

CAMOC Istanbul Sept 2009

Talk y Laure C. Colliex, Lordculture, Associate Director

Subject: How to make intangible Heritage tangible to your visitors?

Thank you for welcoming me in Istanbul and for giving me the opportunity to talk. I was very impressed to see that CAMOC organizers picked up The Greater Paris project to raise issues of this conference. However, I would like to go with you in another French Department, in the Ocean Indian, the Reunion Island.

Today, I would like to share with you our experience for the Civilization and Reunion unity Museum – Musées de Civilisations et de l'unité réunionnaise, so called MCUR. Why would I? Why is it relevant to City Museums panelists?

It is a unique experience of a museum without objects, without collections, only based on intangible Heritage but still dealing with the history of an island, the Reunion, which can easily be compared to a city. Almost 1 million inhabitants, living close one to another, with incredible diverse background. They come from Africa, China, India, America... Island Reunion is a kind of microcosm with an outstanding mixed population, history and civilization but mainly oral and intangible given its colonial and slavery past. Françoise Vergès, scientific Director, defined this museum as a museum for present time, opened to vibrant daily life of the island and its communities. MCUR is to be a lively place, a social space where debates and dialog would be raised.

How can you imagine this theoretical concept into physical equipment without reproducing a classic "Westernized" type of museum? We had to deepen our thought and approach to voices, body languages, oral aspects in order to define an appropriate project.

I think this is a good answer to City museum issues, or at least what will become key City museums issues in the coming years: how to create links with your communities? How presenting, reporting urban and social interactions?

Everything that is quite innovative in this project makes a real added value to 21st. C city museums.

Contemporary artists are usually great in anticipating challenges and issues and ahead of time.

I would like to use two examples to point this out.

1. Artist, **JR**. He questions the way of addressing art to everybody and not only in a museum. He also addresses questions about community and how you know about it, live with it and know who is living so close to you.
He worked in India, Brazil, Spain, Israel, France and many other places. Is two most famous projects are Women and Face 2 face.
All his works take place in public space, in the city itself. He takes pictures of people in their own neighborhoods. He makes big portraits and sticks them in the city itself, in their neighbourhood. His work of art is both his collaboration with the people and the presentation of their portraits on walls, stairs. He does this without official authorization.

Important enough to mention this project as next week in Paris, right in the bank of the river Seine and people using their own cell phone will be able to have access to the voices of those who gave their faces to this experience. People living in the same neighborhood will share some feelings and open dialog.

2. I wanted to present you the work of **Shaina Anand**, Indian artist working on cities. China and India being the two most populated countries face tremendously issues and challenges regarding urbanization, living in a city and city development. That's why Indian and Chinese artists do work a lot on those issues.
Shaina Anand developed a project to examine the city's surveillance society and so ways of living together in a "regarding" city. She wanted to work on the "invisible eye" concept. In a recent work, *Khirkee Yaan*, Shaina Anand, is looking to recreate a link, open a dialog among people living in the same street. She worked with them, interviewed them, filmed them and had them participate in common events. She uses voices and body language in situ and creates the proper system to develop and present it in a museum. *Khirkee Yaan* is an exploration of an open-circuit tv system as a local area network communication, micro-media generation and feedback device.

Both artists raise the issues that City museums of the 21th. C. will have to face:

- How to stay in touch with your community?
- How to keep up with a vivid and dynamic evolutive city and its issues ? How to be relevant to a moving city for the future?

Those two examples will question the ability of a museum to maintain a link with its own community and its own subject in a way.

Both artists use and develop proper tools and system to keep up with it.

MCUR has similar issues for its past as well as for its present time and for its future.

Still mainly unknown, MCUR is to open in 2 years in the Reunion Island, French Region in the Ocean Indian. Heritage from colonial history of France.

We had to imagine innovative solutions because history of this city/ island museum has to deal with testimonies, body languages, and voices, mostly intangible heritage. People come from India, Africa, America, Europe... how can you bring all those different ethnic groups and communities together.

