Difficult Knowledge, Intimacy and Museum Exhibitions: A Case Study of Kulturen's *Surviving: Voices from Ravensbrück*

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In a keynote address to the International Council of Museums' annual conference in 2000, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett warned that "museums can no longer simply celebrate history." Instead, she claimed, "a 'new honesty' has encouraged museums to 'open up for public interpretation the darker side of human society' and to do so more reflexively and self-critically"(2000, 9). Certainly, a trend can be observed over the last thirty years in which museums are attempting to move away from glowing presentations of patriotism, triumph, and great deeds toward a greater appreciation of the complexities and competing motivations inherent to human relationships. A new willingness to take on what has been described as "difficult subject matter"—narratives related to violence, loss, death, and conflict, among other themes—is increasingly evident in museum presentations. Missing from these developments, however, are any sustained discussions on the nature of difficulty. What concerns should museums take into account in presenting difficult subject matter? How should they position viewers to receive the knowledge that comes in

encountering the experience of others, whose lives may be lived on terms very different from their own? How can museums avoid sensationalizing stories of violence, loss and suffering? How, in other words, can they encourage viewers to take the stance not of voyeurs of another's misfortune, but rather of implicated subjects?

This paper will explore these questions through a case study of a museum exhibition in Sweden, where an active dialogue among museum professionals on the relationship between civic issues and sites of public history is coupled with a strong and innovative museological practice. Staff from the *Legacy of Testament* project at the University of Toronto travelled to Sweden in June 2005 to interview museum curators, designers, and programming staff of two very different exhibitions: *No Name Fever: AIDS in the Age of Globalization*, which ran at the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg from December 2004 until June 2006; and *Surviving: Voices from Ravensbrück*, a permanent exhibition that opened at Kulturen, an open-air museum in southern Sweden, in January 2005. Given our time constraints here, we will limit our discussion to the latter.

Surviving: Voices from Ravensbrück focuses on the experience of women prisoners at Ravensbrück, a Nazi concentration camp that was located north of Berlin. The only concentration camp intended primarily for women, Ravensbrück imprisoned over 130,000 women and children from twenty-three different nations between 1939 and 1945. A large number of these women were political prisoners from Poland. *Voices from Ravensbrück* draws upon stories of life in the camp together with the story of survivors' rescue and rehabilitation in southern Sweden. Over the spring and summer of 1945, convoys of Swedish and Danish Red Cross buses transported over 10,000 survivors to southern Sweden. A Polish national and lecturer at Lund University named Zygmunt Lakocinski was enlisted as an interpreter. Recognizing an opportunity to document evidence of Nazi terror, Lakocinski and his colleagues recorded about 500 interviews with Polish survivors, over seventy per cent of whom were women from Ravensbrück.[1] Over the course of these interviews, Lakocinski learned that many women had hidden small objects beneath their clothes, or in the

[1] The interviews were archived in the university library in Lund, where, throughout the remainder of the century, they were inaccessible both to the general public and to other institutions such as Kulturen. Indeed, not until the early 2000s were the restrictions removed from these interviews. As of early 2006, twenty-five of these interviews have been translated into English and are accessible on the Library website. While the interviews provided important background context for the 2005 exhibition, they do not discuss the objects specifically.

heels of their shoes. The objects ranged in function and meaning: they included, for example, a scrap of packaging inscribed with a poem recalled from memory; a tiny cross fashioned of metal bolts; a tiny doll made of scraps of fabric; a miniature hand-written calendar. Although Swedish officials planned to burn all of the objects the women carried for fear of contamination, Lakocinski managed to save a small number from destruction. Almost sixty years later, in 2004, Lakocinski's three children donated his collection to Kulturen.[2] *Surviving: Voices from Ravensbrück* opened the following year as a permanent exhibition showcasing Lakocinski's entire collection of over 150 objects, together with some more recent acquisitions.

The majority of objects are housed in seven wide chests of drawers that line the walls of the exhibition space; a smaller selection are presented in glass display cases which stand between the chests. Quotations from women survivors, stenciled on the walls above the artifact chests or printed on card-stock within the artifact drawers, illuminate the significance of the objects in accordance with six exhibition themes: 1) Dehumanization; 2) Sabotage; 3) Practical Objects; 4) Memorabilia; 5) Religion; and 6) Treasures and Gifts. In the chests of drawers titled "Sabotage," for example, objects include satirical drawings of camp life sketched by prisoners on scraps of packaging, and a pair of "sabotage socks"—forced to knit socks for the

[2] Although the museum had held the collection since the 1960s, its providence remained with Lakocinski and his heirs until 2004.

