

Museology and History

It could be said, with tongue in cheek, that there are only historical museums. If we define the present as an extremely short period of time, museums really can only show the past with objects from earlier times. And even an exhibition about – for example – future urban development can only be depicted using ideas and models from yesterday. A town council debate simultaneously integrated into an exhibition or a new work of art created at a private view might possibly be called borderline cases of musealization of the present. But these are extremely rare exceptions. This year's ICOFOM convention theme is therefore central to every museum and any museological consideration.

However, the theme is by no means as simple as one might surmise from this somewhat provocatively trivial introduction. Starting from a few basic considerations,¹ I would like, in the following, to deal with the subject of "Museum/Museology and History" more theoretically than with reference to concrete historical exhibitions.

Before getting down to history, the past, let me first make a few short comments on the present and the future.

The present is everything that happens. The concept of "the present" – a constantly moving entity – can be interpreted in very different ways. In a scientific sense, it comprises a perceptual unit defined as lasting from two to three seconds. Philosophically it is the phase, indeterminate in length, between no-more and not-yet or (particularly in the non-linear-thinking eastern philosophies) one pole in the now/not now duality. We wish to understand "the present" here with respect to the person witnessing it in the psychological sense of a subjectively experienced unit of variable duration, as a moment of a given reality, as the duration of an experiential act, as the simultaneous presence of perceptual contents, for example a meal, a visit to an exhibition, a theatrical performance, a morning with a like occupation, etc.

By analogy, the future is everything that will happen. It is fundamentally unknown; it is unknowable. Scientifically speaking, one can only deal with present or past (perceptible through the present) states of affairs concerning the future.

A possible definition is "History as the present staging of past sets of circumstances", where "sets of circumstances" comprise ideas, happenings and things. According to this, the past is everything that has ever happened anywhere. It is lost for ever; it can neither be known in its entirety nor ever be reconstructed.

It is essential to remember that the past, here set on a par with history, does not exist as such but can only be constituted with present thought processes and the methods of historical science. A "reconstruction" is therefore fundamentally impossible. It is therefore always a matter only of approximations to a possible but never provable past – that is, a present staging of past sets of circumstances. This obviously applies to the

¹ I refer to my publication: Schärer, Martin R.: Die Ausstellung, Theorie und Exempel. Munich 2003 (Wunderkammer 5), in particular pp. 15-17 und 88-95, which also contains many bibliographical details

individual as well as to society. In the end, the same applies, for the view of history, for an object, of which we can only ever unambiguously prove its lack of authenticity, not its genuineness: “The historical reality, of which we can only ever say with certainty **that** it has been, and perhaps how it has not been, but never, in the end, **how** it has been, exists in our heads thanks to our powers of imagination.”² In this connection, Flusser’s distinction between two kinds of past is important: “Past is what we collect [what is musealized] and to which we can have recourse under certain circumstances, our memory, and past is what we forget and what can in certain circumstances come to us again, so to speak backwards [e.g. garbage].”³

As an abstract construct, as an idea, then, “history” may not be musealizable (this is only possible with its materialized remains, such as objects, pictures, books, films, etc.), but it most definitely can be visualized in an exhibition – above all with things as signs referring to past sets of circumstances. The same goes for “nature”. Thus, man always has only an incomplete and provisional notion of past sets of circumstances, a notion which moreover is changing all the time. It rests on things which have been passed on: stories, documents, objects. According to this, there is not **one** definitive, assured, objective historical truth, only provisional statements. Views of history are therefore always fictitious, which however does not rule out a very high degree of probability. Particularly in everyday history, the fictionality frequently exists in the fact that although it can be approximately stated how certain social strata, occupations etc. lived, such knowledge can generally not be associated with individual persons. The sum of all knowledge about the past represents an increasing approximation to a probable view of history. It can never be known about one person alone, and hence exists only potentially as part of collective knowledge.

