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EUROPEAN COLLECTION RESOURCES − MUSEUMS SERVING EUROPEAN IDENTITY

The local or national identities are a reading of the ultimate *differentia specifica* within the wider scope of, in this case, European heritage. Therefore, in order to retain diversity within equality and common, shared features, there is an implicit expectation that identities are to be recognised, studied, cared for, and communicated to the collective self(-ves) as well as to the others. The basis of this rich and creative working process, which is peculiar to all public memory institutions (but not limited to them) are collections.

The notion of 'building up identities' should be understood in this way; to invent the identities as projections of desired self would be opposite to their implied nature[1]. It is a task to which museums may be central by way of the attractiveness of their communicational nature and the fact that they mostly collect three-dimensional, palpable, and authentic objects, acquiring thereby specific relevance. However, as we move on, we increasingly perceive that present and future will face us with the challenge of all public memory institutions and actions working together in a multitude of ways. Besides for the usual objects as testimonies of conquest (of other cultures and of nature) or possession (all treasures turned into museums) or simply collected because of their superlative values (oldest, rarest, most precious), we will increasingly choose *trivialia* and *quotidiana* as the inevitable basis of new discourse. The notion of collection will expand, and so will the network.

No matter how they come about or what they consist of, it is important that collections retain credibility. Institutions will have their European exhibitions, European rooms, and spaces where they will show the European contribution wherein a certain culture has added to the common denominator of the European identity. This communicational capacity and demand will have to be supported by adequate collecting, networking, and communicational strategy.

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[1] We are always exposed to such a process, however. The historical time for this anomaly was especially the process of forming nation states and issuing national identities, but any branding effort will always challenge our integrity in evaluating heritage.

Incited by theory and practice, the reality changes. Therefore, in regarding collecting from such a vast panoramic standpoint, its nature will change and make it more efficient. Database reality, although its roots are in our scientific or poetic capacities, has an incredible ability to assist not only our memory but also our imagination. Synthetic, animated virtual worlds constructed from/upon (now we see more than ever) rather unattractive fragments of former reality, not only represent an immense interpretative tool, but they also change our notion of the object of collecting.

Whose voice is being heard? Who tells the story?

As museums are nowadays communicational institutions for the most part (though, of course, based upon research and scientific arguments), their acquisition policy must be of the same. The sought after effects upon the community or society will increasingly determine this policy. Squeezed by rising democratic standards, the average Eastern-European politicians, for example, give priority to short-term effects and quick interventions[2]. Collecting never figures as important enough on their agenda: too slow, and too long-term. Therefore, it is only the profession itself that can make a difference. How? By research and documenting the changing spirit of time and its value systems, in turn making it capable of assisting democracy by offering ready insight into the themes of interest.

Profession(-alism) consists of values, rules and strategies, − acquires importance and a high position in society's decision making. Acquiring the trans-generational responsibility by insisting upon an obligatory transfer of professional experience, we can assure long-term policy and strategy. By this transcendence from personal to the collective, we need to come of age, − from occupation to a grand profession. This would decisively change whose voice is being heard. This transfer of the focus, and of the centre of gravity, is what will also change collecting. Expressions such as 'my museum', 'my collection', 'my archive', 'our sector', etc. will dissolve in new creative responsibility. All that we have, as 'ours', is a common mission within the public memory and the issuance of 'our' part in the societal project.

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[2] ...which is, in fact, a democratic procedure, devoid of credible information and turned into a media show where nobody discusses the merit of things but rather the tittle-tattle about candidates, − often financed and orchestrated by power groups, whether domestic or foreign.

When this is about daily institutional heritage practice, communication officers (whether specialised or partially engaged in it) tell a story, − are supposed to convey the sets of messages of which most institutions disposes. Some do. However, the story is often not told at all, because what is offered is facts that could serve a story. When told, it makes the story possible, but most probably not the needed one, because museums are implicitly about governing a value system or being based upon it. That brings us to the questions that are outside of our competence, in that the 'norm' or prevailing idealist project may colour most of our performances[3]. The lack of broad professional vision within the civil allegiance to collective and individual liberty and the lack of disposition to offer significance to the non-goers and minority groups, in turn contributes, albeit unintentionally, to a lack of tolerance, − a problem in the West and a menace in Eastern Europe.

The voice that we hear in most heritage institutions is that of the ruling (complex and often incoherent) establishment. At worst, or best, if you like, − when museums are of no concern to power holders, − they speak the language of science, − an anonymous voice coded by its complexity and aloof by its 'historical distance', but certainly not false. Therefore, what they convey to their social environment usually does not correspond to its needs, − with no reference to the major problems of the community. That makes museums, of which most are still financed by public funds, a part of the problem, and not a part of the solution.

How do collections respond to the needs of the public?

Historically, many collections were formed in order to confer prestige upon, or to assure the immortality of, their owners. A fixation on materiality, exclusivity, and the superlative in turn made many a collection a rather vainglorious project. In addition, the scientific ambition and use of collections was directed towards the production of knowledge. This was the omnipotent remedy for all the problems of humankind, and museums were supposed to create it, care for it, and distribute it. Born of the dramatic acceleration in socio-economic change during the Industrial Revolution, modern museums were supposed to save the evidence of what was disappearing for the sake of remembrance and knowledge − in the form of collections. (A cynic would also have it that a bad conscience might have played a part here).

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[3] Any societal project is based upon a vision, but liberal capitalism does not seem to have any ideology, however unattainable, that would guide us. Therefore, outside of a broad concept of humanist ethics, we seem to have no other recourse.

However, disappearing cultures cannot be preserved, and heritage cannot remain productive, simply by collecting objects. As soon as education became the primary goal of museums, traditional collections started to be questioned. How can one successfully educate, let alone communicate, on an orientation that invests in scientific perfection and the completeness of a collection rather than in its capacity of interpretation?

Today, the fascination with the palpable, original object has become harnessed in the twin goals of advanced interpretation and effective communication with the museum user. The traditional museum has the potential to become a medium of social communication, in which solutions to contemporary problems can be negotiated. Collecting and the museum have been radically reformed, via innovative collecting practices, including 'communicational collecting', the distribution of collections and virtual collections. Instead of knowledge that is supposedly neutral and subject to either indifference or manipulation, collections are starting to serve wisdom, as effective, ethical, and usable knowledge. Our aim should be to create heritage institutions that are a part of a social guidance system, in turn leading to sustainable development and the achievement of shared goals. In the face of the commodification of the planet, collections must reflect what should be the overall objective of the heritage arena: namely, the realisation of the common good. Thus, they will change the very nature of their institutions from vanity and mere knowledge to wisdom (which is moral, responsible knowledge), so that collecting will serve communication and sustainable development.

How collections can be used and communicated

The real network that forms the physical substance of an imaginary Museum of Europe, if there should be one, − could be an open structure, cumulative and anticipatory in the developing destiny of Europe. Europe needs to be communicated, and that can be done best if we forget the old structures and their divisions, or, even better, if we derive from them an inspiration for a new strategy. Collections can be used and enriched in their reflecting the common denominators of European identity.

Living in the age of heritage, museums only comprise one part of it, so that what we should take into account is the existence of many heritage institutions that form a single capacity to be used. A network may be a part of the practical implications, but what we are speaking

about here is a change of attitude, and a different, advanced professional philosophy. All collections, whether a part of living traditions, museums, archives, knowledge banks or virtual museums, with collectors and individual owners of heritage, − all the places and circumstances of identity recourse, have to be 'assembled' and regarded as a common capacity, and as a common resource. Hybrids, as they will all become in various ways, will behave as real and virtual, − depending upon the changing function and respective need that they have to fulfil. They will form a constant pulsating pool, in turn sharing resources and acting according to the concerted action that they will mend.

Once we acquire total insight, we get a chance to play with it, − to use it creatively in order to form responses to the detected needs: of communities (on whatever level) or even of the 'market' or whatever our own specific notion of it may be. Our stakeholders will recognise the benefits of the powerful field of counter-active memory, − as the one that will be used as a corrective and adaptive mechanism that is added wisely to the forces of change. They will not oppose the change. They will rather help moderate it into a meaningful quality, 'down' to the very individual, who is all too often lost in solitude, ignorance, and despair.

Of course, as our practices demonstrate, it is much easier to create an endless multitude of European projects and associations than to change the approach to heritage institutions as a common, flexible network belonging to the same (mega-profession) as well as the same professional philosophy. Whether we are speaking about new museology, heritology, or mnemosophy[4] will matter rather little the very moment that the majority agrees to pass a certain common training for basically the same job that we all do (in our own specific ways): collect, care for, and communicate public memory. Why would we need a theory for that? We need such because a mega-profession mentality is not going to pop up by itself. It will rather come about by constant training and creating a different professional philosophy. Except for the most notorious innovative examples, most curators, archivists, or librarians still see neither the challenging similarity in their expertise nor the need for re-definition and ascent to another level of professionalism. The latter would also comprise linking themselves to their counterparts in the database sector or among private collectors, or even private or legal subjects in possession of one or more objects of public interest.

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[4] Šola, T. (1997) Essays on Museums and their Theory − Towards the Cybernetic Museum, Helsinki: The Finnish Museums Association.

Redefining the relation between collecting, research, and communication

Collecting is often circumstantial. If we forget the splendid exceptions, most museum collections do not adequately reflect the title of the museum that contains those bears. They are the result of various historical conditions, of bequests, donations, grants, and acquisitions. However, even if corresponding more to their contents, museums should not interpret collections. They should rather interpret the identity that they are there for, in turn using collections to their best ability. New technologies are increasingly able to assist us in an unprecedented way. To make it an obvious, possible, and unifying task, we first need to regard all the institutions as integral parts of the same sector.

The aim is to enable an effective navigation through data and knowledge bases in order to retrieve the multidisciplinary content when it is necessary. Communication, strategically recognised as the ultimate vehicle of the societal imprint of these institutions, will only then be possible. Multidisciplinarity, even in trans-sectoral and transnational proportions, should lead to dynamic project orientation.

The science *eo ipso* will cease to be the prevailing source of strategic decisions in collecting: instead, they will derive from the scientific study of the needs of the final users of the heritage sector's products. Needless to say, those products will have to be convincingly honest and usable in order to assure their longevity and cost-effectiveness. It is understood that we never see cultural institutions as a profitable sector in a direct sense.

What can protect us best then from a vulgar or suicidal deviation from the development of firm, professional criteria and standards? That is by definition applied by a scientific approach. As museums change their priorities because of their being forced by the research of the market and situation analysis, their demand for scientific research may seemingly suffer. It may well be that quite a number of museums will not be able to maintain their ideal standards of scientific research. In some cases, it will be enough to make a better division of labour and in others to partly outsource the job, counting on natural partners, such as institutes and universities. Solutions like this, rather painful and undesired for the present specialists of academic disciplines who are working as curators, may seem a powerful tool for future, trained and self conscious museologists. The latter will understand that collecting will be a

matter of ever new deals, policies, and strategies. Commonly managed dislocated storages and care, pools and networks that will include other owners of heritage objects and information, such as legal bodies, corporations, communities, and even individuals, will form the future cumulative collection, sparing thereby the resources and adding to the versatility of the programme.

Collections will be subdued by way of a shift of significance from the original objects to an interpretive inventory. With new multimedia, 3D images and, in the near future with holographic images, into which the users will be able to enter in a literal sense and metaphorically, − we face challenges to originality and authenticity that must, and certainly will, change us. The museums of original objects and that precious, almost fetishist touch will never disappear, but will shift towards a more subtle poetic, artistic language. Public memory institutions, museums included, will change by addition, not by reducing their potential. Their collections will decrease in their particular importance, whereas their *right* to a certain theme or heritage will grow. This will lead to an array of extremely creative para-museal establishments. Copies and reconstructions on the spots that have 'the right' and still bear the potential of *'genius loci'* will increasingly be a legitimate practice. Parallel to it, their obligation to the community or a group that they are responsible to, will count more seriously. 'Value for money' will be universally hated by heritage practitioners, but new professionals, as they will emerge, will take up the challenge so as to transform museums into the proverbial laps of ancestors, where nice and horrible stories will be told in a variety of impressive and convincing ways, − a communication and the appropriate expression that are formed at the creative confluence of curatorial, scientific expertise, and artistic creation.

We shall constantly question ourselves as to whose past we document and communicate in trying to be socially responsible. In political correctness and honesty, shall we have to be able to say as to whose interests are reflected in our collections and what we are doing with them? This will bring forth the redefining of collecting along multiple lines:

- Conceptual: Product or process? Object or concept? Far past or immediate past included? We shall incline ourselves to collecting that will be able to show the processes more, and that will reveal the concepts beyond the physicality of the objects and draw the past as close to us as possible.

- Proprietary: Who is the true, natural owner? Taxpayers? Yes, but the common good

  shall define collecting as serving democracy and properly reflecting it. Collections of
  the powerful and their values will become history.

- Informational: Heritage is information, in character and spread. This being the basic

  fact, we shall do away with the present limits: no matter in which form, where from or
  what, − information will count in order to form a 'meme', units of memory to be
  communicated.

- Professional: 'De-professionalisation' as a policy of the total museum, will simply mean

  that we shall adopt the language of life, will constantly re-define and re-conceptualise
  our institutions in order to adjust to the changing circumstances and ever new needs.
  This will include, to the extent possible, all of our working processes, collecting
  included.

- Organisational: Co-ordination, pools, re-distribution, new partnerships, − all that along

  the changing lines of interest, and as a constant giving and return. Fifty marble busts
  deposited in the eternal darkness of the basement museum storage will be better off than
  in any public space. We shall judge the balance of risk and 'profit' differently.

- Intentional: What is the final use of the material, institutions, working process, and

  actions? Common good. Ennobled present and safe future. The method can only be one,
  − that of a corrective and adaptive nature, assisting thus the quality of the inevitable
  change.

In this respect, the entire memory collected comprises component collections that may be
placed and used by particular interests, but becomes a unified resource at the highest level of
practice and by the most general theory that explains them as occupations of an imaginary, but
rather certain, mega-profession. Collections have to be known and evaluated in order to make
part of the common resource, which will not care for their proper divisions by theme,
medium, ownership, provenance, administration, or whatever. Once in need, they would be
called on for temporary exhibitions of three-dimensional objects or imaginary, permanent
exhibitions with whatever subject that we might have the need for at the given time.

Different occupational traditions (archives, museums, libraries) may, therefore, merge and be complemented by the immense potential of information and communication technologies in which digitisation makes storage, retrieval, and manipulation a different, astonishing endeavour that not only influences traditional institutions, sometimes at the level of hybrid institutions, but also creates its own variety, − digitally born institutions and collections accordingly. It is not a question of whether we shall face this challenge but rath how shall we turn it into powerful tools of our renewed perspectives.

We are already creating digitally born public memory institutions (such as *Europeana* and *Open Library*), which are a type of composite heritage projects that could function according to the needs, expectations, and resources available. There is an astounding number of institutions, so complex in their nature and some nearly temporary in their processual, pulsating nature that they deny any sort of easy classification. What are they? Museums, documentation centres, heritage centres, archives, social action centres, libraries, etc.[5] It is hard to tell, and maybe not at all important, because they will change tomorrow following the current life circumstances and the need to closely respond to the changing needs of their community or target group.

Whose culture should collections represent?

All cultures will have their practiced traditions as emanations of living heritage, their collections in public memory institutions will be accumulated evidence for communicating their heritage, and other public and private subjects as well as the 'mnemosphere' will be the gigantic mega brain as a result, and as a reflection of their nature. Therefore, we may only question if this is carried out in a satisfactory way, or re-consider the situation upon some analysis. If the conclusion is that imperfections would have to be dealt with, then even present collections may make part in the problem. A trained professional from the heritage field would be able to detect whether some heritage is represented correctly or adequately. With identities, it is more difficult, but, then again, a trained person would know that heritage can be shared, but identity cannot. Far from wanting to complicate the matter, the claim should be clear: professionalism.

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[5] See http://www.ns-dokumentationszentrum-muenchen.de/zentrum; http://www.museenkoeln.de/ns-dok/.

The occupations within the domain of public memory will have to (constantly) redefine their mission. Many will rightfully rely upon their historic image, some will have to return to the primary motives of their founders, and others will have to re-invent themselves altogether. The variety of cases is enormous, and so is their position and responsibility within. Therefore, there is no one recipe. In general, conceiving a mission statement for each museum and revising it every five to ten years will be a good method to understand oneself within the changing circumstances. Who are the stakeholders, what is the public, who are the users and non-users, what are the needs that are the reasonable professional agenda of the institution? Some societies have changed and so should their institutions. No change should be aggressive so that it may happen as an adjustment or through an addition (of a new institution, wing, collection, set of activities, etc.). A community having become multiethnic has to deal with that fact even in their public memory institutions.