HERITAGE AND INNOVATION IN URBANISED SOCIETY

POSITION PAPER
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Looking at the list of intangible cultural heritage, one notices that items stemming from urbanised society are missing in comparison to things that we class as rural, agrarian, pastoral, often even as folkloristic. The complaint is common. And now museums, too, are questioning their role in dealing with the intangible heritage of urbanised societies.

I believe these statements are based on a misunderstanding. Not least because, in the end, the lists of intangible cultural heritage are nothing other than the produce of a society that is urbanising and globalizing at an ever-faster rate. And everything we find listed is nothing other than the corollary of this development. Not in the sense that intangible cultural heritage became what it is through this development, but that it was put on the list as a result of this development in the first place. The fact that one finds so few elements that reflect urbanised culture and its traditions is precisely an expression of these globalization und urbanisation processes, and the social responses they elicit.

Let's turn to the facts: undoubtedly the world is rapidly becoming ever more urban. In 1950 not even a third of the world population lived in cities; today it is more than fifty per cent, in developed economies as high as seventy-five per cent. According to UN estimates, this figure will have risen worldwide to two thirds by 2050, in economically highly developed countries to eighty-five per cent. Along with this we witness the ongoing process of globalization, in other words, the ever more intensive exchange of goods, money, ideas, and people across national borders and continental boundaries, an exchange that causes many disruptions but, more significantly, leads to an increasingly vast concentration of capital, power, people, and communication in urban spaces which are marked by superdiversity, as discussed recently at the IMP conference in Rotterdam ("Diversity").

We encounter this development almost on a daily basis; it is a process that has an increasing number of people worried because they fear that only a small minority has a lot to gain, while the large majority … well, that's exactly the question on everybody's mind: what happens to the vast majority?

The answer that many people come up with, especially in the rich countries of the West that have dominated the world so far, could be outlined as follows: the days of linear progress, of safe jobs, and of guaranteed social security are over. We often refer to the golden generation by which we mean people who were born either shortly before or during the Second World War and whose life thereafter only knew one direction: upwards. Higher incomes, more consumption, higher quality of life, and more freedom at all levels, backed by an expanding system of social security as a safe backdrop. Today, a majority of young people in Western countries has lost faith in these blissful prospects and no longer believe that they will be able to rely on a functioning old age pension scheme when they reach the stage. An increasing number of people are worried about how to meet the rising costs of health insurance, and even in affluent countries like Switzerland the costs of care are rapidly getting out of hand. On top of that, the security of permanent jobs is giving way to a system of project-based employment that demands of the workforce not only a high degree of mobility and flexibility but also involves high levels of tolerance in terms of unpredictability.

To many people it seems plausible that these problems are exacerbated, if not actually caused, by globalization; they find expression in an increasing outflux of money and capital into the hands of few and, conversely, an influx of a growing numbers of people from poorer countries who hope to benefit from the prevailing system without ever having contributed to the various social support schemes.

A growing number of Western countries is seeing the effects of these politics in the rise of right-wing populist parties and politicians who hail isolation as the only road to progress. Three features are key to this political repertoire and, at the same time, capture the mood of many worried people.

1. Evoking the good old days. Notably, these good old days are by no means urban, no, they refer to a foregone rural age based on a life of farming in a healthy environment, in charming villages where everyone knew each other, and idyllic market towns. This image is also reflected in the UN Convention on Intangible Heritage which speaks of "clearly defined groups or communities, stable social structures, and direct lines of tradition". Why then should intangible heritage celebrate urbanity? After all, cities are characterized by nothing but a mixture of poorly structured groups, high mobility, and bewildering complexity.

2. Evoking migration as a threat to people's incomes, the welfare state, social security, culture, and identity. Given this, why should intangible heritage concern itself with the traditions and practices of migration, diversity, and multiculturalism? Our times have become "liquid", as Zygmunt Bauman puts it, and in liquid times the tendency of what is called mixophobia rises. "'Mixophobia' manifests itself in the drive towards islands of similarity and sameness amidst the sea of variety and difference. [...] The attraction of a 'community of sameness' is that of an insurance policy against the risks with which the daily life in a poly-vocal world is fraught." (Dibbits, Willemsen, 174). And now we are supposed to add the concoctions of urban space to the list of cultural heritage?

