

University of Groningen

Rethinking Citizenship

Altuna, Asier ; Suárez, Mariluz

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2013

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Altuna, A., & Suárez, M. (Eds.) (2013). *Rethinking Citizenship: New Voices in Euroculture*. Euroculture consortium.

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

Shapes of a Multicultural Society: Some Thoughts on the Rearrangement of the Museum of Cultures, Basel¹

Bianca Rubino

Abstract

This paper is embedded in the topic of postcolonial museums in the context of a multicultural society. Nowadays, ethnographic museums, which were born in the context of colonialism and of Europeans travelling and exploring the world, are facing a crisis with regard to ethnographic representation and thus their identity, and of public interest. This is one of the reasons why Jean Jamin asked in 1998: “do we need to burn ethnographic museums?” and why over the last decades these museums have often changed their configurations and exhibition strategies. In this work the focus lies on the Museum of Cultures of Basel (so denominated from 1996), which, after two years of works, was re-opened in September 2011, with special orientation given to social issues. The paper considers how the museum sees itself today, also taking into account the treatment of the “Other” in the exhibition strategies, the curators’ intent, the public and its role. The methodology includes both a theoretical framework and fieldwork. In particular, it focuses on the analysis of the exhibitions “Intrinsic Perspective: Inspiring aspects of anthropology” and “Chinatown” (for example, considering the introduction of art, the concept of “us” versus “them”, etc...). Furthermore, activities carried out by the museum are also taken into account in order to understand how the public is engaged with the Museum’s activities. The purpose and scope of this work is to investigate the connection between the Museum and its attempt to foster a plural and cultural citizenship in present society. The tentative outcome is to consider the Museum as a “forum”, a “contact zone”, in other words, as a place which promotes practices of intercultural dialogue and is closely related to multiculturalism.

Keywords: ethnographic museums, the “Other”, exhibition, public, multiculturalism

¹ The author thanks the Museum of Cultures of Basel for permission to show photographs of some of its artifacts of the collections.

Introduction

Exhibitions, according to Ivan Karp, are “privileged arenas for presenting images of self and “other” ”.² And especially ethnological museums, which today find themselves affected by two epochal shifts, “postcoloniality” and “multiculturalism”, are concerned with narratives about the “Other”.³ Indeed, concerns about exclusion and inclusion become always more important.⁴ Nowadays, in the context of globalization, ethnographic museums, which were born in the context of colonialism and of Europeans travelling and exploring the world, are facing a even more severe crisis than for other museums. This is due to the crisis of ethnographic representation and consequently ethnographic museums’ identity, but also public interest.

That is the reason why Jean Jamin asked in 1998: “Faut-il brûler les musées d’ethnographie?”⁵. Meanwhile De L’Estoile juxtaposes the “Musées des Autres”, which focus on the others, and the “Musées de Soi”, where people narrate a story about themselves, questioning the practices of talking about the “Other” and their legitimacy.⁶ And the curators of the Ethnographic Museum of Neuchâtel are developing practices working on a meta-museological level. Through critic museology they explore the implication of the relation between collections and their curators⁷ and try to overcome the museum known as “Cannibal”. In other words, the museum which devours and encloses the “Other”, leading us to think that it can be assimilated.⁸

Thus in the last decades these museums have often changed their configurations, exhibition strategies, and museum practices, putting the focus, for example, on colonial past, history, art or multiculturalism.⁹ According to De L’Estoile, multiculturalism is related to the establishment of the Museum of Cultures.¹⁰

In this work the focus lies on the Museum of Cultures in Basel and the interest about it is mainly due to its new reopening in September 2011, the shortage of academic literature about it and the possibility of a stimulating field of work, through which to explore the reality of a European museum. The Museum of Cultures (also MKB, Museum der Kulturen Basel) is the biggest ethnographic Museum in Switzerland and one of the first ethnological collections in Europe, stemming from Swiss travellers and private collections. It was established in 1849 as “Museum der Stadt”, it became the Museum of Ethnology and Swiss Museum of Folklore in 1944, and finally the Museum of Cultures in 1996.¹¹ On the sixth of September 2011 the Museum of Cultures reopened its exhibition area, after

² Ivan Karp, introduction to *Exhibiting cultures. The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 15.

³ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, “Multiculturalism and Museums. Discourse about Others in the Age of Globalization”, *Theory, Culture & Society* (1997), 123.

⁴ See Okwui Enwezor, art curator specialised in the areas of art and multiculturalism.

Enwezor, Okwui. “The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition”, *Research in African Literatures*, 34. No. 4, Indiana University Press (Winter, 2003), 57-82. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4618328> (accessed 20 August 2012).

⁵ “do we need to burn ethnographic museums?” Jamin Jean, “Faut-il brûler les musées d’ethnographie?”, *Gradbina* (1998): 65-69.

⁶ “Museums of the Others” “Museum of the Self”. Benoît De l’Estoile, *Le goût des autres. De l’exposition coloniale aux arts premiers* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007), 11-12-13.

⁷ Jacques Hainard and Roland Kaehr, *Objets prétextes objets manipulés*. Ed. (Neuchâtel, Men: 1984).

⁸ Marc-Olivier Gonseth et al., *Le musée cannibale*. ed. Gonseth M., Hainard J., K. Roland, *Le musée cannibale*, 13.

⁹ See Benoît De L’Estoile (2007) and Sally Price (2007).

¹⁰ De l’Estoile, *Le goût des autres. De l’exposition coloniale aux arts premiers* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007), 285-286.

¹¹ Museum der Kulturen Basel, <http://www.mkb.ch/en/3-1-museum/3-2-history.html> (accessed 15 March 2012).

two years of works. The change did not just affect the architecture entailing a renovation, which was led by studio Herzog & de Meuron¹², but involved museological practices as well, moving towards a special orientation on social issues.

