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Museums and their Collections: A dynamic Relationship

Museums are neither media nor academic institutions, but self-contained communicative systems, which, like other social systems, are created by their own operations, which, again, obtain reliability as much as they unfold. The individual forms of appearance typical for museums therefore not only result from the diversity of their respective assets, but also from the diverse and varying criteria or reference systems, which are applied to realize a specific museum's idea by selecting objects from its collections. Looking at these selection-processes, i.e. the relationship between the collections of a museum and its idea, can not only reveal much of the history of a specific museum, or museums in general, but also illuminate the idiosyncratic structure of meaning and knowledge created by handling objects.

However, as much as we are seeing museums subjected to mental capitalism and, subsequently, being turned into mass-media in more or less non-reflected ways, creating meaning by dealing with objects, or even trying to think with them, nowadays is just not what visitors are intended to expect of a state-of-the-art museum-experience: If communication within the framework of museums at a certain point of their history might have had the character of a scholarly debate, or a learning experience, or a personal enlightenment, it nowadays is talking *about* collections, their display, investments, sponsors, and so on and on. In other words, while museums lose their function as places where knowledge relevant for a given time is being produced, we see them becoming reshaped to *represent* knowledge as a more or less secured value. And as much as such knowledge-values, although stemming from different disciplines, in general can be defined as the outcome of an instrumental rationality, museums at large demonstrate and legitimize the belief in the possibility of a rational control over the world. In this role, however, the museum – understood as a principle, or general format to grasp the world – gradually moves into the position traditionally occupied by religion, its edifices becoming something like aesthetic churches.

Reflecting these developments and trends my general question is whether there are still ways to re-establish the museum as a place of *Wissenschaft* in the literal sense of the word, i.e. as a place where knowledge and insights relevant for our own time, or even our future can be created, and, if so, what kind of knowledge in general that could be. My approach to resolve this question is to look again at the elements the museum is composed of, to explore their interactions, and to modify them where this seems to make sense. Thus my paper has two parts: In the first one I will kind of gallop through what I hope to become eventually a consistent theory of the museum, while in the second part I will show some examples of how to develop the format museum more or less unconventional ways.

I.

If the term 'museum' is comes up, in our culture with some certainty arises the idea of a limited and more or less encapsulated space, so mostly of a building, whatever it may be like. With this idea connected is that a museum is never an empty, but always a space with a specific infrastructure that is suitable to keep and store, no matter how it may be designed in detail, a more or less large number of items. These things, and this is a third aspect that we firmly associate with the term museum, usually do not stem from the museum itself, but rather are almost always collected somewhere else and are brought to the museum in order to remain here permanently accessible. Finally, based on these assumptions, the most important idea that we associate with the term museum is: That in a museum a different reality is brought into view as to which itself belongs as an institution as we as its visitors.

This already names the four most important structural elements, which constitute a museum. I call them the museum's-idea (Museumsidee), the museum's-shell (Museumsgehäuse), by which I mean not just a building, but also the entire scientific and institutional apparatus, the collections (Sammlungen) and the exposition (of the collections) (Schausammlung). The interaction of these elements, i.e. the basic operation of the museum, I name musealization (Musealisierung). Because the interaction of these elements are highly individual, museums take on very different forms, making it difficult to compare them. Nevertheless, there are some general rules, which seem to apply to all museums. The most important, I believe, are these, which I will now sketch:

Collection

Collecting always sets off from the concrete, the individual, or the specific, and can be differentiated into various individual operations. Its necessary precondition is the perception of reality as an accumulation of things, which can be discriminated and separated from each other. Thus, the first operation is a selection-process, by which features that appear to be identical for certain things, are perceived, or are assigned to them by a defined procedure. This selection-process, i.e. the detection of possible relationships or similarities of things will be completed in a further operation, the conceptual de-contextualization of corresponding things, followed by their physical removal from their environment. The manifold forms of such appropriation are known: they range from picking up and finding to the literal impaling, as well as from purchase to robbery, and are almost always an act of at least symbolic violence. The collections compiled in this way differ from reality (Wirklichkeit) foremost by an arbitrarily set, inner connection, which, in so far as it is reflected as cognitive interest (Erkenntnisinteresse), can take a scientific nature.

Collections can be assembled and exist without any reference to museums. Hence museum's collections and the museum's shell are not only not identical, but can never replace each other. Also, museum's shell and collections can be distinguished clearly, because of their different frames of reference: In the case of the collection, this is the reality from which the collected objects stem, while in the case of the museum's shell it is the reality, which the museum as an institution is part of.

