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Orbis digitalis

Preparatory considerations for the the foundation of an educational museum in the internet.

Preliminaries

Just like every real museum the educational ,museum in the internet „Orbis digitalis“ is also confronted with a double task: It must choose objects and it must present objects. Selection and presentation - these fundamental operations are the pillars of all museal work. The criteria which determine the selection and presentation of the exhibits, the selection and presentation code, have a direct effect on all further museal decisions and strategies, for the collection policy, for the kind of archiving for publicity and much more beside. Therefore the development and clarification of the selection and presentation criteria are the core of all museum concepts.

In real museums the selection and presentation criteria are detrermined to a large degree by the kind and value of the already existing exhibits. The acquisition of new pieces is again determined by the intention to extend or even to complete the collection and the presentation follows the almost self-evident maxim of the best staging. For this reason the concept development in an already existing museum is relatively simple: It has the form of a „continuation“ of the tradition to date of collection and presentation in whatever direction the accent may lie

Things look quite different in the case of the Educational Museum in the internet „Orbis Digitalis“. There exists neither a collection nor a presentation tradition which is just in need of continuation or some kind of modernisation. The Educational Museum owns nothing which it could lean back on, not even a room. It must begin at scratch and consider all questions concerning the building of a museum from the beginning and in a totally new fashion. In a strict sense, this means no more and no less than finding and justifying the selection and presentation criteria which are essential for evedry museum in an ocean of endless possibilities. This is a chance, but also a difficult challenge. We can only tackle this if we are prepared to learn and if we do not lose our bearings. The purpose of this paper is to help us keep our bearings. It is not yet a concept but a map. It describes the terrain in which we should find the way and the possible paths which we can follow in search of a concept.

Even if the exact route to the museum concept is not yet clear, three essentials are known. They limit the field of operations and are thus the only marking-points in oujr search. These essentials or marking-points can be formulated in the following way:

1. The development of the concept must be geared to the demand that the planned museum is *an educational museum*. It must always be immediately clear how this educational museum differs and should differ in content or themes from those of other specialist museums.

2. The development of the concept must be geared to the demand that the planned museum is a *virtual museum*. It must always be immediately clear where the true nature lies, the advantages and disadvantages lie.

3. The development of the concept must be geared to the demand that the planned museum is a *university training project*. It must always be immediately clear that the interested education students can take part from the beginning in the planning and realisation of the museum.

An Educational Museum

What distinguishes the collection of an educational museum from that of other museums is not easy to say. It is at the least an excellent subject for debate. There are a lot of gradual steps between a position which tries to include in the collection everything which can be dragged in by the heels, i.e. having anything remotely concerned with the fact of growing up and relations between the generations - which is, as we know, rather a lot - and on the other hand a position which favours a strict limitation, either of the formalised tools of school learning like in a school museum or of the everyday or the not everyday playthings in a toy museum. These can all marshal weighty arguments. We will not begin by taking recourse to these arguments. Whatever it is which will eventually be collected and seen in „Orbis Digitalis“ must at present remain open. Nevertheless not everything is possible. Decisive for the inclusion in the collection and presentation of the educational museum is the educational significance of an object. In order to be included in the collection an object must offer the opportunity for describing a particular educational development. Yet what is it which we describe when we describe educational development?

Educational developments are not processes of maturation. They do not unfold after an endogenous programme like the plant from the seed, in order then after a continuous development in the blossom to reach their predetermined goal. Educational movements do not exhaust themselves in the accumulating piling up of sensations or stores of knowledge which are passed on in a more or less friendly way from outside. Educational movements are rather reflexive processes. They result from the conflict-ridden efforts of the younger generation to come to terms with the conditions of their own existence, which are passed on by their culture, the material conditions just as much as the existing convictions and everyday orientations. Education, by allusion to a short but precise formulation of Sartre, is the small reflexive movement in which human beings transcend their societal „constitution“, something which is not their own, and in an act of „personalisation“ make something of what they have themselves been made of. Education in this sense is always self-education. It cannot and should not be taken from the younger generation. And certainly not through pedagogic treatment. For the task of pedagogy lies not in sparing the younger generation the strain and effort of self-education. On the contrary: the guiding maxim of all modern pedagogy is the challenge to „do-it-yourself“, i.e. self-education.