3. Putting the blame on an elite that is regarded as corrupt, arrogant, selfish, and prone to a lifestyle rooted in discrimination, impropriety, and immorality; moreover, an elite that is centred on urban areas and has nothing but contempt for the simple rural folk. This is most noticeable in the United States with its dichotomy between the coastal regions with its large cities and the flyover states in between, but it also applies to Switzerland where certain political parties play on the message on just about every billboard they put up. And now, despite this, cultural heritage is called to celebrate the excesses of modern urbanity, the new Sodom and Gomorrah, expressed in countless scenes and groups who flaunt their glamorous-exotic-exhibitionist lifestyles at endless parties, parades and festivals, while others barely succeed to make ends meet?

The UN itself has repeatedly praised its declaration on intangible cultural heritage as a means against the homogenizing forces of globalization. Notably, globalization and urbanisation feed off each other perfectly; such a thing as rural globalization is unthinkable.

So why all the fuss? The list contains what it was intended for: an ideal world replete with local and regional traditions which are regularly displayed in a colourful and rich array of dances, songs, arts and crafts to alleviate the people's fear of the powerful forces of modernity and provide a sense of security by offering them something they are familiar with and enjoy.

And where do museums come into all this? Well, to cater to this idyllic image, of course. Let's take a moment to look back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and review the status of material culture, intangible heritage, and museums at the time. What do we see? A world in turmoil, a world that is transforming from an agrarian to an industrial society and, with it, to an urban society, not quite on today's scale, of course, but enough to deeply unsettle people: stinking and smoking factory monsters; trains which make people and cattle freeze in terror; a new social class of workers – uncouth, depraved, and living in squalid conditions.

It is at this time and under these conditions that the first efforts were made to initiate what today forms the rationale on which UNESCO, museums, and other cultural heritage institutions are based: the collection of everything that is seen as good and beautiful and is threatened to be lost. From primitive cultures and wild animals, to old tools, furniture, clothes, and farmhouses, to endangered languages, songs, and legends. Everything material was shipped to the museums, intangible items recorded on paper, in photographs, later also in film and on records and referred to the archives. Which museum collected the industrial and urban culture of the era, documented the life of the new emerging social classes? Not a single one, because, ultimately, the point of museums was to counterbalance the rise of this new world.

Today we are facing a very similar situation. The task of intangible cultural heritage is to alleviate the pain of globalization, not to fuel it. And that's why the ICH lists are what they are today.

Back then, in the Europe of emerging industrialization and urbanisation, rural traditions were invented largely by city dwellers. In Switzerland, this development is borne out by the Unspunnen fest where, in 1805, members of the urban bourgeoisie for the first time staged a festival to celebrate the country's rural and alpine traditions.[1] In the years to come, urban scholars and enthusiasts went on tirelessly to collect, at times even invent, old traditional songs and establish heritage societies to preserve historic Swiss traditions.

Are we experiencing the same today as we did then? Back then it involved the transition from an agrarian- to an industry-based society. Today we are experiencing the shift away from a producing, nation- and continent-based industrial economy focused on mass production, towards a delocalized, non-producing service economy and immaterial media industry – from Google to Facebook – and a global knowledge economy, and towards the supremacy of immaterial or intangible values as represented by the finance industry in particular and by the digital world in general. Indeed, the two periods of major societal transitions have many features in common, but there are also a number of differences that have repercussions on the way in which museums and archives handled material and immaterial goods in the past and still do today. Because, despite all the fears regarding the pernicious effects of the development outlined above, people in the nineteenth century still had a bold and promising vision to hang their hopes on: the burgeoning nation state! In most European countries the formation of national identity emerged concurrently with the process of industrialization, often in close connection. Thus, cultural heritage efforts were never exclusively about saving the past, that is, they were not purely retrospective; they were also about casting the future in the shape of a shared homeland, a sense of belonging, and a national identity. To

