

Museum and Violence: How Violence Became a Museological Category

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Like all academic disciplines museum studies is subject to paradigm shifts. [Half a century ago this statement would have been an academic provocation, not only because scholars rarely thought in terms of paradigm shifts, but also because museum studies were not regarded as an academic discipline – very much like educational studies, another discipline closely connected to the museum.] Museums used to be regarded as collections, which only gathered a special type of objects, chiefly for the satisfaction of their scholars, unless they formed part of an academic institution. Scholars connected to museums traced facts, basic knowledge, which conditioned both publications and the public presentation of objects. Basic knowledge, far from being made up of mere facts, is indissolubly intertwined with the symbolic order, the hierarchy of values, which governs both the museum and the society in which it is embedded. Since the last quarter of the 20th century, the recognition that human beings endow the world with meaning has gained prominence. Scholars began to question the hierarchy of values, which, rather than being immutable, was seen as residing in subjects and societies. There occurred a shift in interest from bare facts to their social interpretation. The investigation of history has been complemented by that of memory, which focuses upon the subjective perception of historical events. Facts not backed by any historical evidence may well be remembered and acquire major importance for the present. They are what we call myths.

In this paradigm shift, the history of everyday life is important, to access which oral history has been developed. While in keeping with the long tradition of narrated history, oral history is used specifically to trace agency.¹ Given that

¹ See Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past. Oral History*, Oxford / London / New York, 1978; Daniel Bertaux (ed.), *Biography and Society. The Life History Approach in the Social Sciences*, Beverly Hills / London, 1982; Lutz Niethammer (ed.), *Lebenserfahrung und kollektives Gedächtnis. Die Praxis der "Oral History"*, Frankfurt/Main: Syndikat,

it is transmitted through language oral history is only slowly gaining ground in museums, which can exhibit objects but cannot tell stories. [The typical display in a museum is presentation and not narration, the symbolical order of things.²] While in a narration facts are told sequentially, in an exhibition objects are on display simultaneously.³ It is the visitors who decide the time spent on viewing each of the objects and the sequence in which they do so.

Our topic has both a narrative and a representative focus[, described by Thomas Hobbes as “power” (*potestas*)]. “Force” (*vis*) and violence are latent in pictures and symbols of power, such as portraits, insignia and fortifications. Who refuses to accept power will feel its full force. [Unjust power can exercise violence.] Violence is suffered by individuals, mostly ordinary people, while the exercise of power is the prerogative of the mighty. Thus, the interest in violence forms part of the history of everyday life.

[The debate about violence, which in its current connotation started some decades ago, is closely connected to the concept of “trauma“, introduced into the humanities in the context of the discussion concerning memory. Since the 1980s, Pierre Nora and Jan Assmann have described memory as a cultural treasure. “Trauma” meant the contrary: a negative memory, a non-memory, what has also been described as an “empty circle”. In the course of the discussion the term approached a metaphoric meaning, it described more a structure of memory approaching a literary form. (I want to stay as near as possible to the historical events in which trauma is caused by violence.)

With trauma, the focus of the discussion shifted from political problematisation to pathos or suffering. This cannot be called a-political, but the feelings of the thinkers acquire a different focal point. Losing sight of the political setting carries the risk of comparing the traumatising of a surviving member of the 12th SS-armoured division “Hitler Youth”, one of the few to come back from Normandy, to that of a survivor of Auschwitz. Trauma is a problem of survivors, who are part of different societies. They bring their past into the societies they are living in. In spite of the danger of equalising victims of different political contexts I do not want to overlook the advantage that

1980; Lutz Niethammer, Bodo Hombach, Tilman Fichter and Ulrich Borsdorff (ed.), “*Die Menschen machen ihre Geschichte nicht aus freien Stücken, aber sie machen sie selbst.*” *Einladung zu einer Geschichte des Volkes in NRW*, Berlin/Bonn, 1984.

² See Gottfried Korff, *Museumsdinge: Deponieren – Exponieren*, ed. Martina Eberspächer, Gudrun Marlene König and Bernhard Tschofen, Köln, Weimar, Wien, 2002; Detlef Hoffmann: “Spur. Vorstellung. Ausstellung,” *Geschichtskultur in der Zweiten Moderne*, ed. Rosemarie Beier, Frankfurt/Main, 2000, 167-181.

³ Detlef Hoffmann, “Aktuelle Symbolisierungsstrategien im Umgang mit dem System Auschwitz,” *Die Shoa im Bild*, ed. Sven Kramer, München, 2003, 171-198.

questions would be asked; not only regarding the number of fatalities , but also the number of psychologically wounded in post-war societies, who leave a *longue durée* mark on the societies that must endure slavery.]

The outstanding example of violence is the bureaucratically planned and industrially performed murder of the European Jews and Gypsies by Nazi Germany. The way for this anthropologically defined genocide had been paved by the persecution of homosexuals, “antisocial elements”, criminals and handicapped people, all for the sake of German “racial purity”. [Starting with this unique historical event, violence and trauma moved more and more into the centre of academic and political awareness. From this vantage point we realize that the entire history of humanity is marked by violence and trauma – which does not make the problem any easier.]

