

When legitimate claims collide: communities, media and dialogue

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Abstract

This paper discusses the exhibition *Jerusalem* at the *Museum of World Culture* (MoWC) in Gothenburg, Sweden. The exhibition mixes photographs of LGBTQ (LesbianGayBiTransQueer) persons in Jerusalem, with quotes from the three Abrahamic Holy Scriptures condemning homosexual activities and behaviours. MoWC held dialogues with religious persons. Although no-one wanted to stop the exhibition, many were critical of the artist's mixing of Holiness and Nudity/Sexuality. The Museum was criticized for bending to fundamentalist pressure, assuming that it had plans to stop the exhibition, and a media debate on censorship and freedom of speech followed. This paper analyzes the situatedness of MoWC, and its discursive belonging. How can a state governed institution deal with legitimate and opposing claims, and counter both heteronormativity and islamophobia? What discourses is the Museum institution inscribed in? What power relations follow from that? Is it, due to historic, bureaucratic, and cultural legacies, tied to certain positions and affiliations in the public space?

Key words: communities, dialogue, islamophobia, media, queer theory

Introduction

This paper discusses the experiences around the exhibition *Jerusalem* at the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg, Sweden, shown in November 2010: a photo exhibition portraying LGBTQ (LesbianGayBiTransQueer)-persons from the Abrahamic faiths *in situ* in Jerusalem.¹ The photographs, some with nude depictions of male homosexual persons and activities, were accompanied by quotes from the three Abrahamic Holy Scriptures condemning LGBTQ behaviours.

The dialogical efforts of the Museum gave rise to a media debate interpreting the Museum's wish to include religious persons, and to give them a voice in the museum's presentation, as bending to fundamentalists and acting as censors, denying the freedom of the artist. When the exhibition was on display there was very little media interest. This debate took place before anyone had seen the exhibition. The article tries to understand how and why this happened, what it means and what we might learn from the process.²

The Museum

According to our mission statement the Museum of World Culture wants to be an arena for discussion and reflection where many and different voices will be heard, where controversial and conflict-filled topics can be addressed, as well as a place where people can feel at home across borders. The museum shows temporary exhibitions with a focus on global contemporary issues, using a multimodal form with photography, museum objects, contemporary visual art, music, label texts, poetry, voices of personal experience, et. al. Together the exhibitions shall mirror the world's diversity and dynamics (Lagerkvist, 2008).³

The Museum tries to promote what can be called an intersectional understanding of the world (I will say more about that later). At its launch the museum received a lot of positive

reviews and was described as 'a bold and radical experiment that works remarkably well' (Pes, 2005).

The Exhibition

The Jerusalem images

Each of the images in the Jerusalem exhibition is connected to a quotation from one of the Abrahamic Holy Scriptures. The models are LGBTQ-persons living in Israel/Palestine. The images adhere to the classical art tradition of using nudity as a symbol for sexuality; therefore a few of the images depict nude or semi nude men (but no women). All images stage a situation or practice that are condemned by the accompanying quote from either the Tannach (Old Testament), the New Testament or the Qur'an.⁴ The project was a cooperation between Ohlson Wallin and gay theologian Lars Gårdfeldt (2005).

The expressed aim of the exhibition was to discuss questions about faith, sexuality, heteronormativity and oppression. The exhibition was scheduled alongside programs giving room to different approaches to these themes. Outside the exhibition room we had a wall with presentations of the program themes and space for the audience to discuss and leave comments. The exhibition was also manned with educators engaging the audience in dialogue. Most visitors did not find the images provoking and there were only a few reviews in the press. The interest was thus much higher before there actually was an exhibition.

The process leading up to the exhibition

As an initial step after receiving the first rough drafts of the images the Museum initiated dialogues with religious persons of the three faiths concerned on the questions and images of this exhibition. The participants were not chosen to be representatives, or representative, of their religions. Some of them work as rabbis and pastors, but they did not represent anyone but themselves (Grinell, 2010a).

In these dialogues Gårdfeldt from the exhibition team took part, introducing the images and the themes they depict. No participant made any comments or efforts to censor or stop the exhibition. A few of the images were by many felt to be provoking, and questions were raised about the purpose of showing them. However, everyone made clear that they respected the museum's decision if it wanted to exhibit them, since the theme of LGBTQ rights was seen as important. Concerns that the images might lead to reactions giving rise to clashes and growing tensions, rather than enhanced understanding were voiced, and the effectiveness of provocation as a method was questioned.

Alternative interpretations of the quotes were discussed, and ways to be true to the Scriptures and at the same time tolerant and accepting towards homosexuality, were argued for. Those who had objections towards certain images were mainly critical of how the artist used holy spaces, and the way the images intertwine holiness and nudity/sexuality. It was not homosexuality that made them feel uneasy and disrespected, but the emphasis on sexuality in what they considered holy spaces and situations. We found the dialogues interesting and constructive and wanted to find means to include the arguments presented in the exhibition, in order to show that religion does not have to equal prejudice and discriminatory practice.

The populist party *Sverigedemokraterna* (Sweden democrats) started its election campaign in the autumn 2009 claiming that Islam was the greatest threat Sweden had faced since World War II. The party eventually entered the parliament for the first time in the September 2010 elections. A growing public islamophobia was thus one of the parameters in our analysis of the Jerusalem exhibition. According to the artist her aim was to counter islamophobia, as the exhibition show that the Qur'an is less condemning of homosexuality than the other two Abrahamic scriptures. Still we had fears that the exhibition should be drawn into the ongoing debates about the Danish Muhammad cartoons and the Swedish artist Lars Vilks' drawings of Muhammad portrayed as a dog. We wanted the exhibition to challenge and cause debate, but not to be seen as a similar provocation and caught up in the locked positions surrounding these examples.

