

Museums and disasters

Until fairly recently many history museums approached their subjects from quite a distance. Nevertheless this does not automatically mean that curators chose only consensual subjects – one need only remember the exhibition Enola Gay, which fell through in Washington in 1995. But in general subjects were chosen that had already secured their places in the history books and they were illustrated as such by the history museums. It was rare for museums to take their interpretation so far as to deconstruct myths surrounding these subjects.

Recently museums have started to question their traditional role of viewing historical phenomena from a distanced and reflected angle. Like society itself, museums also found themselves overwhelmed by historical events. Society challenged them to comment upon instantaneous events and to offer their interpretation on things. This new role of the museum as a social player, actively helping to overcome a present that could not be anticipated in all its changes, failures and faults, faced the institutions concerned with new challenges.

Not just political landslides can shake a society, but also unforeseen events, such as the September 11 attacks, or natural catastrophes such as the tsunami that hit the Indian Ocean in 2004 or Hurricane Katrina, wreaking havoc here in New Orleans. This is why it is also our duty, as museum professionals, to use incidences of catastrophe – regardless of whether

they were triggered by man or by nature – to critically ask ourselves how the museum, as part of society and as part of a community, should handle these challenges and upheavals and what part it plays or can play in overcoming these trials and tribulations.

The tackling of these challenges has two sides to it: the first, very pragmatic, deals with the following question: how do we protect the assets that have after all been entrusted to us to look after? In the end, this, namely the conservation and safeguarding of cultural assets, is one of the museum's key responsibilities. "To collect, conserve and exhibit" is the triad securely anchored in the code of ethics drawn up by the international museum organisation ICOM. ICOM's Museum Emergency Programme (MEP) performs significant work in the protection of cultural assets.

Secondly it is important to question how the museum continues its work in the immediate aftermath of a turmoil. Museum professionals have to react to different challenges

1. *The ethics of collecting and interpreting disasters.*

What special ethical issues face museum professionals as they seek to document and interpret disasters? For example, who holds legitimate title to artifacts (clothing, personal effects, or wreckage) collected from disaster sites by museum professionals or others? At what point does the display of human suffering in the museum cross the line between education and exploitation? Should museums display people's images without their

permission or that of their families? Is the display of human remains a legitimate interpretive strategy (e.g. Cambodia's Killing Fields Memorial)?

2. *Establishing the truth.*

Whose perspective prevails in the interpretation of disasters in museums? Is it the perspective of victims and their families, government, the media, or that of "experts" (historians, scientists, social scientists, etc.)? Is it possible to present multiple perspectives? Do museums have an obligation to make clear to visitors that all interpretations are ultimately subjective? What is the role of politics in the interpretation of disasters—and are there stories that museums simply cannot present, or cannot present fairly, for fear of reprisal? Ultimately, is the museum's version of events reliable? Is it believable?

3. *What's the message?*

Why do museums interpret disasters in the first place? Is it to simply document or commemorate a horrific event, the loss of life? Or are there other agendas driving the process, such as the desire to influence decision making, to bring about change, in the present and in the future? For example, museums in Hiroshima and Nagasaki dedicated to the atomic bombing of those cities emphasize the importance of international peace and nuclear disarmament.

4. *Exhibition design.*

What are the most effective strategies for engaging visitors intellectually and emotionally in the story of a disaster? Should museums rely on the eloquence of artifacts alone to bear witness and carry the storyline? How effective are first-person accounts presented via video or oral history? Are theatrical settings, computer animations, and other high-tech approaches most likely to appeal to visitors? How do we determine the success of these different approaches?

Museum professionals have to conduct an open, intercultural and interdisciplinary dialogue upon the duties of disaster museums. Questions have to be developed and thought without ready-made answers. One thing is certain: Society needs museums which can act as a forum for commemoration and public discussion in order to actively help a community to overcome a present that could not be anticipated in all its changes.

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