Fashioning Futures: Digitality and the Museum of World Cultures

Paper by Wayne Modest, Head of the Research Center for Material Culture

This paper is presented by Ninja Rijnks-Kleikamp, Coordinator of the Research Center for
Material Culture at "The Context of Change and the Move from Analogue to Digital"
workshop in Ankara on 13 May 2015.

Introduction

Digital technology is not new to ethnographic and world cultures museums. Indeed, one
could say that museums, though not always at the cutting edge, have stayed up-to-date with
the changes in digital technology, using it in both research and exhibitions as well as to
engage with a broader public. I was only recently at a Museum Ethnographers Group
meeting in the UK where a PhD student presented his work showing the ways in which
museums adopted digital technology as soon as they came out. Much of this work has been
in the area of collections digitization, where digital documentation has become essential,
almost a mundane part of ongoing museums work. For us at the National Museum of World
Cultures, this has had important consequences, where significant parts of our collections
have been digitized. Up until 2013, for example, a loose count of the digitized records of
collections of the Tropenmuseum, numbered in the region of 360,000. This included both
objects and photographs. By loose estimation, this was in the region of 65% of our
collections. The National museum of World Cultures remains a forerunner in this area of
digitized collections.

The push for digitization was however more than about documentation; it has also had
significant impact on museums attempts to reach different publics. Today, while the level of
documentation of our collections lags behind where we would like it to be, the museum
provides digital access to large parts of its collections online – of course with some areas
better documented than others. A similar analysis of the Tropenmuseum up till 2013 will
show that visitors to our website could access approximately 200,000 objects from our
collections online. This included both discreet objects as well as our photo collections. There
were also almost 50,000 objects on Wikimedia. There is also an important point to be made
here. At that time in 2012, there were over 2013 the museum logged approximately 4

million Wikimedia hits per month that included objects from our collections. A significant amount of these hits were registered from Indonesia. Since then, this number has grown to nearly 12 million hits and has now dipped to approximate 6 million hits per month – still quite a lot.

One of the most interesting example of a museum in the Netherlands recently that have allowed digital access to their collections has been the Rijksmuseum where, they provide, through their Rijksstudio access to large parts of their collections digitally, with high quality images.

I should mention here as well that we have been using apps, audio tours, touch screens, etc. in our museums for decades, again as tools.

But are ideas about the digital only about access to our collections? Can we imagine the move from analogue to digital as presenting different challenges to the museum? In this paper I want to propose a future interest in addressing the digital, not just as a tool for documentation of and access to cultural heritage, but as an important part of fashioning subjectivities – fashioning heritage. As a museum interested in the material evidences of the lifeworlds of people globally, I want to ask: how is the digital affecting how people fashion and experience their lives as cultural subjects, and what does this mean for the museum? This presentation is only preliminary in its exploration. I want to present a few themes that I think worthy of exploration future exploration. At the end I will introduce a conference that we are planning which will go further into these themes.

Digital Born Objects and the Ethnographic Museum – the case of Games

To explore briefly the digitally born objects and the ethnographic museum I want to focus briefly on play/games as an important aspect of social relation. I am interested here to the museums relationship with the study of play. Ask any ethnographic museum about the concept of play within their collections and they will tell you that they have significant holdings of games from across the world, from the Mayan ballgame to games from different parts of Africa, as well as Asia and the Pacific. Ask any of these museums how video (digital games) they have in their collections and many of them would say none. It is interesting, that since gaming has become digitial, the idea of games as a focus of study for museums have diminished. Video games, it would seem do not provide sufficient interest for ethnographic study, or at least ethnographic collections, although their analogue

counterparts populate many museums. Could be that gaming as a way of studying the social has now more purchase for our type of museums? Or is it so the digital games are best placed within science and technology museum. I would say no. Indeed, there has been much study in the field of anthropology on, for example, second life. And the study of gaming has seen significant rise in interest in many academic disciplines. What I want to suggest is that museums find it difficult to deal with the digital. How might we preserve them? What happens when the technology is outdated? Perhaps also there is for our kind of museum the difficulty that the mass produce nature of the digital presents a distinctive challenge for a museum that is interested in uniqueness. I will mention later how this is changing – because even as I present this, a few museums have been collecting apps. This however has not really extended to ethnographic museums. Only recently there was a proposal for an exhibition that would explore serious games, but this was not approved.

Sharing authority and the digital

The promise of the digital turn for museums like ours was that they would help us improve the ways in which we share authority over our collections, as well as how we document our collections. Digital access would help us create digital networks – digital contact zones – that would revolutionise how we improve the documentation of the collections. This emerged at the same time as the rise in the museums as source community narrative, which posited collaborative practices with different stakeholders, which would rethink the ways that museums would work with their collections. While we could critique the source community practices, and this has been done by several scholars, it is unquestionable that ethnographic museum practices have changed over time, where museums have been able to share interpretive authority with different stakeholders. What we feel as a museum however, is that the digital turn has not really resulted in the groundswell of documentary possibilities that we had hoped. The crowd sourcing of information about collections – increasing the interpretation from outside the museum- has not happened in the way that we had hoped. This has happened for several reasons:

1. How do museums incorporate the information that they receive through digital networks
2. How might we establish and maintain digital networks – digital contact zones – that truly work?

