

Conference

Museums, Citizenship and Belonging in a Changing Europe

24-25 November 2017

Research Center for Material Culture, National Museum of World Cultures, Leiden

“The movement of coloniality is speaking about the erasure, about the violence that was necessary for the institutionalization of the world order. What has been lost? What has been erased? The museum should not reinforce modernity, its role is to undo the ‘double erasure’ of coloniality.”

— Dr. Rolando Vázquez

“What if I took your place? Can I feel what you feel? Can my body remember what your body remembers?”

— Lina Issa

“Today’s politics is a politics of sledgehammers.”

— Prof. Steven Feld

“There is a problem in totalizing institutions, to pretend that they don’t have any cracks, or gaps, within which we can get into. The Museum is a site of contestation, like others and unlike others.”

— Prof. Engin Isin

24 November 2017

The merger of Amsterdam’s Tropenmuseum, the Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde in Leiden, and the Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal into the National Museum of World Cultures, has opened a conversation about the future of the ethnographic museum. Following last year’s conference on ‘Museum Temporalities’, this year the focus is on the role the ethnographic museum plays, and can play, within national and transnational debates around questions of citizenship and belonging. This two-day conference brought together museum scholars and directors, curators and artists to think critically about how we might reposition ethnographic museums in the postcolonial moment when citizenship and belonging are in question.

The first day began with an introduction by **Stijn Schoonderwoerd**, general director of The National Museums of World Cultures. He spoke about the reignited purpose of the museums: to safeguard heritage, support cultural dynamism and diversity, and engage with colonial histories and slavery (especially in relation to migration). Central to his talk was the transition from being a museum about objects to being a museum about people—*museum over mensen*. Exhibition and collecting policies reflect this new idea, showing how the world is connected through an emphasis on pop culture elements and contemporary practices. There has been a shift in the public that comes to the events and to the museum because of the emphasis on youth and education, as well as events and programs developed in co-creation that deal with aspects of identity, gender, hair, hip hop, etc., such as the Good Hair Festival, which allowed engagement with themes of colonialism and exclusion. Next, **Steven Engelsman** spoke about the SWITCH project (Sharing a World of Inclusion, Creativity and Heritage), which this conference is a part of and which is supported financially by Creative Europe. Finally, **Wayne Modest**, head of the Research Center for Material Culture, set the stage for the conference. He spoke about the need to understand anxiety as being part of our political moment. The refugee crisis, Black Lives Matter, Brexit, and now Trump, are contemporary issues that highlight the rising importance of visible difference and questions of exclusion—who can be a citizen, who can belong. It is important for

museums to think through what their role is in these discussions and trans-European projects allow us to think comparatively about what culture might mean (through the lens of different histories and different colonial processes). In order to offer multiple perspectives and divergent ways of thinking about this topic, the speakers invited for the conference come from different perspectives, different political and geographical locations, and are working within and outside of the museum.

The first session of the day began with a talk by **Prof. Peter Geschiere** (University of Amsterdam). His talk related his book, *The Perils of Belonging*, about the Macca in East Cameroon, to the predicaments facing museums in the Netherlands. His book made the comparison between Cameroon and the Netherlands, in terms of how the nation-state can deal with internal differences. In Cameroon there was a denial of difference, the consequence of which was ethnic diversity covered by a feeling of national unity. The Netherlands has a long history of nationalism, with the Queen creating unity around her, but under this unity there was still a deep division, especially in the religious pillars. His talk showed how 'difference' changes over time and who is the 'other' changes all the time. He asked how museums today can position themselves in the often painful struggle of nation states to deal with internal difference. The second talk of the session, by **Dr. Rolando Vázquez** (University of Utrecht) was on whiteness, alterity, and the ethnographic museum. Currently working on decolonial thinking, and what this kind of thinking can bring to the thinking around the museum, he outlined a few key standpoints of decolonial thought. Through his definition, the 'decolonial' is a position to think and act differently to overcome the modern colonial order, and decolonization is a political process. The central argument of Dr. Vázquez's talk was that the histories of progress that are associated with modernity can not be separated from the pillaging of the earth, from exploitation. The 'connected histories' of global citizenship are configured by colonial difference. At its roots, the museum was the beginning of colonial success, or the precursor for it—creating systems of representation and controlling the appearance and materiality of the world. The role of the museum today is to undo the 'double erasure' of coloniality, to see colonialism not as an aberration, but as the constitutive moment of modernity. The **Q&A** period brought up questions about how the appeal to global citizenship can allow us to think more about the multiple centres of the world, or the non-centre; the dominant narrative of whiteness in Europe; and how much we want global citizenship, considering the current political climate. Wayne ended with the note that we cannot suggest that our museums suggest the changed societies in which we live, as there are none that reflect it in visitor-ship and in staffing.

