

Museums and Intercultural Dialogue

Madrid, 14 October 2009

I will begin my address by telling you how I became interested and involved in MAPforID (Museums as Places for Intercultural Dialogue). Since I am obviously not from one of the EU countries taking part in the project, perhaps some of you are wondering why I am speaking to you today. I would then like to talk about how I think MAPforID fits into some of the major trends currently going on in the museum and cultural fields, and how it is also breaking new ground.

I was first introduced to MAPforID in October 2008 while teaching a course at the University of Bologna on museums and cultural representation, and through my previous contacts with Istituto Bene Culturali (IBC). I was intrigued by the initiative because, as an anthropologist, I have long been concerned with the role museums can play in promoting cross-cultural understanding and respect for human diversity. Hence, the concept of using museums as a vehicle for intercultural dialogue was immediately captivating. I was particularly intrigued by how ethnographic collections were being used to engage with immigrant communities. As some of you

know, for many years now, scholars, museologists, and members of course communities have been debating the contemporary relevancy of these collections and their appropriate use given their 19th century origins and association with Western colonialism. In many of the pilot projects I read about on the project's website I saw how participants were breathing new life into these and other types of collections and giving them new meaning.

I was so captivated by the concepts and philosophy behind MAPforID I had my students in the Bologna course create proposals for hypothetical projects. They came up with some very thoughtful and clever ideas that I later shared with my colleagues at IBC. It was at that time, they invited me to get involved. I returned to Italy last June to attend your planning conference in Rimini, where I met some of you. And after the conference I visited project sites in Turin, Modena, Parma, Reggio Emilia, and Bologna, learning as much as I could about process, the organization of projects and the people involved.

The motivation behind these visits was not just academic, however. In addition to being a scholar or ethnographer of museums I am also a museum practitioner. I direct the anthropology museum at my university, train

students in museum work, and am an active member of the professional museum community. So, I confess, my primary motive was to see what ideas I could ‘steal’, or rather borrow from you to possibly apply to museum and community work in my hometown of Denver, Colorado.

As I’m sure many of you have experienced in your own lives and work -- once we are introduced to a new concept, ways of looking at or doing something and start down a new path, we begin meeting other people who share similar ideas and are also on this path. So last summer, after telling some colleagues from the education department at the Denver Art Museum about my experiences in Italy, they invited me to some workshops conducted by Rupprecht Matthies, a German artist who was creating a piece for a show opening at the Museum this November called “Embrace.”

‘Embrace’ is an exhibition of 17 site-specific installations by international artists who have chosen particular spaces in the museum to create an individual work. The exhibit is intended to be a dialogue between artists and the architectural elements of the museum’s new wing designed by the well-known architect Daniel Libeskind

Matthies' work is inspired by the exchange of ideas, human interactions and relationships; and the words of people he encounters in his everyday life in a variety of communities and contexts. Human relationships, Matthies says, serve as his muse. Matthies uses his work not only as a catalyst for the exchange of ideas but also as a tool for community building. For over a decade now, Matthies has been creating what he considers socially committed art for public spaces driven by the concepts of language, words, dialogue, and communication. Engaging with diverse communities is fundamental to his work.

For Embrace, Matthies wanted to collaborate with a community group in Denver. Members of the educational staff suggested that he work with two organizations that they had been working with for some time: the African Community Center, which is an organization that helps refugees from all over the world resettle in Denver, and the Emily Griffith School where refugees and immigrants can study English and acquire other skills to help them adjust to life in their new home.

I was very fortunate to participate in three workshops held at the ACC and EGS in which Matthies and staff from the DAM worked with participants

from 16 different countries to gather words for his piece. At the beginning of each workshop, Mathies started by reading a poem he wrote about being a displaced person and the challenges of having to think and speak in a language that was foreign to him, in this case English. He then gave them a set of questions to respond to:

What surprised you about the US?

What did you leave behind?

What English words stay in your thoughts?

And is there a word in your own language that you miss using?

Their words, like-- welcome, thank you, beloved, rules, freedom, fast, country, job, remember, family, together, peace-- were then projected on the wall, enlarged and traced around. The words in English and many other languages and scripts, some several meters in length, were then made into individual art pieces constructed from Plexiglass, cloth, foam and wood that will all form one larger piece to be installed in the entrance way of the museum. Matthies also worked with volunteers who participated in “sew ins”. He will return to Denver in early November to complete the piece for the opening, in which he hopes the participants will also take part.