Even if we wanted to include all the faiths in the dialogue, our analysis suggested that those having the hardest time coming forward in the public debate were the Swedish Muslims.

We did not want to further the opinion that Muslims, taken as a homogenous group, are a threat to Swedish or European values. We were cautious of the risk of showing LGBTQ-persons as a homogenous and transhistorical group as victims, and Islam and Muslims as a homogenous and unchangeable group as perpetrator (Massad, 2002).

The exhibition's conflation of the situations of Jerusalem and Sweden was also viewed as problematic. The everyday situation and the power relations in the two different places are very different, as is the public agency of LGBTQ representatives and religious representatives.

Ohlson Wallin was critical of our wish to include opposing voices in the exhibition – opposing not meaning LGBTQ-negative, but voices arguing for a respect of religious sentiments concerning holy sites and situations - as well as arguments from queer theologians of all three faiths on the compatibility between homosexuality and religious adherence. She thought a more plurivocal display would be confusing for the visitors, and run the risk of losing the message. As a result we separated the presentation of the images from the space for dialogue and discussion around these contrasting perspectives.

Contexts

Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin

The *Jerusalem* exhibition has a long prehistory. The photographer Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin is one of Sweden's most well known artists. Her rise to fame came in 1998 with the exhibition *Ecce Homo*, an exhibition portraying Jesus together with homosexuals, transsexuals, leathermen and persons with AIDS. The exhibition was made from a Christian believing perspective. The artist, a lesbian, and her queer friends also wants to have a place at Jesus' side, stated the exhibition. It wanted to counter the anxiety that people dying of AIDS would go to hell for their sins. Mutual love cannot be a sin, no matter who loves and who is loved, was the message.

When *Ecce Homo* was shown in Uppsala Cathedral, the home of the Archbishopry of the Church of Sweden, it launched a big and far reaching national debate about the Church's stance towards homosexuality (Kriz, 1999).

The importance of Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin's work in the public debate on LGBTQ-rights in Sweden is hard to overestimate. After ten years with exhibitions on other excluded social groups Ohlson Wallin wanted to return to the theme of *Ecce Homo*. The then director of the Museum of World Culture initiated contacts with Ohlson Wallin and a proposal for an exhibition called *Jerusalem: love and hate* was drafted.

The Museum, LGBTQ, and religion

The Museum of World Culture has a strong link to LGBTQ themes. The museum was one of the co-founders of the LGBTQ festival in Gothenburg; it has produced and shown the exhibition *Gender Blender* on transsexuals, and holds queer theory as an important inspiration for its work.⁵ Gender perspectives are important in our pedagogical and curatorial work.

As such we seem to differ somewhat from the international museological field where a recent survey concluded that the exhibitions on sexuality are few, and that museological literature on the subject is even rarer (Conlan & Levin, 2010: 308). Other, of the few there has been, exhibitions on LGBTQ-themes have also spurred similar controversy as the Jerusalem exhibition.

In 2009 the Glasgow Gallery of Modern Art made an exhibition called sh[OUT] on LGBTQ rights. In the media there was critique both of the inclusion of explicit homosexual images in an exhibition open for children, as well as allegations of censorship over the exclusion of works by Dani Marti made during an artist-in-residence stay at the gallery (Sandell et al, 2010).

In October 2010 the National portrait Gallery in Washington DC opened *Hide/Seek*, about gay love. A video in the exhibition by David Wojnarowicz contained a short sequence showing ants crawling over a crucifix, something the Catholic League described as 'hate speech'. The museum management decided to remove the piece and was criticized for being cowards in the press.⁶ In both these cases the religious perspectives was given room in the media, in contrast to our Swedish case.

Religion and religiosity has not been strongly represented during the Museum of World Culture's five years of practice. Still, the museum has been involved in a previous media debate on religion and art. This case has been closely analyzed by my colleague Cajsa Lagerkvist (2006). An exhibition on 'aids in a globalized world' included a painting of a nude couple making love together with a quote in Arabic of the al-Fatihah, the opening sura of the Qur'an. The Museum received a lot of comments that it was offensive to show these holy verses together with figurative images, especially a lovemaking couple. As Lagerkvist writes: 'Most of [the] approximately 600 e-mails were polite and respectful. However, a couple of them were aggressive and threatening.' The Museum decided to replace the painting with one from the same artist with a similar motive, but without the qur'anic text. This decision came under heavy critique.

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' (Lagerkvist, 2006: 61)

When the story of *Jerusalem*, evolving round what seemed to be a similar case, caught the media's attention the paradigm was already in place: The Museum of World Culture is jeopardizing the defense of fundamental rights and bending to bigot and narrow minded religious critics, just because they represent groups seen as multicultural.

According to the museum's mission statement 'different voices shall be heard'. In practice this means that most exhibitions are produced in-house and include multiple modes of display. Ethnographic objects, art works, voices of stake holders, expertise statements are all presented as parts of a theme. Neither art nor objects are displayed for their own sake. They are there to challenge each other and to inspire dialogue and reflection (Lagerkvist, 2008).

