

The London Journal of Critical Thought
Volume 3, Issue 1 (June 2019)

How to Cite: Luise Reitstätter, “Going Radical in Museum Space? Inclusive Strategies that Challenge the Institution’s Core,” *London Journal of Critical Thought* 3, no 1 (2019), 72-85.

Published: June 2019

Peer Review: This article was peer-reviewed internally by a member of the editorial collective and by an external reviewer.

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Going Radical in Museum Space? Inclusive Strategies that Challenge the Institution's Core

Luise Reitstätter

In 2016, the Salzburg Museum integrated Easy-to-Read text panels in their exhibition spaces – a novelty within Austria's museum landscape. The initial reactions were split, ranging from people who declared it a powerful innovation for an inclusive museum to others that sniffed at the strongly simplified 'stupid' text versions. Based on these ambivalent reactions, the project *Say it Simple. Say it Out Loud* – a collaboration between Salzburg Museum and the University of Salzburg – took a two-fold approach to explore this radical gesture of (new) visitor-orientation. First, a sociological analysis through hermeneutic discourse analysis, participant observation and qualitative visitor interviews: How do different people use and value these Easy-to-Read texts in the exhibition space? Second, a specifically developed language course within the exhibition *Tell Me About Salzburg!* for German learners at level A2. Being visitor-oriented not only towards the core cultural audience but towards people with different socio-cultural backgrounds and language levels, the museum becomes a highly-contested site. The study consequently shows the difficulties of hegemonic power structures of institutions as well as the transformative potential of inclusive museum and language strategies, which proposes a basic rethinking of the grounds of 'hospitality' within museum strategy.

If museums are meant to be public places, what is meant by 'public'?

Museums and hospitality may or may not be a logical combination. First, when defining the museum as a public institution, it becomes obvious that there were times when the public claim was not a substantial part of the museum's mission and partly these sentiments still exist today. Museums of kings, aristocrats or simply the elite for a long time represented the model of an institution that was mainly

symbolic of the owner's wealth and power, only strategically opened to a small percentage of the public. In the course of the Enlightenment collections became open to the general public but nevertheless stuck to the model of the audience as admirer of the collections, which were entangled with concepts of the nation state and civic education.¹⁴¹ As recently as 1974, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) refined the museum's definition by emphasising its public role, reframing the institution as 'a non-profit making, permanent institution *in the service of the society and its development, and open to the public*, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of man and his environment.'¹⁴²

In the context of current democratizing tendencies, today's contemporary museum discourse places less emphasis on objects and more on people, putting material and social encounters at the forefront of their purpose. Influential museum publications, websites, blogs, and newsletters all declare that museums are designed for a variety of people, or even for 'everyone.'¹⁴³ However, the nature of these phrases is often more aspirational than based in reality. The general public claim often does not coincide with everyday museum realities, especially regarding visitor profiles. Sadly, despite all utopian concepts, idealistic aspirations and well-meaning social attempts, the visitor profile of most museums reads as a quite homogeneous representation of a relatively wealthy and well-educated class. A major impact on outreach was not necessarily provoked by socialist, reformative or emancipatory ideas but is instead based on capitalist

¹⁴¹ Charlotte Klonk, *Spaces of Experience. Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 19–47.

¹⁴² Emphasis by the author. For the changing ICOM museum definitions, see http://archives.icom.museum/hist_def_eng.html (12.09.2018).

