Northumbria Research Link

'Engage the World': examining conflicts of engagement in museums

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ABSTRACT – Public engagement has become a central theme in the mission statements of many cultural institutions, and in scholarly research into museums and heritage. Engagement has emerged as the go-to-it-word for generating, improving or repairing relations between museums and society at large. But engagement is frequently an unexamined term that might embed assumptions and ignore power relationships. This article describes and examines the implications of conflicting and misleading uses of 'engagement' in relation to institutional dealings with contested questions about culture and heritage. It considers the development of an exhibition on the Dead Sea Scrolls by the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto in 2009 within the new institutional goal to 'Engage the World'. The chapter analyses the motivations, processes and decisions deployed by management and staff to 'Engage the World,' and the degree to which the museum was able to re-think its strategies of public engagement, especially in relation to subjects, issues and publics that were more controversial in nature.

Public engagement has become a central theme in the mission statements and strategic objectives of many cultural institutions, and in scholarly research into museums and heritage (Black 2010, Davis 2011, Watson & Waterton 2010). Engagement is invoked as a process for generating, improving or repairing relationships between institutions of culture and society at large. Engagement as a public policy goal emerged in Western democracies during the 1990s as an essential component of good governance (Newman 2007, McCoy & Scully, 2002). There was a concern about the impoverishment of public dialogue about issues of concern, and loss of the practice of "the arts of democracy (Linenthal, 2006: 124)." This was linked by some to a decline in 'social capital,' the strength and productivity of social connections between people, which was positioned by writers like Robert Putnam (1995) as an indicator of the democratic well-being of civic life. Putnam popularised the notion that reciprocity and trust between people, as expressed through associations and networks, was declining in Western societies and could be enhanced through public policies that boosted civic engagement. Increasing multiculturalism in postcolonial societies, and demands for recognition, self-determination and representation by various subordinate groups (Fraser 1992) also encouraged governments' desire to engage with 'communities'. Those demands sought to unsettle privileged points of views and assumptions, to open up the public sphere to excluded voices, and to legitimise non-dominant subjectivities. Such grassroots empowerment claims were taken up by discourses around the need to enhance social capital, further stimulating governmental interest in 'engagement.'

Access to and participation in culture was perceived as one way to widen civic engagement (Newman & McLean 2004). Cultural participation was thought to build cultural capital, which in turn was expected to lead to other forms of social integration and even empowerment (Stevenson 2013). In Canada social cohesion (Ashley 2005, Baeker 2002) and in the UK social inclusion (Mason 2004, Newman et al 2005, Sandell 2007) became areas of social and urban policies that found expression in cultural institutions by invoking community engagement. For example, the UK Department of Culture, Media and Sport described the desired individual and social benefits of engagement from a public policy point of view:

> Culture and sport, both as forms of human behaviour and as an area for government intervention, is hugely complex. An individual's decision to engage (or not to engage) is set within a range of competing priorities shaped by their beliefs and values but also by the opportunities available to them. The benefit they achieve from 'taking part' is felt individually (for example in terms of feeling better about yourself and just having fun) but also – crucially

– by society as a whole: strengthened communities and social networks, increased independence into old age, greater innovation in our economy. (2010, pg. 13)

Civic engagement in cultural institutions was seen as an inclusive process of stakeholder involvement (Halbert, 2002). Within the museums sector, James Clifford's image of the 'contact zone' (1997) was employed to suggest how their spaces might be used to encourage inclusion and participation by stakeholders. The democratised contact zone offered engagement as a process of equal reciprocity and mutual benefit, where different cultural groups could share, negotiate and change perspectives on knowledge.

Common usage of 'engagement' and 'contact zone' in the museum and heritage sector has been a sign of the genuine desire to welcome all publics into their institutions. Mission and value statements of many museums have been re-written in the past 30 years to encompass engagement as an essential value—the Textile Museum of Canada for example, "engages the public by fostering knowledge, creativity and awareness (textilemuseum.ca 2012)." But this use of engagement is often unexamined or employed for differing reasons. Engage can signify to occupy attention, involve, participate or establish meaningful contact—all laudable social goals for cultural institutions (OxfordOnline.com 2011). In museum education, for example, it is used to describe the enhancement of students and visitors' learning experiences through participatory meaning-making (Simon 2010). In museum management and cultural policies, engagement describes institutional desires to attract and encompass new audiences, take on new strategic social roles, or assure impact (Brown & Ratzkin, 2011).

But engagement remains, in many museums, a concept underlain by particular ways of knowing and unconscious subjective roles that reinforce more manipulative and controlling senses of the word. As well as connoting 'meaningful contact,' engage can also mean attract attention, hire, move into position, bring into conflict or bind by contract (OxfordOnline.com 2011). Waterton and Smith's (2010) exploration of the use and abuse of the word 'community' within heritage institutions impels consideration of 'engagement' as an equally troubled word in this discourse of inclusion and democracy. They note how expressions like community embed restrictive assumptions and unhelpful generalisations that ignore underlying politics of social relations and the idea of 'others' (5). So too, use of the word 'engagement' may lead to misrecognition, lack of parity and the subordination of some publics to management and regulation. Robin Boast (2011) argues that a neo-colonial condition continues in modern museums; that the 'contact zone' of engagement remains a colonial space where cultures meet in highly asymmetrical relations of power, more so than in collaboration and dialogue. Boast stresses that Clifford had advocated truly democratic engagements in the museum contact zone that would challenge hierarchies and authorities of knowledge. Studies of the 2007 commemoration of the bicentennial of the UK abolition of the slave trade revealed such limitations in museum understandings of the nature of 'engagement' (Smith et al 2010). Despite efforts during the bicentennial to reveal hidden histories and explore collaborations with new audiences, a complexity of issues such as political agenda-setting, conflicting subjectivities and power relations inherent in intercultural communication all undermined the engagements achieved.

