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Museums as cultural self-portraits

Cultural encounters of enrichment or erosion

Museums have been extremely important institutions in the formation of identities – individual, local and national identities. They have been called the prime sites of national self-expression, and can be interpreted as national self-portraits. The modern museums have been and still are tied in with the ideas of colonialism and the nation state.

Older European museums reflect how the earliest museum collections served to define and delineate a European history and identity as different from the cultures outside of Europe - from other distant and exotic parts of the world. In the early museums these other parts of the world were strictly hierarchically understood, with the Near East and the Far East clearly above the Americas, Africa or Australia, ranked according to their perceived kinship or likeness to European society. These early collections and interpretations mirrored the logic of European colonialism.

Throughout the 20th century many new installations of ethnographic collections in European museums were created with the stated intention of combating and transcending the values of colonialism and racism. But moving beyond colonialism is easier said than done.

Towards the end of the 20th century museums were seriously re-examining their responsibilities regarding the ways in which we define our purpose and organize and understand our role in society. New types of missions and visions were explored, even in mainstream museums. Museums embarked quite tentatively on a 're-negotiation of histories' as it is sometimes quite paradoxically called, reflecting a shift in focus and loyalties from a homogeneous culture and nation state towards a recognition that history is written by – not just on behalf of – many different partners representing different points of views and perspectives.

Ambiguous processes The demands for a re-orientation of museum values have come from different sources. In countries in which indigenous populations have been colonized, these populations have often been strong and vocal pressure groups. In countries with ethnically mixed populations, minority groups have voiced the need for inclusion relative to the dominant culture represented in the museums. Gender issues have obviously offered similar platforms for critique.

The specifics of these processes vary between countries – they vary strongly even within Europe – with each country’s specific colonial history, traditions of national minority cultures, migration laws, politics and factors such as the need for labour power playing a part.

Moreover, globalisation and internationalisation are ambiguous and contradictory processes, creating tendencies for increased global exchange, interdependency and increased homogenisation, while also creating tendencies for increased differentiation and heterogeneity as well as unique, specific differences based on ethnicity, gender, nationality, class, sexual orientation and age.

As active agents dealing with these issues in a contemporary society, museums move slowly, tentatively and hesitantly towards their positions. We search for and grapple with new forms of cultural representation that both reflect and transcend the asymmetrical power relationships of majority and minority cultures.

As museums venture into the complex and contradictory areas of migration representations we need to affirm our commitment to the values of cultural diversity and pluralism as sources of cultural wealth. We have to be committed to policies of integration and co-existence rather than the assimilation of cultural differences. We must celebrate cultural diversity as an enrichment of our cultural and heritage value systems, rather than perceive diversity as a threat. We need to re-examine and cut through the choice that often haunts the heritage sector and museums between preserving a given culture and opening it up for dynamic cultural development. The policies governing our practice must be based on the awareness that cultural pluralism and cultural participation are essentially closely related.

History and identity Museums are institutions of history and identities. But the prevalent theories of identity formation during the previous centuries have mirrored a specific political and social reality, forging or framing our thinking in static, almost deterministic or naturalistic norms of identity based on place, territory, history and the nation state. The theoretical concepts or scientific paradigms have in themselves been a hindrance to broadening the field of perception and interpretation.

As museums we need to re-negotiate our versions of history and re-orient our understanding of these concepts of identity so that we can begin to perceive identity as process and interpretation rather than as destiny or an essential given.

Museums explore the relationship between history and identity transmitted through objects and memories. Through objects and collections, museums tie together the formation of personal and individual identity with the formation of cultural identity. In traditional museums, as in traditional psychological theory, memories, history and identity are fundamentally linked. The past is given immense importance in the way it is thought to define or determine people’s present and present identities.

For museums to reach a more adequate understanding of contemporary identities

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– identities in contemporary contexts – we need to let go of the stasis of these theoretical concepts. This is even more important if museums are to come to terms with or empathize with the processes of migration, and diasporas in particular.

The meanings of the complex mixture of coercion, force, need and choice within the process of migration and diasporas only emerge or are disclosed when viewed as dynamic rather than static expressions of culture. And in many ways museums can be ideal platforms for exploring these complex dynamics.

People used to talk about identity as something one had. As if one had a specific identity given once and for all. As if identity was a constant and static entity. As if identity was the sum of memories. As if identity was made up of the past. As if identity was very closely related to destiny. As if identity was almost related to and a part of nature.

But identities are continuously re-negotiated on a personal level. They modify and change when people’s lives go through changes. Identity is also in transit when a person moves from one realm, culture or country to another. In transitions, the elements of people’s identities are multiplied, hyphenated; they double and triple. Elements overlap, fragment and merge; they divide, hybridise and fuse. And the most fundamental or defining elements at any given point in time obviously vary – both in one’s own consciousness and in the eyes of others. It is more productive to reflect the real life at the present time, and consider identity not as a given or an entity – but as a construct, a personal choice, a personal interpretation of whatever situation, conditions and prospects a person is given.