This has proved challenging. One way to avoid controversy would have been to act more like an art museum or a gallery in the exhibiting of contemporary art. But the museum has kept its commitment to let art be one mode in its multimodal displays. Part of the critique in both these cases relate to this unconventional approach to art.

The messiness of everyday practice

In the period between the first contacts and the actual making of the pictures for the *Jerusalem* exhibition and the discussions on how to show the exhibition the museum director retired and the directorship was held by an acting director. The head of exhibitions and research, who took part in the initial discussions around a possible cooperation, was on parental leave when Ohlson Wallin started the actual work on the project. The producer and the curator (that is, me) at the museum were employed after the initial contacts and thus had no prior knowledge of informal understandings, outside of what had been noted in the protocols.

These details might seem overly internal and personal. But I think it is important to show the complexities and messiness of everyday practice. In any specific process there are always a number of contingent factors shaping developments. Practice is always messy, even if this project was more affected by disconnections than what might be the average case. Too often scientific descriptions hide this aspect that work is always carried out by living persons, subject to all kinds of everyday happenings, strains and preconceptions (Law, 2003).

The discontinuities created room for misunderstandings; Ohlson Wallin held the belief that she had an agreement about developing the exhibition independently. The museum worked under the assumption that the final shape should be a joint process, where the input from stake holder dialogues would be central.⁷

As it now evolved a disagreement and a conflict arose, giving birth to an understanding in the media that the Museum of World Culture (once again) had censored an artist because she upset religious sentiments towards the public display of sexuality.

Media debate

A media debate on censorship and freedom of speech broke out, on the (mistaken) assumption that the museum had tried to stop the exhibition. The Museum was once again criticized for bending to fundamentalist pressure, for being cowardly and relativistically naive. The museum tried to argue that striving to be nuanced is not cowardice, and that it had not taken any decision to stop the exhibition.⁸ This argument did not come through in the debate, which continued to discuss what the museum's stopping of the exhibition meant. Some saw it as an example of a multicultural lack of principles, some as plain cowardice. For many the expressed concern for how the exhibition would affect the situation of Swedish Muslims was provocative and questionable.⁹

The understanding that the museum had tried to stop the exhibition lingered on, effecting the Stockholm branch of the *Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights* (RFSL) to nominate the Museum of World Culture to its anti gay award the pink thistle.¹⁰ Still, the museum has carried on with its cooperation with the RFSL Federation on LGBTQ-rights, and RFSL arranged an event in the *Jerusalem* program.

With these two cases reported as Art and Freedom of Speech vs. Fundamentalism, the image of the Museum of World Culture as cowardly bending for multicultural pressure is probably going to stay. There is a lot to do in trying to find a more effective strategy for communicating what the museum does and how it reasons. But this is not the topic for this article.

Analysis and Reflections

To understand what happened during this media turmoil, apart from the museum's inability to communicate effectively, we need to think about the concrete situatedness of the Museum of World Culture, and its discursive belonging.

How can a state governed institution like the Museum of World Culture deal with legitimate and partly opposing claims, and counter heteronormativity, homophobia and islamophobia? What discourses is the museum as an institution inscribed in? What power relations follow from that? Can the museum really be an arena for open debate? Or is it, due to historic, bureaucratic, and cultural legacies tied to certain positions and affiliations in the public space? Is it thus possible to deal with different legitimate claims equally, or are we biased, institutionally supporting one side?

The remaining part of the article will try to address these questions. No conclusive answers should be expected. This is an essay, an effort, a reflection in order to understand and learn, not a presentation of results.

Situatedness

One aspect of the *Jerusalem* case is that all participants consider themselves to belong to marginalized minorities, portrayed as somewhat suspicious by the public discourse. In my understanding they are all right. They can also all be seen as stake holders in this project and field. In the continued dialogues around the exhibition we also invited gay religious persons with a foot on each side. There were two main concepts that collided here: the concept of holiness, and the concept of sexuality.

Among the museum staff most employees have developed ideas and theories on sexuality; many have an education in gender studies and/or are familiar with the main outlines of queer theory. The language of the LGBTQ-perspective is familiar and understandable to us. Few of the employees have similar developed ideas about holiness and religiosity, and the language of the religious perspective is unfamiliar and difficult to relate to. My suspicion is that the very same conditions apply for most of the journalists writing about cultural issues in Swedish media, the ones engaged in the debate around this topic.

As political theorist Wendy Brown (2009) has argued the concept of critique, so central to cultural journalism, is closely tied to a wish to expose the mystifications and illusions of religion and idealism. The tradition goes from Voltaire, Diderot, Kant and Marx, via Nietzsche, Freud and the Frankfurt school, and on to Foucault, Habermas and Cultural Studies. At least

in the cultural sector in Sweden we are all educated in faculties for the humanities teaching this as 'our' tradition. The same canon is largely what makes up the foundation for the field of Museum studies/Museology (Bennett, 1995).

I myself have worked as a university lecturer in Cultural Studies and the History of Ideas, teaching class after class inscribing this genealogy of critical humanistic thinking.

Swedish journalists at large tend to live in central, gentrified parts of the larger cities. Working class, low income or immigrant neighborhoods are very uncommon choices for journalists. Journalists live where the consumption of print media is high, where the level of voting is high. There is also an over representation of middle and upper class backgrounds among Swedish journalists (Ekberg, 2007).

There is no similar research available on the dwellings of Swedish museum workers, but much points to a similar pattern. This is at least my assertion. The large majority of the participants in the Swedish cultural discourse seem to be situated in a similar segment of society, sharing a number of every day experiences and understandings, having a shared education, language and referential framework.

