

Decolonizing exhibition halls: Experiences and challenges of participatory curating

Decolonization is one of the challenges museums have to face currently. It affects established exhibition practices because it requires the dissolution of hegemonic discourses and patterns of action. Here, Critical Whiteness Studies offer an important approach. Anna Greve (2019) used this theoretical approach for example to explain some of those crucial prerequisites which were used in redesigning the local history museum in Schloss Schönebeck.

One of her stipulations is, that curators and museum experts have to give up their interpretative and decision-making authority over the meaning and presentation forms of material culture in order to open up a broader debate, made up of diverse perspectives and voices. Such a diversification arises, for example, out of the "active cooperation and influence" on exhibition practices by non-museum experts and laypersons (Anja Piontek 2017). Non-museum experts and laypersons are all those who have no direct professional connection to the research and exhibition practices of museums - regardless of whether they are experts for distinct topics, areas or material objects concerning a certain exhibition project.

For museums in general, but especially for ethnological museums and collections, participatory curating practices pose a particular challenge, since museums are subject to administrative, logistic, and temporal constraints. Additionally, potential partners might be out of reach and not unanimous in their opinions. Therefore, the decolonization of ethnological exhibitions requires a high degree of flexibility and creativity by museum experts together with an increased sensitivity and attentiveness in order to avoid the reproduction of colonial behaviour and discourses (cf. Boast 2011).

The decolonization of ethnological exhibition practices by active participation of members of source communities can only be successful if it includes all fields of work in the making of exhibitions, i.e. 1) the setting of themes, 2) the development of concepts, 3) their elaboration and 4) their creative implementation.

My experience, based on the realization of one exhibition and current preparation of another one, shows that the real challenge is not only to enable but rather to keep up active participation by all partners in all four stages of the preparative process. The Municipal Museums of Freiburg are currently planning a temporary exhibition on "Freiburg and Colonialism", for which I'm the curator in charge. While the topic has been chosen *bottom up* by Freiburg activists, it is now rather difficult to include them as co-curators into the process of the exhibition development. This is caused by administrative, economic and logistic constraints of museums work; as for example tight and already divided budgets, or workflows that focus exclusively on the museum and its needs. A similar challenge arises concerning the inclusion of source communities, local diaspora communities and post-colonial societies. However, if these difficulties are not overcome to include external experts, as the mentioned stake holder groups, into the preparation of the exhibition, colonial behavior patterns and perspectives might be reproduced.

From the curator's point of view, it now needs creative solutions in order to realize genuine participative cooperation with partners outside of the museum. Initially, this starts by increasing the exhibition budget and thus, enabling the inclusion of members of those formerly colonized countries which are presented in the exposition in order to make their post-colonial voices audible within the project. The advisory board will also increasingly call for the inclusion of participatory contributions.

Furthermore, within the German context, we need to ease administrative restrictions, such as tender deadlines for exhibition designs. This requires the reconsideration of established workflows within the museum, either by making them more flexible or by abandoning them entirely. Having the courage to improvise is crucial in this regard, because Co-curators do not necessarily adapt to the given workflows or may even have their own priorities.

Finally, the exhibition concept must be flexible enough to allow the incorporation of new ideas at a later stage within the development process. This flexibility has proven its worthiness during the making of "*maraké* - confirmation: Ways into the World of Adults", an exposition developed at the end of the research project "Men-Thing-Entanglements among Indigenous Societies" and displayed in the BASA Museum of the University of Bonn in 2018 and 2019. It happened that only after the exhibition concept was finalized, the indigenous partners of the research project: four Wayana from French Guiana: Aimawale Opoya, Mataliwa Kuliyanan, Malausi Tikilima, and Palanaiwa Akajuli expressed their wish to contribute to it. In the end, a cooperation developed which was extremely enriching, but had not been considered in the original planning, because it seemed to cause too many financial and administrative uncertainties, such as the need to organize and pay the travel to Bonn from indigenous villages in French Guiana. These difficulties could be eliminated, because the Wayana proposed to use one of the planned research workshops at the BASA to prepare their contribution to the exhibition.

The input of our indigenous partners prevented us from displaying an essential aspect of their own culture from a purely etic, that is to say outside perspective and from reproducing colonial practices in form of "the Othering". They developed their own aesthetics of presentation by designing two showcases, which explained the equipment (tools, baskets, ritual objects, dishes, and body adornment,) for the preparation and performance of the *maraké* ritual. Two mannequin dolls dressed and painted as dancers flanked the showcases. In doing so, our partners questioned current discourses on media used for ethnographic representation, since mannequin dolls have long been NO-GOs in ethnographic displays. Those and similar experiences in the museum context demonstrate clearly that sensitizing museum scientists and curators for the existence of completely different perspectives *on* and perception *of* facts, which can stand in contrast to one's own positions – although developed in critical discourses is only a first step towards decolonizing the exhibition hall.

To draw conclusions: There is no doubt that a consistent process of the decolonization of our museum's world is necessary. According to the above mentioned observations, the following aspects have to be considered in order to achieve the change.

- (1) Collaboration with source communities and diaspora societies should become an indispensable part of curating exhibitions, especially for those museums projects, which want to present non local collections, as in first place ethnological museums but also for example nature history museums
- (2) It needs a change in museum work, that makes the processes of knowledge production and communication accessible for layperson and their ideas and influences. Exhibition projects should offer different formats for participation at an early planning stage – started for example through public events at the museum.
- (3) This must be accompanied by a change of administrative and financial organization and rules in order to enable substantial flexibility within the preparatory process.
- (4) Until this aspect has been achieved, 'participatory curating' is a method of decolonization is a necessary and an indispensable asset which certainly can be

arduous since creativity, flexibility and the courage of last minute extemporization may be needed.

- (5) Finally, it will require the commitment from non-museum experts and laypersons to demand participation in exhibition practices and to persevere with it in everyday life.

Bibliographic references

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