

Speech by Jette Sandahl, Director of the City Museum of Copenhagen

Ms Sandahl was key-speaker at the Brussels' debate "**Negotiating differences - a responsibility of artists and cultural institutions**", organized by the EC and designed by the ECF and EFAH, Brussels, April 2, 2008.

## **CULTURAL PLURALISM AND CULTURAL PARTICIPATION**

In contemporary Europe the political commitment to cultural policies as a path to cultural democracy, to cultural participation, ultimately to intercultural dialogue and cultural integration is highly variable, between countries and within countries.

Correspondingly, the professional, cultural institutions welcome to differing degrees the new challenges and responsibilities posed by the disenfranchisement, segregation, and exclusion experienced by and within an increasingly global context and diverse population.

As cultural institutions in Europe, our relationship to the rest of the world is not a blank or clean slate. Not least museums are rooted in the value systems of colonialism and European supremacy, and it requires an often rather painful reorientation and reinterpretation of formative traditions for them to adjust to the current global issues.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century a number of European countries created cultural policies intended to facilitate access to culture for all. Everyone, regardless of gender, age, class or education should be able to experience and participate creatively in cultural life, and active involvement is encouraged for individuals and groups that for various reasons experience barriers towards cultural self-expression.

This policy never quite succeeded. And as migration has increased during the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ethnicity – corroborated by the traditional dimensions of lack of access to economic and education resources - is increasingly interpreted as an independent factor in the analysis of why the cultural sector – in spite of all good intentions - still does not seem to live up to the responsibilities of cultural democracy and participation.

## **VISIONS, VALUES AND MUSEUM MISSIONS**

I have focused my examples here today, because of the time restraints, on one museum, the new Museum of World Culture in Sweden, for which I had the privilege of being the founding director.

This museum worked intensely and systematically with its value- and mission statements on all levels and dimensions of its activities as a way of preparing the ground or ensuring the ground for the intercultural dialogue.

The documents of Unesco and ICOM on cultural diversity and cultural democracy, and the Declaration of Human Rights remain core inspirations and guidelines for such a process.

Basic values were –as seen on screen-

- Recognizing cultural diversity as a wealth in human heritage and cultural pluralism as a basic condition for peace, harmony and cultural stability in the world
- Recognizing different cultures and their expressions as valuable for cultural democracy and cultural harmony based in integration rather than assimilation

- Recognizing cultural integration as a process of conflicts, contradictions and negotiations rather than easy harmony
- Recognizing public participation in the short- and longtime planning of the museum as the basis on which the museum can take an active role in society

The overall mission statement for the museum was defined as follows:

- In dialogue with the surrounding world and through emotional and intellectual experiences the Museum of World Cultures aims to be a meeting place where people can feel at home across borders, build trust and take responsibility for a shared global future, in a world in constant change.

A series of statements that explore and expand the meaning of cultural participation and clarify the responsibilities of servicing culturally diverse communities for different sections of the museum.

For research, for instance:

- Through interdisciplinary and thematically structured knowledge development, the museum will contribute with new perspectives on relevant topics of current interest, combining scientific methodology with the specific knowledge and competences based in a subjective background in a given community, culture or theme.

For exhibitions:

- Through its exhibitions the museum will create a continuous dialogue with audiences that are diverse relative to age, class, gender, education, ethnicity. The museum will develop an experimental and questioning style for its exhibitions so that many different voices can be heard and also ambiguous and controversial subjects can be raised and articulated. Exhibitions will explore the unique understanding, poetry and power embedded in museums objects.

For marketing:

- Communication, information and marketing activity will ensure that the museum, in its planning and priorities, is linked to essential discussions in society and that the different needs and interests of a diverse audience are represented in the museum.

## **PROSPECTIVE AND HYBRID CONCEPTS OF IDENTITY**

If a cultural institution wants to be part of the contemporary societal agenda it can only allow itself sporadic nostalgia for what once was.

It has to be as pro-spective as it is retro-spective, and ground its practices in a dynamic, forward looking perspective as much as in a historic one.

Museums have a responsibility of transmitting memory, traditions, history and the sense of identity – and thereby a sense of community – to the next generation. However, as the patterns of movement, settlement and migration change, as immigration and globalisation accelerate, as the contact and interchange and interactions between various cultures increase the concepts of identity – also as they are played out in museums – must begin to adapt.

European thinking of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was haunted – from psychoanalysis to political analysis - by historic, static and almost deterministic concepts of identity. Currently we need

much more dynamic concepts that reflect movement, change, multiple choices and potentials in the identity of the individual, a community, a nation. Identity is continuously reinterpreted and is as much a concept of the future as it is of the past. It contains who we want to be, where we are going, the future as we dream of it.

We need to adjust our focus to areas where different cultures meet, merge, overlap, hybridize, and to contemporary global cultures defined through shared hopes and interests, shared lifestyles or political positions. We cannot remain interested only in traditional cultures defined through parameters of geography, nationality and ethnicity or differences in terms of age or gender.

A contemporary museum has to reflect and span both of these trends – identity as accumulated history, as tradition and preservation of continuity, and on the other hand, identity as aspiration and hope, as a striving towards the future.