My research question considers how the museum sees itself today through the exhibitions and the activities, also taking into account the treatment of the “Other” in the exhibition strategies, the curators’ intent, the public and its role.

The methodology includes, beyond a theoretical framework which counts on the contribution of several scholars, also a fieldwork which consists of observation and interpretation of the exhibitions and activities of the MKB. And the accent is more on the way the objects are selected and exposed than on the objects themselves, thus museological practices and their implications. Furthermore, activities carried out by the Museum are also taken into account to understand how the public is engaged in the Museum’s activities. In particular, the analysis of the exhibition is centred on “Intrinsic Perspective - Inspiring Aspects of Anthropology” and “Chinatown”, both accessible during the timeframe between February and May 2012. The analysis was made possible thanks to several visits to the Museum, having attended a guided tour, and a meeting with the Director’s Assistant, Samuel Bachmann. The contribution of this work consists in the consideration of new aspects of the Museum exhibitions and activities and exploring the connection with the concept of a plural and cultural citizenship.

In particular, the purpose and scope is to investigate the connection between the Museum and its attempt to foster a plural and cultural citizenship in present society. In fact, as Deniz Ünsal states, “[t]he cultural definition of citizenship is made with regard to access to and participation in culture, and the recognition of cultural diversity in all its forms”.¹³ This could demonstrate how ethnographic museums as cultural institutions do play a relevant role in the shape of citizenship in a multicultural society.

I. The Museum today: reopening, theoretical pillars and mission

The Museum’s reopening has led to a radical change: from the paradigm of “Primitive” and “Primordial” stemming from the “Wunderkammer” to a more contemporary Museum of Cultures.¹⁴ The need for change originated from the crisis of representation and the intrinsic problem of the term “culture”.¹⁵ The MKB looks “for new ways of exhibiting and new manners of doing”¹⁶, thus dealing with always-different approaches ranging from

¹²With regard to architecture and new museums see also, for example, the case of Jean Nouvel and the Quai Branly in Paris, Sally Price (2007).

¹³ Deniz Ünsal, “Museums’ quest for validity in the 21st century. The impact of globalization in the age of cities”. *Museums.ch. Die Schweizer Museumszeitschrift/ La Revue Suisse des Musées/ La Rivista Svizzera dei Musei* 6 (2011): 37.

¹⁴ Other examples of Museums of Cultures are Castello d’Albertis Museo delle Culture del Mondo (Genova) and Museum of Cultures of the World (Göteborg).

¹⁵ Samuel Bachmann. Meeting with the Director Assistant. 3 May 2012, MKB.

¹⁶ Olivier Schinz, “Assumer sa position d’auteur. Entretien avec Anna Schmid, directrice du Museum der Kulturen, Bâle” *Museums.ch. Die Schweizer Museumszeitschrift/ La Revue Suisse des Musées/ La Rivista Svizzera dei Musei*, 6 (2011), 28.

historical, to regional, artistic, philosophical or poetical, and rotating exhibitions more frequently.¹⁷

Furthermore, the Director Anna Schmid is aware of the fact that anthropology and ethnographic museums are closely related to European history, consequently to ethnocentricity and eurocentricity. She also believes that in displaying it is not possible to remain “objective” and that it is probably only possible to be objective regarding the materials of the objects displayed. This means that museums can give a “partial truth” because it is impossible to limit a whole culture in an exhibition or a museum; it is therefore a question of interpretation.¹⁸

The MKB fully backs up James Clifford’s concept of the museum as a “contact zone”. He borrowed the term from Mary Louise Pratt, who with these words defined “the space of colonial encounters” characterized by “ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict”.¹⁹ Applying the concepts to museums means that “their organizing structure as a *collection* becomes an ongoing historical, political, moral *relationship* – a power-charged set of exchanges, of push and pull.”²⁰ So, the director Anna Schmid agrees that the Museum and its collection, as a contact zone naturally leads to an interaction between objects, the first owners of the objects, the curators, and the public, which also entails an enormous variety of interpretations, “dialogue intérieur” among the visitors.²¹ According to the Director visitors are “citoyens responsables qui doivent être libres de construire leurs interprétations”.²² The visitors can first appreciate the aesthetics, then take into consideration the information given to them. Meaning that the Museum presents the objects and the information but the visitor is left free to appreciate the esthetique and build his interpretation, sometimes also without taking into account the information and thus the interpretation offered by the Museum.

The debate inside the MKB about interpretations appears understandable through the metaphor of glasses, which is a means through which it is possible to see in a different way, but also to think differently.²³ The MKB embraces Marcus and Fischer’s theories in its mission of cultural critique: because it is about knowing oneself through the others and building intersubjective relations. And the “Other” can sometimes be really close, without the need to go miles away.²⁴ In the words of the Director Anna Schmid:

The impact of globalization on everyday life, cosmopolitan tendencies and their regional offshoots, actual individual societies and virtual web communities, cultural plurality and reflections about national traditions are some of the aspects that it is worthwhile considering in a wider context and examining in greater detail. One reason for observing "otherness" has always been to stimulate reflection about one's own identity, with the object of encouraging analysis and knowledge of cultural contexts. Knowledge of cultural backgrounds can have a lasting impact on the

¹⁷ Museum der Kulturen. Press Release. Reopening of the Museum der Kulturen. A place for encounters and inspiration. http://www.mkb.ch/en/2-1-information_services/2-3-media-service.html (accessed 15 March 2012).

¹⁸ Here it is directly used “partial truth”, concept of James Clifford, *Writing Culture* (1986).

Olivier Schinz, “Assumer sa position d’auteur”, 28.

¹⁹ Marie-Louise Pratt in James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts. London, England: Harvard University Press, 1997), 192.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ “interior dialogue”. Museum der Kulturen Basel, *EigenSinn. Band 1* (Museum der Kulturen Basel, 2011), 20.

