

Untrained Museum Staff in the context of interpretation

Group 3: Simona Fazekasova, Sarah Lang, Philipp Odelga, Vladimir Persan, Renca Reny,
Adéla Tojackova

Introduction

This paper discusses the participation of untrained museum staff in questions of interpretation. Therein, it first asks the question whom the term “untrained staff” describes in the museum context, secondly, how this staff interacts with museum visitors and finally, how it can, should or should not be involved in questions of interpretation in the museum context.

The term „untrained employees“ in the context of a museum essentially describes any person a visitor can meet and holds some form of official function (as also the cleaning staff) and is not formally trained in any area specific to museum work.

In a lot of small museums, museum work is often a part time job. Many people involved in museum work are e.g. as volunteers or retired people. If smaller museums don't have a lot of “well educated” employees although, this means that these people haven't received a specific training in the field of the respective exhibitions and might not know additional historical contexts. This type of volunteering is common practise in small museums.

In larger museums employees tend to be professionals, mostly with a university degree as qualification for the job on which they work on regular hours. They are expected to know all the information – but is that even possible? And then, for example in big galleries, there is further untrained staff such as security whom visitors tend to ask questions too. These considerations also lead to the question if they have to know about the exhibition even if it is not a part of their job?

So, the term “untrained museum staff” refers to participants in museum work who are not formally qualified with a degree in any field of museum work. These could be guards, cleaning staff, volunteers looking to help out where they can. Seeing as they are present in the institution of the museum or a cultural heritage public sphere, visitors tend to expect them to be informed and able to answer (at least the most basic) questions. This would be desirable of course, but can we rationally expect untrained staff to help out in ways that make sense in terms of interpretation? If we don't want to disqualify them from participation in interpretation work straightaway, we need to lay out a plan in which epistemic implications are made clear and responsibilities are spread accordingly.

Can an elderly person, a volunteer coming back from retirement work as a guide? Will the stories they tell be scientifically acceptable, which is in this context the presumption a

museum has to act with? This is the question that inevitably leads back to asking for qualification – If they are retired university professors? Of course – who would dare to question their authority in case they are retired history teachers? Maybe, but as teachers, didactic reduction was their job and we would prefer scientifically valid (and thus, not oversimplified) explanations in our museums. Are they contemporary witnesses? Of course, they have something to say on the topic but they are biased. Asking how “untrained staff” can be “useful” for the task of museum interpretation seems to inevitably lead back to the question of how we can get these people some form of qualification.

However, a student of any museologically applicable discipline might not have formal qualification – yet: They are trained staff still being trained, so they don’t really fall under the term of “untrained staff” either.

We can, therefore, agree upon our reluctance to let untrained staff without a (university degree based) historical background or other forms of thorough training participate in interpretation in the form of historical narratives (i.e. giving explanations, answering questions, working as guides). But we agree just the same that untrained staff is not useless: they can point a visitor to a more reliable source of information (be that an information centre or a qualified guide). Getting untrained work out of the isolation from their jobs that mostly separate them from the rest of the team, giving them internal opportunities to gain understanding in the museum even if it is not applicable to or necessary for their own jobs (such as standing guard, cleaning) would integrate them into the team more where there are trained people they can talk to. As part of the team, the guards (for example) could contribute their observations of visitor behaviour to make the museum experience better and give museum professional a new perspective on their work. Also, integrating this staff in social media activity might be something to take into consideration – but of course, here the same sort of concerns come up, especially as social media presence of museum personnel is part of the official face of the institution which might want to verify their own social media contributions.

