

## Real Life Stories in Everyday Objects

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This paper will explore the role of the museum and gallery, in collecting and re presenting life stories of immigrants to Ireland. It will show the potential capacity of a museum or gallery to be a space which can link to those who have made Europe their home over the last 30 years. A case study will be presented - an exhibition called Destination Donegal. Ten people’s real life stories are displayed through personal clothing, objects from mantle pieces, filmed interviews and new portrait photographs, in an innovative art and social history exhibition. A discussion of the approach and results will allow a reflection on museum theory and practice in terms of the use of objects as holding narrative, objects as agency within the “everyday”, and the value of present day material culture in relation to a multicultural society.

## SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS:

- Discusses an exhibition about cultural diversity curated by the author in Ireland, called 'Destination Donegal – 10 real life stories of immigration'
- Museums and galleries may consider the personal and emotional aspects of immigration through real life stories, rather than academic approaches;
- Museums can make cultural diversity visible in a tangible way, in 3D form in a museum or gallery, not simply in written or spoken words alone but through material things and the physical reality of an exhibition;
- The museum/ gallery space can be seen as a cultural hub - as being the actual 'global village', where many cultures are presented together in a public space to form a 'cultural bricolage';
- Museums can collect and display personal material culture which can link people and their autobiography in a unique way. Objects are not seen as having 'object biographies' but 'people biographies in objects'. Real life stories of immigrants can be told with and through everyday things in particular:
  - Clothes, both everyday and traditional
  - Personal possessions brought from home countries
  - Family photographs from the living room mantle pieces

When you start to think about migration and Ireland, you may begin with thoughts about Irish immigrants to America, and recently at the end of May we saw Barack Obama come home to visit the village of his great, great, great grandfather in Moneygall, Ireland (Rte 2011). This paper focuses on migrants coming to Ireland to live, creating a culturally diverse population. Barack Obama's personal cultural identity and his claim for Irish roots, obviously impinges on a public and political arena as he is President of the United States. It actually introduces this paper rather well, as it highlights both the complex cultural heritages we may all have within our blood, and how the personal and public aspects of cultural identity are constantly intertwined - people are seen at once as individuals and as someone connected to a particular culture or country. In this way the micro level - personal cultural identity and how it connects to 'macro' aspects of discussions about cultural diversity - may be seen as a useful starting point. One key idea I want to address is that the personal and emotional parts of contemporary cultural identity can be the focus when exploring cultural diversity in the museum and gallery context. This may be done effectively through presenting real life stories of immigration through people's own words, and by displaying personal possessions. One key museum role in relation to migration and society is in creating and making this very personal, cultural identity visible, and I want to explore this by looking at an exhibition about 10 immigrants to the North West of Ireland I curated this year, called 'Destination Donegal'.

I shall begin with an outline description of the exhibition entitled 'Destination Donegal', shown at the Regional Cultural Centre, Co. Donegal, Ireland in 2011 (See Footnote 1). I shall then draw out the following issues for discussion in relation to the role of museums and galleries in displaying the subject of migration. Firstly, museums and galleries may consider the personal and emotional aspects of cultural diversity through present day real life stories, rather than academic approaches focused on past heritage. Secondly, museums can make cultural diversity visible in a tangible way, in 3D form in a museum or gallery, not simply in written or spoken words alone but through material things and the physical reality of an

exhibition. Thirdly, I consider museums as institutions concerned with objects, and discuss the museum as potentially a collector and exhibitor of personal material culture which can link people and their autobiography in a unique way. Finally, may the museum/ gallery space be seen as a cultural hub - as being the actual global village - where many cultures are presented together in a public space to form a cultural bricolage? My insights will include quotations from participants and visitors to the exhibition.