²² “responsible citizens who have to be free to construct their interpretations” Olivier Schinz, “Assumer sa position d’auteur”, 29.

²³ Museum der Kulturen Basel, *EigenSinn. Band 1* (Museum der Kulturen Basel, 2011), 20.

²⁴ Olivier Schinz, “Assumer sa position d’auteur”, 29.

deciphering and interpretation of everyday actions and patterns of behaviour and, hence, a conscious approach to differences and commonalities.²⁵

So, one can argue that the mission of fostering cultural life, and of being a partner and forum exchange for the public, and a reflective institution²⁶ fully addresses the issue of a cultural and plural citizenship.

In the following paragraphs there will be room for the description and analysis of two exhibitions. Some key points which have been found during the observation of the exhibitions have been deepened and used as key tenets for analysing the exhibition “Intrinsic Perspectives – Inspiring Aspects of Anthropology” and for commenting the exhibition “Chinatown”. These are for example: the nature of the exhibition and its features, the time framing, the introduction of art, the origin of the artists, the cultures represented, the interaction, the reflexive aspect of the Museum.

I.a. “Intrinsic Perspectives – Inspiring Aspects of Anthropology”

The exhibition “Intrinsic Perspectives – Inspiring Aspects of Anthropology” launched the new museological perspective, which represents a reference for all other works and activities of the Museum.

To begin with, its running time will be decided from time to time, probably putting an end to permanent exhibitions. Moreover, meanwhile the tradition of the ethnographic museums sees the objects allocated per regions, as if those areas were “vacuum areas” where people live in “watertight compartments” without changing time by time and without interaction, the MKB has decided instead to bring an end to displays with this geographical categorization (with the exception of the curators who are still divided by geographical areas).²⁷ Therefore, in the exhibition the areas of origin of the objects are at a second level, while the new focus lies in the key concepts of modern anthropology, which are: community, agency, space, knowledge, and performance; and this to underline how diverse systems and structures can shape a variety of different ways of life. The new display represents a way for exhibiting part of the 300,000 objects of the Museum.²⁸ It has to be related with the now and there²⁹ and the MKB through its “new programmatic approach” has stopped considering itself as “repository of encyclopaedic knowledge”.³⁰ Moreover, it seems that the new disposition is able to overcome what the curator Mirjam Shatanawi, commenting on contemporary art at the Tropenmuseum of Amsterdam, defines as the categorization between West and East.³¹

²⁵ Museum der Kulturen Basel. Press Release. “Intrinsic Perspectives - Inspiring Aspects of Anthropology”. http://www.mkb.ch/en/2-1-information_services/2-3-media-service.html (accessed 15 March 2012).

²⁶ Museum der Kulturen Basel, Museum’s Mission statement, <http://www.mkb.ch/en/3-1-museum.html> (accessed 15 march 2012).

²⁷ Olivier Schinz, “Assumer sa position d’auteur, 29.

²⁸ Samuel Bachmann, Meeting with the Director’s Assistant. 3 May 2012, MKB.

²⁹ Dominique Spirgi, “Fasnachtslaterne und Nagelfigur. Das Museum der Kulturen wirft einen neuen Blick auf die Kulturen der 'Anderen'”. *Basler Stadtbuch. 1.32 Jahr/ Ausgabe 2012* (2012), 49.

³⁰ Museum der Kulturen, Press release “Intrinsic Perspectives - Inspiring Aspects of Anthropology”. http://www.mkb.ch/en/2-1-information_services/2-3-media-service.html (accessed 15 March 2012).

³¹ Mirjam Shatanawi, “Curating for a change: contemporary art at the Tropenmuseum today” (paper presented at the conference “Where is Art Contemporary? The Global Challenge of Art Museum II at the Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, Germany 19-20 October 2007).

The categories are as follows. “Community” entails people’s affiliations, which include rules, norms, duties, expectations but also possibilities. With regard to the social dimension, the concept of community helps to explore the phenomena of social integration and exclusion. In particular, the Museum shows an artistic exhibition related to this theme. “Agency” refers to people’s actions, which are always part of bigger frameworks of existing structures. Thus in the area objects are exhibited in order to refer to certain practices (see as examples the “glasses” from Ghana or Côte d’Ivoire or the “snow goggles” of the Inuits). “Knowledge” hints at the distribution of skills, competences and thus at the relation with power and the prosperity of a society (on stage at the MKB objects such as a totem pole show the knowledge of the mythological significance and also the carvers’ skills). Furthermore, space is deemed to be a social construction and the globalized network has led to a change of space’s conception through technology and transport system. It can be argued that space is linked to the division of works and the distribution of resources. In this context “Space” includes maps, which segmenting the space, are key objects (see for example a map from the sixteenth century presenting the Mexican state of Puebla, which hosts both European and indigenous knowledge with regard to territory, property, and kinship relations, and today it is still used by village collectives in order to contrast property rights’ claims of other individuals and communities). The area “Performance” is related to the practice of staging which is common in almost every culture and often also means “display ourselves”. Thus, it takes into consideration rituals, ceremonies, festivities, theatre performances, contests and games and shows some masks of different origin and a speech given by a Swiss President.³²

Furthermore, it is important to point out that the objects are collocated in the exhibition space according to the different concepts analysed above, meaning that there is no visible and deliberate caesura between objects of Swiss or European culture from another culture. So what could be considered as the “Other” is here included, impeding any distinction of “Us” and “Them”. This practice hinders what Victor Segalen calls the “exotisme”, in other words, “la perception du diverse” but also “le pouvoir d’exotisme, qui n’est que le pouvoir de concevoir l’autre”.³³ Therefore, in the exhibition the objects related to Swiss culture, which refer to national culture, but also to the city of Basel, and the Museum itself (showing also the attachment to the city and its community) mixes with other objects of other cultures, presenting some forms of hybridization as well. In fact, it is shown in the New Year’s speech by the Swiss President Adolf Ogi, President of the Swiss Federal Council, given on the first of January 2000, which was highly criticized by communication specialists because of being too populist, but was appreciated by the public. There is also a lantern, one of those carried during the Carnival (“Fasnacht”), which are symbols and attractions of the city of Basel. The exhibited one dates back to 1929 and represents the embezzlement issues of two Swiss politicians. Furthermore, one can observe the mask of Alfred Bühler, who was Director of the Museum of Ethnography from 1959 to 1970 and first full professor of anthropology at the University of Basel. The mask was created by the artists Thomas Keller and Faustina Iselin for his birthday and his return back home from Papua New Guinea and probably was a means to honour him in an unconventional way.

