

Empowerment and anger: learning how to share ownership of the museum

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The Museum of World Culture

Abstract

The article explores the challenges of community involvement and of equal representation agendas in museums in a multicultural society. The aim is to contribute to an increased understanding of power struggles and controversies associated with community dialogue and shared authority approaches in museums. These topics are analyzed in relation to the colonial legacy of Western museums and to discourses of multiculturalism, representation and inclusion. Two recent controversial cases of community dialogue in the Museum of World Culture in Sweden are discussed: the project *Advantage Göteborg*, during which extensive battles over the right of interpretation took place, and the case of the painting *Scène d'Amour* by artist Louzla Darabi, which was taken off display after strong demands from members of the public. While such cases are difficult and challenging for a museum, the author argues that they are *necessary* triggers for institutional change.

Key words: Community involvement, museum controversy, colonial legacy, multiculturalism, power struggles.

Introduction

A growing number of museums are taking on the task of creating a more inclusive institution. Within this mission lies the multicultural challenge: the question of how museums can represent the diversity that globalization and migration have brought to societies all over the world. This has been a particular challenge for museums in western societies since they have a specific legacy of colonialism. This legacy involves, among other things, the unequal power relation between majority society and ethnic minority groups, a relation affected by colonial history, western domination of non-westerners and by the discourse of 'Self' and 'Other' in European philosophy and media – including the media of museum display. The work to increase equality in representation demands scrutinization of the power structures inherent in museum history and tradition, as well as the power structures of society at large.

The aim of this article is to contribute to an increased understanding of museums' capability to change in this direction and of the different types of power struggles that surface as the process of change is set in motion. I will particularly describe and analyze two cases of dialogue and negotiations with (minority) communities in the new Museum of World Culture in Sweden. First, I discuss the developments of the project *Advantage Göteborg*, which involved members of communities in Gothenburg who came from the Horn of Africa. The project entailed conflicts regarding project ownership and the authority of interpretation. Secondly, I consider the case of a painting by the artist Louzla Darabi, which was taken off display and replaced by another painting after strong demands from members of the public. As with other similar international cases where art works have been removed from displays (discussed below), this act led to major debates in the Swedish press about artistic freedom and the problems that arise

when communities want to influence decisions about content in museums. It should be said here that, as a staff member of this museum, I have been directly involved in the first case, and that I followed the second one closely, which affects my understanding of them both. In the course of the article I will analyze the professional process triggered by community dialogue and specifically interpret this process and its internal dynamics in relation to societal discourses of diversity and inclusion.

Cultural diversity is generally understood as a combination of human identities and preconditions, comprising gender, ethnicity, age/generation, religion, cultural background, socio-economic background, disability, sexual orientation etc. In this article, the type of diversity focused on in the two case studies is that of those *ethnically* marked cultural differences associated with international movements of peoples (although these cannot in reality be separated from other parameters of diversity when understanding individuals and communities). When describing the specific dynamics of ethnic diversity in society, which encompass both cultural difference and power relations between a majority and old or new ethnic minorities, I use the term 'multiculturalism'.

As a preface to the discussion, museum history and tradition will be examined and interpreted in relation to current practices of representation, community dialogue and the challenges of multiculturalism. After discussing the two cases at the Museum of World Culture, the article concludes with some remarks on how museums can use community involvement as a trigger for institutional change.

Museum history: proud or prejudiced?

There are few institutions in society that are so affected by their history as museums and few, one could argue, that have been so uncritically proud of it. Pompous celebrations of 'founding fathers', 'great collectors' or 'masterpieces' from far away, are often present in museum hallways, jubilee books and in the general narrative of institutional history. Definitions and (imagined) purposes of museums may have changed many times over the last two hundred years, but regardless of these shifts, the mission has always been to present the collections in a way that will impose on the viewers certain ideals in line with current ideologies, whether it be a certain world order, a glorious national history, rules for citizenship or codes of bourgeois conduct (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, Duncan 1995, Bennett 1995). Indeed it can be argued that the same applies to contemporary museums that reinterpret collections through a principle of 'cultural diversity', with the aim to promote pluralism in society. Consequently, an awareness of the history of museums is crucial in order to have a critical assessment of present day ideologies and museum practices.

The collections, together with the context and ideology that guided their formation, are often seen as the foundation and *raison d'être* of a museum. Challenging the worldviews of former museum curators and directors can thereby easily be regarded as a challenge to the institution itself, and indeed to society at large. In the past museums have featured '*displays of power: great men, great wealth, or great deeds*', as Steven Dubin calls them (1999:3) ratifying claims of superiority. Dubin stresses that responses to contemporary exhibitions which provide alternative histories, are *also* power manifestations; either taking the form of a defensive reaction from those who dislike the new interpretations, or of offensive action by communities or individuals who demand more change in line with the exhibition messages. Therefore, power struggles and controversies are bound to take place as museums adopt a shared authority approach and use modes of display in which great narratives are no longer viable (Dubin 1999:2-5).

During the last fifteen years criticism of earlier museum ideology has steadily grown stronger, a development which has been parallel to the increase of research in the field of post-colonial theory. The criticism has been especially manifest in relation to museums of ethnography, which in the past have tended to assign the role of experts of the culture of 'Others' to western anthropologists. Museum theorists have argued that the way this knowledge has been presented in exhibitions, often in line with evolutionary ideas, has contributed to 'otherizing' and 'freezing in time' of people from the non-western parts of the world (Karp and Kratz 2000, Durrans 1988:144-148, Lidchi 1997:184-191). Consequently, museums of

ethnography have historically been prejudiced in the sense that they reconfirmed two-dimensional images of other cultures as being fundamentally different, exotic, traditional or uncivilized. These collecting and display strategies also 'confer authority to museums over the cultures they represent, and over visitors who expect to receive information objectively from museums' (Riegel 1996:88).