Meaningful Contact or Technique of Control

From this discussion of policies and practices of cultural institutions, engagement emerges as inferring both a meaningful contact and a technique of control. But if engagement is to be considered a part of democratic practice, the relative positions of power assumed by institutions and their subjects needs close scrutiny. Bernadette Lynch (2011) recounted a revealing story in her study of engagement and participation in museums in the UK. Institutional staff possessed unexamined understandings of the word engagement as well as a lack of awareness about issues of power. Lynch wrote:

[An Asian] woman stood at the far end of a room at a museum in London and asked *why* the museum wanted to engage communities? She said, 'What's it for? What is it you want to *do* to me? (446)

This woman wanted to know why the institution wanted to 'engage' with her, as it seemed they wished to do something *to* or *for* her in a way that assumed they had to make some sort of

change in her in a manipulative sense. Lynch brings into focus the politics of engagement, and the tension between meaningful contact and technology of control. As Lynch points out, many museums fail to realise that Clifford's contact zone is a political space, and that engagement policies unexamined and misused can result in problematic and unequal encounters.

If cultural institutions like museums are to be viewed as sites and agents for social relevance and for democratic practices, engagement would entail *less* the idea of institutions reaching out and including others to ensure that visitors participate, and *more* of the idea that participants will assert their own agency, and make their own choices in the way they use culture and heritage as a resource. These perspectives have been differentiated by cultural policy theorist Kevin Mulcahy (2006) as two forms of democratic process, the 'democratisation of culture' (the process by which cultural institutions enable broader access to their programs), or 'cultural democracy' (which means releasing agency so people can be culturally active on their own terms). Revised museum mandates make clear their desire to democratise in some way. The 'democratisation of culture' has involved developing exhibitions on minority subjects or difficult issues, often involving participation in collaborative processes of peoples 'othered' by race, gender, class or ability (Lynch and Alberti 2010; Sandell 2007, Smith et al 2010). But as Lynch and Alberti point out, consciously or not, "Western institutions continue to maintain borders and to privilege particular ways of knowing (2010: 14)." Mulcahy's 'cultural democracy' or the suggestion that ordinary people have real agency in the constructing of cultural and historical knowledge, has had more difficulty gaining acceptance in museums. Many museum staff and managers might not even be aware of the difference between the two perspectives. Their institutions remain 'invited spaces' with limited subject positions for participants situated as beneficiaries, where a deficit model assumes that the public has 'gaps' which need filling (Cornwall & Coelho 2007 cited in Lynch 2011). How to deal with outsiders who reject the subject position of beneficiary and assert conflicting and contradictory engagements is a challenge that many museum personnel are not equipped to handle.

Fiona Cameron has written extensively on the need for museums to develop new ways of thinking about their processes that stress liquidity, pluralism and assemblages (Cameron 2006; Cameron & Mengler 2009). Cameron argues that 'liquid museums' offer "models of order where power is dispersed across multiple actors and dispersed sites, legitimising the pluralisation of authoritative opinion, expertise, multiple rationalities, different technologies and techniques for acting (2011, pg. 91)." She suggests that museum workers imagine themselves as part of broader assemblages of actors and processes in the social world, and be observant of the museum's "emergent possibilities (92)." Cameron's ideas of liquidity are equality applicable to the engagements of democracy. The 'messiness' of democratic practice is a recurring theme in political theory, where it is acknowledged that debates over knowledge can be divisive, conflict-ridden and unruly (Mouffe 2000). Mouffe argues that the political conditions inherent in democracy always involve diverse, and conflicting, alternatives. Mouffe encourages instead an 'agonistic' process of democracy wherein irreconcilable differences lie at the centre of human relations. She criticises the idea of 'collaboration' as a more worthwhile alternative to antagonistic relations. The discourse of 'engagement' appears to idealise democracy as "a world beyond politics" where conflict is a thing of the past, controversial elements are smoothed over and cleansed, and power relations removed (Tkacz 2010, pg.46). Bernadette Lynch suggests, drawing on Mouffe, that museums must acknowledge "passion and partisanship" as a democratic form of museum practice, and that relations between adversaries who can come together to confront difference and power relations is an important part of engagement in the museum contact zone (2011, pg. 453-454).

Engagement at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM)

I was interested in finding out how Canadian museums approached democratisation and engagement, particularly since the challenge and crisis generated by the Royal Ontario Museum's *Into the Heart of Africa* exhibition of 1989-90. The ROM is Canada's largest museum, and this controversial exhibit has become a touchstone for the country's museums. *Into the Heart of Africa* has been described as an early attempt to broaden the museum's historical narratives to engage diverse audiences. But some African-Canadians viewing the exhibition took exception to the way representations carried unconscious meanings that were offensive to them, and reactions towards the museum and the exhibit's curator became violent (Butler 2008). The ROM in reaction insisted that

their exhibition benefitted African-Canadians as subjects, and that these few dissidents were threatening the museum's intellectual freedom (Mackey 1995). The crisis generated by that show was followed by a decade of self-reflection at the ROM, and consultations with implicated stakeholders became a key part of exhibit planning (Exhibit planner interview, Nov. 20, 2009).

Then, in the years between 2000 and 2010, the ROM embarked on a redevelopment called Renaissance ROM, a $280 million dollar project involving the construction of a Daniel Libeskind architectural facelift, renovation of most of its permanent galleries, and generation of a new sense of purpose. The Toronto development was the lead project in what was billed locally as a 'cultural renaissance' in Toronto aimed, according to the City's Culture Plan, "at positioning Toronto as an international cultural capital and placing culture at the heart of the city's economic and social agenda (2003)." It was also one of a number of high-profile museum expansion projects across the globe in this decade that emerged from this urban cultural planning perspective (Message 2006). The Renaissance project was driven by then- Director William Thorsell who announced in 2007, when the ROM had finished its architectural project, a re-positioning of the museum as an "agora" for dialogue and idea exchange (Thorsell 2007). This vision proposed the ROM as a cultural commons where assembly, debate, and discussion could take place. Late in 2008 the ROM changed its branding logo to 'Engage the World' where the museum would "engage the public to explore cultural change and serve as an informed advocate for science and nature (ROM 2009, pg 6)." Engage the World was to be "more than just a new tagline—it summarized the overarching philosophy of the new, revitalized ROM (Ibid)."

