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MUSEUMS – KEEPERS AND MEDIATORS OF CULTURAL MEMORY

Museums are increasingly more of communicational spaces fomenting self-reflection and stimulating a critical engagement with historical and social developments. Museums are challenged to update their contribution to public awareness and therefore integrate new media. The article refers to several exhibitions in Germany and their contribution to public discourse. This role of museums remains vital, but it must be translated into conditions of topicality.

Museums hold an important place within the educational structure of a country as institutions where the general public can acquire both knowledge and experience and which serve as “an indispensable cultural memory.”¹ The presentation of “objects” of various kinds arranged in space with appended explanations transmits knowledge and illustrates primarily the past, but also present-day topics. Exhibitions permit better than other media “to address at one and the same time people from a wide range regarding age, knowledge and interests by means of one and the same arrangement of objects in one place. This makes them unique, since not every medium is suited in equal measure for every topic. Even the supposedly universal medium of digital computers can store, change and reproduce texts, pictures, films and sound at will, but it cannot in the same way offer the opportunity of simulating the physical experience of movement in space and the concomitant physical and psychological experience of time in encountering objects and people. Not least they confront visitors with something they cannot, quite literally, compute.”²

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¹ Cf. for example: Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, Munich 1999; Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, Munich 32000.

² Daniel Tyradellis, *Müde Museen. Oder: Wie Ausstellungen unser Denken verändern könnten*, Hamburg 2014, 16-17.

Permanent as well as traveling exhibitions can have all sorts of intentions and goals. They may try to arouse the interest of visitors for the history of their own nation, to effect a change of mind, attitude or behavior, to incite commitment to a cause, to stimulate thoughtfulness and critical self-reflection, or to call for protest against a specific evil. They can also intend to admonish, warn or provoke, for example by presenting inhumane forms of behavior or war crimes. The latter was definitely true for the two traveling exhibitions about *Wehrmacht* crimes during World War II, designed and arranged by historians on behalf of the Hamburg Institute for Social Research, which toured Germany in 1995–1999 and 2001–2004. The subject was the involvement of the *Wehrmacht* in the war of extermination the Nazi regime waged against the Soviet Union as well as the Holocaust and the genocide of Sinti and Romanies. The first exhibition especially provoked a wide-ranging debate throughout German society and fierce controversy about the role of the *Wehrmacht* during the Nazi era.³

In the course of time, different concepts of the museum have developed in Germany and abroad, related to the respective historical context and usually with some specific intention. For example, during the era of developing nation states in the 18th and 19th centuries museums presented documents, artifacts, objects and material evidence from the past whose purpose was primarily to shape the national identity. After the failed revolution of 1848, for example, the *Germanisches Nationalmuseum* at Nuremberg tried to prepare the formation of a German national state by compiling a collection of objects emphasizing shared traits within the German culture and nation.

If museums are not to fixate on a dead and gone past, they need to keep reflecting on and redefining their function and role. A memorandum on the present state of museums in Germany of the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* of 1974 declares in this context: “Museums should not be static. They need to continuously develop, stay in touch with present realities and derive their goals—for research, instruction, meaningful recreational activity as well as the preservation of

³ Due to a number of incorrect legends the original version was withdrawn and a corrected version presented some years later. Because it addressed a taboo subject it has “definitely been the most conspicuous and influential historical exhibition of the 90s both with respect to the number of visitors and to its impact, speaking directly to the individual as well as the national level of memory” (Aleida Assmann, *Konstruktion von Geschichte in Museen*, in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, No. 49 of 3 December 2007, 6-13, here 8).