¹⁴³ See for instance Nina Simon, *The Art of Relevance* (Santa Cruz, California: Museum 2.0, 2016) or the mission of The Museum of Modern Art and MoMA PS1 'to be inclusive places – both onsite and online – where diverse cultural, artistic, social, and political positions are welcome' (<https://www.moma.org/about/>, 12.09.2018) or the newsletter from 28 April 2018 on the Tate Collective where one can read: 'It's all part of our commitment to bringing more young people into our galleries and putting them at the heart of our plans for the future. Because art is for everyone.'

conditions, in which commodification and cultural tourism widened the museums' reach but not necessarily the scale of diversity.¹⁴⁴

Taking the term 'public' seriously, one could in contrast for a 'Right to the Museum,' that, inspired by the Lefebvrian a 'Right to the City,' fights for this symbolic space at the centre, establishing itself as a political demand by citizens of very political, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.¹⁴⁵ This claim line with the unconditional hospitality imagined by Jacques where whomever or whatever may enter a domain 'without reservations or calculations'.¹⁴⁶ Hospitality, through the simple inviting more marginal groups of people who are not yet the museum, could thus become a clue to reinterpreting exclusionary boundaries.

Traditionally, as outlined above, this is not a particular strength of the museum. However, confronted with the 'societal challenges' of migration and calls for greater inclusion and wider access, museums increasingly have felt the need to react to the realities of a diversified society. Specifically, with the exponentially increasing migratory movements from Africa and the Middle-East to Central Europe since the beginning of 2016, museums were confronted with a wakeup call to assume their civic responsibility, i.e. to open their doors and to develop programmes that could appeal to the new citizens. Often not endowed with a natural gift for working with people from

¹⁴⁴ Graham Black speaks of the core audience making up 70% of museum attendance as 'the professional class, those from higher socio-economic groups and with higher level of education' that 'has expanded rapidly since the 1950s' with 'increased wealth and leisure time.' However, he very much stresses the point that museums should not simply rely on this core audience as 'class is changing.' See Graham Black, "Museum Informal Learning in the 'Age of Participation. Our Museums in 2030,'" *Standbein Spielbein* 109, no. 1 (2018), 11.

¹⁴⁵ Luise Reitstätter and Florian Bettel, "Right to the City! Right to the Museum!" in *UNCERTAIN SPACES. Virtual Configurations in Contemporary Art and Museums*, eds. Helena Barranha and Susana S. Martins (Lisbon: Instituto de História da Arte, FCSH - Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 2015), 159–82, http://unplace.org/sites/default/files/uncertain_spaces.pdf.

¹⁴⁶ Jacques Derrida, "The Principle of Hospitality," in *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, California; Stanford University Press, 2005), 66–7.

different socio-cultural backgrounds, museums struggled with paternalistic project structures and implicit hegemonic attitudes authorised by European cultural dominance, as well as a lack of practical experience and competence in trans-cultural and social work.¹⁴⁷ The same goes for the issue of disability, which has been a blind spot for a long time in museum's representational politics and welcoming practices, neglected in collections as well as as programming.¹⁴⁸

Thus, care for the core audience versus care for the weak may be thought of as the two antipodes when thinking about the political implications of combining the institution of the museum with the concept of hospitality: who is welcome under which conditions? When relating the host of the museum to new guests a central question has to be clarified: do new visitors have to adapt to the invited field with its implicit rules and codes of conduct or does this welcoming gesture coincide with a possible change and disruption of the field introducing new spatial politics and narrative possibilities?

Say it Simple. Say it Out Loud. A project's history and mission

The project *Say it Simple. Say it Out Loud*¹⁴⁹ was intrinsically based on the idea of a 'Right to the Museum' that is practically embedded in inclusive language policies. While *Say it Simple* refers to the evaluation of the newly installed Easy-to-Read text panels, *Say it Out Loud* links to the language course that was developed for the Salzburg Museum. Beyond the logics of spatial accessibility, both address communicative burdens that might not be particularly visible but are nevertheless efficacious in preventing museum visits or creating positive experiences. The project was intertwined with the 2016 exhibition *Tell*

¹⁴⁷ For a guide to this new field of work with critical reflections see: Maren Ziese and Caroline Gritschke, eds., *Geflüchtete und kulturelle Bildung. Formate und Konzepte für ein neues Praxisfeld* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016).