Violence as a Museological Topic

Objects connected to violence can be traced back to the 18th century, when museums in the modern sense came into being: wars fought in Mesopotamia and Egypt, cruel hunts of strong animals and mythical creatures by mythical heroes , Greek wars, mythical duels on vase paintings, the Roman battles, the victory of Christianity in the battle at the “Milvian Bridge” (312 AC), crusades, weapons and armoury from many centuries, the massacre of the innocent, the bloody corpse of Christ on the cross, weapons from all over the world, pictures depicting plague and other epidemics, martyr’s deaths involving the dismembering of human bodies, are examples we are all familiar with. The wars and genocides of the 20th century are characterized by their powerful technology, increasing the number of fatalities. Given the ubiquity of violence, one is amazed that it should have taken until the second half of the 20th century for violence to be emphasized in its own right. Before it used to be subsumed to different topics and thus mitigated. The crusades or Constantine’s battle were claimed as Christian victories through which God became apparent in history. The depictions of fights in Mesopotamia and Egypt honoured the triumphant sovereign. The gruesome pictures showing martyrdom attested to God’s majesty. Our ability to perceive violence in these pictures and objects requires different questions being asked.

The First World War can be understood as a national war, in which the soldiers believed they were dying for their country. The political religions of National Socialism and Communism tried once again to vest violence with meaning. The United States declared the wars on Vietnam and Iraq to be battles for freedom and democracy. But it has become increasingly difficult to make wars generally acceptable. The expiry date of ideals is very short. To the degree

that officially endowed meaning flagged, violence has come to the fore. Once in the limelight the battles fought in the past appear as the precursor of the atrocities perpetrated in the present.

Historical museums are particularly important for our subject. Dating back in most cases to the 19th century, they are intimately intertwined with the idea of the nation. A very good example is “The National Historical Museum” in Athens. It belongs to the “Historical and Ethnological Society of Greece”, which was founded in 1882 “with the purpose of seeking out, collecting and preserving objects and written evidence which help to shed light on the history of modern Greece.”⁴ The exhibition starts with a copy of Eugène Delacroix’ “The Massacre of Chios” (1827), painted by Lazaros Koyevinas in 1920. This painting functions as a leitmotif for the whole exhibition, depicting as it does the contrast between the long-suffering, oppressed Greeks and the violent Turks like no other picture. Portrayed heads and doubloons which belonged to the freedom fighter Bassos Mavrovouniotis finish off the installation. From here the view wanders back to the history of the Byzantine Empire; among others we see an icon showing Emperor Basil, “the Bulgar-slayer” (956 – 1025). While Delacroix’ picture shows the enslaved Greeks, this icon depicts the oppressed Bulgarians – in the museum’s context Basil exercises legitimate power, whereas the Turks are condemned for their violence. It is patriotism which defines what is power and what is violence.⁵

If we add catastrophes, such as earthquakes – documented *in extenso* in the City Museum of Lisbon – or storms at sea to the examples of human violence dealt with so far, there is hardly any museum without displays of violence, down

⁴ Efthymia Papaspyrou-Karadimitriou, *The National Historical Museum*, Athens 1994, 11.

⁵ A similar museum is the “Museo Nazionale del Risorgimento Italiano” in the Palazzo Carignano in Turin. Its main purpose is to promote a deeper understanding of Italy’s unification into a nation state. The idea for the museum dates back to 1878, but it was not opened until 1908. Initially, it was located inside the Mole Antonelliana (which today houses the Museo Nazionale del Cinema), being transferred in 1938 to the Palazzo Carignano, designed by Guarino Guarini, which housed the Piedmont Chamber of Deputies from 1848, and in 1861 became the seat of the first Italian Parliament. In this aspect, too, it can be compared to the Museum in Athens, which is also housed in a building that accommodated the first Greek Parliament. The cruelties of the battles had their aims set and hence their legitimacy bestowed on them by parliament. The museum was opened on 8 September, 1938, in the era of Italian fascism. Hence after the war, the museum had to be given new significance. That is why in 1975 the exhibition was expanded, the new display showing the Second World War and Italian resistance to fascism in their own country and the German occupying forces. Other historical museums can be adduced as further evidence, be it the “Musée Carnavalet” in Paris showing pictures and objects of the French Revolution or be it the “Historical Museum of the City of Vienna” confronting us with the wars against the Turks.

to very small local ones. One example is “The Museum of Islay Life” in Port Charlotte on that island in the Inner Hebrides. Opened in 1977 it is housed in an old church and run by volunteers, who have also designed the display. Here we encounter the story of the *Exmouth of Newcastle*, a ship carrying Irish people escaping from the Great Famine and which was wrecked in 1847 on the shores of Islay. A look at the remains of the ship, the photos of the shipwreck, and the unveiling of the memorial to the 241 Irish emigrants on Friday June 23, 2000,⁶ both natural catastrophes and human violence become apparent. Yet the “Museum of Islay Life” does not does not confine itself to displaying catastrophes. [The exhibits include reconstructions from archaeological excavations, domestic items, room settings, farming objects and the clockworks from Rinn’s lighthouse.]

The past decades have seen the founding of many museums devoted to showing the suffering inflicted by humans on each other. The most prominent of them which all subsequent ones have tried to emulate is the “United States Holocaust Memorial Museum”,⁷ which opened on April 22, 1993. Both museum and memorial form an integrated whole, which is of particular importance in our context. This is not a complete novelty, because the “Museo del Risorgimento” in Rome is located in the Monumento Vittorio Emmanuele. This huge site also houses the “Memorial to the Unknown Soldier”; hence the cult of the hero and the cult of the dead as well as the museum’s documentations are united in one place. While the museum in Rome is subordinated to the colossal monument, in Washington the “Hall of Remembrance”, a large hexagonal space, concludes the historical tour. Here visitors can quietly digest the things they have seen – if

⁶ J. Wiggins, *The Exmouth of Newcastle 1811-1847*, Bowmore, 2002.

