Chapter 2

Translating Objects, Transnationalising Collections: Inventing Europe between Museums and Researchers

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Introduction

I still don't know his name. All the same, the Singer sewing machine salesman and I have travelled together extensively - probably much farther than he dreamed when he posed for the photographer Matti Luhtala in Murole, Finland in 1929 (see Figure 2.1). His digitised image is now visible worldwide in the collaborative online exhibition 'Inventing Europe', as part of a narrative written by my colleague Sławomir Łotysz about the ways Singer sewing machines were introduced into a number of contexts in everyday life (Lotysz 2012). I also use the image in presenting the 'Inventing Europe' project to illustrate the problems and possibilities of using objects from national collections to tell transnational stories. 'Inventing Europe' (IE) is a collaborative effort between a group of academic researchers and ten cultural heritage institutions and is also a pilot project of the European digital library Europeana's API (Application Programming Interface, see Europeana n.d.). Kimmo Antila, senior curator of the Museum Centre Vapriikki brought the salesman to our attention at a workshop we held for authors and collection holders at the start of 2011. The image performs well the functions we seek in online objects, particularly those related to technology. The salesman's bold stance and fur-collared coat are visually compelling on the small screen and imbue the technical object of the sewing machine with subjective experience. His body supplies a basic sense of scale to the object while the sign behind him, with the Singer emblem and 'sewing machine' in Swedish and Finnish, places him at once within the (bilingual) nation of Finland and in a transnational relationship with the US manufacturer. At the same time, this image's historical content is not

entirely self-evident: it is difficult to locate in time (at least without a close understanding of historical fashion) and raises a number of questions about the social relationships that were active in this frozen moment of time. As Łotysz's story notes, Singer machines were neither very innovative technologically nor necessarily cheaper than other machines, but the system of door-to-door sales that the firm pioneered nevertheless helped to spread them far and wide in countries like Finland. But was our salesman successful? Where and how far did he travel to sell them? Who bought from him and what convinced them to invest? Did they buy the machine to keep up better with clothing fashions from abroad or to (re)produce traditional clothes with greater speed?

Figure 2.1 A seller of Singer sewing machines in the Youth Association house in Murole

Source: Photo Matti Luhtola. Courtesy of Tampere Museums Photo Archives.

The sewing machine's eloquence and mystery as a historical object help make the image of the salesman equally eloquent in communicating the goals of the 'Inventing Europe' project to peers. I began taking the salesman on the road to conferences and seminars long before the exhibition went online. This salesman and I are becoming increasingly implicated in each other's social lives. I introduce him into all kinds of social spheres, and he performs there as if born to them. Unlike many digital avatars of museum collections (Macdonald 2006: 84), he – or at least his photograph – was 'born' as a collected object and has spent much of his life being reborn in collections. That life began as part of photographer Matti Luhtala's effort to document and collect scenes of life in the rural communities north of Tampere between 1910 and 1940. Luhtala's 7,000 negatives were collected by the Museum Centre Vapriikki, where they are now classified under 'rural photographs' (Museum Centre Vapriiki n.d.), and subsequently also became part of Siiri, the online photo collection of Tampere Museums (http://siiri.tampere.fi/). The documentary concerns of the original photographer shine through and now do double duty in my presentations, demonstrating the potential for 'local' objects to tell transnational stories. As photos from conferences and talks come into circulation in social media, I find it increasingly difficult to overlook the striking similarities between the salesman and me: there I

stand, too, dressed up and proudly displaying both logo and complex (technological) object, making a journey through various social domains in Europe. Typing my name into the Siiri database will reveal that things have come full circle and such images of me have also been 'collected' in the same database.

In this essay, I embrace this moment of reflexivity to explore processes of bringing 'European' heritage over borders, with the promises and pitfalls we have encountered. IE aims to generate critical historical reflection on the prominent technological processes and narratives of European integration as technological progress. As such, the collaborative online platform for circulating (digital) artefacts and knowledge is inevitably enmeshed in the very sort of processes it seeks to explore. Much in the way that the salesman – man/machine, photo and avatar – makes visible a number of moments of translation between heterogeneous realms, here I will, drawing particularly on some of the fruitful concepts from actor-network theory (Latour 2005), trace some of my own paths through the construction of Inventing Europe to highlight the points of mediation and translation in the heterogeneous digital sphere.