Representation and controversy

The critique that is directed at displays of 'other people' no longer refers to distant cultures but to all minority communities in a society. Researchers may have contributed to the theoretical understanding of these discourses, but the real pressure on museums to change has come increasingly from community representatives who have demanded the right to speak for themselves and to control representation of their own culture. One well-discussed example is the exhibition *Into the Heart of Africa* at the Royal Ontario Museum in Canada in 1989. While the exhibition makers wanted it to be seen as a critical portrait of colonial collecting and museum ethics, the exhibition was perceived as a glorification of colonialism and a caricature of Africans, and caused enormous controversy (Riegel 1996: 89-90, Schildkrout 1991: 182-184). As Anthony Shelton notes:

Ethnographic museums and those with important non-western collections must, more than any others, chart their way through the political complexities and ethical compromises that globalization is unleashing, before they can, in all sincerity, understand and answer audiences that are increasingly made up of people they once considered part of their object (Shelton 2001:222).

However, controversies are not related to ethnic diversity as such. They can apply to any group or community perspective. One such case was the exhibit of the Enola Gay, the aeroplane that dropped the Hiroshima bomb, at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum in Washington in 1995, which exemplified the clash between the need for remembrance and pride of Second World War veterans and the museum's aim to represent the complexities of the nuclear bombings in Japan (Zolberg 1996). These and other cases have increased the awareness in museums of the importance of self-representation and consultation of people who have a personal relation to the topic or materials exhibited. A specific dimension of controversy emerges in cases of art displays where artistic interpretations by a single artist may clash with belief systems of different religious communities or with moral standards expressed by the general public. A number of art exhibitions, museum installations and theatrical productions have provoked controversies during recent years. One such case was the *Sensations* exhibition, a display of young British artists works. When it was shown in New York in 1999, it caused strong reactions particularly among Christians and led New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani to threaten to withdraw public funding from the Brooklyn Museum of Art (Rothfield 2001). The American Association of Museums responded by claiming, amongst other things, that diversity in itself makes controversy unavoidable – an argument that I endorse and which I explore later in this paper.

A collective memory?

Museums are sometimes described as keepers of a *collective memory*¹ (Irwin-Zarecka 1994, Urry 1996). This term is being used widely in heritage policy in Sweden (Swedish National Museum Commission 1994) as well as by museum professionals. It is used as a descriptive rather than as an analytical term in policy and mission formulations, which is problematic since it promotes museums as keepers of a comprehensive and inclusive history whose truth is taken for granted. Iwona Irwin-Zarecka emphasizes that a "collective memory" – as a set of ideas, images and feelings about the past – is best located not in the minds of individuals, but in the resources they share' (Irwin-Zarecka 1994:4). If museums are resources for a collective memory, a relevant question is: *which groups of people* share this resource, either by actual

access to it or by a sense of ownership? Peter Novick regards collective memory as a construction closely linked to collective identity. The purpose of collective memory is to affirm and defend the collective ideas of group identity and thereby also exclude alternative memories and identities (Novick 1999: 146-148). Sharon Macdonald (2003) discusses how museums through their traditional role in (national) identity building and confirmation, a role constructed through the nation-state public museum model, can be used also as sites for examining identity transformation: 'precisely because they have been so implicated in identity work and because of their more particular articulations with the kind of identities that are under threat'./.../ (Macdonald 2003:6). Following the discussion of Novick and McDonald, I think that it is wrong to describe museums, especially public museums with defined geographical service areas, as keepers of a collective memory since what they in effect keep are collections and archives chosen by a small group of museum curators or donors. The collective character of such memory is, surely, very limited. Public museums should rather be interpreted as custodians of a 'collective agreement', stating something along these lines: '*this is what we are through what we have been. This is what we will become*'. At least one may say that this agreement is what museums traditionally *endeavoured* to establish. If people in general, or some groups, in particular disagree or don't identify with the museum's version of the agreement, the museum is bound slowly to alienate itself from society in the sense that it contributes to exclusion and stays in a world of its own. Given the fact that museums are often supported by dominant cultural policies and are considered important in themselves, they can very well remain unthreatened, unless challenged by strong community demands, political initiatives or informed debates in the media. Paradoxically, the position of being an institution with a high credibility factor and an aura of importance – although this can work as a conservative force - also gives the museum a unique potential to contribute to a change of societal discourse. Therefore what museums say and do is important for the way society's great narratives, self-images and identities are constructed and, in the long run, for social change. Richard Sandell has emphasized that museums need to 'radically rethink their purposes and goals and to renegotiate their relationship to, and role within, society' in order to achieve a more equal representation (Sandell 2003:45). I suggest here that those museums that wish to find a new role for themselves within society, should eschew the notion of representing a 'collective agreement' for any such agreement (if it ever existed more than as construct) is no longer possible given the complexities of multicultural societies with their multitude of identities, experiences and frames of references.