priceless cultural assets—from this present, with an eye to the future.”⁴

How to effectively communicate the relevance of conserving and presenting selected objects is a question that the authorities responsible for these cultural institutions have to face again and again. Given the precarious financial situation their success, if not indeed their very right to exist, is measured by visitor numbers and increasingly judged according to economic criteria these days. However, it would be wrong to assess the importance of cultural institutions fulfilling important social functions exclusively according to business management rationale. It seems, though, that in Germany museums and the exhibitions they present are still rated highly. One important example was the Hohenstaufen exhibition in Stuttgart in 1977 which marked a turning point in the interest in our country’s history in the postwar period and provided an impetus resulting in enduring changes in the museum scene in Germany. For years, there have also been discussions about a “visible sign” in commemoration of the victims of the expulsion of millions of Germans from the Eastern territories after the war⁵ and more generally, about how meaningful and relevant such memorials can be. In this particular case it is less a question of commemorative culture as of awareness and shame.⁶

During the past 40 years a number of new types of museum have developed, with corresponding new occupational profiles. This shows that museums preserving and transmitting a country’s cultural inheritance present themselves as “an essential, continually expanding

⁴ Cited in Gisela Staupe, *Museen – Orte des Sehens und des Lernens, der Muße und der Bildung*, in: *Das Museum als Lern- und Erfahrungsraum. Grundlagen und Praxisbeispiele* (Schriften des Deutschen Hygiene-Museums Dresden 10), ed. by eadem, Vienna/Cologne/Weimar 2012, 9.

⁵ The controversy revolves around the question whether the inhumanity of the Holocaust ought to be replaced by expulsions as the signature event of the 20th century and how to relate them in our historical consciousness without falsifying history. The *Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen* in Berlin is intended as “a constant reminder to outlaw displacement of peoples everywhere” (catalogue of their exhibition *Erzwungene Wege*, Berlin 2006, 19). Its emphasis differs from that of the earlier exhibition in Bonn “Flucht, Vertreibung, Integration”.

⁶ Cf. Christian Meier, *Zum deutschen Gedenkwesen*, in: Norbert Lammert (ed.), *Erinnerungskultur*, Sankt Augustin 2004, 21-42; Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik*, Munich 2006; Jan Philipp Reemtsma, *Wozu Gedenkstätten?*, in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, No. 25/26 of 21 July 2010, 3-9; Volkhard Knigge, *Zur Zukunft der Erinnerung*, *ibid.*, 10-16.

and changing institution of our contemporary culture.”⁷ Some of them increasingly emphasize the preservation and presentation of objects of everyday life, including even current ones.

Since the digital media today offer all sorts of possibilities for accessing information and collecting knowledge, the museum which is in principle open to the general public is faced with a strong and still growing competition. “Those who only look for individual bits of information or seek networking with others simply do not need the museum anymore and know it. This is one of the reasons the idea of *cultural education* is booming and children and adolescents have become one of the most important target groups. It is true that they are most responsive to social media which do not transmit much in the way of content, but they are also amenable to experience of all sorts of things as long as it is immediate and new [...]. The original contact usually is—or is not—made by a child’s family or school. By now a large part of the educational effort of museums is addressed to classes of school children or groups from day-care centers and so contributes to the huge task of compensating social inequalities by means of education.”⁸

Expectations as well as prejudice concerning museums often result from the image or remembrance of the conventional art museum characterized by “standing before an object and contemplating it, silently moving through a space which exudes erudition, knowing that there is a valid canon intelligible to the educated expert, though rather less to the ordinary person.”⁹ However, this is not the only type of museum any longer or even the predominant one today. The museum as a platform for discourse and the transmission of knowledge continues to be a space for learning and for experiencing specific worlds. It does not exclude any form or type of art work, any style or medium. Its archive keeps it open also to the future. “It offers a sort of Ariadne’s thread through the labyrinth of the past, flags landmarks in the complexity of the present. It determines a course, traces developments, chronologies, genealogies, diachrony. By determining a course the museum makes intelligible a discourse, opens up boundaries and horizons. By means of its archive, by its work on the cultural memory it offers translations from one generation to the next, from one culture to the other. It realizes a sort of intergenerational con-

⁷ Anke te Heesen, *Theorien des Museums zur Einführung*, Hamburg 2013, 9.

⁸ Ibid. The second part of the book is about children and adolescents in museums, complete with practical suggestions for visits.

