

NORDISK  
MUSEOLOGI

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## 118 "The Stockholm Sentences"

An international conference "Museum 2000 – Confirmation or challenge" took place in Stockholm in June 2001. It was the summation of a series of regional seminars on the same topic arranged at Härnösand, Lidköping, Norrköping, Uddevalla and Helsingborg. David J. Goa, Curator of Folklife at the Provincial Museum of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada, was one of the keynote speakers of the conference. Afterwards he has offered the following sentences, "Reflections on Conversations on Museums and Pluralism".

*Homeblindness.* I was introduced to this Swedish concept many years ago. Since then it has never been far from me. We have difficulty seeing what has become completely familiar and characterizes the place where we live. Perhaps it described some of what we struggle with, what so often remains unspoken when we think of the place of our museums in our community. The museum's vocation and responsibility in relation to the new citizens and strangers in the midst may only be exercised outside its own walls. Why? Because there is little inside museums that touches on the lives and self-understanding of the stranger. There is no reliable way of opening to the new work necessary to address this blindness except through personal encounter, through offering your hand and having some generous person within the new community take you along its pathways.

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*Roots or feet.* We were told that "human beings don't have roots, they have feet." It is a comforting thought to some that the ground we have abandoned in the modern world (replaced at best with ecological concerns), and the places of formation for our parents and

ancestors never existed or at least do not exist for us. To care for the rootless in our society does not require the denial of human ground or the amputation of memory. Our capacity to care requires a recovery of regard for both the roots and rootlessness of our own experience and for the age-old human struggle for common ground.

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*Industrial identity.* We may have a cultural parallel to our ecological situation. The industrial techniques we use to deepen our rational control over nature, the chemical fertilizers, and other biological agents, that leaches the soil, have their cultural equivalent in mass culture, tourism (including the cultural varieties sponsored by museums), and the excising of memory and tradition.

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*Tradition.* Who first said it I do not know. I do often say it, so say it again I will, because it seems to be the idea we fear most in ourselves and love most in the exotic "other." Tradition is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. Why do we reduce the other to the exotic aspects of tradition and refuse to hold dear the traditions that have framed our personal lives and the life of our culture?

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*Mnemosyne.* Memory, the mother of the Muses and all her daughters *may* have the museum as their domicile, but they always have the memory and tradition of women, men and children as their home. That is why our field of action is not within the museum even though the museum is our professional domicile. The community is the home of our work, because the human community is the field in which the muses play.

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*Confession rather than transformation.* We are often far more comfortable contemplating what we have left out, ignored or censored in our museum exhibitions (such as slavery), more comfortable reflecting on the failures within our walls than thinking through how we might work with the stranger who is now in our midst. We prefer the pain of the past to a living presence.

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*Disposable Muse.* It is a curious matter to hear some who build successful exhibition centers which they call museums say, that museums should be built to be abolished every five years and built again. You would almost think they made their living building such places and had studied the virtues of obsolescence with Henry Ford. This gospel proclaims that – to satisfy our customers – we must do for the interpretive centres for whole cultures what we do for other products.

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*Surrogate justice.* For museum managers who have lost their nerve or their way, the thought of repatriating collections (as important and virtuous as that may be) inoculates them so they can ignore their local "dis-ease." Concentrating on the colonial pillage of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries and exercising the virtue of justice for the sins of the past, they carry on as if they were free to ignore the women, men and children who are descendants of the colonial past who are now their neighbours and fellow citizens. Talk about the simple issue of justice for people 6,000 kilometers away often substitutes for the inclusion of my neighbour even when my neighbour has come from 6,000 kilometers away to make a new home next to me.

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*Democracy.* Perhaps we face a fundamental

challenge in understanding because of the different ways democracy is understood and applied. In America democracy is essentially about conflict and pluralism of views and a way of making what are always unsatisfactory decisions possible and so tempering the conflicts. In much of Europe democracy is a system of consensus-building and it is difficult to speak of difference publicly until a consensus is established in committee. In Canada, standing between America and Europe, we remain unsure, caught between these two apparent options.

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*Mind and memory.* The museum is only secondly a place of memory. First it is a place of mind. Memory continues to grow, nurture and texture the active mind. So it is with museums and the communities they serve. Memory and the imagination dance together in the active mind to engage the world of experience and the knowledge of others in the constant work and creative act of understanding.