Museums and the multicultural challenge

Reactions against misrepresentation or exclusion of certain perspectives have been common throughout the twentieth century and have pushed the Academy and, consequently, museums to a change of focus and new frames for interpretation. From the late 1960s and onwards class, ethnicity and gender have provided the main perspectives to gain better representation in museums. The ethnicity perspective is linked to politics of multiculturalism and diversity – one of the most central discussions in Europe, as in other parts of the world, during the last two decades. The Unesco Declaration of Cultural Diversity states that diversity is 'as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature' (Unesco 2001). Cultural diversity may thus be described as an incontestable condition of a society, but *equality* for all groups in a multicultural society is a challenging process that requires constant negotiations and policy up-dates. Charles Taylor (1992) identified two major strands of multicultural policy-making: the politics of universalism (equal dignity) and the politics of difference (identity). While both of these notions are based on *recognition* and *equal respect* for groups and individuals in society, the strategies to reach this goal are almost opposites and come into conflict. The *politics of universalism* are based on the ideas of equality: what is established is meant to be universally the same, an identical basket of rights, immunities and equal opportunities. The objective of these politics is that all citizens and all perspectives should be included or *mainstreamed* into society and its institutions. The *politics of difference*, as an alternative, recognizes the unique identity of any individual or group and their distinctness from everyone else. It is argued that the distinctness is automatically ignored, glossed over, or assimilated to a dominant (majority)

identity, unless there are strong policies to support particularity and alternative identities. Taylor described the underlying conflict as follows:

The reproach the first makes to the second is that it violates the principle of nondiscrimination. The reproach the second makes to the first is that it negates identity by forcing people into a homogeneous mold that is untrue to them. (Taylor 1992:14).

These two strategies can also be identified within diversity policies in museums. The politics of universalism inform the inclusive ideology embedded in the demand for museums to be made accessible to all and representative of all. Society's various identities should then be included in the general national narrative and all institutions share the responsibility to include this diversity. The politics of difference can be identified in special museums for subgroups, e.g. Jewish museums, women's museums, museums for the visually impaired, or in special efforts to increase representation of a certain group or perspective (Lagerkvist 2005).

Sweden can be described as a fairly new multicultural society with a relatively small number of established and recognized national minorities (the Sami, the Swedish Finns, the Tornedaler Finns, the Roma and the Jews) and larger groups of new immigrants who have come through different waves of immigration from the 1950s and onwards. Today, Sweden has a relatively high percentage of citizens with an immigrant background, between twelve and twenty percent depending on whether the second generation is included in these statistics. Strategies for inclusion of ethnic minorities in Swedish museums have shifted focus from documentation of the lives of 'immigrant communities' in the early 1980s to renegotiations of how 'ethnicity' and 'Swedish culture and society' are to be understood and represented in museums in the late 1990s (Magnusson 2006). This shift of focus has also generated a more intense discussion around misrepresentation and exclusion mechanisms and has pressured museums to change their practice. Thus, a small but increasing number of Swedish museums are questioning their interpretative authority and now consult or work in partnership with external communities or individuals. At national level, the biggest financial investment regarding multiculturalism and museums during the last decade, has been the establishment of a government authority of four museums called the National Museums of World Culture², all of which hold collections from 'other parts of the world', i.e. mainly non-European collections. The reason for establishing a common organization was that these museums were thought to be able to play a specific role in dealing with the challenges of multicultural Sweden, through their international collections and networks (Swedish Government 1998). The authority includes three already existing museums and a fourth new museum: The Museum of World Culture.

The Museum of World Culture

The Museum of World Culture is Sweden's newest national museum and opened to the public in late December 2004. It is based in Gothenburg, Sweden's second largest city on the west coast. This museum has made a transformation from a small municipal ethnographic museum to a national museum of 'World Culture'³, a term interpreted in the context of globalization, diversity and pluralism. The aim of the museum is to be a forum for debate about present day questions of global concern and to represent diversity locally and globally. Consultations with different audience groups and communities, as well as active inclusion of many voices and perspectives in the museum exhibitions and public programmes, are strong principles. This way of working contains challenges out of the ordinary. I will now discuss two different cases of community involvement that occurred during the development phase and shortly after the opening of the new museum, the analysis of which can shed light on the dynamics, difficulties and potentials of sharing ownership of a museum.

The challenges in question are particularly evident in the case of museums, like The Museum of World Culture, which aspire to inclusion and which place a premium on sharing ownership. Here, however, it is important to place the museum within the wider context of social

changes which have made it into a site of competing claims and of cultural struggles. Museums have long played a key role in the regulation of what sociologists Elias and Scotson (1994) call established-outsider relations and, as the literature of museum studies suggests (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991), they may lead subordinate social groups to acquire a sense of their own social inferiority. However, contemporary social change has rendered established classifications of museums problematic and more permeable than they have been in the past. In so far as museums have been regarded as keepers of collective memory, migrations of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have rendered the nature and control of museum memories problematic. What I want to signal here is the need to draw together threads which are more usually isolated as separate and distinct concerns within the literature of museum studies and the social sciences: (i) the study of the museum's content and knowledge production within its organizational setting and with particular reference to inclusion and consultation of external partners - in this case a minority group; (ii) the study of museum's situation at the intersection of conflicting definitions of what may or should enter the realm of a shared public culture of social memory.

Thus, the two case-studies which follow are of interest because they illuminate two separate but complementary aspects of the challenges that face museums today. In these circumstances the politics of inclusion have tended to generate tension and conflict along two dimensions: (i) the relation between museum employees and external stakeholders especially concerning the decision-making process which determines what is to be exhibited and (ii) the symbolic and textual dimensions of display.

