

Learning through Museum Controversies Three Canadian Examples

Aprendizaje a través de las Controversias del Museo Tres ejemplos canadienses

Ann DAVIS

University of Calgary
University of Calgary 2500 University Dr. NW, Calgary, Alberta, Canada. T2N 1N4
adavis@ucalgary.ca

Recibido: 2-09-2014
Aceptado: 22-11-2014

ABSTRACT

Controversy has bedeviled museums forever, especially but certainly not exclusively those art museums which show modern and contemporary art. Controversies will probably always be likely, for they are an occasion on which the museum is directly confronted by a public questioning the museum's decisions and processes, often too hidden and frequently misunderstood. Given the increasing recognition that it is no longer sufficient for museums to collect, conserve and display, but rather that museums must now engage fundamentally and directly with their communities, how can museums manage controversy? Can museums learn from controversy to discover better ways of working with their publics? This paper will examine three controversies in Canadian museums – The Spirit Sings, Voice of Fire and Vanitas or the Meat Dress - in an attempt to analyze these questions using the ANT concepts of Bruno Latour.

KEY WORDS: *Controversy. The Spirit Sings. Voice of Fire. The Meat Dress. Bruno Latour. Communities.*

RESUMEN

La controversia ha acechado siempre a los museos, en especial, pero desde luego no de forma exclusiva, a aquellos museos de arte que exponen el arte moderno y contemporáneo. Probablemente siempre habrá controversias, ya que son ocasiones en las que el museo ha de enfrentarse directamente a un interrogatorio público sobre sus decisiones y procesos, a menudo demasiado ocultas y con frecuencia mal entendidas. Dado el creciente reconocimiento de que ya no es suficiente para los museos coleccionar, conservar y mostrar, sino más bien que los museos deben ahora comprometerse fundamental y directamente con sus comunidades, ¿cómo pueden los museos gestionar la controversia? ¿Pueden los museos aprender de la controversia para descubrir formas mejores de trabajar con sus públicos? Este artículo examinará tres controversias en los museos canadienses – Los cantos del espíritu, Voz de Fuego y Vanitas o El vestido de carne - en un intento de analizar estas preguntas usando los conceptos ANT de Bruno Latour.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Controversia. Los cantos del espíritu. Voz de Fuego. El vestido de carne. Bruno Latour. Comunidades.*

Controversy has bedeviled museums forever, especially, but certainly not exclusively those art museums which show modern and contemporary art. The Impressionists were roundly criticized when they first exhibited their canvases in Paris in the 1870s and 1880s, for they were not following the accepted contemporary styles. In New York in 1913 at the Armory Show, Marcel Duchamp and Henri Matisse and other “extremists” were lampooned for offending public decorum. In Canada later that same decade the Group of Seven were accused of executing incomprehensible paintings that favoured a harsh, unpopulated land over the more pastoral sections of Canada. More recent controversies abound: the 1973 purchase of Jackson Pollock’s *Blue Poles* by Australia, the exhibition of Carl Andre’s “bricks” by the Tate Gallery in 1976, and, in the United States, Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* of 1989 and Robert Mapplethorpe’s homoerotic photographs. Controversy is not restricted to art museums. The opening in 2000 of the Louvre’s Pavillon des Sessions and in 2006 the Musée du quai Branly suggested to many outdated modernist primitivism. Such controversies will probably always be likely, for controversy is an occasion in which the museum is directly confronted by a public questioning the museum’s decisions and processes, often too hidden and frequently misunderstood. Given the increasing recognition that it is no longer sufficient for museums to collect, conserve and display, but rather that museums must now engage fundamentally and directly with their communities, how can museums manage controversy? Can museums learn from controversy to discover better ways of working with their publics? This paper will examine three controversies in Canadian museums in an attempt to analyze these questions.