About the future as much as about the past In museums we have tended to essentialize identity, freeze it, make it definite and one-dimensional. Most people recognize this in the very crude and a-historical forms in which gender is represented in museums. But it is equally true for the museums or schools of thought working with ethnicity. Here, people are also frozen into representations of an ethnic and cultural purity that was itself an illusion in the first place.

A concept of identity is needed that is as much about the future as it is about the past, and that deals as much with what a person or a community is trying to become as what it was. Museums need to develop a specific and precise reflection on and responses to people’s various needs during the different chapters of this process of continuously renegotiating identity. There are times when a person needs to strengthen and consolidate her identity as a woman, or as a Hindu, or as a Cap Verdian, whereas in other times and places she is concerned more about being a mother, a dentist, a supporter of the national tennis team, or with passing university entry exams.

To reflect the realities, life styles and expectancies of refugees, expatriates and migrants (or wanderers such as myself) museums need to develop more dynamic, changeable, composite – and often contradictory – concepts of identity that will allow us to span the continuous processes of change intellectually and emotionally.

During the later part of the 20th century these different and varying needs of identities in transition and re-negotiation have found their expressions in different types of museum initiatives – as initiatives within mainstream museums and as specialist projects and specialist museums. Recognition and respect for these diffe-

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rent needs and their different manifestations is crucial. As museums, we lose the credibility of our good intentions when we fail to appreciate the different expressions of ever-shifting identities as supplementary strategies – on both a personal and political level – and are unable to respond to real needs in the communities because of our own institutional oppositions, contradictions and politics.

To gain or maintain a position of trust and respect within our surrounding communities, the museum world itself needs all the supplementary approaches that we can develop. For instance, we need to reconcile the different traditions and strengths of mainstream and specialist museums. Old mainstream museums lend valuable authority to otherwise controversial issues. But they also tend to encounter new, inclusive initiatives in the areas of ethnicity, class or gender with - malevolent or benevolent - inertia. As the projects of certain committed individuals, these initiatives risk marginalization. Hence they can easily evaporate almost overnight if specific funding is withdrawn or the political climate changes. Specialist museums, on the other hand, ensure a continuous focus and ensure that these controversial and intellectually and emotionally difficult issues remain solidly embedded in the cultural discourse of contemporary society.

Sites of empowerment There are no easy answers to the question of what can make cultural institutions such as museums desirable or suitable as avenues of empowerment within, for instance, migrant communities. A prerequisite is a readiness for cultural partnership and public participation based on paradigms of difference rather than of sameness. In concrete terms, bridging the often implicit or unspoken gap between museums and communities in general – or between museums and migrant communities in particular – and inviting and encouraging inclusion and participation might translate into radical change in staff, boards, and policies.

Research conducted in Denmark indicated that public cultural institutions were the least integrated relative to other public sectors and commercial sectors such as the music industry. Minority groups were not seeking education aimed at the cultural sector. This seemed to be a double process – both an active process of excluding minority students through admittance criteria combined with a low priority placed on this field by the immigrant communities who felt a stronger need to establish themselves within medicine, engineering, law and other hard core fields.

The question is, can the museum be of the community, be part of the community? The grammatical and semantic structure of many texts dealing with the relationship between museums and, for instance, immigrant communities, carry a polarity between the subject/us/the museum and the object/them/the immigrant community. This subject/object division will not go away by itself, and will require very conscious and continuous counter-efforts. At the core of the dilemma is whether the museum, in both policies and practices, manages to become a site for representation and self-representation for the often muted and silenced voices of minority cultures – whether these be defined by ethnicity, gender, class, age or sexual orientation.

To move towards an inclusive rather than an exclusive concept of culture and identity also means to move towards interpretations that emphasize context, communi-

cation, exchange, continuity and similarities rather than separateness, borders and boundaries. This process poses a number of challenges to traditional scientific paradigms.

A shift in paradigms A radical shift in scientific paradigms and institutional values occurred (and is still occurring) in the 1970's and 1980's when people who were critical of the prevalent systems of power started identifying the output of scientific processes with who was in charge of the input. Critical thinking started connecting the type of scholarship, collection, analysis, categorization, narrative, documentation and not least interpretation with who conducted it. From a scholarly standpoint this represented an extremely radical break with centuries of refined scientific methods. It crossed every dogma of objectivity.

In cultural institutions, with their roots in this alternative or critical type of thinking, methods correspondingly become more personal. Identification and subjectivity become part of the method within collection, research, communication and exhibitions. Oral history, personal photographs, stories and other types of immaterial objects become part of the effort to get as close as possible to and be as authentic as possible towards the studied object and its specific and unique context.

