

Sharon Macdonald: DIVERSE MUSEUM DIVERSITIES

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'Diversity' has become a lively key word in contemporary museum discourse and practice, with numerous policies and initiatives being conducted under its banner. Achieving 'diversity' is seen as something to be celebrated – a good thing in itself. But quite what 'diversity' refers to is itself heterogeneous, with this only rarely explicitly articulated or even recognised. As such, what exists is a shifting field of diverse diversities, which variously interlink and reinforce each other but which may also mask critical discrepancies, disconnects, incompatibilities and even contrary ambitions.

In some senses, museums might be seen as having always been 'differencing machines'. [1] Through their classificatory activities – cataloguing, labelling and even deciding in which museum something belongs – they don't just represent diversity but produce it. By acts of differentiation they make divisions between things – they slice up the world into categories – and flag these up for scholarly and public consumption. Differentiating and identifying, highlighting difference and sameness, are thoroughly intertwined.

But while it is useful – crucial even – to recognise the inherent differentiating work of museums, it is also important to not elide together the various forms that this may take. The contemporary discourse and practice of diversity is not just business as it always was in museums. The *Kunstkammer*, the nineteenth century encyclopaedic museum and the museum of migration do not 'do difference' in the same way as each other. [2] What persists is museums' extraordinary capacity for differentiating work – conceptual, material, cultural, social and political – and for feeding this back into scholarly and public worlds in relatively durable form.

Diversity in museums today is an unsettled conglomeration of relatively new ideas and practices and older ones rebranded – sometimes running alongside each other, sometimes mashed-up or colliding, and all too often in at least semi-unawareness of the disconnects. Before turning to flag up some of these, I offer a brief prelude to explain the basis for my remarks.

Diversity as ethnographic object and charged concept

As a social anthropologist and ethnographer of museums and heritage, I look at discourse, as it circulates through texts and talk; and I draw on participant-observation in and around museums in order to try to get a handle on what happens 'on the ground' as different players' assumptions and agendas meet and variously mutate or pass by one another unawares, as ambitions bump into budgets and space constraints, and as things happen that may bear only fleeting resemblance to what was originally imagined. Over some decades now I have semi-attentively watched the growing discourse and practice of diversity. [3] This interest informed the design of a research project that I currently lead in Berlin: 'Making Differences: Transforming Museums and Heritage in the 21st Century'. [4] The project involves a team of researchers ethnographically exploring how 'differences' of

various kinds are being produced and circulated, reconfigured and realised, in contemporary museum and heritage discourse and practice. Our main geographical focus is Berlin – including the Humboldt Forum. But this is not exclusive, not least as we follow concepts and practices in and out of our local fieldwork sites, and as we draw on our own resources of fieldwork elsewhere, including in other countries, as well as on work by other scholars.

One of our key concerns is with which differentiating concepts are deployed where, when and how, and with what effects. We are interested, for example, in how terms such as ‘alterity’ or ‘provenance’ are produced and deployed and with what other language and practices they are entangled, as well as which transformations in museums and heritage they help to prompt – or hinder.[5] We treat them, that is, as objects of ethnographic investigation – following them to find out where they come from and what they do, what they morph into, and what manner of dreams and activities nestle under their labels.

Some concepts are especially lively in our field: these are ‘charged concepts’ – indicted and electrified to do something different, something new.[6] Diversity is just such a charged concept. Rising in use gradually since the 1960s and then sharply since 1990, it has come increasingly to refer not just to any kind of difference or collection of differences but to a politically desirable identity-based variety that stands against attempts to homogenise. A product of identity-politics, this kind of diversity is typically understood as ‘already there’ – based in senses of shared identity – but in need of recognising, especially by the state, and even protecting or resuscitating. Diversity initiatives are thus charged with the task of rescuing those who have been marginalised, ignored or repressed by the dominant status quo.

This socio-politically charged sense of diversity has become widespread in contemporary museum and heritage discourse, deployed especially as a supplement and even antidote to the idea of unified, and especially national, narratives.[7] Because museums have played such important roles in the making of national identities, and in expressing and legitimating identities and values more widely, they have become prime sites for diversity work.

