

Museum of Subjects. Why we need museums for children

Examples from the experiences of the MACHmit! Museum for Children in Berlin

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When we write “Museum of subjects”, we refer to the MACHmit! Museum for children. In working with the Bundesverband Deutscher Kinder und Jugendmuseen we know that all children’s museums are driven by a similar spirit. It is always about creating a place that does not subordinate the specific needs of these groups of visitors but moreover understands them as their foundation. In a museum, children look for different experiences than adults.

The MACHmit! Museum is visited by around 70,000 people every year. Alongside many families, tourists and other museum-going people, the numerous groups coming from schools and kindergarten are of particular importance. The largest group of visitors is composed of children who come to the museum in search of an out-of-school education. For many it is the first contact with a museum. From our visitation research we know that a large proportion of these children own a Berlin Pass (admission discount for people on low incomes). This does not mean all of these children come from educationally disadvantaged families. However, we do know these groups of visitors often come with little experience of other cultural institutions.

The MACHmit! Museum is shaped and developed by its audience perception. Everyone has their own perspective. Everyone can reflect upon the meaning of “knowledge” and how we can use it. Everyone is of importance to the museum. Cultural education comes to life. “They learn here, but differently.” (Lorbeer 2016: 264)

Sharon Macdonald is a proven authority on the current debate concerning the question of the meaning of museum in the present age. She currently holds the Alexander von Humboldt professorship, the head of the institute for European Ethnology at Humboldt University and is involved with the international research project CARMaH (Centre for Anthropological Research into Museums and Heritage), including the Humboldt Forum. As an anthropologist of culture and social matters, she looks at the negotiation process of exhibition concepts developing there and their impact on selection of museum objects (MacDonald 2000). Which definition of culture is used there? Which

approaches will be made? For us children-museum-people this kind of international attention is a big opportunity to prove the strength of our institutions.

Sharon Macdonald describes in her contribution to the guide of museum education 2016 how at the beginning of 1990 a trend change occurred in the museum scene. The “educational turn” erupted. Visitors became the centre of attention! Although this new bias did not lead to an overall improvement of the departments striving for museum education. Rather, educational science of museums remained an add-on, an extra, something taken into consideration *after* planning the exhibition. Maybe. If it is a must. The “educational department”, says MacDonald, stayed the “poor cousin”. Was the “educational turn” still without a change of paradigm after all?

Perhaps the question of the function of museums brings clarity. A museum is by definition committed to collect, preserve, research and exhibit. The institution’s classification (Natural History, Asian Art, Currywurst) is determined by the collection. Meaning it is about communicating a certain way of handling the collection to the outside. Within this space of understanding the museum possesses objects and takes care of this object-related knowledge. It is – subordinately - the duty of museum education to impart this object-related knowledge. The “educational turn” claws at this understanding. Museums get moving (see e.g. Thomas 2015; Schorch 2013). We fear that in most cases it is still a matter of top-down-understanding of knowledge transfer (see Bisky 2016). Whoever is looking for new approaches of communicating within museums, is asking about an individual way of dealing with of one’s own collections. Whoever wants to understand the meaning of museums for children develops different questions.

Children’s museums are places of cultural education. Conventionally they do not have their own collections and therefore escape the trap of subordinated knowledge transfer mentioned above. Children’s museums see culture as social exercises and do not feel obliged to a cultural canon. “Culture is a sphere where structures are experienced, lived, reproduced but also transformed”, says Rainer Winter (2004; 4) writing about cultural studies, that traditional critical thinking coming from the non-university adult’s education was taught in the Centre for Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham. It is and was about demonstrating to the subject their own ability to act. Transferred to our situation: The museum for children does not define culture but how culture shapes human actions. A children’s museum does not need a collection to be accepted as an museum; what it does

need is its audience. In children's museums it is not centrally about the collection and its objects but the visitors as subjects.

In this article we argue that children's museums should be granted special importance within the prevailing discussion about the meaning of museums.

Discovering childhood

Children's museums are unimaginable without a "new image of the child". In society as a whole the view on the child also became significant through the acceptance of the UN children's rights convention in 1989. The child was no longer just an unfinished adult but a social protagonist, constructor of its own personality (Hurrelmann/Bründel 2003). First efforts were made right after World War I, which had left behind too many war-affected, parent-less children with no rights. Initially it was about getting the states to formulate rights of protection and support and adhere to them. In recent years the discussion focused more on the participatory aspect of children's rights. We especially welcome this, as participation is at the heart of children's rights.