Museum's idea – Museum's shell

In difference to the collection the museum's shell is determined not by a cognitive interest, but by an interest of representation. The museum's shell is the objectification (Vergegenständlichung) of the museum's idea. While the museum's idea finds its conceptual counterpart as an entity in the museum's shell, idea and shell of a museum are always in tension, because in principle a concrete museum's shell will always be limited, whereas respective ideas might relate to the whole world. The decisions that are taken in a museum are therefore always determined by the general condition of having to realize the museum's idea with limited resources. This, however, means that, whatever a museum is and comprises, it will typically point beyond its frame to a larger whole, which is to experience and become evident on the basis of its limited collections, spaces and other resources. And this also means that other than the collections, which relate to reality by systematic or scientific methods, the museum's shell relates to by rhetorical forms its environment. The musealization therefore has to mediate between scientific standards, represented by the collections, and plausible interpretations, represented by the museum's shell.

Musealization

From scientific, artistic and practical work, the musealization howsoever acquired items mainly differs in that they are kept as fragments of a reality, which includes that further physical operations on or with them are ruled out in general. In order to secure this the items are inventoried, preserved, and stored, i.e. once and for all removed from the everyday life as well as the economic cycle, and kept as commons. In the next step, things are aestheticized, which means not more than that they are seen without any function for common life and are kept permanently in this state. This aestheticization or, expressed in terms of historical materialism: the reification (Verdinglichung) of things causes their conceptual conservation as objects. And this is a prerequisite for the next step of musealization: the possibility of their reflection in the sense of a *sapere aude*, which furthermore might mean that the faculty of judgment itself can be tested. In any case will such a possibly multidimensional reflection serve as the basis for the final operation, in which consistently new and different contexts can be constructed with the objects, because they are processed only symbolically. In these constructions, the objects are now, to say it with a notion of Krzysztof Pomian, 'Semiophors', i.e. things that appear as a carrier of a specific knowledge, and in the context of other assets might constitute their own reality.

Exposition

Which meaning is assigned to the objects, and how the visitors to the museum should see them, is defined by the museum's idea. The place where these interpretations and constructions come into manifestation is the exposition, that is the open-to-the-public area within the museum, in which a selection from the stored collections is on more or less permanent view. The permanent exposition, however, tends to achieve the status of a self-contained reality supported by the museum's shell: It is constructed from the museum's collections, which are seen as a more or less contingent accumulation of things that have to be interpreted in the light of the museum idea. In consequence, musealization here does not relate to the reality from which the collection-objects stem, but perceives them as parts of an own reality, a second nature, from which a reality, the exposition, can be constructed.

In other words, the museum's exposition is made up as selection out of a selection. There are no rules for this selection-process, nor are rules applied fixed for once and all. Rather, as the history of individual museums and museums in general shows, are those rules subject to constant change, which can result from both shifts and redefinitions of the museum's idea as well as from the acquisition of other collections. As always, however, the selection process is established and implemented: in each case, the selected objects in the permanent exposition will always appear in a dual role: as a representative of both the collection and the museum's idea. It should be noted here that the selection of objects for the exposition is based on neither in the one nor in the other function on a scientific, or rational calculus, but on rhetorical reasoned argumentation, namely the relationship between the exposition and collections on the figure of a *pars pro toto*, while the relationship between exposition and museum's idea on the figure of *synecdoche*.

Musealization - Museum

The Musealization is, this proves the almost incredible expansion of museums in recent decades, a universally applicable form of perception and processing, or short, a format that can be applied to at least everything that can be objectified, i.e. take the character of a thing. In its effects it might be compared only with the effectiveness of the central perspective, which led to the complete reorganization of the perception of the world. Was the major achievement of central perspective, to make the separation of subject and object viewable, so musealization is linked to the idea that the world as a whole could be grasped, and brought into view as a well-organized body - under human control. In

essence, the museum is therefore a colonial enterprise.

Based on this claim museums can play both a normative and reflective role in their social contexts. The normative role is most evident in the Natural History Museums as much as they can count on holotypes as part of their assets, which are the base of the scientific taxonomies. In contrast, the reflective role is best seen in historical museums, as their collection-objects usually have no meaning without a attribution and contextualization derived from the museum's idea, if they do not serve as evidence only for narratives established irrespectively of the collections. Between these two poles, on one hand steered by the organizing principles of the collections, and, on the other, the politics of the museum's idea in museum practice expositions may take on all possible variations and combinations.

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