Moreover, it is worth mentioning that in the exhibition the display also entails the representation of European people by other cultures. By “mirroring” itself, this in the sense that the Museum exposes objects coming from abroad, taking charge of representing other

³² Museum der Kulturen Basel. Press Release. “Intrinsic Perspectives - Inspiring Aspects of Anthropology”. http://www.mkb.ch/en/2-1-information_services/2-3-media-service.html (accessed 15 March 2012).

³³ “the perception of the other”, “the power of exoticism which is nothing but the power of conceiving the other”. Victor Segalen in Benoît De l’Estoile, *Le goût des autres. De l’exposition coloniale aux arts premiers* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007), 20.

cultures, but at the same time the European is showed through non-European representations which take form in different artefacts, the MKB offers new and opposite perspectives. And this practice is corroborated by Pieterse, who believes that “[o]ne of the options for reflexive representation is practicing anthropology-in-reverse: looking at the West with the same gaze and cognitive instrument as were directed at the other”.³⁴ So, with regard to this, a mask from Indonesia displays a European with a hooked nose, a moustache and a uniform cap.³⁵ It shows that the European was incorporated into the Borneo mythological and cosmological universe, representing here the spirit of a European, who has the task of accompanying another spirit to its resting place. Others masks come from Africa, staging the encounters of African and European people.³⁶ Here the colonist is featured with a pointed nose, a small mouth and glasses. Furthermore, a mask from Indonesia shows the rosy cheeked stranger, the “European”, through the vision of an Indonesian artist who was inspired by the Swiss “Fasnacht” masks, and the Japanese mask shows the King of England as a “ruthless exploiter”. So both the inverse or reversal and hybrid representations appear on stage.

Another important issue is the time framing. The Director of the MKB seeks to encourage the expositions to be linked to the present-day, to now and here, and to avoid both historical expositions and the use of the ethnographic present.³⁷ This latter, described in the words of the anthropologist Fabian, represents “the practice of giving account of other cultures and societies in the present tense”.³⁸ Allochronic time entails “the denial of coevalness”.³⁹ Moreover according to other scholars, it “freezes” peoples at the time of the ethnography or hints at a society which remains stuck in the past, because deemed not to change during time.⁴⁰ This practice draws a line with the past attitude and it is considerably relevant because it explains why objects in the exhibition are not stuck in the past, although they stem from different time spans. Hence the exhibition also shows fashion and cultural trends, such as for examples, some shutter shades as an item of fashion and a Keffiyeh scarf, deemed as symbol of Palestine and of anti-Semitism but also a fashionable accessory.⁴¹

Besides and related to the thematic of time is that of the introduction of contemporary art in ethnographic museums, which plays a relevant part at the MKB as well. It gives one the possibility of appending a special glimpse on cultural questions, it is an individual approach, a way to pose questions, says Bachmann. Art, like history and regionality, belongs to culture.⁴² Of the same idea is Mirjam Shatanawi, who considering the Middle East and North Africa section at the Tropenmuseum of Amsterdam, believes that including contemporary art is a means through which to favour the creation of a “platform for the diversity in opinions”.⁴³ As a result museums present “personal stories rather than fixed truths” and displaying contemporary art enables museums to relate to the contemporary.⁴⁴ Referring to the introduction of art at MKB it is possible to mention two examples among many others. One is the area of “Community”, which can also be seen as an introduction to the whole museum’s exhibition. The Korean artist Sanggil Kim has

³⁴ Pieterse, “Multiculturalism and Museums”, 135.

³⁵ See Annex.

³⁶ Museum der Kulturen Basel, Booklet “Intrinsic Perspectives - Inspiring Aspects of Anthropology” MKB and Museum der Kulturen. Press Release. “Intrinsic Perspectives - Inspiring Aspects of Anthropology”. http://www.mkb.ch/en/2-1-information_services/2-3-media-service.html (accessed 15 March 2012).

³⁷ Ibid. Olivier Schinz, “Assumer sa position d’auteur”, 29.

³⁸ Fabian, “*Time and the other: how anthropology makes its objects*”, 80.

³⁹ Ibid., 39.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 39, 81.

⁴¹ See Annex.

⁴² Samuel Bachmann, Meeting with the Director’s Assistant. 3 May 2012, MKB.

