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The Definition Debate: From Paradigm Shift to Bend in the Road

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ABSTRACT

The ancient theory of stasis provides a framework to work through a complex debate such as we in ICOM face over the definition of the museum. Its methodology helps determine just where the impasses lie so they can be separately resolved. Its philosophy sees these impasses not as stopping points but resting points, necessary bends in the road that allow all parties to address their concerns and come to new consensus that can lead the debate in creative directions. Rather than seeing arguments like the definition debate as incompatible values struggles, stasis sees them as complex and recursive arguments and searches for ways forward. I will use stasis to break down and analyse the current debate over a definition and then discuss ways a stasis perspective can help ICOM debate more productively.

Keywords: Stasis, museum definition, identity.

RÉSUMÉ

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L'ancienne théorie de la *stasis* fournit un cadre pour travailler à travers un débat complexe tel que celui auquel l'ICOM est confronté sur la définition du musée. Sa méthodologie aide à déterminer exactement où se trouvent les impasses afin qu'elles puissent être résolues séparément. Sa philosophie considère ces impasses non comme des points d'arrêt mais des points de repos, des virages nécessaires sur la route qui permettent à toutes les parties de répondre à leurs préoccupations et d'arriver à un nouveau consensus qui peut conduire le débat dans des directions créatives. Plutôt que de considérer les arguments comme le débat sur la définition comme des débats sur des valeurs incompatibles, la *stasis* les considère comme des arguments complexes et récursifs et cherche des voies à suivre. J'utiliserai la *stasis* pour décomposer et analyser le débat actuel sur une définition, puis discuter de la manière dont une perspective de *stasis* peut aider l'ICOM à débattre de manière plus productive.

Mots-clés : Stasis, définition de musée, identité.

Introduction

After a two-year process, the ICOM leadership thought it had a new definition for the museum of the 21st century. But as voting representatives spoke up at the Extraordinary General Assembly in Kyoto in 2019, one after another, it was clear that there were questions about the jurisdiction of the ICOM procedure, the overall quality of the definition, and, of course, the particular wording of the text. Seventy percent of the delegates eventually voted to postpone the final vote.

Was that action the rejection of a bold definition or of a muddled mission statement, the stemming of a power grab or a backlash to progress, the shutting out of Global South voices or their rise? Multiple perspectives mean multiple interpretations were simultaneously in play. To try to gain a clearer view, I will look at the debate over the museum definition through the lens of the rhetorical theory of *stasis*, an age-old way to break apart a debate and see where in the argument the sticking points lie that prevent consensus.

Stasis is an alternative to the repeated framing of the debate as a paradigm shift where no consensus is possible. For instance, the “Working Documents” prepared by the Executive Board for the Extraordinary Assembly note that

“the MDPP listened to museum communities and discussed with them the shifts in paradigms that have appeared, unevenly and incompletely, but still consistently, in the relationship between museums and the societies around us.” (“Extraordinary”, 2019, p. 5)

”

In a paradigm shift, there is little rational possibility of compromise or consensus from old to new paradigms – it is by definition a break with past perspectives. The subsequent shakeup in the ICOM leadership – the resignation of its Committee for Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials (MDPP) chair and original committee members, among others – points to the sense that compromise on differences in perspective around this definition is in fact seen by some as impossible to achieve. As I will demonstrate, stasis theory allows for a perspective that instead sees arguments as complex and recursive, that *expects* multiple perspectives to engage in ongoing stages of agreement and disagreement, and, most importantly, that builds in pauses along the way to determine exactly where the argument lies for all, not just the leadership, and what creative turns might lead to unexpected resolutions. Thus, stasis can help ICOM reach consensus on what may seem an impossible divide.

Why definitions?

