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**January 2017**  
**Dialogue Issue**

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**Europe and Contentious**  
**Cultural Heritages**  
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This second issue of TRACES Journal has been designed as a dialogue among the scientific coordinators of some of the most recent European Union's flagship research projects focusing on museums and heritage studies, including some recently concluded programmes as well as some newer researches launched by the EU's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme.

Despite obvious differences, all of these projects share a common attention on contemporary social and economic issues and a view to developing instrumental cultural policies, advancing museum and heritage practices and, ultimately, ameliorating key contemporary problems. Our time, however, is one of upsetting changes. Some years after the commencement of the first research programmes included here, European socio-cultural and political reality has undergone dramatical shifts, connected to phenomena that were not entirely predictable at the time they were funded. The heightened profile and nature of terrorist threats signalled by the escalation of attacks and their violence, the refugee crisis and EU countries' different responses to it, the collapse of the Greek economy, BREXIT, the increasingly difficult relations with (and sometimes between) the historic 'Europe makers', Turkey and Russia, the entrenchment of nationalist movements and parties, the mobilization of exclusionary European identities, an entirely changed global situation connected to conflicts in the Middle East... These are all factors that were (largely) beyond view in the first major tranche of EU-funded researches into museums and heritage and to which current projects must adapt.

Arguably the current economic and political crisis of Europe is also a crisis of values and identities; it is a cultural crisis. In such a context it is increasingly evident how social and political conflicts between and within European states are acted out also on the field of culture, including heritage institution and practices. We invited selected scholars who are currently (or have been recently) involved in major EU-funded research programmes in the field to reflect on what this changed world means for our research and for museum and heritage practice. We called upon them to question what roles heritage can and should play to address social division and crisis in Europe. We asked them about the focus and scope of their project and its relevance in view of contemporary social, political and economic issues affecting Europe and its inhabitants; the expected impact of their research as well as the influence of

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EU political and funding agendas on the framing of their programme, its lines of enquiry and methods.

Their work stresses the potential relevance of research programmes in critically confronting the multifarious, inherently complex and often contentious European heritages. The contributors address the drives to develop new approaches to the effective study, use and transmission of heritage and to identify practices that can productively acknowledge diversity, dissent and frictions. What emerges clearly from their words is the critical place of heritage within the public sphere as well as the need for developing discourses on heritage that go beyond instrumental political stances. They also recognize the unavoidable challenge of thinking through heritage in relation to questions about identity and society, nation and nationalism and historical and contemporary understandings of Europe and being European. They believe—as we do—that these are the present and future challenges for museum and heritage studies in Europe that they might be truly relevant within and beyond the academic sphere.

— *Christopher Whitehead and Francesca Lanz*

Full texts of the interviews by Francesca Lanz, Christopher Whitehead and Michela Bassanelli are available at [www.traces.polimi.it/journal](http://www.traces.polimi.it/journal)



# What roles can and should heritage play to address social division and crisis in Europe?



**STEFAN BERGER / ANNA BULL / HANS LAUGE HANSEN**

«Until recently, the neoliberal consensus which dominated policy-making at national and at the EU level exacerbated social divisions but also appeared unchallengeable. Things have changed now that the revolt of the losers of globalisation and of austerity measures has reverberated onto politics and rewarded antagonistic populist and nationalist parties who often use the heritage of war and violent conflicts in ways that risk fuelling tension both within and across Europe. [...]

UNREST aims to question what we perceive as one of the crucial modus operandi of the European Union's official memory politics, namely its belief in cosmopolitan consensus as the basis of forms of memorialisation. Through our research and our practical work with stakeholders, such as museums and theatre companies, we wish to find out to what extent such cosmopolitanism is unable to deal with important differences in the memorialisation of Europe's violent pasts. Furthermore, we wish to test an alternative agonistic form of remembering that, in our view, might better be able to encourage political debate about memorial differences in the EU. In challenging what we

perceive as the dominant mode of memory politics within the EU, the project seeks to contribute to a new role for heritage practices, away from the prevailing cosmopolitan approach with its emphasis on the suffering and passive victims. Revisiting (and contextualising) the social and political struggles of the past heritage can promote critical debates around alternative social orders and help re-establish agency. At the same time, by focusing on understanding perpetrators as well as victims, heritage practices can counter the Manichean contraposition that is privileged by antagonistic discourses and movements.»

«The EU has fostered the foundational myth of the Union itself as a story of transnational reconciliation and peace and relies upon a consensual approach to the traumatic memories of the conflicts of the past (especially the two World Wars and the Holocaust) as the basis of social cohesion. But this story is no longer able to counter the rising of extreme nationalism. UNREST therefore, pursues a third memory way, which acknowledges and engages with wide spread memory discontent without losing sight of fundamental EU ideals. We call this third way agonistic memory.

