POSTMODERN CHOREOGRAPHING OF THE PAST – OPEN-AIR MUSEUMS “DANCING” WITH COMMUNITIES

NIKOLA KRSTOVIĆ

Electronic reference
Above. The characters of “Heritage (in a) supermarket”: “Ivon” and “Nana”. Photo credits: Milica Šolajić. Photo documentation of the Open air museum “Old Village”.

Below. The small museum shop appearance was changed in order to attract more people and to draw attention to the “heritage offer”. It was executed in colourful “bad design” referring to the sales and clearances in the general stores. Photo credit: Milica Šolajić. Photo documentation of the Open air museum “Old Village”
POSTMODERN CHOREOGRAPHING OF THE PAST – OPEN-AIR MUSEUMS “DANCING” WITH COMMUNITIES

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Biography:
Ph.D from University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Art History and research associate of Center for Museology and Heritology at same faculty. He has been curator of the Open air museum “Old Village” in Sirogojno for 12 years. Holds the highest curatorial rank – museum adviser and was awarded as Curator / Museum Professional of the Year in 2017 by ICOM Serbia. Active member of AEOM (Association of European open air museums), Program Council of Museum of Yugoslavia, board of Europa Nostra Serbia, ICOM and ICOFOM. He received special mention of the jury of EU Heritage Awards 2012 for raising awareness of local communities about heritage. Nikola Krstović is the author of numerous exhibitions, programs and projects. Editor in chief of International Yearbooks “Open air museums”(2012-2016). Currently, he’s conducting the research Museum Off Boundaries in John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library of Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and immediately after the Research East & W/R:est in International Cultural Center in Krakow, Poland. Fields of interests are everyday life in/as heritage and memory, interpretation of heritage, contemporary curating.

Summary:
Postmodern choreographing of the past – open-air museums “dancing” with communities

The paper reviews the mission and social and cultural position of the open-air museums and ecomuseums, as well as similarities and differences in their relation to the local communities. Comparing contemporary perspectives of these two missions that largely overlap in their activities, it raises the general question of the relationship of society towards cultural heritage and culture in general. The case study Heritage (in a) Supermarket, from the “Old village” open air museum in Sirogojno, Serbia, represents dualisms of these two “principles”, a compound of the initiative of local communities and the authority imposed by the museum. By simple “games”, role-plays and the display, the position of heritage on the “market” is reviewed; it refers to general market, but also to the cultural with its own
peculiarities. *Heritage (in a) Supermarket*, being a very interactive and provocative concept, has opened the questions of museum freedom of speech, personal and collective senses of belonging, commitment to the ideas and attitudes, redefining relationships towards social issues, as well as the museum exhibition itself, its construction as a medium, and finally the justification of the existence of the museum institution in the society.

**Résumé :**
Chorégraphie postmoderne du passé – les musées en plein air « dansent » avec les communautés

Cet article examine les missions et les positions sociales et culturelles des musées en plein air et des écomusées, ainsi que les similarités et les différences dans leur rapport avec les communautés locales. En comparant les perspectives contemporaines de ces deux missions, qui se croisent largement dans leurs activités, on pose la question générale du rapport de la société avec le patrimoine culturel et la culture en général. La présente étude du cas de Baš:Ti:Na Rafu (Patrimoine (au) Supermarché), représente le dualisme de ces deux « principes », la combinaison de l’initiative de communautés locales et l’autorité imposée par les musées. Par de simples « jeux », jeux de rôle et spectacles, la position du patrimoine sur le marché est examinée ; cela fait référence au marché général mais aussi au marché culturel avec ses propres particularités. Baš:Ti:Na Rafu (Patrimoine (au) Supermarché), en tant que concept interactif et provocateur, a posé les questions de la liberté d’expression muséale, de la sensation d’appartenance individuelle et collective, de l’engagement envers les idées et points de vue, de la redéfinition des rapports avec les questions sociales, ainsi que de l’installation muséale elle-même, de la construction de l’exposition en tant que média et, enfin, de la justification de l’existence de l’institution muséale dans la société.
Dealing with communities: open-air and eco museums

Open-air museums are exactly eighty years older than ecomuseums. The first open-air museum, Skansen, was established in 1891 by Artur Hazellius, while the first ecomuseum, Le Creusot-Montceau, was founded in 1971 by Georges Henry Rivière. Being young means more energy and readiness for innovation. Yet, being older provides more experience and (not negligible) larger insurance.

Open-air museums and ecomuseums do have many similarities, yet many differences. Let us observe these two from the perspective of G. H. Rivière and his perception, at least at the very beginning: “Rivière, in his classification of open-air museums, described their evolution from bare collections of buildings to centers of environmental conservation and regeneration. The initial idea was just the displacement of disused buildings to a chosen site without giving particular attention to matching styles or periods or reproducing the original natural environment they came from. This was the case of the traditional buildings originally removed to Skansen.”