Before analysing the debate, though, let me begin with the question *why*. If definitional paradigms are so incompatible, why work for a consensus definition at all? The debate over a definition is a debate over more than mere words, it is a debate over identity, and as any scholar of identity will say, *who* we say we are determines *what* we say we can/should/must do. As rhetorician Kenneth Burke put it:

“Men induce themselves and others to act by devices that deduce “let us” from “we must” or “we should.” And “we must” and “we should” they deduce in turn from “it is” – for only by assertions as to how things are can we finally substantiate a judgment.” (1969, pp. 336–337)

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That is, the debate over what the museum *is* is really a debate over what actions the museum *should* or *must* be taking in its world today. As Smithsonian Institution Director Lonnie Bunch wrote soon after the vote, “We have to make sure

that museums play a role in shaping a more inclusive future” (Chow, 2019). This focus on the consequences of the proposed definition is what multiple observers at the Extraordinary Assembly referred to as its “aspirational” quality. Yet as Burke points out, this focus on what *we should be* calls into question what *we are* – and so professional, even personal identity is called into question. Thus it is not surprising that the debate over the museum definition has been so heated. As the ICOM France national committee noted in March 2020:

“[In Kyoto] a large majority of the members realized that beyond the words they were discovering, it was their common vision of the museums of tomorrow, their missions and their own ethics that were being called into question.” (“What definition”, 2020)

”

Or as ICOM Europe chair Luís Filipe Matos Raposo put it in the heat of the debate at the Extraordinary Assembly, “This is not a definition...It is noisy words but not for most of us professional sense” (ICOM Extraordinary, 2019).

Which definitions?

In this article I will compare four definitions: the 1958 definition from when ICOM was directed by museologist Georges Henri Rivière; the current definition from 2007 (updated slightly from the significant changes of the 1974 post-Roundtable of Santiago); a relevant piece of the 2015 UNESCO Recommendation that started the new round of debates over the definition; and the 2019 definition proposed to the Assembly in Kyoto. For ease of reference, they are here:

1958	The museum is a permanent establishment, administered in the general interest, for the purpose of preserving, studying, enhancing by various means and, in particular, of exhibiting to the public for its delectation and instruction groups of objects and specimens of cultural value: artistic, historical, scientific and technological collections, botanical and zoological gardens and aquariums, etc. (Rivière, 1960, p. 12)
2007	A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for purposes of education, study and enjoyment. (“Museum Definition”)

2015	Museums are vital public spaces that should address all of society and can therefore play an important role in the development of social ties and cohesion, building citizenship, and reflecting on collective identities. Museums should be places that are open to all and committed to physical and cultural access to all, including disadvantaged groups. They can constitute spaces for reflection and debate on historical, social, cultural and scientific issues. (UNESCO, 2015)
2019	<p>Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.</p> <p>Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing. (“Museum Definition”)</p>

What is stasis?

“Stasis” is a Greek word meaning a “rest”, a standing still. It can be seen as the resting point in an argument, the place where discourse must pause as two sides say, “Now we’ve gotten to the heart of the disagreement!”. In this way, *stasis* for the Greeks was the physical opposite of *kinesis*, motion (Dieter, 1960, p. 348). It would be a mistake, however, to see stases as bottlenecks in the discourse. Stases are turning points in an argument that force us to recalibrate our forward rush into a more universally accepted argument. Stasis and *kinesis* are both required for successful debate, much as reflection and action are required for praxis. Without discerning where the argument is standing still, what is really being debated, there can be no way to move forward together.

Stasis theory was first recorded by Hermagoras of Temnos in the 2nd century BCE (Dieter, 1960, p. 345). His method established four possible stases in an argument; i.e., four points that debaters have to agree on, each in turn, for a dialogue to be successful. He named these four points the stases of:

- *stochasmos*, or fact (“can we agree on what happened?”)
- *horos*, or definition (“can we agree on what to call it?”)

- *poiotes*, or quality (“can we agree on how important or serious it is?”)
- *metalepsis*, or jurisdiction (“can we agree that we are the people who can decide on an action?”)

Communication scholars Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor add that in modern times notions of causality (“can we agree on the chain of cause and consequence of this act?”) are also important to establishing *quality*, while agreement on *jurisdiction* is necessary to successfully debate policy (“what should we do?”) (Fahnestock and Secor, 1985, pp. 220–223).