**Agonistic memory** designates a new mode of remembrance, which embraces political conflict as an opportunity for emotional and ethical growth. It should 1. give voice to all the parties of a conflict in a multi-voiced manner; 2. contextualise conflicts and try to understand what makes perpetration possible, without excusing or legiti-

**Stefan Berger** is Director of The Institute for Social Movements at Ruhr University in Bochum, Germany and Chairman of the Foundation History of the Ruhr. He is Professor of Social History at Ruhr University. He specializes in nationalism and national identity studies, historiography and historical theory, memory and museum studies, comparative labour studies and the history of industrial heritage. He is currently the project coordinator of the research project UNREST – *Unsettling Remembering and Social Cohesion in Europe* (April 2016 – March 2019).

**Anna Cento Bull** is Professor of Italian History and Politics at the University of Bath, UK. She has examined the legacy of Italian terrorism in the 1960s – 1970s, exploring, exploring issues related to reconciliation, memory, truth and justice and comparing the views of victims, perpetrators and politicians close to right-wing movements (or parties). Previously she investigated extreme right-wing terrorism.

**Hans Lauge Hansen** is Professor in Spanish Studies at Aarhus University, Denmark. He has published extensively on contemporary Spanish literature dedicated to the Spanish Civil War and the Franco dictatorship. He is specialized in memory studies, contemporary narrative modes and their contribution to the construction of cultural communities.



## Antagonistic populist and nationalist parties often use contentious heritages in ways that risk fuelling tension both within and across Europe.

misgiving the perpetrators; 3. take a stand against hegemonic interpretations of the past and present, re-politicise the relation to the past and arouse passion for democratic involvement.»



### PETER ARONSSON

«Heritage usually emerges in response to threat and as hope for the future. This applies to the birth of national museums after the Napoleonic wars as well as to the making of new modern democratic nations in more recent history. Future investments in heritage need to claim to prove how sustainable European communities can grow out of the current distress. Heritages that demonstrate earlier successful collaboration, sustainability and the creation of prosperity through problem resolution need to complement heritages that demonstrate the price of failure in terms of war and disaster. [...]

The focus and scope of EUNAMUS was to understand the cultural and political force of national museums in representing, negotiating and handling change. National museums are thus 'defined and explored as processes of institutionalised negotiations where material collections and displays make claims and are recognised as articulating and representing national values and realities.'

The results demonstrate the complexity of museums as institutions where logics and legitimacy from academia, politics, economics and the public sphere meet. If skilfully performed the outcome of that negotiation can help overcome past conflicts and find future perspectives to inspire communities. If they fail they will become irrelevant and even worse, enhance levels of conflict and

Peter Aronsson is Professor of History at Linnaeus University, Sweden. His recent work focuses on the role of historical narrative and consciousness in directing action, action related to both historiography and the uses of the past in historical culture at large. Recently he has performed leading roles in three international projects exploring the uses of the past including the research project EuNaMus – *European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen* (February 2010 – January 2013) which he coordinated.

distrust to the point of disintegrating a nation. This reveals the crucial role of cultural investments in museums as infrastructures with a potential importance beyond a restricted cultural political agenda.

The existence of EU programmes helped to fund and create incitement for European collaboration that would otherwise not have been as large in scope and territorial extension and cross-disciplinary in approach. Eight universities and more than fifty researchers have collaborated in the project. The push from the funding programme to interact with stakeholders and to deliver policy briefs has been frustrating due to the lack of training, developed tools and expertise to do so. However, it has also been stimulating as it has triggered a more intensive and necessary reflection on knowledge exchange. [...]

## **Future investments in heritage need to claim to prove how sustainable European communities can grow out the current distress.**

Subsequent developments have proved cultural investment—in line with European values—to have been too late and weak to stand the test of economic crises. Unfortunately, the argument that challenges of our time need more input from humanities and cultural sciences has not convinced funding bodies in Europe and elsewhere. Still technological inventions are searched for in a one-dimensional thrust to help us manage change. This is insufficient.»



### **KLAUS SCHÖNBERGER**

«The classic master narrative of European heritage was built from ‘the centre’: technical and architectural achievements found in large cities; language, knowledge and customs as signifiers of a nation; art and science as expression of the rise of the middle class. Multiple perspectives, languages and identities have long been considered as the outcome of ‘exceptional’ migration and borderland experiences of marginal interest for the mainstream. Post-modernism, globalisation, the awareness of migration flows and economic crises have refocused attention to the margins for a better understanding of today’s dynamic European setting. TRACES argues that contemporary Europeanisa-

tion needs to take the cue from the margins to identify innovative heritage practices. Reflexivity, i.e., social formats of re-assessing and challenging seemingly given normalities, is a crucial dimension in feeding a new European imagination. [...]