The first case focuses our attention on institutional aspects: on organizational questions of power and decision making. Here I am concerned with who decides, with what level of inclusion is offered to new participants and whether change is merely enveloped as opposed to embraced by the museum. My second case concerns the way in which curatorial decisions may escape the horizons of curators so that display may be re-interpreted in ways that were neither predicted nor completely anticipated by the museum. Even where curators have anticipated difficulties there have been celebrated cases where controversy has exploded onto the public stage in ways that threaten the survival of the project or installation. If the first case that I report is about who determines what may be exhibited the second concerns controversy about what may be exhibited. What clearly brings the cases together is the *dialogue* and *negotiations* they both called for and the way this has contributed to a change of both the internal and the public perception of the Museum of World Culture as a national institution. As I have already observed there have been a number of cases in recent years where 'art' displays comes into conflict with the belief systems of different religious communities or with moral standards expressed by the general public. Such cases may enmesh curators in complex and cross cutting conflicts over what may be exhibited and how things should be interpreted. Such controversies are also indicative of the explosive debates that may accompany the contemporary politics of diversity and inclusion.

Case 1, Advantage Göteborg

I left my country albeit young, unwillingly and unprepared. I left everything behind me, near and dear, brothers and sisters. I left my school, I left childhood friends and I left all memories. I left the football made of old socks, the one we used to shoot towards the goal made of stones. The porridge before sunrise during Ramadan, the juice after sunset and the weekend candy – all this I left together with the traditional games of my country. I left the lust and playfulness of youth. I left mountains, valleys, hills and fields. I miss the sun and the moon and the sea. I also miss the brown desert, the one I look like, the one that looks like me.

Said Abdellah

Personal stories are powerful tools in museum representation as they have the potential for reaching out to people. By including stories that are seldom heard or given public space, museums can work to increase equality in representation and thereby play a role in combating exclusion. The quotation above comes from the book *Rebirth* by the Eritrean author Said Abdellah. It is a story about fleeing your country, finding your identity in an unknown Europe

and remembering your homeland. The story was written within the project *Advantage Göteborg: World Cultures in Focus* and it is presented in the exhibition *Horizons: Voices from a Global Africa*.

The aim of the EU-funded project *Advantage Göteborg*, which is the first case I will discuss, was to break down labour market barriers for citizens from the Horn of Africa; mainly Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia. Despite major efforts to combat exclusion and discrimination in the labour market, Swedish working life still shows an inability to include people from other parts of the world. Citizens with a non-European background are among the most discriminated against and this particularly strikes at people from African countries (Swedish Integration Board 2004a:17-23). The *Advantage Göteborg* project combined efforts to combat exclusion at many levels. The Museum of World Culture was the co-ordinator between local, regional and national partners from the public and the private sector, with a shared goal of reducing discrimination.⁴ Some 30 unemployed Gothenburg citizens who were migrants from the Horn of Africa, applied and were recruited to the project. The strategy was to focus on each individual to observe the whole structure of barriers that hinder employment opportunities for a person. The aim of the partnership was to facilitate the opening of doors to training, internships or employment in the areas of work most suitable for the individual in terms of education, prior experience and personal motivation. The aim was thus *not* to encourage the participants to pursue a museum career, although a few indeed became museum employees after the project was finished. Individual action plans were developed together with each participant following the idea of personal empowerment.

Parallel to the labour-market orientated work, the participants worked with the Museum of World Culture. Since research on inclusion and exclusion mechanisms has shown that a sense of identity in an individual is one of the main precursors to inclusion (Newman and McLean 2002: 57), strengthening the individual's self-worth was an important task. The role of the museum was to act as an arena for identity-building for the individuals through discussions about heritage, cultural background, identities and experiences of being in the diaspora in Sweden. This was combined with reminiscence work and documentation of the collections from the participants' countries of origin. The prevalence of two-dimensional images from this region in the media – war, poverty and famine – alongside stereotypical images of immigrants in general and their lack of representation in the cultural sector, also called for more valid and more diverse images of communities from the Horn of Africa. Therefore, the project also had a goal of providing participants with the opportunity for self-representation in one of the museum's opening exhibitions.

To include the participants in the work, the staff spent a good deal of time explaining what museums do, what role objects play in the museum context and how an exhibition is made. We also discussed the way museums have worked with communities and personal stories and undertook a field trip to London to study exhibitions of this kind. The visits included the Horniman Museum's exhibition *African Worlds* in which many individual African voices are presented, and Hackney Museum where individual memories and stories from representatives of the diverse Hackney communities make up the museum's permanent exhibition about the history of the borough: *The World on Your Doorstep*. The project staff wanted to communicate how important the individual voices and interpretations would be and spoke openly about the fact that museums traditionally have failed in this area.

A crisis of confidence

A few months into the project, the staff were alarmed that there was serious dissatisfaction with the way the project was developing. The criticisms increased, turning into a real crisis of confidence. The complaints were not completely collective, but their general tendency was such that the project risked becoming a failure. There are many things that might be said about this displeasure and the complaints from the participants. I will limit the discussion to the three arguments that were most serious in my view since they pointed to a gap between rhetoric and practice. The first criticism was that of 'tokenism', i.e. that the project participants were just used to give the appearance of inclusion. Many argued that the museum did not truly include the participants in the work and that most of the exhibition planning took place outside of the participants' control. The question was asked why a representative from the group – 'a real

African' – did not have a place in the steering group for the exhibition. The Museum was indeed working with other external people such as international content specialists, researchers and partner museums in Africa for the whole exhibition, but this was not accepted as a legitimate explanation. It was further questioned why input from the participants had to be confined to the African Horn section, and could not extend to all the other sections. The fact that the participants were never considered as potential steering group representatives, although they worked with the Museum for over a year, is worthy of reflection. The Museum's limits for inclusion *in professional areas* were actually quite tight. Including non-specialists in an intense specialist process of a major exhibition seemed both difficult and hazardous considering the time pressure we were working under. However, the symbolic value of representation in arenas where major decisions are being made (or imagined to be made) was clearly underestimated by the project staff and exhibition team. It was decided not to include a representative in the steering group, particularly because it would have raised even more difficult issues of representation since the group was in itself very diverse in terms of age, gender, background and experiences. Rather than taking the risk that ideas would be filtered by a *spokesman* who might not in reality represent the many voices of the group, we decided to consult individuals more intensely and make sure the participants were in better control of their own presentations.