One of the main reasons why such recognized facts are hard to accept lies in the circumstance that museums, which basically enjoy a very high visitor credibility rating because of the original object (“objective time witnesses” as “evidence”) – as institutions, because exhibitions are rarely prominently associated with authors. If the exhibited objects are authentic, the story recounted in connection with them must also be true! But it is precisely here that chance and subjectivity in the choice of objects must again be pointed out. “Historicality” Steen writes, “is not a characteristic of things as such, but perception and interpretation. A characteristic is the authentic thing, the attested origin from a world prior to today’s world... As exhibits, the objects require a means of presentation if they are to be exhibits at all. As mundane as that may sound, it is true of every exhibition.”⁴

This brings us back to the artificiality of the exhibition situation. Maure puts it like this: “In the real world, objects do not exist in isolation. An isolated object is a hypothetical construction.”⁵ “To isolate an object from any physical or social

² Heinisch, Severin: Ausstellungen als Institutionen (post-)historischer Erfahrung. In: *Zeitgeschichte* 15(1987):337-342,340

³ Flusser, Vilém: *Dinge und Undinge. Phänomenologische Skizzen*. Munich 1993:19

⁴ Steen, Jürgen (Hg.): *Zur Struktur der Dauerausstellung stadt- und heimatgeschichtlicher Museen*. Frankfurt 1998:6

⁵ Maure, Marc: The exhibition as theatre. On the staging of museum objects. In: *Nordisk Museologi* 2(1995):159

connection and ask what it means, is as meaningless or reductionist as isolating a word in a sentence.”⁶

The objects obtained by musealization scarcely provide any information about the original reality. This can only be explained subjectively and with time constraints by current knowledge against the background of socially and individually accumulated findings. An essential reason for this lies in the fact that, thanks to their physical durability, things often outlive the meaning systems of their first life. Information which we can apply usually comes only from the meaning-world and sign systems of our time. An exception could however be postulated with respect to oral information provided by people who lived with these objects. But the object itself is always mute. The title of one essay puts it this way: *Le mythe de l'objet ventriloque* (The myth of the ventriloquial object).⁷ The object requires explanation precisely because it has been musealized and is therefore “accessible” as it is therefore no longer in its original individual-unique space/time context.

Precisely because, in the end, a museum musealizes not only things but also man-thing relationships (attributed values, hence “information” in the broadest sense⁸) it cannot simply put across objects, but also only values, in a certain sense also myths about the past. The fact that any historical representation is, in the end, an interpretation, means that false interpretations are also possible in exhibitions.

It may therefore be important in an exhibition to also provide pointers to the exhibition language used, i.e. to make the chosen representation intelligible (with a kind of reading aid). Certainly, such immanent clues can be perceived by the practised view of any exhibition, but they are not immediately detectable for the average visitor, at the most perhaps on an emotional, atmospheric level. Relevant explicit pointers are useful in the didactic exhibition language, and highly desirable in the associative language. In this connection, Cameron demands that the visitors’ reading be understood by feed-back and that they be taught the exhibition code: “*The first task in museum education is to teach the individual the language of the museum so that he can use the museum to fullest advantage.*”⁹ Such a meta-language also serves to relativize the statements made in order to partially remove from an original auratic object pretending to a real reality this very reality reference, to say that a real object and a museum-piece are not identical, that an object always also has a semiotic and an anecdotal character, finally to point out that an exhibition can only show not a direct but only a transposed reality. This prevents the “visitor to an exhibition from being immersed in an apparent reality.”¹⁰ Or, to put it another way: “the pathos of historical truth should be replaced by the irony of broken views of history”.¹¹

⁶ Ebd. 160

⁷ Clément, Bernard: *Le mythe de l'objet ventriloque*. In: Guigue 1983:37-40

⁸ This is the immaterial side of things; however, we do not intend to go further into intangible heritage here

⁹ Cameron, Duncan F.: *A Viewpoint: The museum as a communication system and implications for museum education*. In: *Curator* 11(1968):39

¹⁰ Grütter, Heinrich Theodor: *Geschichte sehen lernen. Zur Präsentation und Rezeption historischer Ausstellungen*. In: Erber-Groiss, Margarete (u.a. Hg.): *Kult und Kultur des Ausstellens*. Wien 1992:178-188, [183](#)