## **Historical conflicts that appear insurmountable on a national and institutional level are often more negotiable on a micro-level.**

Europe's past and present is marked by conflict and difference as much as it is by rich and diverse cultural heritages. TRACES claims that Europe will be a combination (or concurrence) of many, sometimes contradictory voices, or it will not be at all. Its dynamic heritage holds the key to a reconfiguration of European imagination. Focussing on contentious aspects of heritage is expected to prepare the ground for solutions to the multiple crises we are facing today. Creative and practical, yet theoretically grounded heritage work is expected to open up new avenues in negotiating current conflicts.»

«Heritage is an important vehicle in building European imagination, which is constantly being constructed and reconstructed, according to different current needs in different local and regional settings. Performativity relates to this productive character of heritage work. Besides examining and re-producing already existing understandings of difficult pasts, **performative heritage** crucially aims to re-configure existing systems of meaning by developing new, interactive and creative practices. Essentially, this process must be collective, so that different stakeholders can insert their often conflicting positions into the debate. TRACES claims that acknowledging the contentious



Klaus Schönberger is Professor of Cultural Anthropology and Chair of the Institut für Kulturanalyse at Universität Klagenfurt, Austria. He has published extensively on digital technologies and socio-cultural changes. Since 1978, he has initiated and participated in several national and international research projects on cultural heritage and civic society. He is the project coordinator for the research project TRACES – *Transmitting Contentious Cultural Heritages with the Arts. From Intervention to Co-Production* (March 2016 – February 2019).

aspects of European heritage is crucial. TRACES envisages a new European imagination as an area where interactions between different, sometimes contradictory, perspectives and experiences of the past and the present learn to co-exist and dialogue. By engaging with these interactions proactively and collectively, heritage-work may become performative.»





### GENNARO POSTIGLIONE

«Every conflict leaves its own legacy on the built environment. Ruins, rubbles, but also entire buildings and infrastructures, mark European landscapes, reminding us of a past that most people would rather forget. The RECALL research project investigated possible forms of intervention on conflict heritage sites and territories, with the aim of overcoming the trauma associated with numerous places and stories burdened with mourning memories. Researchers employed strategies based on the acknowledgement of the history of these sites by not reducing or limiting their potential to a commemorative space and overcoming the tendency of forgetting and abandoning these places.

The erasure from the collective memory of the image, presence and vitality of an urban space, is a painful act. Reasons for such dissolutions are multiple: ideology, alteration, progress and change.

Architects and designers have the mission to accurately question this erasure while developing the capacity of transforming it into a powerful source of creativity. Hence, the project was based on the attempt to explore a possible shift from a 'simple' commemoration to a more active participation in the history of places through an act of 'reappropriation'.

**Gennaro Postiglione** is full professor of Interior Architecture and Exhibition Design at Politecnico di Milano and coordinator of the Master of the School of Architecture, Urban Planning and Construction Engineering. He researches in the fields of museography and on preserving and diffusing collective memory and cultural identity. He carried out several research projects, among which the research project RECALL – *European Conflict Archaeological Landscape Reappropriation* (September 2012 – June 2014).



### PATRIZIA VIOLI

«I believe one cannot speak of a general single cultural and symbolic process when referring to so-called 'places of trauma', which are often very different, based on their shape, layout, memory transmission mode, as well as political and sometimes ideological intent. In very general terms, we can say that all these places include a value which is, generally speaking, the transmission of memory. But memory may be functional to different symbolic logics and underlying policies. The huge memorial site built in Nanjing dedicated to the victims of the devastation of the city by Chinese troops in 1937 for example,

**Patrizia Violi** is Professor of Semiotics at University of Bologna, Italy, Coordinator of the PhD Programme in Semiotics and Director of TRAME, an interdisciplinary centre for the study of memories and cultural traumas. Her current research areas include memory and space, with particular reference to memorials, museums and trauma sites. She is Project Coordinator of the research project MEMOSUR – *A Lesson for Europe: Memory, Trauma and Reconciliation in Chile and Argentina* (July 2014 – June 2017).

became a gigantic theme park in the 1990s, following the complex ideological reevaluation sought by Deng Xiaoping in nationalistic and hegemonic terms. During the Mao era, the image of China as a victim and a loser would have been unthinkable. Hence, in the course of a few decades memory has first been banned and removed and later restored and emphasised as evidence of how memory is not an absolute value in itself since it follows more complex logics of power and domination.»



