

Narrating Identity by Means of Exhibition Techniques. Making Museum Visitors stumble upon the “Self” and the “Other”

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This paper is based upon the research on the construction of identity, taking into account that identity is produced by internal processes as well as ascribed identity markers. It shows interesting possibilities exclusively hold by exhibitions to make these identity markers visible. The paper doesn't centre on original objects but brings into focus models and installations, which are added to the objects, deliberately positioned between them. By breaking the usual look at the objects, identity markers are scrutinized, the difference between the “self” and the “other” blurs, and the “other” within the “own” culture can be recognized.

Examples are: the installation of the entrance sequence of Liberty Osaka, Osaka Human Rights Museum; a model of “How can we live together”, a special exhibition at Museum Neukölln, Berlin; the installation of “Gerüchte” / “Gossips”, a special exhibition at Museum für Kommunikation, Berlin; models of the Japanese Overseas Migration Museum, Yokohama.

These models and installations transform abstract ideas into concrete presentations for sensualised experiences and thus form a highly interpretive means of display. They visualize fields of ignorance, which usually are filled by stereotypes and prejudice, break self-evident judgements, and present surprising new combinations.

NARRATING IDENTITY BY MEANS OF EXHIBITION TECHNIQUES. MAKING MUSEUM VISITORS STUMBLE UPON THE “SELF” AND THE “OTHER”

“Museums are important because they serve to remind us of who we are and what our place is in the world“, says Davis (2007: 53) expressing a central challenge of the curators’ work: Museum exhibitions consistently give interpretations of the present by reconstructing the past, they are places where societies reassure themselves of their social and cultural practices (Muttenthaler 2007). They help to create the canon to be transmitted to next generations, give an official "curriculum vitae" of a state, a town or a region.

Exhibitions thus show official political parameters as well as ideas of curators. To be taken seriously by visitors, they, at the same time, have to be sensitive to actual social and cultural trends. Among the most important issues museums have picked up during the last decades are migration and cultural exchange. Since cultural spaces less and less correspond to geographical places, the question about what should be part of the permanent exhibition of a town, a region or a state becomes more and more important.

The trend in recent decades is subsumed by the term “inclusion“, asking how the perspective of the majority as the only way to perceive the world can be broken: How can exhibitions convey different perspectives and thus a plurality of standpoints? This applies to the interpretation of historical events as well as to the adequate representation of minorities.

Taking this way, exhibitions have to open up one-dimensional perceptions of the world. Curators try to break the usual view of the objects and thus make aware of the seeming self-evidence of habitual perspectives. Breaking automated patterns of interpretation can have the effect of blurring the difference between the “self” and the “other” and offering new perspectives.

In the following, I want to show interesting possibilities exclusively hold by exhibitions to make identity markers visible and think about the “self” and the “other”. I will bring into focus models and installations which are added to original objects, deliberately positioned between them. The models and installations transform abstract ideas into concrete presentations for sensualised experiences and thus form a highly interpretive means of display.

A MIXTURE OF KNOWING AND IGNORANCE

The basis for the perception of the world is a mixture of knowledge and ignorance, which we most of the time are not aware of. One reason is that gaps in knowledge are principally filled in by own ideas (positive or negative). From history, we know countless examples:



Fig. 1: Detail of an old nautical chart, Exhibition “Tiefsee“ (“Deep sea“), Naturkundemuseum, Berlin, 2010

- Nautical charts of the early days of maritime navigation show country borders as far as they were known. Then unknown regions are filled with terrifying mythical creatures.
- Cabinets of curiosity responded to the wish to know more about unknown regions of the world but at the same time supplied Europeans with fantastic, bizarre objects, which activated spine-chilling fantasies.
- Japanese printings of European and American foreigners from the second half of the 19th century show how the unknown are often characterized by attributes, which make them blatantly obvious strangers.

Problems arise when negative points prevail when representing only scarcely known people - what, unfortunately, happens in most cases. The exhibition "Rumours" at the Museum for Communication, Berlin, showed the prototype situation of "labelling" (mostly bad) attributes to other people: The gossiping about people while the common washing of dirty laundry in the stream. Even today, the expression "washing dirty laundry" is a German proverb meaning "speaking ill of other people."



