Ethnographic Research on / with Art Production: Reports from the Field

TRACES Mid-Term Conference, Berlin Humboldt University, Dept. of European Ethnology, 25 – 29 September 2017.

Arnd Schneider, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo

ABSTRACT

Structure of the Workshop

In this workshop, WP2 leader Arnd Schneider will first briefly report on the work and process of the work-package so far. Arnd Schneider and Leone Contini will report on their work in Italy, and this will be followed by the presentations of the five ethnographers.

WP2 has two main functions. On the one hand, it critically guides and accompanies the research process of the other CCPs through the work of five ethnographers and convening a number of workshops (Klagenfurt and Oslo 2016, Berlin MtM 2017.

On the other hand, WP2 carries out its own empirical research in Italy, in order to critically evaluate artistic research and process at the intersection with heritage providers (museums) facing the challenges of a post-colonial legacy of their collections, as well as the collaborations with and user applications for new communities (i.e. new immigrants).

Bel Suol d’ Amore: The Scattered Colonial Body (see also separate abstract by Contini)

In collaboration with our partners at the Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico “Luigi Pigorini” (part of the Museo delle Civiltà, Rome) Arnd Schneider (anthropologist) and Leone Contini (artist) have identified the collections of the ISiAO (L'Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente) which includes the former collections of the Museo Coloniale (Colonial Museum), later entitled African Museum (Museo Africano). Since the autumn of 2016 we have been working with these collections, including a 6 months fieldwork phase, culminating in an exhibition: ‘Bel Suol D’Amore: The Scattered Colonial Body’, 25 June – 9 July, 2017.

We have been particularly interested in the IsiAO collection of facial plaster casts by Italian physical anthropologists, among them Lidio Cipriani, a prominent anthropologist during Fascist times and signatory of the Manifesto dellla Razza (1938) (Manifesto degli scienziati sulla Razza). One part of this collection was assembled in 1929 in Libya (an Italian colony from 1911 to 1943; *de jure* until 1947). We decided to re-construct them as 3D copies, in a procedure that re-enacts and deconstructs the original act of appropriation from the colonial subject, and that was problematized in the exhibition. Linked to this enquiry of the forced ‘objectification’ of colonial indigenous subjects, we also worked with a number of descendants of Italian colonists investigating nostalgic remembrance of their colonial and post-colonial past in Libya (from where they were expulsed in 1970), revolving around cultural events and food practices (cours-cous).

At the mid-term conference, Schneider and Contini will present from the exhibition, provide the historical context and background, discuss challenges of the research and creative process, and explore the notion of serendipity that became central to their work.

WP2 has a **comparative focus** and is aiming to generate insight for the participating

institutions and communities, in providing improved practices of heritage provision and new

forms of heritage transmission.

However, the ethnographers in WP2 are not just researching the work of the CCPS, but are actively engaging in the work of the CCPs and engaging the artists in particular as an ethnographic lens. This is evident, for example, in CCP3 where ethnographer Blaz Bajic closely collaborates with the team around artists and researcher Alenka Pirman and Jani Pornat, and where these have also a long record of ethnographic research *with* the arts through the Domestic Research Society. Such collaborative research and methodology emerges also from CCP5 and the team of ethnographer, Laura McAtackney, and artists Martin Krenn and Aisling O’Bairn.

3.Preliminary Results

For this session at the MtM conference, the individual ethnographers with the CCPs, will present their results so far. The ethnographers have written two **two** detailed reports so far, one in advance of the workshop in November (2016), and one in April (2017). Their presentation today is based on the draft chapter they will write for the book we will edit from the WP2 research work.

Before we come to the individual work by the ethnographers, I shall also report here, together with Leone Contini, on the WP2 work in Italy.

As mentioned, WP2 also carries out its own ethnographic research on contested heritage, in an artistic co-production in Italy. Following from my invitation as a keynote speaker to the Museo Nazionale Etnografico e Preistorico “Lugi Pigorini” – part of the Museo delle Civilità in Rome 2015, as part of the ‘(European Unionis) SWICH programme (Sharing a World of Inclusion, Creativity, and Heritage: Ethnography Museum of World Culture and New Citizenship in Europe), I developed very strong ties with this museum.