To what extent did the ROM's claim to engagement indicate a strengthened dedication to a democratic positioning? To assess this possibility, I undertook a study of the ROM exhibition *Dead Sea Scrolls: Words that Changed the World* (DSS) opened in 2009 within the strategic mission to 'Engage the World.' The study was part of a broader research project that inspected the 'publicness' of the museum's organisational structure, processes and relationships (Ashley 2011). The ROM had declared in its news release that this exhibition was the most significant project in the ROM's recent history, and it was to serve as an exemplar for the ROM's new planning procedures for blockbuster exhibits. The DSS exhibition enabled particular scrutiny of the extent to which the ROM had re-thought exhibitionary 'engagement'. Did it imply new ways of thinking about the ROM's relationships to its publics?

In this section I explore the ways that the museum's departments deployed the word 'engagement' in planning the exhibition, and how divergent understandings of the word affected the forms of democratisation demonstrated on the ground[1]. Analysis indicated mixed and conflicting impressions of how and why the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibition should engage. For example, the comparison of the objectives for the exhibition as set out in the project planning document, the remarks expressed by visitors or curators or marketers, and what was actually presented, indicated differing and conflicting attitudes about the public nature and purpose of that exhibit. Different interpretations brought scientific, social, market-oriented and interactive perspectives on the word 'engagement'. But when engagement was interpreted by political activists to mean drawing attention to social and political issues—in this case Palestinian claims of ownership of the scrolls—the museum and its exhibition were taken into another realm of 'contact zone'. I argue that a more radical and high-risk positioning of engagement, while not embraced by the ROM, offers the museum transformative potential. Such a positioning must involve the recognition of engagement as an agonistic political field, and museums as potential arenas for making public the perpetual struggles and irreconcilable differences that are intrinsic to processes of democracy.

The Dead Sea Scrolls Project

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[1] The study involved the review of internal and external documentary materials about the DSS exhibition, observations of the exhibition and visitors, and semi-structured interviews with staff, audiences and various outsiders. Documentary data included museum-wide Board policies and annual reports; DSS-specific project brief, minutes, exhibition planning reports and marketing/press materials; and external media and interest group reports and news items. Sixty-nine interviews were conducted over the course of the broader research project, including the nine staff members and volunteers cited here and ten visitors who specifically came to the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit. All documentary, interview and observational material were analysed as texts, employing theory-driven and inductive approaches that led to the emergence of themes. Cross comparisons built a clearer account of what was planned, what was said, and what was done.

On an annual basis, temporary exhibitions at the Royal Ontario Museum included one big-budget, huge square-footage, high-volume show or 'blockbuster'. Blockbuster exhibitions serve multiple goals, but their first is economic as they are seen as critical to the museum's financial survival. Blockbusters dominate the institution's preoccupations and resources—planning for major exhibitions begins three to four years in advance, and annual planning and operational activities are organised around this scheduling. In the words of a ROM project manager, a large project takes over the institution "so that we are living and breathing that subject (Project manager interview, Nov. 13, 2009)."

*Dead Sea Scrolls: Words that Changed the Wo*rld was one such exhibition, planned and designed by ROM staff over a two-year period with a budget in excess of $3 million. This topic was selected because of its strength in several areas. ROM curators had done considerable research in this subject and had a strong supporting collection, plus had already had discussions with the Israel Antiquities Authority which holds the scrolls. The key artefacts were 16 of the Dead Sea Scrolls, fragments of sacred and secular texts from about 250 B.C.E. that were buried in a cave north of the Dead Sea and re-discovered in 1947 (ROM, 2009b). The choice of topic was also guided by marketing considerations—pre-testing of topics revealed a huge interest in the scrolls that would result in good attendance numbers. These were iconic objects, with high recognition value, that management hoped would draw as many as 600,000 visitors (DSS Minutes, Sept. 25, 2008).

But additionally, this exhibit was undertaken to further social inclusion goals under Thorsell's vision of an agora, that is, it could facilitate the visiting experiences of different cultural groups from all religious faiths. The exhibit plan elaborated that the importance of the scrolls lay in their foundational role for Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions, and their potential for interfaith dialogue between these traditions. The topic was also selected as a relevant platform for programming, in alignment with the agora vision, planned under a new multi-departmental umbrella process. A project committee that encompassed all functions within the organisation was used, a process considered to be "a great leap ahead on the new ROM vision" by William Thorsell and senior management (DSS minutes, Sept. 5, 2008). Exhibit development was one part of a much larger museum-wide project that included education, visitor services, the DMV, marketing, public programs, curatorial and communications, wherein the project manager was "the conductor of the symphony (Project manager interview, Nov. 13, 2009)."

The strategic objective of engagement was enthusiastically embraced by all departments who worked through the project planning committee. But the objectives that drove their purpose, and were brought to the table in planning meetings, were multiple, complicated and subject to organisational tensions. It became apparent that different ways of interpreting the objective of 'Engage the World' also connoted different attitudes towards the public purpose of the exhibition. These multiple and conflicting ways that ROM management and staff 'engaged' through this exhibition project are discussed below: engagement viewed from the intellectual or curatorial perspective; engagement seen as a social integration and cultural diversity exercise; engagement as a market orientation; engagement perceived as participation and interaction, but also, engagement viewed as a political practice. The last was not encompassed within the ROM's own objectives, but derives from my particular interest in engagement and democratisation.