This is not to say that such practices are not possible. I am sure that some museums have

established these possibilities. If memory severs me correctly, the Pitt Rivers have done amazing work to be able to incorporate the knowledge generated digitally into their collections. With the NMVW, we have done several projects where we attempted to do such practices. This included projects tied to exhibitions where we developed blogs that could invite comments on the collections which we could incorporate into the interpretive strand of the exhibitions. This was not successful. There was also the project *Foto Zoekt Familie*, where we tried to find the families associated with a large collections of historical photographs from the museum, through the web. These photographs were albums people left behind in the internment camps in Indonesia during the second world war. The collections was given to the museum after the war. Through the project we were able to find narratives and the owners of the collection. These were people searching for their histories. The information we generated was important for the further documentation of the collections.

But perhaps we have been doing this incorrectly. One of the ideas that we now have, which in part emerged from the RICHES project, is that instead of trying to have people come to our museum whether in person or on the website to find information or to help us interpret the collections, what would happen if we were to place our collections within the non-authorised heritage spaces – within established digital communities that are not managed by the museum? What if we were to place our collections from Suriname, for example, within the loop of the website of Suriname.nl, what would emerge from this?

This is a project that we propose in the future entitled connecting diaspora digitally – where we try to connect people diaspora with object diaspora in the digital realm, to see what could be result from such contact zones.

Diaspora Subjectivities and Digitality

My last point is about diasporic subjectivities and the digital, which I will only briefly touch on. Recently, I was at a presentation on African fashion. During the presentation a Dutch designer of Surinames background was explaining her process as fashion designer. She spoke about her market, and how she came to her designs. While she designed African Styled fashion, her market was largely white Dutch. She expressed some surprise about this fact. What struck me, however was the fact that her process of fashion designer, was also part of her practice of diaspora. She was busy trying to find and express what she believed to be a black self, and African self through her designs. But to be able to construct this self

what she did was thrall through the internet. She found African patterns on internet sites – sites of museums, where she could chose designs from Ghana, or Nigeria, or Sierra Leone. In some instances she named a pattern from Ghana but it was from Sierra Leone. She narrated this within a larger story of a fashioning of herself as Afro-Dutch. Alienated from her African heritage through the colonial past the internet had become the place where she was reconstructing the Black identity – and importantly for us, through the use of museums websites and collections. Similarly a South African designer spoke about his first designs emerging from the collections of museums. He made an initiation costume based on the collections of the museum. This started me thinking about the idea of Diasporic subjectivities, Digitality and the museum. For in this case it was through the internet that this designers was constructing a notion of herself, using the collections of the museum. How might a museum like ours address such identity formation? What is the internet doing to refigure how she understood herself – and what role we play.

In her recent book *Nation as Network: Diaspora, Cyberspace, And Citizenship,* Victoria Bernal introduces the idea Network Citizenship, looking at the "ways in which media and mobility are transforming ideas sovereignty and citizenship". Focusing on the practices of diaspora in cyberspace she is interested in understanding the ways in which ideas of sovereignty and citizenship and thereby ideas of subjects are being refigured through new media technology. Victoria Bernal explores the ways in which Eritreans living in the US – where large parts of the Eritreans community live and has lived for decades – construct their identities, participate in structuring the notion of Eritreanness as well as contribute the political process within Eritrea from abroad. Yet the Eritrean community is not singular in this. Large scale migration as well as forced displacement of many peoples from across the world has been significant in reshaping how social scientist have come to think about identity, culture and their relationship to space or locality. Indeed this has led to significant work in exploring diasporic forms of belonging. For my purpose here, I am especially interested in diaspora as emotional citizenship, and how people feel a sense of belonging as part of diasporic imaginations. Moreover, the ways in which this impact the shifting ways in which people understand themselves as subject, here the who I am question becomes much more complicated when one accounts for different notions of the family of community of social stratification if we see the internet as expanding the field of how these very central notion to social theory are being lived in our everyday lives?

What I have presented here are only questions. Of course there are many answers out there

within social science research where there are very exciting projects going on. But for us at the museum we lag behind a little – we will catch up. As part of our research center for material culture, which we have just established, we have set out a research agenda that looks at Digitality and its impact on the museum. Only recently we have been invited to two important projects in this regard: the first will explore the ways in which ageing studies can be furthered at the intersection of digitial technology and museums collections. The second will explore the ways in which digital media can bring people into close proximity with our collections through embodied practices.

But to answer some of these questions, we will also have a workshop later this year entitled: *Digital Heritage in Museums of Anthropology* where these themes will be discussed. The aims of the conference are:

- Discuss ideas for collecting, presenting and preserving digital heritage by analyzing best practices
- Explore how ethnographic museums can reflect on the impact of digital technologies on identity, culture and society
- Define what ethnographic museums can bring to the study of the digital
- Examine how born digital objects are challenging what we understand (ethnographic) museum objects to be

Hopefully some of you will attend. For more information see our website materialculture.nl. Finally I will say that the story is not a hopeless one. Museums like ours are busy with hiring curators for the digital. So change is coming.