

Marko Stojanović

Processes of Change in Ethnographic Museology: Musealization and Exhibition of Objects of New Materials

In recent decades, ethnographic museology has been rapidly expanding the field in which the contemporary environment recognizes the value systems of members of a folk culture that no longer exists today. Processes of change in conceptualizations have enabled museums to become active participants and creators of social changes. The exhibition project of the Belgrade Ethnographic Museum, entitled *Plastic Nineties*, posed several questions and gave avant-garde answers to them. The question was about the anthropological “ethnographization” of the immediate past in the mirror of today’s undoubted permeation of urban, rural, and suburban communities, at the same time communicated through polymerized objects, the so-called plastic materials. In this way, the unwritten rules of ethnographic museology on the exclusive musealization of objects older than half a century, which are entirely made of natural materials, technologically processed in home, manufacturing or artisan production conditions, were challenged.

Key words: ethnographic Museology, Belgrade Ethnographic Museum, plastic, contemporary ethnography, cultural and social changes

Recent changes in the conceptualization of museum practices during which contemporary museums became active participants and creators of social change are also visible in museum practices in Serbia, as well as in the Belgrade Ethnographic Museum. Initial changes in Belgrade Ethnographic Museum were triggered by taking into account all-encompassing socio-economic changes of traditional rural societies that started in the second half of the twentieth century and were later followed by the introduction of urban population into museum practice and a need to reconsider the issue of museum objects and mobile cultural goods, which are vital for every museology including the ethnographic one. Museum practices of Belgrade Ethnographic Museum which were previously mostly connected with rural population and their material culture, cased to be conceptualized through the conservative museum dogmas of the previous times¹ and started to ask new questions about the nature of *ethnographic objects* and their function (Gavrilović 2007: 119-120, Dušković 2006). These new practices were best seen through the introduction of objects made from new materials and new technologies and the emphasis was put on their production and everyday usage, as well as on their cultural significance and symbolic communication.

¹ Traditional understanding of ethnographic museology excluded artificial materials and industrially made objects from its scope focusing exclusively at objects made from natural material and produced through non-industrial techniques and local crafts.

I find the exhibition project *Plastic 1990s* (Stojanović, Matić 2010) paradigmatic for the above-mentioned changes. This exhibition marked the beginning of rapid structural changes in the conceptualization of ethnographic museology and signalled possible directions for the future changes in understanding and conceptualization of ethnographic museum objects. The project was an important part of the development strategy of the Centre for projects and development of Belgrade Ethnographic Museum² and its main aim was to represent segments of everyday life of certain groups of people in Serbia at the end of twentieth century. Exhibition objects were understood as a medium through which it is possible to understand and feel the times of Serbian international isolation and direct and indirect participation in the wars in former Yugoslavia. In the other words, those objects were understood as the material testimony through which is possible to communicate dominant values of recent turbulent national past (Stojanović, Matić 2010: 6). The key aspect of the exhibition was that all the exhibited objects were made of plastics through which the authors tried to communicate the main characteristics of the represented period.³ Under the banner “Cheap awakening of pricy memories” the exhibition aimed to evoke the most important cultural symbols of the 1990s and develop multilayer communication with different social and age groups of prospective audience.

In that sense, *Plastic 1990s* were a radically new concept in Serbian ethnographic museology for several reasons. They challenged unwritten rules of ethnographic museology that only objects worthy of museum collections and exhibition are made of natural materials and produced at home, by local craftsmen or in small non-industrialized manufactures.⁴ At this exhibition, in addition to the plastic objects from the 1990s, the curators included a historical context of the use of plastic in socialist Yugoslavia into the main exhibition narrative in order to explain rapid expansion of the use plastic materials in socialism and their role in the construction of the *new socialist man*. Those materials included women nylon tights – pantyhose (*najlon čarape*) (Stojanović, Matić 2010: 51-52, 54) and unisex jogging jackets (*šuškavci*) (Stojanović, Matić 2010: 57-58) that became

² In 2008 Centre become a part of mid-term development plan of Belgrade Ethnographic Museum. That plan included several points of action. First, the reconstruction of cultural heritage in a sense of integration of so called material and non-material cultural heritage in a single structural and meaningful whole and overcoming of an artificial division between those two aspects of culture. Second, reconceptualization of heritage in a sense that it should include modern as well as traditional culture and dialogue between the two and overcome the artificial cultural and historical distance that creates cultural ideal types and treat culture as a treasure that should be preserved (Stojanović, Matić 2009: 314).