⁴³ Shatanawi, “Curating for a change: contemporary art at the Tropenmuseum today”.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

gathered Internet-communities and photographed them, showing their community bounding interests (Burberry, Harley-Davidson, fans of the musical Sound of Music, and folklore). Here the pictures enable people to think about the link between technological devices and community building. The other example is the first element displayed in the upper floor, which is a video made by two artists from Mali and France, Adrien Sina and Mamary Diallo, and called *Farafin a ni Toubabou* (“the black and the white”).⁴⁵ This video shows two hands involved in simulating the exchange of people, money, passports, and other objects along a border. Thus this artwork explores the practices at borders (exchange, negotiation), hinting at the overtaking of spaces and borders themselves.⁴⁶

With regard to the origin of the artists it is relevant to stress that they are not only European. Yet art does not stand as specimen or metaphor of a cultural landscape, but creates new meanings and connections. So artists from all over the world participate, not being forced to represent their culture but fostering reflection. Meanwhile museum curators are still the permanent ones of the Museum and there is usually no collaboration with the so-called “natives”. In fact, when it comes to the issue of “cooperative” museology⁴⁷ practices, such as those explored in North America, involving the local people for instance, the Museum Director Schmid does believe that what she calls “forme d’autorité partagée”⁴⁸ sets up good examples, but apparently, at the same time, this would probably not be the practice promoted by the MKB. As a matter of fact, she argues that it would be difficult to find the right person, at the same time interested in the representative process and representative of the community.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, local people are called to collaborate with the MKB, when they are already part of the network.⁵⁰

Furthermore, there are some elements in the exhibition, which require the participation and interaction of visitors to the museum. One can find a real podium, for example, through which to develop performance skills. Moreover, visitors can use a touch screen, which enables them to observe the Global Ecological Footprint and also other maps (for example about human development) from the website www.worldmapper.org. And this device provides the possibility of looking at the world through another perspective. Lastly, one can also play a “slit gong”, an object still used in different oceanic societies as a ritual object and everyday instrument to send different types of messages, trying to understand the acoustic room.

In conclusion, it is also possible to underpin the idea that nowadays the ethnographic museums themselves are “no longer at the heart of the debate on non-Western cultures, as it was once” and other museums have taken over the “process of canonization”, so they can “play the role of critical outsider, a discourse space where the cultural canon is put to the test”.⁵¹ The Museum through this exhibition and through all these elements here analysed fosters a reflective attitude and offers also room to reflect, think, and ask questions. The following paragraph describing the exhibition “Chinatown” will stand as example of some new aspects of the Museum’s approach, first of all the importance of the artistic dimension and reflection, in association with social issues and debate around identity.

⁴⁵ See Annex.

⁴⁶ Museum der Kulturen, guided visit (March 2012).

⁴⁷ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, 120.

⁴⁸ “form of shared authority”. Olivier Schinz, “Assumer sa position d’auteur”, 29.

⁴⁹ Olivier Schinz, “Assumer sa position d’auteur”, 29.

⁵⁰ Probably next year an exhibition related to Amazzonia will also count on the contribution of local people in contact with the curator.

⁵¹ Shatanawi, “Curating for a change: contemporary art at the Tropenmuseum today”.

I.b. “Chinatown”

“Les musées en général, et les musées d’ethnographie en particulier, sont des lieux où se mesurent les limites de la tolérance d’un groupe majoritaire envers différents groupes minoritaires”, comment Turgeon and Dubuc.⁵² The MKB seems to be a good ground to explore this statement and thanks to an exhibition held from 7th of September 2011 to 6th May 2012 it has been possible to discover the approach of the Museum towards a community which often has been seen with curiosity or suspiciously, namely “Chinatown”.

It actually sets out to show through photos, videos and dioramas the complexity of Chinatown. What the exhibition and the respective booklet seek to communicate is the underpinning idea of the variety of different communities’ meanings and perceptions about certain phenomena, and in this case the positive and negative attitude towards “Chinatown” and the changeable nature of this latter. The focus is given to spatial organization, affiliation and identity construction and different aspects, perceptions, and actors are taken into consideration: for instance, workers, immigrants, third-generation workers, etc.⁵³

Entering the first room visitors can find data about the history of Chinese migration and Chinatowns in the world and a pair of shoes. The latter can be seen as a metaphor for immigration and invites and prepares the public for the exhibition, so that the Chinese proverb “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step”⁵⁴ meets with the saying “Put yourself in someone else’s shoes”, emphasizing the involvement of the audience.

Next-door a gigantic dragon appears, standing as symbol of the Chinese nation brand and immediately conjuring up a multitude of mental images of China.

The following room hosts the enormous photographs and the slide-show of the Taiwan-born Chien-Chi Chang, representing pictures from Chinatowns of New York and the wider world. They offer more information about these communities, showing aspects of everyday life and culture. In fact, a photograph displays close-up birdcages. As the label states, songbirds are popular in the Chinatown area and in New York, Chinese migrants succeeded in convincing the city to establish a bird sanctuary. Other pictures show wreaths and funerals. With regard to the theme of affiliation, some photographs offer a glimpse to the social life and the connections to the homeland, China, in the context of globalization. Concerning space and spatial organization, tenements buildings in Chinatown are also being displayed.⁵⁵

Continuing, there is a “Paifang”, another symbol of China, which hosts on one side the world of religion and on the other side the field of commerce, showing some interesting aspects. In fact, it displays some Chinese textiles produced in South Africa, some “take-away” packages, and fake Louis Vuitton bags, which express a part of Chinese cultural and commercial technique. In addition, one can find exposed tourist flyers, which show both tourist attractions and the “commercialization of the exotic”⁵⁶ but also

⁵² “Museums in general and ethnographic museums in particular, are places where one measures the tolerance’s limits of a majoritarian group towards different minority groups” Laurier Turgeon and Élise Dubuc, *Musées d’ethnologie: nouveaux défis, nouveaux terrains*, *Ethnologies*, 24, no. 2 (2002), 13. <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/006636ar> (accessed 15 August 2012).

⁵³ Museum der Kulturen Basel, Press Release. Chinatown. http://www.mkb.ch/en/2-1-information_services/2-3-media-service.html (accessed 15 March 2012).

⁵⁴ Panel, Chinatown.

⁵⁵ See Annex.

⁵⁶ Panel, Chinatown.

advertising flyers, which promote Chinese courses for young Chinese Americans. And an installation presents images, calls records, interviews, collected between 1991-2011 reporting the working and social conditions associated with the Chinese “dreams of home”, introducing the topic of family separation and reunification. Moreover, it is worth noting that texts on panels also mention associations which fight for the rights of Chinese people.