This guiding maxim, the challenge to self-education, throws the pedagogues into a classical dilemma, perhaps in a cul-de-sac, an „aporie“ as Mollenhauer supposed in the „Vergessene

Zusammenhänge“ (1983, p. 14). As adults pedagogues are „not only midwives at the beginning of the child’s development but also mighty censors of his self-education“ (ibid. p. 10). Kafka’s letter to his father and with it the whole autobiographical literature of modern times are for Mollenhauer „proof that we not only owe our own education to the adults but also hold it against them“ (ibid. p.10) The adults are responsible for the order of everyday life, the economic base and societal conditions, which the newcomers find on their arrival. It is they, the adults, who decide on the shape of the tangible and intellectual world which is presented to the new generation as material for their self-education. Through this and through the style of the personal interaction with the younger generation the adults determine the course of the possible self-education. They stipulate and restrict. In short, they function as censors for what might be possible. But the adults do not just censor, they also accompany the younger generation on their way in the culture presented and open doors for them. They look after the little ones and put them back on their feet when they have fallen down. They show them what is important for survival and what is not, what causes joy and where one should watch one’s step. In other words, the adults share their experience with the younger generation and thus support them in the difficult task of self-education. Education becomes in these conditions a genuine balance-act. It threatens to collapse at any time into two opposite extremes: into compulsive indoctrination on the one hand or into indifferent „Laissez faire“ on the other. If it comes to these extremes, self-education is no longer possible. In the first case the indispensable individual productivity of the younger generation is suppressed and in the second the equally indispensable coming to terms with the culture which has been passed down to them. To avoid these two dangers, the Scylla of compulsion and the Charybdis of indifference with reference to the younger generation, the adult as educator must display a certain kind of interaction which is described in the traditional terms as „pädagogischer Takt“ (an educational lightness of touch or tact).

This expression has a hard time. It seems worn out and opens the door to many a misunderstanding. But basically it stands for a central condition of the modern project of education: the understanding self-limitation of the power of the adult educator in interaction with the child. For Litt „Pädagogischer Takt“ is the practical consequence of a professional ethos, which, as he described it, “ rules out the desire to enforce one’s own will“ (Litt 1949a, p. 72). That is the decisive point. Weniger calls it „the real secret of the work of education“ (Weniger 1961, p.28). It is only by the renunciation of the desire of the educator to get his own way that he achieves the „ particular distance to the content and to the pupil“ (Nohl 1957, p. 137), which is the prerequisite for the success of the educational interaction. The „particular distance“, whose „finest expression“ is to be found in the „pädagogischer Takt“ (Nohl 1957, p. 137), produces the necessary space for the educational course of events. The young person needs it to develop his individual productivity under the oppressive domination of the adult. And the educator needs it for observation and self-control. One could also say: „pädagogischer Takt“ turns the personal relationship between pupil and educator into a kind of experimental field, on which the one can test out without danger his autonomy and the other can test and check in attentive self-reflexion the rightness of his actions and the validity of his stock of knowledge.

Nothing is fundamentally excluded from the critical self-examination of the educator. It applies not only to the educational practice itself and its instruments, both of speech and material, but

also to the societal conditions under which this action takes place. The educator must subject the whole cultural experiential world and the mode of socialisation embedded into it before the horizon of the child's future to a critical examination. He must constantly distinguish between the influences in the cultural objects we have which hamper or prevent and those which encourage the processes of self-formation on the part of the younger generation.

It is precisely here that we see the task of the virtual educational museum „orbis digitalis“. It must in its own way check through the material objects of our everyday life as to their capacity for contributing to our educational development and discover through a confrontation with our own tradition those cultural elements which have a future and are therefore worthy of being passed on. In other words: the programme of the new educational museum on the internet is founded on the selection and presentation of everything in the object inventory of our meanwhile globalised culture which lends the appearance of being significant, educationally superfluous or indeed harmful. We want in our virtual museum to expose to view the possible educational sense of past and present „material culture“ in all its forms - from the potty and the pram to the fishing rod. In short, the educational museum has to show how the various objects of our culture affect the process in which we become what we are. What competences, what skills are trained or suppressed through the use of the things, what expectations are awoken or stifled, what knowledge conveyed or blocked? Everyday objects are to be presented and described in such a way that their educational or deforming effects on the younger generation are made recognizable and perhaps even felt.