The second session focused on museums, difference, and the politics of emotions. Artist **Lina Issa** was the first speaker and the first in a series of artist presentations. The introduction of artist presentations into the conference was a way to think about the possibilities in mobilizing some of the thoughts, some of the imaginary actions that artists take part in. Lina stated that she does not produce physical objects, but produces interactions as part of her practice, and asked permission to be personal and to put herself, her subjectivity, as a subject of discussion within all these issues that we are talking about and dealing with. Lina's work is inspired by the following questions: What if I took your place? Can I feel what you feel? Can my body remember what your body remembers? Lina described her project 'Where we are not', where she sent a choreographer to Lebanon to take her place in her place. Out of this project emerged two notebooks that can be seen as 'diasporic objects'. Lina is exploring how her work can function within the museum context, perhaps by making empathy a bridge between these communities. Could the museum stand in for these communities? Could it remember what they remember? Feel what they feel? The second speaker was **Dr. Markus Balkenhol**, a social and cultural anthropologist currently working on ways of thinking through the institutional boundaries between 'Dutch culture' and the culture of the 'other'. His talk was centred on the Kabra mask (the ancestral mask of the Winti religion) that is in the collection of the Amsterdam Museum, and how it raised questions about emancipation, secularization, and religion. This mask was created in 2013 by Rotterdam artist Boris van Berkum in collaboration with Winti priestess Marian Nana Markelo, who wanted the mask to be dynamic and to move among the people. Dr. Balkenhol noted that in this intervention secular and religious modes bind and intersect and we have to take seriously the role of religion in emancipation, rather than emancipation

only being tied to secularization. The **Q&A** raised a question about the role of 'collections' and the act of 'collecting' within the context of Dr. Balkenhol's talk, which created a larger discussion about a shift that museums can take to start thinking about objects as human-made things that are not static, that are always changing, and that can move in and out of the museum. Lina added that a good process might be to depart from the people and then go to the collection to ask whether you need something in the collection to facilitate this process of sharing and representation.

During this conference, curators have been invited to present their own ideas in an open debate. The first curatorial conversation focused on ethnographic museums and the colonial past in the present with Dr. **Claudia Augustat** (Weltmuseum Wien), **Bruno Verbergt** (Royal Museum for Central Africa), and **Nicholas Thomas** (University of Cambridge) speaking about what they think decolonization in the museum would be like for their individual museums. Claudia spoke about the gallery in their museum that will be focusing on colonialism and the relationship their collections have to the history of colonialism. Bruno spoke about the tensions and debates that were generated by the process of creating spaces to deal with colonialism and that they chose to forgo a dedicated gallery in order to talk about colonialism all over the place. Nicholas talked about displaying abandoned material, treating ethnographic collections as history collections, and questions of belonging that stem from object repatriation. The **Q&A** session raised questions about what the conceptual frame is through which we display the colonial in the present, the messiness of facts, and whether we can even the playing field by including contemporary or western collections into ethnographic museums. Claudia added that the colonial relationship is larger than perpetrators and victims and this complexity should be recognized. Wayne ended the session stating that the question is not whether the colonial will be attended to, but what will it look like, and what it might mean in the present.

The third and final session of the day was on objects and the politics of post-colonial citizenship. Wayne introduced the session by stating that museums are always implicated in systems of who does and who doesn't belong, citing recent examples of conversations within the black community asking when they will get their own museum. The first talk of the session was by **Dr. Sandra H. Dudley** (University of Leicester) who spoke about encounters with things in the ethnographic museum. She sees the 'encounter' as a meeting between person and thing, especially when something really catches the eye of the visitor, stops them. She created an analogy between colonial encounter and encounter in the ethnographic museum, between person and object. It is still the visitor, not the objects, that determine how the visitor moves through the museum, so what about the object's perspective? What if the objects look back at the visitor? The artefact is therefore no longer a submissive representational tool, it can assert itself, it can be recalcitrant. The second half of this session was an artist presentation by **Monica L. Edmondson** about her project 100 Migratory, consisting of 100 travelling vessels of glass. During the course of her talk one of the vessels travelled through the audience. Monica belongs to the Sami people and spoke about the need to look back to understand ourselves and our contemporary society. The problem facing Sami artists today is that they are being seen as a collective rather than individuals with individual ways of creating. The work of other Sami artists puts into question the Sami identity, their history, and whether they can maintain their identity as Sami while still moving into 'contemporary' life. The **Q&A** raised a question about whether it is the job of the object to give the 'right' information so that the visitor is not misinformed and Sandra answered that while objects and museums have really important responsibilities to particular communities the museum is still doing something important if people have meaningful and powerful experiences within it. Monica added that the people who have been colonized should decide how those objects should be shown.