In conclusion, beside the evident aspect of the introduction of art, the exhibition emphasises other interesting issues such as the relation to contemporaneity, the focus on social issues and in particular identity building, migration and, integration issues. The wide range of information and topics offers an exchange of perspectives, and room for reflection, putting aside stereotyping and fostering critical thinking, also in relation to the development of rights. And here towards the Chinatown community, the MKB seems to deepen and explore social and cultural features, practice which could improve the cultural dialogue between different communities. These practices show the plurality of societies and multicultural societies, possibly leading to a fostering of cultural citizenship.

II. Public, exhibitions and activities of the Museum

In the exhibition which opened in May 2012 “Suspended. The Lightness of Stones” by a South African artist Justin Fiske, the visitors were asked to put his pebble installations into action. In this philosophical and poetic exhibition the visitor could choose his or her own route and by moving the installations see the creation of many different patterns made possible thanks to the stones bound to strings. It seems clear thanks to all the exhibitions mentioned until now that MKB, through interaction and reflection, seeks to give an important role to the public. However, it has to be said that understanding, interpretation and reflection sometimes is also difficult to handle by the audience.⁵⁷

With regard to the reaction of the public, among many positive notes, the visitors’ book also presented critical commentaries complaining about the “emptiness” of the rooms taking into consideration all the objects of the MKB collections, which count 300,000 items. Negative reactions were also reported to the museum staff regarding categories selected for “Intrinsic Perspectives – Inspiring Aspects of Anthropology”, in the sense that the Museum was criticized for having decided the interpretation.⁵⁸ But exhibiting is an on-going process, trying many different approaches and the Museum also makes an effort to take into account the reaction of the public.

In order to involve the audience the MKB is engaged in activities and events of very different nature and settings, such as: guided tours, workshops, conferences, concerts and dance performances. The variety of events enables to generate interest in the visitor and give vitality.

It seems worthwhile to mention a guided tour that took place during the first months of the reopening. For three weeks a theatre group was invested with the task of being the guides, creating couples of one visitor to one guide. The guide-actor who also pretended to be representative of a particular country, during the visit led the visitor using earphone audio messages also through the city until at a certain point, he was left alone in a container-bunker. The audience’s reactions were many and different: some people were shocked at following a stranger in the city, some others criticized the fact that tour guides

⁵⁷ Samuel Bachmann. Meeting with the Director’s Assistant. 3 May 2012, MKB.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

were treated as “objects of representation”, but on the other hand once they discovered they were actors, they were strongly disappointed as well. Thereupon, this path was meant to provoke new feelings and thoughts about migration, for example being shipped from one part to another and social exclusion.⁵⁹

With regard to the public it is important to consider the strong relationship between the Museum and the city of Basel and its citizens. The relation is not only based on their reactions and opinion concerning with the Museum exposition but it is also fostered by collaboration with the local community, also with foreign backgrounds. For example, here the neighbourhood of “Klein Basel” counts 45% of the population with Turkish backgrounds and they were invited to participate in a project, bringing a personal object and explaining why or in which ways it was related to their “Home”.⁶⁰ This example shows one of the means thanks to which the MKB shows itself open to all citizenships, in this case the Turkish community. And this practice resembles what Padiglione calls “museografia interculturale” entailing that museography finds inspiration from immigrant communities and didactics of the differences.⁶¹

The age of visitors of the MKB is between thirty-five and sixty-five, and children have also been addressed in the activities (including visits for schools). Young people have not yet been a target of the Museum, but maybe something is changing. This seems to be possible thanks to the launch of a new communication format with the “Kultur – Dialog/Dialog – Kultur” programme project.⁶² This new approach, a cultural dialogue with visitors, consists of a “simple and inviting mode of discussion” probably more appealing for a young audience: fifteen trained culture mediators will encourage discussion answering and posing questions. Themes touched and developed could be related to ethnology and social and cultural issues, such as the perception of culture. In this way there will be room also for receiving the points of view of the visitors and “establishing the museum as a discussion platform for a broad section of the public”.⁶³ At the beginning the activity will be a few days a week with the plan of covering all the opening hours in the future.

This represents an important mark which stresses how the MKB also thanks to its activities and initiatives seeks to involve the audience and the citizens, gives room for reflection, and avoids giving obvious answers and, thanks to new ways of exhibitions and mediation, encourages new encounters, new ideas, and in general cultural dialogue. This calls for reinstatement of the “forum” conceived by Duncan Cameron already in the 1970s but today more than ever current. By “forum” he meant an institution that, in contrast with the “museum-temple” was dedicated to confrontation, experimentation and public debate.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ In German “Heimat” recalls meanings of origin and belonging.

⁶¹ “Intercultural museography”. Vincenzo Padiglione in Pietro Clemente “L’antropologia del patrimonio culturale”

http://www.fareantropologia.it/sitoweb/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=219:lantropologia-del-patrimonio-culturale&catid=65:interventi-pietro-clemente&Itemid=81#sdfootnote55sym (accessed 20 August 2012).

⁶² Museum der Kulturen Basel. Press Release. A museum that asks questions <http://www.mkb.ch/en.html> (accessed 20 August 2012).

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Duncan F. Cameron, “Il museo: tempio o forum”, in *Il nuovo museo. Origini e percorsi*. Volume 1. Cecilia Ribaldi ed. (Milano: Il saggiatore, 2005): 56.

Conclusion

Features of the exhibitions such as their duration, the abolition of regional display, the new categories, the absence of distinction between “Us” and “Them”, the gaze of others towards the Europeans, the time framing, the introduction of art, the invitation for participation also through activities, the focus on social and cultural construction issues, migration, local communities, minorities, all represent radical and significant changes to, and restatements by the MKB, made possible by its rearrangement. With regard to the display, the strategy is neither “exoticizing” nor “assimilating”⁶⁵, because all the elements are in dialogue. In addition, the Museum does establish categories, which have also been criticized (along with the Museum) for being too authoritative, but on the other hand “fashion” and “knowledge” can be considered optimal terrains of cultural mixing.⁶⁶ When it comes to the treatment of the “Other”, it is important that the MKB shows its awareness of being Eurocentric, which is a starting point for dialogue, reflection and critique.

