



Stapferhaus Lenzburg, CH, temporary exhibition 'A Matter of Faith', 2008

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1. Exhibition Concept

The *Stapferhaus* has no own stock of collection and can thus not be described as a museum in the typical meaning. It is rather a location, where, with the help of changing exhibitions, contemporary topics and issues are discussed. The exhibition *A Matter of Faith*, presented in the *Stapferhaus* in 2008, shall be looked upon as an example of those expositions.

The matter of 'faith' and the question of how individuals think about this issue can be seen as a topic highly orientated to every-day-life. Furthermore, the individual positions concerning the matter of 'faith', according to age and personal environment, are consistently challenged and renegotiated. With *A Matter of Faith* a topic was chosen, from which a high degree of personal concern, but also a need for discussion could be expected.

The curators therefore did not want the exhibition's presentation to be historic-dimensioned or highly enriched with facts and information. In fact, incentives should be given, to think about one's own attitude towards faith and to deal with the present-day problems connected to it. That kind of exhibition also requires a new role from the curator: He puts things up for discussion and activates thinking processes, without asserting concrete results (COP 2: role modification).

2. Reception

The exhibition *A Matter of Faith* had a run-time of 12 months. During this time, 40,213 persons visited the exhibition. When considering that the *Stapferhaus*' average attendance lies between 28,000 and 60,000 visitors per exhibition,¹ the exposition *A Matter of Faith* can be evaluated as successful.

The visitors, that decided to attend the exhibition, were apparently very content with the presentation: As shown in an audience-survey carried out by the *Stapferhaus*, *A Matter of Faith* was rated as 'good' or 'very good' by 98% of its visitors.² Another argument for exhibition's success is that it was also presented in Luxembourg – with adaption to Luxembourg's religious landscape.³

3. Exhibition Design and Visitors Approach: *A Matter of Faith*

The exhibition *A Matter of Faith* wants to encourage the visitors to actively deal with their own religious notions, and also with those of the others. This activation and involvement is carried out with the help of various, methodically different concepts of presentation, some of which shall be presented here – especially with regard to a alter usage in the Toolkits.

¹ <http://www.stapferhaus.ch/stapferhaus/wir-ueber-uns/> (12.08.2013)

² http://www.stapferhaus.ch/uploads/media/Schlussdokumentation_kurz_03.pdf (12.08.2013)

³ <http://www.stapferhaus.ch/stapferhaus/projektarchiv/archiv-ausstellungen/glaubenssache-luxemburg/> (12.08.2013)

3.1 Activation by making decisions

Already in the beginning, the visitors have to face a decision they cannot avoid, if they want to enter the exhibition: Two different entrance doors, labeled with 'believing' or 'unbelieving', have to be entered. Thereby, the visitor is already asked for a self-evaluation at this early stage and has to choose the entrance door according to his assessment. The hereby performed evaluation-process brings forth the visitor's activation und involvement.



At the end of each exhibition-area, the visitors also answer questions concerning their attitude towards faith and therewith reflect the just seen (with the help of media-stations, or rather with the help of a USB flash drive, the visitor has been given). The answers to these questions are anonymously integrated into a concluding overall analysis, presented in the internet after the exhibition (final documentation), so that the visitors can compare their answers with those of the others.

More pictures of the exhibition can be found here:

<http://www.stapferhaus.ch/stapferhaus/projektarchiv/archiv-ausstellungen/glaubenssache-lenzburg/>

1: Believing or Disbelieving © Stapferhaus Lenzburg, photo Adrian Stähli

3.2 Involvement by personified (digital) companionship

With the help of a ‘medial triptych’ in the exhibition, the visitors get to know nine different persons that accompany the visitors through some parts of the exhibition and provide information about their own personal attitude towards faith. By the use of this personified approach, it is easier to communicate information about diverse religious orientations and religious practices. At the same time, the visitors are addressed more directly and thus feel more involved or invoked to determine their own position.

The exhibition area ‘habit’ that is concentrated on the issue of religious practice being strongly influenced by the family and thus by tradition and habit, works with a similar approach. In order to illustrate the topic, three families demonstrate their ‘faith-rituals’ in a film. Again, a personified approach is chosen, to clarify the abstract topic better.