Connecting Domains

'Inventing Europe' is a networked project, but it is also the project of a network: the Tensions of Europe research network (www.tensionsofeurope.eu/network). Tensions of Europe was founded in 2000 by historians of technology, including scholars from the Science Museum and the Deutsches Museum, to develop new lines of research on the relationship between technology and Europe. Formulated broadly, Tensions of Europe's research agenda had two academic aims: first, to explode the national (and very often US-based) framing of the history of technology; secondly, to take the circulation and appropriation of technology as a historiographic lens through which to challenge narratives of European integration that focus on the state actors and formal processes of the European Union. This new framework would also embrace a longer time frame and highlight processes of fragmentation as well as 'hidden' processes of integration (Misa and Schot 2005). These research goals were developed into more specific themes, and an international network of personal contacts was forged, through a number of international

workshops and conferences. In 2006, these networking activities were formalised further when the European Science Foundation embraced the Tensions of Europe research agenda (under the name 'Inventing Europe') as a call for collaborative research projects under their EUROCORES scheme (http://www.esf.org/activities/eurocores.html). Under this call, four major international collaborative research projects were funded, running between 2007 and 2010 (European Science Foundation 2011). Along with these four projects came substantial support for networking between the four projects, as well as disseminating results to a broader public. A collaborative online virtual exhibition was a core plank of these activities, and it was from this initial project that IE was eventually developed.

This academic network shaped IE's collaboration with cultural heritage institutions profoundly, in some ways paradoxically. On the one hand, the model of personal networking across academic and national boundaries central to Tensions of Europe helped to spark the project in the first place. The impetus to collaborate with cultural heritage institutions came largely from researchers within the network who were attached to museums of science and technology. On the other hand, the project in part worked to define an academic field separate from the domain of cultural heritage. This boundary is drawn in terms of the peer-orientation of the academic research community as opposed to the public orientation of cultural heritage institutions. Just as the origins of the public museum are contemporaneous with those of the modern public and with efforts to discipline those publics into national subjects (Macdonald 2003: 1–3, Bennett 1995), from the point of view of academic enterprise, cultural heritage institutions represent access to the public. In the categories of the European Science Foundation, and therefore the structural and temporal organisation of the projects themselves, building an online exhibit falls under the rubric of 'disseminating' research results (European Science Foundation 2011: 25–6).

The prototype exhibition, 'Europe, Interrupted' (http://europeinterrupted.eu), based around the EUROCORES projects was developed in collaboration with six science and technology museums. This exhibition was conceived both as a product in itself as well as a

means of demonstrating the principle, and developing a network, of communication and cooperation for a follow-up exhibition. The dissemination brief meant that the project was largely seen as a way of translating stories written by EUROCORES researchers into the Web environment. This was done by producing short narrative texts, dividing them into Web-friendly quantities and associating them with objects from museum collections. With Web designer Alan Outten, a visual concept was developed that arrayed its 'stories' based on EUROCORES research as a tube map superimposed on a stylised map of Europe, in which individual historical cases appeared as 'nodes' on themed 'lines'. Each story was designed to question, on the one hand, narratives of technological progress and steady integration across national boundaries and, on the other, the fixity of national and ideological borders (such as the 'Iron Curtain'). This design worked well in terms of projecting the intellectual goals of the academic projects that drove it. As an exhibition, however, 'Europe, Interrupted' was criticised by some museum professionals, particularly for its use of objects. These were seen as too small, as well as being mostly illustrations, while the visual relationships between the contents were not seen as clear enough to bring a viewer over borders.

The production process of 'Inventing Europe', in conjunction with the *Making Europe* books, allowed us to address these criticisms in three key ways. First, the books themselves were more oriented toward crossing knowledge domains outside the history of technology and indeed beyond academic research. Second, the production schedule foresaw the completion of the exhibition long before the books in the series were complete, which meant that greater involvement by the heritage partners in the book production process was both possible and necessary. We were thus able to conceive of the project as a two-way flow of information and expertise. Third, the smaller number of researchers working on the *Making Europe* series and their geographical concentration at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study (NIAS) gave the editorial team regular access to the book authors and enabled us to conduct two workshops in which authors and collection curators could discuss themes and common processes of interpretation could emerge.