¹¹ Heinisch, Severin: *Ausstellungen als Institutionen (post-)historischer Erfahrung*. In: *Zeitgeschichte* 15(1987):337-342, [342](#)

This can be communicated in very different ways, for instance by a declaration of intent in an introductory text or by means of alienating representations which create a critical distance between the visitor and the exhibition (which is naturally easiest in the associative exhibition language already containing such elements), in addition by guided tours and educative programmes. It can be argued that such thematization of the exhibition medium gains even more significance in a very time of increasing aestheticization and staging of everyday life.¹²

False positionings are also possible for a completely different reason. At the centre of every process of musealization is the reducing selection of things. Of necessity, the museum with its collections is therefore forced to construct a whole out of fragments, which naturally always also represents a political decision. "Fragmentation" writes Steen, "is a prerequisite of musealization. The object is the scientifically systematized fragment."¹³

Institutionalized musealization in a museum therefore concerns only part of the musealized objects, which in their turn only represent a vanishingly small part of all things that have ever existed. With respect to museum collections, the problem of choice and the associated responsibility is extremely important: what thing is seen as an (important, typical?) document for a given area? Selection in the museum follows socially defined criteria. Any collection policy, however it is defined, is always the time-dependent expression of prevailing scientific and aesthetic criteria. However neutrally it is formulated, adducing and specifying, for example, collection by whatever thematic and/or geographical criteria – authentic, exemplary, typical, representative, elementary, fundamental, innovative or model-based – the selection process, by which history is made, always features an eminently culture-fixing but also falsifying and hence dangerous element, which is at the same time endangered (because susceptible to manipulation).

The resultant position of power of the museum should not be underestimated especially because – unlike in academia – the world views are anonymous and are presented in a context which lends authority. In addition, and much more so in non-pluralistic systems, there is the risk of the museum being misused for extraneous purposes which are incompatible with its tasks. Let us just think of the hijacking of history under national socialism and communism. And the anecdote that puts into the mouth of the leader of a new African country the statement that he needs – in this order – a powerful army, a functioning radio station and a national museum is, if perhaps not true, at any rate a very telling invention. Also, in times of political disorder, national history museums are rarely occupied, although they are often closed and later remodelled. Finally, the wars of succession in the former Yugoslavia with their deliberate destruction of national heritage sites are an extremely distressing spectacle. Regrettably, such subjects are rarely thematized (in terms of exhibitions).

Ethical principles demand responsibility-conscious attention to the past. Museums are part of the collective memory and are hence also partly responsible for transmitted

¹² Schärer, Martin R.: Museologie ausstellen. In: Fayet, Roger (Hg.): Im Land der Dinge. Museologische Erkundungen. Baden 2005:33-43 (Interdisziplinäre Schriftenreihe des Museums zu Allerheiligen Schaffhausen 1)

¹³ Steen, Jürgen: Kategorien der Darstellung von Geschichte im Museum. In: Museumskunde 60(1995):24

views of history. There is not one correct, so-to-say official version of history, but many different interpretations. What national, regional or local history museum dares to show them? “The victor writes history” is unfortunately still the rule. And, it might of course be added: the person who pays! Still, there are some welcome tendencies, above all in temporary exhibitions, to portray the dark sides of the past. But even with good will, such an undertaking can founder on the simple fact that there are no objects left. After a (political) upheaval, nobody wanted anything more to do with the hated past and literally threw it out.

Let me cite two striking examples to the contrary in the great context of the fall of communism. In many cities, statues of Lenin and Stalin were pulled down as superfluous and usually discarded. But luckily, not everywhere! In Narva (Estonia) Lenin was taken out of the city directly to the Hermanns-Feste on the eponymous border river (in other words right on the new external boundary of the European Union), not without a certain irony gazing eastwards with raised fist. And in Cesis (Latvia), site of an old German city, Lenin was taken from the main square to a boarded-off partition in the Order castle where he can now be viewed – recumbent – as in an open grave. Next to it is a panel with photographs documenting the transportation. Here, an unloved past is not simply thrown out but is exhibited at a critical distance and without fear of history.

