

Abstract:

Serena Iervolino, *Beyond the contact zone? The Museum of World Culture as a sharing space for dialogue and exchange*

During last decade museums across Europe have been asked to contribute to the understanding of diversity of their societies and provide visitors with opportunities to reflect upon their multilayered identities (Macdonald, 2003). In recent years they have increasingly been required to rethink their fundamental functions from an intercultural perspective and become 'sharing spaces' (ERICarts, 2008) where an open and respectful exchange between individuals with different backgrounds and worldviews takes place both ideologically and concretely. In this paper the Museum of World Culture (Gothenburg) will be used as a case study to explore the ways in which museums can act as 'sharing spaces' for dialogue and exchange. The concept of sharing space will be employed as a useful alternative to Clifford's (1997) 'contact zones'. The Museum will be presented as a pioneering national institution that is seeking to play an active role in contemporary multicultural Sweden by attempting to act as a meeting space, while simultaneously seeking to have a global outlook and activate international connections (Lagerkvist 2008).

Drawing on findings from research conducted at the Museum in May 2010, this paper will discuss some of the activities and strategies that the institution applies to act as a 'sharing space'. The paper will argue that the Museum is promoting dialogue both with its increasingly diverse audience and within the institution itself by organizing exhibitions, public programmes, special projects, partnerships, festivals, concerts, etc. I will focus, in particular, on the museum's exhibitions and discuss the ways in which, by applying an experimental, thematic, multiple-voice strategy, they promote dialogue with visitors of different ages, genders, sexual orientations, cultural backgrounds, etc.

In the paper I shall suggest that the Museum of World Culture confirms the potential of institutions holding ethnographic collections to be more than 'contact zones' by acting as 'sharing spaces' for intercultural dialogue and exchange, and as forums for emotional and intellectual encounters.