In considering the social aspect of museums, the work of Bruno Latour and his Actor-Network-Theory, or ANT, is useful. Latour aims to redefine sociology as the “tracing of associations ... a type of connection between things that are not themselves social” (Latour 2005: 5). He proposes the metaphor “actor” to indicate that it is never clear who and what is acting, for hybridity and dislocation are frequently the characteristics of evolving associations. ANT builds on a slow, careful, retroactive examination held “after having the actors deploy the full range of controversies in which they are immersed” (Latour 2005: 23). Controversies, or activities, then are central to forward movement and hybrid-

ity and hence to a better understanding of the connections between activities. Actors are not restricted to humans; actors may be objects, a concept vital to museums. For Latour “anything that... [modifies] a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor” (Latour 2005: 71). In this ANT does not propose that objects have intentionality, that the hammer can hit the nail without human intervention. Rather ANT attempts to broaden the field of study by extending the list of participants and by emphasizing relativity. By considering objects and associations museum controversies can be enlightening.

1. The Spirit Sings

The controversy over *The Spirit Sings* exhibition had its grounds outside the Glenbow Museum, which organized the exhibition for the 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary, Canada. The Lubicon Lake Cree First Nation in Alberta, without a reserve and forced to leave their traditional lands when oil companies began drilling in the 1970s, tried to get agreement for a general boycott of the games, and, when that failed, and they heard that Shell Oil was to be the exhibition’s major sponsor, transferred their anger and their boycott to *The Spirit Sings* exhibition as a way to attract attention to their cause (Fig. 1). Soon the contention over corporate sponsorship attracted other exhibition-related issues including the inappropriate display of ceremonial items and claims for the return of cultural property. As Ruth Phillips, one of the curators of the show, explains, no one connected to the organization of the exhibition disputed the justice of these claims. Rather for them the Lubicon’s many “grievous problems seemed to mirror in microcosm the post-contact history of Aboriginal peoples in many parts of Canada” (Phillips 2011: 49). To the Glenbow staff, the controversy revolved around other museological matters:

the debates weighed the nature of the museum as a space for public representation that could provide access to the material artifacts of Aboriginal history against the leverage a boycott could provide for the rectification of specific injustices, and they questioned whether political advocacy was the proper role for the museum (Phillips 2011: 49).



Fig. 1. The Spirit Sings protestors, press photograph.

The exhibition, *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples*, was an immense show of 650 pieces of the oldest examples of Aboriginal art, many of which had been removed from Canada in earlier centuries, were now housed in international museums and had never been show in Canada before. Although the exhibition focused on the early contact period, which led to accusations that it reflected the modernist concept that Aboriginal creativity lay in the past, the Glenbow tried to counter this argument with a full program of performances and demonstrations by Aboriginal peoples. Display techniques, reflecting a hybridization of art and artifact installation systems, worked to redefine Indigenous material culture as art, a complement that had, up to then, not yet been paid to much Canadian Aboriginal material. Despite the boycott, the show went ahead pretty much as planned, although some museums refused to lend and some works were contested as ceremonial pieces that should not be shown. Beyond the activists and academics, visitors were overwhelmingly positive about the artifacts and saddened by the current state of Aboriginal affairs (Phillips 2011: 60). After closing in Calgary, the show went to The Canadian

Museum of Civilization in Ottawa. Here, with the leadership of the indigenous community and in the spirit of constructive dialogue, it was decided to create a national Task Force on Museums and First Peoples.

This Task Force was charged with examining the problems that had surfaced during *The Spirit Sings* and making recommendations to ameliorate or eradicate the problems. In typical Canadian fashion, when a major crisis erupted a task force was formed, a forum for discussion, composed of Aboriginals and members for the Canadian museum community. Carefully and consciously formed as a bicultural committee, the Task Force was chaired by two respected museum people, one Aboriginal, the other non-Aboriginal. The group met for three years, travelling the country. At each venue elders conducted opening rituals which promoted respect and care to help heal or at least paper over a very divisive national confrontation. The final report, published in 1992, recommended considerable changes in protocols, practices and power structures, a reconceptualization of the relationship between museums and First Nations, a new way for the two parties to work together as partners in the future. This

process was to be based on consultation, on involvement, and always on respect. The partners were to consider better, more sensitive ways of handling sacred objects, adjudicating repatriation claims, creating Aboriginal training courses or improving access to museum collections. The details as to how these were to be carried out were not provided (Phillips 2011: 14).

