

Learning by cutting

Public memory and the participatory approach at the Museum of Blacksmith Art and Cutlery

Roberta Altin,

University of Trieste

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5545-2739>

Abstract. This report concerns the Museum of Blacksmith Art and Cutlery in Maniago, which is embedded in the eco-museum network of the Western Dolomites. To engage local people and stakeholders in the process of local heritage, participatory methods have been adopted. The active engagement of women, youth, the visually impaired and other groups has stimulated self-awareness of the local community, creating an emotional and affective archive of the memory of their past work and connecting it to the new generation. The heritage of knives becomes a process constantly "under construction", and learning by cutting the stratified memories through the museum that is negotiating the common background to redefine the meaning of local identities.

Keywords. Ethnographic museum; participatory approach; public memory; applied anthropology.

This report presents participatory actions as applied anthropology practices carried out by the Museum of Blacksmith Art and Cutlery (henceforth MBAC) in Maniago, home to the Industrial Knife District of North-East Italy. The Museum was born in 1996 when the last two local knife artisans had stopped working and the production cycle was becoming post-industrial (Clemente, Mugnaini 2001). Situated at the foot of the Alps and equally distant from Austria and Slovenia, this area is located on the edge of the Dolomites Natural park, which was recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2009. Maniago (in the district of Pordenone, Italy, 12,000 inhabitants) has been recognized as a "town of blacksmiths" since the sixteenth century, when local nobles diverted a canal and built several forges along the rivers, starting a rich production of weapons for the Republic of Venice and providing tools for farmers (Malattia 1965).

The first historical production was characterized by the craftsmanship of large blades; at the end of the 19th century, craft shops inside private homes were spreading throughout the urban area, creating a close homework connection and a rich and varied production of small knives (Baronti 1986). At the beginning of the 20th century the introduction of

electricity led to the opening, in 1924 of the United Cutlery of Caslino & Maniago in the Coricama, a cutting-object production plant that was to become the most important factory in the area for over 50 years, before being converted into a museum. The closure of several factories in the mid-70s coincided with the transition from local industry with complete production cycles to the post-industrial phase characterized by the assembly of semi-finished parts and global trade. The assembling of semi-finished blades and laser cutting quickly replaced forges, grinders and benches; the polymerized plastic handles replaced the old ones made of wood, horn and bone. Nevertheless, today, this area still bases its sense of identity and belonging on this long history of blacksmiths and cutlers; indeed, for the last twenty years, the museum project has become part of an ongoing process of identity redefinition. The decision to refurbish the dismissed factory in order to create a museum is highly significant per se; the eco-museum approach based on the idea of «the museum as a mirror of the community» has been further strengthening a path of public participation (Rivière 1985; De Varine 2017).

The participatory approach has forged the museum project since the first steps, with my two years of ethnographic research in the field, including workshops, factories and public places, and confirmed the common feeling that the Museum was born and finds its mission as a driving cultural centre with strong roots in the surrounding territory. Located in the renovated site of the former CORICAMA factory, a historical setting for memory and local identity, the museum operates «towards a cultural return of this material and immaterial collective heritage, in terms of an active participation in the culture and the growth of the context in which it is placed», as its mission states (Altin 2012: 12-13). The task of the museum is to enhance the heritage of popular tradition, becoming a meeting place and a reference point for the local community, and therefore a propulsive centre of initiatives that connect education, research and dissemination (Basso Peressut 1998). The Museum aims to become a forum centered and widespread in the territory, «a mirror where local people can reflect and re-think themselves» (Rivière 1985: 182).

This territory is included within the Industrial Knife District (with more than 70 companies and around 2,000 workers) and at the same time it borders with the park of the Dolomites, which became a World Heritage Site in 2009, precisely at the time of the global economic crisis. Simultaneously with the official opening of the museum in 2005, the eco-museum of the Western Dolomites was founded in the surrounding foothill area linked to an idea of participatory heritage.

Cultural tourism and global commerce make this case study in the North-East of Italy an interesting example of heritage with a «contemporary shapeless face» (Ronzon 2008: 18). The Friuli Venezia Giulia region, bordering East and Central Europe, has always based its identity on a work ethic and a predominantly family-based production, made up of small businesses often in competition with each other; wage labor was adopted by the farmers who maintained ties to small-scale cultivation and indigenous traditions (Holmes 1989). After a decade of economic growth in the 1970s, globalization (and in particular, Asian competition) introduced a crisis in the production system.