### ROB VAN DER LAARSE

«I have long been interested in cultural communities and conflicts and I have been trained as a historian and anthropologist working on European class, politics and religion from the early modern period to the present. This confronted me with the fact that there was little knowledge about cultural dynamics, thus I became fascinated by the possibility that societies were organised according to deeper rules of order and authority. [...]

Facing the enormous transformation of Western culture after 1989, the 1990s Yugoslav Wars and the post-2001 War on Terror, I realised that the global heritage crusade since the 1980s was strongly related to a new era of identity politics. In contrast to the competing ideologies of modernity, the postmodern recognition of heritage communities and intangible heritage looked peaceful and nostalgic. Nevertheless, what could happen if such signs of identity became politicised? Throughout Europe regions were already starting to define themselves in terms of regional identity thanks to the support of the European Union ('Europe of the regions'), though competing against one another. This explains my interest in the paradoxes of European heritage politics since 2000.

The aim of the Terrorspaces Networking Project was to investigate the dynamics of memory related to past violence from a transnational and transdisciplinary perspective, which included forensics, semiotics, spatial and cultural sciences, conflictual histories, contested heritage and **competing memories** of Europe's 20th-century past in the context of its current financial, political and cultural crisis. Today, the continent still hosts traces of terror (in particular camps and killing fields) as remnants of both World Wars, the Holocaust, civil wars and the Cold War. Nevertheless, we consider terrorspaces not only as *places* where terror, political or state-perpetrated violence happened, but also as *sites* where the 'spacetimes' of terror are collectively remembered, or actively silenced. Traces of terror are from this perspective closely related to signs of trauma and, as the official narratives of memory have become more



**Dynamics of memory are far from linear and strongly related to processes of appropriation of heritage, as well as the owning and disowning of memory sites, in particular those linked to past traumatic events.**

Rob van der Laarse is Head of the Amsterdam School for Heritage, Memory and Material Culture (AHM) at the University of Amsterdam's Faculty of Humanities. He is professor of War and Conflict Heritage at the UvA and VU Amsterdam (Westerbork Chair) and was Founding Programme Director of Heritage Studies at the University of Amsterdam from 2004 – 2010. He is currently Project Coordinator of the research project iC-ACCESS *Accessing Campscapes: Inclusive Strategies for Using European Conflicted Heritage* (April 2016 – March 2019).

and more a domain of struggle between competing ethnic and ideological communities, by understanding Europe's topography of memory-making, which includes forgetting and the negotiation of contested memories between different (ethnic) groups and nations, we actually entered the dark side of the European project.»



#### **LUCA BASSO PERESSUT**

«Although walls, barriers and fences have been erected in Europe in recent years and several politicians are working to consolidate new nationalism and separatism, we are actually living in an increasingly globalised world, 'an age of migrations', in which the flows of people, goods, information and ideas determine processes that seem unstoppable and go beyond any artificially imposed constraint. It is a scenario that offers us unexpected interchanging modes, whereby the comparison of cultures, ideas, memories and identities coming from different backgrounds is undermining the social homogeneity that has long been a feature of geographical areas that are currently facing difficulties with the relationship between the 'self' and the 'other'. [...]

As Ackbar Abbas, former Co-Director of the Center for the Study of Globalization and Culture of the University of Manitoba, wrote: 'migrancy means (...) not only changing places; it also means changing the nature of places.' In this context, an innovative approach to the use of cultural heritage is required. An approach that goes beyond its belonging to a single territory, specific language, or 'immaginated community', and that, by contrast, is able to represent segments of social structures that are widely diversified by age, culture, gender and ethnicity, etc.

This means reorganising codified relations on a new basis among assets, cultural institutions, social, urban and architectural space. Museums, as institutions aimed at favouring inclusive forms of cultural relations within communities (ie: 'places where cultures meet') are strongly

Luca Basso Peressut is Professor of Interior Architecture and Exhibition Design at Politecnico di Milano, Deputy Director of the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies and Coordinator of the Academic Board of the Doctoral Programme in Architectural, Urban and Interior Design. Since 1993 he has taken part in numerous national and international research projects related to museum studies and museography. He coordinated the research project MeLa – *European Museums in an Age of Migrations* (March 2011 – February 2015).

committed to the task of representing these aspects of contemporary society and its complexity. It is increasingly necessary to develop a culture of complexity.

Adopting the notion of ‘migration’ as a paradigm of the contemporary

global and multi-cultural world, MELA investigated the role of museums in 21st-century Europe. Despite recent events and their current awkwardness, these issues, which were the focus of MELA research activities, continue to be a benchmark for an innovative vision of the role of museums today and in the close future.»