A Theoretical Background on Interpretation

In the interpretation process, one expression or concept is explained by replacing it with another one *ad infinitum* (“semiosis”). This interpretation process is our only way of defining the contents of the expressions involved and thus, the longer this process goes on, the "content" of the expression expands. Ergo, an ideal interpretation would mean to foresee all

possible contexts in which a sign could be inserted.¹ In the process of producing art, the artist is aware that he does this not for one single recipient but for a collective² who will not interpret the artwork according to the artist's intentions, but according to their own socialization, their values, knowledge and worldview.³ A work of art is therefore interpreted by the individual according to said individual's competence in interpretation that may greatly vary, especially if the artwork belongs to another cultural sphere or period. But quite apart from any theoretical interpretation being possible, Eco stresses the importance of interpreting cultural objects according to their own cultural convention.⁴ In his *Limits of Interpretation*, Eco argues that while generally interpretation does not allow for one definite answer, there is indeed the possibility of falsifying incorrect interpretations. Therefore, acknowledging the fact one "perfect" interpretation cannot possibly be determined and if it is the duty of a museum to provide valid interpretations⁵, museum personnel should not provide false interpretations.

Interpretation constitutes a communication process but the interpreting individual isn't necessarily grounded in a system of meanings.⁶ Meaning that they can be part of a communication process but not necessarily base their interpretation on the adequate "code", which leads to interpretations which are possible in their very own system of meanings but might not be the adequate ones in a special (i.e. museum) context. So, for example, someone guarding a Van Gogh painting might refer asking visitors to that fact that Van Gogh always reminds him of comic strips. An answer, which is not "incorrect", but it probably is not in fact appropriate in the museum setting and might lead to misunderstandings in visitors with no further knowledge of art.

¹ See Eco: "(i) ogni espressione deve venire interpretata da un'altra espressione, e così via, all'infinito; (ii) la stessa attività di interpretazione è l'unico modo di definire i contenuti delle espressioni; (iii) nel corso di questo processo semiotico, il significato delle espressioni cresce attraverso le interpretazioni a cui esse vengono sottoposte in diversi contesti e in diverse circostanze storiche; [...] (v) interpretare un segno significa prevedere - idealmente - tutti i contesti possibili in cui può essere inserito." Eco 2016, 346-347.

² See Eco: "Quando un testo viene prodotto non per un singolo destinatario ma per una comunità di lettore, l'autore sa che esso verrà interpretato non secondo le sue intenzioni ma secondo una complessa strategia della lingua come patrimonio sociale" Eco 2016, 146.

³ Eco writes that art is interpreted "secondo una complessa strategia della lingua come patrimonio sociale [...] le convenzioni culturali [...] e la storia delle interpretazioni precedenti", Eco 2016, 146

⁴ See Eco: "[l'interpretazione] devo rispettare il suo sfondo culturale", Eco 2016, 147

⁵ See the ICOM code of ethics: "4.2 Interpretation of Exhibitions: Museums should ensure that the information they present in displays and exhibitions is well-founded, accurate and gives appropriate consideration to represented groups or beliefs." ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums, 25.

⁶ See Eco: "L'interprete – come protagonista attivo dell'interpretazione – è certamente presupposto nel corso di un processo di comunicazione (io dico 'rosa' a qualcuno e questo qualcuno capisce che intendo "fiore rosso"). Ma questo interprete non è necessario in un sistema di significazione, cioè in un sistema di istruzioni che fa corrispondere "fiore rosso", come interprete corretto, all'espressione 'rosa'. Eco 2016, 281

So, while it is possible in the process of semiosis to insert a museum object into practically any context to interpret it, it does not necessarily make sense: We might not be able to provide the “one perfect interpretation”, but we are indeed able to make out incorrect ones. Inserting an object in an interpretation context is not actually (scientifically) compatible with an appropriate way and must be considered a misinterpretation. Making out false interpretations can be a difficult understanding for trained staff already, as slight nuances might draw a thin line between an acceptable and a false interpretation. Untrained staff lacks the contextual knowledge needed to make such judgements. Therefore, they are not qualified to give interpretations of their own, acting as official spokespersons for the museum. They can however, give their opinion, if they make it clear that they are referring their very own opinion and not a generally valid interpretation.

