

The Festival: Making Culture Public

by Richard Kurin

The past few years have seen an increasing concern with issues of public cultural representation. A host of symposia and books examine how culture and history have been publicly presented in museums, at Olympics, through the Columbus Quincentenary, presidential inaugurals, festivals, and other mega-events. Controversy now swirls around Disney's America and issues of authenticity and accuracy in the presentation of American history to mass audiences.

More than when the Smithsonian was founded in 1846 for "the increase and diffusion of knowledge," communicating cultural subjects to broad publics is big, and serious, business. New genres of representation are emerging, such as "infotainment," history and culture theme parks, various forms of multimedia, and equivalents of local access cable TV across the globe. Worlds previously separated are becoming conjoined. New technologies from the entertainment industry are entering museums and educational institutions. Entertainment conglomerates are being forced to take responsibility for the ways in which they represent peoples and cultures. The lower cost and wide dissemination of modern technology – tape recorders, video cameras, computers, and fax machines – have broadened the ability of even the most isolated communities to represent themselves to global audiences.

Scholars who engage in and reflect upon these activities find their work traverses the worlds of academia, popular media, and politics. Gone are the days of singular, monological, acontextual studies of civilizations, countries, communities, villages, and cultures. Studies that fail to situate their subjects in a contemporary world of multiple, if not contending, cultural narratives are perilously misleading. Increased attention and analysis need to be devoted to seeing culture within a range of representational forms, generated by community members, politicians, scholars, business people, journalists, film

makers, writers, tour operators, and many others.

In a public institution like the Smithsonian, analysis needs to be coupled with action. Exhibitions, programs, and displays often reflect cultural policies and broad public sentiments, but they may also serve as vehicles for legitimating outdated sentiments and policies as well as encouraging alternative ones. Programs can address public knowledge, discourse, and debate with considerable care, expertise, and ethical responsibility. But scholars and curators have good cause to worry that their efforts will be eclipsed by those with greater access to larger audiences.

How then to understand the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife in this context? What is it? How does it display and represent culture? And what does it suggest about the role of museums and cultural institutions with regard to the people represented?

METAPHORS FOR THE FESTIVAL

I have often wondered whether the Festival is misnamed. The word "festival" is too often used and misused. At first glance, the Festival of American Folklife is not a festival of the same sort as a peasant community's celebration of its harvest, or its freedom. Nor does it seem like a festival of the sort cities sponsor, a list of events dispersed in space and time called an arts festival. Nor does it seem quite like a folk festival – an outdoor concert of pop and revival folk music. Nor does it seem like the international festivals organized by many schools to show off foods, music, games, and costumes only tangentially related to students' lives.

The Festival of American Folklife has been likened to many things. Existing as part of the Smithsonian's museum complex, the Festival has been called a "living museum without walls" and a "living cultural exhibit." Dean Anderson, a former Smithsonian official, offered, "Whereas museum is a noun, Festival is a verb." This highlights the Festival's dynamism and contrasts it with museums,

which in the worst case are lifeless, sterile, and silent. The term “museum” originally meant the “place of the muse.” A museum without musings, music, and amusement – words of the same derivation – would seem to run counter to the original purpose. And, indeed, some of the best museums around are renowned for their ability to make us think, participate in and confront the lives of others. The Festival can provoke thought, does have

music, is amusing at times, has museum-like signs, displays, and so on; but is it a museum? Too temporary, say some. Too outdoors, say others. Too frivolous, says a museum curator. Perhaps if only just the objects appeared and not the people who made, use, and understand them, then it would be serious. “Too messy, but in a good way,” says another official in charge of museums.

But if not quite a museum, is the Festival more like a zoo, as another colleague once proposed? To be sure, as at a zoo, some living beings come to see other living beings. Zoo organizers provide some information in the form of signs and labels, and try to present creatures with a bit of their natural, home setting. By seeing the creatures, visitors learn about them, appreciate their existence, and sometimes even learn about the larger issues they evoke. Zoo staff do this to help preserve the animals and their habitat as part of our diverse biological heritage. Similarly, Festival organizers present people to visitors to display their culture. Signs, labels, banners, reconstructions of bits of home settings, and photographs help visitors understand and interpret what they see, hear, and sense. Hopefully too, visitors gain an appreciation of displayed traditions, national and world-wide cultural diversity. But there are big differences between the zoo and the Festival. Visitors are just as likely to see themselves on display as “others.” And at the Festival, people *talk back* and play the major role in shaping their own self-representation.