Rivière describes these first open-air museums as ‘type A’: the “offspring of conventional landscaping culture: pretty and attractive in the best of cases, unrealistic at their worst” 1. All of these correspond as well with the 1957 Declaration of Open-air Museums: “Composed, as a rule, of elements of popular and pre-industrial architecture: the dwelling of farmers, shepherds, fishermen, craftsmen, shopkeepers and laborers, with their outhouses, places of business, shops and, in general, a variety of examples of rural, urban, secular, ecclesiastic, private or public architecture of this kind”. 3

“The open-air museum philosophy, with its emphasis on buildings and material culture, was overtaken by Rivière’s concerns on the natural environment. Rivière’s ‘Type B Open-air museums’ were those created in situ and with their original geological, climatic, botanic, zoological and environmental conditions.” 4 These new reflections were visible in the conclusions of ICOM’s Museum and the Environment symposium in 1972.

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4 De la Rocha Mille, “International origins of Georges Henri Riviere’s ecomuseum concept,” 59.
Even though Rivière considered open-air museum as more complex enterprises than the mere reconstitution of buildings, these kinds of activities have often been criticized by social and political commentators “as inclined to present too beautiful, too neat and clean picture of the past, to romanticize its great personages and important happenings and to appeal too much to the nostalgia of the present day visitor. Open-air museums often omitted or played down the ugly features of the age they presented, the grinding hard work, pervading poverty, injustice of serfdom, slavery of working class and the ravages of diseases. They also had the problem of freezing a moment or a short time period of the past, of failing to show the development and the flow of history”\(^5\).

However, what about the other “player” beside Rivière in the field of ecomuseums and “new” museology movement: Hugues de Varinee? Answering to one of many questions I asked him for the International Yearbook “Open air museums” 2016\(^6\) entitled “The book of everything you wanted to know about open-air museums” de Varinee stated: “The great difference is that the ecomuseum (or community museum as it is often called for instance in Mexico) is made of a territory where the living heritage is managed as much as possible by the community itself, and is neither collected nor ‘conserved’ in the traditional museological sense. On the contrary, the open-air museum is a traditional museum, which manages a collection of buildings and objects in a secure environment, open to visitors, while in the ecomuseums, there is no public, only inhabitants. It is true that some open-air museums call themselves ecomuseums, (like Marquezé or Ungersheim in France), or that some ecomuseums have ‘inherited’ an open-air museum (like Toten in Norway), but the ecomuseum principles and objectives are radically different.”

De Varine continues: “Many open-air museums, at least in the Scandinavian countries and at village level, were actually the result of a strong community mobilization. They belonged to the people and were object of pride, giving to the community its identity. The more important open-air museums


became traditional museum, particularly when they had become a tourist attraction and when their ‘collection’ of buildings, objects and documents became so important that its conservation, study, increase became too much for preserving an involvement of the community, considered as too amateur. Then, more recently, with the new trends towards ‘immaterial heritage’ and the use of new communication technologies, local people were asked to talk, comment, guide, and record their memories. But I don’t know if these people are considered as ‘informers’ in the anthropological sense, or as true cultural owners of the common heritage. There is a need for independent assessment. I am afraid many professionals, with good anthropological qualification and research methods, don’t consider the ‘natives’ as having a true knowledge and deserving to be associated to research and decisions.”

Open-air museums in/and the discourse of post modern
Comparing eco and open-air museums during the seventies of the 20th century could be completely useless, unless we need to argue historical perspectives of their simultaneous development since the 1970s. Being older and more experienced bring more trustworthiness to all operations. Among other, the ideas of younger penetrated the institutional mindset of the older: open-air museums have slowly and irreversibly changed since the 1980s.

Displacement of interest from material artefacts to the everyday life (which is neither simple nor easily explainable phenomenon) during the early 1980s, certainly gave a strong boost to open-air museums’ missions and visions. Firstly, they had to transform themselves into places that are not only lost images of the past without any real connection with the contemporary life. Various circumstances influenced these changes: expansion of the impact of social history, Georges Henri Rivière’s and Hugues de Varine’s ‘new’ museology and ecomuseums, the popularity of sociological and anthropological movements in studies of everyday life (from ‘other’ distant and exotic to ‘us’, our immediate environment and modern world), contemporary collecting (like Swedish network SAMDOK), the concept, or even philosophy of living history and the development of performative interpretations; simultaneously, or a bit later, more and more clear effects of socio-museology and museology of neighbourhoods, social and economic developments caused by policy of ‘New Right’, the theory of ‘post-societies’ and theme parks (Disneyland is a symbol),

heritage attractions, Cyril Simard’s econo-museums, dramatically improved and democratized communications. Thus, overall changes in society, culture and museology are visible in the open-air museums as well. But it seems that the open-air museums, thanks to their specific 3D and later 4D form of simulacra were able to adapt easily to rapid and dramatic changes. This process is reflected in the metaphor “the return of all the muses to museums” by Peter Lewis, a former director of the Beamish. Professional activities required different engagements: the museum was no longer able to respond to community requests in scientific language, but by communication and interpretation.

