voice, The Beaver Dam exploration is very silly. I was hoping to hear about art – and maybe the other selections cover this – but this heely-feely approach to art is just a bit much! Less new age, more content, please.

Not everyone likes the imaginative approach to viewing artworks – or at least not the approach taken here. This visitor is expressing a desire for 'content', as presented by the experts in the institution. By referring to the tape as 'heely-feely' the visitor is clearly dismissive of the subjective approach in this programme. A certain portion of our audience has difficulty with, and perhaps even feels threatened by, a non-analytical approach. However, a significant portion of the audience feels very good about making personal connections with art works.

Response 14 (Plate 16): A common theme in animating the imagination of visitors is the projection of the self into the response. In this case, a child has entered the picture, hopped into the canoe and gone



16 Reaction card: Projection of self into a picture by a child.



17 Reaction card: Response of a self-proclaimed 'psychic artist'.

fishing. She also declares 'I like the museum'. She has concretized the experience in a way that hopefully will remain memorable.

Response 15: A visitor wrote:

> Vivid colours and bold strokes bring out the relentless cycle of life, emphasizing destruction and at the same time, rebirth. The piece brought back a stream of memories relating back to a near-death experience I had while in Algonquin Park, along with the soothing sounds and smells associated with nature. I am 17 years old and am a student from Unionville High School. I am originally from Pakistan and have lived in Toronto for 7 years to date.

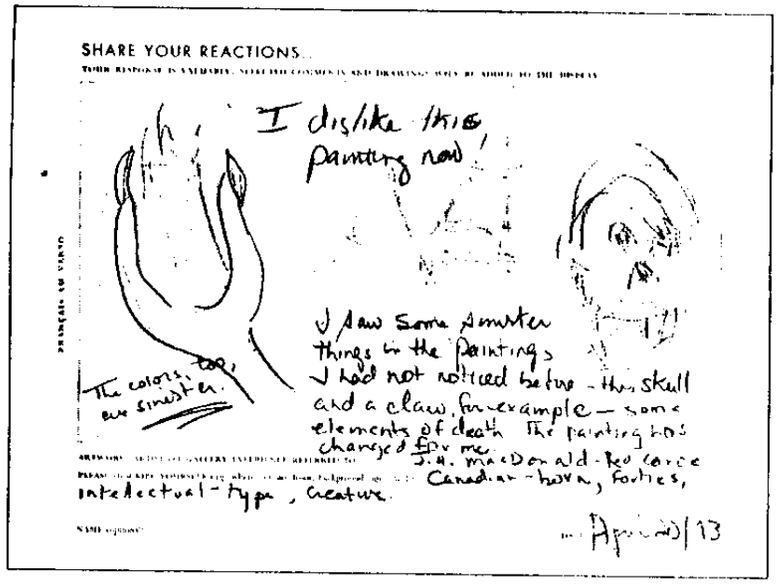
Through the imagination, this visitor has both re-experienced aspects of a 'near-death experience' he had had in a northern Ontario park, while reflecting on the natural cycles of life and death.

Response 16 (Plate 17): A self-proclaimed 'psychic artist' has interpreted the picture in what seems to be a very personal way. Most interesting though, is the fact that all of the themes and images raised by this person recur frequently in the reflections of other visitors (such as the rock on the right which has become a skull image).

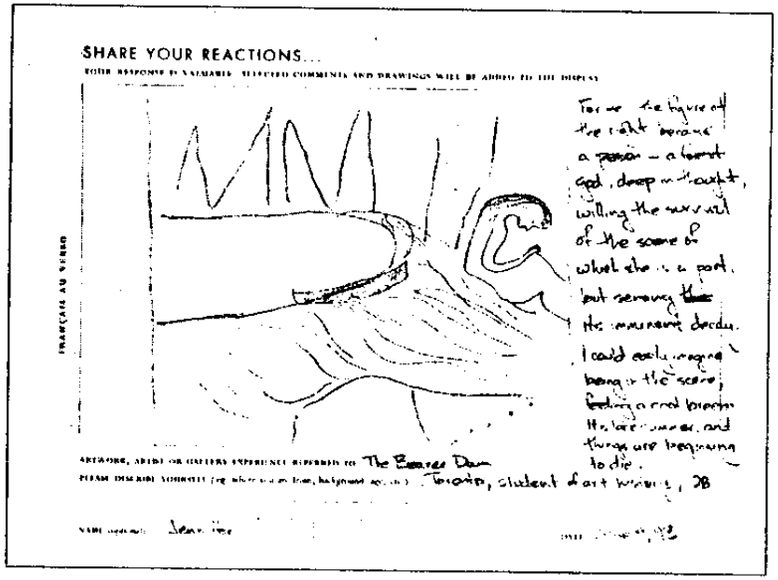
Response 17 (Plate 18): A visitor who describes him/herself as 'intellectual-type, creative' experienced a transformation of this painting, from an image that was enjoyable to one that is off-putting. The imagination led him/her to see sinister images of death, which is what the viewer responded negatively to. This strong reaction is intensely personal and testifies to the transformative power of the imagination.

