



What's Art Good For: Critical Diversity, Social Justice and Future of Art and Culture in Canada

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When we imagine today's art activists reinventing the wheel, we should recall whose wheel we remade, and that the only lasting wheel is the wheel of reinvention
(Cameron Bailey, "Foreword", 13 Conversations about art and cultural race politics, p.8)

Sometimes by taking up the problems of the Other, it is possible to find oneself
(Édouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation, p.18)

The entire art industry has systematically excluded the appreciation and inclusion of other artistic practices from other cultural perspectives. Contemporary art has been defined by and for whites. Looking around Vancouver, there has been very little change. The institutions are the same. They have not reallocated resources, they are not willing to share power and access. The hard fight for "funding for diversity" was hijacked. Monies didn't go to new initiatives by new communities, but instead to "inclusion" in existing institutions
(Wong, Fuse Magazine, 21:3, 1998)

Introduction

Well into the 21st century some of the big questions of the last century still face us, and trouble us, and it appears with no end in sight. Questions and concerns about social justice, equality, diversity, and multiculturalism seem to be even more urgent as the intimacies of global life bring us into closer contact and everyday encounters, with our various others. The inability to live a life solely within the confines of one's demarcated community becomes more and more difficult to sustain and to achieve, making it is clear that figuring out how to live with human difference is an utmost urgent matter of our time. This broad claim that figuring out how to live with human difference is the urgent matter of our time, brings its own unique circumstances to the arts and culture sector, because this sector is intimately connected to all the ways in which people can and do come together, or come to encounter each other across and within difference. The arts and culture sector is rhizomatic – it is creative, it is presentation, it is representative, it is economics, it is social, and frankly, it is

foundational to human life. Thus how the arts and culture tackles the question of how to live together in difference has enormous consequences for the entire society.

In this talk I will attempt to speak to questions, concerns and issues of social justice, multiculturalism, critical diversity and equity in the arts and culture. My goals are twofold, to open up the broad conceptual terms of what a present and future arts and culture sector might take on and look like, if a serious and sustained engagement with social justice, critical diversity and equity becomes central to its mission. And, secondly how taking on such a challenge would be in keeping with the changing nature of Canada's demographics, in both the present and the future. It is important to keep present in our conversations the changed and changing demographics of Canada, and to ask questions about how realistically addressing those demographics might "renew" Canada's arts and culture environment in new and exciting ways. Importantly, it is also crucial to keep in view emerging groups and populations, communities if you will, as central to the conversation as well (here I am thinking of disability communities in particular). This talk articulates social justice, multiculturalism, critical diversity and equity as foundational to the future of the arts and not simply as an antagonistic entanglement with the past or excluded communities. Thus I am interested in providing some conceptual tools for thinking our present cultural conjuncture in a fashion that provides us some space to reside in the possibilities of living life differently.

Before I proceed I want to say something about the terms I will be using. Central to my ideas today are three terms:

- Multiculturalism
- Critical Diversity
- Social justice

These three terms are an orientation rather than a program, in what I will be speaking to. It is important to note that these terms are empty signifiers – that is, each of them can be populated with whatever desire one wants to populate them with. As you all know these terms are highly contested terms. In the Canadian context the fallout from the federal multicultural act and provincial multicultural policies has provided a framework for public institutions of all kinds to address multiculturalism as a central framework of their activities for at least some 30 years or more (we will be acknowledging 40 years of state multiculturalism this fall). In many instances the primary understanding of those policies is to deal with racial and ethnic diversity issues and representation, consequently the long-term outcome of most multicultural policies has been that all of the non-white groups became multicultural, ethnic or some other kind of racialized entity. Additionally, this approach has largely focus on representation at the level of race and ethnicity, often as marked in bodies and has most often produced homogenized groups in which internal differences are given little space for expression. As a state mandated activity multicultural policies produce a kind of diversity that reproduces the

historical legitimacy of the institutions in question without having to address the deeper structures of their orientation. Representational inclusion, both numeric and otherwise is valued at the expense of more thorough institutional questioning and rethinking.