⁷ Jeshajahu Weinberg and Rina Elieli, *The Holocaust Museum in Washington*, New York, 1995, 20. For the history of the Museum see Edward T. Linenthal, *Preserving Memory. The Struggle to Create America’s Holocaust Museum*, New York / London, 1995. This museum would not have been set up without the vision, initiative and power of persuasion of just one man, Elie Wiesel. With this museum the survivors, meanwhile established in US-American society, have created a focal point for their commemoration of everything that was destroyed between 1933 and 1945. The commission appointed by former president Jimmy Carter on November 1, 1978 was given the challenging brief to submit a report “with respect to the establishment and maintenance of an appropriate memorial to those who perished in the Holocaust and to recommend appropriate ways for the nation to commemorate.” On September 27, 1979, the commission, chaired by Elie Wiesel, submitted to President Jimmy Carter a recommendation to establish “a living memorial” made up of three components: a National Holocaust Memorial / Museum, an educational foundation, and a Committee of Conscience.

what they have seen can be digested at all. [The “Eternal flame” does not tie the installation to any specific ritual.]⁸

In contrast to Washington, in Palestine, the places where violence against the European Jews was practised are present in people’s minds, they are part of their lives. Many Kibbutzim house a museum commemorating the crime and the loss. Beit Lohamei Haghetaot, Kibbutz of the “fighters of the ghettos” and Yad Mordechai⁹, named after the commander of the Jewish Fighters Organization in the Warsaw Ghetto, are but two examples. Polish Jews established the latter Kibbutz on December 1, 1943. The architects Arieh and Eldad Sharon designed the structure and the interior layout of the museum in 1968. It combines the culture and the history of the East European shtetl, its destruction by the Germans and the murder of the European Jews with the Jewish partisan activities in Poland and White Russia and the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. The second part of the display shows the Yad Mordechai settlers’ struggle for independence against the superior Egyptian army in 1948. In addition to the exhibition, which consists of photos and objects – such as primitive weapons –, the Egyptian invasion and the defence of the Kibbutz are reconstructed in an installation on the grounds. The peaceful world of the shtetl and the silent murder are juxtaposed with the bravery of both the partisans and the fighters of the ghettos. The same courage fills the Palestine settlers. Thus the display aims to refute the image of the European Jews, that they went “like lambs to the slaughter”. Violence is answered by power.

The concept in Beit Lohamei Haghetaot is similar. 200 survivors from 89 concentration camps founded the Kibbutz on the 6th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, on April 19, 1949.¹⁰ Pictures, maps, documents, and several models portray the life and culture of the European Jewish communities prior to their destruction. The museum depicts the living conditions in the ghettos and concentration camps, forms of resistance and armed revolt, partisan and underground activities in different countries under German occupation. The Kibbutz owns a large collection of works of art made in the camps. While the original, but continuously revised, exhibition can be regarded as a documentation, which is increasingly equipped with videos, the Yad Layeled, “The Living Memorial to the Children of the Holocaust”, opened in 1995,

⁸ Yad Vashem, the major memorial in Israel, has been set in large grounds and consists of several monuments, including a “Hall of Remembrance”.

⁹ See Nitza Rosovsky and Joy Ungerleider-Mayserson, *The Museums of Israel*, New York, 1989; Margaret Larkin, *The Six Days of Yad-Mordechai*, Yad Mordechai, 1987 (7th ed.).

¹⁰ Erhard Gorys, *Das Heilige Land*, Cologne: DuMont, 1985 (4th ed.), 360.

follows a totally different concept: it tries to narrate rather than to document in the traditional sense.¹¹

Officially the exhibition is designed for children and young people. But adults are also attracted by spiral tour, which makes effective use of narrative and experience. Media installations and stage-settings lead from one phase of the narration to the next. In contrast to objects, voices are able to develop a topic over time. Stories are a montage of single historical facts which have been handed down, an academically unusual but poetically common operation. If the course of a life, a story, is the subject, all stories are told in this manner. The montage produces an exemplary narration.

The 'Museum of Tolerance' in the 'Simon Wiesenthal Centre' in Los Angeles, which was opened in 1993, takes developments a step further. [It introduces itself on its homepage thus: "The Museum of Tolerance is a high tech, hands-on experiential museum that focuses on two central themes through unique interactive exhibits: the dynamics of racism and prejudice in America and the story of the Holocaust – the ultimate example of man's inhumanity to man."] The museum has changed into a purely educational institution with a clearly defined learning objective: education in tolerance.¹² The centre's task is the scholarly work, the investigation, which forms the basis for the museum. In the Holocaust Section, the visitors step into environments and onto stages. As if in a theatre they listen to conversations in cafés, they hear political speeches etc. Accompanied by an attendant they walk from one station to the next. With one door closing behind them, another one opens in front. The idea is to generate empathy. Visitors are made to feel the violence which took place in the past, the idea being that there is a valuable nucleus in every human being which is activated by these installations. Violence exercised in the past turns into violence against the visitors[, or to use the difference Hobbes made: once in the power of the timed tour you have to go through all the violence of the past].

The concept of a story-telling museum has been fully realized by the Holocaust Museum in Washington. [Jeshajahu Weinberg, who comes from the world of the theatre, puts it very clearly: "The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is a narrative historical museum. Unlike most historical museums, it is based on a narrative rather than on a collection of works of art and artefacts relating to history. Traditional and publicly displayed authentic

¹¹ See *Yad Layeled. The Living Memorial to the Children of the Holocaust*, The Ghetto Fighter's House. The Museum of the Holocaust and Resistance Kibbutz Lohamei Haghetat, 1995.