In his text in International Yearbook 2013 “Open air museums”, Alexandar Davydov concludes: “The open-air museum display has a cardinal, fundamental difference compared with ‘chamber’ museum. The display of the chamber museum could be defined as a text, and each item in the display is a hieroglyph, whose meaning depends on the context of the display. In “chamber” museum the exhibition principle dominated. In the open-air museum the interior principle dominated. The display of open-air museum is a model of cultural and natural environment of the defined ethnic group at the defined time. Nature and culture in this case could be determined as intercommunicative parts of ethnosphere – the term of Lev Gumilev. So, I define open-air museum as a model of ethnosphere, as a specific form of natural and cultural environment, which contains a landscape (geology, soil, plants and biota), folk architecture and interiors (from a settlement to a spoon on the table), colors (from live sky to folk costumes), smell (smell of smoke in the live house, etc.), sounds (from bell-ringing until sounds of nature, as birds’, animals’, etc.), live nature management processes and patterns of behavior (working professionals, as smith, bell-ringer, miller, etc., folklore festivals, etc.). All of these details have had to be taken into consideration, if we are going to create a living image of folk culture, and operate with sense and ratio of the visitors.”


Present and future came to focus as well: “Cultural Heritage Agenda was the name of a development project that started in 2001 in Sweden by the county museums, county administrative boards and the National Heritage Board. The aim was to work together with society to renew the direction, democratic support and effectiveness of cultural environment care work. The society that formed the basic values and work methods of our cultural heritage work and institutions are not the same as those of society today. We therefore needed new points of departure for the work, a paradigm shift. The manifesto was ready around New Year 2004. It can be summarised in three points: A) We have a democratic duty as well as arena for discussing our society. Our duty is to provide a contemporary historical perspective for now and do it in a way that involves and commits everybody. B) We must work with history and cultural heritage for people and society and our main duty concerns what stories about the past need telling in our society. C) We work in the ‘here and now’, and we must always consider today’s society and our contemporaries first. Skansen’s comments on Cultural Heritage Agenda were very positive, not least in its slogan People in focus. Many of Cultural Heritage Agenda’s thoughts and ambitions were considered to express a similar view and work method that had long since characterised Skansen as an open-air museum. Cultural Heritage Agenda’s manifesto then formed an ideological platform for the work of creating the new culturally historical Ironmonger’s House. Words like committed narrative, people in focus and contemporary historical perspective for the future would be what the work would rest on. This essence would then return when Skansen, in 2008, reformulated its duties, objectives and vision, in which it was decided that ‘The Skansen open-air museum’s duty is, focussing on the visitor, to provide insight and experiences about Sweden’s culture and natural history in relation to now and to the future.””

**Open-air museums – simulacra of everything**

The past (in present and for future) becomes “consuming” if it is usable at the level of all-senses, emotional and mental experience. “The return of the muses” in open-air museum marked the transformation of static images into the kinetic and dynamic processes happening in the real time: the applied methodology was adapted American role-play model. The first museum in Europe that bravely used the models “of history brought to life” was a Swedish

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museum Jamtli. After Jamtli many other Scandinavian, Western European and even Central European museums followed. Nevertheless, European concepts have never meant the usage of living history to the point of transforming the open-air museum to some other type of museum form – for instance like American living history museums. One of the directors of the Dutch National open-air museum – Arnhem, Adrian de Jong, has marked transition period of the European open-air museum by his ideas and texts. Called the “ghost buster”, de Jong published influential article in 1995. In one of his concluding sentences he almost exclaimed: “The mission of our museum is clear and is addressed only to visitors, and it is: ‘You are lucky, the farmers are just back!’” It was clear moving away from the European practices of “inhabitants that have just left”. But “de Jong’s farmers” turned back dramatizations as open-air museums tool of communication: the third and first-person interpretations, story-telling and acting, role-play and re-enactment. Promoting the idea of permanently live and “dramatized” museums de Jong opened the question of museum exhibitions and museum contents and collections, and reproblematized the missions of open-air museums.

It became obvious that three-dimensional experience in open-air museums was missing another dimension: realistic passing of time as much as possible. The open-air museums, which deeply pondered applicative possibilities of living history concept, raised the illusion on a much higher level of experience. Museums became stages with authentic (historically justified) props. One of the living history models – role-play – appeared as the museum’s aftermath of changes that already happened in society – people have been accustomed to “move from one form of reality to another” – experimental theatre of the sixties that actively involved audience in the course of the play was well known, the radio and TV as phenomena have been widely accepted and the Internet was about to explode.

