Designing a house for puppetry: in search for good practices to safeguard intangible cultural heritage

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ABSTRACT: Following the 2003 UNESCO convention regarding intangible cultural heritage, the Flemish government funded a pioneering research project (2005-2009) to safeguard the rich tradition of puppet theatre in Flanders (Belgium). The project's aim was, first, to assess the feasibility of a central house or 'home' for puppetry and, secondly, to develop good practices to address the previously poorly recognized issue of intangible cultural heritage by developing new policies regarding its preservation, registration, conservation and presentation. This paper aims to contribute to the international debate on intangible cultural heritage by sharing the project's methodology and its main conclusions, as well as highlighting some of the problems and challenges we came across in the process.

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the cultural heritage of puppet theatre in Flanders, the northern region of Belgium in Europe. Flanders has its own regional government which has funded a research project to identify the need and the opportunities for safeguarding Flemish puppetry. The project was carried out from 2005 to 2009 by *The Firmament* (www.hetfirmament.be), the regional centre of expertise for puppetry or, as we sometimes prefer to name it, for puppet theatre, object theatre and 'theatre of figures'. The label 'theatre of figures' is meant to be less restrictive than the term 'puppetry', as it hosts all kinds of performing arts based on the animation of objects or the objectivation of animated beings. Because the term 'theatre of figures' is not common in English, we will speak of puppetry throughout this paper.

The case of puppetry was considered an exemplary testing ground for Flemish policy makers in the area of intangible cultural heritage, as puppetry draws on many centuries worth of knowledge, stories and skills that are handed down from one generation to the next, both orally and in practice. In the field of the performing arts, puppetry is generally regarded among the most folkloric art forms, although it has impacted greatly on many avant-garde artists in the past and in the present. The aesthetic and institutional history of puppetry is also defined by various cross-medial and cross-cultural exchanges. One may think here of the impact on the art of puppetry worldwide by the Indonesian Wayang and the Japanese Bunraku theatre, which are presently listed as 'Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity'. Hence, it was clear from the start that the research project could not be limited to a folkloric and Flemish story. It had to adopt a wide-ranging and international perspective, bringing together people, practices and discourses that have traditionally been kept apart for various institutional, aesthetic and sociocultural reasons. In so doing, the research project on puppetry, being among the first safeguarding projects in Flanders, was also meant to provide the newly flourishing field of intangible cultural heritage with good practices. Also from an international perspective, we are not aware of any similar research projects on puppetry of this scale or approach. There are some interesting monographs (e.g. Alkema et al., 1994; McCormick & Pratisik, 1998; Luger, 2004;

Blumenthal, 2005), but they are either too wide-ranging or too selective, and they do not adopt the intangible cultural heritage approach.

2 FROM *THE CENTRE FOR PUPPETRY* TO THE *HOUSE FOR THEATRE OF FIGURES*

The core idea behind the research project was to assess the feasibility of a house that could centralize the cultural heritage of puppet theatre, object theatre and the like. This idea of a house for puppetry dates from long before the start of the project, as it goes back to the dream of a family of puppeteers in Mechelen, a provincial town in the heart of Flanders. This family owned a professional city theatre and used to transmit their trade from father to son. In 1948, Jef Contryn founded the *The Town Puppet Theatre of Mechelen* (*Mechels Stadspoppentheater*). From 1977 until 1995, his son Louis Contryn took over the lead. Willem Verheyden became director in 1995 and changed the name of the theatre into *THE MOON* (*DE MAAN*) in consultation with Louis Contryn's son Paul, who is scenographer, puppet maker and puppeteer at the company for about thirty years. At the end of the 1960s, the Contryn family founded *The Centre for Puppetry* (*De Centrale voor Poppenspel*) out of concern for the growing lack of artistic professionalism in their field. Puppetry was widely practised and one could see it on television, in the class room, in the folkloric theatres, on the professional stage and in the many playrooms of children at home. Yet, there was no institution to safeguard its artistry and to take care of the remains of the performances. That is why *The Centre for Puppetry* decided to organize workshops and to start a collection of puppets, objects and figures from their own company, supplemented with endangered collections from others. In this attempt to keep their artistry alive, one can already detect an implicit understanding of intangible cultural heritage. For the tangible collection was not meant to be put in a case, but to challenge new generations to animate the figure, the puppet or the object. Along with the workshops and the collection, the centre also published a journal in order to preserve the scripts of the performances and the stories surrounding them, but unfortunately it was granted only a short life.

