

Trading perceptions in a post-ethnographic museum

Format	Article	Share	Twitter
Published	17 June 2013		Facebook
Author	Clémentine Deliss		Email
See			

Frankfurt has been at the centre of international trade for over nine hundred years. Fairs, which functioned as a junction for the foreign traffic in goods, featured ahead of the banks and as early as the eleventh century. In the sixteenth century, Germany set up trading posts or ‘colonies’ in Ghana, Venezuela, and the Amazon region. Trade colonies and protectorates grew in scale towards the end of the nineteenth century with the official entry of the German Reich into European imperialism. Mercantile incentives intersected with scholarly research such that one is tempted to ask whether the museological assemblage of ethnographic objects was ultimately a side product of commercial interests.

Founded in 1904 on the ‘geography of trade’, the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt houses over 67,000 objects from Africa, South-East Asia, the Americas and Oceania, a media archive with 120,000 photographs and films, and a research library with 50,000 books and journals. Speaking in 1904, Bernhard Hagen, the first director of the museum, emphasised the relationship between commerce and knowledge. He writes: “Our German Fatherland has evolved from a major power into a world power, and German trade and commerce now has large, indeed massive interests in all five continents. What did China, let alone Japan mean to a German merchant only 50 years ago? Today, every large manufacturer or merchant must bear these empires in mind, not to mention the Australian and African markets... A slight upset in a remote corner of East of Asia may trigger the most severe stock market crisis here. Now this is a gap not yet filled by the geography of trade. This is where the new science of ethnography comes into play.”

Faced with the legacy of this museum in 2012, the central questions may be as follows: Is it possible for ethnographic collections that once offered a scholarly parallel to imperial trade to become relevant once again as reflectors of today’s routes of exchange and changing patterns of citizenship? How does a museum of anthropology – or world cultures – create presence for people who have no national, colonial, or historical connections to those cultures that are featured in its collections? How do we contend with the complex mismatch between so-called ‘source

THEATRUM MUNDI

communities' from the original, historical locations of ethnographic research and the hybrid heterogeneity of citizenship and audience that we find in our cities today? Can we solder new perceptions through innovative educational alloys and shift these anachronistic material objects onto a dialogical middle ground that is politically and socially sensitive to both past and present conditions? To do this requires finding methods of working with these artefacts and presenting them anew. The relationship between rhetoric and display is the final sticking point: for it is the feedback loop between text and object for which the tropes of ethnographic narrative are proving insufficient today. In short, this exercise in remediation requires one to critically engage with orthodoxies of different schools of anthropology, and to counteract the continuing desire to preserve the logos of ethnos.

In order to accompany the shift into this post-ethnological context, the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt has created a workshop-laboratory to undertake fieldwork on site in the archives and depots of the museum. Domestic in scale the workshop-laboratory generates a new contextualization of one's own research as well as enhancing a sense of shared histories and cultural exchange.

This process takes place through analyses and experiments that position artefacts from the collection at the centre of all inquiries. Guest artists, designers, writers, architects, film-makers and social scientists live and work in the museum for several weeks at a time and have the opportunity to develop their own unique take on the collection, creating tests-works based on these historical artefacts and documents. As such, the museum's trade in perceptions operates through in-house production, though the practical application of concepts and the construction of new material objects. The aim is to find forms of representation that extend beyond the academic appraisal of past histories and enable one to view the objects in the collection as prototypes for different futures, and to develop situations that interpellate today's communities without obfuscating the colonial past. If this dialogical approach is successful, then the original collection is expanded through new works in a variety of media.

If one assumes that underpinning all collections are the traces of former trade routes, and if one takes the metaphor of tracking and mapping one step further, then it is curious to consider how historical collections today may come to represent either a continuing flow or an impasse. For how should we treat those areas within colonial or imperial collections that we do not update? Are these precisely the artefacts whose public exchange value, visibility, and presence-engendering capacities are being repressed?