Phillips, a highly respected curator and a *Actes de la 9ième Conférence* academic specializing in what she calls “the indigenization of Canadian Museums,” reports that the lessons from this controversy were quickly learned, that colleagues around the world started to embrace a more collaborative, postcolonial approach in working with Aboriginal materials (Phillips 2011: 13). Latour’s associations were finally being formed. In a very short time, for the Columbus quinquennial in 1992, both the National Gallery of Canada and the Canadian Museum of Civilization mounted “two remarkable exhibitions” which “brought the tensions of margin and centre squarely into the country’s most official spaces...” (Phillips 2011: 161). *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives on five Hundred Years*, openly political, broke important new ground for it was entirely organized and composed of Aboriginals. *Land, Spirit, Power*, the National Gallery show, equally radical and noteworthy, embraced pluralism in both its scope and its range of medium. Other museums followed. The Glenbow Museum, site of *The Spirit Sings*, worked in partnership with local Blackfoot to “develop an exhibit that would reflect their culture and history as they know it” (Conaty 2003: 230-231). *Niitsitapiisinni: our Way of Life* opened in 2002 (Janes and Conaty 2005). Not surprisingly, a number of non-Aboriginal visitors found the show unexpected, unusual and difficult, for it did not reveal the image of Indian they had come expect (Maranda 2011: 123). Most recently this collective process continued in the organization of a large permanent exhibition at the Musées de la civilisation in Quebec City, *C’est notre histoire: Premières Nations et Inuit du XXIe siècle* (Brant 2014: 44-46). Less public but as important in showing respect for Aboriginal property and their materials held by Canadian museum, repatriation continues (Davis 2010:115-122; Conaty 2008:250). Aboriginal artists, such as Kent Monkman, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun and Annie Pootoogook, newly emboldened by post-colonial attitudes, are using humour and irony to push back, to give non-Aboriginals some of their own medicine, their own stereotypes. Not every-

one agrees (Maranda personal communication) of course, but considerable steps have been made in decolonization and Indigenous recovery due in large measure to *The Spirit Sings* controversy.

2. Voice of Fire

The second controversy occurred in 1990, when the National Gallery of Canada announced that it had bought *Voice of Fire*, an imposing abstract painting by the modernist American Barnett Newman, for 1.5 million US dollars (Fig. 2). This precipitated an attack of the second kind, that against the acquisition of art with public funds. Part of the problem lay in the social and fiscal climate in Canada at the time. The economy was in a perilous state; the federal Conservative government was under pressure and the threat of Quebec separation from the rest of the country was very real as the proposed Meech Lake constitutional accord was rapidly unraveling. At the same time the recently signed Canada - United States free trade agreement was raising questions and uncertainty about the Canadian economy, the social safety net and Canadian culture. The populous was not in a good mood. Into this milieu



Fig. 2. Voice of Fire with visitor, National Gallery of Canada.

was injected the acquisition of *Actes de la 9ième Conférence* of a very large American painting, 5.2 metres high and 2.4 metres wide, two stripes of acrylic cadmium red and ultramarine blue, with a price tag four times larger than that ever paid for a Canadian work of art. The timing could not have been worse.