The Virtual Museum

The viewing and presentation of the educationally relevant inventory of objects of our culture take place in a medium which did not exist in this form a few years ago, and whose inner laws we must of course know and respect: the virtual world of the internet. There are above all two characteristics which stamp this virtual world and thus also the Virtual Museum and which distinguish it from the real museums: the two-dimensionality of the presentation and the digital form of storing.

Whatever it is which the virtual museum presents remains locked in the two-dimensionality of the screen and is thus - in the traditional language of exhibitors - „flatware“. One can regard this fact in comparison with traditional museums as a double loss: as regards the subject as a loss of sensuality and as regards the things as a loss of materiality. The visitor of the virtual museum is extremely limited in his sensomotor activity. He cannot move himself physically and he cannot choose a viewpoint of his own. The perspective under which he perceives the exhibits is laid down for him. He must always in front of the flat screen conform with the viewpoint of the photographer or designer. In many virtual museums, such as the Musée d'Art Moderne in the Centre Pompidou in Paris (<http://cnac-fr/musee/>) the visitor is given the possibility with the zoom functions of regulating proximity and distance himself. However the movement created is simulated. Even in this case the visitor cannot escape the presettings. Along with the limitation of sensuality in the virtual museum goes the disappearance of the things. Through the levelling down

onto the area of the screen they lose their materiality, their space and size. They fade away to mere copies.

One can say: As a result of its unavoidable „flatness“ the virtual museum lacks the basic prerequisite for the presentation of original, authentic, unique and tangible objects (Waidacher 1993, p.291). However is that something qualitatively completely new? Has not the traditional museum already shaken this basic prerequisite too? Has not the traditional museum also robbed things of their materiality and put them into glass cases? The classical museum was never a „hands-on“ museum. On the contrary. The objects were only to be viewed, but never touched or worked on. For the encouragement of contemplation the sense of touch was always restricted. The Virtual Museum merely increases this tendency which always existed. So it is perhaps not so far-fetched to see in the virtual museum the logical consequence of the traditional museum.

While one can argue about the advantages and disadvantages with regard to the characteristic of two-dimensionality and its consequences, the position with regard to the second characteristic, the digitality is fairly clear: digitality means a multiple gain as against all previous forms of archiving. Alongside the low cost - digital storage is much cheaper than a real archive room - the following advantages of the virtual museum can also be chalked up to digitalisation.

1) *Unlimited storage capacity*: Digitalisation, which makes the objects of the collection flat, renders them also practically independent from all spatial requirements. The virtual museum knows no more spatial problems, neither in regard to the size nor the form of the objects. The virtual museum always has sufficient exhibition rooms and sufficient storage space. Lack of space as a possible pretext for censure falls flat. Digitalisation allows the storage of any object on a scale which is in its extent and cheapness almost unlimited. All at once the old ideal of completeness appears in a new light.

2) *Complete linkage*: Digitalisation makes possible not only almost unlimited storage, it makes possible also the unlimited linkage of the exhibits. Through the digital form which is common to their existence all the museal objects - be they texts, pictures, films or sounds - can be linked with one another. They can all be linked with one another without trouble and without leaving anything behind forming combinations at one's liking. Thus the virtual museum allows for the first time in history the museal objects to be linked and arranged in a free and unlimited way without consideration for spatial limits or architectural demands. In this way the digital exhibit can suddenly appear in connections which were unachievable for the original.

3) *Up to date*: The virtual museum belongs neither to the category of the temporary nor of the permanent exhibitions. It is in fact both: constantly in movement and yet permanent. The virtual museum can be quickly changed, extended, corrected and completed. Although it rejects the distinction between depot and exhibition rooms, it is nevertheless able to offer a constant „change of scene“. This raises the speed of its reaction to changes in the realm of knowledge and thus ensures that it is always up to date. The virtual museum always has the chance of being right up to date. The wonderful thing is that with all change nothing gets lost. The high storage capacity ensures that each phase in the dynamics is saved and can be presented at any time.