³ The widest filed of museological research and documentation of civilizational role of plastics is presented in the museums that deal with plastics and its use (*Bakelite Museum*, Baerlocher 1998, Cannon 2017), as well as in those that do not deal exclusively with history, technology and role of the various forms of plastics (Plastic Garbage Project 2012, *Röhsska Museum of Design and Craft, Ad Plast*), but basically deal with anthropological aspects of the role of plastics in contemporary world.

⁴ We can see the start of this change in the purchase and musealization of objects made and used after the Second World War that were made partly (rarely completely) from plastics. The second phase of the introduction of the plastic material into ethnographic museology was the inclusion of various plastic objects into the main narratives of temporary exhibitions in order to serve as a testimony of an era, to stress the main ideas of the exhibitions and to reinforce their structural and communicational whole. These processes testify about the “anthropologization” of Serbian ethnology from the 1980s onwards (Kovačević 2001).

iconic markers of the 1990s and which we described as *West in the East* and *East in the West* (Stojanović, Matić 2010: 58). Furthermore, exhibition featured a series of objects made from PVC plastics that were used in all spheres of life becoming an important part of consumer culture of late socialism (Stojanović, Matić 2010: 58-60).

Plastic 1990s were important musicological marker in two directions. On the one hand, by stressing the symbolic and commutative role of plastics in the processes of identity construction, the exhibition signalized structural changes in traditional museology and showed possible directions for its new development. On the other hand, this project showed that technological characteristics and usage of objects of new, “non-ethnographic materials” can be subjects of independent musicological analysis and exhibition. Furthermore, cultural contextualization of those objects will enable us to turn ethnographic museums from “graveyard of objects” to the “house of ideas”. Taking all that into account, I believe that it is possible to introduce only one form of plastics, for example silicon in anthropological and musicological analysis and exploration. There are several directions through which we can approach cultural role and importance of silicon as a significant phenomenon of contemporary civilization and use it as tool for further modernization of Serbian museology.⁵ Everyday silicon objects were already included and analysed in the *Plastic 1990s*, but their further exhibition may expanded its scope in order to include subcultural social groups (first and foremost those of the youth), which are currently on the margins of ethnographic museology. In those sense colloquial expressions such as silicones, Silicon Valley, sponsor-seekers (*sponzoruše*)⁶ that are part and parcel of contemporary Serbian urban folklore and constant debates about the extent and usage of silicone implants in reconstructive and aesthetic surgery (see: *Frost*) confirm the idea of Tomislav Šola (2011: 249) that in contemporary, postmodern civilization everything deserves to be treated as a musicological object.

Furthermore, the use of silicone in contemporary musicological discourse can be conceptualized through the analysis of the various aspects of contemporary postmodern civilization in which we currently live and which produce enormous amount of information in constant flow and question all known systems of value. Similarly, in the last few decades our everyday life has been bombarded with sexualized media images that promote the ideal of “eternal youth”. Sex has become one of the most important factors in the “market of emotions” which manipulate and feed beauty industry including fashion, cosmetics, fitness and healthy life style equipment of all sorts. Those industries shape

⁵ In the contemporary civilization silicon plays a great role. It has a wide use in the construction of everyday and medical objects, while it also serves as material for musicological conservation (Unger et al. 2001: 377).