Our challenge was to invent ways of presenting, staging, engaging the visitors using mainly voices and body language, using life intervention, discourse or recorded. So we have a number of rather new solutions for this we now have to implement is the museum to be built soon.

You see a video of the architecture of the 9 000m² space, the exhibition space, courtyards, restaurants, cinema, auditorium, shops and its environment. Architect is X-tu a very talented and young architecture agency which also worked on a prehistory museum in Jeongok, Korea.

You understand that MCUR will deal with slavery and colonial past of the Island. You understand that most of it is non written and without collection/ any object.

When we started working on the project we really had in mind that oral aspects were key to make the museum different and adapted to its subject, territory and civilization. It is intangible culture saying that it is not material.

Let's go back to basics. UNESCO gives us a definition of this kind of practices and recognizes it as an intangible heritage.

Definition: everything that you can communicate through language, voice, everything that is not written. UNESCO does recognize it as intangible heritage.

We first had to make a clear distinction between what you be "content" from what would be "mediation". The issue here was: how is it possible to work on both in a coherent way?

For content: we define different expression modes:

- **Discursive:** body expression, dialog and exchange – oral memory (testimonies, linguistic)
- **Narrative:** myths, legends, fictions...
- **Performative:** non written theatre, know-how, beliefs, customs, songs, maloya, slam, traditional dances,

For mediation: we distinguish

- **planned mediation** – those are recorded sounds or live performances scheduled at a certain time in the permanent exhibition,
- and **spontaneous mediation** – visitors are invited to spontaneously express themselves in the exhibition space, start dialog and exchanges with lecturers, other visitors and mediators. There was a strong will at MCUR to let people express themselves in the exhibition space.

It was particularly important in this case as illiteracy is very high and people do not necessarily speak the same language (Creole, French and many others). It is also particularly important to work this out when inhabitants are used to act and be outspoken. Their traditions are full of music, dance, oral transmission and heritage and they know how to keep it alive!

Most of the population comes from immigration and diaspora. Therefore, they do still communicate orally with their family everywhere in the world. Through skype, phones and so on. Hear the voice.

There were three targets for MCUR and its team:

- better understand the current society and so better addressed its issues and future challenges,
- have visitors to become actors and
- share different viewpoints, created debates and dialog.

Some direct implications in the planning process itself were relevant and addressed this component directly. Let's name the creation of the "Theater de l'oralité » within the permanent collection, where people can open debates spontaneously or interact with mediators/ dancers/ actors. Fahafana installation is also very relevant to this. It is a big installation with sort of tongs of sounds pending from the roof. Each "tong" speaks a different language that is spoken in the Reunion island. MCUR will have an extensive use of testimonials as a material they collect but they also will collect testimonials onsite. They will develop visitors interactions and make them spontaneous. They will house a space dedicated to religious presents where people can come, pray and give presents to their gods. A dedicated radio will come to birth soon so the museum will also be in the air!

However, so many use of intangible heritage, voices, body languages, performances do have obvious technical constraints you have to keep in mind in order to have the museum work properly and reach its goals.

We identified such technical implications as sound control and expertise, avoiding sound interfaces and reverberations, monitoring noise and heat, ensuring phonic isolation, length of audio record. Accessibility to this content and mediation is also an issue as you need translations most of the time. There are constraints on the content itself: where do we need objects and where will it be only sound? What is the status of the material? How do we use it? Signage and text are also to be carefully adapted. Finally architectural constraints (surface, lighting, and flooring) are at stake.

MCUR is still in the planning process, architects are working on the schematic design but solutions have not yet been implemented. It is a real demanding phase to keep the right direction.

Many other examples can be mentioned as well from the Quai Branly museum, the Music Cité, both in Paris or the Mac/ Val in the suburb of Paris. Mac/ Val develops specific body language visits like "battle visits" or "T-shirt visits".

They all addressed the wish to bring interactions that take place in the city to the museum to make visitor wonder about it.

I hope you will find this analysis inspiring for your work at your city museum and I hope that the museum or institution that will report on the development of the Greater Paris will be able to tackle those issues as well.

Thank you!