Fig. 2: Detail of the installation "Washing dirty laundry", Exhibition "Gerüchte" ("Rumours"), Museum für Kommunikation, Berlin, 2011

The exhibition design provided a perfect example of coherence of form and content (Museum für Kommunikation 2009). The exhibition was built up of a "forest of rumours" to walk through. This installation showed the consequences of gossips: the creation of stereotypes, the generation of scapegoats, the bullying of individuals (cyber bullying) and of whole peoples (propaganda). Throughout the entire installation, one could hear constant whisper: "Psst, have you already heard ...".

In the midst of the whispering, there was an unusual showcase. It showed a dark, small sized office with a small figure moving within it. Only at second glance it became clear, that the small figure was a projection of a man / a woman who actually was acting in real time: A

monitor projected live images of the “gossip agent“ (recorded in a separate studio) into the small cabinet. By means of surveillance cameras and microphone technology, exhibition visitors could stand in front of the showcase and talk with the agent inside it. The “gossip agents“ weaved rumours into the conversations with the visitors (e.g. to pupils: “Have you already heard that from next year on, smart children will have more school holidays than pupils with poor marks?”). Afterwards, the “agents” dissolved the situation by throwing light on their communication tactics.





Fig. 3 + 4: Installation “Rumours“, Exhibition “Gerüchte“ (“Rumours“), Museum für Kommunikation, Berlin, 2011

THE DEMOLITION OF IDEAS TAKEN FOR GRANTED

Recent exhibitions try to make aware of gaps in knowledge and break new ground for rethinking own judgements. To reach this, models and installations are very often used in a specific way: Technically speaking, they first create a known, familiar setting and then combine this setting with an unexpected moment. In their making, they resemble the posters advertising the Jewish Museum Berlin: A sliced coconut with the flesh of an orange, a bicycle tire not with a tube, but with a snake inside, a busted chestnut shell with a golf ball inside. All situations are commented by: “Not what you are expecting.“ (“Nicht das, was Sie erwarten.“).



Fig. 5: Poster of the Jewish Museum Berlin, 2011

Even if they differ totally with regards to content, the examples which I give in the following, work according to this principle. The stylistic methods to create the moment of surprise in these three cases are: unexpected generalization, focussing on single aspects, and reversion of the perspective.

Questionnaire on Normality: Who is “normal“?

From August to December 2009, Martin Le Chevallier organized a survey in the Netherlands asking “Do you feel normal?”, and more than 2,000 Dutch answered. His “Poll“ was part of the exhibition “Not normal. Difference on Display“ (“Nicht normaal [sic]. Difference on Display“) shown first in the Netherlands and then by the Commissioner of the German Federal Government for the Concerns of Disabled People (Beauftragter der Bundesregierung für die Belange behinderter Menschen).

For the exhibition in Berlin, the questionnaire was translated into German and could be answered by the visitors. Entitled "Do you feel normal? Survey about normality in Germany", there were six questions in total:

1. I am a woman / man.
2. My age is 0-19, 20-30, 31-40 etc.
3. My domicile is Berlin / another place in Germany / somewhere else.
4. Occupation: employed / unemployed / student / retired / other.
5. What applies to you: single, separated, widowed without / with children, in a partnership, married with / without children
6. Do you feel absolutely normal / rather normal / rather abnormal / absolutely abnormal / I prefer not to answer.

By formulating the questions as superficial as possible, Le Chevallier puts categories like "normal" and "abnormal" into question, resisting to the opinion that the concept of normality could be defined. When answering this survey one wonders what lies behind these questions, what can be grasped by them? Interestingly enough, even these questions, formulated as meaningless as possible, touch markers which can imply discrimination, like “unemployed” or “separated with child” both evoking “having not much money”. On the other hand, factors often causing discrimination like a handicap, a foreign background, a religious affiliation etc. are not conveyed into the questions. Instead, by his last question, Le Chevallier transfers “normality” into an exclusively subjective feeling.

Liberty Osaka: Who is “different“ – and why?

The Human Rights Museum in Osaka explores the history of minorities living in Japan, showing their struggle against discrimination and recognizing their contribution to Japanese society. At the entrance to the permanent exhibition, an installation called "My values and discrimination" ("Watashi no kachikan to sabetsu") leads the museum visitors into the theme. It aims to encourage reflection on own values and on the double character of values as, on the one hand, guidelines in every day life and, on the other hand, sources of potential discrimination.