Of course, with *definition* the second of the stasis stages, it may seem odd to argue that the question of the museum definition is not simply a debate stuck at the stasis of definition. However, as we’ve seen, this debate is about more than “what do we call ourselves?”. The museum definition is serving as a proxy for various identity issues that remain unresolved – questions of quality, of jurisdiction, and therefore of the appropriate course of action. As rhetorician Ryan Weber argues,

“stasis theory predicts that agreement about facts will not automatically engender agreement about definitions. Every perspective brings with it a clear and well-articulated definition...In turn, these definitions imply corresponding policy decisions....Definitions play a key role in debates and...public policy deliberations often reach a stalemate because of these differing definitions” (2016, p. 94).

”

Indeed, as Fahnestock and Secor point out, we are often too quick to jump to the final policy stage, arguing over what to do about a problem we do not yet agree on how to name (1985, p. 222). Therefore, let us briefly examine in turn the four stages of disagreement in this debate that must be worked on in order to move toward policy, and then how to incorporate these into a more productive approach.

The stasis of fact

There is general agreement among ICOM members on the stasis of fact, the “what happened”. The shift from collections to visitors, the move from institutions to community centres, eco-museums and their kin – these are all changes that have occurred over the past several decades. Further, these shifts have occurred in a world where considerations of justice, equality, and environmental sustainability have become an increasing part of the academic/professional toolkit – often in response to overt acts of injustice, inequality, and planetary degradation. The understanding of the museum in service to society can thus be seen as a generally accepted fact.

ICOM members also seem generally in accord with the need to update the current definition through a standing committee, the MDPP, charged with managing this task and proposing a new definition. Finally, ICOM members are in accord that what happened in Kyoto is that the vote on the updated definition, as proposed, was postponed, after a long debate, to gather further information. As former ICOM President Suay Aksoy wrote in an optimistic January 2020 letter, “conversations around ICOM’s alternative museum definition continue around the globe. We can only be happy for this enthusiasm and commitment and benefit from their outcomes” (Aksoy, 2020).

The stasis of definition

It is at the stage of definition, the “what do we call it,” that the accord begins to break down. There is debate not only over what to call a museum, but even what to call the definition debate itself. It has been repeatedly described as a contest between conservative and progressive paradigms of the museum, a two-sided political question. One side was represented in the press by MDPP chair Jette Sandahl of Denmark, stating that the current definition “does not speak the language of the 21st century” and that it does not reply to current demands of “cultural democracy”. The other was frequently represented by ICOM France, whose chair, Juliette Raoul-Duval, declared the new definition an “ideological” manifesto. As *The Art Newspaper* put it: “The quarrel could be interpreted as a debate between the old guard and the younger generation, or between Latin tradition and the Anglo-Saxon move towards a more ‘inclusive’ model” (Noce, “What exactly”, 2019).

One of those “Anglo-Saxon” groups, the Museums Association of the UK, reported that:

“The negative reaction prompted by the new definition has exposed ideological faultlines in the museum community worldwide. Some have slammed it as...a statement of “fashionable values” – others say the backlash against it comes from traditionalists who are alarmed by “new thinking””(Adams, 2019).

”

Old guard and younger, traditionalists and new thinkers – this simple political division breaks down when both the text itself and the context of the overall document are examined.

Textual stasis of definition

ICOM’s adoption of the 2015 UNESCO Recommendation Concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society – a Recommendation that ICOM itself helped to draft

– provided an impetus for the proposed definition as well as a textual model. That document describes four “primary functions” of a museum – preservation, research, communication, and education – and then adds, in a separate section, a “social role”. These dual visions – functions and role – in the 2015 text can be seen at work in the 2019 proposed definition.