In order to stimulate the emergence of this cultural interface between the industrial-urban and the rural spheres, we decided¹ to adopt different strategies to ensure that the local community participated more aware of the ongoing historical processes. The museum staff is composed of the author (Roberta Altin), anthropologist and director since 2003, Marta Pascolini, anthropologist curator of the exhibition *LAMEmoria*, Valentina Dal Bello, Cristina De Zorzi and Paola Fanti museum operators alternating in teaching, dissemination and organization activities, and Luigina Rosa Bian former cutler and valuable museum collaborator. Using the museum as a cultural hub, heritage management switches from the exclusive competences of cultural offices, focused on administering tourism and economic policies, to the point of involving and intervening on landscape and territorial planning actions (Karp *et al.* 2006).

Participatory methods

Starting from the definition of Nina Simon (2010), the participatory museum is a place where visitors can create, share and connect with each other around content. The first important step was to break down the hegemony of a topdown homogeneous historical memory, moving toward the multi-directional experiences emerging from the oral histories of gender, social class and role within the community. We tried to adopt an intersectional approach in terms of gender, generation and social capital since the first research phase. Then, with the new exhibition, we started organizing evening shows with oral tales and many public meetings with the explicit aim of giving voice to women and workers, mainly from the employees group. In this way, «trends toward greater cultural democracy have been profound disrupters of established museology practice, challenging the very hierarchies of knowledge and power that shaped museums in the past» (Anderson 2019: 142). One part of the exhibition is explicitly dedicated to "the women's side" and the reconstruction of the lockers and identification tags of the workers is meant to acknowledge their historical work and social role. This has slowly started an awareness process with the emergence of personal and collective memories and, above all, a more positive re-evaluation of their active role in public history and community (Golding, Modest 2013). The focus on women's work practice has expanded into the economic history of the factories, trade and productions and contemporary local politics; in the museum meetings many more women propose new ideas and also participate actively in research.

¹ I would like to thank in particular the staff and the volunteers of the museum for their generous participation and collaboration in all the initiatives. This research has been carried out in cooperation with the Municipality of Maniago, owner of MBAC.



Figure 1: Gender approach at the Museum (Photo R. Altin)

In continuity with this approach, we started in 2016 the project *LAMEmoria*, based on a participatory map of historic workplaces, followed by the construction of an online archive and the imminent realization of a temporary exhibition with the active participation of the local community. The project aims at «dealing with alternative forms of commemoration, seeking practices and design vocabularies for engaging with [...] sites and spaces of memory» in order to surface old and new forms of territory, histories of work and identity through engagement (Bakshi 2017: 4).

The theme of community mapping, in the configuration proposed by the Parish maps, is built around a strong idea of a local community that intervenes actively in the processes of representation and narration of one's own landscape. As highlighted by Cristina Grasseni (2013: 99), the goal of the map is a process «during which material culture, intangible cultural heritage, seasonality and sociability come forward according to their proper local expressions, rooted in convention, routines, social environments and rituals». The maps elaborated in an eco-museum context are configured, in this sense, as a concrete possibility to intervene at a patrimonial level, displaying immaterial knowledge and local knowledge, as well as to act in function of an active involvement of the population for the development of a shared and conscious action of social transformation (Grasseni 2004). This kind of operation increases shared awareness and promotes the eco-museum action as an interpretative practice of a territory (Davis 2011). The risk is to simplify the map: if it is based only on nostalgic memory and on a frozen representation of past places, it becomes a cultural reification which is disconnected from the present and unable to capture the complexities of memory, both in terms of space and time (Clifford 1997; Bakshi 2017).

Firstly the mapping of the workplaces was prepared with various public meetings in the town informing the citizens and asking for active collaboration. In the second phase, a number of materials linked to the memories of the workplace were collected before going out in the field with maps, cameras and notepads to retrace the different layers of the workplaces. Then, back at the museum, we worked on a large-scale map spread on the table where each participant progressively marked his/her places linked to working memories. This set of actions was aimed at promoting the role of the people in

the construction of «maps capable of representing in a communicable and meaningful way» (Magnaghi 2010: 7-8).

The amount of information that came out was impressive: in the central area almost 500 places that today are "buried" by other functions have re-emerged. But the most surprising thing was the collective work of memories which, starting from personal memories, often triggered by some nicknames in local language, started the creation of a series of information stimuli that surfaced, finally giving voice also to the female and worker component, not just the male master one (Coombes, Phillips 2015).



Figure 2: Workplaces mapping with former cutlers and citizens (Photo R. Altin)

Through the appropriation of the cartographic tool, the places of work have become dynamic nodes of a complex network of family and productive relations (Pascolini 2018). A workshop, understood as a recognized and numbered physical place on paper, becomes, in the words of cutlers, a place of memory stratified and complex: a real and productive contact area in which the museum collection becomes a historical, political and emotional relationship (Clifford 2004).