Role-play cannot directly represent broader social circumstances of the past; it may rather offer different perspectives of emotional tensions that allow visitors to enjoy the realities of the ordinary people whose destiny is most commonly shaped by general social and historical situations. The most important motivation for using role-play models is opportunity to give “voice and image”

12 Association for Living History Farms and Agriculture Museums (ALHFAM), The present name of the organization was changed to Association of Living History, Farm and Agriculture Museums, but the acronym remained the same. More in ALHFAM – Association for Living History, Farm and Agriculture Museums, accessed July 7, 2013, http://www.alhfam.org/?cat_id=101&nav_tree=101.
to the neglected groups in the museum world. During role-play (depending on the performer’s skills), the audience is dragged in to participate. Visitors “must” cooperate with the interpreter, they are “employed” to revitalize forms of social and/or family relationships, sometimes without any right to “vote or express” themselves… The point is that history is embodied only when the visitors rely on general phenomena: love, hate, sadness, happiness, jealousy, awe, security, etc. Great opportunities of role-play models are in contrasting experiences from specific past(s) with the contemporary human feelings and needs.

Many European museums have avoided performances that could have made “bad publicity”. “Juicy” stories of local character, such as violence, drunkenness or adultery were not subject of interpretations. Above all, the rarest model was “presenting real human suffering”. But things began to change gradually, again first in the USA. Museum education plan in Colonial Williamsburg was developed in a radically new way: it dealt with comprehensive interpretations of the lives of woman, children, African-Americans, servants, slaves, etc.14 Starting points for the interpretations were found in the issues that preoccupied contemporary society. In an era of complete nakedness of intimacy in the 1990s, showing the conflicts and difficult heritage in the museums seemed more realistic and closer to the ordinary contemporary people. The performance entitled “Sold!” during which four African-Americans and pregnant women were “sold” on the museum “slave market” is still one of the most controversial. The public reactions were divided: from those who supported the concept of reviewing own past to those who considered that “national” history cannot and must not be re-interpreted in such a way. What opponents did not understand was that this re-enactment actually did not focused only on national history – it was far more about modern social phenomenon of human trafficking. The whole debate was joined by The Washington Post which published the article “Revived history or undying racism? Slave auction at Colonial Williamsburg sparked protests”.15 However, it is important to address another issue where open-air museums can play a significant role: the question of the museum’s attitude towards the social circumstances. Following the example of the “Colonial Williamsburg” many open-air museums in the United States and Europe began to engage in so-called difficult heritage.

However, the stories performed through living history concepts were told by the museum, i.e. the one who had the authority and “right” to tell for (or

instead of) visitors (real memory holder) in attempt to provoke reviewing of the value systems established in real life. Jan Vaessen was also aware of this problem, stressing that “we are at the beginning of this process, but slowly we are becoming aware of the fantastic opportunities”.¹⁶ Not underestimating contribution to research and documenting of the past realities, living history (with all its performing models) still remained an indication of the museum “right” to filter the truth. Additionally, in terms of museology, living history also represents relocation – regardless of whether we are talking about a thing, an object or a process, we are actually talking about the context torn from its original (some would use terms authentic or natural) environment. Continuously re-created in already existing 3D simulacra all performing interpretations added the new level: re-enactment of (real or typified) events where the people were engaged in real-time passing. The time in the museum became condensed, the most interesting elements were emphasized, but the visitors could still have the impression that time is passing in its natural rhythm. However, many of the performed events actually never happened in history or they have not happened exactly like that. Thus, most of the theatrical performances (role-plays and first person interpretations) were new creations directed as completely new forms of narrative in order to re-create the historical atmosphere – the goal was to transfer the message, the historically and socially accepted value.

Logic question in analysis of the open-air museum simulacra would be: What would happen if the most important element of any performing activity – directing – could be excluded?¹⁷ Or, at least, directing by museum professionals? Real life has no real impact on the museum, except when the museum “expertise” attributes to it the qualities of specific, unique and/or precious. However, an exception in the real life is the positive or negative excess, while in the museum-institution it is common, neutral, and only acceptable as such. The essential question is: how to reconcile the original museum (life itself)

¹⁷ The term “direction” in this context, could be equated with the term editing: “As for Eisenstein a film was editing of attractions and as Disney in his (visionary) kindergartens ‘programmed’ the movement of visitors by the system of visual magnets, the museum, whose future will be characterized by these two giants, is just editing of three-dimensional and other information. Editing is essentially a creative process and, in certain circumstances, an artistic process. However, if we recognize the creativity, we also recognize an open possibility of manipulation that grows with the size of time and mental distance which we have in relation to the objects of editing”, Tomislav Šola, Prema totalnom muzeju (Beograd: Centar za muzeologiju i heritologiju; Kruševac: NM Kruševac, 2011), 85-86.
which only constant is change, and the museum-institution whose only constant is tendency to eternal immutability?

Reacting to this one might ask: “If the museum and life could be the same, why would we need museums?” Reasonable question, indeed! But, it can be asked oppositely: Why do we need life, if we need some form of media to make it apprehensible? Or, do we have life at all, does it belong to us? According to Andrew Wigert, “Everyday life is not at disposal to those who are living it, because they do not shape it in the theoretically-scientific or museum manner (or almost any other). Everyday life is a term which… needs to be constructed”\textsuperscript{18}. The fact is that one form of discourse in open-air museums (research and documenting) requires further reality construction – interpretation. The best example of simulacra, copy of non-existing original is, according to Baudrillard, Disneyland “perfect model of intertwined simulations”. The same could apply for open-air museums – the history performed through living history methodologies actually is not tangible – so it exists only as a construct, illusion and it could be re-performed in millions of different ways and still resemble the “authentic” version that one believes to know.

