

Collecting the Contemporary in the Imagined City

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Abstract

Collecting the contemporary is hot. More and more cultural museums look beyond their walls and go out into the street searching for contemporariness. This transformation towards an open and audience-centred institution is still far from complete. Many museums face certain obstacles and issues on this journey. In my talk I would like to focus on three of these issues, seen from the perspective of a cultural scientist. The talk ends by discussing the concept of the Imagined City.

It's undeniable: collecting the contemporary is hot. More and more cultural museums look beyond their walls and go out into the street searching for contemporariness. What's motivating them?

At the basis of this development appears to be a more fundamental shift in the social role and significance of museums – a shift that started in the 1970's and is still far from complete. The classic function of the museum, as a temple and patron of cultural heritage, is no longer an apt label to most people. There is a call for change, both from within the ranks of museums as well as on the level of governmental policies. The museum as such needs to transform from a closed and elite institution into an open venue aimed at a broader audience. Limiting a collection to the highlights of art and culture as landmarks of a national history does no longer suffice. At the same time, our notion of cultural heritage itself has been widened to include other domain of culture, such as intangible heritage, digital heritage or popular heritage.

Traditionally, the museum took upon itself the task to categorize and explain the world. This purpose is now a point of discussion. In the present postmodern era not only are the traditional museological categories called into question, but also the proces of categorization itself. Museums realise there is no such thing as an 'objective' exhibition and that they do not represent but rather construct cultures. The linear timeframe of their exhibitions construct the myth of progress. And exhibitions focusing on a specific place or social group actively construct the myth of a homogeneic identity.

A curator used to be able to call upon the status of objective professional, but nowadays he is well aware that his or her vision is in the end also no more than a relative and subjective interpretation of reality. As possible counterbalance to this prejudice it has been tried to involve the visitor in the process of interpreting reality. Thus promoting the visitor to co-curator, as a form of 'cooperative documentation' or 'co-ownership'.

These different and not always interrelated developments have led to a growing attention to contemporary culture: to objects and stories originating from the scene and recent history of living audiences. The great stories about heroes from the past have to give up an increasing amount of space to stories about and of 'ordinary people' in the here and now.

Presently, in 2010, this museological revolution is far from over; the transformation towards an open and audience-centred institution started more than 30 years ago and who knows when it will be complete. Many museums face certain obstacles and issues on this journey. In my talk today I would like to focus on three of these issues, seen from the perspective of cultural science. I do hope of course that some of this will be familiar from your own museological practices, thereby offering points for discussion.

First of all, museums of culture with an explicit interest in contemporary culture are now faced with the question: Where lie the beginning and end of the 'contemporary' and how to collect it? If everything 'ordinary' is interesting, then pretty much everything is interesting. Collecting what is contemporary and putting it on display is in that sense a never-ending activity. When the audience is involved in the collecting process choices will nevertheless be inevitable. In the long run choices will have to be made as to what of 'the Now' will be collected and exhibited and what not. As stated earlier, purely 'objective' or 'neutral' collecting is a myth.

Seen from my own perspective as a cultural scientist, one of the most important criteria would be whether there exists an interesting or remarkable history of use, by means of which an object can be placed in a broader sociocultural context. When collecting contemporary objects the focus should not be so much on the objects themselves, but rather on the way in which these objects have been used and how this usage has affected the objects. In other words, the focus should be on the changing significance to various people or social groups that objects may have had throughout the course of history. Here, to quote the words of Dutch ethnologist Gerard Rooijackers, one should focus on the 'cultural biography' of an object.

For example: we could go to a Marks & Spencer outlet today, buy up their complete shelf stock, transfer it from shop to museum and put it on display as a prime example of contemporary material culture. Something not entirely unlike this has been done by the Freilichtmuseum Kommeren, which bought up a complete IKEA inventory for this purpose. Nevertheless, this type of initiative is – at

least from the stance of a cultural scientist – rather useless. The Marks & Spencer or IKEA inventory might be of interest to a design museum, but what a cultural history museum or museum of ethnology ought to focus on, in my view, are used items from Marks & Spencer or IKEA. Items which have collected tiny teenage doodles, half-removed superhero stickers, food scraps in the deepest crannies or secret notes in hidden nooks....

This train of thought can lead to only one conclusion: collecting too hastily and too instantly is of no use. It would be better to let a few years pass. The passage of time and generations is what really leaves ‘fingerprints’ on an object and renders it ever more interesting. What is the use of museumifying the Now when its objects do not provide any information about their owners or even about people in general? Therefore it seems better to outsource collecting and storage of contemporary objects to the people in general and to second hand shops, dump stores and similar companies in particular. Without the addition of time the object is not yet of any museological value and is better left to mature.

