



Workshop “Transforming the Museum: An Exploration” . Imre Kertész Kolleg Jena, Europäisches Kolleg Jena. Representing the 20th Century, 27.05.2016—28.05.2016.

Reviewed by Monika Heinemann

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Workshop “Transforming the Museum: An Exploration”

In recent years, German historians have become increasingly interested in historical museums as a medium and communication strategies in museums. Furthermore, the debates no longer concentrate exclusively on Western examples; recent developments in East Central and Eastern Europe are taken into account to an increasing extent. The Imre Kertész Kolleg Jena has taken part in these discussions for several years, with its “Cultures of History Forum” focusing on “Exhibiting 20th Century History” See <http://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/exhibitions/> (18.01.2017), as well as a series of workshops dedicated to the topic. After workshops in Cracow in 2012 and Lille / Péronne 2014 The results of the workshop have been published under the title “Exhibiting Violence” (ed. by Joachim von Puttkamer and Dorothea Warneck), *Przegląd historyczny* 107 (2016) 1. , the third meeting took place on 27 and 28 March 2016 at the Jewish Museum in Berlin in joint cooperation with the Europäisches Kolleg Jena. The latter is dedicated to the topic in museum practice, and offers the postgraduate certificate programme “Exhibiting Contemporary History” since 2016. See <http://www.europaeisches-kolleg.uni-jena.de> (18.01.2017).

As JOACHIM VON PUTTKAMER (Jena) pointed out in his introduction, the role of museums has substantially changed during the last decades. Former displays of objects are challenged by alternative ways of representing and staging the past. The use of media and visitor participation challenges the educational aspect that museums once offered. Conveying historical knowledge and stimulating a cognitive process of perception are being replaced by a more emotional museum experience:

instead of dealing with historical facts, museums have become “historical theme parks.” How these developments transform the way societies deal with history and historical memory, he named among the central questions addressed by the workshop. Another aim of the workshop was to discuss the historical backgrounds of these developments and to develop further perspectives on ways of communication in historical museums and exhibitions. As a focal point of the debates he suggested several recently opened, noteworthy museums in Poland, against the background of which it could be discussed how “modernity” in the museum sphere can be interpreted and translated into practice. Afterwards, the participants had the possibility to visit the permanent exhibition of the Jewish Museum. The concept of the current presentation was then critically discussed with the Program Director of the museum, CILLY KUGELMANN (Berlin), with special attention also to the ongoing preparations for a new permanent display.

The second day of the workshop started with a panel dedicated to general tendencies within German and Polish museums. JOACHIM BAUR (Berlin) presented an overview of key developments in the museum sphere of West Germany since the 1960s, before he identified three current phenomena which, according to Baur, ought to be discussed on a wider scale. First, museums are regarded more and more as institutions that address conflicts within societies as subjects of discussion. This development is accompanied by attempts to open up the museum to new visitor groups. Second, interest in participative practises in museums is increasing; yet, as Baur pointed out, the question remains as to how these can be implemented. Third, a more immediate style of

“straight-forward didactics” has returned, for instance in the form of simplistic videos, which communicate one-dimensional narratives. The next speaker, ŁUKASZ MIESZKOWSKI (Jena), attempted to outline current museum trends in Poland, for which he employed the examples of two Warsaw “blockbuster-museums.” He contrasted the affirmative, ideological narrative of the Warsaw Rising Museum with the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews as an example of a “critical museum.”

The second panel was dedicated to “Virtuality and Performativity in Museums.” INKA BERTZ (Berlin) illustrated the development of the musealization of Jewish history in West Germany since 1945. As she pointed out, exhibitions about Jewish history were highly political projects throughout the 1960s and 1970s, whose primary goal was to rehabilitate Jewish culture by highlighting its achievements. German and Jewish History were, thus, to be reconciled with each another. At the end of the 1970s, a phase of efforts towards a reconstruction of the lost Jewish heritage had started. But it was not until the end of the 1980s that first Jewish museums and commemorative projects were completed in which also the Holocaust was given room. These museums have been hybrid institutions from the beginning, acting both as memorials and as collections. Eventually, during the second half of the 1990s, a boom of Jewish museums took place while, at the same time, representational practises have been viewed with growing skepticism. Among current developments, Bertz singled out the question as to how, or in which ways, museums can perform.

In the next presentation, SILKE ARNOLD-DE SIMINE (London) dealt with family photographs in memorial museums. The usage of private photographs in these museums, which – according to Arnold-de Simine – was initiated by the permanent display of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum at the beginning of the 1990s, she saw as an expression of the growing concentration on individual and personal memory. As she argued, such images rehumanize victims by means of an affective view – they reframe them as part of a family, aiming at the creation of an interconnection between the visitors and the history presented. Yet empathy as a tool of communication, at which the use of these media is aimed, is rarely addressed in memorial museums explicitly since they work under the implicit assumption that empathy per se is transformative. With regard to this “affiliate look,” Arnold-de Simine criticized that it does not allow a broader look at historical contexts.