A Difficult Landscape

If, in relation to the academic research community, heritage institutions represent gateways to wider publics, those gateways are far from uniform, especially in the digital sphere, and publics are increasingly diffuse in their identities. The much-vaunted eroding of borders around and between galleries, libraries, archives and museums (well-captured in the acronym GLAMs) is being driven both as technical practice and cultural policy, but is by no means complete. This is true both in the sense that heritage collections and collecting have always been bound up in complex networks of agency beyond the institution (Byrne et al. 2011), but also in that digitisation and display practices vary widely (Zorich, Waibel and Erway 2008). Table 2.1 provides an overview of the online presence of IE's partners, though it should be noted this is changing rapidly. Further highlighting the uneven nature of the current digital environment, the table follows Manovich's distinction in new media between database orientation, usually a searchable archive of images, and narrative orientation, in which objects are surrounded by interpretive material and often a themed grouping of other objects (2001: 191). These distinctions are, of course, fluid. The Deutsches Museum, for example, presents its Meisterwerke (Masterpieces) as one rubric under the heading of 'collections' (http://www.deutsches-museum.de/sammlungen/ausgewaehlte-objekte/). Instead of being presented in a more database-oriented fashion as part of a collection, they are embedded within a series of themed, illustrated essays on social history. In contrast, the other elements under the heading 'collections' are then presented in a tree-like hierarchy, which is much more akin to the classical taxonomy of the museum collection (Parry 2007).

Table 2.1 'Inventing Europe' partners and their digital presence.

Institution	Online database	Online narrative environment or exhibition
Science Museum (UK)	Yes	Several
Deutsches Museum (DE)	No	Several
Norwegian Technology Museum (NO)	Yes	Some
Museum Centre Vapriikki, (FI)	Yes	Some

Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision (NL)	Yes	Some
Science Centre NEMO (NL)	Yes	None
Hungarian Museum Science, Technology and Transport (HU)	No	Few
Institute for Tropical Research (PT)	Yes	None
Museum Boerhaave (NL)	Yes	None
Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR (DE)	No	Some

Source: Alexander Badenoch.

While narrative exhibitions tend to address a similar public to museum visitors, the databases show strong differences both in style, scope and intended user. Furthermore, they show the ways in which museum collections have diffused beyond the immediate museum boundaries. At the Science Museum, for example, the Science and Society Picture Library (www.scienceandsociety.co.uk) is a collective database with two other museums, aimed at commercial exploitation of the collections. The Norsk Teknisk Museum's digitised collection is similarly available via a shared database portal, the DigitaltMuseum (www.digitaltmuseum.no), which aggregates content between a number of Norwegian museums and feeds into the European aggregator Europeana.

Practically speaking, IE had to be a flexible object, with multiple forms of participation for stakeholders with a range of assets and needs and a different kind of interface for each institution. In some cases, this would largely entail supplying material from an online database to which we had access. In others, consultations with (and therefore working time of) curators was necessary. At the Deutsches Museum, for example, our point of interface was not the collection curators but the picture archive, which had to be consulted on site. Another partner, the Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR, actually photographed objects from their display for us to include – and at one point even posted physical objects to us so we could scan them ourselves.

It is important to consider the motivations of heritage institutions in engaging with a project such as IE. In many cases, as can be seen, their collection objects are already available for circulation and use online. Many of these online collections are aimed, at least in terms of language, mostly at national users. The personal engagement of individual curators who are

interested in the theme is certainly one key force in driving participation, both in IE and in projects of Europeanising cultural heritage more generally (Kaiser, Krankenhagen and Poehls 2012: 72ff.). The 'European' dimension of the project is certainly another. In their investigations of the 'Europeanisation' of the museum field, Kaiser, Krankenhagen and Poehls (2012) have noted that it is a crowded and somewhat opaque field of actors. Within such an environment, 'Europeanness' appears to add value to objects and collections in various ways. 'Europe' stands in part for a broader and emerging public expected to engage with the objects; demonstrating the 'European' value of collections via international projects in turn is also seen as helpful in attracting funding for further digitisation or international exhibition projects. Cooperation with 'Inventing Europe' has been included in funding bids among partners and presented to peers as a sign of increased and vital presence in the digital sphere.

As a number of scholars have noted, translating museum objects into digital objects for duplication, circulation and variation involves more than creating a digital version of the original. A digital object is assigned a minimum of proprietary metadata, which, while maintaining a faint trace of its life as a collected object, also makes it subject to potentially infinite re-collection (Cameron 2008: 229–30). The creation of and access to such mobile objects, especially within European cultural spheres, is configured around equally mobile interactive subjects, who are expected to engage with them and indeed augment them in new ways (Barry 2001, Bayne, Ross and Williamson 2009, Badenoch 2011). Such networked objects have 'a built-in tendency to become "free" of the institution which originally guaranteed its authenticity and status' (Bayne, Ross and Williamson 2009: 111). In the first IE workshop we held, a curator of the Norsk Teknisk Museum demonstrated this with a compelling presentation that consisted of a number of objects from their digital collection, without captions. Many were visually strong and all had striking stories that were not attached to the objects by means of written documentation or metadata, but rather were part of the knowledge shared between curators. Arguments as to whether the computerisation of collections is undermining curatorship date back to the 1960s (Parry 2007: 46ff.) and of course have persisted. Indeed, at

