CASE STUDY SIX
The State of Things

Author:
Adriana Muñoz, PhD Archaeology, Curator for the Collections
National Museums of World Culture
www.varldskultur museerna.se
Box 5303, 40227
Gothenburg, Sweden


Project background

The State of Things was the second part of a previous project called “The Power of Labelling”, where the categorization of objects and people was examined. The Power of Labelling started at the Museum of World Culture in connection with a request for repatriation from the Bolivian Government in 2007.

In Bolivia, a process started in 2006 where de-colonizing has become a national issue (with a Decolonizing department at the Ministry of Culture). In 2007 the claim
for returning the Bolivian collections stored in Gothenburg came to the National Museum of World Culture. For the museum, that would implicate 16% of its collections.

The dialogue between the museum, the Bolivian embassy and the Bolivian government was not satisfactory. Also, the questions of repatriation of cultural heritage are not handled by the museums or the Swedish ministry of culture but by the Ministry of International Affairs.

After a couple of years, however, the claim for the repatriation of objects is no more in existence. We can only speculate about what happened, but something that could be observed during the period of dialogue was the patronizing attitude in the language and discourse of the museum.

So, when the museum got money from the Swedish Arts Council (Kulturrådet), we focused the first project on studying how categories had been constructed over time, how these categories reproduced an ideology, and how the way in which we categorize objects in museums is the same way in which we categorize people in society.

For this first project we invited Walter Mignolo (professor at Duke University who works on de-colonial theory), Walter Quispe (medicine doctor and Kallawaya from Bolivia), and Beatriz Loza (historian and expert in intangible cultural heritage). We began to understand that there is an extremely close relationship between ethnography and social exclusion, not only in the past but also in the present.

Working on this project we started to see that categories and exclusion are reproduced daily in our bodily museological practice. While the opposite may be observed within a certain contemporary museum discourse, however our daily practices in the storage rooms showed that we reproduce, over and over, the opposite to what we are saying. We have learnt a way of working inside the museum where reflection seldom has place or time. It is easier to continue reproducing categorizations and exclusions through our practices than we are aware of.

At the Museum of World Culture, discussions about exclusion and participation were very important from the beginning of the Museum; the first exhibitions, program and educational programs were structured to have be reflective and incorporate other voices, opinions and knowledge. At the level of Collections Management, we have the same discourse as the rest of the museum but our practices and disciplines are more inflexible. Yet we, curators and conservators, are convinced that practices inside conservation and management of cultural heritage are completely neutral (especially those based on natural science).

This is why we applied again to the Swedish Art Council to study these practices embedded within our work. This second project was called “The State of Things”.
Aims and outcomes

The project’s aim was to examine the construction and reproduction of museological practices, to see how these bodily habits of working in museum storages, considered “neutral”, reproduce ideology and preserve ideas of racism and exclusion, making us unaware about what kind of ideology we are practicing. One of the outcomes was to see how we can be conscious about our practices when challenged with implementing new practices, and how changing practices is a long, sometimes painful, however enriching process.

Also, the project gave us the possibility of observing that changing practices must be supported by institution leaders on different levels.

Are/were you merely providing access / information or is this a project with mutual aims and outcomes?

The idea was to invite the scholars to Gothenburg, and try to come to a process of unlearning and learning. Recognize the old practices, reflect about them, unlearn and learn again. In the beginning we had no plans about what the group of external curators could get from us, but the idea was that they could teach us about new de-colonial practices. All of them have been working on de-colonializing in their museums or academically. However, after the project in conversations with the participants, they said that they got a “place to talk, to reflect and to share” (Barbara Paulson).

How were the aims/outcomes agreed?

Every morning we started by setting the agenda for the day. Mainly the agenda was set by the curators. We only provided the premise that it could be interesting if they could familiarize themselves with the collections and help the museum with the meagre information existing about the objects. We had a general agenda for the week that they were in Sweden; one day they met young students from a secondary school who came to the collections’ stores, and one day we had a workshop about “writing levels” together with curators from other museums, scholars from the university, journalists, poets, etc.

Who are/were the lead personnel on the project?

The personnel in the project were: Christine Hansen (post doc at the University of Göteborg, and organizer of the label workshop), Mikela Lundahl (head of the Museion program at the University of Göteborg), Adriana Muñoz (curator for the collections at the National museums of World Culture), Farzaneh Bagherzadeh (conservator at the Museum), Jan Amnehäll. There was also a film team from Colores production and two assistants (Lisa Karlsson from the university, and Christine Palmgren from the museum) as well as a translator (Spanish-English-Spanish) Analia Battaioa Sanchez. Also the four external curators mentioned below.
The day with the young people was organized by Lena Stammarnäs from the museum.