¹² Detailed information in Harold Marcuse, "Experiencing the Jewish Holocaust in Los Angeles: The Beit Hashoah-Museum of Tolerance," *Other Voices* 2:1 (2000), <http://www.othervoices.org/2.1/marcuse/tolerance.html>, 3 Aug 2008.

objects belonging to their specific fields of interest ... The narrative history museum, on the other hand, has strong educational potential. It uses its exhibits as building blocks in a continuous story line and displays them in their historical context.”¹³ This concept requires modern media, essentially contemporary videos – often equipped with a commentary – and interviews. Films grip attention for a longer time-span than do objects. This is why visitors stay considerably longer on average in the Holocaust Museum than in the National Gallery next door. [A topic such as violence, which relies essentially on process, lends itself particularly to being conveyed by narrative media.]

The Holocaust Museum in Washington has encouraged several ethnic groups in the United States to present their history in museums. One good example is the “Japanese American National Museum” in Los Angeles. [“In 1982, two distinct groups – businessmen in Los Angeles’ Little Tokyo and a group of highly decorated World War II veterans – simultaneously began exploring the concept of a museum about Japanese Americans. Bruce T. Kaji, a real estate developer and chairman of Merit Savings Bank, proposed incorporating a museum into a planned Little Tokyo residential complex. Meanwhile, Japanese American veterans of World War II sponsored a “Japanese American Soldier” exhibit at the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History. They soon began searching for a permanent exhibit site. Headed by a Korean American, Colonel Young Oak Kim, and a Japanese American, Y. B. Mamiya, the veterans approached Kaji. The two groups joined forces, and in 1985, the Japanese American National Museum officially incorporated as a private, non-profit institution. When the Museum opened its doors in 1992, a full decade had passed since the founders conceived of an institution that would illuminate the Japanese American experience.”]¹⁴ The display is governed by two quite different interests. On the one hand the art and culture of the Japanese community is displayed on the basis of the biographies collected by the museum. On the other hand the suffering of the Japanese Americans in the concentration camps¹⁵ plays an important role. The dividing line between the two is marked by Pearl Harbour, represented by a partition in the exhibition I saw in 2001.¹⁶ In the display “Common Ground: The Heart of the Community”

¹³ Weinberg/Elieli 49.

¹⁴ <http://www.janm.org/about/history.php>, 3 Aug 2008.

¹⁵ The museum produced a book on this topic: Frank and Joanne Iritani, *Ten Visits Revised. Brief accounts of our visits to all ten Japanese American Relocation Centers of World War II, Internee and Non-Internee Recollections, Struggle for Redress, Internment of Other Groups, Our Non-Nikkei Friends, and other essays*, Valencia and Sacramento, Calif., 1998.

¹⁶ My visit to the Japanese American National Museum took place on March 18, 2001.

an original shack from the Heart Mountain concentration camp (1943) was reconstructed. Further on, the fate of the 110th brigade was documented, a Japanese American unit which suffered severe losses. Violence and peaceful cultural work appeared to have moulded the Japanese American identity of the second half of the 20th century.

The Anacostia Museum in Washington is the Smithsonian Institution's museum of African-American history and culture. [The Museum explores American history, society, and creative expression from an African-American perspective. The museum encourages the collection, protection, and preservation of materials that reflect the history and traditions of families, organizations, individuals, and communities."]¹⁷ As a neighbourhood museum the centre in Anacostia pre-existed the Holocaust Museum, but latterly, it has concentrated on African-American culture. The relationship between the tale of woe and the cultural production can only be visualized alternately, because the museum does not have a permanent exhibition.

The history of slavery can be seen in the Merseyside Maritime Museum in Liverpool, whose Transatlantic Slavery Gallery was established in 1994. The display comprises many pictures and artefacts. It often tries to argue against its visual material, because European drawings hardly ever criticise slavery. On the other hand, chains and handcuffs are used as effective symbols. The abolition movements of the 18th and 19th centuries produced an European and American imagery which argues against slavery. [In his foreword Peter Moores, whose foundation sponsored the exhibition, writes: "We can come to terms with our past only by accepting it, and in order to be able to accept it we need knowledge of what actually happened. We need to make sense of our history. It seemed to me that the taboo should be exorcised, and black friends agreed with it. I am pleased that my idea to have a permanent slave gallery has been taken up by the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside. It is particularly appropriate that this gallery should be in Liverpool, which not only has one of the oldest black communities in Europe but was furthermore the major European slaving port in the eighteenth century."]¹⁸ The museum has adopted an interpreting approach to history. It aims to show the facts, while at the same time interpreting them. In doing so the exhibition provides the white and black communities of Liverpool with a foundation of common knowledge in order to transform the past, which was governed by violence, into a starting point for a better present.

The genocide of the European Jews has been the largest crime to date, rendered unique by its bureaucratic organisation and industrial implementation.

¹⁷ <http://anacostia.si.edu/index.htm>, 3 Aug 2008.

¹⁸ Anthony Tibbles (ed.), *Transatlantic Slavery: Against Human Dignity*, London, 1994, 9.