After some meetings the number of participants increased and in 2018 the association *Friends of the MBAC* was founded and enthusiastically joined by many citizens, including women and young people, who gave their availability for various activities of the museum. We decided to continue this process involving the citizens in a temporary exhibition scheduled for June 2021 (postponed from 2020 due to Covid-19), which will not only describe the past workplace memory using the material and immaterial goods collected so far, but aims to become a concrete place for the collaborative projects and hence an interactive site for research, education, and innovation. The emphasis on process is also a reflection of a fundamental insight of reflexive museology that the messages of an exhibit are carried not just by objects, texts, and design, but by the extended development process, becoming more important than the physical exhibit itself (Peers, Brown 2003).

The exhibition is proposed as a means of creative, open and participatory writing that uses the ethnographic methodology for the collection of contents and the construction of the museum narration. The path is expected to be very open, including a real concrete

table that will be used to meet and small "memory rooms" where it will be possible to hang objects, images and bequests of personal memories. All this material and immaterial heritage will become part of the museum's permanent exhibition.

This procedural approach highlights not only the historical stratifications, but above all the interlocking of the various local productions with other activities (such as carpentry, project design, packaging, etc.) as well as reconstructing the distribution lines and all the undeclared work (black market labor and work on behalf of third parties) which has never been explicitly recognised, especially the work done by women.

LAMEmoria is a participatory process asking the local community to enter the space of the museum in order to become the protagonist of the narration of heritage. The maps enacted in an eco-museum context are configured as a concrete possibility to intervene in the heritage, visualizing the immaterial forms of territorial experience, and to actively involve the local population (Maggi, Murtas 2004; Grasseni 2004). Self-knowledge and self-recognition create shared awareness which promotes the launch of the eco-museum action as an interpretative practice of a territory (Davis 2011).

Between 2016 and 2020 some activities continued the process of *LAMEmoria* project in other forms: a schoolwork training produced a short film written and directed by the students on their perception of past and current Maniago. Moreover, the *National Knife Documentation Centre* was opened which is a digital archive of the sources collected through the community mapping and a first step of public sharing².

In the project *LAMEmoria* a particular event in July 2019 obtained lively participation: *Let's tell: stories of workshops, blacksmiths and blades*, a sort of theatrical show with ten cutlers acting on public stage telling the pieces of their work-related biography, performing as amazingly engaging storytellers in front of a crowded theatre (Fig. 3).



Figure 3: Cutlers' stories in the local theater (Photo Museum MBAC)

The tradition of smiths and cutlers, similarly to the one of peasants, was not something good to be transferred to children: the craft work was considered as a dirty, dangerous, and often unprofitable job, except for the owner of the factory. Furthermore, after the recognition of the Dolomites UNESCO heritage, increased tourism has determined the

²<http://documentazionecoltello.maniago.it/> (accessed 14 May 2020).

creation of "frozen" folk traditions for the purposes of passive consumption by the visitor in search of "typical" local products (Miller 2012; Dei 2018). The eco-museums have an explicit mission to promote local assets with a bottom-up participation approach, a mission which is expressed above all in teaching in local schools and promoting forms of slow tourism, toward a sustainable economic recovery of the territory.

At first glance all this seems a natural territorial enlargement of the MBAC participatory project, but if the touristic representation and the teaching in the inter-generational transfer are focused and articulated only on fixed and generic themes, there is the risk of flattening and cultural sterility. Nostalgic narratives of the lost community, of "how we were", simplify the material and immaterial assets that should be re-functioned by combining also with new forms of emerging cultural tourism (MacDonald 2012; 13; Ames 1992). By contrast, several of the museum's initiatives have tried to actively involve children, students and youth in arts and sensorial research-action paths. For primary school children, many workshops have demonstrated the didactic efficacy of starting from objects of material culture and from "know-how" to build new experiments of artistic bricolage: from multifunction wooden knives (which become experiments of surrealist design) to the exhibition that recycles pieces of iron creating storyboards of fairy tales, the important thing was to re-build a relationship and a new gaze at blacksmiths, iron and knives.