Textually, the wording of the proposed definition is both more progressive and more conservative than the current (2007) definition’s “service to society”. In the proposed 2019 definition, the progressive paradigm, the museum’s “social role,” is highlighted at key positions at both the beginning and the end of the text, as the museum would no longer be an “institution” for “society and its development” but an egalitarian “space for critical dialogue” about the “challenges and conflicts of the pasts and futures,” working “in active partnership with and for diverse communities” for the purpose of promulgating a future that is more just, equal, and sustainable. Sandwiched between these social-role statements, however, the proposed definition also seeks to return the museum to a more conservative paradigm for its primary functions – instead of merely “acquiring, conserving,” etc. (2007), it is closer now to the 1958 notion of “administered in the common interest,” as museums would *hold in trust* artefacts and specimens for society, *safeguard* diverse memories for future generations and *guarantee* equal rights and equal access – in other words, they would “administer” specimens, memories, and rights. They would also *enhance*, a concept recovered from 1958 now applied not to the exhibits themselves but (post-new museology) to the “understandings” of their visitors. If in the 1950s the museum was an arbiter of cultural value, in the proposed 2020s it would be an arbiter of human dignity – a different goal, but still a return to the role of arbiter.

Comparing the UNESCO statement (2015) on “social role” with both the current (2007) and the proposed (2019) definitions, we can see several clear shifts. First is the shift from museum as physical institution (2007) to museum as dialogic space (2015, 2019). Visitor access, first mentioned in 2015, moves from a wish (“should be accessible”) to a right in 2019 (“guarantees equal access”). Most importantly, we see a shift in the conception of “society” and the museum’s “service” to it (2007): in 2015 the description of that societal service means promotion of “social ties and cohesion, building citizenship, and reflecting on collective identities”, but by 2019 it has moved from social cohesion to championing diverse communities. That is, in the balance between necessary recognition of shared goals and necessary recognition of diverse experiences, the 2015 document highlights the former and the 2019 document the latter. Finally, we see an expansion of the reach of the social role: from affecting *visitors* in the museum through “education, study, and enjoyment” (2007) or “reflection and debate” (2015) to affecting the *world* at large, “contribut[ing] to human dignity and...planetary wellbeing” (2019).

In sum, the shift in the definition’s texts in the four years from UNESCO Recommendation to Kyoto proposal moves from 2015’s dialogic space, hopefully accessible, that acts as cultural glue for its visitors, to 2019’s dialogic space,

guaranteeing diverse accessibility, functioning as a cultural goad to the world. There is not yet a consensus point across these two visions.

Contextual stasis of definition

For proponents of the proposed definition, naming its situation and context, and not simply its wording, is clearly a paradigm shift. Sandahl wrote in the *Museum International* journal distributed at the conference that

“Changing the museum definition to one that is adequate for the 21st century is...a process of understanding the embeddedness of museums in society, of contextualising, historicising, and de-naturalising the current definition and of developing new ethical, epistemological and political positions that reflect current challenges and obligations”
(Sandahl, 2019, p. 11).

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Proponents at the Extraordinary Assembly also defined the situation as a paradigmatic moment: “Despite reservations, the time is now to act,” said the representative of ICOM Australia. “In the end we’re here for public service. Join the moment for the present and future rather than staying rooted in the past” (ICOM Extraordinary, 2019).

Opponents of this proposed definition, however, did not divide so clearly along future/past political lines. To be sure, arguments were passionately argued that the ICOM definition had historically been built upon a tradition now being ignored. Outgoing ICOFOM chair François Mairesse has made the point repeatedly, both in print and at the General Conference, that “the definition of ICOM has gone through many stages and constitutes a kind of *legacy from previous generations* of museologues and curators who contributed to it” (2019, p. 13).¹

His argument includes a genealogical reading of the current definition, tracing the provenance of each of its phrases to past ICOM definitions and then showing that in contrast “only five terms (out of nearly one hundred) [in the proposed definition] come from previous definitions” (Mairesse, 2020, p. 37). But Mairesse sees these textual issues as ultimately a consequence of a contextual problem – the proposal is being defined as a *definition* when to him the text is instead a *mission statement*:

“The mission statement is presented as a roadmap, a statement of the main objectives and goals to be achieved...This strategic logic...differs

1. Translation is mine.

greatly from what is expected by ICOM for its own definition...If ICOM's definition is first and foremost a rather classical definition this is because it fits into a text that has legal status.” (Mairesse, 2020, p. 40)

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This definition – the text as a legal document – has been put forward repeatedly as an explanation for why the words matter. A joint session between ICOFOM and museum educators, for instance, raised the concern that eliminating “education” from the proposed definition might negatively affect public funding in some countries. These concerns were echoed at the Assembly by the representative of ICOM Israel, who called the text “a mission statement, not a definition...which has severe legal implications” for some members (ICOM Extraordinary, 2019).