Critical diversity requires us to disaggregate multiculturalism then. By this I mean that critical diversity does not only work at the level of representational inclusion, rather critical diversity asks some difficult questions about inclusion and what inclusion signals and or means in each context. Critical diversity is about both the texture and the depth of diversity. And by taking into account the texture and depth of diversity, its critical balance and calculation comes into play. Let me give an example of an ideal type of critical diversity. In the multicultural model it might be sufficient to have some form of black representation, maybe even multiple forms, but with critical diversity those forms of multiple black representations would have to account for a range of factors internal to blackness so that blackness is never homogenized. It might account for questions of class position, of disability, of sexuality, of religion and so on in an attempt to get at the depth and the texture of how blackness is experienced and lived out in both its extra and intra-black differences. Thus blackness in this instance cannot only be framed and understood in relationship to race and racism. Thus critical diversity seeks to not just populate our various arenas with one-dimensional encounters it seeks to provide encounters that strike deeply at the core of what it means to be human. Thus critical diversity is about the ways in which categories or genres of the human cross-cut each other.

Fundamentally, it is only when some form of critical diversity is approached that we move towards social justice. Social justice is the greatest unknown in all this work. Social justice cannot be decided in advance, it has no particular destination, it is a process of coming into, a “to come” moment. Social justice and indeed its achievement can only be known to be accomplished when those seeking it declare it to be so – that is declare that social justice has been done. Thus social justice is more a desire and a constant project to be worked on and worked at, than a set of programs, a product and or a concluding deadline. The state multicultural model provided one moment through which movement towards social justice could be glimpsed, but that was merely a moment in the process, an opening. Critical diversity provides other avenues along this process, but critical diversity is not the end point of social justice either it is a part of it. What is most important and crucial about social justice and its philosophical and political call is that it opens us up to rethinking the entire process of organization should it be necessary. Social justice then embeds critical diversity as a normative way of doing things and thereby social justice is a way of being in the world. Social justice is a whole way of life, it cannot be a type of training, and you can’t run social justice workshops and trainings, despite the equity industry’s claims. Social justice is both an approach to living life and an orientation to thinking differently about the present and the past as a way of setting in place the conditions for a different kind of future.

Demographics

In the arena of demographics, the future of Canada and thus of arts and culture is already being made and coming into being. Those broad terms that I have been delineating can help us to make sense of Canada's changed and changing demographics as we move forward. We all know that any population growth in Canada in the next twenty to thirty years is projected to come primarily through immigration and to a lesser extent, but crucially important, First Nations and Aboriginal peoples. This is a significant shift in how the Canadian nation might understand itself. And importantly, it could be the source of many unfortunate flashpoints in institutions of the nation as these changes take hold and communities require something more than multicultural inclusion. Such demographic shifts hold great importance for national institutions and significantly for the arts and culture sector because these demographic changes will require new modes of thinking and being of our national institutions in these institutions are to be a foundational part of social justice. In this regard a nation that has often thought of itself as white will be forced to encounter another perspective of itself, since much of the immigrant population will be non-white, Asian in particular, and Arab and West Asian to a lesser extent. These three visible minority groups along with First Nations peoples bring with them different cultural traditions, different histories of art, their own meanings and relationships to art and culture that are different from those that have been dominant in the Euro-American western world for some time now. And, yet these populations are also deeply familiar and influenced by Euro-America western cultural practices. It cannot be assumed these populations sit outside those practices by any means.

Thus, the question for the arts and culture sector is a difficult one of balance, knowledge and autonomy for communities to articulate, contribute and authorize in an ongoing environment of institutional change. I shall return later to what I mean by articulate, contribute and authorize, but suffice to say now that, in the future First Nations and immigrant communities will continue to constitute the primary audience of engagement for the arts and culture sector. The sector's task will be how to engage them. Important to understanding the work ahead are two vital things: 1. These immigrants are mostly economic immigrants, which means they inhabit particular class ideals and therefore are a ready audience for the arts and culture; and 2. These immigrants bring with them knowledge of multiple arts and cultural traditions, some of those traditions being hybrid and Creole. Similar claims can be made for First Nations in terms of hybrid and Creole traditions, while the question of formal education remains a thorny one for First Peoples their relationship to art and culture is an organic relationship that is complex and holds its own world view which is often in different from Euro-Western traditions. These will be significant challenges that cannot be adequately addressed through multicultural inclusion.