Diversity discrepancies

Here is not the place to describe any of this diversity work in detail or to track the playing out of diversity ethnographically. Instead, I want to highlight some different understandings of diversity – where it is to be found, what it looks like, how it should be treated – that are in play in museum work and talk today. Thus, I sketch three diversity discrepancies – that is, different tacks on diversity that can be the basis of misunderstandings or even struggles in museum work and outcomes but which may go unremarked or even undetected in practice.

Collections-based and lived diversities

Because many museums – art and archaeology as well as generalist and ethnological – hold collections and present objects from many parts of the world – they sometimes claim, not unreasonably, that they are already engaged in diversity work, and even that

they are specialists in it. The Ethnological Museum in Berlin, for example, is advertised as 'a gigantic archive of the world's diversity'.^[8] But the categories through which museums do their diversity are not necessarily those of the socio-politically charged diversities that there is call to include today. Indeed, in some cases, museum categories might be precisely those that contemporary diversity movements seek to disrupt.

Potential discrepancy is not limited to the classifications through which the collections operate. It can also result from a lack of objects relevant to addressing lived diversities, including of recent citizens who bring cultural histories that are not represented in the collections. As some of our Making Differences research shows, a museological emphasis on displaying the collections – which is often understood as a duty by curators and can be seen as a commitment to object-based diversity – does not easily lend itself to including more actively-lived social diversity.

Collections may thus need to be created or expanded in order to better enable museums to address this lived diversity. While this happens sometimes, it is rarely on a scale comparable with earlier collecting; limited in part by perceptions of already crammed storerooms and by resource increasingly directed to exhibition and activities. This can contribute to museums doing diversity-lite. That is, doing diversity in relatively tokenistic or superficial ways, such as flagging it only in some display text or in a temporary exhibition, but not making more substantial or far-reaching changes to the permanent collections, galleries or narratives.

This raises the important question of how deeply diversity burrows into museum practice. The discourse is often of 'bringing in' diverse 'perspectives' or 'voices' – suggesting an invitation to join the party but not to set its agenda or change its format. Here too, then, a shared discourse of diversity can mask widely and even wildly differing practices, ranging from 'adding some non-mainstream colour' through to diversifying the workforce itself.

Tidy and messy diversities

The very shape that diversity is seen to have also varies. Diversity discourse's background in identity-politics – which itself is modelled through ideas of possessive individualism and the nation-state – has led to a strong tendency to think about diversity as a set of discrete, neatly bounded, social entities, in much the same way as species tend to be imagined.^[9] Displacing terms such as 'ethnic group' and 'tribe', the currently predominant expression 'community' has the merit of being ostensibly self-ascribed and less biologically conceived but it too tends to assume diversity as a series of separate entities of globules.

Ethnological museums have been especially accused of peddling this kind of diversity but it is more widespread. Indeed, some ethnographic museum curators, like many other anthropologists, have long been arguing against only seeing diversity in this – Western – way. It fails, they say, to recognise fluidity, mixing and hybridity.^[10] Despite such arguments, the globular way of perceiving diversity is stubborn, shored up not least by identity politics and by museum collections. Currently, indeed, it is being reinforced by preoccupations with indigeneity and source communities. While such preoccupations have their own legitimate political propulsion, the globular view can lead to a squeezing

out of less clear-cut, more multiple and messy, identifications that many people live today. Moreover, it can be hard to accommodate with the fact of cross-cutting and intersecting diversities – of, say, gender, sexuality, abledness and religion. Here too, then, different takes on diversity can bump into one another in practice, as Making Differences researchers have seen in our fieldwork.

Objects and interpretive diversity

Another diversity disconnect concerns new museology's assertion that objects do not have fixed meanings but are open to diverse interpretations.[11] This itself has been divergently interpreted.

