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Mediating culture in the frame of everyday life practices

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Introduction

How to “represent” the past and the present way of living of a particular group of people - traditional and dynamic aspects of different social practices and cultural phenomena - is a problem that both ethno-anthropological and museum studies and practices have in common.

Questions on representation (Karp, 1991; McDonald, 2006) in museums, or “how meaning is created through classification and display” of objects (Lidchi, 1997), recall another well-known ethical concern regarding curatorial or “ethnographic authority”, at least in the western world after the so called “reflexive turn” (Marcus, Clifford, 1986; Clifford, 1988, 1997). Whether in ethnographic writings or in museum displays, the underlying power relations present in the process of representing often reflect the relationship between researches/museums and “their” communities. The problem of “authoritative voices” does not include just the classical examples of a sort of imperialist western way of representing *other* cultures. It is present also on local level where different kinds of local authorities “speak for themselves” while excluding the local *others*. Besides, such “authoritative”, hierarchical and often ideologically guided approaches often create static, timeless and exclusive forms of community representation. This can be seen as an approach that provides for different purposes an exclusive (and often essentialist) based discourse on cultural particularities or differences.

With a strategy to “give the voice” to communities, to reflect on the “meaning that people attribute to things” (Appadurai, 1988) and implementing other inclusive and participative strategies within museum practice (Simon, 2010) when representing the (im)material culture of a certain community, recent ethnographic and museological approaches are trying to promote a kind of collaborative way of representing culture, underlining this “evolving

relationship between museums and diverse communities they represent, serve and with which they engage” (Watson, 2007). The process of “negotiation” that is undertaken on different levels is in the core of such relationship between museum authorities and local communities and the challenge of such approach, borrowing from Fischer what he considers challenging in cultural analysis, “is to develop translation and mediation tools for helping make visible the differences of interests, access, power, needs, desires, and philosophical perspective” (Fischer, 2007). In this way, the role of single museum ethnographer can be seen as a mediator of negotiated cultural meanings while the aim for museums would be cultural mediation between communities and the wider public.

Independently of cultural differences and backgrounds present in a particular territory, the dynamic aspect of culture - the constant tension between local and global, traditions and modernity, forms of preservation of what is defined as cultural heritage and its commodification (Miller, 2009) - embraces all social actors and is reflected in each segment of everyday life. Questioning on everyday life practices of communities concern and mediation of it to wider public could be a strategy to keep the “living culture” active. Also, under the universality of everyday life, cultural diversity and particularities can be perhaps more equally expressed, recognized and included in the dominant discourses of majorities.

More concretely, three cases in recent museum practical work of the Ethnographic Museum of Istria (Croatia) will serve to discuss and explore possibilities that ethnographic museums can have in mediating communities' cultural practices of everyday life, rather than rigidly and authoritatively represent and somehow freeze them in a space and time.

1. Negotiated mediation

Recent exhibition “*Grandma Euphemia’s Kitchen*”, which was produced in collaboration with the local museum and with a great collaborative support of a number of people from the local community of the town of Rovinj and its surroundings, had a focus on displaying the material culture of the traditional local kitchen as a physical space. Further, relations with other aspects of daily life that kitchen as a place of everyday life practices brings together were also examined: intangible and sensory elements of food preparation; socialization; historical and social change; local memory and other cultural and social peculiarities. The final result is an small exhibition that can be divided in three parts:

- The central part of the exhibition is reconstruction of what research participants consider as the traditional local kitchen; most of displayed objects have been donated or borrowed by the same locals while a smaller part belongs to the museum collection.
- Outside of the strictly kitchen space there is a smaller exhibition part that represents the connection to other places of everyday life linked directly to the kitchen: fishing and agriculture tradition; food industry production; important life events, holidays and yearly customs; marketplaces and local fairs.
- Included in the display, there is also multimedia material that consists of edited audio recordings collected during the fieldwork, mostly narrated in the local dialect, whose purpose is not just to inform about how to make a particular soup, how to provide for the fish, how to clean it, in which ways to prepare it (together with other kitchen stories), but also to evoke a sensory memory (Sutton, 2001) and stimulate the sensory perception of smell, taste, touch. Senses also form part of intangible culture and can tell us much about peoples' cultural categories, ethics, value, how they interpret their own experiences, etc. (Pink, 2009). There are also two videos showing two generations of women preparing food in a span of 20 years in their home kitchen, that besides their culinary capacities are showing indirectly also the relation between the sea food culture and the continental food culture, or put differently, the cultural influences between Italian population from the town of Rovinj and the Slavic population from the surrounding villages.

