

Dead-end-road or turn-table between yesterday and tomorrow? New aims for museums

By

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„Cultural traditions, threatened to vanish in contemporary society" is the leitmotif of the ICME conference. It is an idea which is not really new. Traditions are constantly in the process of dissolving and are being replaced by others. This happened very drastically at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, when certain traditions abruptly vanished. Only partially could they be collected, documented and saved for following generations in cultural-historic museums.

A task for the museums of those days. Do modern museums have the same task? In which way does the situation today differ from that of those times? What exactly is the challenge contemporary museums are facing? Can they face that challenge at all? Aren't they themselves in an existential crisis?

At least there have never been so many discussions concerned with the purpose of museums and with their right to exist. Are they superfluous, meaningless? Are museums possibly a mirror to society itself, which is undergoing an extreme revolution of its economy, its technology and its sociology at the moment?

Therefore, one of the problems of contemporary museums are its visitors, or rather the non-existence of its visitors, at least in the permanent exhibitions. No doubt a continuously growing offer of free-time entertainment distracts potential visitors from the museums: themeparks are more attractive and more entertaining. And by now they even incorporate certain elements, which used to belong to the specific nature of museums. On the other hand museums try to attract new target groups of visitors by staging so-called „events". In this context new tasks - like Marketing, Media- and PR-work, quality-management, out-sourcing etc – have been added to the traditional tasks of museums (which used to be collecting, documenting, safe keeping, researching, exhibiting, teaching). Often these new tasks will need so much attention that the museum's essential work, that is safe-guarding cultural relics, is threatened with neglect.

Exhibiting has turned into perfect staging. Artefacts seem to be not attractive enough in themselves. They need a more promising wrapping, a framework, an event, a mediator. It almost seems to be more important to arouse the attention of visitors, than to make them pay attention to the artefact. Exhibitions are less cultural than social events.

Numbers of visitor mirror this trend distinctly: Events like the „long nights of the museums" or museums festivals are well visited. Recently the „long night of the Karlsruhe Museums" in Germany attracted more than 45,000 visitors within 7 hours. In general numbers of visitors are rising. And the basic set-up seems to be more favourable towards museums than ever. Rarely the past, and history has been so much on everybody's mind as at the beginning of the 21st century. The more rapidly things are changing its coming about, the more people are trying to find security in an unchangeable past. The more our present seems to be but a fleeting moment, people flee into the past in retreat. In the year 2000 in Germany alone 200 new museums opened! All in all there are more than 5,400 museums in Germany, today!

Hanno Rauterberg, a german journalist (writing for the weekly magazine DIE ZEIT), figured that if someone wanted to visit all German museums, it would take about 16 years visiting one a day. And if the number of museums kept growing as rapidly, soon a lifetime would not be enough to visit all museums in Germany alone! Within 100 years we would face 24,000 museums! This would make one museum for every 2,500 people in Germany¹.

With these mindblowing figures – wouldn't it be time to stop this museumstrend (or is it madness?) and reconsider, before we get totally fed up with our past in face of all those museums, which are almost haunting us with our past, by now?

Please let me take a short detour in my remarks and let us consider some reasons for the developement of museums as we know them today. They developed in the 18th century following the radical and complete turnover of society. The dissolving of royal systems and ways of living, new scientific findings, but more than anything technical and economic

innovations that brought about the industrialisation of the 19th century also had a decisive side effect: at the same time, almost as an antidote a new historic consciousness grew. This was the ideological basis for museums and other means of remembering, such as historic sciences, protection and curators of monuments, etc. The loss of tradition and the loss of conscious use of tradition was compensated by bringing to mind the past.

This so-called compensation theory was first formulated by Joachim Ritter in 1963 within the discussion on the „task of humane sciences in modern society“ⁱⁱⁱ. As a means of compensation the museum reacts instantaneously to structural changes. And more so compensation doesn't only react to modernisation, but it is necessary to modernisation as it makes its destructive aspects bearable. It makes it endurable by maintaining continuity and tradition, by re-orienting and sensitizing people to history.

Contrary to other institutions of maintenance or memory, museums compensate three-dimensionally. The „thingyness“ is the foundation of its durability, this stability that is missing in a modern, fast changing, fleeting presence. A thing, an artefact is over and above this and is vivid and visible. It is real and authentic. Is the museum as such predestined to be the counterweight to innovation? At least in part it certainly is: museums make us acquainted with estranged, forgotten, lost ways of living.

Are museums therefore a useful mean to keep traditional ways of living from being forgotten? I would say: no! The faster the pace of modernisation, a pace that turns innovations of today into a past of tomorrow, the faster the collections of museums are growing, the more museums seem to be threatened with being turned into mere garbage dumps, uselessly piling up material that will rarely ever find a sensible use in the future. Even though almost everything is compiled and at your disposal, the past lacks any obligating entwinement with the present. As such the museum would be doomed to be forgotten at the long run! Let me quote a statement Michael Fehr made in 1990 in his four part thesis „The museum – a place of oblivion“ (Das Museum – Ort des Vergessens)ⁱⁱⁱ.