In connection with the portrayal of history – both glorified and unloved – the question of representativity arises. Are the national heroes celebrated in museums really so heroic for the entire population? Does everyone really want to forget the withheld past? I plead for a history museum that gathers together and documents all witnesses of the past. And if the time is not yet ripe for the portrayal of the dark sides as well, the objects are available for future, less freighted generations. Historical exhibitions should strive to be as objective as possible in portraying the periods dealt with – while not forgetting that objectivity is impossible for the reasons mentioned earlier.

Precisely because history is always a construct of the present, diverse and relativizing portrayals of the past are to be desired. It seems to me absolutely necessary to get away from the absolute, lecturing attitude – in “safe” exhibition themes as well as controversial subjects. How many European museums, for instance, show Roman times in an uncritical, affirmative and absolute manner! Our town in Roman times, that’s exactly what it was like, no ifs and buts! Does the museum lose credibility if we say that the present view of history has a high degree of probability on the basis of the known objects, the written documents and, naturally, the stringent application of methods of historical science? Or if it also shows a different interpretation in an exhibition that is just as well founded?

“Relativization” seems to me to be a key concept here. The Alimentarium Food Museum in Vevey (Switzerland) attempted this with respect to the representational possibilities of the exhibition medium and using different exhibition languages in 1991. That year, the Swiss Confederation celebrated its 700th anniversary. For politicians it was a major, identity-backing event; for historians more of an opportunity for a critical appraisal. In line with the museum theme, seven small exhibitions were presented at the same time, each of which dealt with the object in a different way and all of which claimed to portray **the** history of food and nutrition

since the Middle Ages. However, portrayal of the past was thereby relativized.¹⁴ An example also presented the aestheticization of history, i.e. its reduction to a few “beautiful” objects. Such a presentation of utilitarian objects as *objets d’art* which, when all’s said and done, is ahistorical, because out of space and out of time, makes any critical discussion of the past impossible. Another production showed a large collection of food objects from 700 years without any explanation, thereby allowing visitors to experience the mute object.

A historical exhibition should also take local, regional and global interrelationships into greater account. Our Town in the Middle Ages, yes, but what was happening elsewhere at that time? In addition, it is important to bring ethnic, religious and social minorities into the picture. So, once again, not only the glorification of “state-supportive strata” but at least an attempt at a holistic portrayal.

Much is also made of the role of history in so-called postmodernism. I prefer the term “second modernism”¹⁵ although it too fails to bring out the distinctness of an era. Beier interprets the growing attraction of history within the framework of second modernism (with the central elements of globalization, individualization and the shrinking importance of scientific knowledge) and with respect to three central functions of an exhibition: orientation, integration and edutainment. The growing interest in history in the last few decades is a very positive factor. There are many exciting theories about the reasons for this, which we cannot go into here. Let us simply mention the connection with an increasing lack of orientation in a very rapidly changing world.¹⁶ Museums ought to turn this tendency to much greater advantage.

The climate for historical exhibitions is excellent. But it also makes great demands on authors and expographers. We must never lose sight of the fact that exhibitions help to shape a view of history, which includes a large measure of responsibility for the museum. This statement gains a dual significance against the backdrop of the relativity of historical knowledge and the fictionality of any exhibition.

¹⁴ Schärer, Martin R.: 700 Years of Food. Or the 7 Exhibition Displays. Food in Switzerland from the late Middle Ages to the present day and ways of depicting the history of food in a museum. Exhibition in the Alimentarium Vevey 1991. An ICOFOM colloquium on the theme of exhibition language was also held in conjunction with this exhibition: ICOFOM Study Series 19 und 20

¹⁵ Beier-de Haan, Rosmarie: *Erinnerte Geschichte – Inszenierte Geschichte. Ausstellungen und Museen in der Zweiten Moderne*. Frankfurt 2005

¹⁶ See for example the important essay: Lübke, Hermann: *Der Fortschritt und das Museum*. In: Auer Auer, Hermann (Hg.): *Bewahren und Ausstellen. Die Forderung des kulturellen Erbes im Museum*. ICOM-Symposium Lindau 1982. Munich 1984:227-246