



Museum as means for survival: Yuri Vella's experience²³³

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When we couple these two words, “museum” and “survival”, I guess the first notion we get is of survival by memory: lost cultures are preserved, all over the world, in places where their material creations, their art, their achievements are put together and shown as testimonies of their former brilliancy. This concerns both antique civilisations, as we may admire it in Rome or Athens or Cairo or Mexico; or, closer to us chronologically, industrial culture presented within transformed factories in disaffected areas. This same practice is quite as frequent concerning ethnic issues. But this is a virtual survival: it often follows the vanishing of the culture concerned.

What I shall be reflecting on in this presentation is how museums may be used as tools for granting actual, physical and spiritual, survival of endangered cultures, as one of the possible means to struggle for them. In this presentation, I shall dwell on Yuri Vella's experience.

Yuri Vella is a quite well-known Siberian fighter for rights of indigenous. In Estonia, we have had the opportunity of meeting him in 2000, when he spent two weeks mostly in Tartu. Yuri Vella is a Forest Nenets: his people live in Western Siberia's remotest taiga areas and has been directly threatened, in the last decades, by massive oil drilling and all the destruction it brings around.

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The problem Yuri Vella seeks a solution to

In order to understand the challenge Yuri Vella tries to face and the role he wants to give museums, I must present with more details the context he is dealing with: in his region, the basin of the River Agan, huge oil reserves have been discovered at the end of the 1960ies. As we know, oil was and is for Russia of vital importance: Western Siberian oil was thus drilled without any consideration for nature or people living in it. Moreover, it dragged to Siberia hundreds of thousands workers, who ignored all about traditional cultures and considered themselves the discoverers of an empty area, which therefore belonged exclusively to them. Towns were built on reindeer pastures, on sacred groves, on indigenous cemeteries. Natives were gathered in villages. Unused skills tended to disappear. Russian started to replace local languages in everyday communication, even between the natives themselves. Most of the Nenets, and their neighbours the Khanty, had to work for the collective farm in the village. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought here only additional harms: oil drilling was not stopped, but the village kolkhoze disappeared in bankruptcy. No more jobs were available any more. At the same time, some new political opportunities appeared: in 1992, a law by the regional government gave the natives who wished to live a traditional way of life the use of their kin's traditional territories with extended rights over the land. Oil drillers needed now permission to use the native's land and they attempted to obtain it by promising the natives financial and other compensations. Some of the natives nowadays gave their lands away and may live without having to do anything. Inactivity, on the other hand, is a good soil for alcoholism, which is destroying the people's physical and spiritual health. From this very rapid overview, it appears, I think, clearly, that survival not only as an ethnic group but also as individuals requires efforts in different directions: outward and inward.

There is work to be done towards the oil companies in order to compel them to take into account the indigenous people's interests. This may be done through negotiations and compromise but also through pressure strong enough to compel reluctant oil drillers to respect their results. The Natives must also be active towards State institutions, which set the

overall rules and might protect the weakest partner: on their native lands, these peoples represent nowadays about 1%. And they must not ignore the population of incomers, who live near them mostly ignoring all about them: many abuses are not of political but of cultural meaning. Finally, nothing may be saved, unless the people concerned are willing to be active themselves: they are uprooted people, who live schizophrenically in a world whose values are very different from their traditional ones, without having totally lost the latter. If they keep despairing, there is no hope left.

Yuri Vella has a degree in poetry from a Moscow University and is a recognised poet; since the early nineties, he is a reindeer herder who lives mainly in the taiga; he is considered as the spiritual leader of the Forest Nenets and, thus, has been fighting in multiple ways for the welfare of the two native ethnic groups living in this area. Among other activities, he has created a museum.

Varyogan open air museum: a living memory

I mentioned there were in Varyogan many people who had been obliged to leave their camps in the taiga and to settle in the village. Thinking of them, Yuri Vella opened in 1988 an open air museum in his village. He started by transferring the abandoned taiga huts and other buildings up to the village, where a large space was allocated for this aim. Here, the main dimension emphasised by Vella is that each item belongs to concrete persons. This connection between the real people, who lived settled in Varyogan, and their former homes was not to be diluted, on the contrary: they were given back what was their own. Vella's intention was clearly to reconcile, through the museum, the uprooted people with their roots, materialised by their former dwellings often built by the people themselves.

Yuri's museum exhibits are thus polysemantic. The traditional meaning, the storage and preservation of items, has not lost any importance: the collections had an objective value, and could be advantageously shown to the museum's visitors. But for Yuri, the items' meaning is first of all "owner-oriented": they still belong to the persons they are connected with. These persons have free entrance in their house,

they may (and are invited to) store in it the objects that were significant in traditional life but that do not serve any purpose in village life. These houses may be used for receiving guests, for lodging visitors for the night. Fires were made the stoves, tea was prepared and food was cooked in the traditional way. The people could recover part of the life they were forced to quit, could practice traditional skills and teach them to their children and grandchildren. So for Yuri Vella, the museum is a living identity marker.

Another aspect which was important for Yuri Vella is memory. The items do not only “belong” to somebody. They are the living remembrance of their author, of his or her skills, of his or her life. Yuri Vella likes to “play Sherlock Holmes”: by observing a detail of a reindeer harness, he is able to tell you lots of information about the owner and the author: how old he was, how skilled, how many reindeer (approximately) he had in his herd. This most spectacular exercise is not only a show ruled by the wish to impress: he wants people to feel that objects are full of signs, that they are actually culture-bearers, memory bearers and this is to be transmitted to the following generations.