2: Confession of faith © Stapferhaus Lenzburg, photo Theres Bütler

3.3 Involvement by user-generated content (participation)

In this exhibition as well, visitors were asked to provide personal objects of believe for a certain exhibition section, which were afterwards presented in the exhibition. Apart from the fact, that the process of bringing one's own objects, already triggered in the preparation, can be classified as participative, the observation of this exhibition section also supplies the visitor's involvement in two ways:

1. On the one hand, the objects, chosen for subjective reasons by the visitors (instead of by the curators), can activate other visitors to think about what objects they themselves might have brought or presented in this section of the exhibition.
2. On the other hand, the visitor gets a kind of feedback by viewing this section of the exhibition, which he can evaluate and question regarding his own religious beliefs: E.g. with the presented objects' it became clear, that not only 'classical' Christian objects (such as the cross) were chosen, but also other objects, that either belonged to a foreign religion or were seen as entirely distant from any classical religion. Accordingly, the presentation automatically raises continuative questions, such as 'which object belongs to which religious faith', or whether oneself thinks of, for example, a plush toy as an adequate object of faith or not.



3. Religious things © Stapferhaus Lenzburg, photo Donovan Wyrsh

3.4 Involvement by addressing of contemporary conflicts (supported by the room-scenography)

Religious conflicts are not only omnipresent in the daily journalism, but many visitors are also directly confronted with this problem, for example in their hometown or region, and thereto have to develop and reflect their position. From this standpoint of their own, many visitors feel increasingly addressed (Toolkit 2; social arena). Individual objects, as well as a sound-installing give a thought-provoking impulse, whereupon a subliminal layer of understanding is also encouraged by the room-presentation (Toolkit 4; synaesthetic). The visitors move over a glass-floor, allowing the vision into the depth and thereby suggesting a doubtful stand. The room impression therewith assimilates the widespread feeling many people have – especially relating to religious conflicts with the Islam. Here, an involvement takes place because of the kind of room-presentation as well as the present-day relevance of this topic.



4: Religious controversy © Stapferhaus Lenzburg, photo Donovan Wyrsch

3.5 Involvement/ Activation by present-day- and future-relevance

Another approach, used by the exhibition's curators to involve the visitors, is the creation of not only a present-day- but also future-relevance. In the exhibition's last room, future related questions concerning the religious landscape of Switzerland are posed; thereby visitors can participate in putting up assumptions about the future development. That way, a position-fixing is carried out and the visitors deal with questions again, that hold reference to their own every-day-life.

4. Conclusion

The *Stapferhaus'* exhibition points out plenty of methodic possibilities that can be used to achieve the visitor's activation and involvement in exhibitions (personification, present-day- and future-reference, reference to every-day life and contemporary issues, room presentation, user-generated content, decisions and questions as possibilities of activation). The exhibition *A Matter of Faith* can therefore be seen as a best practice example in the area of activation/ participation and, concerning the EMEE project, as a valuable help for the elaboration particularly of the COP 2; Toolkit 3.

Interesting for the EMEE project is also the exhibition concept's 'internationalization'. From November 2008 until June 2009, *A Matter of Faith* was presented as well in the *Musée d'Histoire de la Ville de Luxembourg* (COP 3). The exhibition's basic concept remained unchanged, but the content had to be adapted to the religious landscape of Luxembourg (e.g. integration of the cult about god's mother). The visitors' objects of believe were presented in Luxembourg as well, only this time those objects came from the Luxembourgian population. If one thinks this thought through, it could be quite interesting in future exhibitions to present the user-generated content from different regions or countries in comparative perspectives (the comparative approach can by all means be opened virtually; e.g. visitors in Bulgaria see the collected Bulgarian objects and can virtually look into a different museum and see for example the German or Portuguese objects) and to put it up for discussion.

The above mentioned considerations have after all revealed the present-day relevance of the selected topic to be an important foundation for the visitor's involvement, however, precisely at exhibitions dealing with highly social discussed topics, the 'danger' can arise, that the exhibition becomes a part of the discussion or gets involved in undesired conflicts. Yet, this 'danger' can be positively evaluated, since it shows, that the museum with its present-day references can become a place of exchange and discussion (social arena). The *Stapferhaus*, though, seems to have chosen an eased kind of exhibition presentation in order not to get too involved, but thereby evoked some criticism as well. Thomas Hammacher for example wrote in his review: 'Doch lenken aktuell nicht ein zunehmender Fundamentalismus unterschiedlicher religiöser Couleur, so wie Diskussionen z.B. um das Kopftuch, den Neubau von Moscheen und das Intelligent Design unsere Aufmerksamkeit vor allem auf die andere, die öffentliche und konfliktreiche Seite der Religion? Aspekte, die in der Ausstellung zu kurz kommen.' ('After all, doesn't an increasing fundamentalism of all religious shades, as well as discussions about, for instance, headscarves, construction of new mosques and the Intelligent Design, put our focus mainly on the other, the public and conflictual side of religion? Those are aspects, the exhibition is missing out.')

⁴ This example shows that there is a difficulty in socio-politically relevant and controversial topics: conflicts should not be left out, but should at the same time not be presented in a highly polarized or too simplified kind of illustration.

⁴ h-museum@h-net.msu.edu

5. Bibliography

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