Comparison of Disneyland and open-air museums is constant in the debates, regardless of positive or negative connotations. Umberto Eco is far more realistic on the same topic. According to Eco, “Disneyland does not lie. It can afford itself to represent reconstructions as masterpieces of counterfeiting. What one can buy at Disneyland is actually a commodity, brilliant shopping, embodiment of seductive supermarkets, not the reproduction of the world. What is false is our desire to buy “traces of the past” and in this sense, the park is the quintessence of consumer ideology”\textsuperscript{19}. Disneyland is an allegory of consuming society, a place of full icon-ism, as Eco concludes. Same could be easily attributed to open-air museums. One basic thing that makes different is public obligation. Being in a sphere of public service open-air museums must tend to reproduce and revitalize “facts” from history and past in the most correct manner they could.

\textbf{Reconstructing the past – deconstructing the present: Heritage (in a) Supermarket}

Thomas Bloch Ravn, director of Den Gamle By (Old City) in Aarhus, Denmark, writes about how the “market-oriented eye” is changed when it sees an artefact


“on sale” in the museum. However, although this is a kind of shift, we still talk about a visitor in the museum complex. How would that same eye act if it saw a museum object or process in the midst of its everyday life, signs of the past or other existence, or even better, if it became more aware of the specific operation of its rut only because of the museum activity? So, when the real every-day is confronted with the reality of “museum” testimony, i.e. when we provoke the power of cognition, evaluation, and finally the collective memory in the every-day unconscious?

Idea and introducing the project
The idea for “Heritage (in a) Supermarket” came “out of nowhere” or, to be more accurate “from everywhere”: science, design, film, economy, and obviously some other ideas. However, initial inspiration was found in commonly romanticized statements of middle age/class visitors who usually thought of “Old Village” open air museum in Sirogojno, Serbia, simulacra, as elegiac place in time and space structured by order and precise hierarchy and harmonized relationship between family members. It was actually the place of their dreams, somehow an immature reflection of solutions for their problems, answer to their needs and wishes. Children, for instance, were more open to accept the whole image of the past fulfilled both with diseases, hunger, poverty, terrible position of children and woman, as well as with wonderful creations in the field of music, crafts, architecture, and poetry.

Methodology aspects came from the scientific field. Few of the museum curators were occupied with “M theory” or “theory of everything”, bothering everyone else during “traditional” coffee breaks and acting as unbearable amateurs. Theory claims, as much as we could have understood, that there are more than four dimensions (as we know it as Einstein’s space-time) while “M” in “M theory” conjectured by Edward Witten in 1995, stands for “magic, mystery, membrane”. It stands for many other hardly understandable phenomena (strings, particles, super-symmetry, quantum-gravity, etc.) and it explains the probability of existence of many dimensions in which same events could occur in endless variations. The word “probability” rang our bells and the theory was immediately adopted by our curators as “(open-air) Museum theory”. Association to the film “Groundhog Day” where the same day is repeating for everyone else except for the main character whose sense of time is considered as “normal” came out as obvious. The logic question for us was: What if we offered only the possibility and let the people/visitors fulfill the offered structure with their own content? What if we create only some guidelines, a potential for editing, ask the questions?
In order to achieve that, we needed a hook: an intriguing title. “Heritage (in a) Supermarket” is a rather weak translation into English of something that in Serbian sounds as pointing a finger to everyone. It is important here to explain Serbian title in order to understand some layers of its meaning. Serbian word for Heritage is “Baština” (“Баштина”, in Cyrillic font). But when one divides it into syllables (БАŠ:ТИ:НА / БАШ:ТИ:НА) a funny game starts:

1. “BAŠ” means “Exactly”, “Precisely”, “Only” — Sentence examples would be: “This is exactly what I need”, “You are exactly the person I’m looking for”
2. “TI” means “You”
3. “NA” means “On”, “At”

So we have had “Exactly – You – On”. But then, we missed ending of this newly formed construction. Considering that we had ideas about market and trade, prices and values of heritage, personal involvement, evaluation and appreciation (developed earlier in the “Harity Fair” project\textsuperscript{20}), the word “shelf” appeared as logic one. In recent history, Serbia was facing many challenges and bad times: the civil wars, inner economic crises and recoveries, hyperinflation, development of democratic processes, rapid change of ideologies, restitution (of properties confiscated by the state after WWII), brain-drain, etc. Middle-aged generations still do remember completely empty shelves in the supermarkets and bunches of worthless money during the 1990s, but younger ones are living in abundance of offered goods yet alongside the credits, interests and rates. The oldest ones remember all of that plus former Yugoslav period (pre-nineties) with domestic goods on the stores’ shelves, travelling around the world, big borderless country, free education and health programs, but one party political system, censorship of media, etc. All of these periods were characterized by different ideologies and political and ethical values that are still vivid but not only as an inter-generational difference. Museum narrative is beyond (or before) all of these times and as such especially susceptible to idealized nostalgia and romanticism, even false national and populist interpretations.

