

From Imperial Museum to Communication Center?

The New Role of Museums as Mediators between Science and Non-Western Societies.

Ethnological Museum, National Museums in Berlin, Berlin. Freie Universität Berlin, National Museums in Berlin. 23.–26. September 2009.

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The three-day international conference 'From Imperial Museum to Communication Center? The New Role of Museums as Mediators between Science and Non-Western Societies' in Berlin was initiated by Lidia Guzy, Susan Kamel and Rainer Hatoum and served as a venue for the presentation of results of the three scientists' research (funded by Volkswagen Foundation) to a broader audience and the scientific community including curators and museum planners. Furthermore, the conference served as a forum for discussion and for the presentation of strategies and solutions for the controversial 'Humboldt-Forum', which is to be erected in the centre of Berlin in close proximity to the Museum Island on the site of the city's former 17th century castle. This extended goal of the conference seemed somehow superimposed and might be labelled one of the central weaknesses of an overall inspiring and interesting event. The Humboldt-Forum has not only been questioned as an architectural concept because of the proposed historical reconstruction of original Baroque facades in combination with a modern design and use of the interior, but also for its holdings and exhibition concept. The Museum of Asian Art and the Ethnological Museum, both institutions of the National Museums in Berlin, will be moved from their current premises to the Humboldt-Forum around 2016. Thus, non-European objects and treasures from Germany's two most important institutions with holdings of such art will be displayed together. The debate, which left academic circles very early and reached a broader audience through the country's press, centres roughly on methods and processes of legitimising and presenting non-European cultures in an appropriate manner in the 21st century in the heart of Europe.

This question reflects the conference topic, which was illuminated and aesthetically enriched by the exhibition 'Museum Islands' at the Ethnological Museum and was curated by the researchers. It showed Patrik Metzger's photographs of urban scenes and museum impressions of North America, Egypt and India. (Photographs and essays were published by Panama under the same title).

Besides giving insights into the conference organisers' own research on different museums in the mentioned regions, three prominent guest speakers per region, in many cases cooperation partners, were invited to speak. This practice highlighted the organisers' intellectual background in New Museology which declares the importance of verbalisation of local protagonists, and postcolonial debates about the empowerment and participation of indigenous groups in their own representation. Thus, three regional contexts were created that were complemented by the 'Berlin museum scene', consisting of presentations of the Museum of Islamic Art, problems of Ethnomusicology and strategies of collecting Native American Art at the Ethnological Museum and an outline of the Humboldt-Forum by the director of the Ethnological Museum. An excursion to the Museum Island and the special exhibition 'A different approach to the world: The Humboldt-Forum in the Berlin Palace. A first look at the lab' rounded out the event. As the title suggests, this was originally announced as a kind of preview of the future prestige project, but after much criticism has now been minimised to an initial planning stage and kind of experiment.

Kamel herself researched museums in Egypt, focusing on strategies of representation and communication they use to address visitors. She highlighted the difficulty in even defining who this public is, and em-

phasized its natural heterogeneity in developing countries. These observations led to the formulation of a variety of approaches, such as addressing the special needs and expectations of tourists in the Egyptian Museum in Kairo compared to the aims and ambitions of smaller countryside museums and institutions devoted to the non-Islamic past, the promotion of cultural diversity, or, as it is the case with the Nubia Museum in Aswan, to minorities.

Hatoum's focus lay on changes and developments in general approaches to museum studies, as well as questions of Intellectual and Cultural Property in the American and Canadian museum landscape: for example, do Native Americans regard their cultural heritage as a globally shared World Heritage, or is their private legacy accessible only to members of their own community?

Guzy questioned certain aspects of 'alternative' collecting and certain types of museums in India. She addressed Intangible Cultural Heritage as defined and proclaimed by UNESCO and adopted, for example, by the Museum of Mankind in Bhopal, which is dedicated to the heritage and culture of the native tribes of rural India. Large outdoor and indoor exhibition spaces aim to provide a 'living museum' on a neighbourhood basis with holistic and sustainable approaches. In the 'living museum' concept, professional academic museum staff serve only as assistants in accordance with the Indian 'New Museum Movement', which is based on the ideas of Eco-Museums that postulate sustainable, regional, and comprehensive museum concepts.

Another Indian case study presented by its initiator focused on the Adivasi Academy and the Museum of Voice in Tejgarh, Gujarat. Adivasis are the native tribal Indians who were suppressed by Indo-European invaders. Although 'scheduled tribes', they form a highly marginalised, poor, and subdued layer of Indian society. Without reducing the importance and the incredible accomplishments of the Adivasi Academy and museum founder Ganesh Devy, it is fair to ask to what extent one can still speak of a museum that fulfils the traditional museum tasks – as defined by the West – of collecting, preserving, and researching. The Adivasi

museum functions more as a self-governing community centre, providing a stage for discussions, a meeting place where Adivasi literature can be read or the occasional autodidactic photo-exhibition presented. Such institutions should perhaps better be called community centres; they belong to the realm of India's civil society and embody the nation's slogan 'Unity in Diversity'. The same might be true for the idea of regarding the performance of local festivals as a kind of local museum. On the other hand, the danger of 'folklorisation' and of inducing the 'cheese cover'-syndrome, i.e. of preserving traditions and cultures in a vacuum by denying them fresh air to breathe and, in the case of living traditions, hindering their ability to develop and adjust to modern times, risks creating a sense of arbitrary categorisation, without the application of criteria.