Of course the history of use is not the only criterion for selection. Important is furthermore whether objects have a symbolic surplus value: whether they form part of a greater story which resonates with a wider audience. We are after all, not interested in every random anecdote of usage history. The move beyond Modernity’s ‘great stories’ should not result in a cloud of irrelevant micro-stories and anecdotes. I will get back to this point later, but first I’d like to treat another question.

The second issue I would like to discuss today concerns the strong fixation on migrant cultures. In my opinion, many initiatives for collecting the Now lead to a disproportionate amount of attention to migrant groups, while ignoring the everyday life of a host of other groups, for instance today’s nouveaux riches. This fixation on migrant cultures results often in a blissful celebration of cultural diversity in which not a single critical note is heard. The attention to immigrant cultures in history museums and museums of ethnography usually amounts to a display of the life of migrants as a beautiful, modern and dynamic mix of cultural influences and traditions. Exhibitions on migrant cultures thus usually take the form of safe stories, which have undergone a politically correct treatment to make any raw bits of reality more palatable. As a rule controversial subjects are avoided. A classic example, void of any controversy, is food culture – one of the few realms where multiculturalism does seem to be able to claim broad public support.

The same problem arises with exhibitions based on forms of ‘cooperative documentation’, that is, in collaboration with the audience. Ask people for something to be exhibited and they will provide the objects and stories they want to put on display: items they are proud of or which have a personal nostalgic value. This quickly leads to a one-dimensional and hardly unexpected type of story, with no flip sides, no critical comments and no underlying, deeper story. Strolling

through such exhibitions you can't help but wonder: Whatever happened to the clashes between individuals, cultures and social groups? Are those not integral parts of modern life in European cities? Culture is as much about community and sharing as it is about conflict, power struggles and clashes. This 'conflict value' of cultures is nowadays often underdeveloped in museums of cultural history and ethnography and the result is a missed opportunity for curators and organisers of exhibitions.

All this is connected to the social task museums take upon themselves. When reasoning from the ideal of social inclusion the natural response is to only present positive, safe stories, but is that indeed the sole and proper solution? Or should museums take a further step back and dare to address issues such as social problems and clashes, aimed at finding solutions by means of discourse, controversy and growing awareness?

I'd like to illustrate this using the subject of this specific conference: Entrepreneurs behind small and medium-sized businesses in Europe, especially from migrant families. This type of theme means we should beware of uncritical celebration of the entrepreneurship of these migrants and glorifying the cultural mix exemplified by what they produce. Rather, we should also look at the problems these entrepreneurs are confronted with, at the way in which they have to mediate between various groups and have to stifle potential conflict. Small entrepreneurs are often the cultural brokers between different groups of the population. The same used to apply to the classic corner shop; often literally on the corner between different neighbourhoods with different social profiles. There, traditionally the shopkeeper had to navigate his way between different social classes, whereas he or she is now often confronted with various ethnic groups which have greatly divergent cultural patterns and expectations. By looking at entrepreneurs in this fashion, as cultural brokers, we not only learn something about the person in question, but also about the cultural scenes they belong to and the codes pertaining to these different scenes.

The third issue I would like to discuss is the perceived lack of interest from intended audiences. Put simply the question arises: Who wants exhibitions about contemporary culture in which 'ordinary people' play the central role? The number of visitors these types of exhibitions draw in always lags far behind the initial expectations. A cynic might say that the group on exhibit is the only one at the exhibit. Or worse still: often not even that group turns up. When reaching out to the audience is one of the underlying motives of taking on contemporary culture, then this issue certainly is a particularly pressing and painful one.

What can be the reason behind this disinterest? Modernism is based on the idea that there is such a thing as a community – a togetherness, an organic society seen as an unity by the individuals within it. But to what extent is this still applicable in 2010? What could be posed with similar conviction is that our society consists purely of separate splinter groups which ignore each other comple-

tely and only have eyes for the needs of the own group. The sociologist Maffesoli calls this 'the time of the tribes'. According to him the Era of Collectivism and the subsequent Era of Individualism are over. Everyone has retreated into small 'tribes', or if you wish: into small group cultures. Seen from this perspective it is not surprising that there is hardly an audience for exhibits on contemporary everyday culture of a specific group. Because, well, why would people be interested in objects and stories of a different tribe? To pull these people in they need to be offered more – they need to feel involved. To them it is a matter of recognition, identification, purpose.