The concentration of public commemoration on suffering and experience at the expense of the social and political context in which it happened encourage other groups of victims to claim equal public recognition in the shape of monuments and museums. These institutions try to shape public memory, to make their history – which is frequently a history of suffering, murder and extinction – part of national history. In the US the latest museum in this context is The National Museum of the American Indian¹⁹, which, like the Anacostia Museum, is part of the Smithsonian. In Germany we have seen the founding of many Jewish museums over the last three decades. They are torn between commemorating the genocide and showing everyday Jewish life in the last millennium.²⁰ Meanwhile, many groups which suffered violence want to have centres like the Holocaust museums. Among them are the victims of the bombed cities of World War II or displaced persons of the last hundred years. While memory stresses the subjective side of a historical event, history contextualizes it. In the long run the history of these groups has to be integrated not only into the cultural memory of nations but also into the museums of national history.

One final group of historical museums has to be considered, because they are intimately linked to violence: the arms, military and war museums.²¹ Given the evidence of the connection, I will confine myself to considering the “Imperial War Museum” in London.²² It is one of many war museums founded during the First World War to commemorate this major historical event. In 1917 the UK government decided that a National War Museum should be set up to collect and display material relating to the Great War. [King George V inaugurated the museum in Crystal Palace on June 9, 1920. In 1936 it moved to its present site in Lambeth Road. “At the outset of the Second World War the Museum’s terms of reference were enlarged to cover both world wars and they were again extended in 1953 to include all military operations with British and Commonwealth involvement since August 1914.”] Its remit was subsequently widened to include the Second World War.²³ [In 1924 the director of the Imperial War

¹⁹ See <http://www.nmai.si.edu/>, 3 Aug 2008.

²⁰ Sabine Offe, *Ausstellungen, Einstellungen, Entstellungen. Jüdische Museen in Deutschland und Österreich*, Berlin, Wien: Philo, 2000.

²¹ See Ewa Zach, *Deutsche und englische Militärmuseen im 20. Jahrhundert. Eine kulturgeschichtliche Analyse des gesellschaftlichen Umgangs mit Krieg*, Münster, 1999.

²² For the history of the Imperial War Museum see Diana Condell, *The Imperial War Museum, 1917-1920: A Study of the Institution and its Presentation of the First World War*, Diss. Phil., University of London, 1985; Gaynor Kavanagh: “Museum as Memorial: The Origins of the Imperial War Museum,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 23, 1988, 77-97.

²³ “The New Imperial War Museum,” ed. Imperial War Museum, London, 1994, 44.

Museum stated: “Pictures of events which the artist did not himself behold, but which he only reconstructed in his studio from the descriptions given by eye-witnesses, have been excluded with a few exceptions. On the other hand, works with little technical value have been acquired if they were actually produced on the spot by the eye-witness, and many of them possess considerable value even though their artistic merit may be small.”]

Initially, the museum was wedded to quite an ontological concept of authenticity,²⁴ which today may be called into question.²⁵ But it still informs a large number of essays, particularly concerning the examination of drawings from concentration camps. On an emotional level, the objects of academic research thus turn into artefacts of religious devotion.²⁶ Once in the world all material is open to any question. This is also true for violence as a museological topic, unintended though it may have been when the collections were originally put together. They aimed to commemorate some great national event, or sacrifices which had to be made for the glory of the nation. Only after the permanent exhibitions on the Second World War had been put up, i.e. after 1986, did concentration camps regularly feature in the pictorial representation. The Imperial War Museum North, which was inaugurated in 2002, accepts this approach to violence. The architect Daniel Libeskind’s blue prints visually argue against war,²⁷ while the exhibition argues in favour of a detached view on the past conflicts.

Museums on the Spot

The sites of violent events are often commemorated by a statue, sometimes by a museum. Many of them are tourist attractions, albeit for different reasons. Hadrian’s Wall or the limes or the battlefields in the Teutonic forest invite visitors to a walk in the countryside. It takes a certain degree of enthusiasm to

²⁴ A concise catalogue of Paintings, Drawings and Sculptures of the First World War 1914-1918, ed. Imperial War Museum, London, 1963 (second edition), V.

²⁵ Detlef Hoffmann, “Authentische Erinnerungsorte oder: Von der Sehnsucht nach Echtheit und Erlebnis,” *Bauten und Orte als Träger von Erinnerung. Die Erinnerungsdebatte und die Denkmalpflege*, ed. Hans Rudolf Meier, Marion Wohlleben, Zürich, 2000, 31-45.

²⁶ For example Jürgen Kaumkötter, “Kunst in Auschwitz – Ein schmaler Grat,” *Kritische Berichte* 4, 2003, 62-76.

²⁷ See “The Walls are alive”, *The Guardian* July 13, 2002; Helen Carter, “Thanks for the memories,” *The Guardian*, July 3, 2002; Janet Street-Porter, “Daniel Libeskind: Philosopher who creates buildings that perform to the public,” *The Independent*, July 6, 2002 integrates all material into a broader context which she calls “pictorial representations of war”.

visit former battlefields, because some places can only be found by detailed detection work.²⁸ The few museums exhibit excavated relics as well as drawings. Occasionally, volunteers re-enact the historic battles.

Only if the thick of the battle is brought to the visitor's fantasy by reconstruction is such an installation able to single out violence as a central theme. One example is the battlefield in Waterloo, south of Brussels. One has a wonderful panoramic view over the whole battlefield from Lion hill, which was erected by the allied states in 1823 and completed in 1826.²⁹ Its location was intended to recall the wound inflicted on the shoulder of the Dutch Prince on that spot. The lion looks towards France. Today most of the visitors are not familiar with this original context; instead they enjoy the wide panoramic view over the battlefield of June 18, 1815. The bloody attacks marking the battle can best be studied in the panorama built in 1912. It shows the battlefield at about six o'clock in the evening, right at the moment when Field Marshall Ney's companies made a foray into the English squadrons. The painting is done in a highly realistic style giving an impression of the battle's brutality. Though never intended, the display of violence is a by-product of the attempt to make the site attractive to visitors.