The thesis is not as shocking and as far from reality as it may seem at first glance. It is an open secret that in many museums store rooms are crammed to a degree that custodians and scientists simply can't cope with the masses of objects. Can anyone escape this *circulus vitiosus* that the entire reality is safely-stored in the museums to such a degree that our compensatory society can only lament the total loss of reality – which is lost in museums?!

Now, before museums take away their very right to exist by themselves, because they find themselves incapable to cope, we might as well ask a simple question: why, instead of constantly compensating the visitors for his loss of history, why don't the museums simply prevent the present from dissolving into a lost past? Why don't they intervene? Why don't they take initiative in time, instead of following the tracks of the inevitable, which in fact is only seemingly inevitable? Why don't they turn from a collecting, receiving into an active institution?

Undoubtedly, being turned towards the past in an exaggerated way can only produce a feeling of sadness, facing the loss of reality. And if the pieces of reality that trustfully have been given into the hands of the curators, are put to rest in storerooms as it is normal in museums, then this is, as Odo Marquardt put it, a burial in a commemorative garbage dump. Even the posterior effort to reconstitute the former state of the things turned artefacts (de-museification) seems doomed to fail, as even the simulated reality inevitably is petrified only to consequently dissolve – a twofold dissolution of reality!

But is there a way out of this dead-end-road?

„Remembrance is a tentative search in that room of an ever changing, developing reality,“ states Gert Selle^{iv} and proposes to seize things where they are located, in those places where „history is just taking place within the presence. Opening themselves like this, would have the consequence to museums, that they would have to act more sensitively, that they might even renounce from taking away things to museums but point out change right in those locations where it is happening. So one would translocate the museum temporarily into reality, instead of exiling things as artefacts into the irreal of the museum.“ Only the purposeful musealization with a defined interest in documentation determines the value of an artefact or a collection – a well known principle, which in practise is but too often eluded.

Active documentation of the present instead of eager museum-collecting, which is actually quite comparable to the Swedish SAMDOK-program. In front of this, museums should maintain their provocative questions, that understand artefacts or things as a reference to the present. Change as a natural cultural process can thus be approached in a far more open, uninhibited manner without that paralysing fear of the impending vanishing of culture. And more important it can be approached in a constructive, creative and innovative way. A rigid, tense grip on history will block any openness to innovation. A dynamic, flexible approach on the other hand opens new chances to museums and museologists as well as upholders of civilisation. The studied competence of the scientist and the traditional knowledge, the cultural competence of the other can open new spaces in their co-operation, spaces in which new forms can develop, taken one would abandon of the obsession of total, comprehensive material storage. Museum's work would then be not (only) focussed on artefacts but on action.

Anyway, a living, active form of memory which includes historical experience is far more suitable to counteract oblivion

than is heaping up evidence and products, as they are being deposited and exhibited in many museums. This only establishes and intensifies the distance between the viewer-subject (the visitor) and the displayed object. The object is – as Gottfried Korff once stated^v – in opposition to the viewing subject, as the word „objectus" points out („Gegen-Stand").

And how could a museum manoeuvre out of this dooming cul-de-sac of oblivion? How could a museum act, instead of react to cultural processes? First of all, this demands of the institution, that it opens itself to a kind of forum, a competent mediator between both groups, the visitor and the people whose changing culture is subject of the museum. The museums should be open to both directions, establishing a platform, a network for informational exchange. On the grounds of its experience the museum can then well give impulses, act as catalyst within cultural processes. It may trigger innovation, accompany it and co-ordinate it. This open and public approach will include besides the museum other communicative points of support, similar to the „antennae" of the ecomusees.

The cultural competence of the people on location, in connection with the traditional value-system, can within this context be utilized to cope with the reality of the present with all its obstacles. Their knowledge, their handicrafts and their material resources will no doubt experience a quite notably enhancement in value, intensified motivation, and most of all higher self esteem. Thus museum's work will become socio-cultural work as well as socio-political work, strongly connected with economical affairs. You will find a similar approach in neighbourhood-museums or in neighbourhood oriented cultural work with respective neighbourhood-conferences^{vi}.

I would now like to briefly present the case of Transylvania/Siebenbürgen as one example of my suggestions. This is also meant as a proposal for a model project that could be turned into reality in this or some similar way.

At a souvenir market in Bran women at various stalls proudly explained to me that the thick wool with which they knitted Norwegian patterned pullovers for tourists, had been imported from New Zealand. This, they said, was much better than their local wool. It was not worthwhile using it anymore. At least in this business local resources don't seem to be valued anymore (quick bucks for fast knitted jumpers). Many women working in this rapidly expanding tourist-market prefer wool that has been transported across half the world to the hard work of shearing, washing, treating and spinning the wool of their local sheep. This is totally understandable from a practical point of view. It is less understandable if you take into consideration the resources Transylvania has as far as wool is concerned.