Museums, even national ones, seldom consider the political and even the social implications of timing. The acquisition of *Voice of Fire* had been a long, slow process that followed, inexorably, the many checks and balances demanded of a public institution. Created in 1967 for the American pavilion at the world's fair in Montreal that year, *Voice of Fire* was hung in the United States Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome as part of an exhibition entitled *American Painting Now*. It was the dome that elicited attention rather than the exhibition. Twenty years later, seeking magisterial works for the new National Gallery building, the gallery negotiated the purchase of *Voice of Fire* and submitted the purchase to the varied required committees and boards, including the board of National Museums of Canada Corporation. At every step approval was given. In August 1989 the process was finally formally concluded and a cheque was issued, but the acquisition was not announced until March 1990, when it was bundled with other works acquired over the previous year. The gallery was aware that the purchase of *Voice of Fire* could be controversial, but, like the staff of the Glenbow, was not sufficiently prepared for the furor that erupted.

The criticism was swift and varied. On one level the concern was about paying almost 2 million dollars at a time of considerable fiscal and political instability for an acquisition the public deemed unnecessary. The government was under fire for federal budget deficits and the perceived misuse of taxpayers money. In response the deputy prime minister wondered whether the purchase could be stopped, not recognizing that the painting has been purchased months before. In this climate the acquisition of *Voice of Fire* seemed to some to be economically and morally irresponsible (O'Brien 1996: 19).¹ A related problem was that the public simply did not understand why this abstract painting, just three stripes executed in two colours, was worth anything like the price paid. In fact many did not understand the painting at all and questioned the very validity of abstract art. The Chair of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Communications and Culture, Feliz Holtmann, declared on radio that "It looks

like two cans of paint and two rollers and about ten minutes would do the trick" (S.A. 1990). The third concern voiced by the artists' union CARFAC was that the National Gallery should not have been spending such a large proportion of their budget on an American work but rather should have bought more Canadian art. As John O'Brien has aptly summarized in the introduction to the book subsequently written about the controversy, *Voices of Fire: art, rage, power and the state*, the principal problems were that

the privileges claimed by formalism and its adherents are not easily reconciled to the interests of the general public. At the heart of the *Voice of Fire* controversy was a profound questioning of elite accountability in the public sphere (O'Brien 1996:19).

The initial response from the National Gallery did little to temper the debate or even address most of the public's concerns. Dr. Shirley Thomson, director of the National Gallery, when asked to justify the acquisition, replied "We need something to take us away from the devastating cares of everyday life" (Mays 1990). Regrettably this response just served to emphasize the distance between the public and the museum. Far from bringing pleasure and solace, the acquisition seemed to many to add to everyday cares. Comments from the deputy director responsible for the purchase, Brydon Smith, were no more successful at reaching and enlightening the public. Rather Smith maintained his formalist terminology, seemingly unable to explain the work in clear, understandable language. Producing a two page pamphlet, Smith declared that "The bilateral symmetry of *Voice of Fire* confirms each viewer's own upright stance in the world in a straightforward and comforting manner." Further "*Voice of Fire* is not an abstraction of something, nor does it refer to anything outside of itself. It is an objectification of thought" "...[T]he emphatic qualities of purely coloured form are able to flood our consciousness with a sublime sense of awe and tranquility" (Smith 1990). There was no acknowledgement that abstract painting is difficult to understand, nor was the history of the painting ever explained, its link to Montreal, and the fact that Newman taught in Saskatchewan and greatly influenced a number of Canadian painters. As O'Brien noted, the admonitions to enjoy the painting only added to the view that the gallery was a closed, elite institution "less inter-

ested in public service than its own regimes of specialization” (O’Brien 1996: 7). The colourful newspaper critic for the *Globe and Mail*, John Bentley Mays, did not hold back his criticism of the museum:

The gallery should have known that spending \$1.76 million on a big abstract painting by an American would bring down the roof. But instead of hitting back hard with solid arguments, the gallery is drawing up the robes of high principle about its chin, and affecting bewilderment. The official line being trotted out is, by and large, lame and very ad-hoc (Mayes 1990).

The controversy, as most controversies do, eventually died down, but the *Voice of Fire* is now one of the most famous, or infamous, pieces in the National Gallery of Canada.

