Re-visualizing the Recent Past: Museums of Communism and Recent History in Post-Communist Eastern Europe

Report on Team Research, Visegrad Scholarship at the Open Society Archives

Péter Apor, team leader

The team of researchers worked together on a collective volume on the museums of communism and recent history in post-communist Eastern Europe and an exhibition that would seek to visually deconstruct the images of history in these museums. Our group is interdisciplinary and transnational. It consists of Péter Apor (historian, Hungary), Simina Badica (historian, museum curator, Romania), Rossitza Guenthceva (anthropologist, Bulgaria), Viviana Iacob (curator, Romania),Maud Guichard-Marneur (historian, Poland), Aleksandar Ignjatovic (art historian, Serbia), Olga Manojlovic-Pintar (historian, Serbia), Vjeran Pavlakovic (historian, Croatia), Egle Rindzeviciute (art historian, Lithuania) and Irmgard Zündorf (historian – museum analyst, Germany).

The stay of the group in the Open Society Archives had two aims: to use the opportunity of collaborative work for turning the findings of individual research into the basis of a common volume and an exhibition on the museums of Communism and recent history in general. We wanted to use the OSA as both an institution of training and a site of experimentation to learn about experiences of previous commensurable exhibitions and to try out the possibilities of turning our material into visual representation.

The first objective of the team was to establish a common database and collection of sources. Therefore, a folder of visual and documentary material has been created on a web-site providing file sharing services accessible to all team members (http://www.dropbox.com). The folder contains photographs, guidebooks to museums, videos (official ones of museums or self-made, or documentaries made by others), interviews with curators published in periodicals, dailies or, if possible, television or radio recordings, literature on museums (primarily scholarship including our own publications), footage of public events related to the museums, websites, photographs of works-of-art related to the afterlife/legacy of communism.

 Second, the team wanted to collect stimuli and ideas to design its own concept of a possible exhibition capitalizing on the opportunity of OSA's central location in Budapest and the Archives' own history as a site of historical exhibitions. Therefore, common museum visits and discussions with the staff of OSA were prepared. The group visited the Holocaust Memory Center in Budapest followed by a common discussion on the implications of its exhibition on the museum representation of contemporary history. Team members also visited the display of historical paintings and works-of-art devoted to the most recent events of Hungarian history in the National Gallery. In addition, the group took part in a "city-tour" in the two most important sites of public historical representations, the Szabadság square and Kossuth square, both containing various monuments and historical memorials, hence, providing the opportunity to consider them as particular open-air museums of history. Finally, we participated in a presentation by and discussion with László Rajk concerning his two relevant works of designing contemporary history, the Hungarian standing exhibition in the

Auschwitz Museum and the Imre Nagy Memorial House in Budapest followed by a common visit of his exhibition on the memories of the Hungarian Holocaust.

To these visits was firmly connected our meeting with the OSA staff who worked on the historical exhibition, Kádár 100 – In His Own Words. The designers of the exhibition discussed the challenges what the work with documentary material, historical documents and audio-visual record posed for a multi-layered interpretation of a crucial figure in recent history as well as their suggestions to solve these riddles. Beside these common methodological concerns, the team also discussed the technical issues and details of setting up a possible exhibition: the possible use of the OSA Gallery space, and its possible division and allocation for visual display. During our stay in OSA, we used the opportunity to talk with other OSA-Visegrad fellows interested in similar matters (particularly the relationship between art and the representation of recent history), which also proved to be very useful in designing our own vision of the exhibition.

The core sources of our research at the OSA were the country-specific subject files: thematic collection of Radio Free Europe background material. Research into these files completed by additional material accumulated individually in the home countries of team members has yielded the following findings. The apparently new museums of Communism and recent history are not completely inimical to historical processes. In fact, these are parts of a longer history of experimenting with non-historicist, meaning conventional 19th century forms of historical representation, modalities, genres and media of exhibiting historical interpretations. Several of the new Eastern European museums ordinarily offer their interpretation of Communism and the Gulag in relationship to images of the Shoah and Auschwitz. Most of them, allegedly following the example of global memorial museums of atrocity, seeks to justify their particular representations of the recent past in terms of the rights of collective memory replacing, thus, the conventional evidential practices of historical exhibitions. These museums are shaped by current practices of tourism: exhibitions of atrocity or Communism as an exotic "another country" currently attract large numbers of visitors.

The team had a final meeting with the objective to suggest a structure for an exhibition on the museums of Communism. We have decided to propose two notions, heterogeneity and confusion, to frame the visual representation of our material. We understand both terms having at least two meanings: heterogeneity refers both to the diversity of country-specific approach to such museums and the variety of approaches the museums themselves took towards Communism; confusion refers both the apparent experience of observers – museum visitors and scholarly criticism alike – and the uncertainty of museums in what relationship should they establish towards their objects or various historical events and persons.

By the end of the research period in OSA, the team has elaborated a transcript, a structure for a possible exhibition on the museums of Communism. This exhibition is understood as a "meta-exhibition", an exhibition of exhibitions. The plan suggests a structure consisted of three parts that are devoted to three different media of representation as well as three areas. The core section would focus on the content of the exhibitions and would arrange its material in thematic groups to compare the ways the museums relate to their object. Images and museum documents would demonstrate how the museums interpret various historical connections and imply an interpretation of the ways they consider the relationships between historical record and museum exhibition. The suggested themes are: the relationship

between Communism and the Holocaust, Communism and Fascism, WWII, the definitions of Communism.

Two additional sections are suggested to reflect upon possible approaches towards these museums. The first would consist of videos or short films representing the museums made either by museum staff or by observers (tourists or scholars). This section seeks to replicate the practice of the museums itself both to reflect upon their typical intention to use new media and also the cacophony they represent. The third section would address the ways audiences tend to regard such museums as targets of tourism, personal memories or scholarship. This section is planned to be divided into three: in one corner we suggest building a museum-shop containing souvenir objects, memorabilia or publications, in another recreating an entire private museum, and finally we propose to install a library-study-room keeping and displaying academic publications accessible by the visitors.