Perspectives on Engagement: Curatorial

Curators were responsible for the Dead Sea Scroll exhibition narrative, exhibit content, use of illustrative material, script and labels, and offered suggestions for academic forms of programming (ROM Project Brief 2008; ROM Interpretation Plan 2008). Curating at the ROM is still a privileged place of academic inquiry and intellectual freedom. Engagement here is a scholarly exercise: the public is presented information that is considered scientifically important and audiences emerge stimulated by and educated about the topic. The focus of the exhibition storyline was on engaging the reader with knowledge about archaeological process and finds, imparting a sense of the historical conditions in that part of the world, and conveying the significance and religious interpretations of the scrolls.

This intellectual emphasis was clear from the wording of the planning documents, and from the floor plan and design techniques of the exhibition itself. Most of the objectives presented in the

design brief were academic, for example "To highlight the process of scholarly inquiry and scientific discovery that reflects the ROM mission" (ROM Project Brief 2009)." The first half of the exhibition studied the scrolls and social life in Judea in historical and archaeological context, employing a sequential, book-on-the wall design, dense texts, small artefact cases and models, plus video terminals. The modern-era story 1000 years later occupied a minor part of the floor space, telling the events of their discovery, and the science and methods used for deciphering and conservation. The scrolls themselves were the culmination of the exhibition experience, with eight clusters of fragments displayed in a large darkened hall in specially-designed cases. The exhibit closed with a small display of Hebrew Bibles, New Testaments and Qu'rans, together with video statements about the significance of the scrolls today. Curatorial programming in conjunction with the exhibition included lectures and courses with distinguished professors, also reflecting this scholarly emphasis on religious and archaeological topics.

The engagement sought in both exhibit and lectures was in the classic curatorial mode, an intellectualising perspective that historicised the objects and their story—that is, the scrolls were something that could be distanced in the past as objects of study, rendered neutral and objective, and given an aura of common ancestral or universal value (Mackey, 1995). The ponderance of dense techniques of display infused the exhibition space with a solemn and weighty tone that conveyed: this was how one must engage with the Dead Sea Scrolls. While detailed discussion was presented of the ancient Judean society, in the modern-era section of the exhibit, the 1940s to the 1960s, there was no historical social context. Such absences removed any contexts and meanings related to modern political issues. Throughout all displays, visitor's expectations were not challenged, and it did not elicit negative emotions—engagement here was a transmissive teaching exercise.

The design brief objectives suggested an additional curatorial target for engagement that might cast light on the limitations of the representations: "to present an exhibition that meets the scholarly standards of local and international specialists (ROM Project Brief, 2009)." Implicit in this objective was an undercurrent repeated during interviews as a distinguishing characteristic and goal of the ROM: the idea of 'curatorial excellence'. Exhibitioning was seen by staff as a form of competitive academic publishing and intellectual status marker aimed to particularly enhance the museum's international prestige, and its ability to broker collections on a global scale. International-scale curatorial excellence was exploited by the ROM as a rhetorical claim aimed at 'engaging the world' in a literal sense—being seen to play in a global museum curatorial scene (Curator A interview, May 3, 2010). This form of engagement uses the intellectual competence of the exhibit content to demonstrate curatorial status aimed at other museum executives and professionals as audience, thus situating the museum within an upper echelon of curatorial players who can mobilize the networks and credibility needed to create exhibitions on a 'world-class' scale.

Perspectives on Engagement: Intercultural

The second kind of engagement that emerged was intercultural, directly linked to Director Thorsell's desire to create a museum 'agora.' The exhibition had explicit goals to draw out interfaith dialogue between Christian, Judaic and Muslim religions by stressing the commonalities between traditions. The exhibition website at the time declared:

> The ROM's Dead Sea Scrolls Project will build bridges between the past and present unlike ever before at the Museum.... The presence of the Dead Sea Scrolls in Ontario creates the ground for an extended public conversation about shared roots and diverging paths. It invites us to explore how much we have in common as cultures and religions, and what marks us as distinctive too. (ROM website, accessed Jan 7, 2009)

This promise was also addressed through the planning process where a Community Advisory Panel of individuals of the three religions was created. As well, outreach into religious and cultural communities was undertaken to encourage attendance and cooperative programming. As expressed by the ROM's consultation specialist, by bringing outside communities on board, not only were any problem areas to be uncovered ahead of time, but it allowed a buy-in by the affected minority groups (Exhibit Planner interview, Dec 11, 2009). The panel's stated purpose was "to assist in forming

partnerships, counsel the ROM on exhibition programming, and identify sources of sponsorship (ROM 2009d)."

Such consultative practices had become part of the ROM's exhibit planning process after *Into the Heart of Africa*. But the nature of the intercultural consultation that emerged from the DSS process reveals how such 'communities' tend to be positioned less as active subjects and more as objects that serve institutional goals. Despite publicised intentions to 'extend the public conversation about shared roots', the three-faith advisory panel give the appearance of collaboration (or 'representation of engagement'[2]), and its participants appeared to agree to this deployment. While the panel reviewed designs and were kept informed about the project, the small-scale consulting they provided was less important that their fundraising connections. The planning of intellectual content was not developed in any way through collaborative processes: there was no discussion of 'contact zone' here (Exhibit Planner interview, Dec 11, 2009).