The upshot is that demographics in relation to Canada's continued economic health will and should have an indelible impact on the arts and culture sector and its thinking as we move forward in this century – it has to be central to the work that is

done in the sector. To reiterate more firmly, the impact cannot however, be that of the first significant wave of multicultural inclusion. From the late 1970s to the mid-1990s multicultural inclusion led to some significant movement in the arts and culture sector, most importantly, the setting up and proliferation of equity offices, equity officers and specialty programs for racialized others. These programs worked in limited ways to both open up some space for recognition of racial minority arts, artists, presenters and audiences to find space in Canada's art and culture sector and to even sometimes cross over into the "mainstream" disciplines. However, by the mid-1990s with cuts in social spending and the arts those spaces all but evaporated leaving in place a number of artists and institutions who were mid-career in tact in some disciplines, but by and large abandoning a new generation of artists who were about to come through the pipeline. The model of multicultural inclusion has served its purpose and time, so while I am not suggesting that the model should be immediately abandoned, the model needs more than a tweak at this time. I am suggesting that the model failed to produce the kind of critical diversity that I marked out earlier and thus the model of multicultural inclusion could not move towards providing social justice at the institutional level.

Probably, the most outstanding example of the model of multicultural inclusion model is the establishment of the First Nations/Aboriginal gallery at the National Gallery in Ottawa. The creation of a First Nations gallery cannot be underestimated by any stretch of the imagination for the signal it sends about the place of Aboriginal art in the national story of Canada. However, while this was and remains an important outcome it is still very much framed through the multicultural inclusion model, even though technically speaking First Nations and Aboriginal peoples are exempt from the Multiculturalism Act and governed by the Indian Act and Treaty Rights agreements. The boldness of this institutional acknowledgement and the fantastic work done in those galleries as well as the mentoring of First Nations and Aboriginal art practitioners across the breathe of the arts nonetheless still does not move us towards social justice for First Nations and Aboriginal peoples. What I mean is that possibly when an Aboriginal becomes chief curator and the gallery is not only positioned as a national corrective, and example of reckoning with our national shame, but as foundational to art and culture in the taken for granted manner of Euro-American art, then something would have shifted. What that looks like cannot be known in advance, but it holds great promise for a further and genuine democraticization of the sector and our human culture.

Marc Mayer's not so long ago comments on artistic excellence in regards to racial minority artists and their presentation, or lack thereof at the National Gallery reinforces how multicultural inclusion does not have to be either a democratization of the institution nor a fundamental rethinking of how it works. Mayer in part stated that "Our real mandate is excellence. We do think about diversity, however... We put on what we find in the Canadian art scene that is excellent and we're blind to colour or ethnic background, or even whether you were born in Canada, we don't care. (...) We're looking for excellent art. We don't care who makes it." Mayer's response to the question posed to him operated with the old paradigm on diversity as racial and

or ethnic and its inclusion as some kind of compensatory largest from the institution. Such attitudes, because I believe those comments are more than a statement frame what is possible in the future. Such attitudes will require asking difficult questions about our institutions, their leadership, local, national and global gazes and a range of questions, concerns, and perspectives that might help us to think much better about what Canada's demographic changes mean for Euro-American western partial ideas of excellence as though such perspectives were indeed the only and universal perspective. The point I am making here is that there is no singular idea of excellence, but rather excellence is culturally defined and therefore changeable over time, and understood differently from different perspectives.

