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Sharing a World of Inclusion, Creativity and Heritage

SWICH

Ethnography, Museums of World Culture and New Citizenship in Europe

This project situates Museums of Ethnography and World Cultures at the centre of ongoing discussions about citizenship and belonging in contemporary Europe. They are operating in a rapidly changing field as waves of (post)colonial and labour migration, and the increased trans-border movements within the European Union have refigured the demography and citizenry of European nation states. Through a series of work programmes organised within six themes, the project will contribute to the creation of new tools and innovative practices for participating museums to better address the new citizenship regimes within Europe, while also helping them to function better within a global context. These new practices will be aimed at serving our multiple stakeholders both at home and in a transnational/global context. The project will increase the role and visibility of Ethnography and World Cultures Museums as centres of cultural encounters, open discourse, creative innovation and knowledge production based on transnational and international collaborations.

The project builds on the outcomes and successes of three earlier European Commission funded projects: READ-ME I & II, and the Ethnographic Museums and World Cultures (RIME), funded by the EU's Cultural programme (2008-2013). All were aimed at rethinking the role of Museums of Ethnography and World Cultures within contemporary European societies, and shared a similar belief that with their rich collections that catalogue the diversity of world cultures these museums have an important role to play in shaping contemporary Europe.

These earlier projects not only created a strong network of European Ethnographic and World Cultures museums where they share expertise, collections and best practices, but also facilitated critical reflection on the histories of the museums and their collections, fostering the development of new ideas for exhibitions as well as ideas for engagement with their various publics. Many of the ideas generated during these sessions are being implemented in renovation and programming schemes in the various museums.

Today these ethnographic museums are, partly due to these earlier projects, at the forefront of developing self-reflexive and inclusive practices.

The project being proposed under the Creative Europe scheme draws on this already existing network (while expanding to include new partner museums), and will also build on some of the best practices developed in these earlier projects. The project will revolve around a series of interrelated key concepts: co-creativity and experimental exhibiting, relationality, cultural subjecthood, emotional citizenship and diaspora. We will address ideas of relationality, as a way to explore how ethnographic museums and collections are sites around which relationships are built between the museums and its multiple stakeholders, both historical and contemporary. Such a relational approach takes into account co-creative knowledge production, experimental





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modes of engaging with the collections and the importance of contestation. Similarly it addresses issues of Europe’s diversity by looking at the intersecting diasporas of objects and peoples. A major concern for this present project is Digital Futures addressing the question of how new digital technologies are impacting notions of citizenship and (trans-national) belonging and how the different stakeholders experience our museums and relate to cultural heritage presented in them.

With these interrelated concerns, Museums of Ethnography and World Cultures will develop new practices to address the shifting citizenship regimes and practices that are emerging in Europe. We will explore how the museums can function as places that foster a greater sense of belonging for diasporic and post-migrant communities without their continued ‘othering’ or alienation. These museums that reveal how deeply European cultures are routed in travel, encounter, and empire for centuries demonstrate how varied and international European cultures in fact are. The focus therefore is not only on (post)migrant citizens, as the goal is to develop these museums as places of encounter where all visitors can get a better understanding of a changing, super-diverse Europe.

Throughout the project, a series of activities will take place at each partnering museum by turns. International conferences and workshops will serve as platform for discussing key issues of contemporary museum practice among European museum experts. Artists, scholars and members of descendant communities will be invited by some partner museums for residencies for an intensive exchange within the institutions. Finally the outcomes will be presented progressively on the project website, in public programs, in a number of publications and innovative collaborative exhibition formats.