There are some considerations I would like to point out. First, the relationship with research participants, local collaborators that had helped us from the beginning of the project. Some of them had been present on each step, from the display design to the catalog editing. Historically speaking, majority of local population of Rovinj was Italian. After World War II, when the biggest part of Istrian Region joined the Croatian Republic in the new Socialist Federation of Yugoslavia, due to political, social, economical and personal reasons, many Italians started to think about leaving Istria, and the big majority of them, precisely from 1945-1971, left Istria and emigrated to other countries. Rovinj was not an exception and since then big structural changes had occurred on demographic, social and cultural level. In addition, the fast growing global trend of mass-tourism in the last 50 years, just to mention the most evident one, contributed further to the dynamic changes of the local way of living. So the period and memories linked directly to what comes before these radical changes are the one that our research participants identify as something very close to what is “our tradition” or

“our customs”, that can carry the adjective of belonging to the town, in material or immaterial way. So that is the exactly ethnographic present we had to deal with in the exhibition. A specific time lap that works as a sort of identity marker and does not “contaminate” the ideal of what local community that has somehow the access to the traditional time (with their emotions, memories, material culture, imaginary) identify as local culture. I repeat, we had to, because there was no way to include in the display the contemporaneity of the kitchen even if the research participants are all conscious of the changes that had occurred in the meantime in the everyday life local practices, including their own. We could write about it, but what was intended to be displayed, with all internal contradictions, it had to be identified or recognized as something that has its origins “from that time’s Rovinj”. We have negotiated each part of the exhibition and the possible problem of “authority” was most of the time inverted. Together with a part of local community we have mediated a “partial truth” of local culture, a mediation that at the end was applauded by those who as museum authorities we are aimed to represent. The outcome looks quite fair.

2. Digital mediation

One of the most common (and probably the cheapest) forms of mediation and diffusion of cultural practices and phenomena (especially the intangible ones) within museums and accessible in large scale also for the local communities is offered today by the use of digital technologies and Internet. Recent fieldwork that consisted of documenting the production of traditional musical instruments in Istria resulted in making of 4 short videos portraying few local producers, as well as showing concrete process of instruments production. Besides, it was also made the revision of the collection of traditional instruments in our museum and in other similar institutions. Different type of archival documentation has appeared while grasping in museums, National Institute of Ethnology and Folklore and personal collections in people homes. It is obvious that is a never-ending task to do; there are always undiscovered sources where to look for interesting and important resources regarding the traditional music and instruments. While waiting for better times for displaying physically collected and produced material, the idea is to present it virtually within new web pages of the Center for Intangible Heritage in Istria. By now, the videos have been uploaded on the Internet, different types of documentation have been classified and a general concept of the virtual exhibition has been done. What remains is just to put all the content available for the general access on-line. There are some free on-line applications that can be used for such purpose, which can be very useful in order to reduce the costs by engaging professional IT experts. Questions that

could be discussed is how the digital technologies are used in museum practice; how such tools can be used for the empowerment of local communities; is the digital divide still so strong that the problem of the access to digital technologies and Internet remains a distant target in different parts of the world?

One curious aspect regarding the use of intangible culture and strategies of mediation by local communities emerged while participating in a round table organized by different Istrian Folklore Associations that should have been focused on the problem of lack of interest of young people for traditional music and what can be done about it. Well, the focus of the debate went in a totally different direction from the very beginning. The lead speaker's general idea was that first of all we have to create a *brand* of traditional music that can be widely recognized, in a very economical sense of the word, and after that the interest of local young people will come. In simple words, what has to be done is to find a way and implement strategies on how to sell our culture, elements of our identity we are supposed to be proud and we are emotively linked. Commodification is also a way to mediate local traditional culture and I think that as museum workers we are not supposed to judge about the right or wrong, but to accept and deal also with this reality.

