Museums as changing organizations and exponents of the museum institution

Hanneleena Hieta: *Mukautuva museo. Kolmen eurooppalaisen kansanelämän museon muutostarina 1970-luvulta 2000-luvun alkuun*. Diss. with a summary in English (*The Adaptable Museum – Stories of Change from Three European Folk-Life Museums 1970-2000*). School of History, Culture and Art Studies, University of Turku 2010. Online.¹

The museum institution is international and polymorphous with blurry boundaries. However, the institution defines itself and its members quite rigorously. Hieta discusses the museum institution as “an institution which is basically bound on the commitment, how the past is dealt with in the society. The institution is quite binding.” (Translation SP) However, the societal changes and economic exigencies have over and over again tested and changed the understanding of the foci of museums’ tasks, destroyed the basis of the activities of the museums, and created them new duties and potentials.

Hieta studies three exemplars of museums as a part of the international museum institution and national museum organization, and how participating key persons model the development or the change of the museum. The Greek case is the museum of the Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation of Nafplion, basing on private property and focusing on the research and representation of folk costumes. The Hungarian case is the Open-air Ethnographic Collection of the Ópusztaszer Historical-Memorial Park in south eastern Hungary.

And finally, the Finnish case is Kuralan Kylämäki Village of Living History in Turku, a part of the Turku Museum Centre, the former Provincial Museum of Turku, representing life in a peasant village near the town in the 1950’s, and experimental archaeology.

These museums have been strongly affected by economic trends and the political, changing *Zeitgeist*, which binds members of a prominent fraction of a generation to each other with a common “key experience” forming common ideologies and goals. The activities of an individual museum can be restricted to the traditional paths because the actors feel it right or tolerable, or the museum can be opened to something new to be experimented with. Hieta discusses the relationship of economy, *Zeitgeist*, and actions and choices of individuals. How is it possible for individuals to actively change an organization representing an institution, and when does a change actualize? The political activity and the universalist welfare ideology of the 1970’s are quite far away from the dominating ideology of competition and economic growth in the 1990’s. Both of these gained ground only in a part of the museum field but changed our view of the museum as an institution. Hieta is especially interested in how museums emerged in the mental and ideological environment of the 1970’s have managed in the 1990’s.

The ideas of the *ecomuseum* and the *community museum* from the 1970’s and 1980’s are paralleled to the rising interest in museum history. All share the central question how museums exist and operate in their societies. The whole *New Museology*, which has an important role in two of the museums studied by Hieta, is based on the same question. The New Museology started to produce critical in-

stitution history like Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (1992) and Tony Bennett's *The Birth of the Museum* (1995). They looked for wide-ranging trajectories. The concrete everyday life and its variation in museums were not brought into the focus for a start. More deep going studies into the history and practices of many individual museum cases had to be done first. According to Hieta: "When we familiarize ourselves better with their [the museums' of the world] backgrounds and histories everyone is unique." (Translation SP)

Hieta's study takes the history of the museum institution to tracks, where she discusses the impact of centres on peripheries and the special character of individual museums and their leaders and workers in the intersection of museums and folk life studies. She is interested in the relationship between the centres of the museum institution and museums in the semi-periphery of the global institution. She situates the centre of the institution geographically in the big museum countries in Western Europe and North America: France, Great Britain, Germany, Canada and the USA. The museum critics of the New Museology was directed especially to problems peculiar to the centre, and the shaping of the history of the museum institution has also started concerning these centres. The countries studied, Greece, Hungary and Finland can be counted as semi-periphery of the institution, and the museums studied lie peripherally viewed from the capital cities, as well.

Hieta wants to study how the asymmetry between the centre and the semi-periphery comes up: which ideas percolate from the first ones down to the latter ones and how they change, then. How do museum people in the semi-peripheries listen to the centres, when

bases are different? Greece, Hungary, and Finland have all shaped their national identities between the east and the west, and as small language areas.

Alone the language reasons have required a remarkable contribution of Hieta to unfold the folk life research and more general museum history in these countries. The publications are mostly in local languages, and in addition to that, the interviews and discussions went on in several languages. This makes the thesis a quite original and interesting survey in a less known realm. It is a pity that it has been published in Finnish, one of these small languages.