In March 2011, I was commissioned to curate an art and social history exhibition about cultural diversity in a gallery space in the Regional Cultural Centre, Co. Donegal, Ireland. As a social history curator and PhD candidate interested in contemporary everyday life and material culture, the exhibition proposed simply to focus on 10 individuals from a variety of countries of different ages and genders. We began by interviewing 10 people about their real life stories of living in Donegal today, asking for a set of everyday clothes, asking people to choose some special objects which related to their home, their journey and their lives today; and borrowing family photographs from their mantle pieces at home. Each person had a full length photographic portrait taken. The finished exhibition was constructed in a 'white cube' art gallery. Each person had an area which consisted of: a life size floor to ceiling photographic portrait; an exhibition board with written quotes, scans of family photographs and a map of their home place (each of these exhibition panels were 2.5 metres tall); everyday clothes hanging at a height beside these boards; a pair of shoes, and bags brought with them; some traditional clothes on mannequins, personal possessions; filmed interviews on TV screens with headphones, and a large projection screen of all 10 films. There was also a hands-on area where visitors could make a Lego flag, colour in a map of the world, tell their own stories in a video booth, and write and stick up a yellow post-it note answering the question, 'You are emigrating - what will you take?'



The exhibition will now be discussed with the objective of giving insights into the role of museums in relation to migration, and within a culturally diversity society. The discussion will make reference to literature from the fields of everyday life studies within the field of cultural studies, material culture studies, art practice and museums studies in order to engage with discussions concerning the meaning of contemporary material culture as it may relate to

the expression of autobiographical cultural identity in museums and galleries. A discussion of the exhibition approach and results will allow a reflection on museum theory and practice in terms of the use of objects as holding narrative, objects as agency within the “everyday”, and the value of present day material culture in relation to a multicultural society.

My first point is that, museums and galleries may consider the personal and emotional aspects of cultural diversity through present day real life stories, rather than academic approaches focused on past heritage, because by doing so, the everyday lives of people are the subject of the display rather than themes, or old objects. By seeing cultural diversity within the present day daily doings, it is defined in the same sense that culture is defined within cultural studies – as part of everyday life - as David Inglis has summarized, ‘...a shorthand characterization of ‘culture’ would see as it involving what different groups of people believe, think and feel.’ (Inglis 2005: 11). Further, Urry (2000), argues that everyday life is influenced by ‘global networks and flows’. Cultural globalization then, is very much within everyday lives and people. So, if we view people’s lives as part of the everyday life about us all rather than something else, then culture and cultural diversity are within our day to day existence, rather than a culture outside it, or ‘other’ than our daily life. Everyday people are the focus of the exhibition, talking about themselves, their families, the countries they have left and their lives today. The content of the exhibition was personal, drawing exclusively on people’s words, pictures, clothes and personal possessions. As one participant said, ‘So people get interested in your story, and they want to know you more, they want to get closer to you.’ Some visitor responses were emotional, ‘I felt as if I was having a personal connection with each person’; and ‘fascinating insights presented in a warm and accessible way.’ (See Footnote 2)

My second point is that museums are special because they can make cultural diversity visible in a tangible way, in 3D form, not simply through words alone but through material things and the physical reality of an exhibition. This may sound obvious, but some museum exhibitions are still primarily ‘books on walls’ with cased objects illustrating a point made by authoritative text written by a curator about a subject. Also, in discussions of contemporary collecting some see people’s intangible heritage, as living outside the museum with little emphasis on objects (Kurin 2004). So the point is worth making.

Inspiration for the layout of the exhibition came from 3D artworks which use everyday objects. For example, inspired by the work ‘Felt Suit’ by the artist Joseph Beuys, people’s clothes were hung as an autobiographic self portrait. The clothes may be seen as communicating a snap shot of everyday life, as art works such as Tracey Emin’s ‘Bed’, encapsulate a moment in time and express her sense of self, through physical everyday things - in this case a messy bed. As Helen Pheby has argued, ‘....artists appear to be trying to communicate a pause in the everyday that reveals the profound in order to render and make more conscious the human experience...’ (Pheby 2010:84). The initial work involved in the exhibition gathered recorded video interviews of people talking about their journeys and lives. But this was transformed and materialized in exhibition form, presented and given a physical presence by the large life sized portrait photographs, the clothing from each person and the stories told in video clips on TVs. Now I will build on these thoughts in my third point.