Main themes of the project

1. Citizenship and Belonging

In recent years, Museums of Ethnography and World Cultures with their rich historic collections documenting global cultural diversity have started to reach out to more culturally diverse constituents both nationally and in their immediate local surroundings. As these museums’ holdings often share origins with those of immigrant communities, they are especially important as places of recognition and valorisation. Yet, such diversity work may not go far enough in addressing either the needs of post-migrant citizens or the majority population of European descent. Indeed, it contributed to create differentiated citizens that continue to frame some people as belonging and others as outsiders. The growing recognition that citizenship in contemporary Europe is no longer based on notions of homogenous cultural identity but rather on multiple and diverse identifications, demands that cultural institutions learn to adapt. How can museums’ collections and programs provide sources of identification and enable feelings of belonging, while reflecting the changing Europe? How do they function as important nodes for engagement for both local and transnational identity and belonging?





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2. Stereoculture: The Art of Listening

Many Museums of Ethnography and World Cultures have made considerable progress in re-inventing their institution as creative, dynamic zone. Words such as inclusive, poly-vocal, participatory have become buzzwords within the museum field. Similarly, concepts such as shared authority and knowledge democracy are popular within museology. Fashionable as these concepts are, developing and sustaining practices that encourage multi-vocal approaches have not always worked convincingly. To develop such inclusive, democratic or co-creative practices requires rethinking ideas of expertise, access to and governance of knowledge as well as experimenting other work models to involve communities.

3. Connecting Diasporas of Objects and Peoples

Recently scholars have proposed the interpretation of ethnographic collections in European museums as 'object Diasporas'. Taking up a concept normally associated with human migration and feelings of transnational identification and belonging, such scholarship underscores the importance of the network of relations between mobility, materiality and feelings of belonging. The movement of ethnographic collections from across the world to European museums can be seen to foreshadow later migratory flows of peoples from similar places from which these objects originated. Such a comparison between these two Diasporas, clarifies the so far underestimated contingent relationship between these two 'diasporic communities.' Moreover, it highlights the relational role of ethnographic museums as nodes or 'mediators', to build relationships with 'indigenous', originating and diasporic communities.

4. Collecting Futures

Questions of how to collect in the present and in the future are always concerns for European Ethnographic and World Culture Museums. Many museums will agree that contemporary collecting should be grounded in their earlier collection histories. But so too should it be structured around the roles that these museums continue to play both locally, regionally and internationally. A core issue, then, is that objects are relevant to reflect the histories or address the needs of already established and new stakeholder groups in the present and future. As museums in contemporary Europe shift their focus to also address post-migrant communities, for example, how will this affect our collecting behaviour in the future? How do new digital technologies influence our collecting practices and the interpretation of our collections? What role can or will originating and diasporic communities – both local and international – play for these new collecting practices?

5. Creative Dialogue

In recent years several ethnography museums have opened their storage to contemporary artists and invited them to use their collections as sources of inspiration for the creation of works of art or projects of cultural critique. While such practices have been fruitful, especially as they facilitated a sharing of authority and voice to find new modes of engaging with publics, other complementary and similarly innovative practices need to be developed to engage long-established and new audiences. The project will seek to develop new modes for public





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engagement especially with the museums' collections, exhibitions and other programs. Bringing together different disciplines and methodologies for interpretation and display, including anthropologists, artists, designers, scholars/critical thinkers from Europe and overseas we want to develop strategies that can help to maximize the publics' encounter with and experience in ethnographic museums.

6. Digital Contact Zones

New media technology is rapidly changing how we experience the world around us. How we generate, process and consume knowledge, the way we encounter each other and even how we participate in cultural and political communities are all being refigured through a rapidly changing digiscape. This is especially true for the younger generation, for whom new media technology is having an enormous influence on their daily lives. Similarly, digital technology has been influencing the ways in which Ethnographic and World Culture Museums work. It has affected how they engage with audiences as well as facilitated greater access to their collections. But in what ways can the shifts that digital technologies created for human experience and political subjectivities coincide with the museums as an archive of world cultures? How will new media technologies help to revolutionize the ways in which we understand and experience objects? While all museums are present in the web, opportunities for cross-cultural encounter and participation remain underexplored. The project will provide the framework to address some of these questions, thinking through the potential that new digital technology can offer us as museums.