The *area* of the study is the geographical periphery of the museum institution. To get a background, the ethnography and the museum institution of each country is presented. The process of democratization of museums is discussed as well as the connectedness of the ethnography and the museum as institutions. That connection has fractured and broken. Institution and expertise are studied as phenomena linked together. The linkage of museums to public economy and the economic thinking of their time are turned over.

Time emerges as the most important theoretical variable in the study. Hieta highlights the concepts of *kairos* and *kronos* in the way they have been applied in the organization theory of management research. The concepts reflect how the coming events can be foreseen and managed in organizations, and they can be successfully used in studies of different phases of museums' existence, as Hieta proves. As an institution, the museum has sought permanence and foreseeability more than any commercial actor is supposed to do. The idea of the longstanding commitment is related especially to the collections of museums. The

museum institution looks for the *kronos* of a gradual foreseeable and manageable change both for itself and for the cultural heritage. The *kairos* is a disturbance in this perspective. In the phase of *kairos*, the possibility to make changes increases or one is forced to them. The *kairos* can change the organization or cultural heritage suddenly, even to an unforeseeable direction. Considered afterwards, *kairos* phases may enable crucial steps towards better answers to social needs and openings to new possibilities. A *kairos* phase can also destroy an organization or its leading idea, if the new requirements of the time are irreconcilable with what the organization, here the museum, can offer.

Another central concept of Hieta is the *key experience* that has an effect on the *Zeitgeist*. The key experience can interlink people that have lived in the same (socio-political) phase, forming a social generation, to fractions. Especially important are the active smaller fractions of the social generation that have a strong experience of togetherness, solidarity, and that are linked with political traditions. Such fractions enable also a shared understanding of what is good and desirable. These fractions can, according to Hieta, be useful when the societal institutions are analysed.

The stories told by Hanneleena Hieta are basically founded on what the museum personal and influential persons around the museums have told her in the interviews, and in their own publications. The stories start in the 1970's when the international museum discourse argued for civic activism, democracy, and environmental consciousness. These years and discourses and strong personalities are behind all of the three museum cases, but the political systems were quite different. The foundation of the Ópusztaszer Historical-Me-

morial Park followed domestic conventions of professional historical-ethnographical open air museums. The two other museums were very open to the current international discussions. Hieta underlines the goals, the expertises, the relationships, the values and the passions of the involved persons, and the *kairos*-moments for rapid decisions. Each museum examined faced in the 1990's tangibly the economic crisis and the new *Zeitgeist*

The number of museums increased greatly in the 1980's. In this abundance, the financing of a single museum and its right to exist were no longer self-evident. In the 1990's, the financiers as well in the public as the private sector, already waited museums to prove their necessity by their measurable activities and results. Their supply had to react with the demand and the language of marketing, and the new public management had to be learned in museums. The field of activity of the museums grew wider, and museum professionals adopted new roles. In this context the expertises diverged more and more from the roles of the curator/researcher/educator where they had stayed for a while.

Hieta discusses interestingly the changing museum expertise in her case museums. In the Greek case a non-professional museum grew to an innovative professional actor who, in spite of researching, safeguarding and representing folk life, was not bound to the Greek academic tradition of ethnography – *laografos*. The idea of the museum was inspired from abroad, especially the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires in Paris. In the Hungarian case, professionalism lost in the 1990's out to commerciality, the link with folk life research and its outcomes vanished, and the whole museum seemed to slide outside the museum institution. In the Finnish case the professio-

136 nal status of the museum unit did not change but the museum had to adopt the EU-project world, and its ecomuseum ideology suffered a blow when the museum was demanded to take entrance fee.

We live in a time of continual evaluation and counting of results even if good measures are often missing. Hieta suggests that the value of the museums could be a part of the transformation economy where the customer pays for a change taking place in him/herself. If a museum adopts this idea, it has to ally itself with other social actors. But then it is forced, more than maybe ever, to decide what kind of transformations the museum aims to support. The ecomuseum movement motivated citizens and societies to be active and produce awareness of their heritage by themselves and with aid of the experts, for today and for the future social welfare. The experience museum of today could have the goal of understanding aspirations of the customers and offer them resources to enable them to reach those aspirations.

Hanneleena Hietas doctoral thesis shows an interest in the futures research, which is shared by several ethnologists at the university of Turku. And the study of Hieta will stand up to the ravages of time, I presume.

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1. The study is available in www.doria.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/63201/Hieta13082010.pdf?...1