¹⁴⁸ Sandell, Richard, Jocelyn Dodd and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (eds.), *Re-Presenting Disability. Activism and Agency in the Museum* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

¹⁴⁹ *Say it Simple. Say it Out Loud. Easy-to-Read as a Key to the Museum*, a joint collaboration between the Salzburg Museum and the University of Salzburg, was developed by the art educator Nadja Al Masri-Gutternig and myself for the funding programme "The Inclusive Museum" by the Austrian Federal Chancellery.

me About Salzburg! celebrating the 200-year anniversary of the city of Salzburg officially becoming part of Austria. The curatorial goal of this exhibition was to narrate various (his-)stories of this eventful time based on the assumption ‘that every age has to tell history anew and also question previous traditions,’¹⁵⁰ symbolized by twelve different episodes and organised by a group of eleven curators.

This large-scale exhibition project, however, did not only question its own museum collections and foster a critical practice by deconstructing established histories. Far more, it offered the opportunity to scrutinize traditional museum language policies through the introduction of an unfamiliar museum text species: Easy-to-Read.¹⁵¹ With its origin in a self-advocacy movement from the 1970s, where people with disabilities fought for their right to autonomously access information, this text type is characterised by a simplified language structure as well as choice of words.¹⁵² Consequently, the confrontation of traditional museum texts (in German these are commonly based on complex sentence constructions and sprinkled with technical terminology) with this basic language system (with e.g. short sentences, one unit of meaning per line and no foreign words allowed) could not be a more harsh contrast. This clash of cultures on the equivalent introductory text panels in each room also became evident in the first critics’ and visitors’ reactions. While some saw it as a powerful innovation for an inclusive museum, there were others who sniffed at the strongly simplified ‘stupid’ text versions.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ Quote from the introductory text panel in the exhibition.

¹⁵¹ There are a few recent examples of Easy-to-Read panel texts in Austrian museum practice, which have been offered in large-scale special exhibitions such as the national exhibition *Alles was Recht ist* (Schloss Pöggstall, 2017) or as additional text information provided on a regular basis by, for example, the art museum Lentos.

¹⁵² For a comprehensive discussion of Easy-to-Read in German (‘Leichte Sprache’) see Ursula Bredel and Christiane Maaß, *Leichte Sprache. Theoretische Grundlagen. Orientierung für die Praxis* (Berlin: Duden, 2016).

¹⁵³ Personal communication with Nadja Al Masri-Gutternig on May 4, 2016.



Fig. 1: Wall panels of Easy-to-Read (white) and traditional museum text in German and English (black) within the exhibition *Tell me About Salzburg!* Photo: Peter Laub, © Salzburg Museum

The first concern of the project *Say it Simple. Say it Out Loud* was thus to look empirically beyond these poles of appreciation and disregard. In order to investigate the use of these Easy-to-Read texts in the exhibition, the methods of hermeneutic text analysis, participant observation and qualitative visitor interviews were applied. The second attempt of the project was to actively make use of these texts by offering a language course at the museum developed by the language centre of the University of Salzburg.¹⁵⁴ The course *Tell me About Salzburg – German at the Museum*¹⁵⁵ combined cultural and

¹⁵⁴ The course was developed by the linguists Margareta Strasser, Denis Weger and Theresa Bogensperger in close cooperation with the language teacher Florian Bauer who was joined by the art educator Nadja Al Masri-Gutternig during the classes.

¹⁵⁵ Theresa Bogensperger, Margareta Strasser and Denis Weger, “Deutsch Lernen Im Museum. Theoretisch Gedacht – Praktisch Umgesetzt,” in *Leichte Sprache. Sag es einfach. Sag es laut!*, eds. Nadja Al Masri-Gutternig and Luise Reitstätter (Salzburg: Salzburg Museum, 2017), 44–55. This paper offers a comprehensive description of the theoretical background and the practical realisation of the course. The annex

linguistic learning and took place at the Salzburg Museum from March to June 2017. It was modelled on a traditional academic term course in A2 (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) and 14 weekly appointments of 1.5 hours. The participants, identified as newly arrived people in town with an interest in cultural history, could attend the course free of charge but had to prove regular attendance of 80%, hand in homework and do presentations to receive the confirmation of participation.¹⁵⁶ To understand the characteristics as well as challenges of doing a language course within the museum, students of the parallel university course and myself did accompanying research.