⁶ Starting from the last decade of the twentieth century, silicone became a symbolic marker for implants made from this material. Those implants are primarily used in aesthetic surgery for the enlargement of female breasts. Furthermore, part of Belgrade Street Strahinjića Bana that contains large number of café bars that are marker of social status, is usually called Silicone Valley – the name which was given to the place due to the huge number of women with silicone implants who frequently visit those bars. These women are usually understood as sponsor-seekers who use body mutilations such as silicone implants in order to become mistresses or lovers of (mostly older) well off men.

and form new needs of various social groups who then strive to achieve those ideals and adopt them as a crucial part of their life style.⁷

It is widely known that twentieth century surpassed almost all previous human experiences and it is necessary to talk about considerable extension of culturally produced human needs and ways of their fulfilment that are enabled by rapid technological developments. These needs that are dictated by contemporary historical and cultural circumstances found their fulfilment, among other avenues, through the various interventions in and on the human body. Different beauty ideals connected with the body that varies across time and cultures have been marked and included in the practices of museology from the very beginning of museum existence. Museums exhibited and interpreted body culture mostly through archaeological interpretation of prehistory,⁸ ancient Greek and Rome,⁹ and medieval times.¹⁰ But we can also talk about museological conceptualization of aesthetics and beauty in the context of art and art history (Janson 1996) especially in the light of far reaching changes of aesthetic criteria in Renaissance that brought into forefront human body, which then remained a focus of Western art practices and their subsequent musealization till today (Janson 1996: 348-372). Ethnography and ethnology focused on aesthetics of traditional and illiterate societies which helped the redefinition of Western aesthetic ideals as universal and fostered greater inclusion of culturally specific aesthetics ideals into museum practices.¹¹ Thus, today it is a common knowledge that body intervention and mutilations are defined by cultural prerogatives and technological knowledge of every given society. We can distinguish various forms of body interventions, treatments and their final functions. Thus, we can easily differentiate between interventions made by surgery of body and face, dentist surgery, permanent or temporary make up, various implements and/or jewellery in a strict sense of the term. Surgery and dental surgery encompass scarification; removal or reshaping of teeth; ear, lips, body, arms and legs implants; sexual mutilation such as clitoridectomy, incision, ritual castration in case of prostitution and so on. The second group of cultural interventions

⁷ Technological advancements play a crucial role in the emergence and the development of various models of body mutilation and adornment in human civilization. In an ever expanding global *beauty industry* silicones are acquiring a crucial cultural role, since its chemical structure, which is chemically and thermally stable, has oily and thick structure suitable for various body interventions. In addition, the human body reacts positively to silicone implants which made this material the most widely used material in implant industry. In that way, ability to be produced in huge series and their cheap price, made silicon objects crucial plastic material in ever expanding global consumer society after the Second World War and silicone become a symbol of new life style.

⁸ The most famous is Venus of Willendorf, figurines from the Neolithic Vinča culture and other similar archeological evidences.

⁹ Art world of Europe was largely defined by Greek sculptures and their further echoes and developments, which together with Roman mosaics and paintings were crucial for establishment of the desired beauty models of male and female bodies.

¹⁰ If we look at the thousand years of the development of Byzantium art and its remains in numerous museums worldwide, we can easily notice the aesthetics and idealized models of big Christian Empire.

¹¹ Good example of this type of museological conceptualization is the exhibition *Body Art: Marks of Identity* (11/1999 – 5/2000) in the American Museum of Natural History.

on the body that produce permanent or temporary change of body characteristic include: tattooing,¹² make up of all sorts and various forms of jewellery for face, head and body.