Over the following months, Dr. Shirley Thomson, Director of the National Gallery of Canada, took up Mayes challenge and embarked on an extensive lecture tour directly addressing the *Voice of Fire* controversy as well as the next one concerning Jana Sterbak’s *Vanitas*. In her lecture “The Spirit and the Flesh: Collecting and Public Controversy at the National Gallery of Canada,” Thomson did all the right things. She acknowledged the difficulty of abstraction and concluded that *Voice of Fire* was controversial mainly because of its style not its price or nationality. Further she put the painting in context, explaining its importance to Canada as well as to international art history. With sensitivity and humour, Thomson defused the mystique around this particular piece and explored why the National Gallery should acquire this kind of work (Thomson 1992). The Director finished her speech by declaring

If the role of the artist is to hold a mirror up to society, if their vision is meant to inform ours, then we have a vital task: to make their voices heard and in a way our public understands. That will be our great mission ... our public responsibility in the years and decades to come (Thomson 1992: 22).

If her comments had been distilled into the initial press releases, the controversy would have been much less vigorous and perhaps would not have erupted at all.

What of the display of the *Voice of Fire* today? Is it still controversial and misunderstood? Has the gallery changed the way it shows this work and its many others in the museum? Hung as it has been since the opening of the new building in 1988 in a high ceilinged white room, the painting dominates the wall opposite the main entrance, and is flanked by other, smaller works by Newman as well as his contemporaries, Mark Rothco, Jackson Pollock and others. Labeling is minimal, although it is now placed conventionally to the right of each work. For some time labels were removed entirely from the gallery space and put just inside the door. The frigid formalist aesthetic is maintained. There is no interpretation, no extended label, no pamphlet, no catalogue, not even a QR code. The curious visitor is unable to get any help. In this section of the National Gallery of Canada, though not throughout for the current Director would like extended labels on every displayed piece (Personal communication with Charlie Hill, Curator of Canadian Art, July 2014), the baffled public takes second place to the formalistic beliefs of the curator.

At the October 1990 symposium organized to debate this controversial acquisition, Serge Guilbaut, a professor at the University of British Columbia, exploded with his criticism of how the gallery had handled the controversy and exhibited *Voice of Fire*.

Modern museums ... have not changed their mode of thinking. Museums are still presenting aesthetic objects divorced from any kind of reality. Meanings carried by works of art are evacuated as soon as they enter the great white castrating cubic spaces 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 to history in order to make some kind of sense, to be interpreted.... 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. We should do something about it. Now.... (Barber *et al.* 1996: 192).

In the contemporary section, the National Gallery of Canada has not learned the importance of associations and hybridity.

3. The Meat Dress

Like the *Voice of Fire*, this controversy was about a single work of art; like *The Spirit Sings* this controversy was embedded in an exhibition. Again the dispute is an example of a single piece, the *Meat Dress*, sometimes called the *Flesh Dress*, that the public did not understand and questioned the right of the work to be called art. Jana Sterbak's *Vanitas: Flesh dress for an Albino Anorectic* (fig. 3), the full and correct title for the *Meat Dress*, is a construction of salted cuts of flank steak sewn together and mounted on a tailor's dummy. First shown at the Galerie René Blouin in Montreal in 1987, where it received scant attention, it subsequently was hung in the Pampidou Centre in Paris and, in 1991 approximately one year after the *Voice of Fire* controversy, was part of a large exhibition of Sterbak's organized by the National Gallery of Canada. The show explored the body, clothing, wearable objects as metaphors for the body. Referring to the late medieval and renaissance convention of depicting objects of a perishable nature, fruit, flowers, *Vanitas*, ambivalently both body and garment, is



Fig. 3. *Vanitas: Flesh dress for an Albino Anorectic* or *The Meat Dress*, Jana Sterbak.