At first participants in the workshops were a little confused by the concept and process, as you can imagine considering the number of linguistic and cultural layers that had to be worked through. One of the workshops was conducted with the help of a translator since the participants, all Nepali speaking Hindus from Bhutan, had only been in Denver about a month and did not speak English. In this case, we were working in at least three different languages; German, Nepali, and English. .

Overall, it was a fascinating process to witness. There were funny moments with laughter and playfulness as well as more poignant ones. This was especially true when participants were writing about things they missed and friends and family members left behind. Although I cannot speak for the participants, know what they thinking or what they actually got out of the experience, I did get the sense that it was cathartic for some of them. It was a chance for them to tell a small piece of their stories and express their feelings about where they came from and where they now live.

As for me, I had the opportunity to interact with people that I see on the bus, in shops, or walking down the street but with whom I generally have very little interaction. I realized that these are my neighbors and fellow citizens,

not just nameless refugees and immigrants. For a short time I was allowed into their lives to learn something about what they went through before arriving in Denver, the challenges they face, as well as their hopes and dreams. Through the workshops I gained a greater sense of empathy for my neighbors and fellow citizens.

I do not know if this is Matthies' intention, that is, for his art to inspire a sense of empathy in its viewers for the people whose voices are literally embodied in the piece. But this is how the project affected me and helped me see that intercultural dialogue is more than cross-cultural communication and exchange. It is something deeper. It is also about creating a sense of empathy that comes from hearing someone else's story.

Matthies' project also showed me and my colleagues at DAM one way in which we can engage community members in the museum in a more active and participatory way. His community-based, participatory and collaborative approach is also what excites me about MAPforID. Museums and other organizations involved in the program are not just interested in recruiting more visitors or cultivating new audiences as cultural consumers. They are working side by side community members as co-creators and actors in the

process of cultural production. It is a generative approach that is just as much about the process as it is the product.

Because MAPforID is devoted to addressing contemporary social issues and interactions through creative interventions, it is fundamentally grounded in the present and about living culture. This is a departure from conventional museum work, which as you know, has historically been focused on the past and the collection, preservation, and display of tangible, material culture. But since the adoption of UNESCO's Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003, the international museum community has begun to explore ways in which museums can play a greater role in the protection and promotion of living cultural expressions, such as music, dance, theatre, oral traditions, rituals, festivals, social practices well as knowledge and skills. The Conventions describes intangible cultures as a living force that is transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their social and physical environment. Intangible heritage is a fundamental part of community and identity and promotes respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. Finally, the intangible heritage protected under the Convention should be compatible with international human rights.

This is a much more dynamic approach to cultural preservation yet it poses new challenges for museums since it entails the curation of living beings and their practices that exist largely outside the museum. An emphasis on intangible, living culture requires museums to be sensitive to and come up with novel ways to engage with culture as performed.

The MAPforID project is also in keeping with the on-going trend within the international museum community to democratize museums and make them more accessible, socially relevant, and responsive to their publics' changing needs and interests. The initiative underscores the International Council of Museums' definition of a museum as an institution "in the service of society and its development." As museums have become more aware of their social and especially educational roles we have also seen a shift in museum orientations from an emphasis on objects and collections to an emphasis on the people behind objects. In many cases, the stories objects can tell us about people are more important than the objects themselves. Consequently, greater attention is now being given to the social and humanistic dimensions of museum and curatorial work. As Richard Kurin, an anthropologist, former

director of the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Studies and now Undersecretary for History, Art and Culture has observed

“some anthropologists in the museum world are making the shift from curating collections of objects to curating the systems and the people that produce them...Rather than curate dead or captured specimens of a culture, curators are increasingly concerned with the living larger whole” (Kurin 1997:93).

This observation echoes the claim made by Raymond Williams, the well known British cultural theorist, many years ago that “culture cannot be reduced to an artifact as long as it is being lived” (1960:343).

