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SOCIAL NETWORKS 1

Letter From Aspen: Cultural Policy

Steve Cisler on Jan 1 2000

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In 2000 Western States Arts Federation held a structured discussion at the Aspen Institute in Aspen, Colorado, focusing on cultural policy of the U.S West. The participants such as Nathan Griffith, John Kreidler Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, Chip Walton, Colleen Jennings-Roggensack, Fernando Delgado, Vjieran Katunaric, Eric Hayashi, Fred Nahwoosky, Tom Coffman, Paul Fees, Lance Izumi, Chris Zinn revealed their views on this issue.

Wenn ich das Wort Kultur bloss höre, greife ich zum Gewehr.

- Joseph Goebbels¹

Several years ago I visited the TA Ranch in Buffalo, Wyoming. I was accompanied by two westerners, a former carpenter and wildcatter turned distance educator and a lawyer whose real passion was making the history of the Western United States come alive. The TA Ranch is a dude ranch, yet it is steeped in history. The Western film, *Shane*, was based on the range war that took place at the ranch between the Wyoming Cattlemen's Association and homesteaders who began fencing the wide open spaces which had only recently been wrested from the Indians in a series of brutal wars. Ken Welsheimer, the historian, led us around the buildings and gave us a blow-by-blow account of the gun battle that took place. We ended up at the stable which still had century-old bullet holes that allowed the light to enter and make bright circles on the soft earth floor. Several cowboys were saddling up some horses for us, and one came over to greet us. He wore Levis, a broad leather belt with a buckle the size of a hubcap, red plaid shirt, and a Marlboro dangled from his mouth. He removed his gloves and extended his hand. In a thick German accent he welcomed us to the ranch. It turned out he was an enlisted man in the German *Bundeswehr*, and he was spending his vacation working on the ranch. The pull of Western culture in Europe predates Karl May (Adolph Hitler's favorite writer) and the movies of John Ford, but it remains strong to this day, and no written regulations or guidelines about *la patrimonie* have been needed to keep the myth of the West alive. In fact, it has been something of a burden to westerners who don't want to be limited by the myth of the frontier, big sky, and wide open ranges.

But what else is unique about the culture of the U.S. West? In 1999, the **Western States Arts Federation** convened a symposium to discuss cultural policy in that part of the United States, and in early October 2000, WESTAF held a second meeting with a few of the same participants plus new guests including me. I had written a piece entitled "**Arts, Crafts, and Globalization**" which WESTAF had read, and they extended an invitation to take part in a structured discussion at the Aspen Institute in Aspen, Colorado. At first, I was supposed to respond to a presentation by John Heileman, a writer from *Wired*, but an employee of Corbis was later substituted when Heileman bowed out.

Each participant received hundreds of pages of readings related to cultural policy or the works and positions of the other participants. Also included were the **1999 proceedings**. The Web provided additional information on the subject of cultural

policy, a topic which was very new to me. Evidently, the U.S. has been criticized by other nations for lacking an official cultural policy (or a minister/department of culture as one finds in many countries including France, Canada, Nigeria, Malaysia, Burma, and Croatia.)

In 1999 the consultant, Don Adams, and his wife Arlene Goldbard, who have long been involved in local community cultural efforts in California and Washington, helped organize the meeting and write the background paper on cultural policy. One of the attendees, Christopher Zinn of the Oregon Council for the Humanities interpreted it this way:

"In the absence of an explicit cultural policy, we instead have an implicit policy, with tacit, often unpublic, and largely undemocratic cultural effects. We have created in America a mainstream culture based on privatization, the suburbs, consumption, the shopping center, and various idealizations?such as the myth of innocent, freedom-loving people."

Others in the meeting objected to the demonization of the ommercial sector and said they had to be included in any discussion about cultural policy. Judging from the proceedings the exchanges between the left and the center-right members grew rather heated.

The assembled group in October 2000 was very diverse in some ways, but on the surface we seemed to have less heated discussions than in the previous year.

Nathan Griffith, Art Specialist, Image Processing, Corbis

This year some of the same participants returned and others became the facilitators. Nathan Griffith represented Corbis, a company owned by Bill Gates, with over 1000 employees and offices around the world. Originally, it was a way that Gates could acquire photographs for use in his big house, known as "the compound." Visitors fill out a preference survey on images, and this is programmed into a badge that relays the profile to flat panel displays in each room, and images matching the preferences are fetched from Corbis and transmitted by a broadband connection back to the room. As you move from one room to the other, the images change. I don't know what happens when one person likes sad-eyed puppy dogs and another likes Francis Bacon or Fernando Botero and both guests are in the same room.