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*Heritage.* "Heritage is a chosen set of comforting things", or so I hear it said. Chosen? Comforting? Only, perhaps, when the heritage is constructed by curators or historic site committees. The living heritage of communities is seldom comforting and never experienced as chosen, not even and perhaps least by those who understand themselves as "chosen people" as many if not all peoples do.

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*Gallery of the Missing.* What a lovely notion, poignant and useful. Whole museums illustrate the "missing" when they fail to help us consider the meaning at play in the lives of the human beings who are the subject of the objects on display. Every museum, if we but

120 look at it, is a gallery of the missing. Too often they are unconsciously so.

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*Anesthesia.* Historical experience is anesthetized by the aesthetic dimensions of the museum exhibition, and the meaning at play in human culture is colonized by our reduction of art and artefact to the historical or the aesthetic.

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*The dance partner of experience.* Where there is no place for the language of meaning called tradition, there is no place for the depth of the experience of the subjects reflected in the art and artefacts of exhibitions. It is a curiosity of the human mind that meaning is the dance of personal experience with the experience of those who have gone before, experiences reflected in the language and meaning that forms our mind and cultural framework. Tradition, that which is handed on, is the music making the dance possible.

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*Identity.* The attempt to expunge the word "identity" from the museum discourse has all the right arguments on its side. But I wonder. Perhaps the discounting of "identity" is a post-modern trick? Just when the modernist conquest is complete and traditional cultural communities around the world have begun to use the framework of identity politics sold them during the last three hundred years of imperial conquest, indeed, just when issues of "identity" become useful in international law and the new nation building, we, sons and daughters of the post-modern world say it is a fiction. Perhaps we recognize that we are about to be hoisted on our own 18th century petard. It is not so easy to escape the sins or the gifts of the Fathers. "Identity" is a tricky Word. It suggests substance where there is

continuity, privileged facts where there are memory and tradition. It suggests the fixed where there is the on-going movement of life with its various accretions. It may even invite us to avoid being. Questions of identity are often manipulated by ethnic politicians claiming to represent the culture's voice. "Identity" may be manipulated by those who are modernity's priests as well. Together ethnic politicians and modernity's priests colonize the whole of the community for an immediate institutional or political purpose. In English "tricky" implies rubbing different things together making new meaning; it implies complexity and irony; and it also refers to the offerings of a prostitute, who in "turning a trick" gives a moment of pretend, a semblance of love's most enduring gift.

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*Similarity and difference.* "Similarities between cultural traditions and communities are all." Museums should concern themselves with these similarities as a way of nurturing democratic society. Yet, if museums are to shed their ideological habit of reducing the particular to the known general, and if they are to care for the new citizen and stranger within the midst, they will have to care for the particular, precisely because human beings are human to the degree that they are particular and incarnate within the moment of history they are given to live. Working to understand our neighbour and the stranger is work in dense, thick and deep worlds. It is not to work in flat, thin and relative ideological frameworks, as important as the civil ideas of such frameworks may be.

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*Cultural memory and museum.* When culture-specific museums and public museums do their work well, both types of museums touch,

in a compelling way, the integrity of a cultural world and particular life experience. Both take cultural memory, living tradition, historical experience and sense of place seriously. The public museum is also responsible for nurturing an understanding of the civil values that make it possible for different communities to live well under the same public canopy. While culture-specific museums do not have a responsibility to reflect on civil values, they may also do so. Both, however, have the same challenge: how to enter into dialogue with specific persons so the work they do is not on semblance but touches the experience and world of meaning of those who engage them. Their second challenge is to find a public language that will invite those who come to the museum to encounter those worlds the museum has seen fit to consider.

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*Public language and the language of tradition.* *Cultura* is a verbal noun in Latin. It is what we cultivate and nurture within our common life. Consequently, the language of a given culture, its ritual text, the mind and heart of the hearers. Accompanied by an open narrative such traditional texts have a magnificent ability to speak even in the modern world. Museums have shied away from such texts precisely because they are rich in meaning. If post-modern perspectives offer anything it is the freedom to pull such language forward and let it be heard in our time.