Equally strong arguments about defining the text as a (de)colonial document were made by both proponents and opponents from the decolonizing movement of the Global South. “If the present definition of the museum allows for such biased judgments, including the continuation of the historical biases and injustices,” writes Kenyan MDPP member George Okello Abungu, “then something is not right and needs to be addressed” (2019, p. 68). The proposed text, he argues, is a step in that decolonizing process. But Brazilian ICOFOM chair Bruno Brulon Soares countered in the Assembly that the proposal was still not taking into account Global South voices because “it has great implications for poorer countries that don’t have the luxury to be as progressive as proposed here” (ICOM Extraordinary, 2019), and therefore it could not be defined as a decolonizing document.

These contextual sticking points in the stasis of definition were not about naming particular elements of the text but rather about how to name the document itself – as definition or mission statement, aspirational or legal, anti-colonial or colonial. Some of these issues bleed over into the next stases, issues of quality and jurisdiction that were debated in the guise of questions of definition, as we shall see.

The stasis of quality

In the stasis of quality, the contended question asks “how good and important is this action” – here, how important is the act of producing a universal definition for museums. There is a good deal of consensus among participants in the debate that a universal definition truly is “the backbone of ICOM” (“Museum Definition”, 2019). That consensus on the quality of a definition, though, makes it paradoxically more difficult to agree to the language of *this particular* definition.

The importance of the current 2007 definition is evident in the 23-nation survey conducted by museologist Michèle Rivet in 2019 to determine the role of the current definition in national legislation. Her research found that in countries as wide-ranging as China, Brazil, Sweden, South Africa, and Canada, the current ICOM definition is echoed – sometimes verbatim, sometimes more generally – in national law, national regulations, or professional accreditation and standing. “Soft laws, rules laid down by ICOM, freely accepted by its members, thus have a binding force for each of them,” she writes,² particularly – as a number of Rivet’s respondents mentioned – as museums struggle against increasing political and economic pressures (2019, p. 77). The definition provides both guidelines for policies and a bulwark against threats – thus any changes are seen as having a serious impact on many nations’ museums.

It is the stasis of quality that also explains the repeatedly raised concerns about the wordiness, clumsiness, and translatability of the proposed definition. This is not a concern with the aesthetic beauty of the definition but with its utility: if it is a statement important enough to be incorporated as “soft law” on a global scale, then the wording needs to be clear in all languages – and the concern is that it is not. For instance, Marion Bertin reports that *polyphonic* was singled out as problematic by ICOFOM respondents (2020, p. 143), and Burçak Madran of ICMAH noted in a panel that *critical dialogue* has only negative connotations in Turkish. Bertin adds, “Underlying translation problems were also pointed out, particularly for writing legislation” (2020, p. 143).

Proponents of the new definition, meanwhile, agree about the importance of this “backbone of ICOM”, and this for them heightens the urgency of adopting the proposed definition. “The world watches if we stay in the past,” warned ICOM Australia at the Extraordinary Assembly, and ICOM US asserted, “Our younger colleagues say to us, ‘Is this all ICOM offers us, a patriarchy afraid of losing its grip?’ The time is now – we must lead the conversation for the future.” President Aksoy also warned during the Assembly that “we must consider the political ramifications” of postponement (ICOM Extraordinary, 2019). This particular question of quality, however, was not agreed to by the 70% of delegates who voted to postpone.

The stasis of jurisdiction

The stasis of jurisdiction asks who has the right to act on the issue under debate – here, who has the right to change the museum definition, and particularly to make such large changes outside the usual channels of ICOM participation: the national, regional, and international committees.