There are other metaphors for the Festival. Some people have likened it to a cultural theme park. Others to a street fair and block party. To some it is a series of performances and demonstrations; to



The Festival has provided a forum, a stage, and a microphone for a broad diversity of the nation's and world's people to speak to the public. Festival coordinator Lucille Dawson speaks during a presentation of Native American culture on the Mall for the American Bicentennial in 1976.

Photo by Andrew Wile, courtesy Smithsonian Institution

others, it is an annual lunch break with free entertainment. For some it is an illustrated book of

cultural practice; for the tour minded, a quick and easy trip around the world. For the conspiratorial, it is a form of national theater, in which the state exerts its understandings upon the masses; for the counter conspiratorial it is a demonstration against the cultural hegemony of the state, a reassertion of the people's ability to make their culture and define themselves. For yet others it is merely a good time.

The Festival of American Folklife is a complex form of institutional public cultural display that accomplishes a number of different purposes and occupies a variety of conceptual spaces. It can be seen in a number of different ways, and its successes and failures tallied accordingly.

The Festival was invented by Ralph Rinzler in 1967 with support from then Smithsonian Secretary S. Dillon Ripley and the head of the Division of Performing Arts, James Morris, and help from a score of inventive thinkers from a range of fields. It shared some affinity with folk festivals of the time. Ralph, and Festival supporter Alan Lomax, had for example been part of the folk revival and were organizers of the Newport Folk Festival. Don Yoder's work with the Pennsylvania Folklife Festival and festivals in other countries provided some models for the Smithsonian.

Earlier antecedents existed in forms of cultural display along the lines of the 1893 Columbian Exposition. This attempt to present the exotic cultures of the world on Chicago's Midway Plaisance first engaged and then derailed the public anthropology mission of Frederick Putnam, Otis Mason, and Franz Boas. Crass commercialism, lack of framed presentation, journalistic sensationalism, racism, and a cultural evolutionary framework con-

spired to make the living cultural displays at the Exposition a critical failure.

This was not true at the Smithsonian in the 1960s. The Festival followed in the wake of Rev. Martin Luther King's use of the National Mall as a pulpit to assert civic participation. The Festival was used to signal the presence, voice, and cultural/artistic endowment of American populations underrepresented in public institutions. The Festival signaled to members of Congress that there was culture back home, and that that culture was worthy of national pride and attention. In relation to the museums, the Festival, for Ripley, was a means of livening up the Smithsonian, broadening and enlarging its visitorship.

The Festival has always navigated between the various axes of art (as entertainment), cultural rights (as advocacy), education (as public service), and knowledge (as scholarship and experience). It was originally intended to broaden knowledge, appreciation, and support of art forms and practitioners often overlooked in a society whose sense of beauty and value is generally driven by the marketplace. At times during its history, and even within the same year among its programs, presentations and framing have gravitated toward one or another axis. But by and large, the Festival's form, contexts, purposes, and place have remained the same.

THE FESTIVAL AS A FESTIVAL

In general, festivals provide a time out of time. They separate off the heightened and the accentuated from the mundane, the usual, daily routine. Festivals are liminal moments, temporary pauses or transitions in the flow of events and activities, in which new relationships can be made, old ones reinforced or inverted. Festivals may indeed reinvest the social order with legitimacy – connecting that order to higher powers, cosmic purposes, and sacred history. But festivals may also provide a



The Festival offers interesting, even arresting juxtapositions of cultural life. Here a 1982 demonstration of cowherding skills by Oklahoman Sherri Lyn Close is set against the backdrop of the Capitol.

Photo by Dane Penland, courtesy Smithsonian Institution

release valve, so to speak, giving members of society a chance to revolt against the usual order, counter the structure of relationships with either inverted ones or none at all. Festivals typically conjoin and separate people, magnify and compress space and time.

In the *Washingtonian* scheme of things, the Festival of American Folklife does operate like a festival. It creates its own space on the Mall, a sometimes jarring presence in the midst of official, neat space. It creates a kind of face-to-face type of community in the shadows of inanimate official buildings and the institutions of state. The Festival is messy, it leaks at porous boundaries of participation, time, and event. The Festival does compress time and space. It creates an experience and event which are intense, but short-lived, in which representations are magnified, pushed together, and then, just as quickly, dispersed. And it brings people together – tradition bearers, the public, scholars, officials, administrators, builders, designers, volunteers, etc., who would not normally interact. As Margaret Mead wrote (*Redbook*, July 1975), the Festival is “a people-to-people celebration in which all of us are participants – now as organizers, now as celebrators, now as audience, as hosts and as guests, as friends and neighbors or as strangers finding that we can speak the same language of mutual enjoyment.”