The second serious critique was that the Museum was not welcoming and inclusive enough and this was expressed as a disappointment by some participants who expected a museum of 'World Culture' to differ from other societal institutions. As an example, the participants were dissatisfied with the project room, since this was placed in the basement section of the building, with little access to the rest of the museum offices. This particular room had indeed been carefully selected. It was adjacent to the museum storage facilities and allowed direct access to and handling of objects, which was a central part of the work. But this allocation became a symbol of low priority and of being allotted a less important space. Any group of people would have found the room problematic to be in for a long time but would not necessarily see the place as discriminating. It is however important to keep in mind that a group of individuals that have been excluded for a long time, are especially vulnerable. Therefore it is wiser to prepare an obviously positive environment. After some time we managed to find space in the offices.

Thirdly, it was brought to our attention that participants had encountered the same kind of prejudice and even racism in the museum as in other parts of the society. This comment was perhaps the most difficult for us to handle and to understand. The way the members of staff who were involved in the project, had tried to welcome and prepare for the project participants by explaining the museum world and its challenges seemed to contradict this criticism. Indeed, there had initially been internal doubts about the project from other members of staff and it was the first time this museum had liaised with the social and private sector and taken on a project with labour market objectives. And yet it seemed very unlikely that there was racism in the Museum of World Culture: some 30 percent of the staff members have another ethnic background than Swedish and many employees have degrees in anthropology, have travelled all over the world and have a sincere interest in cultural diversity. This, however, does not automatically mean that the institution is more welcoming than other places.

One important eye-opener was the comprehension that the museum was not separated from the societal structure of ethnic hierarchies. Just as with any diversity project, ours existed within a certain discourse that contains unspoken presumptions about the targeted group of individuals. Although we had an appreciation of the fact that media images of the Horn of Africa communities in Sweden were highly misleading – this is what we wanted to balance through the exhibition stories – perhaps we unconsciously still had these images in the back of our minds? If this is so, it might have been difficult to regard the participants as agents, active and fully empowered. These are difficult questions to answer but may be used as reminders of how strong a societal discourse is no matter how well you know its inaccuracies.

The Museum dealt with the crisis by having open discussions between museum staff and project participants on a number of occasions. Some of the criticism weakened but other aspects of it remained. It was not until the group participants took control over the process of changing and improving the project that real negotiations started and positions shifted. Discourses much larger than the individual agents were activated as the Museum entered an

area of unequal power relations defined by ethnicity. Empowerment for a disempowered community means demanding power in the arena where you are invited to act. This arena – in our case the Museum of World Culture – must be prepared for it and allow it to flourish. Going back to Steven Dubin's discussion on power struggles in museums, this can be interpreted as a case of *offensive action*: more changes were demanded in line with the ideology of our project, specifically empowerment, the right to self-representation, and authority of interpretation of their own history and culture.

Despite all the trouble and frustration, the work in *Advantage Göteborg* proceeded. All of the participants stayed throughout the project, which is a sign of its meaningfulness. Providing an opportunity to link with the past through reminiscence and reflections, collecting stories to tell people of today and to save for the future, are still very important parts of museum work. These tasks, I would argue, will *increase* in importance as museums start sharing the authority of interpretation with their various audiences.

What was at stake here was the strength of dominant classifications and discourses within museums which may be reproduced through the implicit meanings of reform as it is expressed in, for example, the physical space that is assigned to projects. This case alerts us to the limitations of reforms which fail to build inclusion into the institutional fabric of the museum. Thus, as my investigations suggest, the stigma of exclusion may, if we are not careful, be re-encoded and expressed in new versions of museum authority. The lessons that can be learnt from the case of the *Advantage Göteborg* project are two-fold. First that museums undertaking this kind of work, apart from planning well and learning from the experiences of other museums, need to be prepared for unpredicted reactions and developments and to regard them as *necessary* for the project, rather than as barriers or failures. Reactions to and criticisms of projects and institutional traditions should instead be faced with openness and with the provision of enough time for dialogue and reconsideration. Secondly, controversies in themselves should be embraced as part of a mutual learning process where the question of shared ownership is at stake. Creating an inclusive institution is not about finding the right model for this kind of work – a model that can be applied to all museums and all communities. The task is essentially to keep the dialogue alive, to negotiate and renegotiate and thereby to find a balance and move positions forward in each separate case of community involvement. In other words, there are no shortcuts to inclusion.

Case 2, Scène d'Amour

The second case of community dialogue appeared shortly after the opening of the Museum in late December 2004. The exhibition *NO NAME FEVER – Aids in the age of globalisation*, which was on display in Gothenburg from the Museum opening until the end of June 2006, deals with the pandemic of HIV/aids. It is structured around different emotions: Fear, Denial, Despair, Hope, Desire, Sorrow, which are universal for all individuals and societies where the infection strikes – even though the effects of the disease differ enormously. The exhibition contained two paintings from the series *Scène d'Amour* by Algerian artist Louzla Darabi in the section *Desire*. They were chosen for their celebration of erotic love, in an exhibition where much else concerns sorrow, fear, denial and death. When the museum received the paintings, one of them turned out to have the Quranic verse, Surat Al-Fatiha, written on it, in combination with the image of a lovemaking couple (already known to the Museum). Staff members signalled that this could be controversial. In the hectic process of preparing for the opening the decision was made to put it up anyway.