This, I believe, is where an institution can involve and attract people who define themselves more through multiple cultural belongings than as immigrants of one specific ethnicity or nationality, but for whom the issues of cultural diversity and of the relationship between majority culture and minority cultures are nonetheless central.

Ethnicity as one – and only one - among many other dimensions of diversity, and these dimensions are and should always be treated as a whole, in a richly intertwined, interdependent and interrelated totality.

It is the principle of diversity as such that is the focus, rather than the specific historic content, which is continuously changing.

### **COLONIAL ROOTS, PARTNERSHIPS AND SELF REPRESENTATION**

In his installation *Site Unseen: Dwelling of the Demons* at the Museum of World Culture artist Fred Wilson questions both the ability and will of museums to confront and transcend their history of racism and sexism, the hierarchies of power.

In playful juxtapositions of named and anonymous people, Fred Wilson poses the question of who gets to speak? And from which position? Whose voice is recognized? Who wins the right to be heard?

In the exhibition *Horizons – Voices from a global Africa* the museum's collections from the African continent were supplemented with new collecting done by African museum partners, with loans from African museum and loans from artists with a background in the African continent.

However, the most intense example of self-representation and interculturality in the *Horizons* exhibition was created with and by local Gothenburg citizens who have their cultures of origin in the Africa Horn area.

This was a tough and demanding learning process in which the cruel mechanisms of discrimination and institutional and personal racism were played out. But despite the often discordant character of this project, it created a series of very personal, and very popular contributions, centered on the themes of the Diaspora and diasporic identities.

The exhibition medium is stretched to the breaking point through the powerful presence of dance, theatre, and music.

On all levels the mix or integration of non-professionals with very high profile international names in the visual as well as performing arts have been key elements in the museum's strategies for dialogue with new user groups, not least younger ones.

## INCLUSION, EXCLUSION AND WHO GETS TO SPEAK

Seeing, understanding and even empathizing with the view of the Other is a core issue for contemporary society. It is best achieved in an active exploration, exchange and testing of one's thoughts and reflections in dialogue with others. Educational programs are reinterpreted as 'exercises in democracy', with a purpose of raising the participants' awareness of what and who is included or excluded in a given statement, communication and setting.

The exhibitions *No Name Fever. Hiv-Aids in the Age of Globalization* and *TRAFFICKING* signalled the museum's engagement with contemporary global issues and commitment to the most excluded, most muted realms and members of society.

These exhibitions mix all types of media and integrate contemporary art, documentary material, historical objects, personal testimony, and political commentary. Film, video and music enclose and juxtapose material objects and thousands of voices, rich with emotions, up close and personal. Expert voices and politicians' voices mix and blend with the angry voices of those who died, the voices of suffering, the ambivalent voices of survival. In research, documentation and exhibitions at the Museum of World Culture the subjective and personal knowledge and expertise form an essential supplement to traditional scientific methods and skills.

## EXPLORING AND RESPECTING DIFFERENCES

With increased global dependency, increased global communication and migration it is crucial to learn to respect what one does not immediately recognize and understand. For the process of cultural democracy it is vital that both individuals and societies at large become comfortable with difference and heterogeneity, and develop concepts of equality that do not call for or impose sameness, homogeneity and uniformity.

In its evocative, dreamlike visual language the exhibition *Sister of Dreams – People and myths of the Orinoco* seems to be suspended, outside time. In its fundamental differences from the traditional European rationalism and a Christian frame of reference. *Sister of Dreams* poses an enormous challenge. It requires both good faith and self discipline for people trained in Western scientific thinking to not reduce what is outside Western rationality to irrationality. But it is crucial at the present time that we, as cultural institutions and as individuals, learn to not belittle, disparage, censure or distance itself from the stories of creation and systems of beliefs held by the people in a given setting.

The intention with this exhibition was to implode the stereotypes of primitivity and backwardness and to facilitate an understanding – not least for children - that different ways of life carry their own qualities that are sometimes beyond simple comparisons and hierarchies.

## SHARED AUTHORITY AND RECOGNIZING THE REALITY OF THE OTHER

In increasingly complex and diverse societies the relationship and dialogue between majority and minority cultures becomes a correspondingly complex web of interrelated integration, assimilation, opposition and resistance, of dissent, disagreement and conflict.

The greater the diversity in society, the greater the range of cultural 'differences', the more difficult and the more acute are the responsibilities and accountability towards the inclusion and the rights of 'the other'.

So summing up some prerequisites for the intercultural dialogue:

Letting go of the monocultural traditions and the ideals of easy and unbroken harmony, letting go of the monopoly of knowledge and interpretation, letting go of control without shunning the obligations and responsibilities are some first prerequisites.

Expanding institutional missions from the role of expert to include the role of facilitator and explore the meaning of terms like platform, meeting places and centers of communication.

Experimenting with the discipline of dialogue and learning the practices of negotiation.

Discovering the pleasures and rewards of mutuality and the sharing of knowledge and authority between equal partners.

Opening recruiting processes so that both governance and staff reflect the diversity of global migration.

Aiming towards a shared inclusive public space, with a commitment to community involvement, community participation and the rights to self-representation, inviting and encouraging the many voices and world views.

Making room for or even celebrating differences and disagreement to become centres for dialogue, mediation and reconciliation.