Fig. 6: Installation “My values and discrimination“, Liberty Osaka

The installation is several meters long and simulates several rooms of a Japanese middle-class family. Doors, windows, cabinets and bookshelves are shown as black outlines on white ground, partly three dimensional. Other furniture like tables, desks and sofas are made of white cardboard and arranged in the rooms. They serve as a stage for original everyday objects which call attention because of the very fact that they are not white but in their usual colours: a school uniform, exercise books and school reports, toys, a passport, drugs. In red circles, different values are stated: "I want a decent education / a good job / to get rich / to be clean and pure / to be healthy / to live in a rich country." Big balloons give conventional, standardized statements on the subject in everyday language ("For a good job, you simply need good qualifications").

There is a sliding door at the end of the installation. The visitor can open it and then looks into a mirror e.g. catches his or her own reflection. But the image is blurred, because the mirror is formed in waves.

The aspects pointed to at the installation refer to the groups of people introduced in later chapters of the permanent exhibition: People who do not or can not respond to one or more of these values and therefore are discriminated against. The installation is an impressive attempt to uncover principles of the perception of the "other". The seemingly “normal“ / conventional view on the world is challenged and questioned.

***“Happy Boys”*: Reversal of Perspective**

The model “Happy Boys” was shown in the exhibition "Identity under construction" (“Baustelle Identität“) in the Kreuzberg-Museum, Berlin, a part of the town, where many migrants live. "Identity under construction" showed the results of joint projects of German and French schools, which dealt with past times’ as well as today’s migration.



Fig. 7: Installation “Happy Boys“, Exhibition “Baustelle Identität“ (“Identity under construction“), Kreuzberg-Museum, Berlin, 2009

The model was developed as a joint work of the design school Intuitlab (Chris Miller) and the art academy Weissensee (Oliver Thie). The explanatory text is: "In a world in which Africa is the Promised Continent and the people of a ruined, poverty-stricken, violence-ridden country like Germany have long given up any hope for a decent future at home, two Berlin boys decide to follow the example of so many others and seek their fortune in Lagos, the Nigerian capital, the city of glass. The place, where people drive big cars, the women have black hair and you can be a little king even without working."

The accompanying text makes clear that common stereotypes are reversed. But the basic message, the design of a parallel world, can be understood by viewing the model alone. The two boys want to escape from a bleak residential area which could be located in any economically run down country of the world. It is only the design of a single, small detail of the model which turns our common ideas upside down: A poster on top of a ruined skyscraper, at first glance a Marlboro cigarette advertisement, shows the way to the distant land of promise. The poster shows shadows of cowboys around a campfire on the prairie in front of a sunset. But instead of horses, they have an elephant. And this elephant together with the slogan "Come to Mumbutu Country" pulls paradise away from the USA towards Africa.



Fig. 8: Detail of the installation “Happy Boys“, Exhibition “Baustelle Identität“ (“Identity under construction“), Kreuzberg-Museum, Berlin, 2009

APPROACHES TO NEW VIEWS?

Making a further step, surprising combinations can be used to approach new ideas.

Berlin Neukölln: "How can we live together?"

"How can we live together?" was a special exhibition at the Museum Neukölln, Berlin. The exhibition focused on difficulties, which can occur in urban districts where immigrants of different origins live together. The initiators of the exhibition asked pupils about their opinion on friendship: "What is friendship? Does a different background, religion or skin colour matter when making friends?"



Fig. 9: Model of the exhibition "Wie zusammen leben" ("How can we live together"), Berlin-Neukölln, 2009

The model introduced here illustrates the answer of a Turkish pupil with German citizenship: "Different religions are no obstacle for making friends - as long as you respect each other's faith." Even without this explanatory text, the message is clear just by looking at the two dolls.

These are Barbie and her Arab counterpart Fulla. Barbie – in spite of being heavily objected by women – until today is the embodiment of European and American ideals of female sex appeal with long, blond hair, big breasts, wasp waist, wide hips and long legs. The left doll wears the accordant outfit: a tight mini skirt. On the contrary, the body of the doll on the right is almost completely covered. Despite their completely different outfit, the two seem to be friends, the blonde putting her arm on the shoulder of her friend. Furthermore, the shoes of the one girl and the bag of the other are of the same colour.

The religion is demonstrated by an external attribute, the headscarf. The model uses stereotypes: the liberal European / Christian versus the veiled Arab / Muslim. By doing so, all

aspects of the currently burning debate are reduced (or only hinted at by the lipstick of the Muslim woman), and it is precisely by this reduction that the model makes a clear statement.