During the month after the opening, the Museum started getting strong emotional reactions primarily by e-mail from Muslims who had visited or heard of the image in the exhibition. People informed the Museum of how sacred these first verses of the Quran are, that they should not be shown with a figurative image, especially not that of a love-making couple, and asked the Museum of World Culture to remove the text from the painting or the painting itself from the exhibition. Most of these approximately 600 e-mails were polite and respectful. However, a couple of them were aggressive and threatening. One person was for example referring to what had happened to Dutch film-maker Theo van Gogh who was murdered in Amsterdam in 2004 by a Muslim fundamentalist as a penalty for his film *Submission* about the violence against women in Islamic societies. However, the majority of the e-mails contained

nothing of this kind. Many e-mails were similar in content, signing up to a standardized complaint. Others who wrote to the Museum developed their arguments more thoroughly and tried to explain how they felt. These are some of the voices⁵:

No one would consider displaying images of your loved ones in the nude or in an intimate situation. In the same manner, this insults our pride of the beliefs we praise highly /.../. I believe you should know better and that there ought to be other ways of making Muslims feel appreciated and included in Swedish society and art. (Mona)

As a Muslim, I constantly encounter expressions that are not in agreement with my values, but I live in a country where people have a right to choose and therefore I accept this. There are however limits that can be stretched too much, exceeding the acceptable. Violation becomes a fact. This is one of those occasions. (Irina)

The way we understand this museum is that it aims to bridge the gaps between cultures and increase cross-cultural understanding. Showing a painting that all Muslims feel is deeply offensive, is not only tasteless and should not be done in a cultural museum, but can also counteract multiculturalism and excludes Muslims from the dialogues of society. (Swedish Association of Young Muslims)

After spending many years in Sweden I absolutely agree with the notion of freedom of expression. But you would agree that this should not be done at the expense of hurting the religious and emotional feelings of another segment of society. /.../ I would request you remove this painting as soon as possible so as not to hurt the feelings of the Muslim community. (Waseem)

While the painting was meant as a general celebration of lust and desire, it was perceived by a group of people as offensive, as religious harassment for people that already felt discriminated against considering the increased suspicion and negative attitude towards Muslims in Sweden, as in many parts of Europe, in the post nine-eleven environment (Swedish Integration Board 2004b: 64-77). It became clear that the Museum of World Culture had made a mistake and misjudged the reaction this artwork would cause among a specific segment of the audience. Some people expressed their support of the Museum and of the HIV/aids exhibition, but also their expectation that this museum in particular should be able to do better and take a more inclusive position. The reactions were massive and unequivocal enough to indicate that the painting was making a large number of individuals feel seriously excluded, which was a very bad sign since one of the Museum of World Culture's major goals was to be welcoming and inclusive to new user groups. The painting and the discussions it precipitated became a barrier to access. After long discussions the Museum's steering group decided to take the picture down, and instead to negotiate another loan from the artist. The painting and especially the Quran verse were not in essence linked to the HIV/aids theme of the exhibition and it could thus not be a matter of principle to display this particular work. It was argued that another painting in the series *Scène d'Amour* would serve as well. This was explained in an official statement from the Museum, in the exhibition and on the web page (Museum of World Culture, 2005). The change of paintings was negotiated with the artist herself and the new painting was installed after a few weeks.

A second crisis of confidence

The Swedish press instantly reported on this matter, generally with a very critical attitude towards the decision. Cultural journalists, art critics, museum personnel and even politicians held the Museum of World Culture responsible for putting freedom of speech at risk. Tabloid evening papers focused on the two threatening letters among the large majority of respectful ones, and blew up stories about how the museum had given in to fundamentalist threats. The editorial of major evening paper *Expressen* wrote:

It is at Korsvagen in Gothenburg that the freedom of speech and the freedom of religion are at stake. But this is something the management of the Museum of World Culture doesn't understand. They took down the painting *Scène d'Amour* by Louzla Darabi and thereby displayed a monumental gutlessness. Through their compliance they have let Muslim fundamentalists set the agenda for what can be shown in a national museum. (*Expressen*, 3 February 2005).

A number of people also complained directly to the museum:

Shall you let Muslims decide what is to be shown in *our* (italics by author) museum? What kind of democracy is that? Soon everyone will be forced to wear a headscarf as well. (Kalle).

The Museum of World Culture has many important roles to play; create dialogue, increase understanding, but also question truths, shed light on dogmatism and implacable positions. If you do not demonstrate fearlessness and independence, the good ambitions will fail. In this case I was deeply disappointed (Jan).

Although there were indeed Islamophobic tendencies in these e-mails, as for example the second quotation above shows, it is too simple an explanation to say that that it was a fear of Muslims that guided the protests. Instead many e-mails displayed a sincere concern that the Museum's actions would infringe on the fundamental human rights and freedoms gained in democratic and politically secular countries. People argued that once the Museum had chosen to show the painting it had to stand by this decision and that, by exchanging the painting, it was infringing on freedom of expression and on the rights of the artist. However, as the previous quotations show us, arguments concerning freedoms of expression and religion, and the law forbidding agitation against ethnic groups, also occurred in the protests *against* the painting. Challenges of multiculturalism were a fact in this case and called for cultural sensitivity and intercultural dialogue.