#### CHRISTOPHER WITEHEAD

«In Horizon 2020, the European Commission posits the importance of cultural heritage for communitarian social relations, individual personal development and inclusive senses of belonging. These positions are reflected in the report of the Council of Europe’s *Conclusions on Cultural Heritage as a Strategic Resource for a Sustainable Europe* (2014) and the H2020 Expert Group on Cultural Heritage *Getting Cultural Heritage to Work for Europe* (2015). In the latter, heritage is presented not as a cost to society and a financial burden but as a boon to the European economy and a means of fostering ‘greater unity and cohesion of European citizens’, overcoming the challenges of demographic change, migration and political disengagement. While we recognise and respond constructively to instrumental perspectives such as these, COHERE also explores problematics relating to the notion of ‘European identity’ that are particularly visible now in some contexts.»

«The COHERE project does not shirk from an awareness of the contested nature of the political, and indeed moral and philosophical, terrain to be explored, where there is a commonplace attachment of ethics to heritage that often manifests in tacit or overt prescription. This leads inevitably to axiological discussions about exactly which human and social values, if any, constitute absolute goods. Following this, other questions emerge: why, and (sometimes) where and when did such values develop, or through which historical processes and memory practices—for example through reflection on ‘never-again’ iniquities such as genocides? [...]

## **Along with (apparently) new divisions across the EU, fissures within the social fabric of individual states come into view, as political polarisation results in seemingly irreconcilable oppositions between groups.**

These concern the valorisation of European heritages that enable: the development of identities based upon communitarian and egalitarian attitudes; non-prejudicial openness to difference; a commitment to peace; historical awareness; and equal opportunities for social and cultural participation. Alongside these, we must recognise that heritage can be and often is active

within quite different ethical constructs—some classifiable as malign. While these rarely figure in authorised representations, we ignore them at our peril and it is necessary to find techniques to represent and understand them plurally, relationally, historically (even as they happen) and critically.»

**Christopher Whitehead** is Professor of Museology at Newcastle University and member of the University's Cultural Affairs Steering Group and the Great North Museum's Board. He researches in the fields of museum history, interpretation, knowledge construction, place and identity, memory and heritage studies and museums and migration. A major strand of activity relates to education and interpretation practices in art museums and galleries, and includes several government-funded and policy-relevant research among which the ongoing research project CoHERE – *Critical Heritages: Performing and Representing Identities in Europe* (April 2016 – March 2019).

# Map of the dialogue Voices from EU research projects

## Ongoing Projects 2016-2019

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UNREST – Unsettling Remembering and Social Cohesion in Europe  
Stefan Berger > Ruhr University Bochum

TRACES – Transmitting Contentious Cultural Heritages with the Arts.  
From Intervention to Co-Production  
Klaus Shönberger > University of Klagenfurt

CoHERE – Critical Heritages: Performing and Representing Identities in Europe  
Chris Whitehead > Newcastle University

iC-ACCESS – Accessing Campscapes: Inclusive Strategies for Using European Conflicted Heritage  
Rob van der Laarse > University of Amsterdam

## Former Projects 2010-2017

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EuNaMus – European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen  
Peter Aronsson > Linköping University

MeLA – European Museums in an Age of Migrations  
Luca Basso Peressut > Politecnico di Milano

REcall – European Conflict Archaeological Landscape Reappropriation  
Gennaro Postiglione > Politecnico di Milano

MEMOSUR – A Lesson for Europe: Memory, Trauma and Reconciliation in Chile and Argentina  
Patrizia Violi > Università di Bologna



TRACES is an independent quarterly peer-reviewed, non-profit journal that brings together original contributions to explore emerging issues in the field of heritage and museum studies.

Selected research papers published in a sixteen-page, custom-designed, off-set print, limited edition. Each issue investigates a specific topic from different perspectives focusing on practices, innovative approaches and experimental research actions.

Three issues per year: 'Snapshots', with graphic-based contributions raising questions and investigating practices; 'Dialogues', in which the topic unfolds through a semi-structured interview; and 'Insights', that expands the field of inquiry by means of theoretical and empirical critical thoughts.

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TRACES Journal ensues from the research project  
*Transmitting Contentious Cultural Heritages with the Arts.*  
*From Intervention to Co-Production*, which has received  
funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research  
and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No. 693857.

For further information please visit [www.tracesproject.eu](http://www.tracesproject.eu)

The views expressed here are the sole responsibility  
of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the  
European Union.

ISSN 2531-4858



9