The second curatorial conversation of the day was with **Dr. Pooyan Tamimi Arab** (Utrecht University/National Museum of World Cultures) and **Mirjam Shatanawi** (National Museum of World Cultures). The talk focused on Islamic visual culture, heritage, and citizenship in the National Museum of World Cultures. Mirjam spoke about what it means to display contemporary Islamic images, like images of the prophet Muhammad, in a museum and its political implications. Pooyan spoke about the

'begging bowl' in the museum collection and about the collection of Ottoman objects, linking it to the redactive idea that we can only relate to our own cultures—"we also treat the Turkish population as foreigners if we only think we can engage with them with Ottoman objects". During the **Q&A** period the question was raised about the issue of 'cultural sensitivity', and whether there is the possibility to give choice to visitors, perhaps by putting a cloth over the image so people can choose to see or not see. Another question was raised about belonging and whether it is possible to give the feeling of belonging by inviting people to speak who feel a belonging to those objects. Mirjam answered that the source community question is difficult to answer and that she wants to have a more open conversation so people can engage with museums beyond the ethnic/national line that we define for them.

The first day of the conference closed with the 6th annual Gerbrands lecture by **Prof. Steven Feld**, whose academic research concerns the history and culture of sound, diasporic acoustamology, and jazz history. His current work has focused on sound and sustainability—listening to a world that is heating up. Prof. Feld presented three stories during the course of his lecture that entangled cicadas and humans, poetics and politics, vocal mediation, and affect. He spoke briefly about 'acoustemology', existing at the conjunction of acoustics and epistemology, it is the study of sound as a way of knowing. Positioning this new terminology with Donna Haraway's 'companion species' approach (that a person is not a unique entity but rather an amalgam of relations with spirits, places, and non-humans), Prof. Feld spoke about the Bosavi people of Papua New Guinea and his research on thermometric cicadas (who produce a pulsing sound as temperatures rise). He spoke about the language structure of the Bosavi people and how, through their language, they can express the feelings of sounds in the forest: "the Bosavi people are languaging about sound, while sounding about language". When they sing, the harmonic frequencies of the cicadas and of the song merge into one another. He stated that we need to understand that sound is material in order to continue a dialogue about song and image, sound and physical objects. Referencing Yasujiro Ozu's 'Tokyo Story', as a link to Hiroshima—where the cicadas heard the heat of the atomic bomb—he presented one of his installations where he used sound art to explore cicadas as the traumatized voice of acoustic memory for post-nuclear Japan. He uses the examples of the cicadas to understand how ethnographic, scientific, and art sound recordings can recompose culture and nature into what Donna Haraway calls "naturecultures". The **Q&A** period opened a discussion on how to make an exhibition of sound in a society that is dominated by the visual and how sound art and ethnographic recordings can be brought in as a way to reimagine new relationships between the ethnographic and observers. Final questions were raised about the decaying and different characteristics of sound and their temporal qualities and about the audible and sonic elements that are lost due to the visual turn.

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The second day of the conference began with an introduction by Wayne Modest where he spoke about the contemporary art museum, the different kinds of histories or baggage that it carries, and its similarities to the ethnographic museum. The talk accompanying the introduction was on collaboration and practices of self-representation within the ethnographic museum by **Dr. Barbara Plankensteiner** (Yale University Art Gallery). Her talk was focused on the production of difference and self-exoticization in collaborative formats in current ethnographic museum and artistic practice. Referencing an experience where this form of collaboration was labeled as 'performing folklore', she defended this practice by saying that ethnographic museums should give room for self-representation and give a central space to activities that might normally be relegated to the margins or the periphery. Some examples of these practices included a Tibetan ritual, the Nigerian Adire Festival which aimed to create links between the Austrian and Nigerian communities, and the work of Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto and the Huni Kuin: Aru Kuxipa (Amazonian peoples). Dr. Plankensteiner emphasized the complex history of these human shows, like the travelling Samoan performers, where some people were forced to perform

and others had their own personal agenda when choosing to participate (such as raising money and creating positive understanding of their community). The **Q&A** period brought up a question about what the reactions were of the Austrian people to the Nigerian festival, since communication and sharing of culture should run both ways. Another member of the audience asked whether this voyeuristic attitude can be a tool whereby we can learn about how other people see the world.