The process used by the MDPP was repeatedly described in documents and in Kyoto as participatory – “we were the editors, not the writers,” said Sandahl in the Extraordinary Assembly – but this repeated assertion actually exacerbated a

2. Translation is mine.

key sticking point. The committee gathered suggestions from “broad dialogue” and “expert fora,” but then in January 2019 invited “members, committees and other interested parties to take part in creating a new, more current definition” (“Museum Definition”, 2019). Some of the 269 separate proposed definitions it received were the result of dedicated collaborative sessions, while others were individual submissions by anyone perusing the website – but all were published equally in a long anonymous list (“Creating the new”, 2020). And then the MDPP wrote its own definition to present to the Executive Board. Mairesse cites an analysis by Emilie Girard of the proposed statement which found that its wording includes many terms mentioned in only very few of the 269 proposed definitions received. For instance, *polyphonic*, *pasts*, *conflicts*, and *planetary well-being* were mentioned in 0.4% of the submissions; *specimens*, *equal rights*, *human dignity*, and *social justice* in less than 2% (Mairesse, 2020, p. 38). “This is a break,” noted the representative of ICOM Argentina at the Assembly, asserting jurisdiction, “and it’s necessary to postpone the vote so that it represents faithfully the thinking of the museum world” (ICOM Extraordinary, 2019).

Jurisdictional problems were also exacerbated by the short timeline. The nearly 500 voting members of the Extraordinary General Assembly in Kyoto, representing national, regional, and international committees, had approximately five weeks to consult their members after the proposed definition was unveiled. “How can I vote without time to discuss the opinions we haven’t heard from?” asked Brulon Soares from the Assembly floor. “Forcing the vote makes a nuanced vote impossible,” agreed the representative from ICOM Belgium (ICOM Extraordinary, 2019).

The process itself, then, engaged the stasis of jurisdiction regarding who was making the decisions on what everyone agreed was an important issue. The Executive Board appeared to come to consensus on this point as well, evidenced by the announcement in January 2020 by President Aksoy that a new MDPP (the MDPP2) had been appointed, enlarged with representatives from national and international committees, “thus ensuring a participatory and bottom-up model for the decision on the new museum definition. Allow me to reiterate that we anticipate our National Committees and International Committees to open up these conversations and discussion to the whole of their members and not limit themselves to their boards.” The responsibility for broad-based input, in other words, was back on the committees throughout 2020. Raoul-Duval of ICOM France, for one, saw this in March as a positive resolution of the stasis: “A few days ago, the MDPP2 embarked on a new dialogue. It is our turn, elected representatives of the members, to nourish this dialogue” (2020, p. 28). However, the abrupt resignation in mid-June of Jette Sandahl, along with other original members of the MDPP, would indicate that the stasis of jurisdiction – who has the right to make decisions about the definition – remains unresolved for at least some of the participants.

As Fahnestock and Secor predicted, it is the implied change not just in *what is* but *what should be* – the change in policy – that leads to the stasis impasses of jurisdiction. Mairesse notes that the definition “does not take into account the extraordinary variety of museums. It would be disastrous to impose only one type of museum” (Noce, “What exactly,” 2019). This “one type” would not be a problem if the proposed definition were defining what is already universally in existence – if most museum professionals saw this as what they are or could (almost) imagine being. It becomes more of an issue when, like 57% of the members of ICOFOM who responded to its survey, museum professionals feel that the text represents not who they are, but instead what (someone else thinks) they should be (Bertin, 2020, p. 142). And it becomes a debate when a sizable minority – 30% of the Kyoto Assembly, 39% of the ICOFOM respondents – feel that it does in fact represent who they are. Such strongly differing visions of *what is* lead inevitably to strong disagreements over *what should be*, disagreements which then circle back around to fuel more debates over *what is*.