That is why the text in the catalogue starts with confusing remarks relating to post-modern paradigms of shattered meta-narratives and global neo-liberal philosophy that could relativize all: “‘Everything is for sale!’ , so ‘everything has a price’: it is possible to calculate how much we have to pay for someone’s life, freedom, love, friendship, loyalty, memory, identity... These claims frighten

\textsuperscript{20} Herity Fair (2012-2014) was project initiated by Faculty of Philosophy and the Open air museum “Old Village” which included seven museums of South-western Serbia to simultaneously produce the process of inclusion of local communities into the whole process of exhibitions’ creations. It was a kind of parallel co-creation process.
you, don’t they? Any ‘normal’ person would say no because it is sure that some things are impossible to be bought or sold – the priceless ones. But most economists will convince you otherwise, they will probably prove practically these claims. Perhaps they would replace the noun ‘price’ with a bit more digestive one ‘value’ and your attitude will soften to a certain extent. ‘Everything has its value’ – now, it does not sound like ‘everything is for sale’ or ‘on the market’. Let’s try not to understand market as a place of sale, a supermarket, a stock exchange... If we replace it with the word ‘compromise’ where one value is modified for another, aren’t we still trading”?  

**Concept and characters**

The project “Heritage (in a) Supermarket” and its structure cannot be characterized as an exhibition, nor publication, installation, residence, the concept of living history, museum network or a platform for understanding relationships of individuals, organizations and institutions towards heritage. “Heritage (in a) Supermarket” is above all an experiment, a multilayer contribution to shedding light on dilemmas and debates that we lately pay attention to. In terms of museology (Exactly:You:On (the) Shelf) opened the question “Who is You?” in the title of the program. As we have already analyzed, the process that had been defined as democratization of museums and heritage interpretation, led to the idea that anyone can be an heir. In that sense, the questions posed by the Exactly:You:On (the) Shelf relate to all those who know they are professionals, those who feel that way, those who are amateurs and believe they are the best professionals, those who believe that they are professionals and are worse than the worst amateurs, as well as to those who are indifferent regarding this issue.

“Heritage (in a) Supermarket” is conceived through two opposing segments which together form a whole. The first part is based on the performance of the “living” avatar (Ivon) with basic character traits designed and “played” by one of our young associates. Curators and associate were responsible for creation of psychological character of a person who “inherited” the house defined as cultural heritage and “comes to grips” with the notion of inheritance in its broadest sense. The ways in which the character succeeds or fails to distinguish the personal from the common cause, the difference between rights and obligations, the way she understands the position of responsibility in the

system of inheritance through daily role-plays and interpretations in the first and third person are revived by a project associate and a friend of the museum who understands the opposing positions and dilemmas. The created figure (avatar Ivon) represents a profile of a frequent type of the visitors in the Open-air Museum “Old Village” in Sirogojno which is uncritically inclined in favour of an idealized image of the past and everyday life in rural areas at the turn of the 20th century. Through adaptation of the half of space of the main house (museum permanent exhibition), the character reacts to comments of visitors, approaching or moving away from own vision or authentic appearance, functions and behaviour patterns. At the same time, she keeps a personal diary as a testimony of her life in this fluid simulacrum, and daily evaluates her own views and visitors’ attitudes. The whole concept was conceived as a direct collision of value systems of the past and present, reviewing the limits of compromise and limits of ‘trading’.

After this “script” for avatar Ivon, the second person was introduced. The woman from the local community was a counterpoint to the first character, the avatar Ivon. The local woman worked at the museum as a cook and after retirement as a housekeeper of one of the main houses in the museum household. Considering her private biography and some very hard moments in life during her marriage in Kosovo where she lived in family patterns similar to those portrayed in “Old Village”, she became provocative contrast to Ivon and her pseudo-contemporary perspectives on the rural life in the past: living memories and real life in village were confronted to false vision of “new age” uses of the past, rurality and heritage.

So, the platform for the debate was set, as well as the theme. Yet, topics which could be started by characters were open: they could be about anything. Furthermore, switching between different models of living history (role-play, first or third person interpretations, sometimes even re-enactment of elements of life of one or other) the characters repeated every day. Younger, Ivon, was in charge of rearranging half of the space, sometimes cooking international cuisine, rehearsing yoga, knitting for fun, “promoting” her stands… The older one, Nana (as we all call her, meaning Grandma) was in charge for cooking in traditional ways, doing the housework, gardening, knitting for income, reviving her own memories… As time passed, living history models were enriched with something that we started to name as reality “show-ing”. As more “reality” started to appear, more social and cultural anthropology experiment tone of the project started to reveal itself.