Interpreting Our Heritage is a book written by American writer Freeman Tilden, first published in 1957 wherein the author, as the first person narrator⁷, set down the principle and theories of Heritage Interpretation. As we already discussed, interpretation itself is a quite delicate term of which even the definitions differ, sometimes even tremendously. Tilden points, that interpretation (in an everyday sense) is usually being performed with only a very vague reference to its possible theoretical grounding and sometimes interpreters use their own imagination, in the wrong way, without being aware of any underlying principles. This same fear and criticism of unqualified interpretation matches the routine treatment of untrained staff in the Czech Republic, where the majority of this staff is not supposed to talk to visitors, because the misconception in interpretation Tilden warns against, could turn out to become a problem for the whole institution itself, discrediting the authority and tarnishing the aura of scientific flawlessness of the museum. But Tilden also mentions how American National Parks have created manuals for their staff which also include best practices of sharing information.⁸ This could be a viable option in the integration of untrained museum staff which requires only a moderate amount of work institutionally as well as for the staff itself.

A central argument of Tilden’s thesis is that interpretation consists not so much in instruction than in provocation of thoughts.⁹ If we follow this theory, almost anyone would be able to provide guidance and interpretation in a museum, also and, maybe even especially, untrained

⁷ Cf. Tilden 1977.

⁸ Cf. Tilden 1977, 18.

⁹ Cf. Tilden 1977, 32-39.

staff. But seeing as this provocation will most certainly create a “thirst for knowledge”, unqualified interpretation already reaches its limits – yet again.

Reaching the limits of interpretation: Does a museum have to know everything?

Should a museum, still show a mostly unexplained artefact provided from an archaeological excavation or not? It still qualifies to be exhibited possessing authenticity and a value as a historical witness. So, does a museum have to know everything? The artefact without a story still has value and should be shown to visitors. It could even be shown as a means of transparency: the museum admits to its own imperfection and thereby asks what interpretation means.

Interpretation in the Public Sphere: The Case of Monuments

As shown, interpretation can be seen as the ascription of meaning and serves as a mode of human orientation. This is not only true for museums and museum objects, but also for the public sphere of a city, where topographic space and places within the city need to be made sense of. This applies to both spatial orientation, as to orientation concerning the function and semantics of buildings, signs or places.

In Graz, one of these places is the Hauptplatz (main square) with the Erzherzog-Johann-Brunnen, a memorial in the form of a fountain. Erected in 1878 by a civic committee, it consists of a statue of Archduke John of Austria (1782 – 1859) and allegoric figures of four main rivers of historical Styria, as well as of trades and industries seen as important for the country. It also features commemorative plates expressing the styrian people’s gratitude for the efforts of the Archduke.¹⁰ During history, the fountain has been slightly altered to make it more “readable”¹¹, and was also used for a controversial art project to point out the pollution of the river Mur in 1985.¹² The monument is one of the significant sights of Graz and usually an inherent part of guided city tours.

Monuments and museum objects – similarities and differences

Like museum objects, monuments inherit several layers of meaning. Appearance, place and usage tell us more about time and intention of its construction than about historic facts it refers to.¹³ This historicity makes the meaning of monuments fluctuating and open for

¹⁰ See: Schweigert 1979, pp. 163-164.

¹¹ Bronze letters with the names of the four rivers were added in 1976. See: Schweigert 1979, p. 164.

¹² See: Celedin/Schick 1995, p. 51.

¹³ See: Uhl 1994, p. 171.

interpretation by all individuals or groups who deal with them.¹⁴ Since monuments are public signs of collective memory and subsequently identity, this process may lead to heated public disputes.