“Multiculturalism unhinges the old citizenship rituals of the national museums and museums of modernism opening a new field for museums and media”, states Pieterse.⁶⁷ Taking as reference the alternative agenda of museums and exhibitions of Pieterse, which is based on the pluralist, the dialogical, the hybrid and the reflexive, it is possible to think that the MKB addresses all of them in different ways and with different results.

The pluralist and dialogical approaches are not difficult to point out. In fact, the MKB does not underestimate its nature of public service, but develops strategies to involve the public, these strategies becoming apparent at several points in the exhibitions but also through the activities. However it is a pity that visitors can no longer manipulate the installations on their own in the exhibition “Suspended. The lightness of Stones” due to their fragility. This is a Museum open to its citizens and also to communities with a foreign background. Moreover, the Museum tries its best not to fall into the categories of the typical “Musée des Autres”, being also a “Musée de Soi”.⁶⁸ The Museum questions itself and seeks to confront its audience. Not giving what they expect, but experimenting in the exhibitions and in the activities. Seeking mediation, but also accepting the critiques and building bridges. The Museum presents itself as a “contact zone” where individuals through the institution and the collection can meet and create new trajectories. Moreover, hybridity, understood by Pieterse to mean “the openness and fluidity, the cut’n’mix zone of selves and others”⁶⁹ has become an exhibiting strategy, a point which has been developed at length in the body of the paper.

Lastly, reflection is promoted by both exhibitions and activities. “Reflexive representation can transform exhibitions into laboratories of collective understanding”.⁷⁰ And this also means that Museum can also play the “role of critical outsider”.⁷¹

The Museum seeks in many different practices, by its exhibitions and being a “forum” and a “contact zone”, to become a place which promotes practices of intercultural dialogue, at least at a museological level. It is closely related to multiculturalism, here understood, in a fluid perspective, to mean “not simply as a cohabitation of neatly bounded cultural communities but as a field of interspersed and crossover culture and the formation

⁶⁵ Pieterse, “Multiculturalism and Museums”, 124-125.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 124.

⁶⁸ “Museums of the Others”, “Museum of the Self”.

⁶⁹ Pieterse, “Multiculturalism and Museums”, 135.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 125.

⁷¹ Ibid.

of new, mixed identities”, or “interculturalism” (as a “polycentric multiculturalism”⁷²).⁷³ And it is taken for granted that “[l]ike the diversity of communities in the urban landscape, the perception of citizenship in general has an impact on how museums construct relations with the public”.⁷⁴

Although research should be done on levels of participation and democratization of citizens, it becomes apparent that by mirroring society and being reflective, a cultural institution such as the MKB produces trends, which can lead to the cultivation of a plural and cultural citizenship.

Annex⁷⁵



1. Mask showing a European with a hooked nose, a moustache, and a uniform cap, Tumon-Dayak, Borneo, Indonesia, 1934.

“Intrinsic Perspectives - Inspiring Aspects of Anthropology”.

⁷² Shohat and Stam in Pieterse, “Multiculturalism and Museums”, 129.

⁷³ Ibid., 128-129.

⁷⁴ Deniz Ünsal, “Museums’quest for validity in the 21st century”, 37.

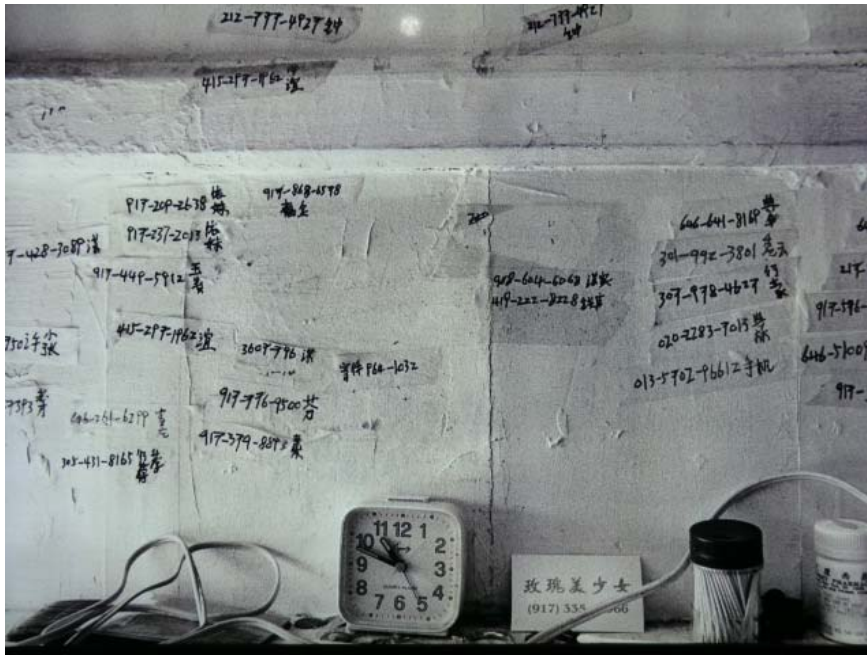
⁷⁵ Pictures have been taken by the author of this paper.