In this cultural discourse's defense of what has been called 'good Sweden' against the xenophobic Sweden Democrats, Sweden is portrayed as anti-racist, feminist and tolerant, under slogans like 'we like difference', implicitly acknowledging that we aren't different, that the locus of enunciation is still the privileged white Swede's position (HübINETTE & Lundström, 2011).

In Paul Zuckerman's (2005) contested attempt to measure the number of atheists in the nations of the world Sweden comes in first, with a percentage of non-believers at somewhere between 46-85. It is difficult to judge what these numbers really measure, but it is an oft used statement that Sweden is one of the most secularized countries in the world. In relation to the above cited variables of the recruitment base to the cultural sector the level of religious affiliations is probably even lower than the national average. In this broad demographic description a lot of nuances are lost, but the tendency is clear enough to be the basis of a discussion.

Swedish Muslims at large tend to have another habitus than the cultural workers. There are differences in everyday practice, conceptions, canon and language. The cultural sector seldom share references with the Islamic canon, all the values argued for in the discourse of cultural critique find their grounding in the secular language of Western humanities. The sense of belonging and ease in the cultural institutions also differ. The representatives in the cultural sector most often see these spheres and spaces as theirs/ours, while there tends to be a more reluctant identification with state run institutions from the non-State Churchly religious sector (SOU 2009: 52).

Museums often identify and communicate themselves as agents of positive social change, but, in the words of Richard Sandell, 'they have functioned to engender feelings of belonging and worth in some and, in others, a sense of inferiority and exclusion' (Sandell, 2007: 3). The universalism of expressions of freedom of speech, censorship and human rights are situated within a Northwest European context, a context also being the place where colonial imperialism, islamophobia and racism came from.¹¹

Museums, the Museum of World Culture included, often want to be arenas for discussions, inviting the public for free disputation. But it seems that there is a great difference in who can feel at home in this arena. In this specific case it was obvious that the actors in the public debate felt much more at home with one aspect of the question raised, to a point where peaceful and legitimate arguments for nuance went unheard.

But even if there might seem to be a conflation of the life spheres and canons of the spokes persons of the Swedish LGBTQ movement and the cultural workers, there is still a lot of discrete repression of LGBTQs in society at large. It would be too simplified to argue that the LGBTQ movement is accepted just because most Swedish politicians and journalists support Pride festivals and feminism, or because queer theory is a popular perspective. LGBTQs of course live everywhere in society, also in sectors, communities and families where there is still a lot of heteronormative pressure and open hostility.

The LGBTQ-perspective has been criticized for assuming 'that homosexuals, gays and lesbians are universal categories that exist everywhere in the world', and thus

misunderstanding the dynamics of sexual life in non-Western contexts. 'In undertaking this universalizing project, the Gay International ultimately makes itself feel better about a world if forced to share its identifications. Its missionary achievement, however, will be the creation not of a *queer* planet, but a *straight* one' writes Joseph Massad (2002: 385).

Intersectionality

I think we can be helped by an intersectional perspective. Intersectionality is a concept developed within feminist theory, at first by black feminists and women of color as a critique of main stream feminist's universalizations of the experiences and conditions of white middle class women in theories of gender oppression. The concept stresses that there are factors besides gender that make up the specific way any person is oppressed, it also implies that categories like gender, sexuality, race, religion, generation and class are simultaneous and intersecting. Neither one of them can be said to be prior or more fundamental, they always intersect in any specific and localized situation (Gillman, 2007). As Judith Butler puts it in the foundational book *Gender Trouble*: 'gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out "gender" from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained' (Butler, 1990: 4-5). Categories aren't fixed – the understanding of, for example, sexuality and religion are always construed in complex relation to other factors. The specific factors in play always constitute each other (Mohanty, 1989-90).

Few persons are privileged in all sections, a binary opposition between in and out is too coarse, being part of the discourse does not mean you are privileged as a citizen. Nor can an underdog position on one axis be universalized as a representation of the oppressed as such.

In relation to the Museum of World Culture as a state agent both LGBTQs and different religious groups are of course in a weak power position. If the museum tries to speak against one group in the name of another group's interests there is a complicated and problematic mediation of power, as well as a risk of misrepresentation. The claim for a right to enter the arena of power and speak for oneself is legitimate, and the arena's concern that this free speech might harm other groups and individuals with limited power is a kind of oppression. The mediator (the museum), trying only to govern over the practicalities of the arena, is a powerful actor, whose intentions are worth careful scrutiny, whose words should not be trusted uncritically.

One problem is that intersections between the religious groups and the keepers of the cultural discourse are rare. The legitimate critique directed at the keeper of the arena thus runs the risk of being one-legged and one-eyed.

It is difficult for us to see distinctions and specificities in arguments articulated from an unfamiliar point of view. All religiously informed opposition seems to conflate into one – the fundamentalist threat to freedom. The very concept of holiness seems to be awkward and strange, even scary to many Swedes. As Butler has pointed out in relation to the debate following the publication of the Muhammad caricatures in Danish *Jyllands-Posten* this inability and lack of interest in understanding why other people feel hurt or upset shows that taken for granted norms often override critical attempts to understand. This is a characteristic of moral dogmatism, shown by many on both sides in their response to the caricatures (Butler, 2009a). In the *Jerusalem* debate this dogmatism has mainly surfaced in the response from the secular side. And they have been the ones to criticize the museum for bending to dogmatic fundamentalists.¹²

Those who work within the presumptions of a single and adequate framework make all kinds of suppositions about the cultural sufficiency and breadth of their own thought. As a result, they will doubtless think that the refusal to accept this monolithic framework (secular, legal) is nothing but a covert way of taking up – and disavowing – a position within this framework. Such reasoning confirms the monolithic hegemony of the framework (Butler, 2009a: 102).