These Indian examples vividly illustrate the problems and challenges of the conference: to what extent can the tremendously interesting and without doubt deserving individual case-studies presented by the guest speakers be generalized and above all be applied to Germany? Or to a city like Berlin with its long grown museum collections and its special history, an urban space with a highly industrialized, highly educated society, and with a population containing individuals of ethnic groups who are to be represented by the museum? In the 21st century, an often-expressed desire for 'authenticity' no longer exists, if it ever did. How can we exhibit nearly the 'whole world', like the current plans for the Humboldt-Forum demand, without confusing visitors and risking over-simplification? Other important questions should at least have been touched upon: For example, the conference terminology did not differentiate between museums of art, ethnology, or natural history. This would have been important, as their approaches differ greatly, as do the expectations of their respective visitors. Or is the distinction between museums of art and those of ethnology perhaps invalid and inappropriate today? The enthusiasm for postcolonial self-determination should not be uncritically and naively communicated. All problems are not solved by simply involving representatives of indigenous cultures as participants. The museum is a Western invention and has always been an elite institution. Local upper classes did and still

nowadays do marginalise their own people. Nevertheless, these new museum developments often mark important contributions, even if they offer no substitute for the traditional museum tasks of collecting, preserving and researching.

Regarding the overall conference feedback and panel discussions, it became clear how in Germany and the German-speaking world the issues of postcolonial studies and general issues concerning museums, art and material culture, and especially museum studies are approached in a backward or even ignorant manner, or else ignored altogether. Similar discourses were by necessity initiated long ago by other formerly large imperial nations, such as France or Britain. Facing the economic, cultural and intellectual rise of so-called developing countries or emerging markets, the conference topic proved highly political, controversial, and often ambivalently and provocatively politically incorrect.

Program Overview:

Vernissage: Museum Islands

Welcome Addresses

Hermann Parzinger, President, Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation

Ursula Lehmkuhl, First Vice President, Free University of Berlin

Viola König, Director, Ethnological Museum, National Museums in **The New Role of Museums** Berlin

Prolegomena

Lidia Guzy, Rainer Hatoum, Susan Kamel: From Imperial Museum to Communication Center?

Context: Egypt

Iman Abdul Fattah: Egypt's Museums in the 21st Century (Researcher, Supreme Council of Antiquities, Cairo)

Ossama Abdel Meguid: Nubia Museum Exhibition and Field Scientific Research (Director Nubia Museum Aswan)

Nadja Tomoum: Curating the Other Egyptian Heritage: The Coptic Museum in Cairo (SCA Employee, Coptic Museum Cairo)

Context: North America

Stephen Inglis: "The Other" and Ourselves: the Construction of Distance (Senior Curator, Canadian Museum of Civilization)

JoAllyn Archambault: Many Ways of Knowing: The Highways and Byways of Museological Practice (Director, American Indian Program, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution)

Manuelito Wheeler: The Navajo Nation Museum: A Navajo Way of Researching and Presenting Culture (Director, Navajo Nation Museum, Window Rock)

Context: India

K. K. Chakravarty: Collecting Documenting - Mediating and Reinventing Cognitive Categories of Indigenous Cultures in India (Chancellor, National University of Educational

Planning and Administration, New Delhi)

Vikas Bhatt: Museum Movement in India (Director, Museum of Mankind, Bhopal)

Ganesh Devy: Adivasi Academy and Museum of Voice in Tejgarh - A process of De-musealisation (Founder Adivasi Academy/Bhasha Center)

Documenting Cultures

Lidia Guzy: From Collecting Tribal Artefacts to Adivasi Art

Source Communities and Research

Rainer Hatoum: The "Scientification" of Tradition Towards a Museum as Trans-Cultural Science Research Centre?

New Forms of Communication

Susan Kamel: "Représentation de L'Égypte"

Context: Berlin

Peter Bolz: Ethnic Art or Fine Art? Twenty Years of Collecting Native American Art for the Ethnological Museum Berlin (Curator, North America, Ethnological Museum, National Museums in Berlin)

Lars Christian Koch: New Forms of Representation and Documentation of Asian Cultures with Special Reference to Music. (Curator, Ethnomusicology, Ethnological Museum, National Museums in Berlin)

Stefan Weber: Presenting Islamic Art in Berlin Today (Director, Museum of Islamic Art, National Museums in Berlin)

Viola König: The Humboldt-Forum in Berlin (Director, Ethnological Museum, National Museums in Berlin)

Excursions for participants to the Berlin Museum Island and the exhibition "A Different Approach to the World: The Humboldt-Forum in the Berlin Palace. A first look at the lab".

Autorin

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Titel

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