This is how Yuri Vella understands museums. Now how did this system work? Does it function at all?

Because it was a private imitative, at first it worked pretty well. The people in Varyogan, especially the elder ones, started indeed to use the rooms as Yuri hoped they would. It was a practical place to store objects that were just a nuisance in village homes. The problems came from the authorities. The official understanding of a “museum” required that several rules would be fulfilled. The items were to be secured. It was not acceptable to have rooms permanently opened, to have the exhibits touched by anybody. Official labelling as a museum killed the life in it. Yuri Vella, compelled to write regular reports and to ensure security, was no longer interested in a museum like all the others. He resigned his post as director and turned to other kinds of activities.

When thinking about the failure of his attempt, we may easily identify a pattern in which individuals are smashed by institutional machines and oral tradition is replaced by written culture. In spite of Yuri being a writer, he confided in practice and oral transmission: he did not envisage writing

long descriptions of the exhibits and all the data about their author and their owners. He acted according to the logics of his traditional worldview. But this mental approach was not recognised and the experiment was to be concluded.

Life as museum

Perhaps even more curious is another dimension of Yuri Vella's notion of what is a museum: one that no authority can deny him. He often declares that his life is a museum. What does that mean?

In 1991, Yuri Vella resigned his job as a hunter, bought ten reindeer and went back to his ancestors' lands to resume traditional life in the taiga and learn to be a reindeer herder. At the beginning, he and his wife lived in the traditional conic tent, later they built step by step different camps, with all you need for living a comfortable life and even a school for their grandchildren. Now Yuri Vella wants this place to be a public one. Indeed, there are almost always visitors at his camp. I have spent myself five months with his family; several films have been shot there; Russian, German, Estonian, Hungarian and Finnish linguists and ethnographers have been hosted at his place. But here are also journalists, representatives of local administrations, project managers asking for advice, not to talk about neighbours, friends, or even people from the closest oil industries who happen to drive nearby. Everybody may be accommodated for the night in the same conditions as the hosts and live for a little while the same kind of life, partaking to the household tasks, respecting the special rules of the place. Everybody may have a look on Yuri dealing with his reindeer and his wife with her household.

This openness of his whole life is what Yuri calls "life as a museum". He pretends having been inspired by the French notion of "écomusée", but Yuri Vella's approach is both radical and broader than the boldest attempts. It is radical, because what he intends to show is his own actual life, which is totally exposed to other people, without any kind of privacy. In ecomuseums, you may see living handicraft, but the people you admire do their job, get their wages and go home. Yuri Vella does not get any wages, although he pretends he should get paid for his "job", and he is at

home. He accepts the constraint this approach requires, for the sake of a higher goal. But it is very hard to bear for his family. On the other hand, his understanding of ecomuseum is broader, for it encloses not only the past, but mainly the present as a way to prepare the future. Yuri Vella wants to answer the following scenario: he is persuaded his region is developing according a provisional model. He is expecting the end of oil reserves and then, the companies will go away, the money that flows so liberally at the moment will disappear, the incomers will go to more profitable areas and the natives will remain alone. They will then need all the traditional skills to survive. This need is not massively felt nowadays, but he is witnessing its very beginning: unemployed natives that have nothing to do in the villages start looking for better life in the taiga, where, by hunting and fishing, and breeding reindeer, they may live with dignity without starving. Ensuring continuity means give the upcoming generations a chance for choice.

Yuri Vella's life seen as museum is addressed both to their own people and to aliens. He intends to convince Khantys and Nenets it is possible to live a traditional life taking advantage of many achievements of contemporary life: he has an electric generator, an electric oven, a video cassette recorder, a television, two computers. An example of his syncretic way of forging his model is the school issue: he wants his grandchildren to be brought up in contact with nature, still receiving a proper education and therefore founded a school in the taiga, where his camp's and the neighbours' children may attend lessons according to the official school programme and take exams twice a year at Varyogan school. His "museum" is not a nostalgic remake of old times, it is a way to adapt to modernity, preserving the framework, but allowing the inside elements to transform.

Towards outsiders, Yuri Vella "works" as a guide: it is sometimes difficult to make a clear distinction between acting and being. In presence of occasional guests, Yuri Vella often exaggerates his traditional chief's attitude, in order to impress people and to transmit his message in a most efficient way. He tries to make visitors aware of the dignity connected with traditional way of life, of natural respect for the environment. He wants to gain respect and understanding.

How can we assess this second way of fighting through the museum idea? The impact of Yuri Vella within his community is certain, but

ambiguous. His personality is very much respected, but not without some scepticism or even irritation. His is often seen as too radical. The world he endeavours to create in the wild is often seen as imposed by dictatorship to his wife and daughters. Still, I am sure that, in spite of these reserves, his approach has a stimulating influence on his people. As far as the outsiders are concerned, Yuri's attitude is certainly more univocally efficient. The persons who visit him are held under his spell: as he is perfectly familiar with their worldview, and aware of their prejudices, he is able to play the most adapted role to guarantee the reception of his message. Respect for nature, sustainable development, parsimonious use of resources – all these are sensitive themes nowadays for Westerners – and in this respect, I would include Russians among the bearers of Western culture. For oil companies, he is a nuisance. They may win trials against him, but they cannot easily get rid of him: his openness grants him huge support abroad and this is a most effective protection.

So Yuri's challenge has led to some results, first of which is his own safety. As for the impact of Yuri's strategy upon his global aims, their remoteness does not allow us to assess it so far. It will probably become clear when his grandchildren are grown ups. Till then let us just appreciate that museums may be seen as much more active tools than they usually are.