German army, women prisoners devised a way of making the heels extremely uncomfortable. An accompanying interview excerpt credited the socks with stopping the German advance at Stalingrad. A display case next to the Sabotage cabinet presents a hand-made doll accompanied by a quotation explaining how women made dolls for children in the camp, and sometimes used them to smuggle things between barracks. While quotations from women survivors[3] form the bulk of the exhibition text, limited curatorial commentary provided additional context.

Our approach builds upon the work of Susan Pearce and others in seeing exhibitions as performative structures—that is, complex practices of language that attempt to communicate with those who engage them. An exhibition's address, in other words, is designed to elicit a response from its viewers. While the substance and structure of an exhibition never fully determine a viewer's response, they do position the viewer to apprehend the address of the exhibition in certain ways. The nature of this address is dependent on both previous meanings and associations of objects, images and texts and the framing of these components within a given time, space, and place. With this notion of an exhibition's "address" in mind, we can now

[3] Exhibition curator Anita Marcus interviewed fifteen survivors of Ravensbrück from 1998 to 2004. These women were not necessarily the same women who had made or held onto the objects that Lakocinski collected in the last months of the war.

open the question of the particular aspects of an exhibition that condition this address and in doing so help structure various modes of engaging and responding to exhibitions.

Central to our interest in new forms of public history is the recognition that the presentation of an exhibition offers both a gift and a demand. How such demanding offerings are received determine much of what it might mean "to take an exhibition into account." To arrive at historical understanding, one of the major tasks in taking an exhibition into account is to settle (at least provisionally) on the significance of the objects, texts and images that one encounters. When there are problems in doing this, the accomplishment of knowledge becomes troubled. In their study of difficult knowledge, Alice Pitt and Deborah Britzman provide the insight that the substance of what is difficult in engaging representations about the experience of others is not only a matter of what histories are represented but also the prospect of "encountering the self through the otherness of knowledge" (2003, 755). On such terms, what is difficult about historical knowledge is not that an exhibition might elicit strongly divergent opinions nor that the materials exhibited reference events that are in some way disturbing or shameful. Rather, difficulty arises when this encounter with the self turns out to be troubling to the self; when one experiences the limits of one's ability to grasp and settle the meaning of past events through one's own frameworks of knowing. This difficulty marks an engagement with traces of the past that undoes one's sense of mastery, producing feelings of anxiety, vulnerability, and ambivalence. Such historical traces are not easily digested; they may elicit unconscious distortions or evasions among exhibition viewers. Yet the possibility that historical knowledge might be experienced as difficult also provides an opening for an expanded and responsible sense of what it might mean to "reckon with" an exhibition or take it into account.

Beyond the notion of public history as a practice of representation, where the primary concerns are how the past might be accurately represented and known, there is the possibility that an exhibition might encourage viewers to "dwell" with the past in an intimate way. This sense of "dwelling" with the past implies an altered way of living with and learning from images and stories that engages one's sense of limits and possibilities. In this regard, of interest are exhibitions that take viewers beyond historical understanding to approach what Gerald Bruns has termed an "intimacy with the world." As a mode of living within the throes of difficult knowledge, Bruns'

notion of intimacy suggests the possibility of "a self that inhabits the world but does not settle it." Intimacy with the world is to be understood then as a sensibility with the capacity to unsettle the self, enabling a possibility of reflexive critique and transformative insight regarding one's relationship to the past, and complicity with established historical certainties. This critique and insight may create a foundation for re-thinking the significance of history.

On such terms, what do we mean by intimacy? At root, "intimacy" refers to the quality of a relationship in which one embodies a significant degree of exposure to another, an exposure often enacted as openness to the touch of another. Such openness can be felt as vulnerability and appear as responsiveness. While what is at issue within a relation of intimacy is most commonly registered in the quality of an erotic relation between lovers, it gestures as well toward a more generalized sensibility. Within this sensibility and in relation to history, one stands not as an observer seeking comprehension of the terms on which another lives; rather, one is open to the density of detail that traces another life, to the specificity of another's experience. In an intimate relationship, the significance of a person or an object cannot be contained conceptually, cannot be objectified; both the cognitive and emotional quality of the intimate relationship exceeds the sayable. It is difficult, for example, to represent in words the depth of one's love for a spouse or child. Hence, as a mode of engaging an exhibition, intimacy requires not an ability to "know" the other, but a kind of "responsiveness," an act of "acknowledgement" of the experience of another that does not reduce her experience to a specific value, cause or identity.