Response 18 (Plate 19): A variation on the death-imagery evoked by the painting (see the two responses above), is reflected in a different interpretation of the rock on the right of the canvas. Here, the rock becomes a forest god, symbolizing nature as a holistic force – yes, it has death and decay as an aspect of life, but with a powerful and counterbalancing will to survive. This interpretation of the painting recurs frequently in many idiosyncratic forms.

Response 19 (Plate 20): This visitor entered into the world of the painting, took up an imagined vantagepoint and drew the scene



18 Reaction card: Response stressing images of death.



19 Reaction card: Perspective on death imagery.

from the new perspective. She wrote of her experience, 'I'm in the woods behind the rock, (I) climbed up and am looking down. Fresh Wondrous.'

Response 20: A visitor wrote:

> My daughter and I both listened to the 12 minute female commentary about MacDonald's *The Beaver Dam*. By totally focussing on the painting, we were amazed at the mysterious shapes, movements, and colour patterns in the work. It was a thoroughly enjoyable experience, and a unique one for me - a student of Art History (a while ago!). ART = VIOLENCE, RELEASED AND UNDAMAGING. I am a female, 45, originally from Toronto, living in the Ottawa area since 1972. I am with my 14 year old daughter.

A mother and daughter used the facility together. It led to the mother writing about her own sense of intense involvement in the painting, and the enjoyable discussion she had afterwards with her daughter. This woman also felt moved to offer up a reflection on the meaning of art.

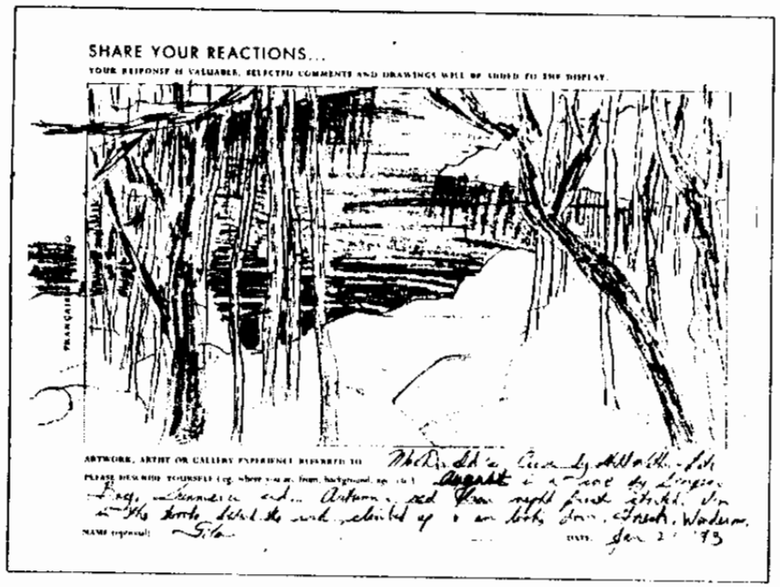
Response 21 (Plate 21): Many visitors, like this one, began with the opinion that the painting was boring. Through the intense looking that is encouraged by the programme, this person's judgement was transformed and she ended the experience feeling buoyant and energized.

Response 22: A visitor wrote:

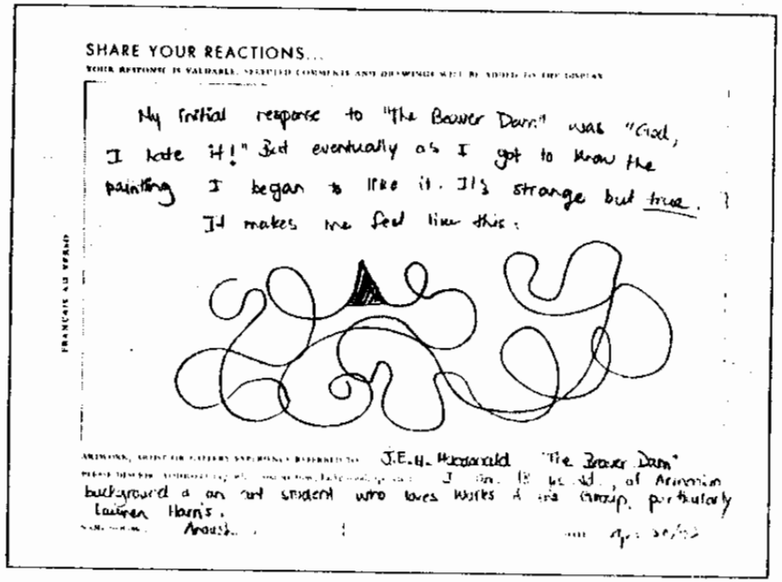
> How do we learn to love our land, our landscape, our country? Not by patriotic harangues by groups and politicians – but by living in it, watching and observing it, and then taking the time to reflect, ponder and integrate. Thank you, AGO for giving me a few minutes of serenity and intense viewing – making me Look and Think! Making me love my land more than I know! I am a bartender in small town Ontario.

One visitor's experience of *The Beaver Dam* led him to reflect about the importance of personal experience (as opposed to 'patriotic harangues by groups and politicians') in developing a sense of identification with a homeland.

All of these cards demonstrate to me how powerful and creative personal meaning-making is in the viewing of art. It is something that we in institutions have not actively encouraged before – in fact, museums have effectively undercut the public in this regard through



20 Reaction card: Response stressing personal involvement in a painting.



21 Reaction card: Transformation from boredom to interest.

their emphasis on objective judgements by staff 'experts'. Yet clearly the public can provide new insights into the art works.

CONTEMPORARY ART - AN ONGOING PROBLEM

I believe that our institutions can learn a great deal from the so-called 'idiosyncratic' responses of visitors. When people engage their own subconscious, a process of personal creativity begins. Within museums, this process can extend the meanings offered up by the experts in very exciting ways. Perhaps museums need to acknowledge that a major dimension of meaning-making, one that is complementary to the institutional perspective, can be found within the public's own creative responses to the art. And there is a missing complement to our perspective on art – the art of the twentieth century has made that painfully clear. One need only spend some time in the contemporary galleries of any art museum to experience this reality.

I don't think that anybody reading this would argue that the art of the twentieth century frequently leaves visitors feeling hostile and frustrated – and museum visitors are amongst the most educated people in our society. Yet our institutional arguments in defence of particular contemporary art works often feel to the public more like empty rationalizations for what they see as a sham. From my years of teaching in the galleries, I know how hard it is to talk convincingly about certain types of art. Part of the problem with contemporary art, I believe, is the absence of collective meanings associated with many of the images. Much of the art work created in recent decades flies in the face of public expectations for the comprehensibility, beauty and quality traditionally associated with the fine arts – there appears to be no collective symbolic language for people to follow. From the non-insider's viewpoint, if there is a knowable language of art, it seems like a remote phenomenon that must: (i) be acquired through academic degrees in art history, (ii) sound like 'artspeak', and (iii) remain rather unconvincing. Further, most of what experts have to say about contemporary art is extremely intellectual in tone and often does not address the art work itself, but rather its context. Many visitors experience this scenario as an impossible hurdle within the framework of a museum visit. It may be that one solution to this seemingly unbridgeable gap between visitor and museum is respectfully to invite visitors to engage the

works idiosyncratically, to reflect on their personal reactions and to share these reactions with the museum and with other members of the public. Adding the personal dimension of meaning-making to the museum experience, as a complement to the expert vantage-point (hopefully expressed in clear, direct language), may provide another model of how one might relate to an art work at the same time as it may deliver many new insights.

A case in point is one reaction to *Fleeting Breath*, painted by Jock MacDonald in 1959 and now in the AGO collection. Several months ago, I received a 'Share Your Reaction' card from a visitor that has strengthened my resolve to integrate personal meaning-making processes formally into the interpretive strategy of the museum. In this card, a woman wrote about her powerful and personal response to this 1959 Canadian abstract painting. In my many years in this profession, I have never heard any convincing insights into this painting. I have heard and read several art historical tidbits: that it represented part of the Canadian version of the New York School of abstraction; that it was a coming-of-age of Canadian art; that it represented a rejection of naturalistic depictions of the world in favour of the embodiment of the inner creativity of the artist, and so on. All of this is fine, and perhaps there is even a fascinating side to the artistic context of the 1950s, but none of it means much if there is no personal connection with the art work. The woman's idiosyncratic associations with the picture provide a vivid example of how the personalizing of an art object can bring it to life in a very powerful way:

> Jock MacDonald's 'Fleeting Breath' (which suggests a hand emerging from rubble – or fragmentation as the essential quality of the 20th century) reminds me that my father built a bomb shelter when I was 12 – in 1956 – in our 1920s double-brick home on tree-lined Park Avenue. The street was valued for its streetlights that still looked like gas lights. My father felt a little silly, but wanted more to keep his family of four children safe: he returned from navigating for the RAF in WW2, cramped in metal surroundings on 16 hour flights, coastal reconnaissance along the Baltic. He returned, but nothing since matches the terror and heightened emotion of WW2. In the 50s, I grew up on war stories, and occasionally went down and stood in the shelter: raw, smooth, concrete, with a maze-like entrance. He never bothered to stock it. There was a wild pink lady's slipper that came up, tiny, every spring in our backyard. I would rather die above, with 'fleeting breath', than go alive below. That's what it was like, and it was never simple.

We, as an institution, cannot fabricate this powerful form of personalized experience. If museums decide that there is merit in integrating the many meanings that individuals experience with art works into the collective wisdom relating to our collections, as I believe we should, then our organizations will have to renegotiate the authority structures relating to the meanings of culturally significant objects. Such a step will demand that effective partnerships be formed with the public.

PROPOSING A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR MUSEUM OPERATIONS

Part of the reform that museums need to undergo is to reassess and re-express their core mission regarding public service. In my view, such a new mission might be:

> to relate to the public, through intellectual and symbolic experiences with art objects, in a way which meaningfully reflects/mirrors the cultural identity of a community and which supports individuals in affirming and evolving their personal identity.

With such a mission, museums could thoroughly re-examine and rebalance the ways in which they currently function in society. They could also begin to explore and articulate the full potential of what public service might imply and possibly achieve. If the emphasis is on relating to the public, rather than informing them, then the operations become more organic and acquire a growth potential.

With such an orientation to the public, museums could expand their functions beyond the current emphasis on exhibitions in the galleries and embrace more fully other modes of communication. Exhibitions of objects and information will continue to be one vehicle within which a productive dialogue with the public could take place. Innovative approaches to publications is another. Television is a third, event programmes is a fourth and computer-based media is a fifth. Whichever vehicles are chosen to realize the mission of the museum, there are three basic components of any communication strategy that need to be taken into consideration (see Fig. 7.1).

Many museums are working hard at addressing two of the components of the communication strategy suggested here – contextual information and institutional valuation. New approaches to writing supporting information with a view to clarity and relevance – and sometimes presenting the information in a number of 'voices' – is exciting. But for me, the most radical and most exciting challenge

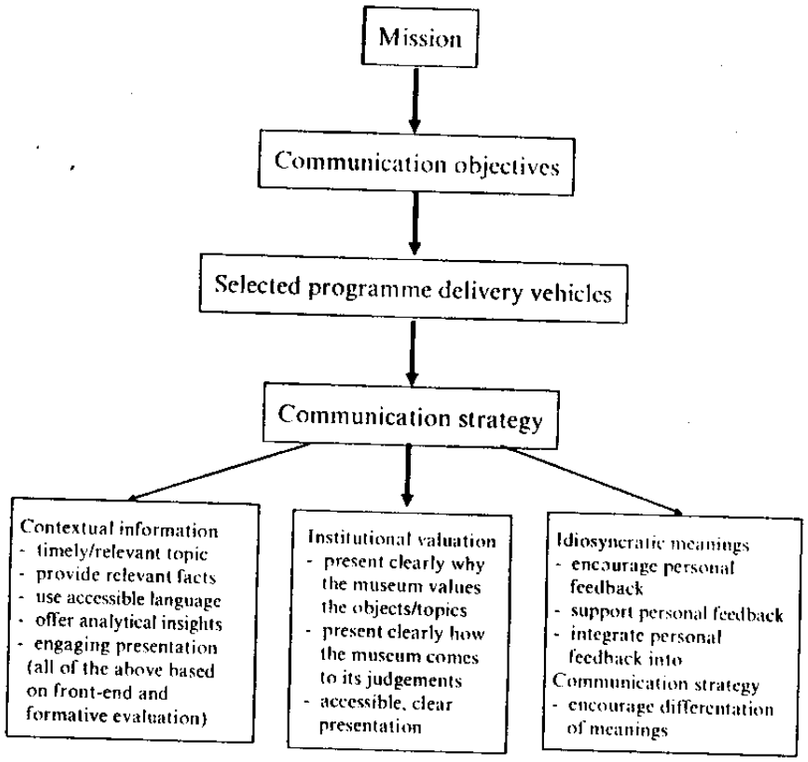


Figure 7.1 A revised museum communication strategy.

lies in the open integration of idiosyncratic meanings into the process of meaning-making.

As part of this proposed framework for museum operations, I would like to offer up a conceptual model of the visitor experience (see Fig. 7.2). The emphasis in this model is on the individual and the many processes and products of experience that happen during interactions with objects, people and places. Here, five processes of interaction mediate between the individual and the world in which that person lives (and all of these processes have both conscious and unconscious aspects). Cognition, emotion, imagination, intuition and physical interactions all contribute to the experience of an individual's sense of identity – either by affirming an existing sense of self, or by providing an impetus for an evolving sense of self. This identity is generally reflected in one's knowledge, beliefs, taste and skills.

Identity is a very complex notion, particularly because it involves

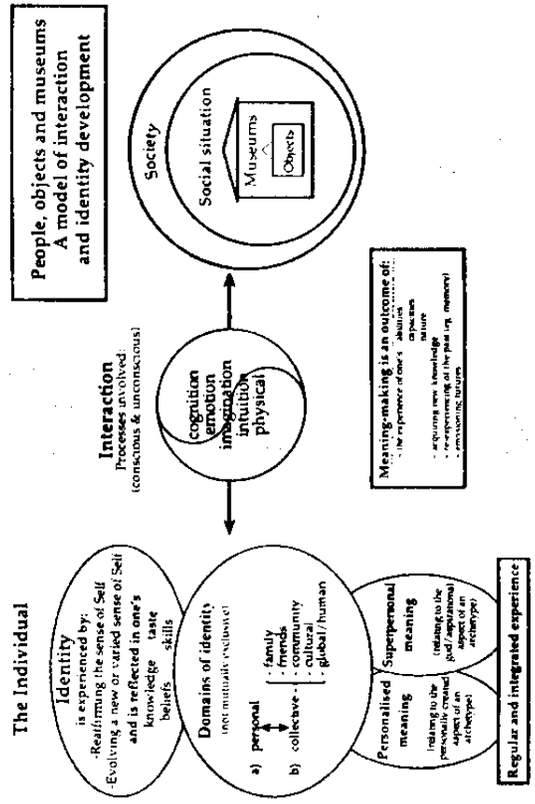


Figure 7.2 Conceptual model of museum experience.

both conscious and unconscious aspects. However, for my purposes here, the concept has been broken down into two general categories, which are not mutually exclusive – that of one's personal identity, or the sense of distinctiveness; and that of one's sense of belonging to a collective identity, such as a family, community or culture. Experiences of cultural objects can set in motion symbolic and literal experiences that can reinforce, undermine or develop one's sense of identity.

This model implies that museums have traditionally honoured certain types of meaning-making processes with museum objects, but have largely ignored others, which are equally important. One hypothesis here is that museums have created an imbalance in how the public experiences symbolic objects and that this imbalance needs to be corrected. Specifically, most museums seem to focus their attention on rare and unusual objects in order to spotlight the extraordinary, superpersonal aspects of human experience. It is assumed that an inspired painting by Van Gogh, for example, is a source of an archetypal experience of nature or humanity. Yet the success of a Van Gogh painting depends on the particular way in which a viewer experiences it – and there is a great range of powerful responses to such art works. The painting must be experienced as something both outside the individual, but also within that person. I have come to think that museums generally encourage visitors to defer any personal, idiosyncratic meaning-making processes to the meanings that conform to the expert consensus (which is itself something of a myth). By encouraging people to experience objects with all of their perceptual capabilities (cognition, emotion, imagination, intuition and physical interaction) the museum can become a much richer forum for the showcasing of living cultures.

CONCLUSION

All of the 'Share Your Reaction' cards demonstrate to me how much creative energy exists within the public – it is a powerful energy that has many faces – unpredictable, moving, insightful. Even when visitor reactions seem elusive and idiosyncratic, it is possible to relate to them empathetically, and I believe it enriches everyone's experiences when we do so. As a cultural institution, museums do have a great deal to offer – insights based on research – and we need to share our insights as effectively as possible. But, museums have limitations. They cannot experience art works creatively, but rather must rely on the public for this function.

For me, museums in future years will include a new form of partnership with the public – where the many ways of meaning-making are encouraged, supported and respected. I imagine that museums will become places that more effectively present information which interacts with visitor imagination and emotional responses – and which in turn blend with social dynamics. The result will be museums that function more as places of a living culture. If the museum is truly the place of the muses, then museum professionals must realize that the physical and intellectual aspects of our current operations must function more symbolically as triggers that support visitors in activating the muses within all of us. It is this inner space that, in my view, is the real museum.

NOTE

1 This article has evolved from two presentations given in 1993, one at the Museum Education Association of Australia Biennial Conference in Melbourne, the second at the Visitor Studies Association Conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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