Who are/were you working with?

We worked with a selected group of curators. This group consisted of four curators coming from four different places and groups: Juana Paillalef, director of the Mapuche museum in Chile, Sunna Kuoljok, curator at the Ájtte museum in Sweden, Barbara Paulson, curator at the National Museum of Australia, and Charles Tshimanga-Kashama, assistant professor at Reno University. The four of them are also members of groups that the museum has collections from.

All of them have been working in de-colonizing theory and practice. During the project two other local communities were invited. One was a group of young students from the primary school, they were at the storages during one day and shared experiences with the curators. The task was that the students should write labels to objects chosen by the curators.

The other community invited was a group of curators from other Swedish museums, journalists, poets and academic staff from the university, who participated in a workshop of writing exhibition labels for the objects.
Are you clear about why you are working with this selected group and with their role as representative of others? Please comment:

We chose this group of curators. The question of representation was not an issue for the project, they were chosen because of their experience as individuals coming from colonial experiences (situations of existing internal colonialism), who have been working on museum questions and improving de-colonial methodology. The question of representation was not raised by the participants in the project, however they were often asked about who they represented by the people from the academic world. Assessment of authority: why are/were you dealing with this individual or group; how are/were they empowered to speak on behalf of a community? Are/were you satisfied with their ‘credentials’?

The external curators had the control during the week. They decided the job to do. The individuals were not “empowered” by us, they were not “welcomed” to our house, and they were in charge and made their own decisions. That was one of the tasks in our project, to see if we (working at this particular museum) could lose control over “our collections” and trust curators coming from other places.

Who were the main partners?

The partners of the project were the University of Gothenburg with the institutions of Cultural Heritage (Christine Hansen) and Museion (Mikela Lundahl).

Is/was it a museum-to-museum/ cultural centre project?

The project was mainly supported by the Swedish government, and it was not a collaboration between museums or cultural centres but more a research programme. Those programmes can be used only for academic research, however we chose to incorporate a dialogue with people who came from where the collections themselves came from, and used the funding more for training and reflection.

What are/were the budgets and other resources? (e.g. grant awards, dedicated staff, sponsorship):

The project was mainly financed by the Swedish Arts Council which is a government institution whose task is to implement national cultural policy, ergo both projects have been carried out outside the normal activity of the museum. Also it was supported by the National Museums of World Culture and The University of Gothenburg. The budget included resources for travelling and per diem for the participants. The remainder of the funds were used to make a film instead of publishing a book.

What are/were the timescales?

The timescale was one year, we needed to inform the Swedish Arts Council at the end of the year how we used the money. Continuity for this kind of project must be
supported by the leaders of the institutions, otherwise they can only be carried out once.

**Ethical considerations – describe what these involved in relation to the project and how they were agreed/adhered to?**

We considered from the beginning that a project dealing with practices constructed on colonial ideology should raise an important number of ethical issues. In this project, because of its nature, and the kind of objects that were under consideration, questions of property, possession, repatriation among many others were discussed.

Please also describe any compromises, surprises and how the project may have been transformed through the engagement:

The project opened the possibility of having a new form of dialogue with partners outside Sweden. However the biggest surprise was in observing how, after a couple of days, the place, the people, and the atmosphere opened up the possibility to share the most intimate feelings among all of us. It was confirmation that changing clinical practices is possible in museum storage rooms.
What things would you consider if embarking on a similar project again?

The possibility of learning, not only about the objects but also the possibility of changing practices. As it is suggested in de-colonial practice, it is important to unlearn to have the possibility of learning.

Also it was an important experience that there exists the possibility of creating an open space within the museum stores, where different individuals coming from different places of the world can share similar experience of growing up and living in colonial situations and how they work daily within the realization of this fact.

What things would you avoid?

We spent one day at the university during this project. Every curator presented their job, and the audience had the chance to ask questions and have a dialogue. They were often asked the question that day, who it was that they represented. It was interesting to observe that when a person says they belong to a nation not included in the state, the question of who they represent is the most important question, while others (like Swedish, or Chilean, or Australians) never need to make an issue about who they are or whom they represent.

References to publications relating to project (online/in print):

www.varldskulturmuseerna.se  (the film from this project is coming in September 2013).
http://www.humanas.unal.edu.co/colantropos/baukara/la-creacion-del-museo-de-la-cultura-del-mundo-gotemburgo-suecia-tentativas-de-cambio-de-paradigma-y-practicas-museales