It is important not to mistake this position as rejecting the discerning conceptualization and judgment necessary for historical understanding. As Bruns reminds us, "acknowledgment is not an alternative to knowing but an interpretation of it, even a critique of it" (Cavell cited in Bruns 184). By acknowledgement, we suggest an openness and acceptance of the other's difference, and a surrender of attempts to contain the other's experience within one's own frameworks of understanding. This surrender of knowing in order to acknowledge the experience of another, a commitment to neither fully know nor fully forget, is a profoundly troubling process. This "trouble" can be described as part of the process of engaging difficult knowledge. From such troubling engagements come the potential for insight about oneself and one's relation to the lives of others, past and present.

From the perspective of an "intimate" public history, then, what possibilities

does the *Ravensbrück* exhibition offer? In many ways this exhibition works to restrain an intimate relation between the viewer and the objects and texts presented. Certainly the exhibition's central message—that human dignity and courage can triumph over degrading circumstances—forecloses opportunities for intimacy in suggesting that the experience of these women can somehow be "known" or contained within the viewer's frameworks of understanding. Text in the introductory panels, for example, delimits viewer responses by stating: "in here you meet things and voices that testify to profound humiliation but also great courage, human dignity, and the will to survive…." Clearly a response is expected, but it is one that is constrained by the "good news" message of triumph over adversity. The hierarchical structure of the exhibition also conditions the viewer's experience: objects are arranged in logical groupings defined by function or theme—a collection of rosaries in one drawer, an assemblage of eye-glasses in another. Such rigid categorizations make it difficult for objects to "jump the frame" in which they are set to signal other meanings, other traces of experience.

Despite these limitations, the *Ravensbrück* exhibition has other aspects which are of interest in their ability to invite visitors into an intimate engagement with the past. Two presentation strategies in particular work to generate a sense of intimacy between the viewer and the exhibition's "others": first, the things that visitors are

required to *do* physically in order to engage the exhibition; and second, the possibilities for slippage in the relationship between text and objects. As Elizabeth Ellsworth observes, an exhibition's physical requirements—requiring visitors, for example, to stand in front of a video screen, to read a wall of text, to move in close to a display case in order to perceive the particulars within—have implications for the ways in which visitors will engage with an exhibition. In the *Ravensbrück* exhibition, the size and mode of presentation of the objects encourage the viewer to close out his or her surrounding social context in order to apprehend the detail of individual objects. Display cases present diminutive contents at eye level, obliging visitors to move quite close to the objects, and enhancing their ability to view them from several angles. This opens the space to the paradox that by drawing closer to an object we begin to acknowledge its specificity and our distance and distinction from the lives traced by these objects. In this moment of drawing closer, time becomes less linear, less subject to a narrative movement through the exhibition, enabling the viewer to "dwell" with the materials.

Furthermore, the way that individual objects and texts are presented allows space for other meanings to emerge. Although, as we discussed earlier, objects are presented in logical categories based on their significance or function (Practical

Objects, Sabotage, Memorabilia, Religion, etc.), the specificity and detail of certain objects invites viewers into a more intimate space with the traces of past lives. Under the theme of "Gifts and Treasures," for example, a red handkerchief embroidered with lace generates meanings and questions that push beyond the curatorial frame of dignity and courage. The handkerchief's particularities—its delicacy, colour, and exquisite craftsmanship—give us a window into the woman who treasured it. Did it remind her of something she used to own, or that her mother or sister used to own? Did its style of craftsmanship remind her of similar articles from home? Or, was the handkerchief simply a bright piece of fabric, an other-worldly luxury so incongruous with her present surroundings that it helped to carry her imagination to another place? The text that accompanies this object opens rather than constrains its potential for such multiple meanings. "We gave each other presents on birthdays, often a drawing," a survivor named Maria recalled, "but also tiny little things we had embroidered or sewn." Curatorial text in the drawer above (containing other examples of "gifts and treasures") reads "in the chaos of the camp, gifts were important links between the prisoners. They tried to give presents on special days and when they wanted to honour someone." There is a space here, outside the relationship between the object and its descriptor, for the "presencing" of the life of another. This slippage between the object and the text that tries to secure its meaning allows the viewer, we argue, to enter into an intimate relationship with the trace of another—a relationship defined not by "knowing," but by uncertainty. In conclusion, although introductory text frames the exhibition within the redemptive language of courage and dignity, the objects themselves and the way they are presented create a deeper resonance with the potential to destabilize mastery and allow new thought.

The purpose of this paper has been to open up some questions about the way that exhibitions can take on a force in our lives. As we work further on these ideas, what is coming to preoccupy our thoughts is the question of how exhibition practices encourage people to "dwell" with presented material so that extraordinary events stand in proximity to our ordinary lives, becoming manifest in our thoughts and actions and altering our ways of being with others.

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