Anwar Tlili writes how inclusion of 'other' cultures has become "routinized" within museum practice as a taken-for-granted box-ticking requirement of administration, but warns that this has obscured its ethical basis (2008, pg. 136). The goal to include diverse stakeholders and audiences permeated the concerns of most staff and volunteers I interviewed, usually expressed from an ethical point of view—increasing the numbers of volunteers who were visible minority, or 'representing' the multiple cultures that Toronto is home to, or ensuring cultural sensitivity. But in this case, not only was the formation of an advisory panel viewed as a suitable form of compliant inclusion, the panel's economic utility was accepted by all as normal. The DSS panel became an extension of accepted administrative practices at the ROM that routinized the utility of ethno cultural groups. The museum's group sales department, for example, regularly targeted what they called 'heritage communities' with reduced ticket rates in order to entice them into the museum. As well as generating new attendance, such groups then became exhibits themselves, positioned for other visitors to see within the museum and in promotional materials. Thus, instead of intercultural engagement interpreted as ethical sharing in the processes of historical content and program development, what became more important for the ROM was the appearance of engagement, and new money-generating opportunities. And further, such governmental practices appeared normalised and even internalised by members of the minority communities the museum sought to engage.

Instead of inter-faith 'communities' situated as active subjects, they instead became objects for fundraising and marketing. The co-chairs of the Community Advisory Panel were high-profile local businessmen who nominally came from the three Judeo-Christian religions: Mohammad Al Zaibak, Jonas Prince and Tony Gagliano. In operation, this panel was a fundraising committee supervised by the Governors' office, the fundraising arm of the museum (Senior Manager interview, May 27, 2009). This point was reinforced by the museum's consultation specialist as a change in practice at the ROM: that community consultation once perceived as cultural inclusion projects were managed as fundraising opportunities (Exhibit Planner interview, Dec 11, 2009). The Dead Sea Scrolls advisory group was a case in point, presented in rhetoric as consultative, but who eventually contributed heavily towards the exhibition. The chairs of the panel donated a total of $150,000 towards the exhibition (DSS minutes, Mar 24, 2009).

The solicitation of financial stakeholders through the selling of status is accepted museum practice and was a basic strategy of the Renaissance ROM fundraising campaign.[3] What was new for the ROM was including ethnic communities to provide some of the money. According to Thorsell, "Half of our supporters at more than $5 million each are first generation immigrants (Thorsell interview, Nov. 5, 2009)." One staff member argued that the new ethnic patrons still fit into the structuring relations of class:

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2 Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for using this phrase.

3 This occurs within museum administration more generally: one museum textbook unabashedly characterizes ethnic groups as "one of the 'hottest' new markets" and advises, "museums that are not already doing so should begin marketing to these groups not only in order to better serve and increase audiences, but to cultivate future financial support (Grenoways & Ireland, 2003, p. 256-257)."

We always have served the people who are better educated than most and have higher incomes than most. We've always done that, since the beginning of time… That doesn't change with ethnic diversity. (Exhibit planner interview, Dec. 11, 2009)

This high-profile committee made plain that, notwithstanding the ROM's new mission of 'engagement', corporate messaging consistently carved an image of the museum as 'celebrity'. The 'engage the world' tagline, from its earliest appearance in corporate communications, seemed to be more about 'world status' than 'world connection', consistent with the celebrity the museum wanted to generate around the Renaissance project. This inevitably targeted those elites who wanted to participate for social affirmation or legitimation or somehow bask in the glow of the museum's renown, who are themselves used by the museum to represent ethical, inclusionary engagement.

Thus intercultural engagement in this instance appeared to serve status and financial objectives, more so than objectives of collaboration on content or equal access or cultural sensitivity. The overwhelming pressure for financial survival seemed to change museum's community interactions to a focus on moneyed elites from immigrant communities. It is unlikely that any disenfranchised agents, such as the Palestinians, would be a part of such collaboration. Engaging the public became engaging *certain* publics, those who were sources of funding or revenue, or who had some kind of social status. This in turn undermined the motivation to ensure more democratic practices of participation in the processes of knowledge development. In such a case, the public value of engagement efforts on all levels shifts from the process of relationship-building to products for sale and consumption.

Perspectives on Engagement: Marketing

When engaging the public is interpreted as selling or marketing, success is then measured by market penetration and numbers of tickets sold (McLean & O'Neill 2007). Market consideration was a primary consideration in the selection of the Scrolls as a topic. Market orientations and the language of the business world are influential elements within big museums like the ROM, and have been much-critiqued in debates about neoliberal governance in the management culture (Belfiore 2004, Bourdieu 1998, Janes 2009). 'Engaging the World' in this perspective came to imply attracting paying customers and selling as many souvenir books and special tours as possible. Services for visitors were then viewed as 'client services' and important to admission revenue. As one staffer said "It's as if people are going to walk in the doors of a museum, purchase a piece of museum as a consumer transaction, and walk out again (Exhibit planner interview, Dec 11, 2009)." The all-encompassing nature of this point of view was sustained throughout the organisation, in speeches by the Director, in the language of visitor services, within the education department and certainly through the marketing division. Engagement in this case blurred the line between *exhibiting* as something the museum always did to communicate with the public, and *marketing* as something the museum did for sales and business development. This point was reinforced in 2010 when immediately after the DSS exhibition these two areas were unified in a Department of Marketing and Major Exhibitions under one Vice President, grown to encompass marketing, membership and sales, as well as exhibition planning, design, communication, promotions, and the Institute for Contemporary Culture.

Engagement in this perspective was defined not as a relationship or communicative dialogue, but as a deliverable product. Success and impact was measured in quantitative terms. Director Thorsell announced to staff after the Scrolls exhibition was closed, that group sales (package admissions and tours sold to businesses, religious groups, churches), had taken a lead role in "establishing relationships with many community groups and corporations in Ontario, taking the initiative to bring visitors to the museum who would otherwise not probably attend (Thorsell Apr. 26, 2010)." Group sales experienced a 76 per cent increase in visitors (63,871) for 2009-2010, with the DSS as the primary offering. Decision-making about time, space and the allocation of resources were assessed by *types* of visitors engaged, as well as numbers. Viewing times for the sensitive Dead Sea scroll artefacts, for example, gave preference to private functions in order to maximise revenue (DSS minutes, Oct 21, 2008). Those who could afford it, such as corporate, special interest groups or donor communities were also able to buy special access, insider events and invitations to participate in, and even organize, lectures on intellectual content.