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1 A festival highlighting the traditions of Swiss alpine herdsmen at the foot of the ruins of Unspunnen Castle close to the town of Interlaken.

underline this point, just look at how collections at the time were designed and what they focused on: even the most trivial everyday object became a hallowed item against the backdrop of nationalization; in Switzerland this includes flails and scythes – still to be found in just about every local heritage museum today – as an expression of the country's farming tradition, which, tellingly, became a token of true Swiss identity at the very moment in which the size of the rural population began to dwindle from then over seventy-five per cent to today's two to three per cent. Still, the peasant element still prevails in local and regional museums just as it impacts on the political imagery of what actually makes Switzerland and what it means to be Swiss.

At the time there was also a second force directed towards the future but which, at the time, was unable to assert itself as far as the politics of museums and cultural heritage museums were concerned: the purported solidarity of the new working class, in other words, socialism, which also promised to create paradise on earth, albeit not based on the nation state but on class affiliation. In the wake of the disaster of nationalism, in other words, after the Second World War, the socialist vision grew in strength. With the emergence of the modern social state, the working class achieved many things it had been campaigning for – not necessarily classless society and unbounded solidarity but at least a more solidary national community and a functioning welfare state.

Modern mass culture with all its cinemas, television, rock and roll and pop gave expression to cultural forms that were closely linked with the age of industrialism. But it was only when the old industrial world came to an end, that the urge to collect and exhibit its hallmark tokens set in by establishing factory and mining museums, salvaging old workers' settlements, and conserving old steam engines and industrial equipment of all sorts which were cleaned of any sign of usage and turned over to museums as testimonies of a bygone world and age.

Nationalism and socialism (the latter in the sense of social security provided by the state), stand as the two dominating forces of the twentieth century. Today's cultural scholars and museum experts are still strongly influenced by the disasters of nationalism, which is scrutinized over and over again in often amazing exhibitions, along with the ideology's corollary manifestations racism, colonialism, and imperialism. Working class culture, on the other hand, has more or less – but not with a touch of nostalgia and sentimentality – been shelved by contemporary collectors and curators. The focus is on what has happened since then and what is going on today, namely, the rich and colourful diversity of modern sub and counter-cultures, be they youth, ethnic, gender-based, or sexual, and their concomitant lifestyles. Today, urban events are celebrations of diversity, including all the different street and love parades, the Notting Hill and other cultural carnivals, at times with a regional focus ranging from the Caribbean to the Indian Holi festival of colours, or according to sexual preferences, then again following specific styles of music or dance, or in line with particular fashion and life styles. In the meantime, all these forms have also become part of our cultural heritage; occasionally they have been included in cultural heritage lists but, relative to their significance in today's society, they are only marginally represented. One of the reasons for our gathering here in Bern is to elicit how this could be changed.

Undoubtedly, there are many promising projects in this field. On various occasions, I myself have proposed that museums should pay more, and more serious, attention to these different groups and scenes, and that institutions should

- find ways of addressing these groups, who rarely set foot in a museum; this includes large parts of the population with a migrant or foreign background
- come up with topics which in some way involve the target groups
- rethink their collection policy
- to the effect that the distinction between material and intangible culture is gradually reduced
- which, in turn, would profoundly change the occupational profile of curators and museum experts
- leading to a fundamental shift in the understanding of the respective institutions, that is, transforming them from tranquil places of contemplation into spaces of debate and discussion, into forums in which things are not only viewed and explained but in which meanings are negotiated by means of a "network-laboratory approach" (A. van der Zeijden and S. Elpers , Rotterdam position paper), or as Dibbits and Willemsen demand in reference to Zygmunt Bauman: "We should create open, inviting and hospitable public spaces as laboratories of mixophilia to prompt mutual understanding." (Dibbits, Willemsen, p. 174.)
- so that participation, a term with many shadings, becomes a main theme. Allow me to quote once more from the Rotterdam position paper at the IMP conference: "Shared authority calls for a new role of museums in which the authority on what is displayed and what is not is shared with others. ... 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."