While the former enemies in the battle of Waterloo are now allies, the same does not apply to North Americans and Mexicans. The Alamo in San Antonio in Texas is a monument of national pride. What is it that you have to remember, when you "Remember the Alamo"? In 1826 a small unit of 109 men defended the fortress for several days against the army of the Mexican General Santa Anna. The event is highly charged emotionally, as evidenced by the inscription on the monument, which was built in 1936: "From the fire that burned their bodies, rose the eternal spirit of sublime heroic sacrifice, which gave birth to an empire state." The remains of the fortress, which are open to visitors, have been restored since 1940 in an increasingly dignified manner. Before, the buildings, which have taken on an almost sacred status, had served various profane purposes. The museum is located in the former church of the mission preceding the fortress; in the apse the dead are commemorated. Texas Rangers ensure that people behave in a dignified manner. Today's visitors are often familiar with the emotionally charged 1960 movie "The Alamo" directed by and starring John Wayne. [Wayne plays Davy Crockett, Richard Widmark, Jim Bowie, Laurence Harvey, William Travis and Richard Boone, Sam Houston.] The larger-than-life

²⁸ See John Kinross, *Discovering Battlefields in England and Scotland. A Guide to 69 Battle Sites Describing Each Battle and What Can Be Seen There Today*, Haverfordwest (Shire), 1998 (first edition 1968), 6 museums are listed in the book.

²⁹ Georges Patrick Speeckaert, Isabelle Baecker, *Relics and Memorials of the Battles of 1815 in Belgium*, Lasne, 2000.

heroes waging Texas' fight for independence from Mexico loom large over the cruel battle scenes and the fateful last stand at the Alamo. Violence appears in both the movie and the museological scenography on location as a necessary precondition for the founding of a nation.

The Alamo as well as the grounds and the museums in Belle Alliance/Waterloo are two good examples of a large number of memorial locations which relate to the founding of national states in the 18th and 19th centuries. In these memorials violence is always legitimised in the context of the genesis of a state/birth of a nation. Consequently these places are granted the consecration of a political religion, and death and killing for a nation state are removed from the sphere of rational argumentation. That is why they are mythical rather than historical sites. The "Lieux de Mémoire" of World War I have become such sites. Their visitors refer to themselves as pilgrims; their journey turns into a pilgrimage. In using these words, the English and the French are not alone in linking their visits to the First World War battlefields to religious ritual. This way of thinking has been transferred to the memorials located on the sites of former concentration camps. Yet in contrast to the Alamo and the Waterloo battlefields an important change has taken place: many memorial sites of World War I are combined with graveyards. In the centre of the battlefield in Verdun there is the Ossuary of Douaumont. ["By the end of the war the ground had become a chaotic desert, stripped of all vegetation, covered only by corpses torn into pieces, and littered with human bones. Only 120,000 bodies of French soldiers could be identified, about a third of those gave their lives around Verdun."] To provide the relatives of the unidentified dead with a place to mourn, a committee was set up to organise the construction of a monument in the centre of the battlefield. ["The identified bodies were buried in national cemeteries, except about 10 %, who were claimed by their families. The unidentified were transferred to the temporary mortuary, a large wooden hut, built by the committee early in 1919, on the roadside of Thiaumont Crest."]³⁰ The unidentified bodies were transferred to the Ossuary on November 18, 1927, and the President of the Republic inaugurated the monument on August 7, 1932. The Ossuary functions as a cathedral of the memorial site,³¹ the museum, called "Mémorial de Verdun", presents objects which are connected with the battle. The display tells the story of the battle of Verdun. With some reservation the museum can be called a place of historical argumentation. The permanent exhibition is very similar to a military museum displaying weapons, uniforms,

³⁰ Guidebook to the "Ossuaire de Douaumont", Verdun.

³¹ See the guidebook "Mémorial de Verdun", Verdun. Detailed information in Horst Rhode, Robert Ostrovsky: *Militärgeschichtlicher Reiseführer Verdun*, Herford and Bonn, 1992.

maps of the battle's course, works of art produced by soldiers, propaganda of both sides etc. Even the atrocities of the industrialized war are featured, as is living in mud and dirt. In this respect, violence is one aspect of the display. It might be an idiosyncrasy that Verdun feels obliged to teach the merits of peace, as evidenced by changing exhibitions of children's drawings relating to peace. The reconciliation between France and Germany in the context of European integration is of great importance. The organisers do not condemn their former enemies in the exhibition. With the nationalist perception of war weakening, consideration of the violence done to the soldiers of both nations becomes possible³².