Some critics were quick to construct such chains of equivalences. Some participants in the dialogues gave voice to a questioning attitude towards the choice to portray LGBTQ-rights

within the framework of the holy. These spaces are seen to approach people on a level surpassing their sexuality (Wiederhold, 2004). The perceived negative attitude to the exhibition was easily conflated with homophobia, misogyny, disrespect for democracy and freedom, and all kinds of vague shadiness. The metaphor of 'bearded religious men' was used. The theme of the exhibition was clearly caught in what Butler has called 'the binary framework of cultural conflict' where both sexuality and religion are assumed to be 'singly and exhaustively determining of identity', as if a (homo)sexual person is nothing but a (homo)sexual, and a religious person is nothing but religious (Butler, 2009b: 144). There seems to be an almost perpetual antagonism between sexuality and (Abrahamitic) religion. But it is important to remember that most people's lives are fundamentally shaped by both sexual and religious/spiritual attachments. In many cases there is probably an antagonism between the two, but often that antagonism can be productive and dynamic. Antagonizing forces are not the same as binary oppositions, presenting them in terms of a conflict where we need to take sides is hiding and denying the complexities that we live in and by (Butler, 2009b).

It is not farfetched to suppose that citizens notice that the hegemonic framework for this critique is the same framework that most of the discourse of the museum springs from - whether the topic is multiculturalism, intersectionality, environmental concerns or heteronormative critiques.

Western aesthetics, universal rights and neutral arenas

The architects of the Museum of World Culture wanted to create an open and inviting space in the center of the building. A large set of stairs were made to connect different parts of the building, explicitly making connections to the Spanish stairs in Rome (Brisac & Gonzalez, 2005). The aesthetic, architectural language of this museum, and many new museums, is firmly inscribed in a (post)modernistic international competition framework. This architectural framework have been criticized for being more directed towards 'global style', interested in doing something that catches the eyes of the international architectural discourse, rather than catering for the broader citizenry at the site (Davidson, 2007, Architectural Design, 2010). Poet and feminist Gloria Anzaldúa have argued that this aesthetics of virtuosity is a trait found throughout Western high culture.

It is dedicated to the validation of itself. Its task is to move humans by means of achieving mastery in content, technique, feeling. Western art is always whole and always "in power". It is individual (not communal). It is 'psychological' in that it spins its energies between itself and its witness (Anzaldúa, 1999: 89).

Its products are meant to be displayed to others, to conserve, cherish and admire. Anzaldúa instead calls for a mestizo aesthetics, a borderland aesthetics, geared towards the communal, she also sees this direction towards mutual participation in culture as more prominent in other, non-Western, traditions.

Is art and architecture of this tradition of virtuosity really a good vehicle to invite people to dialogue and mutual discourse? Aren't museums one of the major forms for this non-communal aesthetics?

People are right to doubt the sincerity of inclusive approaches of the keepers of the public arena as long as the invitations are all articulated within this hegemonic framework. We are faced with what I want to call 'the missionary's dilemma'. It is quite possible to make a distinction between the qualities of a message and the role of the messenger bringing it. The Gospel of Salvation was spread in the New World by the compatriots of the Conquistadors, who looted, killed and enslaved the locals that the missionaries then came to save; the declaration of human rights penned by the French National Assembly was spread through Europe by Napoleon's army. Even if the message in itself may be both sound and well meaning, the position and behavior of the messenger might be suspect and arrogant. As the political philosopher Fred Dallmayr has stated:

Generally speaking, right-claims should always give rise to questions like these: Whose rights (or liberties) are asserted, against whom, and in what context? Do rights-claims advance the cause of justice, equity, and human well-

being, or are they obstacles on this road? Basically, all these questions boil down to the simple query: Are rights rightly claimed, or what is the 'rightness' of rights? (Dallmayr, 2001: 52)

Our public discourse is full with issues where Islam taken as a monolithic ahistorical entity (and to a lesser degree other religions) is articulated as a problem. Some argue that it is a misconceived problem, but the frame of discussion is still the same: as a Muslim (or religious person of other denominations) you need to prove that you are harmless, that you are an exception from the stereotype perceived as Islam, you have to state that you are a modern, moderate Muslim. As if a typical Muslim abiding to standard-Islam is by definition not in tune with Modern values and norms. As Butler asks:

What does it mean when the notion of freedom has been twisted to ratify discrimination, xenophobia, racism and nationalism? [-] And what happens when lesbian and gay freedoms are instrumentalized to harass religious minorities or to ensure that new immigrants can be denied entry on religious, ethnic, or racial grounds? (Butler, 2009a, 130)

The critique of religiously grounded misogyny, heterosexism and discrimination is of course very legitimate. It is hard to find other institutions that have had the same power to condemn people's innermost wishes and life choices as immoral or sinful, as worthy of punishment. But any analysis of power must be constantly rearticulated and situated. A large part of the critiques of religious values in contemporary European public discourse is not directed against powerful institutions, but target minority groups as symbolically responsible for religiously framed violence and terrorism (Allen, 2007).