And that's where the bottleneck seems to be: how can we – museums of ethnography or cultural history – document and exhibit the Now in such a way that a broad target group is addressed, intrigued and made to feel involved, at least involved enough to look beyond the boundaries of the own tribe, visit the exhibition and have that visit be meaningful or worthwhile to themselves? All this in line with the original objective of the museum.

To try and find an answer to this question, we ought to search for a greater story; a story which is not restricted to one specific group, but one that offers relevance to various social groups. A story that combines grand narratives (or a discussion thereof) with more intimate and personal perspectives, and shows how these public and personal realms are always intertwined. A story which not only celebrates the aspects of diversity and familiarity we are at ease with, but one which also provides room for tension, conflict and confrontation, and where the museum is careful not to be judgemental or patronising. Good drama needs conflict, and so do good exhibitions.

When this is applied to the context of city museums – as is the case today – we ought to search for a greater story about the essence of the city. This quest starts with the question: What constitutes a city in the first place? What makes a city more than the sum of its streets, squares, buildings and space between? These are only physical objects in their own right, which do not have all that much in common when compared to similar objects outside the city limits. Despite this absence of a clear-cut physical identity, the city is nevertheless experienced as an organic and real unity by inhabitants and tourists alike. The city exists, but only in the heads of the people.

In my latest book, entitled *Places of the Imagination*, which is due in Spring 2011, I write about the phenomenon of geographical imagination. Every human being carries with him a mental map of the world. We have a coherent mental picture of many cities, regions and countries, often without having been there at all. This image of other cities is on the one hand personal, but nevertheless also a shared collective process: culture gives us certain visual icons and stories, on the basis of which we construct an image of Paris or London and based on which we feel connected to certain cities or regions. As the Chinese-American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan writes, we humans are topophiles: we want to link our identity to

specific places and we want to belong somewhere; have a home, and surrogate homes. We want to be part of a community – or to be more precise: to be part of an imagined community.

The Italian author Italo Calvino wrote a novel about invisible cities: imaginary cities each of us carry with us. According to Calvino it is not possible to get to know a city properly by looking at a map or its architecture. The real essence of a city lies hidden in immaterial aspects: in the hopes, dreams, fantasies and fears which are present in the city or which have been projected upon it throughout time. Other authors and philosophers have written in the same fashion about the ‘the city of the mind’ or ‘the mental map of a city’.

The challenge museums face consists of bringing to life this (what one could call) imagined city, including its hopes as well as its nightmares, and to offer visitors the opportunity of a guided tour of their own imagination. This quest consists of two parts. Firstly, there is the way in which the city has been depicted throughout time: the representations of the city in art, literature and contemporary forms of popular culture. The narratives that are carved out in the streets, houses and squares. Secondly, there is the representation of the city on a personal and experimental level: the process by which individuals and groups perceive and have perceived their own urban environment, based on sensory impressions and spatial imagination. It is precisely this combination of personal experience, creative reflections, popular mediations and architectural visions which can truly bring the imagined city to life.

Of course this combination should not be confined to the walls of the museum. The point of departure ought to be the city itself: present day Liverpool, Amsterdam, Berlin or Barcelona, where the museum spans the city like an octopus with tentacles branching in all directions and (albeit not necessarily) with the actual museum-building acting as the main body of this octopus. Not until then can objects and stories be experienced in their proper setting without the alienation intrinsic to all types of museumification.

To conclude: In my opinion, the fundamental transformation towards an open and audience-centred institution is still far from complete. Many museums still face certain obstacles and issues on this journey. In my talk I have focused on three of these issues: 1) finding relevant selection criteria for collecting and exhibiting the present; 2) the dangers of limiting oneself to ‘safe stories’; 3) the difficulties of reaching out to a larger audience.

Underlying these three issues is the quest for a greater, overarching story: a story of the city which will help us to overcome the before mentioned difficulties. One possible solution that I have put forward today is the concept of the imagined city: the way in which mental and mediated representations of the city intertwine with the lived experience of people from diverse social groups. By bringing to attention this imagined city – making it possible to be read in the real world, with the internal processes of imagination of the visitor as a guiding principle,

we the museums, do not only document our times, but also submerge ourselves in the deeper layers of contemporary culture. Thus we can engage the symbolic machinery – the collective imagination at work. That ought to be our objective: have museums be the engine rooms of our imagined city, and not merely the display cabinet of times gone by...

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Personalia

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