There is something reassuring in the fact that official Washington can make room for the humanity it seeks to represent. Washington loves a good show, and though the town feeds on politics and breeds bureaucracy, what it really likes is drama. The Festival provides some of this drama through



While Festival curators and technical people plan for certain types of performances and demonstrations, participants often creatively mold their own representations.

Here bahrupiyas from India, impersonating the monkey god Hanuman, grab a visitor's bicycle and improvise a routine at the 1985 Festival.

Photo by Mary MacInnis, courtesy Smithsonian Institution

everyone's and no one's at the same time, enables people to cross boundaries they usually wouldn't cross. And when people speak on the Mall at the Festival, they often feel they are doing so with a power they do not ordinarily possess. I think people listen in somewhat the same way.

This makes it hard, if not impossible, for anyone to impose a single, overriding, monological voice upon the Festival. And if control over the Festival comes from us, the organizers, more often than not it is overtaken by the contingents of participants and the contingencies of their participation. We know this, which

cultural juxtapositions – a horse race course from the Capitol to the Washington Monument, a Tennessee moonshine still in sight of the Justice Department, a Hawaiian lei draped over the statue of “the haole guy” (Joseph Henry, the Smithsonian's first secretary), a New Mexican adobe village on the national green, a buffalo birth on the Mall, a Junkanoo rush, carnival and Mardi Gras parades blaring at cool stone buildings.

Most festive of all is what happens amongst people who gather to talk, listen, sing, dance, craft, cook, eat, and watch. Unlike the rules and regulations and authoritative voices that come from the buildings, Festival voices are more intimate, a bit more human and inspired. The lack of direct personal contact so expected in official Washington is contrasted with the folksiness, perceived or real, at the Festival. We can hear from and talk with people whom we might not ordinarily meet. Indeed, the social space of the Mall and Festival is endowed with a certain power; they are, as Anacostia Museum director Steve Newsome says, “sanctified.” This power, coupled with the sense that the Mall is

is why we have to fight both within and outside our own bureaucracies so hard, lest the desire for control be so burdensome as to squeeze out the spirit of the people.

To some extent, and for its limited time every year, the Festival subverts the normal order of cultural power along the Mall, and is thus also a Smithsonian festival of sorts. A Smithsonian “informercial” in *Business Week* (April 4, 1994) refers to the Festival as the time when “the normally stately institution [the Smithsonian] lets its hair down.” A recently published murder mystery by Richard Conroy begins: “This is a tale of an imaginary time [the 1976 Festival] when the folklorists tried to take over the Smithsonian Institution and how they almost succeeded. And how the traditionalists of the museum were driven to the foul crime of murder to prevent this great catastrophe.” Museums in their most formal ways can project a sense of the *inside* (spatially and culturally), the serious (almost dour), propertied (laden with valuable objects), and rule bound (no talking, no touching, restricted access). The Festival by contrast not only occurs

The Festival has sometimes loudly announced concepts for public cultural discourse. Large banners and presentations of African-based expressive traditions by scores of groups from Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States helped convey an idea of the African Diaspora in the 1970s.

Photo courtesy Smithsonian Institution

physically outside, but also represents the *outside*, associated with the common people, the playful, and the open ended. Given the great popularity of the Festival, attendance by dignitaries, attention by the press, and use of the Mall, the normal power relationship shifts – the outsiders are in – if only for the duration of the Festival.



THE FESTIVAL AS A GENRE OF CULTURAL DISPLAY

Political and poetic dimensions are linked in cultural displays like the Festival. While the Festival may, in some literal way, recall 19th-century forms of cultural exhibitionism and voyeurism, it has benefited from decades of cultural research and discussions about representation to become quite different than that. Shifts in authoritative voice, collaboration in self-representation, treatment of contemporary contexts, as well as the forms of discourse have significantly changed thanks in large part to the efforts of people like Ralph Rinzler, Bess Lomax Hawes, Bernice Reagon, and a generation of folklorists who have worked at the intersection of scholarship, cultural community advocacy, and public education. Large-scale cultural displays are situated in a public world in which various parties have a stake. Politicians, advocacy groups, rebels, and scholars may use these forms to forward their own agendas, and have become very sophisticated in doing so.