4) *The principle of ubiquity*: Digitalisation makes it possible to send the objects of the virtual museum practically in „real time“, at all events at high speed, to any part of the globe. These are therefore freed from their tie to time and place and in principle at least available to everyone at any time. Virtual museums can be ubiquitous, i.e. they can be everywhere at once. „The beauty of a virtual museum is its capacity to connect the visitor with valuable information across the entire globe.“ (McKenzie 1997) Of course the principle of ubiquity of the virtual museum reaches its limits in reality. The most important of these limits is that of language. The „world language“ English speaks of course for a wider acceptance for the virtual museum than Swahili or German.

5) *Productive participation*: The virtual Museum allows the visitor not only a highly individualised form of viewing. It allows him not only, as in any conventional museum also, to satisfy his special interests or just to wander around as the mood takes him. The virtual museum does much more, in that it offers him the opportunity to play a part in the presentation of the museum, to change things by way of correction or completion, and thus to make a constructive contribution to the building up of the museum and the presentation of its exhibits. The terminus technicus for this is „interactivity“. This makes the visitor a productive factor in the development of the museum. The interactivity of the virtual museum makes him in the extreme case act, quite apart from complaints box, guest book and chatroom, as co-curator.

A University Training Project

The conceptional development and the real construction of the virtual museum „orbis digitalis“ take place in the framework of the educational study course at the Humboldt University in Berlin. The educational museum in the internet is therefore a university training project. It gives the students particularly of the study course „Museum education“ the opportunity of trying out the most important aspects of the basic operations of a museum in selection and presentation, while relieved from the immediate pressure of having to succeed in a practical and commercial way. The educational museum „orbis digitalis“ offers to students of educational science who are interested in museum education a virtual practical work placement, a two-dimensional experimental field, in which all problem areas relevant to museum education can be raised and discussed scientifically and for which new creative solutions can be found. This cannot of course be done without risk. Not everything succeeds at once. Some things lie unfinished, others turn out quickly to be mistakes or flops. In one case the theoretical ambition may be extensive and soundly based, while the realisation on the screen is not very convincing, in another case the web design may be perfect, but the commentary from the standpoint of educational theory scanty and inconsistent. Sometimes the photos are badly chosen, sometimes the metaphors unfitting. All this and more can and will happen and the appearance of a smart high-gloss museum may quite fall by the wayside. The educational museum „orbis pictus“ is far from being a culture citadel for internet tourists, it is rather a workshop. Here it is a matter of trial and error, rough-hewn, with sawdust flying and the sweat pouring out. Does the idea of working in a virtual „museum in progress“ appeal to you? If so, you are most welcome: just come to have a look or, better still, join in yourself!

The construction of the museum is experimental. There is no cut and dried project plan which takes into account all details of the future museum and which just has to be „activated“. Our procedure in the construction of the museum does not follow the instrumental logic of plan fulfillment. Because we do not know what the museum will one day look like we have no choice but to stop after each step, take stock of what has been achieved and take fresh bearings. One could say that the procedure which we favour in the realisation of our idea for a museum is that of permanent self-correction. We move forwards by giving ourselves a push from the point we have just reached. Progress begins with the smallest autonomous sensuous unit known to the educational museum - with the virtual glass cases. For the formal shaping of these virtual glass cases there are no directives. All the technical possibilities which the internet offers must be used and tried out. So far as the content is concerned there are no limitations apart from the essential basic themes of education and educational theory. In the structuring of form and content of the smallest museal units everyone participating has a free hand. Experimentation is called for. Everyone is called on to work out and present his own suggestion. Whether this is realised and put into the internet is decided after an exhaustive discussion by the working party and the directorate of seminar and museum.

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Zur Zitierweise:

Michael Parmentier: Orbis digitalis. Preparatory considerations for the the foundation of an educational museum in the internet In: Schwerpunkt Museumspädagogik (zuletzt veröffentlicht am 15.06.2009), URL: <http://www.60320ffm.de/orbis/>