In Transylvania, firms still process local wool into blankets and carpets (for example COVTEX in Heltau). But it certainly is a declining business for large factories as well as small manufacturers. The same goes for the use of wool in households. Thus raw, unfinished wool will barely make any profit. On top of this, keeping sheep has become more difficult. Negotiating rights for grazing pasture and rights for the passing through of herds has become extremely complicated. Pastures and watering places are not being cared for anymore so that water has to be transported over long distances. Due to dry weather over the last years prices for winter fodder (hay, etc.) have risen extremely. On night-pastures fencing or protection against wolves and bears is inadequate or priceless. Wages for sheperds are in no relation to their extremely hard working conditions.

As opposed to this, the international demand for raw wool is still undiminished and this goes for the textile industry (clothing, textiles for the home) as much as for the building industry (insulation for buildings).

But to return to our initial question: how could or should a museum react to this situation? Should they just document the imminent loss of sheep-keeping and wool-manufacture? Or should they seek new possibilities for a culture to revalue the wool-industry. This, though, could only be accessed by an holistic, interdisciplinary, inter-institutional and international approach, which I will briefly describe: in a preliminary, rough draft I see tasks within three main areas:



- Sheepkeeping
- Wool-manufacture and handicrafts
- Museums and media

First biologists, (economic) geographers, ecologists and lawyers need to work out adequate solutions to the problems regarding sheep-keeping (that is, keeping and breeding sheep so as to gain a specific wool-quality, caring for pastures, security of night-pasture, better contract for sheperds etc.)

The second field is concerned with the raw wool and the many ways of processing it in crafts and handicrafts. The locals' traditional knowledge as to how wool should be processed ought to be linked with the professional knowledge of fashion- and textile designers. Based on the technical experience of local craftsmen, innovative products could be designed and manufactured that meet the demands of regional, national and international markets without being souvenir-trinkets.

One might set up a number of „wool-centres" each of which specializes in certain products. This could be any product that is produced during the process: washed and treated fleece, un-coloured or coloured yarn, knit-wear, fabric, clothing and home-textiles of all kinds. Blending the traditional and the innovative in terms of processing and design is decisive so that it remains clear to the manufacturer as well as the customer that the gap between traditional and modern products has been bridged.

By the way, this is not an innocent vision far removed from reality, but within smaller ranges it is already working, for example at the felt manufacture plant of Cismădie, the Casa Rustica in Ilieni/Covasna and the big project Viscri Incepe in Viscri near Rupea.

And here again the question is raised about the participation of the museums, that is the transilvanian museums and their international co-operating partners. They could participate in many ways, by developing creative ideas and by accompanying the various workshops or as mediators between manufacturers and museum visitors.

The museum's role as catalyst

Museums could participate in motivating, counseling and coordinating during the process of re-activating traditional techniques (cf. the fulling machine project of Lisa, directed by the Brasov ethnographic museum). By all means, museums with their particular scientific competence should accompany the development of the production line. The efficiency of such a project, though, is only secured by informal organisational networking, which should inter-connect the various wool-centres and the museums.

The museum's role as mediator

No doubt the role as mediator is the more traditional role of the museums. In this connection the museums will care for the various wool-centres as branch-office, but – and this is important – they do not look at them as shut-down factories, as the traditional museums of industry would have done. On the contrary, these are places where tradition is continued in a creative, innovative and active way. Comparable to the „antennae" of the ecomusees they will attract professionals as well as tourists as part of a „wool-route". Interested visitors can not only follow the process of woolmaking on location, but can learn it themselves in workshops. Places of sheepkeeping, shearing and cheesemaking will also be part of this „wool-route".



Documentation of all aspects of the process with „new media" is of utmost importance especially in the context of international co-operation. „New media"-products can be used for educational materials, exhibitions, workshops, etc.

The interest that museums will arouse through their wide-reaching work amongst the general public will in itself have a direct influence on the wool-centres. Growing interest in their products and better sales will raise the self-esteem and motivation of the craftsmen and in the end will lead to a new valuation of traditional materials and techniques. Using their cultural competence, in connection with the professional competence of the various institutions involved, will lead to new ways of a holistic, ecological and economical development of a cultural landscape at the beginning of the 21st century. A development which the museums in their social responsibility should not only carry along, but actively create.

Notes:

ⁱ Hanno Rauterberg, *Musealisiert Museen!* In: *museumskunde* 67/2/2002, p. 34-40.

ⁱⁱ J. Ritter, *Subjektivität. Sechs Aufsätze.* Frankfurt 1974, p. 105 ff

ⁱⁱⁱ In: Wolfgang Zacharias (ed.), *Zeitphänomen Musealisierung*, Essen 1990, p. 220 - 223.

^{iv} Gert Selle, *Suchbewegung in der Wirklichkeit. Einwände gegen eine selbstverständliche Musealisierung.* In: Kuehn, G./Ludwig, A. (ed.) *Alltag und soziales Gedächtnis.* Hamburg 1997, 93

^v Gottfried Korff, *Staging Science.* In: *museumskunde* 68,1, 2003, 67-72, 68.

^{vi} Cf. the neighbourhood-museums in Germany, France, Scandinavia, Great Britain and America; s. the detailed bibliography in: Udo Gößwald/Rita Klages (ed.), *Ein Haus in Europa. Stadtkultur im Museum.* Berlin 1996.

ICME - International Committee for Museums and Collections of Ethnography

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