remade in each location with fresh meat so that it gradually dries out and changes as the exhibition progresses. The affect is poignant. In Ottawa the work quickly attracted outrage by politicians, the media and the public. Alderman Mark Maloney started the brouhaha, seeking publicity and attuned to the likely press coverage of a contested work of art. Maloney centred his attack on a putative health concern, claiming that he was “absolutely disgusted and ashamed” of the raw beef and ordering health inspectors to examine the work to ensure that it did not violate local health standards (*Globe & Mail*, 2 April 1991). After review, the inspector declared that there was no health hazard to the public (*Flesh dress not a health threat* 1991). Others were concerned about the use of meat in a work of art when people were going hungry; some claimed the work was inappropriate to the maintenance of decorum in a national institution; others attached the feminist intent, arguing that Sterbak was portraying woman as a consumable object. Cartoonists delighted in the new material.

The full Jana Sterbak exhibition, named *States of Being*, was circulated across Canada by the National Gallery, and, in the fall of 1992 was booked into The Nickle Arts Museum, at the University of Calgary. Boasting the best exhibition space in Alberta, this university museum was not inured from its own controversies. The year before, in 1991, under an acting director, an exhibition of the work of a local male art student collective, a show called *The Castration of St Paul*, provoked outrage, especially among the right wing clergy, for the exhibition consisted of photographs of penises labeled with the names of the Judeo-Christian religious figures, such as Moses, Noah and Jesus. The exhibition set out to promote and provoke discussion about the patriarchal nature of the church. A lengthy, vicious letter writing campaign ensued, focused on what was called the offensive nature of the subject matter and the appropriateness of such an exhibition at a university, as well as questioning public funding of such a show. The university was not amused. Getting wind of the arrival of *States of Being*, the press quickly jumped on the possibility of furthering the *Meat Dress* dispute in Calgary by provocatively declaring, on February 6, 1992, “Meat Dress Comes to Cow Town.” By nine am that morning the President of the University of Calgary, Dr. Murray Fraser, called the new director of the Nickle, me, into his office. I had been in office exactly one month.

An urbane and sensitive man, Fraser wanted to ensure that the university would not suffer under the new publicity for *States of Being* as it had around *The Castration of St Paul*. He also wanted confirmation that the *Meat Dress* was a legitimate, high quality “work of art,” that it was not a health hazard and that the publicity could be managed to mitigate negative press. He gently commented that he could cancel the show. Furthermore he asked me to present my case for the exhibition to the Board of Governors of the university, with the understanding that they might decide not to risk further problems coming from the museum. This I did. I argued that *Vanitas* was a profound and powerful piece, that a university was exactly the right place to debate the meaning of art, the materials of production, its value and connection with every day life, and that it was imperative to see the specific contested work in the context of the full exhibition and not judge it before a careful viewing. The show, I suggested, was one that many university departments and faculties would find relevant to their academic concerns, for it targeted society’s expectations of women, their colonization, their self-expression and some of the resulting psychological symptoms including anorexia nervosa. I also presented a full slate of interpretative activities that I proposed to mount to ensure that, on the one hand, visitors would have access to solid analysis of the material presented and, on the other hand, have lots of opportunities for discussion and to voice their opinions. The university agreed to go ahead with the exhibition, but I had the distinct impression that I was going to be carefully watched.

We had six months to prepare an exciting and rewarding public program as well as a carefully crafted media campaign. Of course we were greatly helped by being the second stop for the exhibition: the main points of contention had already been revealed in Ottawa. To counter the idea that Sterbak was profligate in using meat at a time of poverty and hunger, we set out a box in the gallery for food donations to a local food bank, had the meat donated so we could not be accused of using public money unwisely and had the Alberta Cattleman’s Association confirm that there was no shortage of beef in the province. These actions were carefully noted in our initial press release. As with the *Voice of Fire*, many of the questions surrounding this work stemmed from a lack of understanding, a profound uncertainty about its meaning and purpose. The question “Is this art” demanded address. First we