Sometimes it fostered a move to pay more attention to audiences in order to investigate interpretations made by different members of the public. In sociological readings, this has meant researching how responses might relate to social differences, thereby linking to socio-political diversity debates. Others, however, have taken it to mean that individuals all have their own unique take on any object. This is often coupled with assertions about the inherent multivocality of objects. While friendly to objects, the assertion has not infrequently been used to draw the opposite conclusion, namely that one cannot take visitors into account as they will all just do their own thing anyhow. In a re-romanticising of the object this has also spurred on a search for exhibitionary forms that are perceived as releasing objects from restrictive mono-vocal or mono-perspectival modes of presentation. It was in this spirit, for example, that the *Kunstkammer* made a reappearance in museological theory and practice – and that has been part of its rationale for one format for the Humboldt Forum.[12]

Final comment

The question of which differences and which diverse groups get represented in museums – not just in their displays but also in their collections and workforces – is undoubtedly crucially important due to museums' citizenly legitimisation roles. Here, however, my aim was to also point out that diversity questions run deeper than who to put in and who to leave out. What is even identified as diversity and how it is done is itself diverse.

All of the discrepancies I noted above – and more – are at play in ongoing museum developments in Berlin, including the Humboldt Forum, as are struggles over which differences to represent. It is a space that matters – a space to watch!

[1] T. Bennett 2006 'Exhibition, difference, and the logic of culture', in I. Karp et al. *Museum Frictions. Public Cultures/Global Transformations*, Durham NC: Duke UP, pp. 46–69, p. 46. His use is with reference to more recent developments but his wider arguments support the idea that they have always played such a role.

[2] This formulation is used by S. Hirschauer, e.g. 2014 'Un/doing differences. Die Kontingenz sozialer Zugehörigkeiten', *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 43(3): 170–191.

[3] The organizers of the ZfL conference pointed out in their introduction to my presentation that my co-edited (with G. Fyfe) book of 1996, *Theorizing Museums* (Oxford: Blackwell), has the subtitle *Identity and Difference in a Changing World*. A more recent piece (2016) is entitled 'New constellations of difference in Europe's contemporary museumscape', *Museum Anthropology* 39(1): 4–19.

[4] Funded primarily by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, with further support from the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, the Berlin Museum of Natural History and the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, the project runs October 2015–September 2020. For further detail see: <http://www.carmah.berlin/making-differences-in-berlin/>

[5] See www.carmah.berlin/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/CARMAH-2018-Otherwise-Rethinking-Museums-and-Heritage.pdf. These particular concepts are discussed by J. Tinius and L. Förster respectively.

[6] S. Macdonald 2018 'Introduction' *Otherwise*.

[7] See, for example, I. Ang 2005 'The predicament of diversity. Multiculturalism in practice at the art museum', *Ethnicities* 3(5): 305–320.

[8] <https://www.berlin.de/en/museums/3109373-3104050-ethnologisches-museum.en.html>. (Accessed 4.4.2018).

[9] I discuss some of these ideas, including those relating to C. B. MacPherson's 1962 *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, in *Memorylands. Heritage and Identity in Europe Today* 2013 (London: Routledge).

[10] See Macdonald *ibid.* Ch. 7; A. A. Shelton 2006 'Museums and anthropologies: practices and narratives', in S. Macdonald *A Companion to Museum Studies* (New York: Wiley-Blackell), 64–80.

[11] See P. Vergo (ed.) 1989 *The New Museology* (London: Reaktion), especially his own chapter 'The reticent object'.

[12] E.g. H. Bredekamp 2016 'Das Schloss und die Universität: eine nicht endende Beziehung', in H. Bredekamp and P.-K. Schuster (eds) *Das Humboldt Forum. Die Wiedergewinnung der Idee* (Berlin: Wagenbach), pp. 104–132.

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On the ZfL BLOG we document contributions of the annual conference 2017, Representing Diversity. So far we have published the [Introduction](#) to the conference by Mona Körte, Georg Toepfer and Stefan Willer, [Ordnung des Diversen. Typeneinteilungen um 1900](#) by Jutta Müller-Tamm, ['In the Name of Diversity.'](#) [Zur Neuformierung studentischen Protests an amerikanischen Universitäten](#) by David Kaldewey, and Albrecht Koschorke's [Auf der anderen Seite des Grabens](#).

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