Seen from the perspective of volunteers and educators who worked on the floor, private and group sales created a scheduling nightmare and seriously affected the general public's experiences within the exhibition. Volunteers had been asked to lead these group tours, and the Department of Museum Volunteers was reimbursed for their efforts, but many were stressed by this demand (Volunteer 5 interview, Oct. 22, 2009). This volunteer felt this was not the kind of important public outreach that Thorsell was envisioning, and he blamed it on poorly thought out marketing with its emphasis on what he saw as *private* tours:

> And what I understand, the museum now has a new marketing department… and they are very aggressive at promoting. And they promoted very aggressively private, paid tours to help generate money for the ROM. …But the museum really isn't capable of handling them properly. (Ibid)

Perspectives on Engagement: Interacting

The effect of turning docent tours into a money-making venture is contrary to any conceptualising of engagement as dialogue or participation or interaction in the sense of a 'contact zone.' The literature on engagement as an interactive or dialogic process has a long history in museum studies (Black, 2005). These include emphases on museum-visiting as a social experience with family/friends (Coffee, 2007); on participation as the core value of museum public spaces (Simon, 2010), on the value of conversations with strangers in public spaces about issues (Abram, 2007), the importance of face-to-face encounters with 'real' objects (Latham, 2009), and the potential influence of affective experience in engendering engagement (Smith, 2011). Elaine Heumann Gurian invoked this materiality in her imagining of the ideal museum as "real things in real space among real people (2007)."

The programming department had developed an extensive schedule as part of the Scrolls project over its 6-month tenure, including a sponsored lecture series, courses on religious and archaeology, a symposium, controversial speakers, podcasts, educational programs tied in to curriculum, and the many special-interest paid group tours. But attempts to engage in face-to-face or interactive encounters with and among publics were limited to group and school tours, a stationary docent-in-the-gallery, and a children's activities area on the third floor (there were no free docent tours). Of these, the volunteers' activities were spotty and weak, and the children's activities were embarrassingly irrelevant and difficult to find. Suggestions in the planning committee to include a space where visitors could "share their reflections" were not followed up in the exhibit (DSS minutes, Oct 21, 2008).

Ten groups of ROM visitors were interviewed as they exited the Scrolls exhibition. What came through clearly was their desire to engage with 'the real': most described their engagement as a spiritual pilgrimage to actually see venerated historical objects. I had not expected the level of spiritualism in visitors' responses, especially when compared the languages of marketing or of scholarly inquiry employed by ROM staff and planning documents, where acknowledgement of affect took a more expedient perspective: "The awe and mystery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the fascinating story of where and how they were found will be key selling points in the ROM's marketing campaign (ROM Project Brief, 2008)." In quiet times, many visitors achieved a spiritual experience, but many others encountered massive crowding and chaos from conflicting users that took away from their overall experience. None of the visitors interviewed had attended the public programs, none knew about the children's activities, and I was the only real human they had encountered with whom they could share their experience. This is not unusual in museums where often people come, see the exhibits and leave. But if engagement is the goal and mission of a museum, then opportunities for some human interaction, some form of active feedback or dialogue beyond comment cards, must be clearly offered. Most DSS visitors attended the museum while socialising with friends, kin or fellow group members (Marketing coordinator interview, June 4, 2010). As general research has suggested, the most memorable or pedagogical museum engagements stem from those occasions when sociability is enhanced (e.g. Leinhardt et al, 2002). One visitor to the ROM did recount to me how the best part of his experience happened to him in the long line-up threading through the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibition. A fellow-viewer took the time to explain to him how a Judaic prayer artefact worked as they shuffled past the exhibit. This led to a shared experience through the rest of exhibition where the

two strangers exchanged ideas and conversation in an extended visit that engrossed them for several hours. My informant remarked in wonder that that had been one of the best museum visits he had ever had. This is the ideal form of interactive engagement which seemed to occur despite the intentions of the ROM, not because of it.

Crowding issues emerged in the ROM's post-exhibit evaluation, but the importance of 'engagement' was lost when crowding was treated as a logistical problem in committee meetings, using language such as 'bottlenecks' and 'visitor flow.' Competing values of engagement and competing hierarchies of publics converged in an incident I witnessed on Friday, October 16, 2009. The Ten Commandments exhibition, put on for nine days as an add-on to the Dead Sea Scrolls, attracted many thousands of additional visitors. Confrontations between formal school tours, the marketing department's corporate tours, the roaming volunteers and the surge of general visitors all came together in one afternoon to create a chaos of priorities in the space of the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit. Tellingly, the corporate tours took precedence, the school kids were perceived as impediments and rushed through, and the tourists were made to wait twice in long queues by security staff both outside and inside the museum. The volunteers on duty independently chose to 'work' the lines trying to give a personalised face to the excuses for delays, but understandably tempers were frayed. The VP of Visitor Relations admitted, "We were slammed. And we did what we could. But the team regrouped, pulled in some resources, tweaked the strategies, and Saturday and Sunday we didn't turn one person away (Senior Manager interview, Nov. 27, 2009). But what manner of 'engagement' can be facilitated here when the marketing campaign brought in the attendance, but the quality of interactive experience was neglected.

