

Achieving DIVERSITY at the Museum



An Imperfect, Incremental and Vital Process

Viviane Gosselin

What do we mean by diversity in the museum? A few years ago, sitting around the table with our very diverse 18-member advisory committee for the exhibition project *Sex Talk in the City* at the Museum of Vancouver (MOV), I remember thinking I had more in common with the straight South Asian sexologist sitting next to me, than with the white woman across the table who was a lesbian and former sex trade worker—that's if I used sexual orientation and occupation as the identity markers. When the same group was asked to share their experience learning about sex in and outside school as teens, the big differentiating factors were age and ethnicity, not sexual identity. Achieving diversity, in the context of museum work, is too often equated with our ability to attract an ethnically diverse workforce and audience. We only have to look at the cultural make-up of museum conference attendees and visitor statistics in British Columbia to

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see that we have a long way to go to de-centre whiteness and become more ethnically inclusive institutions. Yet, there are other diversity strands that need to be taken into consideration when reflecting on issues of inclusion in the museum: socio-economic, religious, disability, gender and sexual identity, to name a few – and these intersect.

So practicing diversity means taking into account these many strands in the way we hire staff and engage with the public but also in the way

we collect, classify collections, research, provide access and share stories. It's nothing short of rethinking the museum. Plenty of inspiring work and publications have contributed to advancing our thinking on the subject. The big challenge is always how to adapt, rejig and further push these ideas in the context of our own institutions. At MOV, we are working at this issue from various angles: staffing, programming, collecting and exhibit planning. What follows is a brief incursion into a series of recent and interconnected museum initiatives designed to engage with the notion of diversity.

Collecting and Exhibiting Diversity(ies)

A few years ago, American-born Ken Brock initiated a collaboration with the City of Vancouver Archives and MOV. Since the 1960s, he had been documenting his life as a gay man and wanted to donate his collection incrementally to both institutions.

Top: Collector of Chinese Canadian restaurant menus, Imogene Lim, featured in *All Together Now: Vancouver Collectors and Their Worlds* at MOV (2016).

Photo credit: Rebecca Blissett

MOV welcomed this opportunity as we had never recorded the lives and worldviews of openly gay individuals residing in Vancouver. Brock's collection was digitized and made accessible online. Part of it was also displayed in *Sex Talk in the City*, a highly collaborative exploration of how ideas about sexuality shaped the city. The exhibition, which opened in 2013, addressed sexual health, diversity and education. It featured a wide range of perspectives while highlighting issues and concerns shared across age, gender, ethnicity, able and disabled bodies, and sexual orientation and expression. Addressing the notion of sexual diversity by locating differences within a framework of shared experiences felt VERY good! The exhibition deliberately “mixed things up” by bringing into the same physical

space facets of sexuality that are typically considered separately. In a space called the “Bedroom”, for instance, a man living with cerebral palsy, a burlesque performer and the archdeacon of an Anglican church shared their views about sex. In the “Classroom” section, sex education props, sexting and pornography were linked in a discussion about the process of learning about sex and sexuality.

By de-compartmentalizing these ideas, the curatorial intent was to encourage the public to revisit cultural attitudes and beliefs about sexuality. This approach attracted a broad array of visiting groups—kink and burlesque practitioners, high school classes, agencies working with youth at risk, public health workers, cultural studies and health

sciences students—demonstrating the exhibition's capacity to resonate with a wide range of concerns and with the interests of diverse communities. The emphasis on shared experience between heterosexual and sexual minority groups had the effect of mainstreaming the latter.

A similar approach was adopted for the 2016 exhibition *All Together Now: Vancouver Collectors and their Worlds*—that is, moving conversations that usually take place in the margins to the centre. *All Together Now* explored why and how people collect. The exhibition examined how the act of collecting engaged with identity, history and community. It showcased 20 beautiful, rare and unconventional collections from local collectors. The selection



Above: Drawers in the *Pleasure of Belonging* section of *Sex Talk in the City* at MOV (2013).
Photo credit: Rebecca Blissett



Above: Kwiaahwah Jones, Guest Curator of *Haida Now* showing the Indigenous Northwest Coast collection at MOV to Haida culinary chef Brodie Swanson, and partner Jaylene Jones.
Photo credit: Paola Merkins

process aimed at highlighting the diversity of the collecting community. Featured collections ranged from pinball machines to circus mementos, seeds, corsets, ethical taxidermy and pocket watches.