As a representational genre, living cultural exhibitions like the Festival share features with the zoo, the local fair, a town meeting, object-based museum exhibit, ethnographic monograph, talk show, and documentary film. The Festival is a low-resolution medium, as Bob Byington, the Festival's former deputy director, always said. The Festival differs from a book, film, exhibit, and concert in that it lacks lineality. While the Festival has highlighted special events, a daily schedule, and structured

forms of presentation, many things happen simultaneously. Not everyone experiences the same thing. And levels of mediation in communication vary considerably. Simply, the Festival offers the ability, indeed the desirability for people – visitors, staff, participants – to chart their own experiential routes through it. The density of the crowd, the symbolic weight of the location, the significance of the time (around the Fourth of July) help make this experience important. Most distinctively, the Festival offers the immediacy and sentient presence of people possessed of knowledge, skill, and wisdom, who can and do speak for themselves. At the Festival, many different people speak in a variety of voices and styles. For the most part, the authority to speak and the content of that speech are diffuse.

One anthropologist who helped present a Maroon program on the Mall a few years ago turned to me at one session where Maroon leaders from Jamaica, Suriname, French Guiana, Colombia, Texas, and Ecuador were meeting with each other for the first time in the almost 500-year history of *marronage* – and asked rhetorically, “What have they got to say to each other?” Well, it turned out, a lot. People who don't usually have the opportunity can use these occasions to talk to a public directly and say their piece. They can cooperate with as well as challenge the ethnographers who claim to and so often do represent them. They can engage their exhibitors in dialogue and confrontation. They can speak with, conspire, and learn much from each

other, and with all of this gain skill and standing in representing their own concerns in a complex world. At the same time, I think we as practitioners of our own art gain experience and appreciation in both understanding and conveying representational processes.

As a genre, cultural displays like the Festival can disrupt the complacent, linear flow of history. The representational act or event can highlight salient issues and challenge public notions of the given state of social life. Almost like a collage, the Festival is a display of recontextualized cultural imagery. In offering bits, pieces, and slices of life, the Festival allows visitors a way into someone else's life as they are willing to publicly represent it.

Such displays are usually risky. The actions of participants – those conspiring in their own representation – is somewhat unpredictable. Who knows what the musician from Jerusalem or the Hawaiian nationalist will say when they have the microphone and pulpit in front of a few hundred thousand people on the Mall? Yet with risk comes the playful ambiguity of the genre, the way in which cultural styles are brought to the organization and experience of the event itself. The genre shares the interstitial social character one now finds increasingly in borderland regions and other cultural crossroads. New forms and syntheses of cultural expression may emerge at and be invented through the event itself.

Politically, cultural displays can be used to say new things, foster new understandings, promote old ones, valorize and legitimate stances by governments, peoples, or communities. The very presence of largely working-class folks and people from a variety of backgrounds who are not usually represented on a national or international stage is significant. The institutional investment in their presence and voice helps legitimate their right to speak, and sometimes what they have to say, and how they say it. Part of this investment, as our senior folklorist Peter Seitel has suggested, consists of scholar-ethnographers providing a model of listening and respect for public audiences. If scholars and cura-

tors can find ways of showing the general population how to listen to and respect the lives and life-ways of the people to whom they owe their livelihood, no matter who they may be, we might all be better off. I think the Festival reflects well on the power of educational and cultural institutions in a democratic society. Others may be more skeptical. Some may doubt whether there is anything to learn from such people. Some entertainers, politicians, and experts who themselves seek the limelight of display (through performances, appearances, and distinguished lectures) worry about the ethics of the display of "lesser others" who, they fear, may not have the capacity, talent, or good sense to represent themselves well.

Public institutions should be attuned to the form of power increasingly shaping the 21st-century social order – the ability to produce (and control) meaning and disseminate it (some would say inflict it) upon others. The ways of producing meaning, particularly about things cultural, are widely distributed among marketeers, media moguls, politicians, journalists, and many others. Yet at a time when commodified culture is emerging as the world's foremost economic industry, and issues of cultural identity have become part of big-time politics, scholars and curators in the cultural studies fields have both an opportunity and responsibility to participate in the public understanding of *culture*. We must pick forums and media that enable our ideas and approaches, multiple as they may be, to enter public discourse, dialogue, and debate. As scholars and scientists, we fumbled the ball on the public understanding of *race*. Let's not do the same for *culture*.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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