Ivon and Nana were in (or around) the house every day from 11AM to 1PM and from 3 to 7PM. Two scenarios were “official”: Ivon personally inherited the house and came (with her mother – Nana) to spend in it her summers, or she
got married to Nana’s son and the family inherited the house. Division of the house in two sides – east and west from hearth (which in role-play meant one that is continuously renewed and one that represents old “museum” part) – reflected many divisions between two main characters: generational gap, ideological gap, even the class belonging, different relationships towards traditions and past and most importantly the gap between inheritance and heritage, and personal and collective. This visually symbolic gap and the gap between characters was reflected in their everyday activities and conversations. It allowed characters to be in roles, but also to incorporate their own personalities into the “game”. Once again it is important to emphasize the fact that real background of persons involved in program is quite different (Irena Molnar (32), aka Ivon, is MA in ethnology/anthropology from University of Belgrade and Athens, president of organization that deals with rights of young people and drugs, as well as an associate of many museum programs, while Milena (67), aka Nana, is a local woman, used to live in similar “traditional” condition as presented in the museum, a housewife and a former employee of the museum). So, both have real and strong connections with the museum and heritage, but quite different life stories. Irena (Ivon) is oriented towards philosophy of inventing and renewing heritage, exciting approach in interpretation, while Milena (Nana) is rather for preservation of the objects and presentation in very traditional ways.

Rearranging the main house: rearranging the perspectives

Everything began as “normal”, but Ivon started to change and rearrange her “part” of the house according to her “needs” and visions. In doing so, she constantly explained to Nana (and to visitors) why she was doing things like these. Gradually, but rather quickly, Ivon’s half of the house appeared as different and unrecognizable. Some of the things were bought in Chinese stores, some dishes in specialized stores, furniture borrowed from furniture stores, decorations from everywhere, food supplies from supermarkets; in several occasions Ivon brought her own (Irena’s) things to furnish the interior (books, magazines, things for exercise, cutlery, decorations, etc). Bringing new things meant that some “old” had to be “thrown away”. In reality they were turned back to museum’s depot, in fiction some of them ended up in the museum shop being characterized as “old enough to end in up some museum” (look below at the section Story of a museum shop).

As changing the house interior was in progress, the topics that characters discussed in front of the visitors were way of living in the past and in the present, what were and are commodities, electricity lack, water supplying, necessary things for cooking and dining space, in general the usage of house and its facilities. But when Ivon’s part of the house was shaped according to her
wishes, and some extra time appeared, new topics came out that portrayed generational and even historical gaps: their relationship's characteristics, roles of genders, position of children in family, domestic violence, and actually all kinds of things that people debate nowadays: politics, fashion, holidays, salaries, unemployment, weather, etc. During one debate about humanity back then and nowadays they started the humanitarian action (they agreed on that with a local charity organization few days earlier) they collected quite decent funds for the local hospital's maternity department. Topics of family planning, maternity leave, parenthood and adoption were very interesting topics inspired by the action. In all of these debates between Ivon and Nana visitors got involved discussing their own stands being on one side or another, or moving in the space between. It happened frequently that visiting family or a group reflected exactly the same divisions of two characters. Also, being quite often present at the scene, curators participated in those discussions. The role of curators was to moderate or support the continuation of the debates.

“Up to my eyeball in heritage” interview: media criticism

It is important to remember that the character of Ivon is pre-developed more than the character of Nana, not just in psychological terms, but also in terms of media appearance. It is a reflection of general superficiality of media coverage of any phenomena, usage of stereotypes and quick sensationalist information. Even before the project had started in its form of role-play, the design of the whole program referred to the ways media address, select and observe the issues and information. That museum stand is visible in all visual designs and directly refers to the most popular media network “TV Pink” (with its numerous TV channels, several internet and radio stations) in Serbia and throughout the region. Using specific pink colour (magenta) and TV’s logo (small stain), especially for the program catalogue cover, we wanted to point out these “pink magnifying glasses” and that simplified or banal (in some cases bizarre) information in dealing with pasts and history (histories) and social tensions is just not enough.

In that sense, Irena gave the interview for a magazine as Ivon, “clarifying” her position in the museum and the program. It was tendentious role-play or “abuse” of character: Ivon appeared as not stupid, even relatively well educated. She also believes she has the best wishes and intentions. But in interview, from time to time, her logic (deliberately) collapses, her knowledge appears as suspicious one, her good intentions are blurred by her contemporary needs for commodities.

The best way to observe this position is to quote some parts of her interview with remarks – [F] – for ‘false’ (not true) statements. In defining her position after “inheriting the heritage”:

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“I’m fascinated by the idea that in the past, people lived healthy [F] and long [F] and had the knowledge that we do not have today; everything was quieter, more pleasant [F], people respected and revered each other more – in a word, there existed order in everything [F].

