

Everything You Need to Know about Museums (and Much More) Salzburg International Conference(s) 2009 – 2010

In 2009 and 2010, the Department of English and American Studies of Salzburg University, within its Interdisciplinary Programme Arts & Aesthetics, organized two international conferences focused on the role, the development and the future of museums as cultural institutions, not solely from the perspective of museographers and cultural managers, but also from that of poets, film directors and writers.

Designed by Prof. Sabine Coelsch-Foisner and her very active team of PhD students as a small conference, with no more than 25 participants that had the chance (and obligation) to listen to all presentations and engage in interesting debates upon the topics advanced by the speakers, the two events completed each other and managed to cover almost all the aspects related to the existence of this art institution: from its role and practical issues concerning its organization and activity, to the narrativisation, medialisation, theatricalisation, popularization, digitalization and commercialization of the museal space. As the two editions followed each other in a natural and much-needed expansion of the topic, with few exceptions the group of participants was the same. This created a familiar atmosphere and gave way to productive discussions that most of the times were prolonged after the official time of the sessions.

If the 2009 edition, entitled *Museum Narratives*, examined the way in which museums and their space tell a story and manage to create a space that would add to the message of the exhibitions displayed, the following edition advanced the topic of the changes that are imposed on museums in contemporary culture. Under the title *The Museal Turn*, the 2010 edition highlighted the variety of new dimensions that museums take on in present-day life, when they are compelled to play a more active role in the local life and to engage in a direct dialogue with the civil society.

Topics varied from the “Political, Economic and Communicative Dimensions of the Museal Turn” (presentation by Peter Assmann, director of Oberösterreichisches Landesmuseum, Linz), to “Dance Performances as ‘Imagined Museums’” (Claudia Jeschke, University of Salzburg), to “The

museum and the Poet” (Glyn Pursglove, University of Swansea), to “Musealisation Goes to Town: The great Debate around the Reconstruction of Vanished Buildings” (Gerd Stratmann, University of Bochum), or to “The Crisis of Collecting: A Statement on a Precarious Task of Museums” (Margit Zuckriegl, Rupertinum Salzburg. Several presentations focused on the various illustrations of museums included in novels and theatre plays, and to digitization and the educative programmes that museum take on at present, in order to both make collections more accessible to a wider public and ensure an early artistic education of their future visitors.

Cleverly set in two conference centres slightly isolated from the busy and luring historical centre of Salzburg, and avoiding this way the participants’ dilemma of choosing between the debates and the numerous attractions of the town, the two events elegantly combined scholar activity and artistic recreation, by inserting in the programme visits to the Museum of Modern Art (in 2009) and to the Museum of the City of Salzburg (2010). The latter rounded the discussions about the organization and transformations of the museal activity, by the visit behind close doors that unveiled the inside work carried on by the staff (restoration, lightning, transportation and storage, preparation and arrangement of a new exhibition, development of PR and educational materials, etc.).

The participants included museum specialists (managers, curators and members of the educational departments from Austria and abroad), university professors and PhD students, musicians, poets and choreographers. This variety of backgrounds created a holistic image of the dimensions that museums have acquired in present times and ensured a variegated approach to the issues in debate.