3. Mediating social engagement

The last example I want to give is related to the exhibition that our museum will soon display in occasion of its 50th anniversary. The challenges of this exhibition will consist in displaying a critical overview of the museum activities in the past 50 years, which will inevitably represent a historical, yet practical, summary of the ethnological practice in this area in general. Ultimately, the goal of the exhibition is to create a mutual dialogue with its visitors by inviting them to evaluate the museum work along the time, exposing them to the issues considered challenging and collecting their opinions in respect, as well as their expectations on what the Ethnographic Museum of Istria should focus its efforts on in the future.

Whether we speak about art, science or ethnographic museums, recent debates have a tendency to emphasize the active role that museums should have in society. With active role it is mostly meant the educative and social component of museum activities that would contribute to foster processes on different levels like social cohesion, inclusion (Sandell, 2002), to serve as a platform for intercultural understanding and dialogue between social and cultural differences present in each society. The main theme of the last ICOM General

Meeting in Shanghai (2010) – museums and social harmony – is also an important indicator of this trend that museums are experimenting today.

Far away from having missionaries' aspirations, I agree that this should be a kind of path to follow for museums. However, I am still questioning about how far is the practice from the theory: What kind of everyday issues that are surrounding us are considered as socially worth to be taken in account by museums? What are the concrete experiences that museums are offering? What else can museums do in order to fulfill the social harmony mission?

The example I am proposing here to consider, as an engaging model in today's society, does not come from the museum environment. However, in my opinion this experience has a lot in common with a possibility of the engaging role that museums should think about. It is about the *Citizen Initiative for Muzil* coming from the main Istrian town – Pula – whose main goal from the beginning of their activist engagement in society is to rethink in transparent way the use of public spaces. By transparent way what they mean is an open dialogue in decision-making processes regarding public spaces between citizens and institutions. In today's world, such spaces, which in our case are mostly abandoned areas near the seaside that once served for military purposes, are seen in the mainstream society, represented by local and national politicians and businessmen, just as areas for a future tourist resort, golf courts or similar contents oriented to tourist sector and other capital investments like shopping malls, that at the end, together with promised jobs for the local population, still haven't been carried out as long time ago was promised. Where the big money rules, no transparent dialogue or direct democracy can breathe. It is a classical conflict present at the global scale where the dominant discourse of the capital influences local people lives. In this concrete case we are talking about the contested places, and in many others, which are often directly linked with the first one, about fighting for the existence and preserving in such globalizing context local cultural values, identities, way of life, personal dignity, environment and so on.

At the core of the *Citizen initiative* that is formed by the heterogeneous group of people, there are young architects that call themselves "*Pulska grupa*". Their active engagement includes concrete architectural projects and urban interventions related to these contested places with clear social purpose that would benefit most citizens, not just the capital and a small number of already well-staying "big players". The local government considers them as a treat, utopian usurpers of the biggest investment regional projects. What the group is asking is not to eliminate tourism or change the economical system, but to consider the risk of speculative

managing of public spaces; to include in urban planning real necessities of their citizens in order to improve the quality of life in a more sustainable way in a long-term period. Despite the problems encountered on the local level, the initiative of the group was recognized recently on the national level. Projects they have made by now, including also other similar experiences on the national level that they have merged as elements of the same story, have been selected by Croatian Ministry of Culture for representing Croatia in this year Biennale of Architecture in Venice. While talking to the group about the way they collected all the material that is to be presented at the Biennale, I realized that methodologically we are doing similar things: talking to people and listening to different experiences, combining it to certain theories, experiences and knowledge and presenting the outcomes to wider public. It is evident the similarity of this experience with museum agendas that advocate social purposes and active role of museums in society in general (and anthropology in particular), that cultivates the interdisciplinary approach, claiming that museums should be platforms, open spaces that can contribute for the social change and improve the life of communities they aim to represent. Are we ready?

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Web pages:

For traditional Istrian instruments/music videos:

<http://vimeo.com/album/2005282>

Citizen Initiative za Muzil & Pulska grupa:

<http://muzil.net/web/>

<https://sites.google.com/site/pulskagrupa/>