Ritual-symbolic or purely functional body interventions are among the oldest cultural forms through which humans used culture to signify the victory of culture and suppression of nature. Needs for body interventions had two main reasons. First, they can be caused by specific external forces that cause injuries or other dysfunctions. Second, they can be performed because of psychological status of a person and/or cultural dispositions of different societies. Generally speaking, needs that were caused by some sort of external coercion include injuries sustained in struggle with natural soundings or in wars, or those occurring during the work and caused various gears and machines. On that basis, "body interventions" caused by external forces include all forms of traditional reconstructive surgery procedures and use of prosthetic and other artificial equipment.¹³ The aim and the desired result of those interventions are partial or complete reconstruction of body functions which should enable reintegration of a person in a society. Contemporary example of musicological treatment of the subject of social reactions to body redefinitions that include various artificial implants and prostheses can be seen at the exhibition entitled *Reconstructing Lives* (Gibb 2012) at Scottish War Museum.

In that light of the above mentioned arguments about contemporary construction of human needs and ideals of body aesthetics that are harder and harder to achieve, as well as museological efforts to take into account those changes in contemporary world, I find it important to mention almost forgotten historical fact about the first surgery intervention that insert tubule of silicon into human body.¹⁴ Market products made from plastics entered the history of medicine about a half and century ago playing an important role in the technological advancement of medicine and quickly becoming widely used in *beauty industry*. In that way they became a part of everyday cultural context and achieved a status of a civilizational icon. If we put the history of silicon use in a contemporary museum context, we can easily recognize cultural path that use of silicone passed from necessity to aesthetics and beauty ideals.¹⁵

Inclusion of plastics as a paradigmatic new material to ethnographic museology and its exhibition and contextualisation aims to represent cultural context from which those objects have been taken. Musealization of silicon requires special care from curators who should adequately define its musicological context making it attractive for various groups of visitors. In that sense the exhibition should contain information about rising percentage of silicone implants use in all type of surgery, social consequences of its use and analysis of new identities that are directly or indirectly connected with its use.

¹² Good examples of the musealization of the millennium old art of tattooing can be seen in Amsterdam (Amsterdam Tattoo Museum), Yokohama (Horiyoshi III Tattoo Museum, Wilkins 2015) and Baltimore (Baltimore Tattoo Museum).

¹³ The processes at issue here are congenital disorders or dysfunctions made after an illness.

¹⁴ First medical use of silicone was an implant tube that redirected liquid from the brain to thoracic cavity. Today there are around 2 million patients who have various silicone made implants. Silicone has been used in medicine for more than forty years. The long history of its use as well as numerous tests of its safety proved silicone as one of the most important materials in reconstructive medicine.

¹⁵ Contemporary division between *reconstructive* and *aesthetic* surgery speaks for the above mentioned statement, which is important for everyday as well as for museological communication.

Contemporary anthropology deals with the construction and establishment of identities in their local settings and I will start from the premises that ethnography, ethnology and ethnographic museology deal with identity issues in one way or another. Looking at the exhibition catalogues of Belgrade Ethnographic Museum we can notice a wide use of the following words: Serbian, folk, traditional, patriarchal, etc., which clearly indicate curators' attitude towards the group they study. However, in the recent times curators attitudes towards the importance and function of ethnography and museology in general has changed, as well as the discourses, models and concepts through which they communicate with the visitors. In that sense, it should be said that in the recent years museological concepts shifted from the "objective", outside and professional views that treated the nation as a whole (this comes from the very definition of ethnology as *the science about nation (people)*) towards the representation of the insiders' understanding of their own culture. For that reason, I want to mention here two exhibitions: *Costumes and equipment of football supporters* and *Real words of phantasy* that deals with contemporary issues and make museological conceptualization of subcultural social groups.¹⁶ Those exhibition projects prove that Serbian museology has already incorporated contemporary anthropological trends into their agendas and both disciplines are now working in the same framework of non-material cultural heritage.

If we conceptualize silicone in the above mention context and follow the idea that culture is "a bundle of conceptual and real procedures and products through which human societies regulate their bio-physical givens in accordance with their own assumptions and ideas about themselves, other people, living beings, imagined world and the world in general and through which people organize their material surroundings necessary for everyday life" (Žikić 2011: 8), we can include various practices of silicone use for the improvement and achievement of current cultural ideals into the corpus of non-material cultural heritage.