the same time as increasing numbers of objects come online, particularly at Europeana, the situation identified by Manovich over a decade ago seems to persist, that the proliferations of databases means there seems to be an increasing need for narrative environments (Manovich 2001: 193). This is precisely a realm where collectors can step back into the digital sphere, not so much as authorities, but as expert networkers.

Using 'Inventing Europe' as a platform for discovering and mobilising the extra knowledge attached to artefacts was seized upon by book authors and heritage partners alike as an important aspect of the project. Realising this goal in practice, however, was hampered both by the realities of trying to develop stories based on emerging books and the wide range of collections. While some rich objects, including the sewing machine salesman, emerged from two joint workshops, the editors needed to develop far more content than this. Ultimately, the choice was taken to start by interviewing the book authors to select themes and stories that would be representative of the themes of the book. These were then developed into 'storyboards' of five to six units each, with suggestions for what sort of object would fit into each unit. While the storyboards made sense to the editors, however, they were less effective in being points of dialogue with heritage partners, because they were often too specific to be of use in helping to locate objects. This resulted in a production bottleneck in which the majority of the exhibit objects had been chosen, provisionally at least, from online databases other than those belonging to our partners. Only very late in the production process was this impasse overcome by the editors visiting most of the partners onsite. Where the editors' storyboards had failed as boundary objects, the partners' collections were far more successful. The objects were more clearly visible as part of a larger interpretive network, and it seemed that curators as well found it easier to engage the collection objects from within their 'native' environment.

Reframing Curation

Networking allows museum collections to step into a new form of agency, 'not just as a symbolic technology but as an influential force, as an attractor in a network bringing together serendipitous elements and as a border zone where heterogeneous systems of representation

might meet' (Cameron and Mengler 2009: 213). Helen Robinson similarly argues that looking more closely at the differing classificatory and interpretive practices of museums, archives and libraries allows us to acknowledge 'nuance, diversity and polyphony in the representation of history and cultural memory' (Robinson 2012: 414). Drawing attention to gaps and points of disjuncture can encourage visitors to employ what Latour (2005: 217) calls social 'plug-ins' – small portable pieces of social behaviour from other parts of social life that can be called up and brought to bear in new social encounters. Translation, not necessarily in Latour's specific sense, but rather a willingness to move into new knowledge spheres, is such a plug-in (sometimes performed now using an actual software plug-in). By highlighting such historical moments online, curators can also encourage users and readers to take plunges into new domains, other languages, and otherwise cross the visible boundaries of cyberspace (Badenoch 2012). In the online realm, curation is another such plug-in that can be activated. It seems to be transformed by the online environment and become immediately intelligible in numerous realms of online – and offline – space, also as a reflexive exercise. The 'self-curation' behaviours of social media are well-known, but via digital media, this shifts into the physical realm as well.

With these notions in mind, 'Inventing Europe' set out not to absorb collection objects seamlessly into new narratives from the *Making Europe* books, but to show them simultaneously as parts of national or local collections. By showing multiple frames of curation, the intention was to show objects as open to multiple interpretations and make explicit the interpretive work of cultural heritage collections as well as academic research (Bal 2002). Specifically, there are four different frames of curation visible in 'Inventing Europe', each occupying a different position between the domains of the book series and the museum collections: exhibitions, tours, guest-curator tours, and related content from partner websites.

The site is divided into six 'exhibitions', which correspond to the six books of the *Making Europe* book series. Each book is named with its authors and a short blurb lays out the theme of the book. Objects appear arrayed in clustered 'tours' (the five-to-six unit 'stories' mentioned above) within each associated exhibition. The metaphor of the 'tour' came out of an earlier

visual design iteration using the visual metaphor of a visitor walking around a museum with a notebook, collecting items and impressions of interest. In the first instance, these tours would be impressions of a guided 'tour' through the objects in the exhibition, given by one of the exhibition's creators. Initially, the intention was these stories would provide inspiration for users to then create their own annotated tours through the exhibitions by collecting items from different stories into new connections. This idea proved technically unworkable when it was decided that user tours should include related content as well. We kept the term 'tour' because of its implications of a selective and incomplete trajectory 'inspired by' the forthcoming book. The tours are in a hybrid form between an academic narrative, with a named author whose photo (with a link to a biography) appears in the sidebar, cited sources and a suggestion how to cite the article, and an interpretive exhibition text (for which they would be slightly too long). By clicking on the object, a user then switches its frame to that of the supplying institution: the user views its metadata, can enlarge the image and, if the object is from a project partner, follow a link back to it on the original site.