The first session of the day brought up the larger topic of questioning the concept of citizenship itself. The first speaker, **Prof. Engin Isin** (The Open University, UK), spoke about the notion of performative citizenship and his transformation from a political theory professor into an amateur curator. For Prof. Isin, citizenship is a paradox: It is a strategy and technology of government that divides both internally and externally, creates inclusions and exclusions, while at the same time, citizenship is also a means of empowerment because it enables people to both make and claim rights for themselves and others as an art of living together. During his talk Prof. Isin outlined the five senses of performative citizenship (the performative perspective considers citizenship as an unstable institution as we are constantly signifying and re-signifying citizenship): citizenship as a means of social struggle in order to unravel the dominant characteristics of citizenship; 'citizenship and its others' which encompasses struggles that feature citizens and non-citizens respectively who are struggling between these subject positions; citizenship as multiplicities' with the citizen and non-citizen divided themselves into multiple categories; 'citizenship as performance' whereby people bring themselves actively into citizenship, by acting it; and finally, 'citizenship as creative transformation' which is about creatively re-signifying the act of citizenship— aspirations to citizenship means aspiration to equality, justice, liberty. Prof. Isin also spoke about his work as an amateur curator, working on the 'Migration Museum Projects' and the 'Who Are We?' project at the Tate Modern for 2017 in their new space for 'exchange'. The second half of this session took a playful turn with **Dr. Alana Jelinek** (University of Cambridge) addressing issues of representation, museums, and the concept of European-ness with her project Europe the Game. The project is both an actual game and an artwork, the combination of which was intended to actualize her idea that paintings, or any objects, are actually relational and not static. The entire audience was asked to take part in the game by taking a piece of the game (a landscape painting) and seeing how they could fit it into the frame of Europe (a large grid on the stage). In the act of playing the game everyone is making a choice of what to put into the frame of Europe, evoking the choices inherent in the process of curation. With this game Dr. Jelinek wanted to highlight the process of accommodation, compromise, and negotiation, and ask whether museums can be more 'up front' that the museum is a contested space, that it is formed through the choices of multiple people, and that it can change. The very active discussion in this **Q&A** period raised questions about who we are representing in the museums and who we want to give a platform to, how we can establish a museum space where 'traditional' performances also live in this moment, and what kind of Europe we imagine when we imagine together? Engaging in a discussion about the 'whiteness' of Europe, Alana responded that humans have always moved all over the world, "people from elsewhere are here, and all people from here are elsewhere, so we need to erase the narrative that Europe was purely white at some point". The issues of doing critical work within the institution was also brought up, with Prof. Isin elucidating that there is a problem in totalizing institutions, pretending that they don't have any cracks, or gaps, within which we can get into. A discussion was raised about whether symbols and objects generated from contemporary resistance movements can also be collected. A question was raised about always being labeled a colonist regardless of the presentation choices you make and Amal responded that the ethnographic museum, at its base, is a colonial place, so the more productive question is how do we move forward from here? Amal spoke about 'writing ourselves into society', writing the institution into the present—What do the young Nigerians want to see in the museum? And what do the Austrian-Nigerians want to see?

The third set of curatorial conversations, with **Cécile Bründlmayer** (Weltmuseum Wien) and **Liza Swaving** (National Museum of World Cultures, NL) was about the politics of inclusion/exclusion in ethnographic and world cultures museums. Cécile spoke about the Weltmuseum Wien and its exhibition World on the Move, which focuses on the connected world and cultures becoming unbound from specific

territories. They are trying to figure out how to talk about migration and include voices from different communities, in order to avoid grouping 'migrants' into one group that is positioned outside of the visitors. Liza spoke about her project gathering examples on how museums respond to the refugee crisis. She is interested in how refugee stories might enter this national cannon and disrupt it or change it. Liza presented a series of projects including collaborative community projects and projects that are performing, experiencing, or re-enacting refugee stories. She asked whether these emotional experiences can lead to more empathy or more tolerance? During the conversation a question was raised about whether it is the refugee that needs to be experienced or is it us? There was some critique from the audience that we should not homogenize the category of the 'refugee' and 'ourselves' and that maybe what we need is a new vocabulary to talk about nationality that is not tied to a transnational border.

The final session of the day was about museums and the politics of belonging. The two presenters of this session are located in spaces outside of Europe, prompting us to think about how we can use these spaces to think through similarities across borders. The first talk, by **Prof. Ruth Phillips** (Carleton University) was on pluralism and the politics of change in Canada's national museums. Her talk was focused on the problem of time, specifically how much time it takes to develop responses within the museum to developments outside of the museum. She compared the virtues of the often glacial pace of traditional exhibition development to the virtues of fast change. Her example of the danger of change that is too slow was the 'Into the Heart of Africa' exhibition at the ROM in Toronto, where the response to protests about the exhibition was too slow. The second example was the Nisga'a Girl boat, which was removed from the Canada Hall of the museum, following a change in government, and was to be sent back to the originating community. This example showed the importance of giving originating communities the right to make decisions about how they are being portrayed and that the slow pace of exhibition development made it possible to work together in consensus. Prof. Phillips concluded that museums need to take advantage of the strategic initiatives of both slow and fast change. The second talk in the session was from **Dr. Judy Jaffe-Schagen** (University of Amsterdam) about museums and belonging in the political cultural landscape of Israel. Recently, Israel has experienced a flux of new museums and memorials, which bring up the complex Israeli national heritage. Every new museum has had to deal with whether to relate to the Zionist narrative or to other narratives about Israel. She presented two examples of collections to show her point. The first was the Bedouin Heritage Centre where they don't ignore their own memory, but they make rationalizations to fit into the larger Jewish narrative, such as the focus on military duty. The second example was the Umm el Fahem museum, which was meant to be a platform for Palestinian and Arab art, with only a minimal amount of Jewish/Israeli art, but in the end when the gallery opened it showed, as its main artist, an Israeli-Jewish artist. The art that gets funded in Israel supports the narrative of Israel. She ended by asking, what happens if there is no room left to belong? When do you leave? The Q&A session raised questions about the potential avoidance of conflict from the 'Heart of Africa' exhibition and the potentially irreversible elements of political changes and swings. Wayne ended the period by speaking about the inadequate consultation that occurred with the black community for the 'Heart of Africa' exhibition, with Ruth adding that they should have used a 'participatory action research model' instead.

The final curatorial conversation of the conference was about museums as spaces of belonging within the global and/or the local. This conversation featured **Dr. Sandra Ferracuti** (Linden-Museum Stuttgart), **Nadja Haumberger** (Weltmuseum Wien) and **Dr. Bojana Rogelj Škafar** (Slovenski Etnografski Muzej). Sandra put herself on the table as a case study because she is an Italian curating the African collection in the Linden Museum in Stuttgart. She has been interacting with the African diaspora in Germany and they are teaching her what it means to be German, prompting the question of whether people can become 'too German' in the process of integration. Nadja spoke about the fact that our politics and our policy makers strongly influence what we are doing, and that although museums are contested areas, they can also be spaces of belonging for a diverse group of people. Bojana spoke about dealing with the Slovenian national identity within her museum and their current engagement with global questions

and matters of belonging and citizenship. The Q&A session raised questions about the museum as a space of escape, the difficulty to belong, the motion and movement of citizenship, and the importance of 'roots'. Responding to the notion of the museum as a hopeful place, Wayne added that "without hope, one cannot structure futures" and under the absolute violence of the resistance of the colonial project, people have to structure new kinds of futures.

This two-day conference brought together a diverse group of scholars, museum directors, curators, and artists to speak about how museums can respond to a changing Europe and deal with conceptual frames and concepts of citizenship which are always in flux. Questions were raised about how museums can respond in diverse ways to mobilize their collections to connect with differently identified publics within society, whether it is through responsive and timely programming, allowing objects to move in and out of the museum, or shifting the focus from objects to people. Within a political climate that aims to create divisions between people, the museum can act as the space that highlights our 'connected histories' and makes steps towards undoing the 'double erasure' of coloniality. By acknowledging that 'traditional' and 'contemporary' objects exist in contemporaneity with one another, the museum can engage with a new public and respond to social and political issues within a changing Europe, within a changing world.

Report by Margarita Osipian