

Introduction: Does War Belong in Museums? The Representation of Violence in Exhibitions

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The armoury in Graz is part of the Universalmuseum Joanneum and the largest historical weapons collection in the world. Built in the seventeenth century by the Styrian Diet, it was once the most important armoury in the Southeast of the Habsburg Empire. Due to the symbolic meaning it held for the Styrians and local history, the armoury remained in place despite political reforms that saw it change function. The armoury has been a museum since the 1880s and continues to house around 32,000 pieces of military equipment over four floors.

Due to the largely unchanged presentation, the armoury in Graz is considered a unique cultural monument; one of the principal historic sites in Styria and an important tourist destination in Graz.

From a museological perspective the armoury as a museum presents – perhaps predictably – some problems: the in-situ presentation of the weapons in the historical building allows the objects to appear timeless and neutral. The method of display for the mass of swords, lances and armour serves to render them improperly harmless. Most problematic is that there is no possibility to include any contextualization; the inclusion of text or any other medium is made impossible by the museum's designation as a protected historic monument. Circumstance, therefore, makes the interpretation of the objects beyond the aesthetic very difficult: war is, therefore, shown as a history of beautiful, expensive and technically accomplished weapons. The social, economic and everyday aspects are not included, and topics such as killing or being killed are not addressed. It is not possible to present or reconfigure the exhibition in a contemporary manner and so it offers an immersive atmosphere, evoking an arresting and awe-inspiring overview. Such a presentation does not allow the legitimacy of individual items to be questioned or examined within the exhibition, or the discussion of varied and multiple meanings and interpretation. As a mass, the objects are part of a limited tableau and are perceived as such by the public.

In order to at least temporarily disrupt this powerful presentation, the armoury has commissioned and presented several curatorial and artistic interventions in the last years. An international conference was held as part of this institutional reassessment to address the question of how war can be responsibly handled as a theme in museums.

At the invitation of Dr Wolfgang Muchitsch, Director of the Universalmuseum Joanneum, and in cooperation with ICOMAM (International Council of Museums and Collections of Arms and Military History), the Museums Academy Joanneum (www.museum-joanneum.at/museumsakademie) held the conference *Does War Belong in Museums? The Representation of Violence in Exhibitions*, 21–23 September 2011 in Graz. Together with academics and practitioners from related museums, discussion focused on how museums can represent war and to what end. We discussed how museums can avoid reducing death to the banal or aesthetic and the transformation of violence into a tourist attraction, along with how museums construct and transmit affect and empathy.

The following articles began as papers delivered at that conference. All relate to European history in the twentieth century and were chosen as representative of the most important aspects in the display of war and violence, the questions of how to appropriately utilize the objects and resources available and provide an insight into current museological practice.

The Yale historian Jay Winter offers an overview of the history of military museums and wars in the twentieth century, detailing the 'representation dilemma' of the place of documentation that can never be neutral, whilst at the same time having a memorial function. Alexandra Bounia's focuses on several examples from the divided South and North Cyprus, the difficulties presented by the use and contextualization of photography in exhibitions about war.

Gorch Pieken and Ralk Raths present two projects – one a new concept, one a reinterpretation – from the German-speaking world. Pieken describes the development of the Bundeswehr Museum of Military History in Dresden that opened in 2011 as the biggest military museum in Germany and is housed in a building with new elements designed by the American architect Daniel Libeskind. Its permanent exhibition combines a chronological as well as a thematic approach; characteristic is also the multiperspectivity of the presentation that includes the history of politics or techniques as well as cultural- and social-historical aspects or contemporary art. Raths, from the much smaller German Tank Museum in Munster, describes the transformation of his museum from a traditional and technical presentation of tanks, into a cultural heritage exhibition that places the human experience of war central to the interpretation.

All of the contributions from the conference will be published in English in the coming months by Transcript publishing house.