Practising cultural sensitivity

As discussed earlier, museums of the twenty-first century are increasingly developing methods to include people, objects and perspectives that were once excluded from the narrative. Unesco and the International Council of Museums (ICOM), the major international organizations for the museum and heritage sectors, both prioritize efforts to increase cultural sensitivity and promote intercultural dialogue. The ICOM Code of Professional Ethics stipulates the importance of dealing carefully with materials of sacred significance:

taking into account the interests and beliefs of members of the community, ethnic or religious groups from whom the objects originated (ICOM 2004: 4.3).

Requests for removal from public display of human remains or material of sacred significance from the originating communities must be addressed expeditiously with respect and sensitivity (ICOM 2004:4.4).

These two paragraphs have generally been applied in relation to items, such as sacred or ceremonial objects, held in museum collections and the beliefs and values of indigenous groups from where the objects originated. As a contemporary art work, Louzla Darabi's painting cannot be considered as such. However, I believe the paragraphs can indeed be applied to the Darabi case, if we regard the *sacred object* as a different one in this context. Central to the protests, was the fact that the Quranic verse is not supposed to be objectified in this manner; it is a sacred *text* which should not be displayed with a figurative image, and it is this which caused the request for removal. This way of interpreting a dimension of a sacred object may be both novel and complex and possibly difficult to acknowledge, as it opens up to a whole new way of thinking about rights to heritage, but it was not very long ago that requests by indigenous

groups for the removal of secret/sacred objects from exhibitions were met with a lack of understanding, suspicion and resistance in museums and, in the worst cases, with arrogance and scorn. It is therefore relevant to ask what makes requests by indigenous communities different from requests by other communities. One aspect is of course the question of 'ownership' and origin of the materials in question. Indigenous communities have often reclaimed and regained the right to heritage materials that were once taken from them and removed into the realm of public museums. Another aspect to consider is the current political context and the power relation between the museum (or society at large) and the community in question. By this I mean to suggest that museums that endeavour to take part in the process of promoting equality in society need to be more sensitive to claims from communities who are struggling for equal rights from a disadvantaged position, than to claims that come from well-established communities and groups of people who already have access to power positions and the media. This proposed relativism will be controversial in itself, but it is a way of understanding the larger meanings and implications of protests such as the ones against the *Scène d'Amour* painting, in the light of the current Islamophobic climate in Europe and thus the disadvantaged position of many European Muslims. Practising cultural sensitivity in community dialogue will be one of the major challenges to Western museums in the future. Professional codes of ethics and guidelines for best practice will, as I see it, increasingly reflect this. This change process will most certainly involve new controversies and power struggles.

A complex case of empowerment and anger

The case of *Scène d'Amour* was clearly not an easy one for the Museum and the analysis of its many dimensions and effects are complex. It is relevant to point out that the opinions expressed in the e-mails were not representative of the *whole* Muslim community and all Muslims in the world. But is this of relevance when analyzing the Museum's response? There have indeed been voices stating that the Museum of World Culture made it harder for Muslims in Europe who wish to break away from older Islamic tradition. In particular, one woman, who demonstrated outside the museum every weekend during 2005, believed that this is what the museum did by removing the painting. One frequent argument against policies of multiculturalism and cultural sensitivity in relation to ethnic or religious groups is that society may fail to support those who are victims of an oppressive system or of family abuse, especially women and children. In the attempts to understand cultural difference and tolerate alternative ways of life, it is argued that important human rights risk being compromised at the cost of the individual (Dembour 2001:58-62; Loenen 2002).

The Museum of World Culture, as mentioned previously, found the removal to be justified since this particular painting did not carry a central message for the exhibition and moreover, given the context, continued display of the painting would have risked alienating a large group of the Museum's Muslim visitors. However, if the religious connotations of the artwork had indeed been about HIV/Aids, and thus a principle theme of the exhibition, the Museum would have made the opposite decision. Had this been the scenario, more extensive challenges would have come. Following its line of argument the Museum would have had to defend displaying the painting and at the same time keep the dialogue alive with all those who were offended by it, *and* handle any possible threats. It is clear that the case of *Scène d'Amour* triggered important and difficult discussions relating to challenges of multiculturalism. Freedom of expression, as an ideal, fundamental and unassailable principle, contains in itself a number of contradictions and limitations which, without doubt, become more evident in a culturally diverse society. The right not to be harassed for who you are and the right to be respected for your religion, both limit other people's rights to express whatever they wish, especially in public institutions. Freedom of expression is also framed by power structures. Some societal institutions hold the power to define the space given for different voices and to control how and where marginalized voices can be heard. This power position can be abused and I believe the Museum of World Culture would have risked doing so if it had only answered the protests by firmly defending its right to display the painting. The credibility of any cultural institution that wishes to break down cultural barriers to access is founded on the capability to listen sensitively to its various stakeholders, to share authorship, and take seriously even those arguments with which one does not personally identify.