Evidently, all this has been expounded in detail and on multiple occasions. However, in my opinion museums can incorporate as many ethnic and migrant traditions as they like, collect, document, and display however many alternative scenes and lifestyles, address the relevant target groups and include them at eye level... yet, I increasingly doubt whether this would change anything.

Please don't get me wrong. I am very much in favour of all these things, in my opinion expressions of urbanity are well worth collecting and exhibiting; I welcome every broadening of the concept of museum and culture that overcomes old boundaries. But all this will not necessarily change the way urban culture is judged and valued.

Because – and this brings me back to the beginning of my paper – all these things make up our everyday life today, in other words, they are self-evident. There is no need to drive these things into people's heads, they are already there – it's the way we live, as a matter of course.
But – and this is the decisive point: does our way of life hold a plan for the future in the way the visions of nationalism and socialism did at the beginning of the twentieth century? I think the answer of many people would be no.

Today we are experiencing that nationalism is on the rise again, celebrating a joyous resurrection, not least because the counter project postulating a multicultural world of diversity and tolerance has, as yet, failed to convince, although, factually, we are already living it in our everyday lives. Moreover, the achievements of the modern social state are at risk because nobody actually believes that the national foundations on which they were based are solid enough to survive the onslaught of unrestrained globalization.

In addition, indications are mounting that, inadvertently, diversity and multiculturalism are giving rise to fundamentalisms of all kinds – religious, political, ideological, from Islamism to Identitarianism – and that people are seeking salvation in fundamental "truths" in the face of a growing sense of insecurity.

What is missing today – as opposed to the last major thrust of social change – is a unifying and shared vision of the future.

So, if anything meaningful can be done in the field of material and intangible culture and with regard to museums and other cultural institutions, then it is this: we have to seriously seek answers to the pressing issues of globalization and urbanisation – not in the sense of sealing ourselves off from the world, but by focusing on the crucial question, namely, what kind of society do we wish create for ourselves and our children? The last time the world faced such a watershed, the answers were nationalism and socialism, with disastrous outcomes, as we all know too well, but also with a lasting and formative impact in the sense that their legacies still largely determine our lives today.

So far, society has come up with nothing but two inadequate answers, which do not target the future but simply draw on the ideologies of the last great upheaval. For one thing this is neoliberalism, an ideology that ties in with the predatory capitalism of the outgoing 19th century, at a time when young nation states had not yet developed checks forceful enough to counter the power of money, and national oligarchies and monopolies enjoyed similar freedoms as enterprises like Google, Amazon, and Facebook do today on a global scale. Neoliberalism took advantage of the opening of the world after 1989 and changed a lot in terms of the economic system but, at the same time, the incredible arrogance it displayed was one of the primary causes for the fears the majority of people suffer from today.

The second answer relates to the movement of retrograde populism with its emphasis on restitution and its "back to the future" mentality. For now, it remains an open question whether this ideology, which blends elements of the old ideologies of nationalism and socialism, will lead to a disaster similar to the one before, or whether it will fizzle out like earlier social movements such as the Luddites[2] who, in the 19th century, rose up against modernization and set fire to factories and machinery in the hope of obstructing development.

None of the two paths – neither the unbridled forwards of neoliberalism nor the unreserved backwards of populism – provide a sound basis for the task of facing the future. The critical challenge of our time lies in finding answers as to how we can shape the future on the basis of the cultural legacy of modernity and democracy that go beyond voicing laudable intentions and staging emphatic actions in support of solidarity and tolerance, and, instead, offer us a perspective of the future which is worth fighting for (in the sense of struggling for an ideal).

If museums and cultural institutions concerned with material and intangible culture succeed in creating a space in which these questions can be debated and negotiated, they will not only manage to preserve the cultural heritage of urban society, they will actually help to shape it and make it fit for the future.

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2 A protest movement named after its supposed leader, Ned Ludd. The radical group of English textile workers and weavers fought against the mechanization of their industry in the early 19th century in the course of the industrial revolution.

References:

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