How open are open cultural data? Some critical remarks on an ongoing discussion
Koch, Gertraud

HOW OPEN ARE OPEN CULTURAL DATA? – SOME CRITICAL REMARKS ON AN ONGOING DISCUSSION[1]

Gertraud Koch

Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen!

It is a pleasure to be part of this opening event! Pleasure is one of those things that becomes more, not less, when it is shared with others. And this evening there are many to share with.

First, I would like to thank my previous speakers:

Senator Dr. Brosda[2] for joining us and encouraging us in our conversation about open cultural data,

the Director of the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Prof. Schulze, especially for providing this space here, and

the founder of the »Sharing is Caring« conference Merete Sanderhoff[3] for supporting this extension!

And we thank, of course, our co-organizer, co-conceptualizer and co-thinker Dr. Antje Schmidt!

Openness and digitization constitute a shared interest of Antje and myself. We had been discussing it for a long time before Antje took the initiative to speak with Merete about an extension of this conference. We realized in these exchanges that we look at both issues from different angles, and that this is very inspiring for each of us. We also cooperate in teaching; Antje is giving a class on digitization in museums in our study program at University of Hamburg.

Antje Schmidt approaches digitization from the standpoint of the GLAMs[4], her longstanding experience in the implementation here in the Museum für Kunst & Gewerbe Hamburg and all the international discussions around these issues. My angle, as a professor and researcher, of course, is academia.

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1   Talk at the Sharing is Caring Conference 2017 in Hamburg. For the video documenta-tion see URL: https://lecture2go.uni-hamburg.de/l2go/-/get/v/21392; for the conference's closing statement and documentation see: http://sharecare.nu/hamburg-2017/.

2   Dr Carsten Brosda is senator for culture and media in Hamburg.

3   Merete Sanderhoff is curator and senior advisor in the field of digital museum practice at Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen. She has set the agenda for openness in the community of Danish cultural institutions at the international »Sharing is Caring« semi-nars in Copenhagen since 2011 and serves at Europeana at the European level.

4   The abbreviation GLAM stands for galleries, libraries, archives, and museums.

Educated in European ethnology and cultural anthropology, I now work in the fields of digital anthropology and the anthropology of knowledge.

Open cultural materials or open cultural data are issues which are transdisciplinary by nature. Such crucial questions are not organized along academic disciplines but embrace various branches. This becomes nicely visible in the conference program. GLAMs – Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums, NGOs – nongovernmental organizations, cultural administration and politics, creative professionals, social entrepreneurs and academics meet to discuss the issue of cultural data in its multifacetedness.

Openness is a value

»Can culture be copyrighted?« – asked US American anthropologist Michael F. Brown[5]. He did not have digitization or open cultural data in mind when he titled his paper back in 1998.

Rather, he refers to the request of an ethnic group in Australia to remove information about their group in the public domain. The group did not want their cultural materials to be displayed in museums and made available to the public there.

The self-evident understanding of the free circulation of cultural materials was challenged. It was experienced as a form of disappropriation. Are we allowed to publish what we have collected and observed in field studies elsewhere? What cultural materials should be in the public realm? Is there something like cultural or collective ownership?

This debate at the end of the 1990s highlights that bringing cultural materials into museums and making them public was considered an act of illegitimate openness by an ethnic group in Australia. It questions what looks rather normal to us today.

The idea of open and free circulation of knowledge is a value deeply embedded in European culture. However, it is a value that we cannot take for granted; it is contested in many ways also in Europe when economic, political or social interests emerge: copyrights, secret elections, privacy. The discussion about the conditions of openness is thus an ongoing matter. Openness needs to be balanced with other values and orientations and is thus permanently negotiated.

Openness is an issue that is not just emerging with digitization; however, of course, here it is at stake in a new and pressing way.

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5   *Michael F. Brown:* Can Culture Be Copyrighted? In: Current Anthropology 39 (1998), No. 2, pp. 193–222.

Openness is a form of valorization

Bringing cultural materials to museums – or translating them into the digital realm – and thus making them public changes their quality, no matter if art or everyday culture is concerned. It makes them more visible, they become objects of public interests, and this practice also valorizes them as a relevant form of culture, as cultural heritage.

Valorization of culture happens in many forms. Concepts like ›heritagization‹, ›invention of tradition‹, and ›inscription into heritage lists‹ indicate diverse ways of valorization and also ways of making culture available for marketization. These forms of valorization are, by far, not comprehensive but rather only the ›tip of the iceberg‹ of possible forms. They also indicate that the return on investment often is not a direct one in the realm of culture. Moreover, the marketization of culture is a very sensitive question: To whom do cultural expressions belong? Should traditional patterns from ethnic groups be printed on materials and who then earns money? What is the role of the museum that is displaying the patterns? Who should benefit when culture gets monetized: the bearers of culture or the bearers of the valorization?