Regarding museum objects, this variable readability and re-readability of monuments carries the same quality that is meant by Pomian's term *Semiofere*, the quality of serving as a reference for our self-perception completely differs to Waidacher's term *Nouophores*.¹⁵ The main difference between museum objects and monuments lies in the level of usage. While Robert Musil famously points out that nothing is as invisible as a monument, they are part of everyday life and often serve a practical purpose, may it be in form of memorial ceremonies or maybe just as a place to sit down and eat a snack during a walk through the city. Museum objects on the other hand are things that serve no reasonable purpose anymore and have been removed from the circle of usage.¹⁶ This difference becomes apparent when monuments are removed from their original places and put in a museal context as the example of "Mementopark" in Hungary shows.¹⁷

Monuments also gain museal qualities when approaching them shifts from a semantic or performative, to a more visual stance. Unlike people who may see a certain monument as a symbol for current social or political topics, "visitors" like tourists are in higher need for interpretation, which is mostly offered by public institutions or professional companies and usually rather conventional in nature. This again correlates to the diverse levels of preceding knowledge that is typical for museum crowds.¹⁸

Professional and untrained Interpretation of monuments

Since the differences between monuments and museum objects are subtle, such interpretation happens in similar ways for both. It often lies with professional guides or media, who will typically inform visitors about historic facts and further implications of the monument, e.g. the circumstances of its construction, information about the artist, or occasions where the monument played an important role. Tour guides and guiding media give well-grounded information and interpretation,¹⁹ but are far less common than individual sight-seeing. This

¹⁴ See: Csàky 2009, p. 34.

¹⁵ See: Pomian 2013, p. 50; Waidacher 2005, pp. 28 and 33 - 34.

¹⁶ See: Pomian 2013, pp. 13-14.

¹⁷ See: <http://www.mementopark.hu> and <http://econfaculty.gmu.edu/bcaplan/museum/szobor.htm> for a picture gallery. Retrieved on 17.12.2017.

¹⁸ See: Flügel 2014, pp. 100 - 101.

¹⁹ Official guides for the city of Graz have to complete a seven months course and pass an exam. See: http://www.verwaltung.steiermark.at/cms/dokumente/11682744_74835957/7599474a/WKO%20Fremdenf%C3%BChrer.pdf. Retrieved on 17.12.2017.

compares to the situation in museums, where individual visitors make up the large majority and often turn to untrained museum staff for questions.²⁰

While tour guides and media can be compared to professional guides and other means of interpretation used in museums, the counterpart to untrained museum staff in the public sphere of a city could be seen in public servants like policemen/-women or garbage collectors, as well as people who work in fields that have a high number of visitors like Taxi drivers or Newspaper and Tobacco shops. The service nature of these jobs gives them a functional character, which implies the role of a respondent who may be approached with questions about monuments or other public places of interest. In the case of the Erzherzog-Johann-Brunnen, one example for this kind of “implied respondents” can be found in the permanent market stands on the Hauptplatz, which offer food and souvenirs, making it the most likely place for interaction between tourists and locals in a semi-official social role.

Conclusion

Public objects of cultural heritage like the Erzherzog-Johann-Brunnen don’t carry the same level of detachment from everyday usage as museum objects, but both are open to interpretation in the sense of pointing out a certain or possible meaning. While there is awareness of the role of untrained staff for interpretation in Museums, the role and impact of untrained individuals for interpretation in the public sphere is uncertain and the task of interpretation lies predominantly with trained guides and media.

The possible interpretative role of what we have called “implied respondents”, raises the question if such professions should be given guidance by a curatorial instance like the Board of Tourism. Regarding the example of the Erzherzog-Johann-Brunnen, such an instance could offer a guided tour especially designed for public servants and market stand vendors of the Hauptplatz, which should provide them with basic information about the monument and the Hauptplatz in general. It should specifically point out their possible role as stand-in tourist guides, give them advice on how to handle questions and the knowledge where to turn people to when they need further help. A participative approach could invite “implied respondents” to point out the everyday dimension of cultural heritage objects of their city, something that is not usually done with classic guided tours, either in the public sphere or Museums.

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²⁰ See: Höge 2016, pp. 270 and 272; Schmitt 2016, p. 274.

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