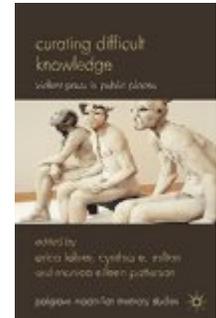


Erica Lehrer, Cynthia E. Milton, Monica E. Patterson. *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Places.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 219 S. ISBN 978-0-230-29672-5.



Reviewed by Berthold Molden

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In his 2009-essay “The Way of the Shovel” curator Dieter Roelstraete writes of a “‘meta-historical mode,’ an important aspect of much artwork that assumes a curatorial character.” Roelstraete explains central features of this development involving both artists and curators in their ever-increasing confrontation with controversial histories: “The retrospective, historiographic mode [is] a methodological complex that includes the historical account, the archive, the document, the act of excavating and unearthing, the memorial, the art of reconstruction and reenactment, the testimony [...]” Dieter Roelstraete, *The Way of the Shovel: On the Archeological Imaginary in Art*, in: *e-flux journal*, no. 4 (March 2009), <<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-way-of-the-shovel-on-the-archeological-imaginary-in-art>> (accessed August 25, 2013). The essay has been extended into a current exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. And yet, the resurgence of history in the art field is but a segment of an intense process of self-reflection that has characterized museum studies for almost two decades in the wake of New Museology and its strong focus on representation. The literature on this subject is too diverse

to be shrunk into a single footnote, but it is well documented in Sharon Macdonald (ed.), *A Companion to Museum Studies*, Oxford 2006 (last edition 2011). Within this process, priority is often granted to histories of repression, violence, and the complex relationships between victims, perpetrators and bystanders.

It is precisely this realm of “violent pasts” and the role of curators in their representation into which the editors of *Curating Difficult Knowledge* promise a “creative” and “innovative” intervention, as stated on the back cover. They distance themselves from “custodial” approaches and instead understand curating “as care-taking—as a kind of intimate, intersubjective, interrelational obligation” (p. 4). This ethical imperative is the main aspect that sticks out from the book’s programmatic introduction, which otherwise recites the classical post-structuralist commitments to polycentric narrations, multivectorial agencies and the explanatory potential of inner-social break lines and disturbing experiences (“difficulty,” in the terminology of the volume). Its ten essays offer concrete examples of curatorial prac-

tices in museums and exhibitions in Africa (3), North (2) and South (1) America, Australia (1), Europe (2), and Israel (1). The absence of Asian case studies is striking, even though the book does not promise an embracing global perspective, but is organized along three categories of representation – bearing witness, visualization, and materiality.

The first part concentrates on the representation of victimized communities and their history within the larger nation-state or even global frameworks. Canadian Inuit curator Heather Iglo-liorte begins with the analysis of her own experience curating oral history-testimonies about the impact of the government’s experimental “residential schools” on the life of Inuit students. After explaining the ambivalent role of these schools, her account emphasizes the need for sensitive, emphatic approaches to possibly traumatized subjects and their story as well as the ensuing personal relationship with these subjects as a highly rewarding curatorial experience.

Vivienne Szekeres’ following description of the Migration Museum in Adelaide as a “safe haven” in the controversial terrain of Australia’s history of colonialism and racism is also based on her own long work experience in this institution. In this case, too, it was crucial to involve the different communities in the weaving of a legitimate storyline. In fact, Szekeres defines the title’s “difficult knowledge” precisely through the historico-political interest that some of these communities have invested in the public representation of their story of suffering. Answering to these needs involves the creation of public spaces for mourning and remembrance, but a central difference between a “neutral” museum and its “objects” remained: “While the Museum was interested in presenting multiple interpretations of the past, community groups were not” (p. 52).

Monica Eileen Patterson addresses another tricky question in her article about the Jim Crowe Museum of Racist Memorabilia in Big Rapids,

Michigan: how to tell the story of racism, violence and suffering without recurring to sensationalist narratives or, worse, reaffirming the ideology and prejudice that is supposed to be explained? Not really a publically accessible museum, but a large collection of everyday objects this institution claims to be a “politicized space” (p. 62), a “counter museum” (p. 65) creating awareness about Jim Crowe segregation and racism among Michigan students (the primary audience) and other interested visitors. Drawing the visitors into debates about their own experiences is its main didactic approach.