But the implicit conclusion to this line of argument runs the counter-risk of exempting minorities from critique for discrimination within their respective communities. There is one very important distinction to be made here. There is a fundamental difference between supporting other people's claims for justice, freedom and opportunities, and quite a different thing to argue for people's rights from the outside, without asking what kind of help they need. In this project this was complicated; there is an oscillation between Jerusalem, Sweden and religion as a global phenomenon.

Dallmayr's suggestion that we query about the 'rightness' of rights seems to imply that we can find an unambiguous answer. I would like to add the questions: Whose well-being and justice is advanced? Is it at the expense of others? In the example under discussion I do not find it possible to deliberate in any certain direction. Yes, every attempt to further LGBTQ rights should have our support. But every time we try to argue for one group's rights by pointing to the foundations for a structural discrimination we run the risk of spreading the blame too widely. Depending of the loci of annunciation a message has very different meanings and impacts. Our sound message might be caught and transformed by the contextual power relations and symbolisms. This is what an intersectional perspective might help us see. But it is still very difficult to transform this understanding into a better practice. We need to see where our arguments lead in the long run, and do our very best to adapt them to our actions.

Dialogue and partial perspectives

In *So far* (2010), produced to summarize the experiences of the first five years of the Museum of World Culture we can read that the Museum wants to arouse dialogue, but it does not say much about participating in it. The publication presents a world view: 'There is no one universal truth; the voices, opinions and experiences are many and diverse' (p. 8). The museum tries to hover over this world of diversity, change and hybridity: 'because the world is constantly changing, pluralism and variation are particularly important features of the exhibitions' (p. 10). But there have been no exhibitions or presentations of this overall frame, rather the exhibitions cover exemplary themes of contemporary global issues. 'With the focus on what changes the images, alters perceptions and turns things upside down, the definition of the world immediately becomes more complicated – and thus more interesting' (p. 8). But surely not all kinds of complications can be viewed as interesting and positive. There is a normative strand emphasizing hybridity and interconnectedness that seldom come to the fore. Where

does the museum stand? Maybe the museum has been too silent in stating its own normative position, even if many have felt it to be a multicultural politically correct institution.

Seldom do employees of ethnographic museums talk about their own majority community. Communities are by definition marginalized minority groups. There has been a lot of important community work empowering such groups in museums. This seems to be working best when a museum is located in an area where this group live, or when a museum is dedicated to a theme that has a clear stakeholder group.¹³ But again, the museum professionals all too often assume a role as unattached brokers, distributing power to the unprivileged and unrepresented groups in society (Crooke, 2008). Or, they might be recruited from within the community under support and thus become part of the empowering work.

Most museum professionals in most ethnographic museums are not such persons, though. Still, we are all situated in particular genealogies, we all have partial perspectives (Haraway, 1991). If the partiality of this perspective is under discussion it is most often within a critique of patronizing, colonialistic and imperialistic traditions within the museum. This is very true of the Museum of World Culture.

But it would be strange to argue for the need of a communitarian identification that only focused on the negative aspect of our majority history. I think we really need to put our feet deeper in the ground and start exploring what a local Swedish legacy can mean. I think we should highlight the fact that Swedish is a small language. That Swedes always have had to think through another language to take part in the universalistic and universalizing discourses, be they in Latin, German, French or English. As Tariq Ramadan has argued: 'it is impossible to start earnest dialogue about present diversity in one persists in denying the plural reality and the diversity of one's own past' (Ramadan, 2009: 307).

There is a distancing potential in this. We can emphasize the marginality of our history. Official Swedish history has been trying hard to latch on to the idea of progressive Modernism (Ruth, 1984). I think there are other potentialities in planting our feet in the local ground, seeing Sweden's dependence on, and interaction with, foreign ideas, foreign labor, and foreign capital. It is also important to trace the contrapuntal histories of the tradition. No tradition has ever been monolithic, and there are always dissidents, traitors against privilege and ideologies of supremacy that we can identify with (Martin Alcoff, 2000). There are critical potentialities in a non-chauvinistic local history. But the acknowledgement of our own situatedness, our own entrapment within a specific framework, would hopefully also make us more humble in our wishes to be the hosts of a neutral arena, thinking of ourselves as transparent brokers of other communities' interests.

We, as individual professionals and as a museum, are also tied to interests, and the fact that we tend share interests and framework with the privileged actors in the public discourse gives us a specific position, framing our acts to specific power relations and often putting us in what at best could be described as the missionary's dilemma. Maybe we should even question the quality of our message more often?

My own reflections are trapped within this same problem. All these arguments for the need of a more equal distribution of power and sensibilities are stated on the shoulders of thinkers and theories formulated in the academic power centers of the West, coming from only one side of the border. It is the same classical intellectual superiority complex at play. I know what is best for you, even if I have no contact with your living conditions or your intellectual tradition. I can represent you (Spivak, 1988). This is, of course, a telling image of the complete dominance of the Western intellectual tradition in international institutions and discourse. It is still very difficult to be heard with an argument building on non-Western resources and traditions.

To me there is a pressing need for what can be called border thinking, the development of an epistemological framework that include different canons, traditions and languages (Grinell, 2010b). To be convincing and inviting, the articulation of why and how museums want to be an arena for all citizens must have other points of reference than the narrow Anglo-French-German tradition. At the same time we cannot escape our situatedness and historicity. We are a state institution, a museum, placed in Western Sweden, Northwestern Protestant Europe. With this come a number of legacies. Donna Haraway (1991), who formulated the theory of situated knowledges, uses this predicament as an argument for the

possibility and need to join forces with other knowers. 'The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another' (p. 193). Knowledge must be dialogical in order to be less partial.