Although in the previous times, various body mutilations had been use to mark social status – power and authority as well as in rites of passage denoting courage, maturity and new identity, domination and subordination, we should not forget that body mutilations today get their best expression in popular and media culture that promote culture of body and sex as the major tools for self-promotion and communication. As I have already said, those cultural concepts have been part of museum exhibitions for the long time, but they gained a new momentum in the recent years with the opening of the specialized museum such as the *Museum of Sex* in New York or *Sex Museum* in Amsterdam. Following the qualitative and quantitative rise of silicone implant use in medicine for aesthetic purposes, we can assume that those practices fulfil new cultural needs of contemporary civilization and we should take them seriously.

¹⁶ The exhibition *Costumes and equipment of Football Supporters* was made as the reaction to Heysel Stadium Disaster when tens of people died in the stadium riot. It should be noted that this exhibition anticipated the future development and social and cultural influence of contemporary groups of football supporters in Serbia. On the other hand, it could be said that the exhibition the *Real world of Phantasy* did not only present cultural importance of science fiction literature, but also pointed out to the existence of informal groups of readers of this literature genre.

If we follow musicological and anthropological theories, we can look at the eroticism as a main reason for implant use and apply three main directions in its analysis. Those directions can be seen as separate analytical units, but together they make a holistic view of human sexuality. First direction of analysis contains aesthetic criteria, the second one discusses real improvement of sexual functions and the third one introduces intuitively shaped imageries of desirable body images. The third interpretive direction has its roots in the system of values of traditional societies. In that context we can discuss aesthetic ideals of female bodies that use silicone implants to enhance breasts and buttocks in order to achieve “erotic golden ratio” (specific breasts-waist-hips ratio), which was seen as a marker of female fertility. In male bodies, silicone implants are primarily used in buttocks and the lower leg in order to enhance muscles responsible for sexual endurance. The fact that silicone implants are used for the body parts that are usually marked as important indicators of secondary sexual characteristics and sexual stamina shows the ways in which artificial materials play a part in shaping the sexual roles in our society. Thus, we can say that there is a globally supported archetype of woman as object and man as dominant and strong subject.

Anthropological theories and musicological conceptualisation offer several cultural meanings of silicone implants. The most important are: media promoted ideal of eternal youth, historical moment in Western Civilization that asks for return to nature and abandonment of all cultural and mediated products of our time and finally, aspirations towards impossible ideals in everyday and sexual communication. The use of silicone implants for non-corrective purposes tell us about the desire to enhance and aestheticize naturally given characteristics. Thus, the ever improving aesthetic interventions that include augmentation of female breasts and lips, male breast, buttocks and calf muscles, as well as the interventions on buttocks that make them appear more rounds how that contemporary “silicone love call” use the discourse of “natural than nature” to communicate its main message. Contrary to the idea from the previous time of human history, when beautification procedures – make up, scarification, hair dying, etc., basically spoke about cultural overcoming of natural givens and construction of nonverbal messages, contemporary use of silicone intramuscular implants that are put under the skin, deny the very existence of that message and points to the new models of communication through bodily identities.

Notorious duplicity of plastics, whose chemical degradation lasts for centuries, while the duration of its cultural use is usually very short (mostly because of the very characteristics of the material: fragility, brittleness, easy tearing)¹⁷ make it very interesting as a material which serve to prolong human life and redefine human relation with death. I do not think that we should discuss post-mortem adornment specifically. Post-mortem customs are part of archaeological and anthropological indicators of human attempts to overcome death, while at the same time numerous psychological and cultural research and theories, from Freud concepts of Eros and Thanatos onwards, show that death is closely related the concepts of sex and reproduction. In addition, the new trends of museum exhibition of body remains speak about the necessity to include

¹⁷ The cultural use of plastics is best illustrated by the absurdly short life of plastics bags – from shop to home.

silicone body interventions into museological practices.¹⁸ This trend started in the last decade of twentieth century with the exhibition project *Body Worlds*, that included the exhibition of more than 200 bodies, organs and systems of organs. The project was enabled by the development of the techniques of *plastination* that was invented by Professor Gunther von Hagens who was also the author of the exhibition.