Perspectives on Engagement: Political

The project manager for the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibition was pleased with the success of the planning project and the favourable reactions to the exhibit. She said with satisfaction in an interview, "I'll tell you how I know that people are loving it: I have not had one comment card come across my desk…. which means, no one is looking for anything to change in the exhibition (Nov. 13, 2009)." The irony of that statement gave me some pause. This was a question of scale: while the ROM might not have had visitor comment cards asking for changes, they certainly received particular complaints from leaders and activist groups around the world: just before the opening of the exhibition, Palestinian government ministers had sent letters to the ROM and the Prime Minister declaring the exhibit illegal and calling on Canada to cancel the show. Engagement here was interpreted by political activists to mean drawing attention to social and political issues—in this case Palestinian claims of ownership of the scrolls—taking the museum into another realm of 'contact zone'. They claimed the scrolls were acquired illegally when Israel annexed East Jerusalem in 1967, thus their use in the exhibit would violate international protocols on stolen cultural objects (Ross 2009). Canadian activists followed up with lengthy proposals to change the texts of the exhibit and marketing materials (CJPME 2009). What is notable here is that this form of feedback was considered by the project manager to be outside of, or not a part of, her evaluation, or at least not in the same category as comment cards, in response to my question of 'do you know how people are receiving it?'

The Palestinian story hit the headlines globally for a few months, resulted in legal opinions, web outrage, a letter-writing campaign, on-site demonstrations and a meeting between ROM management and a group called Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CJPME). The Jordanian government withheld their approval of the loan of an iconic artefact, the Copper Scroll. The CJPME asked for a number of changes that would recognise their place in the historical narrative of the region, and in the life of the Dead Sea Scrolls. They protested the use of modern Hebrew place names instead of locally-used Palestinian names; pointed out that the word Palestine was never used in the exhibit text even in relation to the story of their discovery, and wanted to add the fact that the Palestine Archaeological Museum at one time housed the scrolls (CJPME, 2009). The museum did not make any of the suggested changes to the exhibition, and made one correction to the website. Internally, staff members were told that the "key message" was that "the ROM is not the forum to air these grievances (DSS minutes, April 21, 2009)." Why the nuances of language were not noticed at an earlier stage of planning is unclear. As the project manager pointed out in a Nov 13, 2009 interview for this study, consultation through the ROM's advisory panel "was a hugely important part of the project. And that is because we knew it was a political project, in terms of the Christian, Jewish,

Muslim issue, and just in, inherently, being a project coming out of Israel." It appears that the Community Advisory Panel, constituted in part to ensure cultural sensitivity, had not paid attention to these potentially volatile issues. Meeting minutes from April 21, 2009 indicate they were again consulted when the official letter from the Palestinian government was received.

The challenge by the Palestinians raises questions about the nature of the engagements with heritage, and engagements among and between communities, being encouraged in cultural institutions. Engagement as invoked by the meeting place, agora and contact zone concepts inherently involve the political. As the *Into the Heart* controversy revealed, anything a museum does can be viewed as political; the nature of any interpretation and *display* of knowledge is political (Luke 2002). This meant thinking about this exhibition beyond the scholarly topic of the scrolls as antiquities, or the simple social inclusion exercise of inviting ethnic groups in for a feel-good session, or the frenzy of marketing to improve attendance. Here was a real life, current example of how museums are under demand to play a role in articulating global, cultural and historical issues. But this challenge emerged not from within the carefully managed intercultural agenda of the museum and its partners, but from outside the institutional frame on the steps of the museum. Palestinian government ministers took advantage of the political nature of this particular museum space and topic to draw attention to their own agenda. The ROM was a major cultural player in Canada with a very high media profile, which made the museum important as a political venue. And as with any subject connected with Israel, the scrolls' significance as symbolic icons lay beyond mere religious interpretations and intellectual debates about meaning. This does not mean that the Palestinian claims were justified, only that the ROM could not hide as a quiet contemplative or intellectual place.

Clearly, people do not regard museums as isolated cultural spaces, or the images within them as purely historic (Baumann et al 2011). The ROM wanted to contribute to cultural debates, but attempted to manage them, keeping them historical, archaeological or cultural. Even the DSS programming, lauded by other scholars for encouraging debate (see Ellison 2010), introduced some contemporary issues but avoided the present day politics of Israel/Palestinian/Arab relations, arguably the number one political crisis of our age. According to one ROM manager, "we can't pretend we are not political. But we don't deal in politics at the level of…. debating ownership of antiquities. There is another forum for that (Senior Manager interview, May 27, 2009)." The exhibit storyline relentlessly universalised the significance of the scrolls as foundational to many peoples but within a clear Israeli national framework, and the Palestinians firmly re-localised the story, bringing the scrolls back into the context of their particular lives and history—all of which involved a politicisation of history, of heritage, of culture that is extremely complex, multivalent and inescapable.

What kind of forums are cultural institutions, then, and what is the extent of the engagements allowed? I argue that cultural institutions like museums must *expect* to be used and interpreted in the context of the present because they are public, and operate as media in the public sphere. This is not a new contention: it has long been argued that the past has always been used within museums for contemporary purposes. What is new is the nature of the participants who now expect to, and have the right to, engage within this public sphere. All types of possible present-day contexts will be brought to the table for engagement and, according to Cornwall & Coelho (2007), different groups will employ different communicative styles and modes of self-expression depending on social situation or class. Is it appropriate to say some things cannot be brought to the contact zone and will not be discussed, and to unilaterally set the terms and agenda for how they will be discussed? Declining to debate the ownership of antiquities in an Israeli exhibit on the Dead Sea Scrolls, for example, should itself be subject to debate. I suggest such a situation must be seen instead as an opportunity to explore an issue of importance to museums, perhaps even a pedagogical moment.

The Complexity of Engagements

The multitude of conflicting interpretations of how the ROM should 'Engage the World' resulted in confusion on the part of the museum staff members and museum visitors, cynicism among some because of the apparent dominance of the marketing emphasis, and aggravation among those wanting to confront political issues. The Dead Sea Scrolls exhibition can be seen as a missed opportunity for nuanced intellectual engagement about cultural heritage, for building durable connections among diverse communities, and for assembling first-hand experiences and relationships

among 'real things in real space among real people'. All of these elements are essential ingredients in cultural democracy.

