

Cultural Democracy: A Global Warming

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The number of conferences, publications, festivals, Web sites, government and multilateral discussions and initiatives about cultural representation and cultural policies is growing across the globe. Some programs focus primarily on the arts and artists. Other programs, involving artists, professional cultural and development personnel, and civic institutions, are more directed towards the application of arts and culture (including knowledge systems) in economic and social development programs. Post-September 11th events have brought to the fore more urgent discussions, debates, and proposals about the significance of culture in people-to-people programs across national boundaries and in statecraft within and among nations of diverse cultural backgrounds.

How to keep up with the fields and topics of interests is a complicated challenge. The proliferation of sites of engagement and life-defining consequences around matters of arts and culture would seem to demand that colleagues across a wide variety of arts and cultural fields consider closer collaborations, at least strategic thinking, about mutual issues of high, although not exclusive, priority.

During the last few years, several CFCH staff and external colleagues, including tradition-bearers, have participated in a number of distinct projects in which we have placed primary emphasis on fostering "a dialogue with the people whose traditions and aspirations are studied and represented," which CFCH describes as its "most distinctive contribution." Each arena of engagement is steeped in serious discussions, debates, and negotiations about the world views and practices of cultural communities, especially in relationship to professional cultural practices and objectives of state governmental institutions, multilateral bodies (e.g., UNESCO, the World Intellectual Property Organization), and other public-sector institutions including universities, museums, and professional disciplinary cultural and related organizations (e.g., folklorists, cultural anthropologists, and development specialists).

The new attention to cultural topics is stirring review, debates, and in some instances, revision and invention with respect to guiding terminology, the exercise of democracy between political bodies and citizens, ethics and human and cultural rights, and the role and focus of scholarly research. Emphasizing perspectives about creative and intellectual agency in cultural communities as a cardinal principle around which inquires should be made and project development informed, we have sought to use our institutional positioning and fields of research and arenas of cultural activism to encourage and facilitate equitable participation of community representatives in deliberative and decision-making bodies dealing with all aspects and forms of the arts and culture.

In addition to the UNESCO events cited above, CFCH interventions during the last year with regard to the principle of agency during have been made at the World Conference Against Racism, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerances held in Durban, South Africa, in August and September, where attention was directed to recognition, respect, and protection of traditional knowledge systems, cultural dress and physical appearance, and linguistic and religious rights; The Center for Black and African Culture symposium "Black and African Cultures and the Challenges of Globalization"

in Lagos, Nigeria, in August; The World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in late January-early February, which included focus on "Cultural Production, Diversity and Identity," "Human Rights" (economic, social, and cultural), and "Globalization and Communication"; the meeting of The International Network for Cultural Diversity in Lucerne, Switzerland, in late September, a civil society organization which represents individual artists and cultural activists, cultural organizations, and creative industries (and which is developing a global legal instrument for discussion by its members and cultural ministers at its October 2001 meeting in Cape Town, South Africa, designed to motivate governments to adopt plural measures to legally protect and encourage cultural diversity); The International Network for Cultural Policy, comprised of 41 Ministers of Culture involved in the protection and fostering of cultural diversity, which met in Switzerland in September and will also convene in Cape Town, South Africa, in October; and the first hemispheric experts seminar on cultural diversity ("Making Cultural Policy a Key Component of Development Strategy" and "Fostering National Cultural Policies in a Global Environment") in Vancouver, Canada, March 2002, requested by the Third Summit of the Americas in Quebec City in April 2001.

As a means of keeping up with the expanding contours and intersections in heretofore relatively distinct arenas of our work, the CFCH Cultural Policy Team is organizing a reading-discussion group dedicated to critical reflections about cultural representation and cultural policy. We invite collegial participation.