De:link // Re:link Workshop

Museums as Cultural Infrastructures: Claiming History and Heritage in Central Eurasia

1st of June 2023 at Humboldt Forum, Klangraum, Schloßpl. 1, 10178 Berlin
2nd of June 2023 at re:work, Georgenstraße 23, 10117 Berlin

Organizers:
Jeanine Dağyeli (University of Vienna & Austrian Academy of Sciences)
Manja Stephan-Emmrich (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin)

Museums seem to be everywhere in post-Soviet Central Eurasia. From magnificent state buildings to regional, private, and 'house' museums, they all attest to an interest in and an urge to document and shape collective, national and public discourses of identity that relate to specific visions of the past. By engaging a variety of material, affective, performative, medial, commemorative, and representational historical aspects, different actors put forward their understandings of the past, retrieve putatively lost traditions, or resist agnotological, 'selective' or 'punitive' forgetting (see Assmann 2016). Thus, in the spatial politics of heritage making, museums are sites for advocating and negotiating post-Soviet, often ethno-nationalist, visions of the 'Own' and the 'Other', forms of indigenization, civic activism, and identity politics. Some attention has been dedicated to top-down processes of museumization (e.g. Adams 2013, Cummings 2010, Schubel 1999) but there are also bottom-up activities such as laying claim to and marking contested territory, for example by establishing a museum with locally excavated archaeological findings, a tomb of a sacralised personage, or specific material objects associated with one's own group. These processes of museumization and institutionalisation of community engagement may also develop into alternative forms of local development, most notably through tourism.

In this workshop, we understand museums as infrastructures of cultural configurations, discourses, practices, and politics. They serve as crossroads that link art, education, science, cultural practices, and identity, but also as potential connectors across regions, nation states, and social boundaries. This cross-border potentiality of museums brings collections from Central Eurasia that are held elsewhere, specifically in Europe, into the conversation. The role and history of collections in museums outside of Central Eurasia increasingly engenders debates about their role in and potential for decolonising and trans-regionalising heritage making, but also of preservation (most notably now in the case of Afghanistan and Xinjiang), and popularising knowledge about the region in an increasingly nationalist political atmosphere. Ideally, these holdings could practically work towards a knowledge transfer in both directions. Setting out with Di Nunzio's double take at 'reading infrastructure politically', as consequences of certain politics as well as shapers of political decisions and people's experiences (Di Nunzio 2018), we ask about the politics of museums both in reflecting and in creating identities, national consciousness, and public history. We will address the growing importance of museums as well as processes of museumization in the formation and re-formation of cultural identities, communities, and heritage politics in and beyond Central Eurasia.

With its attention to cultural heritage, the workshop takes up one of the main research foci of De:link // Re:link, and asks: Which visions of the past materialise in infrastructures such as museums, and which ones are side-lined or challenged? Do museified narratives change as political circumstances change, and if so, how? As histotainment and public history shape the understanding of many people about what their history is/was, what role do museums play in heritage making and related politics, community engagement, civic activism, and education? In the context of increasing weight given to ethnicity and national heritage, which role do translocal connectivities as evoked in the Silk Road play? How do Silk Road narratives navigate between the abstract 'grand idea' and vernacular culture?

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Workshop programme

Day 1: 01. June 2023

venue: Humboldt Forum, Klangraum

3 – 5 pm   Roundtable: Restitution in any case? A Discussion on the Role of Central Asian Collections in European Museums in the Preservation of Endangered Cultural Heritage in Central Asia

Guests: Tobias Mörike (Weltmuseum Wien); Melanie Krebs (Ethnologisches Museum/Humboldt-Forum Berlin); Chorshanbe Ghoibnazarov (University of Central Asia, Khorog); Diana Lange (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin / Universität Hamburg)

6 – 8 pm   Film screening: Two Poets and a River (dir. Richard K. Wolf)

Day 2: 02. June 2023

Venue: IZ re:work, Georgenstraße 23

9 – 9:30 am   Welcome & Introduction

Jeanine Dağyeli (University of Vienna & Austrian Academy of Sciences) and Manja Stephan-Emmrich (Humboldt University, Berlin)

9:30 – 11 am   Panel 1 De-/colonizing Landscapes of Memory and Identity

Nikolay Tsyrempilov (Nazarbayev University, Astana): Recoding National Space: How Kazakhstan Establishes Symbolical Rights over its Territory (Online)

Rune Steenberg (Palacky University, Olomouc): Rugged Landscapes of Memory and Erasure in Xinjiang. Bulldozers, Museums, Check-Points, Face-scanners and Convenience Police Stations

Coffee Break

11:15 – 12:45   Panel 2 From above: markets, nations, empires

Zarina Adambussinova (University of Bielefeld & American University in Central Asia, Bishkek): Dissonance in Heritage: The contested Heritage Discourses of the City Museum of Kökşetau in peripheral, post-Soviet Kazakhstan (Online)

Snezhana Atanova (Nazarbayev University, Astana): "Bloody" carpets: the road of Turkmen textile into the museums' collections

12:45 – 2 pm   Lunch Break

2 – 3:30 pm   Panel 3 From below: community-based and private initiatives

Chorshanbe Ghoibnazarov (University of Central Asia, Khorog): Community-based Museums in Wakhan Valley, Tajikistan

Fiona Katherine Smith (Humboldt University, Berlin): Beyond Museum: A private photoarchive as an alternative historical narrative to current events in Afghanistan

Coffee Break

3:45 – 5:15 pm   Presentations of student research projects from Vienna and Berlin

5:15 – 5:30 pm   Concluding remarks

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