Another complementary position on this question is taken by the prominent French sociologist, Luc Boltanski/[Arnaud Esquerre][6]: Using the example of France, he recently highlighted that it is mainly the symbolic economy that is creating additional value in Western societies: the work of designers, artists and in the cultural sector. The national economies in Europe depend on innovation in these sectors since the industrial production is undertaken elsewhere in a global division of labor. Moreover, Boltanski/[Esquerre] highlights how essential it is for these societies to acknowledge the contribution of the cultural sector in financial terms and let those, who add the value, also benefit and partake in the wealth rather than having a large number of creative people living precariously. However, Boltanski/[Esquerre] does not provide a way how to solve this claim. It is a more complicated question affecting national economies and thus rather a matter of joint, transdisciplinary efforts. Beyond valorization, another aspect is crucial.

›Openness‹ as a form of sustainability in culture

Even though sustainability is not a very well defined concept in the realm of culture, I will use it here to highlight that culture is a living system.

Culture is vital for human life, it is a public matter, it is a ›commons‹. We need it like food to eat and air to breathe. Humans are a cultural species. Culture has a large bandwidth from art to trash. It is a concept that refers to aesthetic expressions but also more generally to the man-made, to the collective, to shared conventions and perceptions, to common behaviors and intersubjective shared meanings and symbols. Uniqueness, a high value in the arts,

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6   *Luc Boltanski/Arnaud Esquerre:* Enrichissement: Une critique de la marchandise. Paris 2017.

emerges from and in reference to collective repertoires and conventions. If we speak about culture, we thus address a large bandwidth of expressions, objects and practices. It is this bandwidth that frames and maybe also complicates our discussions about openness and the sharing of culture – digital or analogue. How can cultural expressions circulate in a group when their use is regulated by institutions, restricted by copyrights or a fee is charged for economic purposes? What does this mean for the liveliness of cultural traditions, for their inheritance from generation to generation? Questions like these point towards the basic quality of culture for the organization of human life, a question that is immediately present when we speak about open cultural data in GLAMs.

Openness in respect to this broad understanding of culture then becomes also a question of cultural citizenship, a question of partaking of all groups and people in society, of staging and including their heritages in public memories. Adding the idea of cultural citizenship to the idea of open cultural data contributes to developing concepts and models of sharing and openness. This looks like quite a promising coalition.

Digitization

Allow me also a few sentences on digitization. Digitization indeed makes a difference. It changes the modalities of cultural production and thus of remembering and forgetting.

›Copy and paste‹ has become easy with digital technologies. ›Sharing‹ seems to be deeply embedded in social media, but not only there! It is deeply inherent in everyday practices and communication. It is a nature of culture. Only what is shared can become common, can become common sense, can become ›normal‹ and routine in peoples' lives. ›Sharing‹ is what people do with cultural materials, what they have always done; they take pictures to share them; they make texts to circulate and comment on; they use media to mash up and to create new ideas by merging old materials and adapting them to current situations. Digital media just give them new means for that.

From a historical point of view: Never before have so many people been able to spend so much time on aesthetic productions. Never have people been able to publish their self-made pieces so easily and to make them available to a world-wide mass audience as they do today through social media platforms.

We will have to cope with these changes in digital cultural production. They are already affecting our societies and will continue to affect us even more in years to come. It also deeply affects the ways of memory work, of ›remembering‹ and ›forgetting‹ and we are only at the beginning of these changes. In the future we will have to deal more frequently with born-digital materials, and we will have to consider and learn about the circulation of cultural mate-

rials from digital to analogue and back again and what this means for single elements, as well as, for culture in general.

Link to the future

Let me conclude with a link to the future because this is why we are discussing open cultural data. Digital cultural materials provide new means for how we want to refer to the past for envisioning possible futures in European societies.

Open cultural materials or data are an issue beyond GLAMs and research for society at large. It is thus a matter of education. Education is maybe not quite right in this context; we should probably better speak of ›cross-generational learning‹. The term education gives the impression of a more unidirectional path. My impression is that in the context of digitization we gain a lot from young people, too. In this respect, I am quite happy that students are involved in the conference. They not only help in the organization of it, they also contribute intellectually, in various ways, through selecting relevant positions in the debate about open cultural data from literature, transforming positions and practices into digital representations or documenting the outcomes of the conference. Most likely, even more good ideas would have emerged if the students have had more space and time to develop them.

Opening up thus means to include more ideas, more people and groups in the sense of a cultural citizenship: young people, people with diverse cultural backgrounds, people not in the mainstream of society. They have much to contribute for envisioning possible futures in digital times. We will gain a lot for future developments.

Thank you!

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