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*Rootless and fragmented.* The rootlessness and fragmentation is often the implied condition of immigrants and refugees, those who enter new times and new places. One of the clearest issues that emerged for me in our discussions was whether or not this diagnosis would

not have better been applied to museum professionals. We are often the ones manifesting the symptoms of such dis-ease. My own work among culturally specific communities (certainly for the first and second generation) suggests that rootlessness is not the central question. Museum workers need to examine the rootlessness and fragmentation they may discover at the centre of their self-understanding so that they do not project those onto the community of new citizens and strangers they wish to engage in the next generation of museum work.

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*Soil in the reliquary of the heart.* How do we seek to understand those in our midst who have carried the ground of their ancestors into the new lands of their immigration and settlement? We may indeed have feet and not roots but if we wish to understand those with ancestral soil in their hearts we had better look to see what is in our hearts and learn to appreciate both what is there and what is not there.

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*The gift of pluralism.* Pluralism is our greatest gift when we seek to speak about complex issues and difficult questions. The historians and curators who did the initial and ultimately censored exhibition on the Enola Gay at the Smithsonian in Washington chose to reduce the agony and struggle of the Second World War to two themes: what happened at ground zero when the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, and the Congressional Record and the Presidential Papers that tell us the decision to drop the bomb was not militarily necessary. If they had included themes on the cost of the war to American life, on the plight of some of the personnel involved in the making and dropping of the bomb, on how mili-

122 tary propaganda shapes decisions on both sides of conflict they would likely have been able to include what was censored from this exhibition. Various perspectives make the complex and difficult possible. Ideological narrowness in public museums is rightfully problematic and the indication of curatorial failure.

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*The Human Being is not Humanity.* To understand the human being one must engage the specific existential encounter. Museum work is not about ideological considerations. When our work has been ideological, abstract and general it has failed to be compelling. Like the novel, it requires the particular.

*David J. Goa, Edmonton, 28. August 2002.*

## ”Poesi i sak”

**Julian Spalding: *The Poetic Museum. Reviving Historic Collections.* Prestel 2002.**

Varför skrivs det så lite om sakutställningens<sup>1</sup> teori och praktik ur ett gestaltningsperspektiv? De historiska och kulturhistoriska museerna får aldrig den slags utställningskritik som varje konstmuseum tar för självklar, en kritik där form och innehåll ses som en helhet och där utställningens framträdande i rummet och objektens fysiska påverkan på besökaren är utgångspunkt för resonemang och reflektion. Jag är sannerligen inte den första att ställa denna fråga, allra minst i Nordisk museologi

som uppmärksammat bristen på estetiskt orienterad kritik av sakmuseernas utställningar<sup>2</sup> men som också försökt avhjälpa den med artiklar om forskare<sup>3</sup> och arkitekter<sup>4</sup> som – från olika utgångspunkter givetvis – balanserat föremålets yta mot deras innehåll så att det sinnliga inte skymmer berättandet och tvärtom. Snarare förutsätter de varann – det omedelbart sinnliga och det narrativa.

I våras utkom i England en bok om museer, skriven av en museolog som ovanligt nog också har ett ’artistiskt’ förhållande till tingens i museet och ett intresse för utställningen som konstform. Boken med det trevliga namnet *The Poetic Museum* är skriven av Julius Spalding, pensionerad chef för The Glasgow Museums and Art Galleries. Han var en kort tid verksam som museolog vid Nationalmuseet i Köpenhamn, vilket förklarar den uppmärksamhet han i boken visar danska museer. Endast ett svenskt museum nämns – Vasamuseet. Det får å andra sidan hans oreserverade beröm som ett av världens bästa museer när det gäller att berätta historia.

Det är en bok med ett radikalt kulturpolitiskt innehåll och lämnar inget av museets många samhällsliga uppdrag okommenterat. Men det som fascinerar mig är Spaldings intensitet och tankerikedom när det gäller hur föremål kan utnyttjas och förvandlas i olika utställningssammanhang. Inget ting, inte ens ett billigt dricksglas är för trivialt för att säga något om verkligheten. Men i likhet med vår store realist C.J.L. Almqvist menar nog Spalding att det reella inte kan reduceras till det materiella; till ’verkligheten’ hör också poesin, berättelsen, med vars hjälp verkligheten överskrids.<sup>5</sup> För Julius Spalding är museet en av samhällets allra viktigaste institutioner med ett avgörande inflytande på dess självuppfattning och historieskrivning. Kan det uttryck-