Conclusion: What stasis can tell us

What is the benefit of stasis to this debate in a divided membership? First, stasis helps us to see where the points of contention and agreement lie. We can see that there is already general consensus that it is time for a new definition because its role is to serve as the “backbone” of ICOM’s identity and act in the “soft laws” of many nations. Because of these two points of agreement, there is also consensus that the language of the definition needs to be clear and translatable. Within the definition itself, there seems to be precedent for the dual nature of the museum – its “primary purposes” and its “social role,” although there is clearly disagreement over their specifics. Considering the various iterations of the text, Girard’s analysis, and the ICOFOM survey, I would say that other points of consensus appear to be the sense of the museum as a public space for reflection and dialogue, open to and working with diverse peoples. The major points of contention, then, revolve more around both the stasis of quality – including the question of the reach of that social role and whether the words chosen are appropriate for the role a definition plays in its context – and the stasis of jurisdiction, whether these words are reflective of the will of ICOM members across the globe.

Beyond its analytical role, though, stasis can also help us to recalibrate, if we remember that stases of a debate are not stopping points but turning points. Seventy years ago, Otto Dieter noted that stasis’s basis for Aristotle lay not in his *Rhetoric* but in his *Physics*:

“We conclude that the stasis of Aristotle’s physical science...is the event which must necessarily occur in-between opposite movements of a subject on a line deflected at an angle of more than 90 degrees. It is immobility, or station, which disrupts continuity, divides

motion into two movements, and separates the two from one another; it is both an end and a beginning of motion, both a stop and a start, the turning, or the transitional standing at the moment of reversal of movement” (1950, p. 349).

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It is ever in the nature of a policy-changing movement to march continually forward, to say *we should* and *we must* and *let us* – and therefore its leaders can outpace the larger group, sure that *what is* for them is the same for all. Stasis points, however frustrating they feel in the moment, encourage a rest, a stopping point to see where precisely the disagreements between diverse perspectives lie and work to resolve them before moving on. These resolutions then build a history of a growing number of consensus points that help to move the debate further. They may well mean being creative enough to turn in unanticipated directions, to accept – as even the proposed definition puts it – the need to “work in active partnership with and for diverse communities”.

Since Thomas Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, we have understood differences in values perspectives to be incompatible, incommensurable, the result of paradigm shifts from the old to the new. Consensus between old and new perspectives becomes rationally impossible across the break of a paradigm shift. As rhetorician Nola Heidlebaugh puts it, “Incommensurability lent rationality to the assumption that moral debates are essentially intractable” (2001, p. 144). But stasis, she suggests, is a way out of this bind. Examining a debate through the lens of stasis shows us that

“Incommensurability is not . . . logically intractable... It is seen as a moment in an ongoing conversation...at which the weave has become too tight on each side for the fabric to continue to be made. Incommensurable frames, thought of in this way, are points of stasis, not unassailable justificatory systems” (p. 144).

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For Heidlebaugh, “The point of conflict may be seen either as a strategic choice of battleground or as a common place where wildly divergent groups can meet, communicate, and make decisions” (Smith, 2003, p. 521). Stasis, that is, becomes the moment when the argument is stopped from forging ahead and comes up against alternative perspectives that force a pause, a movement at right angles, a reversal – all in the inventive situation of people personally invested in the debate. It is this that occurred at the General Assembly in Kyoto and continues in the new, more global discussions now ongoing.

So what is the contribution of stasis to the museum debate? Perhaps most importantly, it champions complexity and the need for inventiveness in the

work of persuading an audience at debate. To Fahnestock and Secor this was the benefit of its recursiveness:

“A question about any issue can interrupt the discussion of any other, sending the whole procedure . . . through another round of establishing facts, definitions, evaluations, and jurisdiction... Each [element] evokes more refined questions at the same stasis and counter-argument at every stage” (1985, p. 218).

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Convincing 40,000 members in 123 nations of a definition, something so fundamental to identity, so entwined with law and custom, *should* be a complex and recursive process. Stasis suggests ways to move beyond impasse, seeing each disagreement as a bend in the road, a place to reflect together and find new commonalities, on a continuous journey toward the mutually unknown.

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