

Special issue of the Austrian Journal of Historical Studies (OeZG)

Displaying Violence

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Current approaches in critical museology, visual and postcolonial studies challenge the established ways in which historical museums, especially those relating to modern or contemporary history, create meaning. The single, homogenous, and nationalised historical narrative has lost credibility as the assumed standard of storytelling in historical exhibitions, so have traditional formats of exhibition and display in museums. As a result, many actors in the field have been left wondering how to animate the current buzzwords of museology, such as participation, multi-dimensionality, positioning and dialogue while still committing to the public's expectations in regard to education and guidance, so pertinent for museums devoted to legacies of political violence. Critics' demands from museums to reflect on ethical issues when exhibiting conflicted or violent histories has transformed what is considered "justifiable" curatorial practices and thus, what historical exhibitions should look like. Activists and scholars have pointed out, for instance, that by displaying relicts or documents of a violent past, especially when connected to colonialism, war or genocide, museums perpetuate historical semantics of power and, as a result, reify the humiliation of victims and leave frames of violence and power intact. Similarly, museological analysis has shown that the exhibition of political propaganda can contribute to a re-evoking of historical ideology, thereby museums are constituting (or contributing to) the allure of precisely that violent rhetoric which they are claiming to educate the public about. Some fear that a reflexive consideration of such questions might force museums to empty their display cases and thus create a void in historical narratives, obscuring altogether the history of oppression or violence. And yet, such stories can be told from a position of empathy with the victims, by representing multiplicity of voices, or by engaging the audience/participants with reflexive meta-questions.

This special issue of the Austrian Journal of Historical Studies (OeZG) is collecting interdisciplinary perspectives from historical studies, theoretical museology and other fields of research that contribute to the advancement of debates on display of violence in museum exhibitions. We invite scholars to critically analyse contemporary museum practices and trace the shifting ethical standards of how to represent historical violence in museum spaces. We call for papers that identify trends and changes in museological standards pertaining to display of artifacts, photographs and other medial representation of violence. We are especially interested in combinations of theoretical considerations with analyses of specific cases and comparative exhibition analyses, which focus on the role of visual material, objects and stories in staging and perpetuating violence and victims' humiliation, and in discussion of strategies used by cultural institutions to deal with complex material, such as e.g. perpetrator photography and propaganda material or human remains. Of particular interest are papers examining emerging curatorial responses and exhibition techniques which seek to disrupt propaganda and violence.

Authors are invited to discuss museums' positioning within the field of cultural power dynamics as such, alongside strategies of hegemony, (racialised, gendered etc.) marginalization, and exclusion. Possible lines of inquiry are: Why and how have exhibitions recently changed how they display artifacts or visual representation of violence? How does the often applied emphasis on individual and victim's perspectives tie in with questions of the renewal of violence and re-traumatisation? What positionalities vis-à-vis displayed violence are museum visitors/participants invited to adopt or perform? What relevance can be attributed to the binary between agency and structural approaches or the treatment of everyday life as illustrative of specific historical and contemporary contexts? Finally, what is the role and performance of violence in exhibitions that aim to create emotion and reach broader audiences via the exploitation of shock value or to justify their institution and mission?

Proposals of approx. 500 words/3000 characters are welcome in either English or German until 15 March 2021 sent to the three editors listed below. We are calling for research papers (published after passing two double-blind peer reviews) but also for interviews, concept papers, essays and other formats examining the subject. The deadline for submitting the final papers will be 15 December 2021.

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