An example of such a collection may be found in the armouries of 18th and 19th century universal or encyclopedic museums. How does one bring up to date this assemblage of weapons to include the kind of warfare technology (including food security measures)

THEATRUM MUNDI

that we hear about through the media, that is purchased through middle-men (both public and private), and that constitutes a commercial enterprise, which is neither discussed nor exhibited for the cultural edification of the wider public? Similarly, collections that reflect highly nationalist identifications such as those found in folklore or 'Volkskunde' museums in Germany or Austria have become redundant as reflectors of national or urban-rural identities in today's worlds. The trade routes and civic identifications that underpinned their reasoning have shifted. The mediating role of the museum operates today within a different dynamic.

Let's assume, following a conversation with Richard Sennett in London this summer, that a person who moves from one part of the world to another – a so-called migrant – brings with them a set of objects in their suitcase. The transition to a new environment alters and shifts the architectonic frame within which these things once found their place. Their owner has to renegotiate the presence of these goods within a new experience and spatial practice. This is an activity of adaptation and adjustment, which helps to re-signify meanings and affect between people, objects and places.

An ethnographic museum introduces a further dimension of agency in this relationship, one that is incorporated in the person of the anthropologist or collector. Between the movement from there to here, from say the Amazon to the city of Frankfurt, ownership has altered from one of reasonably straightforward personal possession (as above) to one of ambivalent custodianship. The object is no longer housed in the home, on the market stall, or placed on the ritual altar relative to its faith of origin, nor is it transported in a suitcase as a personal souvenir. Instead, it passes through a process of reconstruction that involves internment, administration, assessment and conservation. The ethnographer as collector is now in the middleman position and turns out to be the person who generates history around an object or chooses not to, denies presence or seeks to enhance this potential. In short, there are institutions, which act as trading posts and there are the middlemen or brokers, who negotiate exchanges of knowledge between groups and individuals. The rules of the game may vary. The scale of trade and exchange will reflect different economic and political incentives related to state, national, municipal or private ownership or custodianship. Visibility is not always guaranteed – the middleman may be illegal, or the institution may wish to obfuscate its engagement with regard to this transaction.

If we take on the possibility that individuals and groups from 'dense, working-class neighbourhoods' (Saskia Sassen) can and wish to 'make presence' (Sassen) in the cultural centres of the city, then the position of the middleman raises interesting questions. For there is no sole legitimate trader of perceptions. There is also the itinerant hawker whose method may be chaotic, informal, part of a non-accountable administrative activity and most probably

THEATRUM MUNDI

linked to a complex set of aesthetic practices and stealth architectonics (see Markus Miessen). The middleman may also be rethought within cultural centres as an artist, an architect, a designer, a visitor, but also as a building: a museum with a collection, a house that can engender intermediation. As Philippe Descola writes (2004, Musée du quai Branly): 'Le musée un grand trafiquant d'agences'- the museum is a huge trading post of agencies.

For historical collections have an anthropomorphic even fetishist feel to them. They evoke relations between people, things and ideas, between failures and successes, between the inheritance of meanings and their erasure over time. The ethnographic museum represents the survival of a particularly obsessive form of cultural and scientific institution, one that is simultaneously local and diasporic, possessive and rehabilitating, familiar and feral. To attempt to remediate its collections today is to engage with discomfort, doubt, and melancholia, but also to activate a necessary process of revitalization in the urban context.

To conclude, I would like to make a proposal: that the museum building has the potential to provide the space for these objects to produce presence once again, to act as points of departure in future dialogical acts of trade. Here I do not intend a focus on corporate-run, large cultural centres. Instead, the intention is to recast the scale of the museum both conceptually and physically as a domestic operation. Here research, production, and exhibition-making take place 'in-house'. The education that is mediated through the historic collection of objects is produced in a temporary home, a sheltered space, a maison de passe, or a half-way house with all the shades of activity one might associate with this nomenclature, locations which can be usurped by visitors and citizens without entry or exit examinations.



1/1 View into Trading Style Installation PAM