A new epistemology emerged that did not measure truth by its distance to the subjective, as one of the philosophers of science in the 1980's so beautifully phrased it. Good or valid knowledge – objective knowledge – is no longer to be defined as the opposite of the subjective; things are not to be considered more truthful the less they relate to one's subjective reality. Instead, methods were developed that made conscious use of subjectivity as a unity of emotions and intellect, of thinking and feeling. These ways of working tended towards an almost therapeutic concept of becoming aware of and containing emotions rather than splitting them off and doing away with them; of knowing emotions and subjectivity and putting them to work – the wishful thinking, ambivalence, identifications, anger, sympathy and compassion.

Closing the subject/object gap requires a framework of shared authority for both the questions raised and the content produced. It implies recognition that training and skills in scientific methods provide one important set of qualifications, while personal rootedness provides another, and that these different approaches and different methods supplement each other. Practices based on partnership, dialogue and participation are necessary.

Beneath the surface: four examples To be partners in a process of empowerment for immigrant or other under-represented communities, museums need to examine their own practices beneath the surface of what they claim to be doing. A museum needs to read its own coordinates and adjust its recruitment policies if – as is much too often the case – the staff is white and wants to address and attract a non-white public, or the staff is old and wants to draw partnerships with younger groups, or

the institution is essentially straight and wants a dialogue with the gay community.

Through a series of special exhibitions and events the National Museum of Denmark experimented with developing partnerships and dialogue, blurring the boundaries between the museum and different communities and placing the museum in a more active role in a culturally diverse society.

One small exhibition portrayed five women who had successfully integrated into Danish society. Photographic portraits were supplemented with personal objects and personal possessions that for each of the women signified the transition between their country of origin and Denmark. Differences were pronounced between, for instance, a Pakistani woman's well-planned immigration with chests full of personal possessions, and an Iraqi refugee woman who had literally nothing – no objects – with her. She exhibited a couple of tiny scraps of paper on which she and her husband, in the airport, had made drawings of what they imagined this new place, this new country, this no-man's-land they were headed for might look like.

While this project from the museum's side was defined through collaboration with immigrant communities, a very important theme running through the content was that of differences in migration circumstances. The so-called immigrant experience is not by any measure identical.

A fun and unusual example was a joint project with the Philippine community in Copenhagen, in which the old and ultra-respectable museum was wrapped in the most extravagant, frivolous, over-the-top electronic Philippine Christmas decorations that changed one's view of Christmas ever after.

A third example was an interactive exhibition on being a refugee and seeking asylum, created with various refugee and international organizations. It was a cross-disciplinary and cross-sectional exhibition integrating elements from exhibitions, theatre performance and education that evoked the fear, panic, anger and impotence of the refugee's situation. It was an experience that took the museum into deeper waters than it knew how to navigate. But it was also an experiment that showed the real potential of the museum and the exhibition medium, and it laid bare how small a fraction of this extremely powerful medium museums normally explore.

A last example from the National Museum of Denmark is the Diversity 2000 exhibition. Every week throughout the year 2000 this exhibition was increased by one new object, chosen in partnership by a member of the museum staff and a person of their choice from the outside. New meaning was created and new associations were revealed. Traditional museum visitors were somewhat astonished when the famous Gundestrup cauldron, the ultimate national treasure, was exhibited by the museum director in partnership with a Roma accordion player from the Balkan area from which the cauldron originates. Their exhibition partnership was based on their shared love of music. A young curator had as her partner the anti-nuclear league. Their object was a scrap of the unsinkable Swedish ship that was supposed to carry nuclear waste from Barsebäck, but which ran to ground right after leaving the

harbour. Worth remembering is the latent tension, unease and hostility within the museum when a medieval church key was chosen by a head attendant and a young Turkish transsexual man/woman. For them, the key was a metaphor for both safety and openness, for freedom of expression, absence of fear and willingness to let new things in. As the exhibition grew, people started coming to the museum as individuals or as organizations asking to be included and represented in the exhibition.

A road of hard issues A large and challenging project is being conducted by the Museum of World Culture in Sweden involving Gothenburg citizens with a personal background and cultural heritage in the Africa Horn area. The project includes documentation of the museum's collections from the Africa Horn area. Individual narratives and oral history projects have blossomed and the project is developing as part of one of the new museum's opening exhibitions. The hope is that it will validate the personal histories for a number of people who have systematically been silenced as well as for some who have had quite traumatic personal diasporic transitions. It is also hoped that it will validate the formal and informal labour market qualifications for the participants and widen their range of choices. It will obviously deepen and broaden the provenance of the museum's collections and will hopefully create a sense of ownership for a population that does not normally visit museums or other cultural institutions. It is a project paved with good intentions and fraught with dilemma on all levels.

New museums dealing with contemporary issues have a clear responsibility to combine traditional academic knowledge with the expertise that lies in a more personal and subjective rootedness in a given theme.

For museums to initiate or to house projects of empowerment for multiple voices implies choosing a road of hard issues, conflict and confrontation with their own colonial paternalism, prejudice, bigotry, chauvinism and racism. But there seems no easy way around this. The revitalization of museums lies in transcending the boundaries between our community and ourselves.

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