Fig. 2: Participants of the language course working in the exhibition *Tell me About Salzburg!*
Photo: Neumayr/MMV © Salzburg Museum

offers the complete course materials published open source, both documents can be downloaded at: <http://www.salzburgmuseum.at/index.php?id=2101> (12.9.2018).

¹⁵⁶ As the course was given at the Salzburg Museum, which is by definition not a language programme provider, only a confirmation of participation could be given to the participants. Negatively, this is less attractive to people who need official language certificates for visa purposes. Positively, this provides more freedom regarding course content and less formal evaluation pressure.

Empirical evidence on Easy to Read ...

Twenty informal qualitative interviews were carried out in April 2017 to analyse empirically the acceptance of the Easy-to-Read texts at the Salzburg Museum. While it was easy to convince visitors to participate in the interview, it was not that easy to interview them on museum language policies and practices. Rather, the talks revealed that asking people first about their reading patterns in the museum meant stepping on sensitive terrain. Simply because of the symbolic power mechanism of the institution, on the one hand, and the desire of being 'good' and competent visitors on the other hand, it seemed that people felt obliged to consume the offered texts in full rather than only partially. This 'ideal' approach was frequently opposite to real reading behaviour: 'To be honest, I have only read some parts' (V02), 'I was more looking at objects' (V08), 'Only walking by' (V04), or 'I have to be selective (...) I read what I'm interested in.' (V07) Here, the inclusive potential of text is thwarted by the civilizing power of the institution and the visitors themselves who regard their individual reading patterns not always as officially legitimate.

Coming to Easy-to-Read, another obstacle of the interview was revealed as a majority of the visitors were not yet aware of this text type. The interview position was thus transferred to an exhibition spot where Easy-to-Read and its specificities could be visualized and also consciously experienced in comparison with the regular wall text. Being confronted with the question of the possible addressees of this newly introduced text type, answers ranged from 'For children, for elderly people, for teenagers' (V01) to 'For non-native speakers, tourists, people with little time' (V08) to 'For the uneducated, and the ones who don't want to read that much, for instance myself' (V12) to even 'For everyone'(V07). Interestingly, and in contrast to the museum staff who introduced Easy-to-Read mainly for people with learning disabilities, visitors pinpointed the wide range of second and third addressees of Easy-to-Read (including themselves as regular visitors) who potentially profit from this new text policy.

Asking for critical advice on the museum's text policy from the visitor's side stressed the phenomenon whereby audiences are often in line with the institutions' decisions. Statements such as 'Everything fine' (V13), 'Keep it up' (V12) or 'Both texts' (V20) as well as the

reluctance of critique demonstrated the high degree of acceptance of the institution's actions. What can again be interpreted as statements of obedient visitors simply acknowledging the power of the institution can, on the contrary, be seen as a great opportunity for institutional change as it demonstrates that museum visitors are willing to accept new initiatives. A minority of visitors also proposed their own ideas such as 'Short texts, with questions and answers' (V03) or the idea of including images as visual communication tools (V02) based on their personal experience as teachers or non-native German speakers. These suggestions for improvement show the inadequacy of a 'one size fits all' approach. A critical awareness and understanding of the museum's 'voice' clearly needs to take account of the obviously different language levels present among the visitors.

... and Learning German at the Museum

The participants of the language course *Tell me About Salzburg – German at the Museum* were also united by the need and desire to improve their German language skills. When recalling the initial situation of being confronted by a new and complicated language, symbolized by the German text panels in the museum, one participant said: 'What is that? This is so difficult. We cannot read.' (I08) The three main goals of the language course developers therefore were first to mediate reading and learning strategies, second to improve textual skills, orally and in writing, and third to stimulate a reflection on culture and history (I01). Characterising the experience of the course, participants stress the heterogeneity of the group with a uniting goal of 'We are all different people but in the course we are equal. We speak the same language, of course German.' (I02) Thus, addressing the common border of a language can become a tool in building a community rather than a stigmatising issue.