Since the beginning of TRACES, as WP2 leader, I have been working there with artist Leone Contini on Museum’s collections. After an exploratory phase, consisting of two short field-trips to Rome in May and October/November 2016, we have now concluded an intensive fieldwork phase that lasted for almost 6 months from the end of January through to the end of June 2017, and culminated in a final exhibition “Bel Suol d’Amore: The Scattered Colonial Body” (25 June – 9 July, 2017).

In collaboration with our partners we have identified the collections of the ISiAO (L'Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente) which includes the former collections of the Museo Coloniale (Colonial Museum), later entitled African Museum. Since the closure of the IsiAO, a large part of its collections were housed in the Pigorini museum, whilst others were kept in various other museums (including the Municipal Zoological Museum, the National Gallery of Modern Art, the National Library, and not least the Infantry Museum of the Italian Infantry military (Museo della Fanteria), or indeed on the premises of the defunct IsiAO (from where we could observe their recent removal).

We have been particularly interested in the IsiAO collection of facial plaster casts by Italian physical anthropologists, among them Lidio Cipriani, a prominent anthropologist during Fascist times and signatory of the Manifesto dellla Razza (1938) (Manifesto degli scienziati sulla Razza).One part of this collection was assembled in 1929 in Libya (since 1911 an Italian colony). We decided to re-construct them as 3D copies, which would permit them to be taken out of the museum depots- for instance, to use in discussions. The procedure re-enacts and deconstructs the original act of appropriation from the colonial subject. With the process of scanning (repeated as a performance during the opening of the exhibition) and subsequent 3D-printing we wanted to invoke a process of ‘reanimation’ of the colonial subject who comes ‘alive’ as a simulacrum, and whose agency had been repressed through the colonial regime, and the often forced and violent ‘impression’ of plaster to obtain the facial mask. Thus we commissioned a specialized 3 D company, which also does reconstructions of skulls (replicas) for the physical anthropology department of the Pigorini museum to scan and replicate one of the skulls as a 3D copy– a process we also documented, and which we repeated (for the scanning) during the exhibition. This leitmotif was also used in our exhibition - performance where one of the original plaster cast head was scanned live, and the process contemporaneously visualized on the computer screen, thus reanimating a facial cast (which itself was taken originally under physical duress).

Another line of enquiry concerns a group of elderly Italian colonists from Libya, the ‘white others’, so to speak – little known, or written about in present-day Italian society. These former Italian settlers have an ambiguous status in Italy, and are only partly comparable (in others very dissimilar) to the French *pied noir* or Portuguese *retornados*, since Italy did not fight a war of decolonization (but Italy de facto lost its colonies after Mussolini’s fall in 1943,in a process that was concluded in 1952), the colonial Italian settlers and their descendants had to leave from Libya after Ghedaffi’s revolution in 1970 (and the fall of King Idris). Overall, the community of mainly elderly Italo –Libyans preserves strong nostalgic memories, both privately and in the communal activities of its associations. The majority of those still alive, was too young to actively participate in either the occupation of Libia after the Italo-Turkish war, subsequent colonial administration and repression of indigenous resistance during the 1920s and 1930s, or the Second World War. Rather they are descendants of original colonists. In their majority, they have a conservative outlook, stressing the Italian contribution to the development of Libya, in terms of modernity, infrastructure and agriculture, and emphasizing overall good relations with the Libyan Arabic population, and indeed an important Jewish community, as well as Greek and Maltese settlers. This trope of nostalgic positive remembrance of the colonial and post-colonial past also gets ritually celebrated in regular encounters of their associations, and special cultural events (such as the exhibition ‘Gli Italiani in Libia: il contributo allo sviluppo del paese’, Bologna 2016). They have childhood memories around Catholic Schools (La Salle) and community associations (football clubs).

Nevertheless, a few others (including Leone Contini, the artist, whose mother was born in Tripoli) have antifascist and socialist roots (expressed through critical video interviews by his grandmother in the exhibiton), but also a prominent archaeologist maternal grandfather, Giacomo Caputo, who excavated (as archaeological superintendent) the Roman ruins of Sabratha.

Remarks on Method / Research Process

This is obviously a hybrid project, set at the juncture, or at the crossroads, between art and anthropology, ethnography and artistic production. Where we followed a mix of methods, including ethnography, interview (audio, video), artistic intervention and production.