Witty, funky and serious collections lived side by side in the gallery space demonstrating that collections could become catalysts for important conversations: on sexuality, disability and intercultural encounters, among others. For instance, anthropologist Imogene Lim's Chinese-Canadian restaurant

menus connect her to her family story and offer glimpses into Chinese diasporic experiences in British Columbia; prosthetist David Moe's assortment of vintage artificial limbs lend insight into changing cultural attitudes about disability; journalist Willow Yamauchi's collection of her father's drag queen costumes documents the history of his 1980s band, the Bovines, highlighting its importance to the LGBTQ+ community of the time. The success of the Bovines also spoke to the public fascination with drag culture and to its role as bridge-maker between dominant

and marginalized sexual communities in the 1980s Vancouver. To the museum's great joy, the collector donated the Bovines' costumes to its permanent collection. The new acquisition compellingly enriched MOV's collection in regard to the history of family, entertainment and sexuality in the city.

All Together Now was part of a larger reflection on MOV's collecting practice. As it embarked on developing its five-year strategic collecting plan, the curatorial team was interested in investigating ways to make



Photo: *City on Edge: a Century of Activism in Vancouver* at MOV (2017). Central projection is on Indigenous activism. Photo credit: Museum of Vancouver

more transparent and inclusive the process of shaping the museum's collection. *Mindful Collecting*, a symposium held early in 2017, invited over 25 community members, historical societies, cultural associations, architects, naturalists, Indigenous knowledge holders, public and academic historians, neighbourhood associations and LGBTQ+ community organizations to provide input on MOV's collecting directions and priorities. This strategy aimed to embed diverse perspectives in the very guiding principles that shape our collections.

Diversity and Indigeneity

The process of mainstreaming marginalized voices in *Sex Talk in the City* and *All Together Now*, and the conviction that museums have a key role to play in repairing and renewing relationships with Indigenous communities inspired new directions in MOV programming: the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in all exhibitions. This does not mean that museum programming focuses only on exclusively Indigenous topics and collections. Rather, local Indigenous knowledge and perspectives are integrated regardless of the topic. For instance, in the photo-based exhibition *City on Edge: A Century of Activism*, which opened in September 2017, an entire section is dedicated to Indigenous activism; in the project *Wild Things: The Power of Nature in our Lives*,

opening in June 2018, we look at the relationship between urbanites and nature. All three local Indigenous communities—Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh—are involved in fleshing out the exhibition's content, showing diverse ways of engaging with and relating to nature. We are looking for contributions that complement and contrast with other ideas and themes in the exhibition—as opposed to sidebars. To achieve this vision we have created a new, permanent Indigenous Curator position, to help forge relationships and facilitate participation and self-representation of the various local Indigenous communities. We also continue to develop exhibitions and projects that prioritize Indigenous knowledge and perspectives.

In March 2018, MOV is opening *Haida Now*, an exhibition featuring our substantial Haida collection and the first interpretation of this collection from a multitude of Haida perspectives. The project, among other things, discusses the Haida's long-standing and at times conflicted relationship with local Coast Salish communities. It has become a launch pad for discussing the experience of urban Indigenous communities and diversity within Indigenous cultures and across individual experiences. Multiple visits with Indigenous knowledge holders in the collection storage, arising from these collaborations, have encouraged MOV to start rehousing its substantial Northwest Coast First

Nations collections in ways that are more culturally appropriate. The process will take years to complete.

Small Gains, Big Task

Like many other museums, MOV is invested in incorporating into its work and workplace different world-views and different ways of being in the world. The process is non-linear, iterative, requires institutional flexibility and improves only by small increment. The museum initiatives cited above built on one another. They are modest in scope while the issue of diversity (or lack thereof) at the museum remains immense. Ultimately, we want the diversity that defines our communities represented in the museum. Only then will people recognize themselves in the museum and learn from each other's differences while also recognizing themselves in others.

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