Griffith said that cultural policy in the US is shaped by five forces: Government, academia, Art advocacy groups including WESTAF and the artists, the Media, and the marketplace óone of the strongest factors in determining where culture is headed. He said that the potential of the WWW had not been realized yet, and he commented on the ways the different sectors were using the Web.

I responded to his comments with a few ideas about the importance of communication as well as information, about the development of the Internet as a lowering of barriers to interconnection, to better connectivity, to decent interfaces and salient content. I said that in the realm of the arts, libraries tended to serve the raw material without interpretations, but museums wanted to add more value and were reluctant to give up their role as interpreters. I also mentioned the EU's memorandum of understanding that was drawn up by museum and arts representatives as a way of dealing with Corbis and their offers to buy the exclusive rights to the patrimony of various countries. It seemed that the deals between commercial firms and artists and indigenous groups who had different relationships to their cultural products would be one place that cultural policy was hammered out. Distribution systems like Gnutella and Freenet present opportunities and challenges to the arts world, and will provide the tools for further experimentation and sharing/theft (depending on your point of view.)

John Kreidler, Cultural Initiatives Silicon Valley

Kreidler has recently been hired as director of this non-profit aimed at promoting the arts in Silicon Valley through arts education and fund-raising. One of the board members, Harry Saal, told me that the entrepreneurs and risk-takers in the technology world of Silicon Valley were conservative and risk-averse when it came to art and architecture. Kreidler's organization hopes to encourage more Silicon Valley wealth to flow to the arts in the form of cash and stock options. In an area much larger than San Francisco, there are only 120 cultural organizations with an annual budget of \$160 million. In San Francisco, there are 500 organizations with much more money. With the goal of engaging the executives (and early retirees) of Silicon Valley, Kreidler and a team have designed a simulation that puts the player into the role of a fund manager who has to divide up a \$25 million pie for promoting culture and the art. This game, which is distributed on CD-ROM, will be targeted at an audience of 600 to 800 people in the valley. Over a forty year period the investors can observe the effects on the overall life of the region of their investment strategies. The goal is to help the area experience

a "belle époque," but bad investments can cause the arts to wither away.

Kreidler says that place still matters, even in a region whose wealth comes from convincing people to communicate, work, and be entertained in a virtual environment like the Internet. The great cities of Europe are clearly an inspiration. He loaned me a book on Siena, Italy, and a small picture of the main plaza in Siena shows up on the C3 simulation. Having tried the simulation, I felt it might be a good way to start a conversation with the newly wealthy who might re-think how they spend their time and money. I wondered if you went back to 1980 and plugged the actual figures into the game what would the result be? The current state of Silicon Valley in 2000 or some alternate world.

Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, Associate Director for the arts and humanities at the Rockefeller Foundation, made the point that "place" is a 19th century concept and was not complex enough for the 21st century cities like London or Los Angeles. Yet the pattern of philanthropy emerging in Silicon Valley is still tied to place: to schools in East Palo Alto, to local arts groups, to land purchases for expanded parks, whereas many of the older family foundations in the East are thematic and not confined to the home town of the foundation or the founder.

A second theme of the discussion was youth and the arts. **Chip Walton**, who runs a theater group in Denver, uses elements of popular culture to make his work more relevant to today's youth. Adelma Roach stressed that kids should be thought of as creators of culture as well as entrepreneurs and not just voracious consumers of commercial culture. She dispelled various myths about youth by explaining that they need something to do, that they are engaged in a variety of creative projects such as DIRT (dynamic, intelligent, responsive team) which has produced tons of organic vegetables that are sold in underserved areas. She reminded us that most of the learning takes place outside of the classroom and that the most effective kind is not transmissive but constructivist learning.

She noted that there are a lack of shared spaces for kids. **Colleen Jennings-Roggensack**, Executive Director for Arizona State University Public Events, called these "spaces of meaning" which, for lack of other places, becomes the mall or cruising strip downtown. In our area large groups of teenagers gather to street race. Roach said the pressing needs are for more spaces for youth and to involve them in advisory committees as well as the arts themselves. Finally, she asked if involvement in the arts will keep kids from leaving their home town. She distributed a video and booklet, entitled *ArtShow* which looks at the ways young people are involved in their own communities and how it changes the way they learn. For more information contact Partners for Livable Communities

There was some discussion about quantifying the value of culture and the arts because the ones who write the checks (government and foundations) are looking for evidence of its effect on society.

Ybarra-Frausto said that the notion of youth was a euro-centric social construction. He asserted there is not the high esteem for youth in Latin culture. He prefers the intergenerational model to provide the historical memory for youth. He alluded to the historical antecedents to the poetry slam and hip-hop. Of course, many youth participate vigorously in these art forms without paying allegiance to historical precedents.