Children's rights are not a present

"It is not enough to 'give' rights to children. They also have to recognize them as their own, meaning that they have to be able to draw a reference to the world they live in." (Liebel 2013: 17) Children's rights are not a present from adults to children. So it is also not necessary to pedagogically handle the knowledge over children's rights in a way that children do not understand the rights. The children are not the addressees, they are the right-holders.

In the museum we do not look for everlasting valid answers but want to collectively train asking questions. We do not say "Do you know you have a right to play?" We ask: "What would you like to play?" Children should feel free to define "That's what I like to play" today and answer differently tomorrow. Children's rights can only influence our world and help demolish encrusted structures if they are filled with content by the active subjects. Children must also have the possibility to develop their own new rights and advance the convention for children's rights. Meaning that working with children's rights is processual. The collective conversation is already part of the results. There is no point at which to say: "Right, now these children have all the information. Now they do not have to learn this any more." You can not tick off children's rights. Because children's rights should be reinterpreted by everyone of us. That way a lively dialogue arises that an open society needs in order

to evolve. “It should not say: Teenagers will be engaged. But teenagers engage themselves.” (Ebd.: 44)

The museum without collection

Theoretically a children’s museum can collect anything. Though applied it is neither doable nor wise. Which object would be unimportant to children’s museum’s collection? Are there really topics children are not interested in or that are not worthy to be discussed with children? The museum knows that all of its visitors have experience in collecting. Children guard treasures in pockets, under the pillow or in their heads. The museum's starting point is this very form of adopting the world: What do we mean when we talk about objects having different meanings to us? The themes for collections develop from the visitors’ environments, from their their own experiences, from the need to bring certain topics to the public. No exhibition is without context. Every human has a very own distinctive view of the world.

The children’s museum also works with objects. We too search for what Nicholas Thomas calls “spiritual uplifting”. As a museum free of collections, the search for suitable objects is open to all directions. In the MACHmit! Museum the division of museum educational service is always within the team of curators. Pedagogy is no add-on but an always-been-there.

For the current exhibition “born & welcome” an artist was commissioned to build a accessible womb - but not as an anatomically accurate replica but an object of art. From the outside the womb looks like a golden half of a ball. It is circa 1.5 metres high and therefore impossible to be overlooked by children while also an interesting eye-catcher for adults. On the floor neon writing guides the way: “Back into the womb again?” Who wants to go in, has to crawl. Into the dimmed light. Pale red is the dominant colour. There is space for many children. The floor is softly cushioned. The womb as protective cave. Lined with rose-coloured fabric from the inside, the sewn umbilical cord leads to the placenta. Hidden speakers make it possible to experience what a foetus hears inside the mother’s belly. A place of comfort that inspires one to think. How does a baby feel inside the mother’s belly? How was that with me? How was it with you? What do I know about my own birth? Which questions have not even thought of yet? Birth - a universal topic. Is it not garbage “born” in some way, too? And next to all the other thoughts we bring to this world, so too are all other mammals born. Everyone of us has their own thoughts about this, our own questions. The sentence “There are no

dumb questions” may sound trite but still it is not untrue. Some questions are boring, some embarrassing and some mysterious. Always simply depending on the viewer. Depending on who is asking the question, who wants to give an answer and what happens next. We have no basement to collect all of our questions to the world. For that we have a museum.

The museum as a “contact zone”

The image is clear: Contact zone. The museum is no place for transferring knowledge from top to bottom but a place of dialogue. The thoughts for “contact zone” stand in connection to the “educational turn”. However it must be noted that “contact zone” initially comes from the “ethnological corner” and refers to the effects of a new handling of colonialism. Museums create new links of relevance. Who is to say what gets exhibited in a museum? Who does the museum “speak” for? “Thus, the multiplication of contexts becomes less about discovery and more about negotiations, less a matter of creative curators having good ideas [...] and more a matter of responding to actual pressures and calls for representation in a culturally complex civil society.” (Clifford 1997: 210) In Tobias Netke’s overview of the functions of modern museum education he describes something similar when he talks about “communication as ‘museum interpretation’” (Netke 2016: 37). When the questions of communication are asked in new ways, a museum as a “contact zone” is formed. A spirited museum beyond difficulties such as top-down or bottom-up. How that is possible? Every day we work on that.