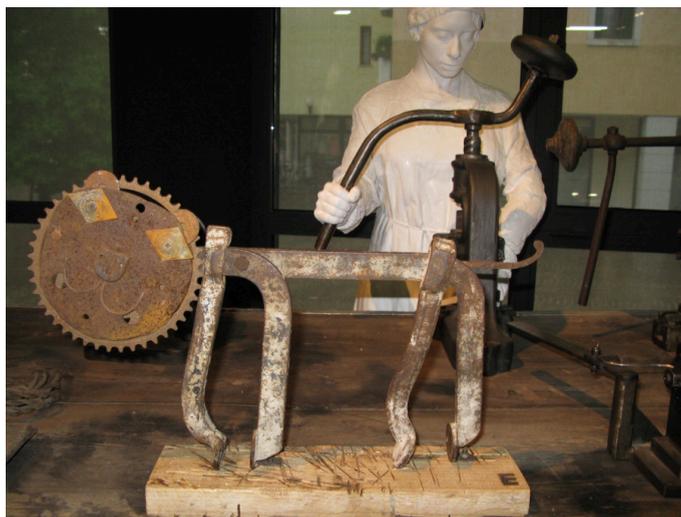


Figure 4: Art with recycled iron by Emanuele Bertossi (Photo Museum MBAC)

The rusty iron recycling of a local artist who writes contemporary fairy tales for children has been included in the permanent exhibition, with some pieces, such as a spaceship descending into the forge, that break the museology 'cataloguing' order, arousing the protests of some of the old cutlers (Altin 2016). From a participatory point of view, this stimulated a heated discussion of different local stakeholders with different expectations towards the museum. This confirmed the reading of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2012: 199) which defines «heritage as a mode of cultural production that has recourse to the past and produces something new». The museography assets therefore are created through cultural actions that extend values and methods (collection, documentation, conservation, teaching, interpretation and presentation) to

living people, to their knowledge, practices, fields of life and values (Appadurai 1986). Thus, the artisans move from the unconscious *habitus* of their professional practices to the conscious selection of *heritage* that becomes oral assets to be filed with oral heritage.

During the collective storytelling at the museum, the local customs testify the female working presence for almost a century, and being able to recount this publicly and have museum spaces dedicated to gender representation, has activated forms of pride and women's active participation in the museum documentation, collection and teaching activities. The awareness for marginal groups, such as women or wage workers, not only highlighted the "unofficial" history, with positive effects on public participation, but was important for documenting important steps of the knife production cycle. For example, during the collective meetings of community map building, it emerged that as early as the 1950s, couriers distributed ready meals at midday in Maniago because women worked in the cutleries (or at home, on behalf of the factories) and it was more convenient not to let them cook; this historical fact contradicts the traditional view of gender, collected in the Friulan saying «*feminis a cjasas e i omin a lavorâ*» (females at home and men at work)³.

Another inclusive experiment towards new participatory communities was the audio and tactile path for the visually impaired, done in collaboration with translation experts and guides for blind visitors. Part of the permanent exhibition is based on a reconstruction of human plaster casts that re-enact the postures and working gestures of the knife cutters; the tactile path for the blind has become a trick to analyze the importance of "know-how" and ergonomics in the work of blacksmiths, expanding cognitive skills and stimulating new interpretations of material heritage.

³ In the autonomous Region Friuli Venezia Giulia the Friulian is a linguistic minority recognized and protected by LR. n. 482/1999 together with Slovenian and German minorities.



Figure 5: Tactile path (Photo Museum MBAC)

In the production and use of knives, understanding materials and ergonomics of the handle and the blade through touching helps to interpret the "embodiment" of this technology which represents the first historical extension of the human body when hunter-gatherers built flint and obsidian blades (Warnier 2005). This new approach to the museum objects has generated a new way of thinking about knives and human motricity, causing reflections on the sense of the body in relation with tools and self-perception, not only among visually impaired users, but also in young people from visiting school groups (Ingold 2013).

Taking advantage of the laboratory of new technologies found in the industrial area for company production, we entrusted high school students with the task of enriching the tactile path by constructing 3D copies of handles, blades and normally dangerous sharp objects that have been reproduced in prototypes of plastic material or non-toxic food fibers also usable for teaching with young children. In this way the pilot experiment increased the inclusiveness of the museum, as 3D prints are objects that perfectly reproduce the shape with edible corn fibre material. At the same time, it increases the skills and the creativity of the students involved, who had to use photographs and choose materials and dimensions in order to print the prototypes. During the same period of

internship, other university students produced audio guides in MP3 format for the visually impaired with orientation and learning functions concerning a selected part of the museum path (Achiam *et al.* 2014). The track of the audio guide allowed us to explore a part of the artifacts and the exhibition literally "with closed eyes", to entrust the other senses with the task of reconstructing the ethnographic and historical context of the museum (Perego 2018)⁴. In particular, touch and soundscape have allowed us to reformulate educational actions useful not only for visually impaired people but also for all users who had "naturalized" the vision of certain objects for daily use, such as knives and scissors. A museum that includes a multisensory path has a significant emotional impact on the visitors, both local and from outside the region, because it predisposes them to knowledge and stimulates deep interest in the topic (Pink 2009). The experiment conducted using a blindfold to explore, with the audio guide, a tactile part of the museum path has allowed a more complete and engaging experience, and a climate of real inclusion, because the disabled as well as the non-disabled can have the same experience and therefore compare on equal terms, generating an exchange of ideas and cultural enrichment.