Fernando Delgado of Arizona State University lamented that many of their students are not being trained to ask "why" even as they receive their certification for networking skills with Cisco or Motorola equipment. He believes that our education systems removes that inquisitiveness at some point in the early college years.

The most distant guest was **Vjeran Katunarić** a professor of sociology who headed up the team that developed the national cultural policy for Croatia which declared its independence after the breakup of Yugoslavia. His challenge was to resist the right wing nationalist forces and forge a pluralistic plan that would not exclude anyone in the borders who did not happen to be Catholic or speak Croatian. He said that a nationalist university had been established, but with the death of President Tudjman, the *country* is looking more to the west and the EU. When he defended the policy in Strasbourg, the European assessment team said it was the best presentation they had seen.

Eric Hayashi of the the Japanese American Cultural & Community Center talked about the kinds of programs sponsored by his organization in Los Angeles. Though many of the board members are old, they have encouraged programs that reflect traditional Japanese art, as well as the interest in zine culture and new media. *Giant Robot* rented part of the facilities and held a mini-exhibition and rave on the grounds.

Fred Nahwooksy, Executive Director of Atlatl spoke about American Indian arts programs and the small average budgets of most non-profits. He described his shifting ethnic affiliation that depended on the company he was with. As we talked about demographics many of those present indicated that the self-classification for each depended on the context and the setting. Many had very mixed allegiances, though that may be too strong a word for the mindset of someone like Tiger Woods. **Tom Coffman** outlined the Hawaiian sovereignty development, from the overthrow of the monarchy more than a century ago to the present legal challenges and arguments about who can vote on Hawaiian matters. Coffman said that an indigenous nation with about 250,000 people of Hawaiian ancestry would be members. What kind of art policy will be shaped, given the multiple influences and potentially large budget from the Office of Hawaiian Affairs for artists and cultural events? **Paul Fees**, Senior Curator of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center said that by encouraging local arts you overcome parochialism, but when this is tied to a cultural ideal from the past, when outside influences were less prevalent, it would seem to reinforce the limits of what is acceptable, what is inside a certain cultural tradition. In the case of Hawaii, if Hawaiian guitar players acknowledge their debt to Mexican migrant workers/musicians (and Mexicans tip their hat to the German accordion players in southern Texas) then parochialism may fade.

Lance Izumi, Senior Fellow at the Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy, gave an interesting critique of fellow conservatives' attitudes towards art and state funding. Many object to the cultural objects being produced, not that government is funding the arts. However, it's up to them to work on the supply of acceptable products. Increasing education funding might correct the perception that the public "has not taste." Ybarra-Frausto remarked that conservatives want to conserve, so he can see how minority groups can be seen as conservative, as they try to preserve old traditions.

Chris Zinn of the Oregon Council for the Humanities described a two year project many groups are working on in his state. The goals are 1. to protect and stabilize Oregon resources; 2. ensure that these improve the quality of life, and 3. expand access to these resources. For those agencies that work together there will be a total of \$250 million. Part of the project is to produce a youth magazine, and he wondered if that was a good format to reach a demographic that is moving away from print. I thought so, given the new commercial offerings, as well as zines, and online publications by and for youth.

The closing brief comments of each participant stressed collaboration between groups, the strong link between art and life, the idea of culture as a non-renewable resource and therefore worth preserving, the influence of information technology on art and culture, language as a critical part of culture, the strengths and weaknesses of a diverse cultural policy, and that migration is central to culture: the migration of people, ideas, and technologies work against the idea that a culture (or language) can be preserved without change.

1. "When I hear the word 'culture', I reach for the gun." Or, as the Babelfish site translates it: "When I hear the word culture only, I access to the rifle."

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Steve Cisler's background is in libraries where he worked for 14 years before going to Apple Computers in 1988. He was a member of the Advanced Technology Group at Apple and ran the Apple Library of Tomorrow Program that provided equipment and software for innovative research and demonstration projects in all types of libraries. Within the Advanced Technology Group, he was involved in national information policy issues. He serves on the board of the Association For Community Networking, Formed in October 1997, to assist local community networking advocates and has lectured worldwide on the promise and the cultural challenge of the Internet. His current interest is how cultures can be preserved and even enhanced using the Internet, as well as the establishment of public access sites for Internet access. Currently, he works as an advisor to Tachyon, Inc., a satellite Internet services carrier which will be providing low cost high bandwidth Internet access in global markets.



::CrossReference

last 5 articles posted by Cisler

:: Arts, Crafts, and Globalization - Jan 20 2000

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