After World War II many museums devoted to the landing of the allies were founded along the Norman coast.³³ Except for the "Mémorial de Caen" these are purely military museums, which, in spite of their holdings, refuse to engage with violence. The memorial, inaugurated on June 6, 1988 by the president of the republic, is different: it defines itself as a museum for peace. Alongside the

³² Cf. in this context two Belgian museums which clearly differ from the "Mémorial de Verdun". The "In Flanders Fields Museum" in the Cloth Hall in the Market Square of Ieper opened in April 1998. Its concept is new in that it is not a museum of military history. The exhibition focuses on the personal experience of war. The objects (many quotations from letters by soldiers, drawings and other works of art) are presented as material witnesses of what happened. They are displayed in the context of experience (see Catalogue of the objects, ed. In Flanders Fields Museum Ieper 1999). The exhibition mainly works with the techniques of stage productions; flash light, dark and bright contrasts create impressions. More than does the Verdun Memorial this museum tries to involve the visitors' feelings in the documents of the past. It takes no political or national side, but concentrates on showing the atrocities of war. If there is any museum explicitly dealing with violence it is this one. (See Museum Guide, ed. In Flanders Field Museum, Ieper 1998) In Dixmuiden one can visit a very different museum: The Peace Monument, "Vredensmonument". The museum is housed in a 22-storey tower. The viewing platform offers a view of the restored, blooming countryside. Above the panoramic windows a painted panorama (360 degrees) depicts the destroyed city and the trenches of the front line. The exhibition starts with a reference to the region's sufferings. The theme of the show is "Flemish emancipation", the debate about the Belgian language-areas presented from a Flemish point of view. The tower, the Isjercross, was built 1928 and inaugurated on August 24th, 1930. It was destroyed in 1945 and 1946 and rebuilt in 1951. All this is linked to the conflict between the different ethnic groups in Belgium. Walking through the exhibition one sometimes forgets that the subject matter is the war between Germany on one side, Belgium, France and England on the other. All the atrocities are described in relation to the conflict between the Flemings and the Walloons. The pilgrimages remembering the fallen Flemish soldiers taking place every year on the last Sunday in August are manifestations of Flemish identity. Catholicism and political religion are the same in this case (75 Ijzerbedevaarten een terublik. Vrijheid, vrede, verdraagzaamheid, Dixmuiden 2002).

³³ See Jean Quellian: *The Landing Beaches*, Caen 2003.

historical sections on the interwar period, World War II and the Cold War, there is a Hall of Peace, a gallery of the Nobel Peace prize winners and a large educational section on peace.³⁴ The organizers reckon that visitors stay for an average of 6 hours, during which they are looked after by museum staff, who counted 130 in 2002. The museum also organizes field trips to the sites of the invasion. Set up by public private partnership the whole enterprise vacillates between tourist and educational goals. In this it can be compared to another institution, “La Coupole”³⁵, near St. Omer. Today the bunker, built by the Germans as a launching-pad for V1s and V2s targeting English and Dutch cities, is a tourist attraction; its museum displays both the history of occupied Northern France and the history of missile technology, from the V1 to the modern space-rocket Ariane. Both museums lack the aspect of political religion. They interpret their geographical locations partly technologically and partly educationally. Their overriding aim is success; the museum must offer attractive displays in order to satisfy visitors having been charged high admission fees. Hence violence as a theme is irrelevant. But neither institution would reject this way of looking at an issue if the public was willing to pay for it.

The Memorials for the victims of the Holocaust on-location are particularly important to our topic. Their main intention is to mourn, but by reflecting the pain and cruelty suffered they point to violence not in an abstract manner but in a specific historic moment. [On location, the imagination is challenged in a specific way.] Violence as a form of social communication is dealt with in books and academic sessions, but on location it has a specific symbolic presence, challenging the imagination in a specific way. The memorials of the Holocaust cast a new light on earlier events: the First World War, the Napoleonic Wars or the American Wars of the 19th century. Museums dealing with them are no longer simply places to worship heroes, but to confront violence in history.

Art Museums

Art museums own many artefacts concerning violence. From our earliest exposure to visual art, we are familiar with pictures depicting fights and wars. The early cultures in the river deltas of this world documented the battles of the sovereigns who ordered them to be fought. Military campaigns form the subject matter of the great ancient epics, the Iliad, the Gilgamesh epic or the Mahabharata. Relief and sculptures, paintings and craft objects depict warriors, both male and sometimes female, battles and even peace agreements. The

³⁴ <http://www.memorial-caen.fr/portail/index.php>, 3 Aug 2008.

³⁵ See <http://www.lacoupole.com>, 3 Aug 2008.

pictorial accounts of the last 2000 years may differ in quality, but they frequently serve a particular commander, depicting his point of view. Only in the modern age do we find examples of an artistic analysis of war, such as in the drawings by Jacques Callot and Francisco de Goya. They depict the atrocities of warfare as the suffering of the people and there is good reason to regard them as condemnations of war. In post-World War I Germany, following the defeat suffered in the modern war intensely experienced as such, many opponents of war reacted with a blunt depiction of the realities of war: photographs showing disfigured and crippled people, the misery of trench warfare, the calculated losses. Art – especially photography and film – is of immensely important in demonstrating the terrible causes of war. Painters like Otto Dix focused not only on the atrocities of trench warfare, but also represented the obscenity of crippled soldiers. The thesis, occasionally to be heard in academic circles, that such strategies of bluntly describing war and its effects would produce a different way of thinking, even a pacifist attitude, has proved wrong. Nazi cultural and educational policy reacted with the movie *Sturmtrupp 1917 (Storm Troop 1917)* to the earlier film *All Quiet on the Western Front (Im Westen nichts Neues)*. Both movies focus on the absurdity of war, are similarly blunt, but carry opposite messages. As this example illustrates, art depicting war can be both pacifist and bellicose, though using similar visual strategies.

The political icon of violence *par excellence* is “Guernica”. Pablo Picasso painted this picture for the pavilion of the Spanish Republic at the World Fair in 1936. Making use of surrealism the artist embedded the first terror attack on civilians in the great mourning gestures of the Mediterranean cultures in what was perhaps a last attempt to answer and ward off modern wars with the emotiveness of humanism.