For three decades, *The Centre for Puppetry* had its share of ups and downs, for different reasons. The acute shortage of resources was one of them, both for the centre, for the few professional theatre companies and for the myriads of amateur theatres in the region. But at least as crucial was the animosity among the different members of the field who were unwilling to concede to *The Centre for Puppetry* its central institutional role. This was partly because of its close ties with a single theatre company in Mechelen. In 2002, Willem Verheyden and Paul Contryn, the youngest member of the Contryn family, revamped the centre and renamed it to *The Firmament*. Although the artistic legacy of their workshops was great, the institutional impact remained low: the trainings they offered were not officially recognized; the collection of 5000 puppets, objects and figures was not in an optimum condition; and there were no resources to sensibilise the many so-called 'living human treasures' to collaborate in order to preserve their work and to re-empower the state of their art. Not a moment too late, the 2003 UNESCO convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and the subsequent 2004 Flemish cultural heritage decree were eye-openers: they made *The Firmament* recognize how their activities and, above all, their dream for a house for puppetry could be defined as cultural heritage. With the 2004 decree, the Flemish government called for initiatives to develop expertise on how to preserve, register, conserve and present cultural heritage. They funded the research project, entitled *The Paradise. A study into the need, the feasibility and the desirability of a Home for puppet theatre in Flanders*, to examine whether the preconditions for a cultural heritage house for puppetry were readily available. This was immediately understood as an important signal from the government to get the field together in order to collaborate: if the house was not supported by the entire family of puppeteers – that is to say, by the greater part of its heritage community – it was destined to fall before it was even built.

The research project thus faced various challenges, but as soon as it started, the crucial support from the field grew quickly, thanks to the official recognition from the government and the introduction of external junior employees with great interest for the medium and without a previous history in a particular company (Smessaert & Daenen, 2009). But most of all, the approach of the project was very effective in bonding the many members to achieve a common goal. For the first aim of the project was to detect and to register all of the extant collections in both private and public hands in Flanders. In order to do so, there were numerous on site interviews which made many people aware of their precious artistry and collections. There was also an annual conference to discuss the results of each phase of the registration, and to provide a platform to get to know eachother better. Hence, registration was not an end in itself but also a deliberate means to realize other ends (Jacobs, 2011), among which establishing a self-conscious heritage community.

Another good practice of this kind was the thesaurus group for which members of the field were invited in order to prepare for the proper registration of the various objects. In this thesaurus group we agreed on how we would identify the various sorts of puppets, figures and objects. Among the most famous kinds of puppets are those that have a mouth with which they can speak, like *The Muppets*, created by Jim Henson in 1954-55. Although the term 'muppet' is often used to refer to any puppet that resembles the distinctive style of *The Muppet Show*, it is an informal name as well as a legal trademark for the characters created by Henson.In English this type is commonly called a 'mouth puppet'. The thesaurus group, consisting of puppeteers, theatre critics, performers, amateurs and researchers, decided to use the Dutch term 'bekpop' or, translated into English, 'beakpuppet'. The definition reads as follows: "A theatre puppet which is manipulated from under or from the back. The puppeteer's fingers directly handle the mouth of the puppet. Usually several fingers are put in the upper half of the mouth, and the thumb in the bottom half." (www.hetfirmament.be/content/view/23/46/) This definition helps to classify different types of puppets. A sock puppet for instance does not need its own category, as it can be defined as a beakpuppet made of a sock.

The thesaurus group exemplifies the principle of dialogue which *The Firmament* continously tried to apply in the decisions on what to register as well as how to register, and also why and to what means we register and conserve. Since there were also stakeholders from outside the field of puppetry (e.g. museums and archives, heritage centers, tourism, academia, and the other visual and performing arts) involved in this dialogue, many so-called 'culture brokers' (Kurin, 1997) became not only familiar with the medium and its heritage but also concerned with its current position in the field, which, artistically spoken, is still peripheral. In so doing, the research project also realized an increasing awareness of the medium's value. Working with intangible cultural heritage hence not only concerns the past, but also affects the present and the future. One major outcome of the project's interviews and surveys was the widely shared call to maintain in any context whatsoever the puppet's aura, without which it would revert to a nameless bit of craft, treated wood and recycled material. This aura could be created and maintained through stories, traditions, manipulation techniques and co-ordination skills, all of which create a unique performance and experience. This call for a performative presentation of cultural heritage rather than placing it in a traditional museological framework follows from how puppeteers typically transform all kinds of material and ready-made objects into animated figures. Their advise, then, was not to re-enact original performances, but to translate the material to a new performative context in which not only the tangible objects but also their intangible artistry gains new meanings and functions.

