

Abstract

ESF – Conference on Re-Visiting the Contact zone: Museums, Theory, Practice

Angela Jannelli, M.A.

Merianstr. 49; 60316 Frankfurt am Main

angela.jannelli@stadt-frankfurt.de

“Savage Museums”

Community museums as contact zone for people, objects and different forms of knowledge

Whenever I cross an amateur museum, I try to visit it. I am fascinated by the enormous variety of topics those museums deal with, and I am intrigued by the often unmanageable number of objects and the often quite uncommon way in which they are arranged in the exhibitions. The more museums I have visited over the past years, the more intrigued I was by the question: Why do people make museums? I wondered, what made the museum so appealing that more and more people decided to spend their time and often enough also their money to set up and run one?

Theoretical and methodological approach

To find an answer to this questions, I started a field research in three German amateur museums. I wanted to learn something about the motivations of the museum-makers and what their museums meant to them. In my research, I started with analyzing the exhibitions. What objects did the museum-makers collect? How are they arranged? Which are the criteria they adopt to organize the objects and to convey meaning through the different objects? I soon realized, that I couldn't answer this questions with the semiotical approach usually adopted for exhibition analysis. With the existing tools for exhibition analysis, I only could assert that in amateur museums reigned a precious mess!

It was the French ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and his theory of “the savage mind” who helped me solve my methodological problem: Lévi-Strauss criticized that in ethnology the “savage” view of the world was often judged according to “civilized” (that means scientific) criteria which could only lead to the conclusion that it was considered as underdeveloped and premature. According to Lévi-Strauss the “civilized” and the “savage mind” constitute two different but equal modes of thinking. Therefore, the “savage” view of the world had to be considered as a self-contained way to look at and interpret the appearances of the world. Following Lévi-Strauss, I analyzed the amateur museums no longer with “civilized”, i.e. “scientific” criteria but as independent and self-contained ways to arrange things in order to establish meaningful systems. That meant: To understand why people make museums, I had to turn my attention to the process of museum-making.

The “Savage Museum” as Contact Zone for people and things

Looked at through a process-oriented perspective, the amateur museums revealed themselves as veritable “contact zones”, as places where the getting together of people and things opened up powerful social or performative spaces. In the performative aesthetic and according to newer theories in material culture studies, people and things do not belong to different worlds, they share and constitute one world. As scientists as Alfred Grell, Bruno Latour or Daniel Miller suggest, things have

“agency”. In the amateur museum, the power of things is used to perform different kinds of actions concerning identity, memory or the manifestation of knowledge.

In the McNair-Museum – the museum of the former civil employees of the Allied Forces in Berlin – for example, the museum was a powerful instrument to keep up the group of the former employees: After the German unification the Allied Forces left Germany and with their withdrawal in 1993, thousands of civil employees were no longer needed, the community was likely to be dissolved. A group of former civil employees started collecting objects from the world of the former Allied Forces. By collecting, they got or stayed in touch with former colleagues and established a huge collection of varied things from every realm of the civil employee’s former life. Through this exchange of things, they established and tightened social relations between the former civil employees and made of the museum a social space where the community could be upheld, where the members of that community could meet and remember the “good old days”.

The McNair-Museum – as other community museums - can be described as a “contact zone”: With the museum the former civil employees provide a space where the civil employees can get in contact with the past. It is a contact zone for remembrance. The past is not “objectivated”, it is not closed and untouchable, but it shows to be a lively space where the always new narratives of the “good old days” are realised. What makes the McNair-museum such a powerful space for collective remembrance is the fact that each object is a symbol for a relationship. It is much more than a pure sign referring to some abstract knowledge. Objects in amateur museums are not used to explain general facts (as it is usually done in scientific museum), they are used in a symbolic way in order to perform social actions. Therefore, the museum can be defined as a highly effective symbolic space for (re) collection, exhibition-making can be interpreted as a process where things are arranged in a proper order, i.e. as a process of meaning-making.

The “Savage Museum” as contact zone for expertise and science

Another important aspect that makes amateur museums veritable contact zones is the fact that they mostly do not represent scientific knowledge. The “Savage Museum” is a space run by aficionados and adepts not by scientists. Therefore practical and personal “know how” is considered to be much more important than the abstract, scientific “knowing that”. The “Savage Museum” is a space for tacit knowledge, for experience and not for education. Viewed in this context, the question arises, if it really suffices to explain the proliferation of amateur museums during the last four decades as a need for the compensation of the losses brought by progress, as German philosopher Hermann Lübbe does in his theory of musealization. Is it enough to interpret community museums as nostalgic manifestations, to explain museum-making as a hobby for people longing for the past? Wouldn’t it be more appropriate to explain the popularity of the museum with Nowotny, Scott and Gibbon’s thoughts about the “re-thinking of science”? According to them, our society is characterized by a growing importance of expertise and an increasingly critical attitude towards science. Viewed in this light, the “Savage Museum” proves to be one of the contact zones where the struggle of expertise and science becomes manifest.

Angela Jannelli (*1973), cultural anthropologist and museologist. Since July 2007, I work as a curator at the Historical Museum Frankfurt where I am responsible for a present-oriented and participatory exhibition space to be opened in 2015. This research was part of my PhD-theses, which I submitted in March 2010 at the Institute for Cultural Anthropology at the University of Hamburg.