To question “You’ve already turned one part of the kitchen/house into a small corner for pleasure and leisure?”, Ivon answers: “That’s right! This is my vision, my perception of the antiquities. If we add a little of something new, something of our own, every space is distinguished. I found some things in the house – the old photos and the like, and some of them I bought…”

To question “Since you spend the summer months here and slowly adapt the house to your own modern needs, do you ask experts for advice, instructions?”, Ivon answers: “Well, no … I think it’s more about the feeling, the personal sense of belonging to a whole, a kind of heritage and wider culture … I think I carry that knowledge inside, that sense of responsibility and duty. And, frankly speaking, private heritage is a private matter, isn’t it? What I’m trying to do is to enrich and modernize it, to refresh and preserve…”

So, she herself appears as incomplete expert for dealing with heritage and her ethical stands are not quite clear. In a word she is in a grey zone between her wishes and her possibilities, rights and obligations. And that is exactly the zone where museum mission is coming to its best. We should not forget that “Museums hold a unique position of being trusted, which is particularly important given the perceived lack of trusted institutions in society such as the government and the media. Both of these are seen as biased and operating under agendas. Members of the public, who took part, see museums as the guardians of factual information and as presenting all sides of the story.”

But in “Heritage (in a) Supermarket” the “absence” of the museum authority represents the strongest museum presence. We “left” to characters and visitors to discuss diverse topics in societies of past and present. The way they all discussed topics was far more important than conclusions they have. Yet, subconsciously visitors are aware of presence of two museum characters so, in a way, the official presence of the museum. The idea was basically that the museum offered the scene where all kind of questions could have been asked and debates started, not necessary the answers to be given – it’s all about thinking, not concluding.

Story of the museum shop
The second part of the experiment was (bizarrely) located in the Museum shop where the visitors could buy replicas of the traditional crafts and occupations products and souvenirs. In the typical ambience of sales and discounts, there were eight white museum showcases exposed with the glass boxes above. They contained eight items from the Museum ethnographic collection, actually those that Ivon has thrown away from “her” part of the house. The items came with the labels that placed them into historical context of the craft or profession and were personalized by photos of manufacturers, biography of the object, along with the inventory number. So Ivon’s “garbage” became labelled. The appendix that “distracted”, or, depending on the angle of observation, quite naturally fitted into the ambience of the Museum (store), was a distinctive hyperbolized market value of the museum object given in an almost surreal price. As it was by far higher than similar or identical items that could be purchased in the store, even “astronomical”, the question of values and prices was opened: Does the value correspond to the price? Does the object’s history play a role in determining its value? Does the presence of biography of the item raise the value and how can it influence the price? Can the collective and institutionalized heritage value be estimated or is it priceless?

Making visitors uncomfortable with the notion that the museum artefacts were presented in the (museum) shop and were for sale, the “trick” was followed by instructions: “All numbers mentioned in the shop, exhibition catalogue or elsewhere in ‘Heritage (in a) Supermarket’, which could be connected with potential price tagging of artifacts of Ethnographical collection of the Open-air museum “Old Village” are calculated based on the formula: the age of artifacts multiplied by salaries of those in charge for them divided by total number of collection artifacts. They serve for the purposes of education and promotion of the museum mission and are author’s and curators’ expression.”

Also, connection to the media and TV station(s) was pointed out through: “Any similarity to the popular media or real creatures that walk, fly or grovel on this planet is accidental and has no intention to offend or belittle anyone. The text as well as the whole content of this publication is aimed for and adjusted to all ages, genders, social and economic classes, races and ethnicities, professions, confessions, but it’s not recommendable for those with thin nerves for pseudo-economic/financial games, suspicious ethical stands and those generally easily adaptable on common mixing of light entertainment and culture.”

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23 Nikola Krstović and Bojana Bogdanović, Bašćina (na) rafu, 6.
24 Ibidem.
Highest bid, lowest price: non-consuming past!

There will always be differences between perspective of managing and thinking heritage, between institutional and all other models of keeping collective memory. First one is practical the other is philosophical, theoretical; the first is pragmatic the other one idealistic; the first one is always restricted and structured; the other one is liberal and diffuse.

New challenges that stand in musealization of everyday realities can be analysed through two applicative trends: 1) Activity of an open-air museum outside its own framework in order to create and promote the development of mental (cognitive) map as a prerequisite for raising awareness about the community itself. It means accepting the museum’s mission as a platform for the promotion of its own (cultural) values shaped in everyday life outside the “authority” of museum. Of course, it is a long term process of creation and development fulfilled with constant changes, and 2) Possibilities to overlap pre-discursive real everyday with activities (not the institution alone) of a museum in order to define the memory potency of a community and to overcome artificially created opposites: museum and life. 25

The term “museum” itself becomes subject to review: whether it represents a load or opens up new possibilities. If we understand museum not as an institution, but as a mission aimed at preserving the collective memory of the community / for the sake of better quality of life, the positions are changing dramatically – museum is no longer a place of preservation and interpretation, but of an active participant in people’s daily lives.

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Websites:


