



## INTANGIBLE HERITAGE & THE MUSEUM IN AN AGE OF SUPERDIVERSITY

### POSITION PAPER

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In this position paper we focus on the question of how museums can find new roles in a more (ethnically) diversified society. New demographic realities pose challenges for larger conurbations in which museums should also play a role. Not least is the challenge of what English sociologist Steven Vertovec has called the challenge of superdiversity. This refers to a new demographic reality, a diversification of diversity in which city populations are more dynamic than ever before. Where until recently the challenge was mainly restricted to the integration of a limited group of migrants in a dominant 'white' heritage discourse, we now see much more diversification in which the notion of majority versus minority cultures is no longer relevant.

To name but one example: West-Kruiskade, a district in Rotterdam, the city that hosts our international conference and meeting of experts, presents us with more than 160 ethnicities from countries all over the world, migrated to Europe for a variety of reasons and with different social, economic and cultural backgrounds.

In a city district such as West-Kruiskade every group has become a minority including the former host culture. According to Vertovec and political thinkers as Homi K. Bhabha, this has led to new dynamics in society. In the past a huge amount of contact and exchange between different groups was already common, nowadays this exchange is the standard. People of different backgrounds meet each other in interactive social spaces that especially can be found in large city conurbations like Rotterdam, which Bhabha interprets as "contact zones". In

these “contact zones” ‘cultures’ do not remain unaltered and do not have a clearly delineated set of traditions. The coming together of many different ethnicities and traditions implies new dynamics of social cohesion. Old and new traditions are appropriated in a new and diverse context and new hybrid forms of culture arise. The approach of superdiversity focusses on difference not as a lack, but as a stimulus for interplay between various identities and a motor for creativity. The lens of superdiversity increases possibilities for people to negotiate and combine “several cultural repertoires that they can selectively deploy in response to the opportunities and challenges they face” (Levitt 2009: 1126). It also presents heritage institutions with new challenges.

## **NEW MUSEOLOGY**

Of course, it is possible to criticize the concept of superdiversity. If it is only applicable to large city conurbations, where does that leave the smaller cities and the countryside? Some would even argue that superdiversity is first and foremost a political concept, just as multiculturalism was before. But in reference to new demographic realities the concept of superdiversity is useful in raising our attention to new kinds of diversity. Our idea is that the intangible heritage perspective might be a useful starting point to address the challenge of superdiversity. This might be included in a shift for museums towards “new museology” and “socio-museology”. These two concepts imply that museums should take on crucial challenges of our time and play a social role in society. Social inclusion, community empowerment and museums as “contact zones” (Clifford) are the keywords in this context. These ideas are very much in line with the position of UNESCO about the central role the bearers of intangible heritage should play in heritage issues.

For the intangible heritage sector the focus on superdiversity opens new perspectives to interpret intangible heritage from a more dynamic, global perspective – heritage which is always on the move and becomes meaningful in ever changing fluid contexts. This focus shows that intangible heritage is NOT being carried by stable homogeneous groups, „distinct from the rest of society and lost in time”, as Ramon de la Combé once formulated it in a provocative way. Instead, heritage is about dynamics, flow, and fusion. It is determined by multiple perspectives. This means that different people have diverse ideas about a certain intangible heritage. These ideas can sometimes look very similar, however, they can also be different, competitive, and conflicting, and lead to controversies. As Richard Kurin has rightly remarked, cultural brokers should situate themselves in a contemporary world “of multiple, if not contending, cultural narratives” and give up the illusion of a singular, monological reality. It also invites us to think about the explicit reflection by Laurajane Smith as to whether the 2003 Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage challenges the Authorised Heritage Discourse.

This position paper suggests new perspectives on the role of museums and intangible heritage from ‘conservation’ towards ‘safeguarding’ based on a strong role for ‘communities, groups and individuals’ bearing intangible cultural heritage, which are interpreted as fluid and dynamic networks.

## **MUSEUMS AND THE CHALLENGE OF MIGRATION**

Our conference is about museums, intangible heritage and diversity. How have museums until now dealt with the diversity of society? Some Dutch examples: The Netherlands present us with a strong tradition in dealing with

diversity, in which museums have found the intangible perspective interesting because it offered them opportunities to include new ethnic groups in their heritage projects.

Museums like the Dutch Open Air Museum and city museums such as Amsterdam Museum and Museum Rotterdam already started experimenting in the eighties and nineties with inclusive approaches towards the new demographic realities. The Dutch Open Air Museum opened in 2012 (the plan making process already started in 2010) a Turkenpension originating from the Westerstraat in Amsterdam. It documented the migrant experience from the 'guest-workers' ['gastarbeiders' as they were called then] of the sixties and seventies. It also enriched the museum with a street from Amsterdam, unusual for a museum formerly specialized in presenting the history of the rural parts of the Netherlands. City museums like Amsterdam Museum and Museum Rotterdam started collecting objects and stories of newcomers. 'Anatolië in Amsterdam' is an early example from Museum Amsterdam from 1996, a photo-exhibition that was also aimed at collecting objects relating to the Turkish community within Amsterdam. Museums like Rotterdam Museum employed 'cultural scouts' to explore the cultural spaces and cultural objects that were relevant to the newcomers from abroad. At the turn of the century Museum Rotterdam experimented with what were then called 'Wijkcurators', more than just 'collectors', but curators who consulted with the local residents in what they would consider meaningful to be integrated in the museum collection. A new participatory way of collecting was born.

## **INTANGIBLE HERITAGE**

Perhaps not coincidentally during the same decades museums became more and more interested in what in the offspring of a new UNESCO convention was called the intangible cultural heritage. In the Netherlands the Dutch ministry of culture, and also funding agencies like the Mondriaan Foundation, suggested intangible heritage as a useful approach to address the heritage of newcomers, because, unlike the monumental heritage, it formed an integral part of the memories and practices you take with you moving to another country. The Mondriaan Foundation funded several museum projects focusing on collecting intangible heritage of newcomers, first on the migrant experience and later on also about traditions that UNESCO defined as intangible cultural heritage. The 'discovery' of intangible heritage was an international trend. Already in 2007, only one year after the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Heritage went into force, it became an integral part of the museum definition of ICOM: '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 the purposes of education, study and enjoyment' (ICOM Statutes, adopted by the 22nd General Assembly (Vienna, Austria, 24 August 2007).

All this coincided with a shift from an object-oriented approach to an approach focusing on 'meaning'. The new perception was that the story behind the object was just as important as the object itself. Museums began to collect personal narratives and experiences, with a strong focus on the newcomers who were underrepresented in the museum. 'Het geheugen van West' is a well-known example from Amsterdam Museum, an interactive website in which local residents from diverse off-spring could present their personal memories and experiences. A museum such as the Catharijneconvent, which highlights Christian heritage with the aim of getting better insight into our current society, started a project to document the 'pilgrim experience'. It documented the changing meaning and attitudes towards pilgrimage within what appeared to be a secularizing society. The project proved useful to document changing attitudes towards an age-old phenomenon in a changing society with more diversification and with more religions in a formerly almost exclusively Christian Europe.

## **MUSEUMS AND THE NEW SUPERDIVERSITY**

In these early years museums began to collect objects and stories from the new migrant groups, that differed from 'their own' culture. In this they adopted a more or less essentialist approach to the new 'other' cultures. With the new superdiversity there is a growing awareness that museums should be more attentive to the dynamics of culture. Through this they can avoid the pitfall of essentialism and go beyond dichotomous othering discourses in which "migrant" otherness is described as the opposite of the Self.

What makes intangible heritage attractive for museums to work with is its strong connection with 'meaning' and its connection with social practices important in processes of identification and social cohesion within society. Intangible heritage opens perspectives of working together with groups and networks in the process of heritage making. During that process, it is important to adopt an open and inclusive approach, in which negotiations and controversies about specific social practices and concerns surrounding objects and stories in connection with these social practices are taken into account and 'conflicts over identity and the politics of identification' are faced. Furthermore, museums should reflect on their own role as institutions that create identities and make heritage, which means to address questions of power. In this, a museum should be as open and inclusive as possible. 'Shared authority', introduced by the American scholar Michael Frisch, calls for a new role of museums in which the authority on what is displayed and what is not is shared with others. This asks for new forms of expertise of the museum professional, not just working with objects but also with people who function in ever changing, fluid networks.

## **CO-CREATION AND LABORATORIES OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE**

'Participatory collecting', 'connecting people', and 'listen to multiple networks around objects and stories' are the important key words. In this context the concept of co-creation was introduced and we would also like to suggest to adopt this concept in connection with heritage. The focus on intangible heritage implies a shift from 'heritage preservation' to 'safeguarding heritage' and 'heritage in the making', and a shift from 'heritage of the past' to 'heritage in the present and future' – for intangible heritage is by definition contemporary, dynamic culture. Furthermore, urgent pressing questions of the world in which we live are not seldom negotiated in connection with intangible heritage. Think of the figure of Black Pete (part of the Sinterklaas festival in the Netherlands) and the actual debates about the Dutch colonial past and related memories. This is why intangible heritage is the appropriate vehicle for museums to engage in our recent super-diverse society.

Through co-creations between museums and the networks around intangible heritage – as will be presented during the conference – museums can support the safeguarding of heritage while at the same time draw attention to the superdiversity of society. Co-creation offers opportunities to negotiate intangible heritage among different stakeholders and to develop heritage for the future. It is an open ended, experimental approach towards intangible heritage, for what we like to call a network- laboratory approach.

In connection with the crafts Dutch museums already have some experiences with 'craft laboratories' focusing on the renewal of the crafts. Most of these Labs focus on bringing together craftspeople with designers in order to innovate production methods and to create new products attractive for new audiences. Others also involve training institutions and other relevant stakeholders, such as commercial entrepreneurs necessary for marketing

the new products. This bringing together of so many people, with the museum in a facilitating role as a cultural broker, might be called the 'network' approach.

In our view the network laboratory model could be useful in dealing intangible heritage in a super-diverse society. By adopting the laboratory model, intangible heritage can be approached as a productive dialogue, focusing on creating a shared future. In a superdiverse society heritage in the making is always 'dialogical heritage', to adopt the well-known phrase of heritage scholar Rodney Harrison, in which heritage 'emerges from the relationship between a range of human and non human actors and their environments', which, according to Harrison, 'also might help to connect heritage with broader issues of environmental, political and social concern (Harrison, *Heritage: critical approaches*, 204).

#### **STATEMENTS**

1. Museums should engage in contemporary society, responding to the new challenges of super-diversity.
2. Museums should provide spaces of reflexivity to go beyond dichotomous othering discourses.
3. Intangible Heritage can help to make museums more relevant for society.
4. Intangible heritage calls for the development of participatory methodologies to engage heritage communities and heritage bearers in their projects and opt for an open and inclusive approach and in which heritage communities are interpreted as dynamic and fluid networks.
5. Museums should consider to act as laboratories where different people experiment with innovation for a sustainable future.