While “Guernica” can be seen as a painting of loud lamentation for the suffering caused by German bomber pilots, the pictures by “COBRA”, a group of artists established after World War II, represent a stunned reaction rather than any attempt of coming to terms with the events of the war. Their reaction suggests trauma rather than mourning as the source of their motivation.

Works of art accumulated by museums closely engages with war and violence; artists are free to interpret events and be partial in doing so. By contrast, museology lacks this freedom, although it, too, can be partial. Whether or not art museums can present their material in a manner that conveys the issue of violence to a general audience is a question to be answered by their academic staff. At any rate there will always be exhibitions dealing with this subject.³⁶

³⁶ John Keegan and Joseph Darracott, *The Nature of War*, New York, 1981; Exhibition Catalogue *Schrecken und Hoffnung. Künstler sehen Frieden und Krieg*, Hamburg, 1987; D. J. R. Bruckner, Seymour Chwast and Steven Haller, *Art Against War*, New York,

Violence Against and For Museums

As institutions, museums are themselves exposed to violence, be it that their objects are threatened by wars, religious uprisings, iconoclasms, crimes etc. or be it that they display objects which have been booties, spoils of war, neglected as a result of religious movements, revolutions etc. Walter Benjamin's 7th thesis of the philosophy of history that there is no document of culture that is not at the same time a document of barbarism³⁷ can easily be applied to museum.

In modern history it was Napoleon in particular who stole works of art from all over Europe.³⁸ The same can be said of the German Reich during World War II.³⁹ Adolf Hitler attempted to concentrate his stolen works of art in Linz.⁴⁰ On the one hand the NSDAP tried to justify the robbery of art works, on the other it banished from museums exhibits which did not fit into the party's ideological concept. The exhibition "Entartete Kunst" (Degenerate Art) presented such works of art, many of which were put up for auction in Lucerne.⁴¹ The seemingly legal process by which an institution sells its own works of art must be seen as an act of violence. On the other hand works of art stolen from Jewish citizens found their way into museums, many of which are still reluctant to investigate the origin of some of their holdings. After their victory the western allies established a "Collecting Point" to assemble the scattered, partly stolen cultural objects in order to return them to their rightful owners. The Soviet military administration collected works of art, which were then taken to the Soviet Union.⁴² While the allies tried to protect the cultural possessions at risk

1984; Exhibition catalogue: *Zugehend auf eine Biennale des Friedens*, Hamburg, 1985; Lucy R. Lippard, *A Different War. Vietnam in Art*, Seattle, 1990.

³⁷ Walter Benjamin, "Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen," *Zur Kritik der Gewalt und andere Aufsätze*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1965, 78-94, 83.

³⁸ See Paul Wescher, *Kunstraub unter Napoleon*, Berlin, 1976.

³⁹ Wilhelm Treue, *Kunstraub. Über die Schicksale von Kunstwerken im Krieg, Revolution und Frieden*, Düsseldorf, 1957.

⁴⁰ Charles de Jaeger, *The Linz File. Plunder of Europe's Art*, 1981; see also Natalia Volkert, *Kunst- und Kulturrraub im Zweiten Weltkrieg. Versuch eines Vergleichs zwischen den Zielsetzungen und Praktiken der deutschen und sowjetischen Beuteorganisationen unter Berücksichtigung der Restitutionsfragen*, Frankfurt am Main, 2000, here further literature.

⁴¹ See Stephanie Barron, "Degenerate Art," Los Angeles, 1991.

⁴² Koslow Akinscha, Grigorij Koslow, *Beutekunst. Auf Schatzsuche in russischen Geheimdepots*, München, 1995; Koslow Akinscha, Grigorij Koslow, Clement Toussaint: *Operation Beutekunst: die Verlagerung deutscher Kulturgüter in die Sowjetunion nach 1945, zusammengestellt nach bisher unveröffentlichten Dokumenten aus Archiven der Russischen Föderation*, Nürnberg, 1995, zitiert nach Nicola Doll, *Rezension von Natalia Volkert: Kunst- und Kulturgutraub im Zweiten Weltkrieg. Versuch eines Vergleichs*

during their war on the German Reich, the same is not true for the war waged on Iraq by the USA in 2003. Baghdad's museums were plundered, with US troops quietly looking on.⁴³ In each instance of vandalism, carelessness and robbery violence is embedded in ideological contexts. They appear as justifications of the perpetrators. The Hague Convention signed by most states is an attempt to prevent the worst excesses.⁴⁴

Translated by Bärbel Schmidt

zwischen den Zielsetzungen und Praktiken der deutschen und der sowjetischen Beuteorganisationen unter Berücksichtigung der Restitutionsfragen, Frankfurt/Main, 2000, *H-Museum*, 6 Jan 2003.

⁴³ See Jørgen Wadum, Chair ICOM-CC, "ICOM-CC appalled by looting in Iraq", posted on the mailing list *H-Museum*, <http://www.h-museum.net>, 15 April 2003.

⁴⁴ See <http://www.ifla.org/VI/4/admin/hague-convention.htm>; see also http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php@URL_ID=18069&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html: Barbaric acts committed against cultural property in the course of the many conflicts and, in particular, during the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union that took place at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, highlighted a number of improvements to be addressed in the implementation of the Hague Convention. A review of the Convention was initiated in 1991 to draw up a new agreement to complement the Convention taking account of the experience gained from conflicts and the development of international humanitarian and cultural heritage protection law since 1954. Consequently, a Second Protocol to the Hague Convention was adopted at a Diplomatic Conference held at The Hague in March 1999.