Art to promote dialogue on contentious cultural heritage

EU-funded researchers are developing art-based methods of promoting reflection and dialogue on contentious aspects of Europe's cultural heritage. Transmission of these methods aims to increase inclusiveness and foster convivial relations, thereby helping to shape European imagination.

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Europe's cultural heritage is complex, with conflicting perspectives on different historical events. Although it is hard to convey the various layers of such contention to a wide audience, failure to do so can impede the development of good relations.

The EU-funded TRACES project aims to formulate art- and research-based strategies for transmitting difficult aspects of cultural heritage in a sensitive manner. In so doing, it contributes to a process of reflection and dialogue between people of opposing viewpoints, aiming to increase self-awareness and helping to develop a collective European consciousness.

TRACES has launched five creative co-productions (CCPs) focusing on selected examples of contentious heritage in which artists confront these issues through experimental art. This is backed up by theoretical investigation by heritage providers and academics to enable cultural institutions to find new ways of framing controversial issues.

"We try to break down contentious aspects of cultural heritage through long-term projects in specific settings," explains assistant project coordinator Gisela Hagmair of the University of Klagenfurt in Austria. "Within these projects, artists, researchers and heritage providers work together to build CCPs, using artistic freedom to address uncomfortable matters and thus initiate a public discussion."

Five examples

The five examples chosen as case studies for development of heritage transmission approaches are: the abandoned synagogue which housed the archives of the Jewish community of Mediaş, Romania; Eastern European vernacular art on the Holocaust; death masks and use of the representation of death in the process of European identity-making;

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collections of human skulls kept by public institutions for the study of individuals and ethnic groups; and the Long Kesh/Maze prison which housed political prisoners during the conflict over the constitutional status of Northern Ireland (the Troubles).

These examples are being analysed with a focus on issues including the way in which art and research interact, treatment of educational aspects and stakeholder involvement, and the implications for the arts of the CCP model. The work is also considered in relation to the organisation of museums and the way in which everyday creative practices can support reflection on contentious cultural heritage.

Other benefits

According to Hagmair, the CCP concept can be used in other contexts to encourage groups of people who are in conflict to talk. Moreover, an important side effect is that, as the CCPs last at least three years, they can bring benefits in areas such as tourism, as in the case of the Mediaş synagogue.

Thanks to TRACES, a building that was previously abandoned has become a hub for cultural activities, exhibitions, art workshops and concerts related to the history of the city's Jewish community and its disappearance. The project also gives the artists themselves a boost.

"Artists often work under precarious conditions and usually only have a short time for projects – about two or three weeks on average," says Hagmair. "With TRACES, they are employed for three years on a basic income that gives them time to concentrate on the topic instead of being forced to look around for their next project. Hence, the CCP model creates a more secure working environment for artists in the field of heritage transmission."

Project details

- Project acronym: **TRACES**
- Participants: **Austria (Coordinator)**, Italy, Germany, Norway, Switzerland, Romania, UK, Poland, Slovenia
- Project N°: 693857
- Total costs: € 2 711 052
- EU contribution: € 2 303 358
- Duration: March 2016 to February 2019

See also

Project website: http://www.traces.polimi.it/
Project details:
https://cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/200849_en.html

View the article online:
http://ec.europa.eu/research/infocentre/article_en.cfm?artid=47797

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