Children’s museums see their visitors as experts of their living environment. We are interested in what kind of ideas they bring with them and want to create a space of possibilities. Dialogue being the central point. In the exhibition “born & welcome” nine children present their individual story around their own birth. Next to the large-scale photographs there is also a small text. Nine children tell their individual story and invite the observer to join thoughts. Various workshops about birth were held during the conception of the exhibition. We let us be told stories and asked the children that they themselves should discover something about their own birth. Who gave you your name? Who held you in their arms for the first time? What was the weather like on the day of your birth etc.? This form of teamwork is always participatory. Discovering new questions together is the main focus. Our expert’s living environment shall be discussed by people of all ages. Many children talked to their parents about the meaning of their own name for the first time and communicated with friends as well as distant relatives about their births and the time afterwards. So we do not only create

„new knowledge“ for the exhibition.

The museum as a beginning

There are no single visitors coming to the children's museum. Everyone is accompanied. Meaning that – in contrast to an “adult museum” - communication options relevant to the exhibition can be picked up more easily. The historic soap shop offers grandparents the chance to put their own experiences into words and have an impact on all ages. In the museum's printing studio, parents and children can try out old printing techniques together. Objects are not only looked at but can be tried out.

Children's museums are interested in bringing together the past, present and future. Inherently this is because of the visitor's specifics. Our main group of visitors is between three and twelve years old. They are not only the future people of today. They already are them now and their own future is always a part of the work of the on-going exhibitions. We are very aware that many of our guests enter a museum for the first time in their lives when they come to the MACHmit!. What an exhilarating event for everyone.

The museum as political place

We understand the museum a political place. Because we start by looking at the subject we are interested, and face every single human with respect and empathy and to make them part of the conversation as a producer of relevance. Of course there is no guarantee this approach supports democratic thinking 100 percent. But we do act on the assumption that within the MACHmit! everyone can see themselves as independently acting subjects.

“Our questions about culture [...] were concerned with the changing ways of life of societies and groups and the networks of meanings that individuals and groups use to make sense of and to communicate with one another [...] cultural studies insists on the necessity to address the central, urgent, and disturbing questions of a society and a culture in the most rigorous intellectual way we have available.” (Hall 1996: 336f.)

The museum as breeding ground

The children's museum is an interesting place for out-of-school education: the public view (who ever

that is supposed to be) does not have much confidence in the museum (“It’s just for children.”, “An indoor-playground with a bit of exhibition.”), otherwise our visitors come happily and in numbers. They are comfortable and pay attention to us. And our guests are never alone. The children bring their adults: nursery teachers, teaching staff, parents, friends and relatives. New things can be tried here. The children’s museum as a field for experimenting with relevant processes for society as a whole. Change, critic and renewal are at home in the children’s museum. Museums for children are museums for humans. They love dialogue.

The museum as possibility

We are open to intensifying the cooperation between the museums. Collections lend objects to the museum (e.g. the Klee exhibition “Thousand dots meet” led to a flourishing collaboration with the Paul Klee Centre in Bern and its department CREA VIVA). For every exhibition skilled external employees work together with the children’s museum. A dialogue begins.

The children’s museum as “contact zone” means participation. The new and unexpected is produced collectively. The children’s museum as a game of possibilities means pushing the experts as participatory partners. Not children as addressees but as recipients, unknowing. In such a setting children and adults meet as equal creators of relevance. Participation is always a plus - for everyone.

The museum as attitude

We are convinced that firstly every exhibition must have an attitude. It must not hide behind some alleged truth. We know that we are dealing with interpretations of the word. Thus we do not want to hide but discuss.

“About Native American Cultures and and the Art of Getting to know each other”, that is the subheading of the annual exhibition of 2017. The main title is “The broad Horizon”. We advocate showing how cultural identity is lived historically, but also how it is always changing. Our (European) image of the Native American is unthinkable without the conquest of the American continent. “The American who first discovered Columbus, made a bitter discovery.” Lichtenberg writes in his scrapbooks in the 18th century. He sneers at the discoverer’s pride of the European. Were they really looking for discovery? Or just looking to cash in?