The power manifestation in the case of *Scène d'Amour*, again following Steven Dubin's line of argument (Dubin 1999:2-5), did not primarily come from Muslims protesting against the museum, but from dominant cultural representatives who reacted against the museum's decision. It can be seen as a case of *defensive reaction* from those who disliked the decision. The controversy was about how the Museum of World Culture could in effect handle demands from the public and change exhibition content after the opening. The fact that the demands came from Muslim stakeholders clearly increased the controversy, again considering the context of the post-9/11 environment. In examining the case of the *Scène d'Amour*, one thus has to consider the social and political context in which it took place; and the extent to which the current climate of fear and suspicion arising from perceived terrorism threats and attitudes towards Muslims which pervades many Western societies influenced the debates. What can be learnt from the second case, again apart from being aware of an increased number of possible connotations and interpretations when you deal with art and audiences within a global spectrum, is the need to establish and communicate a policy of dialogue and inclusion and clearly stake out what it actually means in terms of *handling* crises, since crises will inevitably come if you endeavour to tackle problematic issues of our time. As Rothfield notes:

It is not clear whether museum policies could be /.../ seeking to deliberately incite (rather than avert) a reaction they control and channel its energy towards productive dialogue. What is clear is that absent careful crisis-management thinking before the fact about the array of interests and sensibilities within the public, the very communities that should be drawn into discussion will either reject it altogether or enter it enraged. (Rothfield 2001:5).

Conclusions

The unequal relations between the majority population, and minorities of immigrants of different generations and from different waves of migration do still, in the post-colonial era, influence potential relations between museums and minority user groups. This relationship is also affected by different national politics of multiculturalism and current political and social conditions such as the general debates around integration and inclusion of minority groups. Museums of the twenty-first century need to actively transform their relationship to these diverse minority communities which is a difficult process that includes both tension and stress. However, active community involvement is, as I see it, a *prerequisite* for a museum's ability to change towards being a more inclusive institution. Community involvement does not only give room to broader perspectives and better representation in museum display - it also makes visible and increases awareness of power structures within museums. The high degree of credibility attached to museums and the aura of authenticity and significance assigned to museum displays, lead to the conclusion that what museums say and do makes a difference. Efforts in museums to combat exclusion are therefore worthwhile. Museums are spaces where a certain kind of dialogue over time is made possible. This dialogue can include many interpretations and perspectives and can be balanced by historical comparisons. Considering this potential, museums have a unique role in and responsibility for working towards achieving a more equal society. The whole process of change requires that the critical view be turned inwards towards one's own institutional foundation. It also requires that old stakeholders share power with new ones, that the majority gives space to minorities. The two cases discussed in this article have been about power, empowerment and anger. In the first case, which was about inclusion of external expert voices into the Museum's organizational frame, anger was directed towards the Museum because of its power position and inability to include people who were supposed to be empowered and who had indeed invited as the experts in some of the cultures represented in the exhibition.

In the second case, which was about the display and interpretation of a certain art work, the major anger reactions came from dominant culture representatives, who saw the Museum's decision to change a painting as a threat to fundamental rights. The Museum of World Culture listened to and prioritized – or one could say *handed over power to* - new stakeholders; a minority community of Muslims, who in the post 9/11 environment are looked upon with

increased suspicion and fear. This was obviously seen as a challenge to the position of Swedish national institutions as places where freedom of expression will never be compromised, and possibly to majority society itself.

Although both of these cases were challenging, time-consuming and stressful for the Museum of World Culture, they have indeed been important learning experiences and in a way evidence that the Museum has managed to blur some important boundaries concerning the division of power and ownership. When constructing a new national museum or redeveloping an old one, museum professionals have a responsibility to create a place where all members of the community can engage. To accomplish this we must *avoid* constructing institutions that defend our own power at all costs and thereby fail to fulfil the new mission: that of handling the complexities embedded in a society built on diversity and pluralism. I have tried to emphasize, in each case, how controversy can be used in a positive way. Some might argue that the cases provide lessons in the need to avoid controversy. My argument is quite different. It is that controversy is an opportunity; it is a medium through which museums may be helped to become more inclusive.

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Notes

- 1 The theories on 'collective memory' were first introduced by Maurice Halbwachs in the 1950s (Halbwachs 1992) and have been developed by many scholars since then. I limit the discussion here to problems with the descriptive term and its relation to museums and communities.
- 2 The *National Museums of World Culture* are made up of the Ethnographical Museum, the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, the Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities, all situated in Stockholm, and the new Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg. The museums share appropriation directions from the Ministry of Education and Culture which includes a mission to reach new and diverse audiences through innovative forms of communication.
- 3 When the new museum authority was given its name in English the term 'World Culture' was chosen. There have been major internal debates regarding the appropriateness of the translation in relation to the new museum's mission to include diversity, pluralism and a multitude of voices and perspectives. Thus, there was a proposal to change the translation into 'World Cultures', but the singular form was kept. Arguments against the term 'world cultures' in plural, were based on the criticism of the tradition of ethnographical museums to understand, study and display 'cultures' as separate units, while the arguments for the term 'world cultures' were based on another understanding of the plural form; the idea of pluralism, changeability and hybridity in and between individuals, communities, nations and continents. This is not as problematic in the Swedish name, since it is based on a newly established word in the Swedish language: 'Världskultur' which opens up for many interpretations and the possibility to fill the word with meaning based on the museum's activities.

- ⁴ The EQUAL-programme of the European Social Fund runs between 2002-2007. The programme mainly supports projects that try out new methods to reduce inequality in the labour market. The partners in *Advantage Göteborg: World Cultures in Focus* were the Diversity Unit of the City Council of Göteborg; the Integration and Gender Equality Section of the Regional Administration; the Trade and Industry Group of Göteborg & Co – an association of the largest companies in the region; the Swedish Association of Ethnic Entrepreneurs; The Public Employment Service in Göteborg; and the Swedish Integration Board. All national partners had their specific role in *Advantage Göteborg* but the article focuses on the role and the work of the museum.
- ⁵ E-mail correspondence to the Museum of World Culture, January-March 2005, Archives of the National Museums of World Culture. The e-mails were mostly in Swedish. A few were in other Scandinavian languages or in English. I have translated all quotations into English.

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