

# A Museum Vision

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*"The bridge suspended between history and truth, is not a way towards this or that. It is to see the stillness within movement."*

*Octavio Paz*

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## Vision of Engagement

Museum policy today considers the question: who will be the museum's participants and how will participation be enlarged to encompass all ethno- cultural groups? The Gore Bay Museum does not pose this question (nor does it organize its activities around the concept of 'policy'). Instead, this small museum works with an idea of proceeding with visions. Our visions themselves become our exhibits and our event-functions. In each of our activities, we offer parts of our collections for the education and edification of the public. There is, for the visitor, what we would call an engagement in which the so-called objects of the exhibit or so-called activities of event-functions become museum subjects. Old snow shoes, a prison table, historical photographs, pieces of lace, all are presented as possessing vitality and integrity; each is regarded as its own subject possessing its own memory, each "subject" of the collection is seen in terms of an encounter of its "humanity with that of the visitor's humanity.

It is this process of engagement that we attend to and it is this process that we learn from. This interaction of subjectivities between the visitor and a part of the collection shows us, the staff, the many, many ways by which each exhibit and each event-function held by the museum comes to evolve as: 1) a perceptual encounter; 2) an experiential interest; 3) a specialized informational interest; 4) a biographical or cultural memory, or combinations of these. These four encounters are the source of diverse interpretations among museum visitors. The voluminous aggregate of such potential interpretations demonstrates to us that we cannot begin to know our visitors by classifying them into socially defined identities: we can only know them by their responses, by the perceptions behind those responses, by the faith and reverence that they bring to exhibits they attend, by their commitments to activities related to those exhibits, by the memories that they bring forward; and by specialized interests that they hold and find echoed back to them by the exhibits.

So it is that we find the contemporary questions of who will be involved, who will visit and participate in museum activities, and how we will bring diverse ethno-cultural groups to use the museum to be inappropriate for purposes of envisioning the way in which the museum is a part of people's lives and a part of Canadian society. We emphatically declare that we cannot use an exhibit to target an audience of participants. For we recognize that museum activities are developed around collections, and each part, each item of that collection is transformed through its presentation, and again transformed in its reception by a visitor. To "target" an ethno-cultural group with an exhibit is to lock the collection and the participation of ethno-cultural groups into a limited language, understanding, and interpretation. As Roland Barthes pointed out: a given meaning is a dead meaning. The Gore Bay Museum has found that we can only discover clusters of responses, understandings and relevances among our visitors: we can only discern groupings of distinctive meanings and interests. We cannot design policies for participation.

We have suggested that the act of visiting an exhibit and participating in a museum event-function transforms the collection. This transformation comes as a result of the ceremonial nature of how museums fulfill their role in Canadian society. As found in all ceremonies, each gesture of attention by a visitor transforms the materiality

of an object from a named socially-constructed identity, from a fixed point of designated time and place and former function in history into a subject that has layers of significance to be uncovered and interpreted. It is from this ceremonial transformation that we discover new identities of the subjects of the collection and the true identities of the visitors who are their mediums.

We can say that this encounter of the visitor with the exhibit is similar to that of person with person. In other words, the potential of an exhibition and event-function is to be ceremonially transformed through a dialogical metamorphosis from its fixed point of objectivity to an evolving direction of subjectivity. We may call this the subjectivizing of the collection through exhibition. This is a process by which the visitor "finds" the subject within the collection. We must listen to and collect the many ways by which visitors come to this encounter and came from it with their insights and significations. We can only hear these insights and learn new meanings and identities of items in a collection if we are not limited by expectations of culture and language, identity and indexicality, we can only learn about visitors by accepting the principle that the direction of the exhibit's meaning is potentially infinite.

What we describe as the transformation and subjectivization of the collection is what Foucault describes as an emancipation from the constraints of history:

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*"The success of history belongs to those who are capable of seizing these rules, to replace those who had used them to disguise themselves so as to pervert them, invert their meaning, and redirect them against those who had initially imposed them; controlling this complex mechanism, they will make it function so as to overcome the rules through their own rules."*

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The overcoming of rules set by others is an overcoming of the objectification of object and person. It means that each visitor to the museum becomes a subject within rather than an object of history. For this to occur, the museum enters into a dialogue with the visitor, listening, receiving, responding, learning and relearning, being self-critical, reflexive, and open to shifts in relevances, ontologies, and practices.

For this reason we cannot begin with a perspective of museum participation based on a particular faith, identity or heritage. We must understand that entering the museum is as in the entering into any cathedral or temple: it is a place of universality rooted in what sustains faith and hope. It is a place of reverence that has no fixed designation. It enfolds the subjects of the collection and the subjects of the visitors. It entails the encounter of the body of the collection with the body of the visitor. Here we note the words of Vivian Darroch-Lozowski:

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*"distance-hardship-penance I am becoming physically connected with the historical time in which I live. It is a time of pain and tool and artifact. a time of cyclical collision of fire and plasma"*

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The encounter of visitor and exhibition is such. It is a collision, which begins with a catch and surrender, as Kurt Wolf describes meaningful human action. What we describe here is the way in which museum staff can and we believe should recognize the profound interchange between the attended-to-subject of collection and the visitor as subject. We recognize that the description we provide will appear strange to a rational- material perspective. The latter is an externalization of the world, a model based on a nihilistic view that the encounter of museum exhibits can only be understood from a cognitive, ego centered, politically defined world in which the aesthetics and ethics of self are subordinated to the social context in which they are found. Those holding the restrictive view of the force of the social context apply it in order to define issues of museum participation. But in doing so they find themselves in an increasing cycle of creating greater and greater subdivisions of categories

for defining Canadian society and for organizing their exhibitions and event- functions. Each attempt to reach out to an as yet neglected part of the public results in a clash of definitions of cultural and political identify and control. The result of this approach is demeaning to potential museum visitors and depressing to museum staff. It increases distance between cultural groups and even worse, sets up unbridgeable boundaries between ethno-cultural groups. We can only say that this approach has demonstrated its own destructive qualities to both the Canadian society and to its institutions.

Contrary to this approach, the Gore Say Museum has found that the vitality of museum engagement is founded on a whole range of visions created in spite of, rather than because of, history, purpose, and calculations. We need to uncover and understand the affective history in which we have lived and to which we direct our lives. To do this, we find that an affective history is multiple, fragile, and variable. Further, we must discover the interruptions, even the eruptions of what is fixed by political designation. We stand by the idea:

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*"Tout cherche tout, sans but, sans treve, sans repos. Everything seeks everything, without purpose, without end, without cessation."*

*Victor Hugo*

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This is the relationship of the museum towards its many clusters of participants: it is the other of the many voices of our visitors. The museum must listen to visitors with compassion and trust, stepping into engagements of experiences that bring its staff beyond understanding the visitor as merely other. Similarly, we would say the museum must listen to the subjectivities of its artifacts to bring them beyond their identity as objects.

### **From Visitors to Friends of the Museum**

The museum exists in a sphere of silence, a place of quietude, a world where the drone of everyday visual and auditory stimuli ceases. For the museum goer, the public everyday world is a universe of advertisement, information, and entertainment, Too often, museums attempt to emulate commercial organizations with "Blockbuster" exhibits in order to bring in large numbers of visitors. We have not followed this approach. Instead, the Gore Day Museum visions have effected exhibits that have, over the years, achieved slow, steady growth in the number of visitors. Large numbers of visitors are not important to the museum. What is much more significant is a building of relationships that sustains visitation over many years. Being in a farm region, we look forward to the continual return of members of the immediate community, as well as people who are retired, as well as artists, school children, cottage residents, and tourists. We arrive at these identities by the way people define themselves and their interests. We especially notice this by those who return to the museum yearly and even more frequently. We note also those who refer to themselves as Anishinwabe. Do note that we do not refer to visitors as native, aboriginal, First Nation Peoples, etc. unless they refer to themselves in that way. Self- identity rather than designated identity is called for, and where the visitor does not wish to use an identity, where they refer to themselves only by their name, region of residence, or by their Interests, the staff of the Museum follows these categories with courtesy and respect.

Museums today often follow an excitement of creating exhibits that are entertaining but of little or no intellectual substance. This brings into the museum a condition that Foucault noticed existed outside:

Outside the closed precinct of Museums, the intellectual tradition has been exposed to a continuous and insidious erosion which, because it is not intentional, is extremely difficult to stop. Power of publicity, has turned what was once an interchange of ideas, values, tastes, and opinions.

The spectacle of exhibiting a well-known collection or including an interactive entertaining effect often precipitates a sudden rise in museum attendance. But the effect of such enterprises are short lived. The visitors do not return for "ordinary" exhibits. An exhibit that is marked by the museum as a spectacle and that is accepted by the public as such creates a superficial interest and relationship between visitor and institution. It is actually damaging in the long run. Only the patience of a sustained devotion to the collection by the staff and the discovery of the collection through exhibits that permit an openness of meaning will create a sustained participation of visitors with the museum. If a museum follows this course of exhibition and the building of relationships with visitors, when they return again and again we come to consider them as friends of the museum and friends of the collection. This role emerges over time, and it is to this kind of participation that the Gore Bay Museum dedicates its purpose.

Such friends of the museum stretch across many kinds of social identities and life-styles. We see these friends as individuals and also as groups of people clustered around particular perceptual, and knowledgeable, selectiveness. Over time, as we come to know them we find that their responses "gather" parts of the collection, "select" aspects of exhibits according to what they bring with their secular and spiritual interests. From these observations we gain a recognition of the way museum friends organize collections and exhibits, and it is from these observations that we learn the true wealth of the Gore Bay Museum collection.

The Gore Bay Museum sustains its visions around the vitality of its collection. The museum's collection of such things as lace, photographs, kitchen utensils, and farm tools, all serve as mere decoration unless they can become an organic part of a communal celebration. The museum's collection becomes a part of that celebration only when it is free from the strictures of a fixed historical designation and this is possible only within a pluralist culture. The museum's holdings become part of the dynamics of Canadian culture only when the collection retains a continuity of meaning from person to person and group to group. The collection is transformed only when it is recognized for its connection between the materiality of its body that yields a dimension to be discovered, identified, and interpreted by visitors who bring to that collection their knowledge and their deepest commitments and values.

We have tried to describe the course of action by which the Gore Bay Museum forms exhibits and event-functions, encourages visitations, discovers clusters of friends, and rediscovers its treasures. These processes can only emerge out of a pluralistic perspective that includes understandings that there are many trajectories that can be followed in a way to the universality of the object, that there is a continuing presence of the object beyond its materiality, and that each item in the museum's collection is art and that art, when it is free, is both witness and conscience. We must acknowledge the mystical and moral dimensions of what the museum brings forth. As Foucault has noted, our task in contemporary society is to find an aesthetic praxis of life.

The museum's responsibility is to treat its objects, to make them accessible in a way that permits visitors to open further the aesthetics and ethics of their lives.