More significantly, however, is the way in which ideas of excellence can and do come up against certain notions and conceptions of cultural rights. Cultural rights are a tricky and difficult matter and I don't have enough time here to go into all the ways in which ideas of cultural rights can both open up new possibilities and simultaneously shut down possibilities. But let me stress an aspect of cultural rights that is important I think to our conversations as we move forward. It is the close and intimate link between cultural rights and human rights. In the case of formerly excluded groups, the question of cultural rights is one in which access to institutions, the rights to have ones culture – cultural expression, cultural views and cultural perspective as a part of the human conversation and a source that is taken into consideration in the organization of our society is both necessary, crucial and an important element of moving towards social justice. As [INTERARTS](#) notes:

Cultural Rights are rights related to art and culture, both understood in a large sense. The objective of these rights is to guarantee that people and communities have access to culture and can participate in the culture of their election. Cultural rights are human rights that aim at assuring the enjoyment of culture and its components in conditions of equality, human dignity and non-discrimination. They are rights related to themes such as language; cultural and artistic production; participation in cultural life; cultural heritage; intellectual property rights; author's rights; minorities access to culture, [and cultural institutions] among others.

This perspective puts Mayer's comments in a wholly different light when Canada's changed and changing demographics are added to it.

Let me suggest by way of example that a recent festival like Luminato comes close to operating with a notion of cultural rights that embraces Canada's new demographics even if such is not immediately articulated as an idea of the festival. Luminato commissions work from Ontario artists, Canadian artists and artists around the world. In the last five years it has brought art to the streets in a range of venues that begins to democratize art in relationship to its audiences. In particular, its free musical concerts are recognition of how music shapes contemporary urban life. And its global commissions opens up Toronto as a global space by recognizing that those commissions are engaging audiences at home, in Toronto, who might already have some relationship to the source or the underlying elements of the commission. The

festival imagines an intelligent audience for its multidiscipline platform. But what I probably even more crucial about Luminato that should never go missing should it success continue unabated is that at least one of the founders and thinkers behind it, David Pecaut was very much involved in social justice civic issues. This perspective applied to an arts and culture festival has produced great results in a very short period of time. It is an example that social justice and art and culture, excellent art and culture are not incompatible. Thus Luminato has thus far succeeded at building a festival that is diverse in its arts and audience with a genuine global reach.

In a similar vein, the no longer existing Canada Council program Explorations worked well into the 1990s to expose visible minority artists who accessed and received funding to not only create work across a range of disciplines but so doing, to produce audiences for their work. Explorations remains, I think an important program for what I would call the first phase of multicultural inclusion. That phase demonstrate that visible minority artists had something to say and could bring audiences to it. Importantly, then as we move forward the kind of risk-taking that Explorations represented needs to be resuscitated.

In both of my examples the question of audience is important. However, I want to caution against quickly using my comments to begin thinking about the market for art before we think about the institutions under which art comes into and through our lives. The pedagogical importance of art requires us to think about art and its funding twofold: the work and then its audiences. Sometimes the work requires support before and until it can find its audience or its audience can find it. Too often the kinds of communities, which are the foundation upon which my comments have been premise are assumed not to have an audience. Such assumptions must be adumbrated by our institutional leaders and institutional policies. The challenge of the future is to think art, artists, audience and funding simultaneously as a central element, foundational even of citizenship. Too often in the last decade or so we have arrived as creative cultures of all kinds without addressing the bedrock issues that face communities, thus continuing the historical streams of inequality in our society.

Conclusion

Thus we are centrally faced with the question of how to produce a common public sphere of art and culture in which critical diversity and a future of social justice might be in sight. Simultaneously the question of justice is not a question of the market, and yet given capitalism's all encompassing reach into our lives the market cannot be ignored nor denied. Therefore, any sober and sobering conclusions will for the time being have to rest in paradox. The very ideas of liberty, equality, freedom and so on that we rely on can also be used against us, as we see with the war on terror – the suspension of freedoms to fight for freedom. Thus following the black British cultural thinker Stuart Hall we require new political logics. These new political logics will only reveal themselves through brave leadership, risk-taking and a profound recognition that Canada has changed. Our inability to misrecognize the change, and our lack in embracing the change could and will result in a stalled public

sphere for arts and culture in which the culture wars of the last half of the 20th century proved to be only a small skirmish in terms of what would come. Public art funders have to lead in path-breaking ways and it means that you will have to think otherwise than you might be accustomed to doing so that other ways of knowing and being come into view. It is not scary work, it is exciting work, it is legacy building work, and it is work that changes how human beings live in difference with each other.