Following, GREGOR LERSCH (Berlin) introduced

two projects directed at the implementation of participative strategies in exhibitions. First, he outlined the efforts at the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg Museum in Berlin to involve the local community in the development of a new permanent display, aiming at the realization of the vision of a genuinely inclusive museum. Next, he presented the project of Polish-German guided tours through the exhibition “Tür an Tür. Polen – Deutschland. 1000 Jahre Kunst und Geschichte” (Door to Door. Poland – Germany. 1000 Years of Art and History, 23 September 2011–9 January 2012, Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin). In his conclusion, Lersch expressed doubts that the buzzword “participation” is still a current paradigm for museum development; he argued, instead, that it is nowadays mainly used in educational programmes.

In the last presentation of the workshop, FOLKER METZGER (Weimar) outlined several educational initiatives of the Klassik Stiftung Weimar in the field of digital media. Aimed primarily at groups of students visiting Weimar, their main challenge is to question and dispute the pre-formed image of the town and to deal with the usage of its heritage in the Nazi-period. Among the projects he presented an augmented reality tool, the app “Zeitfenster Weimar,” as well as “Weimarpedia” as a participative framework. As he argued, the goal of these projects is to give students tools to develop their own way to learn about the past, which so far has proven to be successful.

The final discussion was opened by statements of three museum practitioners, BARBARA KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT (POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Warsaw), CILLY KUGELMANN (Jewish Museum Berlin), and PAWEŁ MACHCEWICZ (Museum of the Second World War, Gdańsk), introducing a comparative perspective on museum trends and their public perception in Western and East Central Europe. Paweł Machcewicz described the current tendency in Poland to view museums as temples, as places that present a sacred version of history, whose shape is heavily discussed. Politicians especially use museums in these debates to convey their view of the past. As just one example, he mentioned the current attack on the Museum of the Second World War and its planned permanent exhibition by the government. With regard to Jewish museums, Cilly Kugelmann pointed out that they are increasingly faced with expectations to function as moral institutions in Germany. Subsequently, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett posed a key question, which was widely debated afterwards. The question as to what museums actually are good at should, according to her, be the starting point to any exhibition concept. In her view,

it is not the communication of information but rather the presentation of narratives as a powerful means of stimulating curiosity, and of opening up ways for exploration. Against this backdrop, the participants of the workshop also considered the role and the use of objects in exhibitions, in the face of the ongoing success of scenographic design and extensive multimedia presentations in museum displays.

The great interest in the workshop showed how topical its subject matter is. During the course of the two days, the debates focused especially on issues of participation in museums. Yet, the examples presented as well as the discussions left many questions unanswered: it is still to be clarified what can be expected of, or understood by, participation in a museum context and how ideas could be implemented. Over and above that, the organizers managed to further a dialogue between academics and museum practitioners from both Germany and Poland, which proved very fruitful during the debates. At the same time, the large number of participants gave the event the character of a conference rather than a workshop; due to the number of speakers and the necessary time limits, different positions could often not be discussed thoroughly. It remains to be hoped that the Imre Kertész Kolleg will pursue the subject further and, thus, continue to act as a platform for exchange between museum theorists and practitioners in Central and East Central Europe.

Conference Overview:

Joachim von Puttkamer (Imre Kertész Kolleg, FSU Jena): Welcome Address

Visit to the Jewish Museum Berlin

Reflections and Discussion with Cilly Kugelmann (Jewish Museum Berlin)

Chair: Włodzimierz Borodziej (Imre Kertész Kolleg, FSU Jena / Warsaw University)

LECTURES

Chair: Juliane Tomann (Imre Kertész Kolleg, FSU Jena)

Joachim Baur (Die Exponauten, Berlin): Temple, Stage, Arena: Conceptualizations of the Museum since the 1960s

Łukasz Mieszkowski (Imre Kertész Kolleg, FSU Jena): The Museum Boom Revisited: How New Trends are Adapted in Poland and the Consequences they Bring

PANEL "VIRTUALITY AND PERFORMATIVITY IN MUSEUMS"

Chair: Stefan Krankenhagen (University of Hildesheim)

Inka Bertz (Jewish Museum Berlin): Objects and Collections: The Performativity of the Non-Virtual

Silke Arnold-de Simine (Birkbeck, University of London): Mediating Memory in the Museum

Gregor Lersch (Jewish Museum Berlin): Museums and Exhibitions as Participatory Spaces of Memory

Folker Metzger (Klassik Stiftung Weimar): Possibilities of Digital Media for Learning in Museums and Heritage Sites

FINAL DISCUSSION

with Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Warsaw), Cilly Kugelmann (Jewish Museum Berlin) and Paweł Machcewicz (Museum of the Second World War, Gdańsk)

Chair: Joachim von Puttkamer (Imre Kertész Kolleg, FSU Jena)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

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