Ramadan (2009) urges us to be cautious in our praises for dialogue, though. Just because they are theoretically possible and politically popular it doesn't follow that they are necessarily always good. 'Depicting the "dialogue of civilizations" as the positive ideology of our time to avoid discussing the strategies of political, economic, cultural, and military domination is a smokescreen and, when all is said and done, nothing but hypocrisy' (p. 306).

Ramadan is, as can be seen, critical of many of the present initiatives for 'dialogue between values and ideals'. There is too much empty talk in this, there are symbolic acknowledgements of the worth of other people's values, but policies and practices are left unexamined and unchanged. Dialogue is not merely about seeing the others and letting their voices be heard, dialogue should instead be a means to help us see our own short comings and the need for reforms to be undertaken about oneself. To get there, Ramadan argues, dialogue must start with respect, not patronizing tolerance, or the high belief that our ideals can help others improve their practice. When dialogue is done in earnest each part is focused on self-criticism and assessments of concrete realities. Too often the aim of dialogue seems to be more dialogue, instead of addressing the questions that made dialogue necessary in the first place – that is power, domination, politics and economy. Too often it is believed that dialogue is better when sensitive issues are left out of the dialogue. But such dialogue cannot reach what is at the heart of the matters. Inequalities and discrimination can linger on beneath the understanding built on some idealistic mutual arena (2009: 304-310).

Butler offers a similar critical argument, but from a very different departure. Somewhat rephrased she argues that a problem with many dialogue efforts is that they put the participants in a position where they are assumed to be 'self-same at every moment', that they can give a coherent and clear account of themselves. But recognition can only come about when we show our inability to achieve self-identity ('I do not know why I am who and how I am'). Ideally we would enter dialogue with the understanding that 'I need to be forgiven for what I cannot have fully known, and I will be under similar obligation to offer forgiveness to others, who are also constituted in partial opacity to themselves' (Butler, 2005: 42).

In the *Jerusalem* exhibition sensitive issues were forced to the surface. But, it turned out to be very hard to get a discussion focusing on self-criticism and respect. To get there all parts needs to acknowledge that there are many layers of discrimination in society. In the geopolitical site Jerusalem it seems very clear that the discrimination against sexual minorities is severe, and that discrimination in the name of faith or religion is less visible. Jewish LGBTQ-women can enter the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and be photographed kissing in front of the stone of Unction by a foreign, lesbian photographer, while Christian Palestinian heterosexual men cannot enter the Church to worship. Power is always played out in intricate ways, and people are always entangled by many different imposed identities or chosen identifications.

When a lesbian photographer and TV-show host from the platform of a state governed museum criticize Abrahamic religion for its timeless discrimination against women and LGBTQ-persons it might run the risk of putting further pressure on persons already portrayed as threats to our European values, persons never having the chance to communicate their possible acceptance of LGBTQ rights.

Conclusions

This has been an explorative text, an effort to think as freely as possible, not trying to legitimize the museum's actions nor trying to find easy solutions.

One problem is that there is more than one legitimate claim, and that they are partly colliding. The choice of action can only be strategic. But behind this choice lies the constant obligation to always question the framing of the questions put, to deconstruct the conflicts and parameters that are thought to circumscribe the possibilities of a certain problem, and to show that antagonism is a foundational and productive aspect of human life (Butler, 2009b).

Another problem is the pace of museum work. In the years from the first contacts until the actual presentation of the exhibition the contexts and frames have changed, maybe calling for other strategic moves. But strategy is also always contested, and tied to ideological and theoretical positions. In this case the strategic analysis of the museum and the invited artist came to differ.

It is obvious that the museum's efforts to protect the freedom of expression both of LGBTQ-activists and of religious representatives arguing for the sanctity of holy spaces did not succeed.

There is legitimate critique of the way the museum handled the issue. We tried to hold a firm curatorial grip of the exhibition, brokering the different interests that we could see. We tried to let people stake their own claims and to react to them. But of course the artist who conceived and produced the images had a privileged position. In trying to cater for other groups interests we came in conflict with what is commonly seen as the area of artistic freedom. The process was too far gone to restart and develop a new mutual understanding; our work was hastened in order to meet production deadlines, we were presenting solutions rather than opening a dialogue between the artist and the stakeholders.

Dialogue does not seem to sit very well with the deadlines and time frames of production. Dialogue takes time; it must build trust and understanding. If there is no time for this the broker and the arena will hasten things and impose their agenda on the other participants, in the name of repertoire, audience interests and its understanding of public trends. The power discrepancies are difficult to handle and any imposed decision will rightly be criticized. It is telling, though, that only the critique from one of the claimants could be heard in the media in this specific case.

I think museums need to be careful in analyzing who gets the first invitations, from what position we approach an important theme we want to dialogue and exhibit. When legitimate claims collide it is important that the strategically less privileged have a strong institutional grounding. In this case this was not the case.

You cannot invite to a dialogue when the parameters are already set. This kind of outreach work is more like a costumer survey. It might be important to evaluate how the audience will respond, but it is not a respectful invitation to dialogue. Inviting people to agree with your decision *is* patronizing. If dialogical work is not implemented at the very heart and start of museum work then it might very well sow division, distrust and anger, rather than understanding and inclusion.