tackled the problem of the medium, meat, noting that all sorts of foods, including grains, breads and potatoes had been used in previous exhibitions, including, in 1939 Salvador Dali creating a lobster bikini. The curator Diana Nemiroff suggested that that controversy was due largely to the work being taken out of context of the whole show which explored women’s place in society. Nemiroff explained *Vanitas* as “a kind of double cross because clothing is supposed to be second skin and cover us up. And this one reverses the process and reveals what we don’t want to confront: our mortality” (Rowley 1991: 16). We organized a full and continuing roster of tours, targeting a full range of university departments and including one especially conducted for the university’s board of governors. In conjunction with the opening Diana Nemiroff gave a fascinating, crowded tour of the full show, commenting that she had not expected 200 people to be hanging on her considered words. As well we organized a three part lecture series to examine the reasons for controversy in contemporary art. One of the speakers was Dr. Shirley Thomson, Director of the National Gallery of Canada. All of these activities were well attended, as was the show itself, with many university classes from a wide variety of faculties using the exhibition as part of their academic requirements. We also wanted to ensure that everyone, for or against, had an opportunity to express his or her opinion, believing that a university must be a forum for free expression, enquiry and critique. To this end we set up a Hyde Park Corner, a speaker’s stand where anyone could openly state a point of view. Interestingly no one did. More successful was a bulletin board on which we invited people to write their reactions on 4” x 6” cards. The card system had the advantage of allowing for removal of a card if a comment was rude or inappropriate. Negative comments were not filtered out. Virtually no cards were removed.

All in all both the show and the programming around it were a great success. The press was uniformly good, much to the relief of the university administration. The attendance was high, and varied, for both the general public and the campus community flooded in, in part of course because of the controversy. More importantly visitors emerged with a new understanding of *Vanitas* and a new respect for contemporary art. The show poignantly demonstrated that good art could explore major social issues that are not easily discussed. University departments beyond

the department of art recognized that The Nickle Arts Museum had value for them, had relevance and reason. Class barriers were not impermeable; museums were not just for an art élite. Why was the small staff of the Nickle successful where the well-staffed National Gallery was less so? Part of the reason was that we were aware of the potential controversy and could prepare our defenses. But then the National Gallery definitely knew that the *Voice of Fire* was going to arouse critical comments and did little. Another reason was that the Calgary staff, and especially the curator in charge of the Nickle showing, me, firmly believed that many visitors need help in decoding difficult works of art, but that such help does not axiomatically take away from that piece, that the formalist system of “no comment”, that used for the *Voice of Fire*, is not helpful. Finally the university museum decided to ensure that interpretation was varied and available throughout the run of the show so that a visitor who liked to listen, but not read, for example, might find ways to enter, understand and react to Sterbak’s provocative pieces of art. We tried different and hybrid approaches to marketing and interpretation, not because we had an intellectual understanding of their efficacy, but rather because, somewhat desperate to avoid what had occurred at the National Gallery with this work, we formed many associations. This success was recognized with a number of awards, including the Canadian Council for Advancement of Education Gold Award, 1993.

In conclusion, museums, and especially contemporary art ones, can be controversial and probably will always be. After all the Impressionists and Picasso were roundly criticized by their contemporaries. How museums have traditionally displayed art has not been helpful, since it is usually without context, without associations. In 1998, Max Allen, a long time Canadian broadcaster of contemporary ideas and a major collector, opined:

I think the way art is produced and displayed now does not result in an exchange of ideas. It’s a one-way street... I would very much like to go to a show of stuff that I have

never seen before and have it contextualized. And that would make me much easier about it. I really like to understand things (You call that art 1998: C7).

Diana Nemiroff, the National Gallery curator who put together the Jane Stebak exhibition, replied:

Working in a museum, I agree with Max. It’s taken me a long time, but I think that we have to address the discomfort – we have to give them the information where and when they need it (You call that art 1998: C7).

Finally a senior curator recognized and accepted the need to alleviate discomfort, to be proactive with difficult objects.