Amy Sodaro tells a very different story about the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre in Rwanda. In my opinion this is one of the volume’s best essays. Sodaro points out the difficult position of a public-private partnership (a British NGO and the Rwandan government) in a society where victims and perpetrators not only live door-to-door, but where the prevention of a new genocide is as real a goal as the mere remembrance. Hence, this endeavor goes far beyond the ritual phrase of “Never Again!” in Holocaust museums and in fact attempts to mediate highly conflictual identities in a still-explosive society.

The second section of the book broaches the issue of the visualization of past crimes through visual arts and photography. First, Darren Newbury writes about the Kliptown Open Air Museum in Soweto as a part of a differentiated memorial landscape of post-Apartheid South Africa. Newbury emphasizes the “central role [of photography] in the presentation of apartheid histories” (p. 93) and therefore focuses on this museums outstanding approach to “offer a positive counter-narrative to the systematic denial of the humanity of the other” – that is, heroic stories instead of visualization of victimhood that answer to a central problem in current politics of memory: “The remembrance of the victims seems unable to coexist with the recollection of their struggles, of their conquest and their defeats.” Enzo Traverso, Euro-

pean Memories. Entangled Perspectives, in: Jürgen Mittag/Berthold Unfried/Eva Himmelstoss (eds.), *The Memory of Labour and Social Movements. A Global Perspective*, Leipzig 2011, pp. 33–51, here: p. 40.

Photography is also the topic of Tamar Katriel's article about two Israeli activist groups who use photography as an activist strategy against the maltreatment of Palestinians by Israeli security forces and against the occupation of Palestine territories. One being an army veterans' collective and the other a women's organization, both used documentary photographs of incidents in exhibitions to raise awareness and as a means of prevention. These exhibitions were interventions "constructed as a communicative occasion" (p. 115) to trigger audience reactions to images of oppression and state violence.

The last essay in this section is dedicated to the use of Visual Arts and returns to South Africa. Erin Mosely writes about South African artists as "alternative memory makers and public citizens" (p. 130). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is pointed out as one of the central sources for historico-political art, both in forms of positive appropriation and in critical engagement, for example with the Commission's problematic amnesty hearings. Thus artists, according to Mosely have themselves become curators of difficult knowledge.

The third section of the book tackles the issue of the exhibited object and its ambivalent role in historical exhibitions. It is opened by Andrew Herscher's analysis of cultural heritage and counter-memory in Yugoslavia's successor states. With ample reference to Pierre Nora's concept of memory and James E. Young's notion of "counter-monuments" aiming to initiate ongoing debates about the past and its lost memory, Herscher arrives at a provocative function of art exemplified by the "Monument to Bruce Lee" (Urban Movement, Mostar/BiH, 2005). Such art produces "a

counter-concept of history [...] as an intervention or eruption of alterity" (p. 159).

Cynthia E. Milton contributes a Latin American case of Cold War memory in her article on Peruvian visual art and its confrontation with the heritage of the civil war during and after the Fujimori period. After a short introduction to Peru's troubled recent history, Milton discusses the "Ojo que llora"-monument. She uses Steve Stern's concept of memory knots (developed for Chile after Pinochet) to explain the complex relations of forces in a post-dictatorial society and the often-violent social reaction that art and memorial works may trigger in certain groups. Given the extremely important artistic interventions into the political and mnemonic landscapes of Latin America and the impact these practices have had outside the continent, this chapter points to a crucial issue within the overall topic of the volume.

The final case study, by Sławomir Kapraski, puts the physical term of "memoryscapes" under the lens of hegemony theory and asks for the dominion over public space in Poland after the Holocaust. He points out how the remnants of the destroyed Jewish culture still irritate the trends to homogenize post-Holocaust Polish memory beyond the globalizing standards, as interventions like the work of the artist Yael Bartana do indeed prove. Mnemonic hegemony is ceaselessly being destabilized by subversive activism, while mainstream politics of memory tries to impose the icon of not-yet-sainted pope John Paul II over the social memory of socialism. "Their voices, however small, constantly trouble the official meaning of a memoryscape, both defying its closure and opening toward the future" (p. 191).

Altogether, this volume brings together an interesting array of case studies on the lively intersection of the politics of memory and the exhibitionary complex. Among the growing number of publications in this interdisciplinary field, this book, while not always breaking new ground, in several of its best parts reminds us of how highly

different social, political, and cultural conditions in different parts of the world may create similar challenges to the agents of memory active in these realms. Roger I. Simon has a point in quoting Irit Rogoff in his afterword: it is not necessarily the success that counts in the pedagogy of museums; it is trying.

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