If the model dealt with another source of conflict, for example an ethnic one, the dolls would be used with other differentiating features, e.g. dolls of different skin colour. By a friendly gesture, the difference would be dissolved.

Yokohama: Former Emigrants coming back

JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency) coordinates the official development assistance on behalf of the Japanese government. In their International Centre in Yokohama, they set up a museum on the history of the Japanese migration which documents the life and achievements of Japanese overseas. A message of the President of JICA at the entrance of the exhibition says that now more than 2.5 million Japanese emigrants and their descendants live abroad, mainly in the countries of North, Central and South America. Nearly 300,000 people have come back to Japan for work and studies.

Very often, this return of descendants of Japanese emigrants (Nikkei nisei / sansei) does not function smoothly. Lack of language skills and completely different experiences in socialization separate them from their Japanese peers. The exhibition seeks to diminish these differences in several aspects. The presentation of the historical development begins with the 2nd half of the 19th century after the opening up of Japan and ends with the 1960s, when the rapid economic growth in Japan slowed down emigration.

In the exhibition, the emigrants' special position between Japan and their new home plays an important role. An installation of old trunks typical for migration museums shows items the emigrants took with them: a picture of the Tenno's family, a shōgi game, zōri sandals, a karate suit - items which connect them with the culture of their homeland and thus with most of the exhibition visitors. Detailed explanations of their motives, for example during difficult economic times, take the distance to the emigrants as well as the presentation of the often difficult situations abroad.

Installations of the new living and working conditions overseas show the mingling of the old and the new. To illustrate this generation-lasting process of adaptation, a table with a mixture of Japanese and South American dishes is laid. In Japan, highly realistic food models are everyday products, they are not realized in terms of their artistic design, but the high quality of their aesthetic appeal is taken for granted. This makes them useful as models in exhibitions to transform abstract ideas into something which can be experienced by the senses. The accompanying text explains that emigrants of the first generation had to learn to eat with knife and fork, did not want to eat meat, and had problems to sit on chairs at rectangular tables.



Fig. 10: Installation: Living abroad, Japanese Overseas Migration museum, Yokohama

The exhibition shows the history of Japanese migrants, but at the same time provokes reflections on developments within the own country, especially in relation to the declared "internationalization" (kokusaika) and "globalization". Here, the emigrants with their varied experiences are presented as true bridge-builders between Japan and other countries.

Getting Older: Becoming the “Other“

One part of the permanent exhibition of the Museum of Hygiene in Dresden deals with the topic of "Living and Dying". In the section about aging, the usual possibilities of medical supply and supports of daily life are shown. Besides, there are devices which make it possible to empathize with older people, for example a brush-like device which can be tied under the shoes and gives a wobbly feeling while standing; special earphones which block sounds and thus simulate hardness of hearing; a motor that is attached to the wrist and puts the arm in a constant tremor. With these tools attached to the body, young people are invited to move, to have a conversation, and to write on a paper. Generally, visitors are glad when they can get rid of these hardships again.

CONCLUSION: MAIN POINTS

One of the main tasks of museum exhibitions is to be places where difference can be experienced and thought over. With this paper, I have presented possibilities which exhibitions have to break the usual view of objects:

1. The first step is the visualization of fields of ignorance which usually are filled by stereotypes and prejudice. As an example, I introduced an exhibition which focussed attention on rumours.

2. The next step is to break self-evident judgements: for example by an exaggerated generalization, by highlighting certain details, by a reversal of perspective.
3. The final step is to present surprising new combinations: by bold combinations of the “own“ and the “other“, by the diminishment of differences, by offering the possibility of taking over another role.

All these techniques are put into effect by models, installations, and other devices which can be realized exclusively in exhibitions.

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MUSEUMS MENTIONED

Museum für Kommunikation, Berlin, special exhibition “Gerüchte”

Museum Neukölln, Berlin, special exhibition “Wie zusammen leben”

Kreuzberg-Museum, Berlin, special exhibition “Baustelle Identität”

Kleisthaus, Berlin, exhibition “Nicht normaal [sic]. Difference on Display“

Naturkundemuseum Berlin, special exhibition “Tiefsee“

Deutsches Hygiene-Museum, Dresden, permanent exhibition

Liberty Osaka, Osaka Human Rights Museum, Japan, permanent exhibition

Japanese Overseas Migration Museum, Yokohama, Japan, permanent exhibition