A telling example of this is an installation made by Eric Raeves, a contemporary dancer-performer who was invited by *The Firmament* to work with the registered collections. He created an exhibition, entitled *PLAY* (Devens, 2010), with live performances and installations. Among these installations was a perpetuum mobile with puppets made by Paul Contryn (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Eric Raeves, *PLAY* (2010), installation with puppets made by Paul Contryn from the performance *The life of Charlotte Salomon*, which was produced in 2006 by the amateur puppet company *Kopspel*. (C) *Het Firmament*.

This installation explores the borderline between living and non-living, that is to say, the concept of animation which is so endemic to puppetry. In the installation, the puppets hang upside down, apparently deprived of their lives, as their mobility depends only on the machinery of the perpetuum mobile that can be set in motion by the hands of the visitors. So on the one hand the puppets seem to be treated as lifeless objects, but on the other hand the suggestion is that they once had their own life. They are still seen as having bodies. In this way the installation creates, albeit indirectly, the magical moment where matter becomes alive and dead at the same time by the imagination of the audience. Yet it is the very technique of hanging them upside down and making them move by pushing the machinery that stirs the audience to notice the artistry of animation. In so doing, the installation combines the tangible and intangible aspects of puppetry heritage in a reflective way. We therefore expect that the field of performing arts in general will enable the heritage field to produce innovative, exciting and creative approaches to intangible cultural heritage (e.g. Taylor, 2003). This also responds to the criticism made by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett about the heritage sector's tendency to create metacultural productions, by which she means that dealing with the past is far too implicitly streamlined by the agenda of policy makers, like UNESCO and national governments, and risks to lose its inherently dynamic nature: "But, all heritage interventions – like the globalizing pressures they are trying to counteract – change the relationship of people to what they do. They change how people understand their culture and themselves. They change the fundamental conditions for cultural production and reproduction. Change is intrinsic to culture, and measures intended to preserve, conserve, safeguard, and sustain particular cultural practices are caught between freezing the practice and addressing the inherently processual nature of culture." (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 2004, 58). *PLAY*, on the contrary, proves that reflection on heritage by means of performative reinterpretation can be implemented and keeps the dynamics of both the medium and its heritage alive. In the future, *The Firmament* will futher explore this performative approach with other partners in the field of intangible cultural heritage.

4 CONCLUSION

The research project resulted in the detection and registration of more than 16.000 puppets among many other things. The project's outcome, however, outreaches the mere quantative and qualitative research results. In the first place, this project contributed to the ingression of the heritage paradigm in a field that used to focus almost exclusively on making theatre. Now people became aware of the heritage value of their creations and started thinking of ways to preserve their puppets, objects and figures, and to present them in new performative contexts by using the broad vocabulary of intangible techniques they or other members have in store. The surplus value here is that performing arts and cultural heritage dynamically enrich each other.

Secondly, the research project also reinforced the foundation of the *House for Puppetry* and its position in the field, partly due to the policy recommendations formulated at Brusselpoort (The Brussels City Gate), to *The Firmament*. This means that the *House for Puppetry* finally has a home. This *House for Puppetry* will encompas the different functions that have been listed by the heritage community: promotion and communication, presentation, memory or storage, meeting and education. Ideally, the house for theatre of figures should combine all these functions – an office, a library and documentation centre, an open depot, a workshop space, etc. – in an interactive, dynamic and actual fashion. The sum of the whole should be more than the individual parts. The quintessence of this centre is inspiration, animation and movement. These elements should be integrated in all aspects of the house: from the reception desk to the open depot or exhibition space. That is quite a challenge for the future.

Furthermore, the methodology of this research project lends itself to the mapping of other heritage communities. For instance, in order to assess the feasibility of a central house or home for storytelling in Flanders, the voluntary association *From Chair to Chair* (*Van Stoel tot Stoel*) has conducted a research project based upon our approach (Vandewijer, 2010). They brought to-

gether all actors in the field of storytelling to develop a safeguarding plan. Unlike for *The Firmament*, the conclusion was that a central house for storytelling was not feasible, yet the different organisations decided to cooperate in a network, named *Flanders recounts* (*Vlaanderen vertelt*). This network was partly the result of conducting this project, which once more demonstrates the benefits of an integrated approach.

To conclude, then, the project's major achievement is the insight that mapping out the heritage of an entire sector in close dialogue with the sector itself as well as with its most important stakeholders readily leads to a comprehensive safeguarding strategy which is not only supported by the entire heritage community, but may also yield innovative and creative means to deal with the past in a contemporary way.

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