Although plastination does not only mean use of silicone in the process of permanent preservation of human tissue, the process is important because it enables the exhibition of real, revived human bodies in real movement. This leads towards the development of new museological, communicative and broader cultural model represented in the exhibitions entitled *Bodies revealed* and *Bodies – the Exhibition*, which used liquid silicone for conversation. Use of silicone in conceptualisation and making of these exhibitions in a certain sense make a change in the communication through human bodies after death, but they are first and foremost the continuation of the millennium old human attempts to preserve the body for eternity and/or life after death (the best testimony for these attempts are Egyptian pyramids).

If we take cultural and historical approaches in order to analyse those phenomena we can find a several paths that lead to the cultural conceptualization of *the Body* in contemporary Western civilization. From mummification of dead rulers in the ancient Egypt where technical and technological expertise got combined with the priests' paths of sacred ritual practices through the concepts of saints' non-disintegrated and sacred bodies that are believed to be preserved only through the holy intervention without any human influence, to the preservation and exhibition of the bodies of undying leaders and "saints of communism", we can talk about mummified bodies as a specific medium fit for museological representation and cultural solidification of cultural/religious/ideological systems of values (Gavrilović 2007: 58-60).

Patterns that we can use to talk about museological communication parameters and meanings of *Bodies*, indicates that there is unintended culturally produced eclecticism that can be read as a specific inversion of the above mentioned models. In the nonreligious context, a socially accepted criterion of holy nature of Egyptian rules is replaced by individual choice about the use of the body after death. This was then use in the process of contemporary conservation where the Christian concept of God's intervention has been replaced by scientific and technological preparation of human remains. Communist practices of mythologization and preservation of *Leaders'* remains was actually based on an older Christian practice that achieved the new atheistic twist, while in the contemporary museums holy bodies are replaced by the exhibitions of ordinary with the possibility that every body becomes part of an exhibition after death. On another level, the fact that human remains have become mediums for exhibition complexes (due to the techniques of plastination or silicon intrusion into death bodies) and part of local, wider and global cultural surrounding, we can speak about new relations thorough which understand non-dead bodies.

¹⁸ We can talk about museological justified exhibition of human remains on the basis of the fact that in the last several years there were many cases of the return of human remains to local communities from which they were taken in archeological and anthropological exhibition of imperial times (Gavrilović 2007: 58-60).

In the above mentioned tripartite representation of body remains and their preservation, the main common element is a strong emphasis on culture and cultural belonging of the bodies regardless the presence or absence of religious context, although human remains should be primarily part of natural surroundings. Seen in the same way the exhibited *Bodies* of the unknown deceased despite the fact that they have been put into planned and museologically constructed communication through cultural intervention, still seem to belong to nature as the emphasis is on those aspects of bodily mutilations which are under the skin and thus invisible. On the other hand, easily recognizable technologically and chemically caused position of the exhibited mummies,¹⁹ that emphasize the distinction between death as a mirror of natural processes on the one hand and culture embodied in post-mortem adornment and clothes on the other hand, is resolved through the frozen movement of *the Body* with strong emphasis on the lack of cultural symbols. The use of silicone enables hypothetically endless and repeated meetings between viewers and “the inside” of the human body and it also sends a nonverbal message about the improved nature (those that avoid decomposition after death). Thus, I believe that the very perfection of silicone represents new system of values that caused new museological and wider cultural conceptualisation of death human Bodies. Finally, if we understand exhibited bodies on the move as a medium of nonverbal communication, they become part of a dynamic exchange of information constructed in a discourse that define “body redefinitions” among sportsmen, entertaining and media stars, and all those who commercialize their bodies in that way.