What I think we should do is to always refrain from simplified solutions, and mere polite celebrations of diversity and difference. Difference is a fact, as is shared values and histories. But we cannot merely state that, we must let stakeholders help us explore this from the very beginning, before we decide exactly when and how we are going to exhibit the process and its result. Controversies are not always bad. They cannot always be solved, but may be given space and form in exhibitions. Butler states that:

The question of ethics emerges precisely at the limits of our schemes of intelligibility, the site where we ask ourselves what it might mean to continue in dialogue where one is, as it were, at the limits of what one knows yet still under the demand to offer and receive acknowledgment: to someone else who is there to be addressed and whose address is there to be received (Butler, 2005: 21-22).

We need to dare to work at the limits of what we know and receive unanticipated and harsh addresses. Museums are situated in a field of power relations that precludes objectivity, or being neutral arenas. Even so, as individuals and institutions we can gain more diverse groundings in traditions and experiences. And maybe we can be content with raising issues that will be addressed in arenas controlled by other actors involved in public debate.

Unfortunately there is no practical guide to be gained from these reflections, no example for others to follow. But the messy realities of everyday practice cannot be solved by neat methods. My belief, or hope, is rather that sincere and theoretically informed reflection can make us more sensitive to the situatedness of our institutions and to the intersectionality of power relations of every topic, in every community or dialogue constellation.

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Notes

- 1 There is no consensus on in which order to put the letters, it is mutually possible and usual to use the acronyms QTBLG and GLBTQ. The choice of acronym does not signal any particular theoretical affiliation, but I find it appropriate to start a sequence aimed at questioning heteronormativity and patriarchal structures with a non-male factor. Since the theme is largely homosexuality I do not use the more queer orientated QTBLG here.
- 2 It should be made clear that I have been a part in this work and debate, as the Museum's curator. I can not claim objectivity, but an insider's desire to reflect. I will try to be self critical in my reflections, focusing on problems, constraints and dilemmas, rather than excuses or defenses. Of course my reflection will have blind spots, and I urge the reader to find them and reflect upon them. My views are not necessarily shared or supported by my colleagues, or in accordance with the museum's official stances.
- 3 2009 the Museum had 248,000 visitors, around 60 % of them under the age of 30. The Museum of World Culture was the best visited museum in Gothenburg, and it was awarded *Swedish Museum of the Year* by Swedish ICOM. <http://sweden.icom.org/verksamhet/arets-museum/> (retrieved 17 Oct. 2010)
- 4 The quotes came from Genesis 3:16, Leviticus 12:2-5, Deuteronomy 21:18-21, Ecclesiastes 7:27, Hosea 5:7, John 13:8, 1 Romans 1:26-27, Corinthians 6:9-10. The Qur'an: 4(an-Nisa):15-16, 7(al-A'raf):80, 26(ash-Shu'ara):165-66, 29(al-Ankabut):29, 39(az-Zumar):54.
- 5 Queer theorizing assumes that (sexual) identities are not stable. Labeling or categorizing identities from (sexual) activities or (bodily) attributes is claimed to produce and uphold normativity and power, to the detriment of the contingent intersubjective responsibility of human encounters. Queer theory is thus not only applicable to questions of sexual normality and normativity, as Lee Edelman (1995) described its potential in an early formulation 'queer theory curves endlessly toward a realization that its realization remains impossible' (p. 346) or as Annamarie Jagose (1996) states: 'its most enabling characteristic may well be its potential for looking forward without anticipating the future (p. 131).
- 6 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/30/AR2010113006911.html> (retrieved 8/8 2011)
- 7 It is not of much use in this context to argue about whose understanding best reflected what was contracted. What from a practical side can be learned is that the Museum of World Culture should be more careful and precise in the formulation of the contracts it signs, and make sure that each part articulates and agrees upon what the contract means.
- 8 <http://www.varldskulturmuseet.se/smvk/jsp/polopoly.jsp?d=1573&a=18138&p=0>. (Retrieved 16 Oct. 2010).
- 9 I can only refer to some of the input in this debate (all retrieved 16 Oct. 2010): <http://www.newsmill.se/artikel/2010/05/31/varldskulturmuseet-viker-ner-sig-for-frikyrkopastorerna>. The thread starting at this site gathers the contributions in the debate on the news site Newsmill. Other examples can be found at: <http://www.qx.se/kultur/14268/inga-jerusalem-bilder-pa-varldskulturmuseet>, <http://gt.expressen.se/kultur/1.2008108/varldskulturmuseet-missar-premiaren> (where links to the papers other articles can be found), <http://www.etc.nu/30575/visa-wallins-bilder/>, <http://www.gp.se/kulturooje/1.380362-museum-tvekar-om-utstallning> (also with links to further articles), <http://>

svtplay.se/v/2026611, <http://ulfbjereld.blogspot.com/2010/06/varldskulturmuseets-velande-kring.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.mynewsdesk.com/se/pressroom/rfsl-stockholm/pressrelease/view/jimmie-aakesson-och-kaliber-i-p1-nominerade-till-rfsl-stockholms-priser-445301>. (Retrieved 16 Oct. 2010).

¹¹ The references could be innumerable, classics (with gender perspectives) are: Spivak 1987, Minh-ha 1989, Pratt 1992, McClintock 1995.

¹² <http://www.sturmark.se/?p=366>. (Retrieved 16 Oct. 2010).

¹³ See e.g. the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum. <http://anacostia.si.edu/>.

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