⁹ Ibid., 15.

tract between dead and living artists, between collecting and exhibiting art.”¹⁰

Two special fields that museums permit the public access to are art and society. In their exhibitions they show visitors the world of art on the regional, national and global level as well as the world as manifested in art, in other words the world the visitors live in. “Special programs for children, the sophisticated accompaniment of their educational services, museum cafés, events, museum shops” have added elements which allow us to experience the museum “not as a dusty junk room of the past, but as part of the every-day world in which we live.”¹¹ Nonetheless, certain types of experience remain the same. A painting on the wall, an object presented in a showcase take the concentrated gaze to become accessible. Attentive observation of the exhibits, by oneself, with the help of the catalogue, the multimedia presentation or discussion with others, is the only way to acquire additional knowledge and deeper insight. “Whereas the natural history museum from the start aimed at storing and communicating specific knowledge,¹² the [Prussian] ideal of the art museum was cultural improvement, a comprehensive formation of all human faculties, a refinement of the mind. All reforms, all criticism refer to this ideal and the forms of presentation it demands.”¹³

Usually museums present a reality which lies in the more or less distant past in order to bring it back to life to be seen and experienced by the senses for the duration of an exhibition. Therefore they try to collect and show originals which epitomize historical substance and as a material memento of another time and space project a special aura. Still, the question remains whether the historical museum as a relic of the 19th and 20th centuries is not going to become less attractive due to the wide-spread use of the new mass media. It remains to be seen “in how far historical exhibitions will satisfy the perception requirements of the 21st century as an attractive staging of

¹⁰ Peter Weibel, Das Museum im Zeitalter von Web 2.0, in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, No. 49 of 3 December 2007, 3-6, here 3.

¹¹ Anke te Heesen, *Theorien des Museums*, 15.

¹² Objects appropriated or purchased by the European colonial powers were collected, deposited, catalogued, studied, arranged and exhibited in ethnological museums founded for the purpose, in order to inform the public about the way of life, the social structures, the customs, the world view and religious/cultic rituals of the peoples in the colonies. Natural history collections allowed a glimpse into the flora and fauna of the overseas territories which were the context of their everyday life.

¹³ Anke te Heesen, *Theorien des Museums*, 15-16.

history, without mutating to a mere multimedia theme park of the past.”¹⁴

ABSTRACTS

Museen sind immer mehr Kommunikationsräume, die das Selbstbewusstsein und die kritische Auseinandersetzung mit geschichtlichen und sozialen Entwicklungen fördern. Sie sind herausgefordert, sich für ihren Beitrag zum sozialen Bewusstsein zu erneuern und dafür auch neue Medien zu integrieren. Der Artikel berichtet von verschiedenen Ausstellungen in Deutschland und ihrem Beitrag zur öffentlichen Diskussion. Diese Aufgabenstellung von Museen ist auch weiterhin wichtig, muss sich aber in die Bedingungen der Aktualität übersetzen.

Museos son cada vez más espacios comunicativos que fomentan la reflexión y estimulan la confrontación crítica con desarrollos históricos y sociales. Los museos se ven desafiados a actualizar su contribución a la conciencia pública y, por lo tanto, tienen que integrar nuevos medios. Este artículo relata algunas experiencias de exposiciones en Alemania y el aporte al discurso público que han podido realizar. Este papel de museos sigue siendo importante, pero tiene que traducirse en las condiciones actuales.

Les musées sont de plus en plus des espaces de communication provoquant la réflexion et suscitant un regard critique sur les développements historiques et sociaux. Ils sont incités à mettre à jour leur contribution à la formation du public et donc à intégrer les moyens de communication modernes. L'article renvoie à différentes expositions en Allemagne et souligne leur contribution au débat public. Ce rôle des musées reste vital, mais il doit être actualisé.

¹⁴ Günther R. Mittler, *Neue Museen – neue Geschichte?*, in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, No. 49 of 3 December 2007, 13-20, here 20.