Evolutionary and persistent ways in which the objects from new materials got integrated in new museology, shows the structural processes of change in the understanding of ethnographic objects in contemporary cultural surroundings and asks if there are chronologically, technologically and culturally and/or historically conditioned boundaries for interheretiological combination of various museological conceptualizations that come from disciplines including applied art and science/technology. Museological projects such as *Plastic 1990s* certainly prove that there is a whole new type of objects made of technologically various materials that are widely accepted in our civilization and which make an important achievement of 20th and 21st century. As such they should be included in contemporary musealization and exhibition processes and should be protected as part of our cultural heritage. *Plastic 1990s* presented a specific system of value of a singular cultural and chronological period and offered new communicational structures that should be applied to the permanent exhibitions in Belgrade Ethnographic Museum. This exhibition was not only an attempt to modernize Serbian museology, but it also showed that musealization of new material is not a destruction of old ethnographic museum practices, but rather its advancement.

In the contemporary time of museum boom and literal musealization of reality, every object can be a communication marker for the culture it comes from as well for those in which it has been put in use, which makes silicone a good example for a multi-layered

¹⁹ I state that mummies are part of public communication as the Egyptian patterns of hidden, holy and mummified ruler, which symbolize the pledge for the eternity in the culture he/she belongs to, became contextualized in contemporary civilization through museum exhibition.

museum mediator. Taking into account that on the one hand in a cultural exchange the whole structure of objects connected by their use can speak about a particular cultural context, while on the other hand one single material and the technologies of its cultural production together with their use, symbolical and communicative value can do the same thing, we can say that the objects made from one material can talk about the whole culture in which they were produced and used. In that way, new materials and their possible museological contextualisation helps further foundation of century long processes of establishment of ethnographic museology in Serbia. In addition, global use and cultural position of new materials, including silicone, enables us to represent marginal groups in contemporary museum practices and show new aspects of traditional and contemporary societies which should help further development of new hertiological practices and inter-museum communication.

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Процеси промена у етнографској музеологији: музеализација и излагање предмета од нових материјала

Сажетак

Недавне промене у концептуализацији етнографске музејске праксе покренуте су интеграцијом музејских репрезентација о последицама свеобухватних социо-економских промена у музејску делатност и теоретску музеолошку подлогу. Процеси током којих су савремени етнографски музеји постали активни учесници и креатори друштвених промена поставили су питање етнографског ексклузивитета традиционалних сеоских друштава и назначили потребу истраживања и репрезентовања урбаних садржаја те увођење културе градског становништва у музејску праксу. Потребом да се преиспита питање етнографских музејских предмета и покретних културних добара назначени су одговори који су од виталног значаја за сваку музеологију, па и за етнографску. Изложбени пројекат Пластичне деведесете у Етнографском музеју у Београду постао је парадигма горе наведених процеса и означио могућност брзих структурних промена у концептуализацији етнографске музеологије. Пројекат је био, радикално новим концептом, назнака у стратегији развоја којом се у питање доводе неписана правила етнографске музеологије да су само предмети направљени од природних материјала и произведени код куће, од стране домаћих занатлија или у малим неиндустријализованим мануфактурама, етнографски предмети. Репрезентацијом културе на основу експоната искључиво израђених од пластике, изузев пластичних предмета из последње деценије 20. века, кустоси су у главни изложбени наратив укључили историјски контекст употребе пластике у социјалистичкој Југославији. Брза експанзија употребе пластичних материјала у социјализму играла је улогу у изградњи “новог социјалистичког човека”, а главни ток изложбе, са циљем да представи сегменте свакодневног живота појединих група људи у Србији крајем двадесетог века, постао је значајан музеолошки маркер. С једне стране, наглашавајући симболичку и реалну улогу пластике у процесима изградње идентитета, изложба је сигнализирала структурне промене у традиционалној музеологији и показала могуће правце њеног новог развоја. С друге стране, овај пројекат је показао да технолошке карактеристике и употреба предмета нове, “неетнографске грађе” могу бити предмет самосталне музеолошке анализе и излагања.