Serendipity

The research was very serendipitous, in that the main research path and process followed from completely unexpected leads.

Perhaps the most the most curious interlacing, encounter in terms of serendipity, or (as you might call it) was best illustrated when Leone brought a simple tin palm with him which he had been given by his deceased grandmother. Also, by pure chance and coincidence, it turned out at the Pigorini museum one of the office employees was born in Tripoli (member of the Italian community) and that her father had been a mosaicist /skilled craftsmen doing work for Leone’s grandfather.

Then Leone in an act of soldering / mending memories with the woman repaired joined memories (which never had been shared in this way), symbolically tying them together.

Different leads (and dead ends)

We initially explored a set of avenues to work with communities relating to the collections of the Museum, such as the Filipino community having market stalls at the Fermi subway station in the surrounding EUR neighbourhood.

Differences between artistic and ethnographic approaches

Differences in ethnographic / artistic approaches came to the fore, when we were interviewing, and Leone wanted to have very clear shots /frames for the camera, whereas I still had a small audio recorder on the table that would disturb the frame. As Leone pointed out to me, in the art world evidence of the ethnographic moment of research is not something which is incorporated into the final artwork.

Challenges of acesss

Since our research began (with TRACES in May 2016, preceded also by pre-TRACES fieldtrip in January 2016), the Pigorini museum went through a change of three directors, and we had to repeatedly renegotiate and revalidate our research permissions /access, in order to see collections which include a wide array of objects in the depots of the Pigorini, made both by Italian colonial manufacturers and colonists (colonizers), and colonial subjects themselves (sometimes overlapping), or singularly by colonial subjects, and also items taken as war booty during the colonial wars Italy engaged in at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century.

The IsiAO closed since 2011, is presently scattered over a number of musems in the capital, including the Municipal Zoological Museum, the National Gallery of Modern Art, the Infantry Museum of the Italian military (Museo della Fanteria). The practical challenges of doing work on such a dispersed , indeed ‘scattered body’ (as the title of our exhibition suggests), the challenges are formidable – not least in terms of access. For instance for the Infantry Museum, the permits to visit the collection were particularly difficult to obtain. However, eventually the official executor of the estate of the IsiAO, an official of ambassadorial rank at the Foreign Ministry (whom we also interviewed), put us in touch with the Museum. Still, in absence of the Museum director (on leave) I had to get clearance from a General who is the Vice-Commander of the Military District /Chiefs of Staff of Rome.

--

In fact, one thread that goes through our research (and will also be a future preoccupation) is the interest in military museums – the strange cult rooms (or occult domes of male violence) where death, oppression, and colonial aggression are glorified, but also miniaturized.

--

Historical Background

I will now give you some historical background and context to the exhibition, before Leone reports on the exhibition itself.

The historical background to these collections is the history of Italian colonialism. Italy was a relative latecomer on the colonial scene, but in a complex set of powerplay and arrangements where it basically tried to play off established French and British interests in the Horn of Africa, managed to establish itself as a minor colonial power in the Horn of Africa, first with some small possessions (in today’s Somalia +Eritrea ?, cf. Labanca), and then, after the Berlin conference (year) with the establishment of full colonies in Somalia and Eritrea (check, Labanca). In the Mediterranean, Italy took advantage of an already moribund Ottoman Empire, and after the Italo-Turkish War 1911-12, occupied Libya (and also the Dodecanese Greek speaking islands of Rodi and …., ), establishing the provinces of Tripolitania and Cirenaica.

Libya which occupies us here, and euphemistically called the *La Quarta Sponda* (the Fourth Shore), by state propaganda, (that intensified and fortified) especially after the advent of Fascism in 1922 (that cast itself as a successor to the Roman Empire), was seen as the rightful (re-)possession of a once roman province. However, initially, the Italians (as the Romas) only controlled the coast and a few proximate inland areas. In a war of attrition, indigenous resistance was brutally repressed, and included deportations, forced resettlement and internment in concentration camps, the use of chemical weapons, and (mass) executions, the Fascist state eventually succeeded in ‘pacifying’ ever larger parts of the territory.