In this way, the museum becomes a place for meeting and reflecting on the importance of equal opportunities for information and expression between all kinds of people, not only between disabled and non-disabled. In addition, an approach to knowledge that makes it possible to use non-conventional channels (for example the senses such as smell and taste) is useful for learning to understand reality from multiple points of view and to better understand the relationship between technology and human being, both in terms of "affordance" and of social environment (Gibson 1979; Ingold 2013).

The idea and the practice of a participatory museums are fed through research, films, interviews, cultural events and management methods. Indeed, social technology applied to museums helps to build a new perception and representation of the museum for the local communities and in general for the public (Foucault 1993). With a slow but constant and "snowballing" involvement, trust and active participation by former cutlers and workers, schools, teachers, pupils, artists and various associations, the new museum concept spreads a collaborative turn (Karp *et al.* 1995) which, in addition to branching the network of participation of the local community, begins to extend beyond its neighborhood.

Collective memories and identities "under construction"

Following Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2012), we could consider ethnographic museums as agents and producers of heritage and each museum site as a cultural artifact that connects to the network through objects, stories, people, products, representations and consumption, well beyond their territorial perimeters. The museum therefore becomes a hub between different heritage practices and interpretations and a cultural trigger which stimulates an active process of heritage re-appropriation, not only for different genders and generations, but also for different stakeholders and for the communities involved. A museum as an open work, in which the objects are not exhibited as static artifacts, but as signs that expose ideas and behaviors, promotes dialogue with

⁴ I must thank Elisa Perego and Giulia D'Andrea for the excellent interdisciplinary collaboration in the experimental work carried out as a case study at the MBAC.

the many productive, social and territorial spheres. Thus the museum becomes an arena where different public meanings are negotiated, even if not entirely shared (Bennet 1995).

The dialogue with economic and political structures, with cultural institutions and local associations enhances the image and the awareness of the traditional production of cutlery by means of a contextualized presentation of the ethnographic and technical findings, highlighting the complexity of their material, economic, social and symbolic meanings. The MBAC as a museum, partly ethnographic and partly connected with technical knowledge, seems a perfect laboratory to experiment the complex relationship between society, environment, culture and technology. This place of exhibition and permanent action-research, by combining tradition and modernity, makes it possible to deal with greater confidence with the contemporary reality pervaded by technologies and to explore possible future paths.

The attempt is not only museographic but also economic: trying to rethink a slowly dying working tradition in order to explore a sustainable future for this mountain area that is always fighting for survival against harsh territorial conditions. After the economic crisis of 2008 many companies closed. Now we are witnessing a recovery, both in new niche productions distributed on global markets (especially USA and Japan), but also thanks to young people who resume the family business by updating the production with new technologies and materials. This resilience and prompt reaction to the crisis have made it possible to return to a widespread and stronger production, with less competition within the territory (here traditionally the windows were blackened so as not to copy the prototypes of new knives). In the last decade an unexpected performance allowed for growth of knife production and distribution networks, thanks to new technologies and international online markets.

At the same time, the 15 year long participative approach of the museum has strengthened the cohesion and image of the local community in search of a more "representative" idea of common heritage. But this fact might produce also some negative outcomes: there is a constant risk the museum will be used in a manipulative manner for political or commercial purposes. However, this is also a sign of the museum's vitality, as it can be considered an open arena for negotiations, conflicts, and redefinition of spaces and it has the power to represent the many local communities. Working through cultural practice (*habitus*), the museum thus returns to the meta-cultural status of heritage (Kirscheblatt-Gimblett 2006) through active participation and negotiation.

Born as a mirror of the past community, the Museum of Blacksmith Art and Cutlery becomes a living and open space for the construction (and re-construction) of contemporaneity. Artifacts, public event and exhibition function as a "contact zone" – as a source of knowledge and catalyst for new relationships – both within and between the communities and typically anthropology curators are the interface between the museum and a source community (Clifford 1997; Peers, Brown 2003: 5, 10)

With many stakeholders involved in the process of local heritage around the hub-museum, the heritage of knives has become a process constantly "under construction", learning by cutting the stratified collective memories in order to negotiate the overlapping of several local identities.

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