The group forming process is supported by the embodied and communicative practices of learning within an exhibition as 'It's a vivid course. It works, with the strategy of movement. Looking and commenting. And later we have dispute and dialogue.' It's not a surprise that '(l)anguage always comes with communication. No matter what the course is about (...) every

time you learn something' (I07). The combination of linguistic and cultural learning lightens the gravity of traditional language courses through a mixture of linguistic input, exhibition-related tasks and personal thoughts. This combination provides a communicative basis that helps to establish relationships between the participants and see parallel and intertwining histories between the exhibition's content and their lives. Based on the assumption that culture is a not a static but complex relational construct, one of the course developers stresses the overall need in transcultural communication to 'gain competence in relating your actions with the actions of the others' (I04).

From access to agency?

Consequently, Easy-to-Read texts or the specifically based language course in the museum can offer keys to access and work with information that otherwise might represent a wall or a burden. People with limited reading capacities (ranging from people with learning disabilities to children to non-natives or tourists) and different socio-cultural backgrounds (representing a rising number in an increasingly migrant society) are invited to synchronize and compare their own interpretations in line or in contrast with given information. When Derrida quotes Emmanuel Levinas saying that 'the essence of language is friendship and hospitality'¹⁵⁷ we can note a basic reaching out in this sense as the museum recognises the need to break with the elitist mode of museological address symbolized in the traditionally difficult 'museum tongue.'

This shift was in a way already curatorially set when the exhibition on Salzburg's Austrian history refused to present a seamless and linear city development. Rather, the twelve chosen topics – starting with traditional alpine Salzburg Sagas and ending with alternative post-colonial narrations on golden museum objects by the artist Lisl Ponger – selected very specific angles to tell the history of Salzburg. This attitude towards asking for personal accounts, also symbolized by the engaging exhibition title *Tell me About Salzburg!*, was taken up by the course developers who regarded the exhibition's

¹⁵⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 10.

content not as something static to be mediated but as material to be personally engaged with.

Referring to the concept of culturally-sensitive learning, the course explicitly tried to overcome the binary scheme of ‘us,’ the Austrians, and ‘them,’ the others, that so often prevail in comparative talk. On the contrary, and also in an ideal theoretical conception (not always realised in practice), it approached the participants as cultural experts in their own right, calling on them to comment on the presented Salzburg history from their own cultural background and knowledge. Practically, this resulted in timelines overlaying decisive moments of personal history with historical Salzburg events, biographical presentations of Mozart’s international contemporaries or even producing their own audio guide files where participants talked through an exhibition object imagining its story from a personal standpoint. This active engagement with the exhibition *Tell Me About Salzburg!* thus explicitly aligned personal memories between glory and crisis that do not only characterize cities’ histories but also personal biographies of so many – with or without the immediate experience of migration.

While this extends the hospitality framework of the museum through the institution's welcoming and language policies, the question of the specific agency of these new visitors remains less addressed. Here we step into a terrain where the radical turns quite conventional. Agency is mainly given through the possibility of personal meaning-making, in silent thought or spoken out loud to companions. This is fairly in line with what regular visitors do, the only difference being that a diversified textual basis is given as a starting point. Additionally, the course encouraged its participants to produce materials such as the aforementioned audio guide and to give a collective tour through the exhibition showing their personal engagement as part of the concluding event. Again, this is similar to the experience of regular language course participants. Nevertheless, I would like to advocate for the conventional being possibly part of a museum work still aimed at a radical hospitality. By providing different texts and a language course especially for newly arrived people in town, visitors and participants were able to gain agency

in their role as active spectators. While there are certainly many other ways to give and gain agency in a more political, activist or interventionist context, I also believe that in conventional host and guest relations, radical seeds can be sown that change the institution at the root of its structures.