As these three controversies demonstrate, museums can no longer be Allen’s one-way street. Not only must they add context, not only must they explore meanings, but they must also recognize the importance of affect and visitor engagement, they must accept hybridity and change, seeking ANT’s associations. A conversation is an exchange, a two-way or three-way communication, in which the visitor is equal to the museum and the artist. Museums must be sensitive to what the public does not understand and not just respond with formulaic or academic interpretation. *The Spirit Sings* controversy arose fundamentally because First Nations in Canada were not treated as equals, were colonized. The *Voice of Fire* controversy exposed the destructive nature of Latour’s fictive pure categories, in this case revealing the intransigence of the formalist art historical approach. The *Meat Dress* controversy revealed the public’s reluctance to embrace semiotics and the true worth of identity politics. As post structuralism has proved, exhibitions are political, whether museums like it or not. The museum must leave behind its hegemonic control and embrace dialogue and participation. Museums must be willing to embrace genuine collaboration, true associations, be that with artists, First Nations and especially with their visitors. Then their objects, certainly actors, will truly connect. As Latour contends, things and attachments are the real centre of the social world.

NOTES

1. Interestingly, when the museum bought an old master painting by Guido Reni in 1991 for 3.3 million dollars, there were no objections.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- BARBER, B.; GUILBAUT, S.; O'BRIEN, J. (eds.) (1996): *Voices of Fire: art, rage, power and the state*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Buffalo, London.
- JAMESON C; BRANT, J. C. (2014): Redefining First Nations and Inuit Involvement in Education Planning. *Muse*, May-June: pp. 44-46.
- CONATY, G. (2003): Glenbow's Blackfoot Gallery: Working towards Co-existence. *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader* (L. Peers, A.K. Brown, eds.), Routledge, New York.
- CONATY, G. (2008): The effects of repatriation on the relationship between the Glenbow Museum and the Blackfoot people. *Museum Management and Curatorship* 23, n° 3: 245-259.
- DAVIS, A. (2010): Repatriation of Indigenous Artifacts and Beyond: How the Glenbow Museum is Attempting to Change Colonial Attitudes. *ICOFOM Study Series* 39: 115-122.
- JANES, R; CONATY, G. (ed.) (2005): *Looking Reality in the Eye: Museums and Social Responsibility*. University of Calgary Press, Calgary.
- MARANDA, L. (2010): Deaccessioning and Repatriation. *ICOFOM Study Series* 39: 167-174.
- MAYS, J. B. (1990): National Gallery Should Tune Out Static Over Painting. *Globe and Mail*, 14 March 1990.
- NEMIROFF, D. (1991): *States of Being/ Corps à corps*. Exhibition Catalogue. National Gallery of Canada. Ottawa.
- O'BRIEN, J. (1996): Introduction. *Voices of Fire: art, rage, power and the state*. (Barber, B., Guilbaut, S., O'Brien, J., eds.): 3 – 21.
- PHILLIPS, R. (2011): *Museum Pieces: Toward the Indigenization of Canadian Museum*. McGill-Queens University Press, Montreal and Kingston.
- ROWLEY, S. H. (1990): 'Flesh dress' is rotten art, some Canadians say. *The Spokane-Review* (Spokane WA). Chicago Tribune: 16.
- S. A. (1990): MP Vows to Make Gallery Explain Why It Bought Costly U.S. Painting. *Toronto Star*, 10 March 1990.
- S. A. (1991): *Globe and Mail*, 2 April 1991.
- S.A. (1991): Flesh dress not a health threat. *Globe and Mail*, 3 April 1991.
- S.A. (1998): You call that art? *Globe and Mail*. C7, 5 September 1998.
- SMITH, B. (1990): *Voice of Fire: Barnett Newman, 1905 -1970*. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.
- THOMSON, S. (1992): *The Spirit and the Flesh: Collecting and Public Controversy at the National Gallery of Canada*. Lecture notes. National Gallery of Canada archives, Ottawa.