Like Kurin, I am a museum anthropologist. But unlike most museum anthropologists, I have been interested in studying not just the objects or collections in museums and the people who create them, but also the museum itself as a cultural artifact. Over the past twenty years, I have been investigating how museums are conceptualized and museum work is carried out in different national and cultural contexts looking for similarities and

difference. I have also been involved in museum development and training, and my work has taken me from the United States to Europe and Asia.

Among the many things I have learned over the years is that every museum is a product of its own unique historical background, cultural context, and social milieu, and operates within a particular museum culture.

Correspondingly, museums do not exist as isolated entities but are shaped by the values, attitudes, priorities and ideologies of the societies in which they exist. Because museums are unique to a given context, we can see how what may be considered appropriate practice and theory in one context may not be in another; and we must adapt approaches to individual community needs and interests as well as local cultural, economic, and social conditions.

Over the next few days, we will be hearing about MAPforID projects from six countries. In this respect, the projects represent great cultural diversity, and MAPforID is in itself a grand exercise in intercultural dialogue, cross-cultural exchange, and international cooperation. During the conference, we will also have the opportunity to discuss, share, and borrow ideas from one another. In light of my previous comments, we might reflect on the circumstances from which each project emerged, why it was or was not

successful, and whether or not it is transferable from one setting to another. The goal of our work here may not be so much to create a corpus of “best practices,” but more so, to recommend guidelines for “appropriate practice.”

Although MAPforID has involved a wide range of cultural, artistic, scientific and educational organizations, its primary locus, at least in name, is the museum. And as many of you are aware, the museum is generally considered a modern, Western cultural product. However, in my research I have discovered that many non-Western cultures have created spaces for storing, displaying and preserving things of special value as well as methods of caring for them since ancient times. I have also learned that they often have their own curators, or people who are responsible for taking care of a community’s cultural heritage. These are frequently spiritual leaders such as shamans, priests, healers, craftspeople and artists. In short, they have their own models of museums and curatorial traditions. There are unique cultural expressions in their own right, but they also have much to teach us about how people value, care for, and transmit culture through time in different cultural contexts.

The Western museum concept has now taken hold around the world, and in many cases, has been merged with older, existing museological forms and practices to create new hybrid, cultural forms. For example, I was recently in Thailand where I had the opportunity to visit several museums that are housed in Buddhist monasteries, and where monks serve as curators. In addition to sacred relics and texts, the museums house historic photographs and documents, local arts and crafts, and anything community members deem worthy of saving and displaying, including old televisions, sewing machines, and record players. The museums also serve as living cultural centers where community members come to learn and practice traditional dances, play music, and hold festivals. Although these spaces in monasteries in former times were not called museums they essentially performed museum-like functions.

We can find examples of similar cultural borrowing and mixing in MAPforID projects. For instance, several museums in Italy are inviting members of different ethnic communities into their museums to reinterpret objects and co-curate exhibitions. These co-curatorial and collaborative activities are in themselves forms of intercultural dialogue as well as opportunities to learn how objects are curated in their source communities

by whom. They are not only bringing new life and meaning to objects and exhibits but also demonstrating how there is not one, universal, standard Museology but a world full of potential museologies. Just as museums are as diverse as the societies in which they exist so too are approaches to curation. By sharing curatorial authority and recognizing alternative approaches we can liberate museums from their Eurocentric biases, and redefine the museum concept in the process of redefining who we are as multicultural societies.

I believe the outcomes of MAPforID will show that museums and other forms of cultural work can play a critical role in promoting intercultural dialogue, and help us move beyond being multicultural societies to being intercultural societies where “a plurality of cultures cooperate in a dialogue” and share responsibility in the workings of civil society. In this respect, MAPforID is a valuable case study in how museums can answer the call to be socially responsible institutions.

Robert Janes, in an article titled “Museum, Social Responsibility and the Future,” writes that being a socially responsible museum can be having the “will and capacity to solve public problems.” It can also mean facilitating

civic engagement, acting as an agent of social change or moderating sensitive social issues. Socially responsible museum work is a ‘purpose-filled’ experiment, whose intention is just as much about learning as it is about achieving (Janes, 2007:141-143).

To close, a final quote from Janes: “Socially responsible work is an unprecedented opportunity for museums to renew themselves, and define a more sustainable role in their communities—a role that goes far beyond education and entertainment. This is a choice that any museum can make, and many are already doing so” (2007: 143).

Thank you.

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