The popular (European) cliché of the Native American goes: a Native American owns a horse, lives in a tipi, behaves dignifiedly and loves nature. What do we find as visitors when we realize how our

perception of Native Americans is shaped by history - when we make the discovery that we were wrong? The children's museum's audience may be quite young but still they have their own concept of understanding. Children are not less ideologically unburdened. But they are more open to questioning their own views and remaining curious. The museum makes use of this interest and wants to - based on Lichtenberg - shift the perspective. Collectively we want to think how it could have been as a "Native American" (Lichtenberg's American) to discover the first horse.

Cultures are not islands. They are neither homogeneous nor static, nor invariable. They are not coherent in themselves. The children's museum seeks not to prohibit this or that image. Preconceptions must be allowed to be discussed and find reflection within dialogue. Children are interested in cultural methods of other people. They are curious: "Do all humans brush their teeth?"

If we hold an exhibition about Native Indian cultures we pick up terms like "Tradition". The Iroquois with their Longhouses. The Sioux in the Tipi. Who lived in the Wigwam? How do Native American cultures live today? Who is to say at what point someone is Native American? Do I become Pawnee through my ancestors? Am I Pawnee because I'm interested in them? Because other people say that? I am Pawnee? To which cultural and social categories? Define humans? What are we talking about when we say "Syrian refugee child"? How does this child describe itself? We want to make the permeability of cultural concepts visible. In all directions.

Today many of our visitors are "children with a migration background". Is that a culture? Does this attribution define identity? Which external and which self-attribution (and in which context) follow when the label "children with a migration background" has expired? What do we mean when talking about "cultures" and what does "tradition" means? Are "Native Americans" traditionally closer to nature? How long does a tradition last for? Who determines whether I am acting traditionally?

"I think that one needs to recognize that when one talks about tradition, one should be talking about, in a sense, a dimension of social life and not a stage of social development. In an important sense, tradition and modernity are not really two mutually exclusive states of a culture or society but different aspects of historicity. Many of the things that are thought of as modern belong to traditions which have their roots in Western history. A changing tradition is often developing rapidly but a tradition nevertheless." (Asad 1996)

A difficult task for a children's museum, you think? We think: the museum is a good place to collectively ask questions and doubt truths.

The museum as play

Things are always creative in the children's museum. Every exhibition - how could it be different - is interactive. The museum is remembered as an aspect of one's own childhood that defined identity. There are offers of thematically suitable workshops at every exhibition so that all children can become creatively active. During the exhibition "Born & Welcome" there is the possibility to make Mongolian protection foxes, birthday candlelights or diaper babies. The visiting children are thrilled. They are curious and want to learn about new techniques. In doing so it is children to be new artists. We want to enable everyone to have a nice experience. So the workshop offers are not about what expertise is given to the unknowing. The museum understands cultural education as a chance to support fairness of participation and act as personality development. Whoever has experienced that drawing is fun and that crochet is not difficult may hopefully take the next opportunity to engage with oil paints, knit a scarf by themselves or take part in a course in the printing studio. We want to provide incentive, make freedom visible.

The museum "on the road"

Many children's museums begin their educational work in a construction trailer. There was drawing in empty store offices or transporting "museum content" in a suitcase. In the case of the many refugees looking for help and solidarity in Germany the MACH!mit uses new old ways. Since June 2016 we stand with our own MACH!Mit trailer in front of one of the hangars at the emergency accommodation (NUK) Tempelhofer Field in Berlin. Under completely different circumstances the museum has reminded itself of its own origins. A construction trailer again. Once more everything is different. A new challenge again.

We quickly noticed that the art offers cannot simply be transferred from the workshop tables of the museum to the Tempelhofer Field. The children here really feel like building, hammering and sawing. Often our new visitors know exactly in which way they want to work creatively. They independently craft yo-yos, playhouses, small tables or fly kites. But just as often, we as a group try to come up with something that could be the most fun to do in this afternoon. The MACH!mit trailer

is another attempt to collectively explore the space of meaning: culture as social exercise. While we hand out nails or untangle strings we talk to each other. Some call it language promotion, we call it communication.

The museum of Subjects

We know that in post-modern times subjects are experienced can be highly fragile and multi-vocal. We are many. Everyone of us lives multiple identities. But identity creation is always a dialogue. Humans need a counterpart. He/She lives in relationships. The museum lives from its visitors. Through them the children's museum finds itself. At its core is the prevention of a real separation of the museum and its audience. Without visitors there is no museum. Every children's museum is a museum of subjects.

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