From the margins to the core?

The project *Say it Simple. Say it Out Loud* thus showed – via the exhibition itself, its widened text policies through Easy-to-Read and the specifically oriented language course – that institutions might be diversified through voices from the margins. The question, however, still remains as to whether these efforts are located merely at the peripheries of the institution or if they are able to change the centre itself. This problem of power mechanisms becomes especially obvious when the institutional change regarding the interruption from the ‘foreign’ ranges from accepting possible alternative narrations from the margins to including these voices at the institution’s core. As Derrida points out in describing the relation of hosts and its guests, there is the wide spectrum between the pressure to adapt in the setting of conditional hospitality (when guests have to adjust themselves to given scripts and rules) or the possibility to change the codes of conduct in the setting of unconditional hospitality (when guests have the right to intervene and act).¹⁵⁸

The described spatial and communicative politics, with the welcoming gesture of opening doors to the discursive environment of the museum by assigning space to different text styles, teaching methods and interpretations is conceptually and ideally aimed at a radical hospitality. This is in line with Derrida’s pure, unconditional hospitality where welcoming practices are linked to singular identities, in which everything is done ‘...to address the other, to accord him, even to ask his name, while keeping this question from becoming a ‘condition,’ a police inquisition, a blacklist or a simple border control.’¹⁵⁹ Transferring this concept to practice, I would like to refer to the cultural educator Carmen Mörsch who has formulated four premises that should be met in any anti-racist collaboration between museums and marginalized audiences:

¹⁵⁸ Jacques Derrida, "The Principle of Hospitality," *Parallax* 11, no. 1 (2005), 6–9.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 7.

1. Nothing about us without us.
2. Active redistribution of added values and privileges.
3. Accompanying research or formative evaluation.
4. Diversification of organizational structures.¹⁶⁰

Looking honestly and critically at our project retrospectively, the impression prevails that these four premises are hard to fulfil. 'Nothing about us without us,' a basic slogan of so many self-advocacy movements from gender to disability movements, implies that participants are crucially embedded in the project structures with a given agency to speak out. Although trying to make their voices visible through, for example, interviews with and statements in the project's book by course participants,¹⁶¹ I also have to admit that their perspective is less present than ours embedded in academia or the museum world. Regarding an active redistribution of added values and privileges, I can say that participants could claim personal profit by taking part in a course and got the privilege of using the museum as their personal (learning) space. Indeed, formative (instead of summative) evaluation could adapt the course to participant's specific needs and prove that it was meaningful to them. However, I might only guess if this goes beyond the project's duration and radius. For now, I personally have the feeling that marginalized audiences have their place in the museum, but still in the peripheral position of specific projects, in relation to specific persons, and for a specific period of time. Positively, this could be the beginning of changing museums' attitudes if, as the fourth premise calls for, the project also helps in diversifying structures and implementing programmes on a regular basis. Our case study, the Salzburg Museum, obviously demonstrates its intention of continuing its process of diversification: Easy-to-Read text panels are now an integral part of every special

¹⁶⁰ Handout by Carmen Mörsch on anti-racist collaborations between refugees and NGOs in that area and museums at the annual conference of the regional association *Museumspädagogik Ost e.V.*, Berlin 18–19 November 2016, translation from German to English by the author.

¹⁶¹ Gruber and Magenau, "Erzähl mir Salzburg! Ein Ausstellungsrundgang mit Stimmen aus dem Sprachkurs."

exhibition and the language course continues with internal funds from the museum.

More generally speaking, projects going from the margins to the centre and aiming for a radical hospitality may prove to be fulfilled if they are not only nice (to have) but necessary (to live). Museum narrations and relationships that are deeply based on anti-discriminatory-ethics and passionately fighting for inclusive policies will probably not change the core of the historical institution of the museum in a minute but will at least challenge its public conception and understanding of its core audience. So let us proceed ...