The tours written by the editorial team are arrayed within the themed exhibitions, linking them closely to the books. In addition to these, there is a series of 'guest-curator' tours. These are done by curators at partner museums, following the same visual format, but these present objects from their own collections. This is a reversal to the traditional way in which cultural heritage institutions have been placed within public heritage spheres. Rather than appearing as authorities granting access to objects they own to members of the public, or to a curator in their own institution, here they are granted voices to speak in a broader transnational environment. Not only do the objects become mobile but institutional knowledge is mobilised over borders as well, and networked with other objects and places. Interestingly, most of these new tours grew out of conversations that took place on site in the heritage collections, very often during or following an actual tour of the collection. The tour on cotton cloth, assembled by Tone Rasch of the Norsk Teknisk Museum (Rasch 2012) grew out of such a visit and is a prime example of the possibilities for translating national history. Based largely on a collection of material on early

industrial weaving in Norway held by the museum, the narrative presents an interesting retelling of the beginnings and developments of a national industry. Rather than highlighting the national story, which was why the materials had been collected by the museum, objects from Manchester (a loom) and Hamburg (teaching materials, Norway's budding industrialists) emphasise the ongoing transnational aspects of the story.

Mirroring the networks woven by the collected tour objects is a range of related content both from our partners as well as from Europeana, fed in via RSS feeds in thumbnail form. Viewing these objects, which are linked by selected keywords (currently selected by the content editors), the user is then able to use the platform to follow objects back to the collections they stem from and ideally into new narrative environments to explore. Often these new sites are in foreign languages, which has proven disturbing to some users, but the hope is that, by presenting such a cosmopolitan environment, users will be encouraged to continue and find ways of working in the new environment. While this Web 2.0 feature contains some of the greatest potential for opening new transnational connections from the exhibition, making it useful to users and heritage partners alike has also proven to be one of the greatest challenges the project has faced. The task of marking content on the home pages has proved time-consuming, and thus far has been done by the 'Inventing Europe' team, which is not scalable. Just as the storyboards often proved less engaging for partner institutions, so, too, the long list of keywords that do not necessarily match categories on their own sites has proven difficult for them to work with. In the future, marking related content will either be automated, with keywords being automatically extracted, or it will become a more open activity, undertaken by groups such as students, as they engage with the exhibition.

Conclusions

Long after I first took the salesman on the road, my incomplete understanding of the Finnish database meant I was still unaware of the photograph's date. The Siiri database's apparent date of '1900' referred to a century, not a year (decade and year are listed elsewhere). When further enquiries of the photo archivist revealed the date, his proud pose gained new poignancy: 1929.

It is hard not to wonder what happened when he and his clients found themselves networked with the US in the crashing global economy and that of the world of commodities. While these are perhaps not quite such dramatic times, the world of digital heritage institutions is still quite uncertain, especially currently (at the time of writing, one of IE's partners is threatened with closure due to funding cuts). Like the sewing machine, digital heritage, while costly, offers a range of tools for networking knowledge and translating skills and indeed well-known patterns into new realms and connections. Translation involves more than simply engaging with the possibilities of the digital sphere, it also requires closer attention to the realms of institutional knowledge to be translated. In the case of 'Inventing Europe', this has meant following the example of the travelling salesman more literally and visiting the collections' physical sites, where the partners' knowledge is situated, and using those encounters to help structure the online space.

'Inventing Europe', online live since the end of August 2012, is envisioned as a space of interaction that will continue to grow as more tours are developed. A re-launch with design adjustments to allow for additional expansion took place in April 2013. Further tours are expected from current partners, and the expanding platform also will allow involvement of new partners. With the publication of the *Making Europe* book series starting in September 2013, the book authors appear on the site themselves with new tours tied more directly to work on the finished product. Parallel to these planned expansions, an initiative is currently under way to use the site in a number of university courses across Europe. Apart from exploring the themes of the exhibition, this also engages students with the uneven spaces of digital heritage and can help to identify new material. As this initiative moves forward, this will also allow 'Inventing Europe' to become a space that will enable student collaboration across borders as they develop new skills of translation.

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