Thirdly then, I consider museums as institutions concerned with objects, and discuss the museum as potentially a collector and exhibitor of personal material culture which can link people and their autobiography in a unique way. In contributing to what may be called a ‘material turn’ in museum and gallery theory and practice, I argue that objects are very much knitted into life, and in particular the narratives of autobiography.

As recent material culture scholars have discussed objects and humans interact and give meaning to each other (Gell 1998, Tilley 2006). Dudley has discussed this recently in the museum and gallery context, ‘To see objects not as background scenery to the drama of

human life but as actors within it, bridging the realms of the physical, the social and the mental, has been an important part of the recent turn towards the material. Can we reconsider those realms – even if only for heuristic purposes – as not being separate at all, or argue that the engagements which matter happen not in objects, nor in minds nor social relationships but, physically as well as emotionally and cognitively, in the spaces in between all three?’ (Dudley 2010:13). In addition, some see objects as having their own ‘object biographies’ and social life (Appadurai 1986, Hoskins 1998), and this has been applied in museums (see for example Wehner and Sear 2010).

However, ‘object biographies’ for me, put too much emphasis on the object as being at the centre, rather than people. By drawing on recent fieldwork from sociology and social anthropology by Hurdley (2006) and also Miller (2008) (See footnote 3), objects in the exhibition are considered as players in a life story, that enable linkages to under the surface identities and to worlds in past times and in other countries. Further within the exhibition display itself, the objects are ‘social objects’ acting as ‘engines’ for conversation and engagement (Simon 2010), as well as being affective and having agency in putting across an essence of the individuals. In the exhibition, objects are connected to people in different ways. In particular, personal possessions brought by migrants from their home countries as holding memories of another time and culture – for example a Bible in someone’s first language; clothes worn everyday as a personal statement of identity – for example cowboy boots and jeans; things kept at home as a link to the past - a letter from a father who has died. As Nolunga from South Africa says, ‘And the bright colours (Orange circumcision clothing), they represent my roots, you know, where I come from...And at least with the green jacket (Springboks rugby jacket) that represents my country you know.’ And Gary from America, ‘I like my cowboy boots, I feel comfortable in them, I always wear them, and otherwise I keep telling people I’m a blue jean kinda guy.’

Finally, the exhibition created in the gallery space an actual global village’, where many cultures were presented together in a public space. Can the museum or gallery actually be a hub or place which makes a contribution to the wider society by expressing a culturally diverse society within its walls? Can it actually contribute to social inclusion? Perhaps it is possible that a museum or gallery can create through creative displays, a cultural ‘bricolage’ (Hebdige 1998, Levi Strauss 1964) – a do-it-yourself expression of the mix of people from different cultures. As Nolunga says, ‘I never thought that in reality, that I would live in a foreign land, and I would be appreciated, the main thing was to be appreciated as a foreign national... I believe, your organisation, I believe this is the first of its kind, you know the event that you did, it was just beautiful, I am very proud of you guys.’

#### Footnotes

1. Destination Donegal, curated by Harriet Purkis at the Regional Cultural Centre, Letterkenny, Co. Donegal, Ireland from 25 March 2011-7 May 2011.
2. The quotations from the participants in the exhibition come from recorded evaluation interviews carried out by the author in May 2011. The quotations from visitors come from the ‘Destination Donegal’ visitor comments book.
3. Rachel Hurdley’s ‘Dismantling Mantelpieces: Narrating Identities and Materializing Culture in the Home’ 2006, interviewed people at home about the display of objects on mantelpieces in Cardiff. For one interviewee according to Hurdley, ‘Objects were not only props to life histories but essential players...She could show, by means of the narrative, that she had other identities, societies and values.’ (Hurdley 2006:721). Daniel Miller in his ‘Comfort of Things’ 2008 led an anthropological study of thirty people from one street in South London. The study claimed to be, ‘an experiment in learning how to read people through their possessions, and to help us appreciate the diversity and creativity of contemporary Londoners’ (Miller 2008:7).

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