An explicit aim of Italian colonialism (colonial policy) was to bring settlers to the newly conquered territories. This was for two reasons: 1) to rule and dominate the new territories, and extract natural riches 2) to channel and control what was perceived by the ruling Italian elites as a transient workforce (in structural terms a labour surplus), whose movement had to be controlled, rather than just expelled or let go, in previous Italian migrations to the Americas (Us and Argentina primarily), for instance. In the 1920s this kind of unregulated labour migration was halted, primarily ofr political reasons. As historian Pamela Ballinger points out, settler migration to Libya aimed both a sedentarizing Libyan pastoralists and Italian agrarians. The oclonization consisted both of urban and remigration, to Tripoli, Benghazi and the countryside, where the National Social Security Institte funded modernist model villages where settlers were supposed to grow olive oil, citrus fruits, almonds, and other crops. A first batch of 16.000, euphemistically the ‘Ventimiglia’ (the 20.000) arrived in 192 \_ . Settler immigration was thus characterized by a class gap.

As mentioned, Italian colonialialism, Italian colonies, did not experience a proper process of dcolonization. Italy’s Colinialism and decolonization, whilst not entirely a phenomenon sui gneris, and certainly not decoupled from global events and development, are difficult to classify with the standard conceptual tools of post-colonial studies. In contrast wit other colonial empires, deolonization was not primarily the result of struggles for independence, although resistance movmenents put up a fierce fight against the Italian occupiers right from the beginning. Instead Italian colonialism was brought to an abrupt end through Fascist Italy’s defeat in World War II in 1943, resulting – in the case of Libya from the German Italian defeat in north Afric, and in East Africa of Italian forces by the British. Thus in the case of Libya historian have sopoken of a long and drawn-out process of decolonization, not marked by one single date (of independence). Rather than a single date there are certain markers, or turning points which put this process into relief, and which Pamela Ballinger addresses with her critical questions:

The Italo-Libyan interview subjects of our research are then living remnants of this process as postcolonial subjects in today’s Italy, contructing a particular (and nostalgic version) of their history, and current relation with Libya, defining (redefining) their identity in today’s Italy.

 5. Future Plans and Concluding remarks (WP2)

Over the next two years, whilst there will be ongoing ethnographic work, WP2 will be increasingly focus on the planned publication, i.e. the final deliverable (D 4.2.). The first important step after two major reports (November 2016, and now April 2017) by the ethnographers will be the mid-term conference in Berlin where they will present draft chapters. These will be reworked and complemented, through other virtual workshop (depending on funds, also in person) in 2018 to culminate in the planned publication in 2018.

The work of WP2, as ongoing work and process is the ethnography of the artistic co-production, and as final result and deliverable an edited volume is planned, entitled provisionally:

 “Art, Ethnography, Contentious Heritage” (working title), edited by Arnd Schneider

 (draft only, chapter topics, formats, and sequence can change)

1 Introduction: (Arnd Schneider).

Chapters 2 – 6: critically reflective chapters, based on ethnographic work with the CCPs (authors: ethnographers).

Chapter 7: critically reflective chapter on fieldwork in Italy with Leone Contini (Arnd Schneider).

Chapter 8: shorter, hybrid intervention by Leone Contini including ‘traditional’ writing’, photo essays, collage, sketchbook and diary extracts etc.

Chapters 9 – 13: shorter, hybrid interventions by the CCPs including ‘traditional’ writing’, photo-essays, collage, sketchbook and diary extracts etc.

As regards the collaboration with other WPs, our ties with WP4 are well established (especially Marion Hamm) and continue to be developed further (we will have a common workshop at the Berlin mid-term conference). For the Berlin conference, and the preparation of the edited volume, we see great potential in developing also further ties also with WP5 which is obviously the lead WP in conceptualizing the notion of the contentious will play a significant part in our volume, too.

To summarize, the work of ethnography is tremendously important as it provides an ‘outsider/insider’ view and critical perspective, a critical mirror so to speak for the CCPs and the whole project, and allows the development of new epistemological and methodological tools at the border between art and ethnography. The impact of the artworks to be created within the CCPs and during and with WP2 research work is also important, since these will operate in more widely accessible public spaces than the publications, and complement these. Ethnographic work with CCPs and the research of WP2 is also of significant European relevance, as it provides a view from below, and, in the process of critically working with a multitude of European identities under construction, shows the great varieties of contentiousness of their materially accreted history (in the museum collections, for example).

Museum complicated heritage (post-colonial museum -)