2. From left to right Snow goggles (from Canada), glasses (from Ghana or Côte d'Ivoire), Shutter shades glasses. In the background the Keffiyeh scarf (from Palestine).
"Intrinsic Perspectives - Inspiring Aspects of Anthropology"



3. *Farafin a ni Toubabou* ("the black and the white"). Mali/France.
 Adrien Sina and Mamary Diallo. 2005-2007.
"Intrinsic Perspectives - Inspiring Aspects of Anthropology"



4. "Interior of a tenement building in Chinatown"
 Phone numbers of friends and relatives. New York, 2007.
 "Chinatown"

Bibliography

- Bachmann, Samuel. Meeting with the Director's Assistant Samuel Bachmann. 3 May 2012, MKB.
- Cameron, Duncan F. "Il museo: tempio o forum" in *Il nuovo museo. Origini e percorsi*. Edited by Ribaldi C. Volume I, Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2005, 45-63. Originally published in *Curator*, 1971, XIV, 1, 11-24. Original title: "The Museum, a temple or the forum", translated by Nanni Cagnone.
- Clemente, Pietro. "L'antropologia del patrimonio culturale. Una pratica post-classica". 21 Luglio 2010. "http://www.fareantropologia.it/sitoweb/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=219:lantropologia-del-patrimonio-culturale&catid=65:interventi-pietro-clemente&Itemid=81#sdfootnote55sym (accessed 20 August 2012).
- Clifford, James. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. London, England, Harvard University Press, 1997.
- De l'Estoile, Benoît. *Le goût des autres. De l'exposition coloniale aux arts premiers*. Paris: Flammarion, 2007.
- Dubuc, Èlise, and Turgeon Laurieu. "Musées d'ethnologie : nouveaux défis, nouveaux terrains", *Ethnologues*, 24, no. 2, 2002: 5-18. <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/006636ar> (accessed 15 August 2012).
- Enwezor, Okwui. "The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition", *Research in African Literatures*, 34. No. 4, Indiana

- University Press (Winter, 2003), 57-82. (accessed 20 August 2012).
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4618328>
- Fabian, Johannes. *Time and the other, how anthropology makes its object*. Columbia University Press. New York. 2002, 1983.
- Fournier, Anne. *Le nouveau départ du Musée des cultures de Bâle*, 6 septembre 2011.
<http://www.letemps.ch/Page/Uuid/fbdee4aa-d7fe-11e0-bb3b-242652408a2f>
 (accessed 15 August 2012).
- Gonseth, Marc-Olivier, and Hainard Jacques, K. Roland. ed. *Le musée cannibale*, Neuchâtel: Men, 2002.
- Hainard, Jacques, and Roland Kaehr, ed. *Objets prétextes objets manipulés*, Neuchâtel: Men, 1984.
- Jamin, Jean. "Faut-il brûler les musées d'ethnographie?". *Gradhiva* (1998): 65-69.
- Karp, Ivan introduction to *Exhibiting cultures. The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Edited by Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine. Washington and London, Smithsonian Institution Press: 1991.
- Karp, Ivan and Lavine, Steven D. ed. *Exhibiting cultures. The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991.
- Museum der Kulturen Basel. *EigenSinn. Band 1*. Museum der Kulturen Basel, 2011, 17.
- Museum der Kulturen Basel. Booklet. "Intrinsic Perspectives - Inspiring Aspects of Anthropology".
- Museum der Kulturen Basel. Press Release. Reopening of the Museum der Kulturen. A place for encounters and inspiration http://www.mkb.ch/en/2-1-information_services/2-3-media-service.html (accessed 15 March 2012).
- Museum der Kulturen Basel. Press Release. Reopening of the Museum der Kulturen Basel 6 September 2011. Chinatown http://www.mkb.ch/en/2-1-information_services/2-3-media-service.html (accessed 15 March 2012).
- Museum der Kulturen Basel. Press Release. A museum that asks questions <http://www.mkb.ch/en.html> (accessed 20 August 2012).
- Museum der Kulturen Basel. Press Release. Reopening of the Museum der Kulturen Basel "Intrinsic Perspectives - Inspiring Aspects of Anthropology" http://www.mkb.ch/en/2-1-information_services/2-3-media-service.html (accessed 15 March 2012).
- Museum der Kulturen Basel. <http://www.mkb.ch/en/3-1-museum/3-2-history.html> (accessed 15 March 2012).
- Museum der Kulturen Basel. Museum's mission statement. <http://www.mkb.ch/en/3-1-museum.html> (accessed 15 March 2012).
- Pieterse, Jan Nederveen. "Multiculturalism and Museums. Discourse about Others in the Age of Globalization." *Theory, Culture & Society* 1997, (SAGE, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi): 123-146.
- Poulot, Dominique. *Musée et muséologie*. Paris: La Découverte, 2009.
- Price, Sally. *Paris primitive. Jacques Chirac's Museum on the Quai Branly*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- Schinz, Olivier. "Assumer sa position d'auteur. Entretien avec Anna Schmid, directrice du Museum der Kulturen, Bâle" *Museums.ch. Die Schweizer Museumszeitschrift/ La Revue Suisse des Musées/ La Rivista Svizzera dei Musei*, 6 (2011): 27-30.
- Shatanawi, Mirjam. Curating for a change: contemporary art at the Tropenmuseum today. Royal Tropical Institute/ Tropenmuseum Amsterdam Conference "Where is Art Contemporary? The Global Challenge of Art Museums II" ZKM| Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe October 19th and 20th, 2007.
- Spirgi, Domique. "Fasnachtslaterne und Nagelfigur. Das Museum der Kulturen wirft einen neuen Blick auf die Kulturen der 'Anderen'". *Basler Stadtbuch. 1.32 Jahr/ Ausgabe 2012* Christoph Merian Stiftung (Hg.) Christoph Merian Verlag, 2012: 47-53.

Ünsal, Deniz. "Museums' quest for validity in the 21st century. The impact of globalization in the age of cities". *Museums.ch. Die Schweizer Museumszeitschrift/ La Revue Suisse des Musées/ La Rivista Svizzera dei Musei*. 6 (2011): 35-38.