It is possible that the Royal Ontario Museum had no desire to re-think its strategies of public engagement, despite the rhetoric of its Director. As a bureaucracy, there was no apparent change in values, orientation or practices to accompany the director's invocation of 'agora.' Part of the difficulty in building non-market-oriented means of engagement lay in the museum's organisational hierarchy and its exhibition planning processes. The DSS committee structure, for example, brought senior management together to make decisions, but tended to leave out lower staff. Education and visitor experience workers were not involved in the project planning, and instead were represented by VPs less in tune with actual visitor needs. Senior management in any museum are notoriously "risk adverse" (Janes, 2009), and those at the ROM made the decision to downplay the Palestinian protest even though some staff members lower in the hierarchy indicated an openness to facilitating debate on the subject (Senior manager interview, May 27, 2009). While senior managers were in the loop and on the same page with planning decisions, internal consultations were lacking. Volunteers, programming and education workers—essentially, workers on the front lines—seemed poorly informed and organised.

The dynamics on the senior-level working committee also had the effect that departments represented by stronger managers seemed to have the most clout in meetings. What had changed in this organisation was the increasing voice of marketing within the organisational hierarchy—a source of worry for some employees. When the influential VP of Marketing had grown his department to include not only marketing but exhibition planning and all aspects of design, VP of gallery development voiced concerns about the separation of exhibit planning from his gallery development department. The DSS project manager commented,

> [The VP Marketing] and William are the two people who have a very, sort of louder voice. Definitely want to see what they want to see in their shows. Those are the two who are important. (Project Manager interview, Nov. 13, 2009)

This increase in hierarchical power structures at the ROM was coupled with a new planning system whose net effect was to reduce, simplify and streamline complexity within the project's planning. This type of umbrella planning was very much a 'marketing' approach to planning, with all workers and systems in an organization aligned towards that purpose (Rentschler and Hede, 2007). By adopting a project-management style of planning, centralised, top-down decision making made the DSS exhibit production processes on-time and on-budget, but stifled innovation and nuance. This reflected a situation where upper management were unwilling or not capable of enabling their staff, or where staff were hesitant to come forward with ideas. The umbrella project-management way of doing planning also treated the museum as a product/project/thing to consume, with engagement re-cast as consumption. Such a model is very different than an interactive model of engagement that emphasises the importance of planning *process* not product: consultation, relationships or even dialogue. Positioned as a product to sell, this blockbuster exhibition had only to exist to be considered successful—how well the exhibit was designed to engage intellectually, psychologically and socially was irrelevant to its economic impact. Evaluation of the success of the DSS was based on attendance, strategic relationship-building and lack of negative comment cards. Even more troubling was the possibility that success for this museum meant maximizing forms of status that validated hierarchies of engagement. That is, the mere hosting of this celebrity blockbuster that showcased world-class 'curatorial excellence', status-enhancement, and the appearances of diversity was enough to signify success.

Moving towards 'engagement' perceived as complex, flexible, resilient and democratised requires a deep commitment to dialogic communication across an organisation (Grinell 2011). How to *commit* involves dealing with issues of propinquity, mutuality and risk—thorny problems that have been theorised, but infrequently solved in actual organisational practice (Kent & Taylor 2007). What would be required is not to see museums as tightly controlled sites for engagement, but to foreground the role of agents in extending cultural debates, using public institutions as platforms for launching public deliberations about matters of concern. In essence, choices must be made as to whether the museum organisation, and its professionals, wants to risk losing control in order to attain meaningful contact. This offers transformative potential, not for publics as objects but for the institution of the

museum and those people who constitute it. This is a key problem for museums: is it even possible as they are currently configured— guided by professionalised, managerial and marketized ideologies— to host democratic engagements? Bob Janes (2009) is pessimistic that managerial and marketplace-style museums can ever produce the evolving, negotiated and sustained relationship-building that dialogic engagements require.

The role of new media in pushing this potential is worth noting, especially the breaking down of entrenched knowledge, hierarchies and marketizing processes. Following a new media model, the museum exhibition itself would become only a starting point, and the reverberations in the extended online public sphere become the central in a 'culture of engagements'. The impact of the media in general and the internet in particular has changed the public's sensibilities about cultural production. While museum professionals like those at the ROM might continue to harbour the belief that information can be impartial, fixed, certain and expert, audiences themselves live in a media-saturated world where knowledge is increasingly viewed with scepticism, and who believe that anyone might participate in its shaping. Social media forms stimulate cultural exchange, conflicting visions, shifting connections and do-it-yourself ways of life among diverse communities (Russo 2011). Are museums ready for DIY culture of the future? According to Angela Russo participatory culture will *drive* future institutional missions.

Within this transformative scenario, underlying managerial and marketization motivations and structures will be challenged, as they are daily within new media forms. The museum can be seen as just one more platform where the culture of engagement is challenging the current world order. Whether museums like the ROM are able and willing to face this prospect—exercising a form of engagement that might, for example, entail antagonistic Israelis and Palestinians sharing the museum stage—is the hard question to interrogate. As the case of the Dead Sea Scroll project at the Royal Ontario Museum demonstrates, despite the vision of agora voiced by the museum's director, engagements did not even come close to recognising real differences, social change and resilience, especially when outside forces challenged institutional practices. Whether it is even possible to truly claim to 'engage the world'—and move away from rhetorical intellectual practices, status obsessions and market-oriented responses, and instead towards responsiveness, debate and complexity—has yet to be proven by cultural institutions like the ROM in their current form. The real democratic and engaged activity might continue to be restricted to the steps of the museum outside.

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