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Ritual as Resonance. Religious Objects on Display

Museums exhibit objects used for religious purposes on site and as visual images on their websites, particularly Jewish museums. Such a consideration does not differentiate between religious and secular use of rituals to use such objects as evidence for migration, narrating the life stories of these objects. What these museums and their life stories bring to the fore is that objects change their meanings (and functions) from being used in religious practices, objects of memory and loss and of objects that constitute a history of a group. These museums identify 'ritual' primarily with a religious use of the objects. However, is this not a slippery term, as they are actually not used in such rituals anymore when displayed in museums? Have the objects not become 'ritually' mute? To which extent do exhibits and the museum environment produce unexpected resonances? Not in all cases do the works resonate as the environment suggests, which becomes obvious when a person begins to pray in front of a ritual object exhibited in a museum, because the association with the object seems so strong that the object is enacted as a religious object rather than an exhibit.

This project investigates the curating, display and spectatorship of museum objects formerly used in religious rituals, particularly relevant at a time of globalisation, when art spectatorship has become more religiously diverse and curating is increasingly produced online.

While much literature has been published regarding museum spectatorship, even in view of being considerd as a ritual (Duncan 1995), and curating, little has been dedicated to that of religious objects (Sullivan 2015; Li 2020). Taking on Sullivan's concerns for sacred objects of Asian religions displayed in museums, who argues that such objects raise questions about the spectator's identities and who suggests ways to display objects so the religious traditions are understood when displayed (Sullivan 2015), this project takes its starting-point from the spectators and their reactions to the curation of religious objects to identify the environmental reasons and the role of repetition and memory for a particular viewership that does not only 'understand' but resonates with exhibited object.

This project conceives of the 'ritual' not as an essentialist, fixed notion with which to describe a religious object but rather as an activity that creates a relationship between things and spectator. This relationship, which actor-network theories call associations (e.g. Latour 2005) is always established anew. Unlike associations, which seem very neutral in view of direction and intensity, 'ritualising' is considered as a form of resonance that relies on repetition and memory. Such a consideration does not differentiate between a religious and secular use of 'ritual' as conventional writing has undertaken, but rather allows an explanation of spectatorship that is affected by the object (and therefore is rather described as viewer or even participant). It is therefore suggested to understand ritualising as the practice of establishing ritual meaning between the object that has the potential to resonate and that of the 'actor' that

forms and formulates these associations. Therefore, ritualising is an activity that forms a complex net of associations, similar to each other, which become part of the 'actor''s memory and are enabled by objects that evoke a memory of such an association. It takes further the concepts of resonance and ritual by exploring the latter as a form of resonance marked by repetition and memory and contributes to questions about ritual memory. Exploring this topic on the basis of actor-network theories, it uses an approach to the ritual which is grounded in the understanding of rituals that emphasises its performativity (e.g. Rüpke 2003; Bell 1997) and of performativity that conceives of identity formation through repetition (Butler 1990). It is distinguished from both, actor-network theories and performativity theories, in suggesting to disregard the connotations of the theatrical (such as in 'actor' and 'performance') and to speak of the 'self' that enacts and simply of 'activity.'

The sources for this project consist of on-site and online museum displays of religious objects in form of installation photographs. Furthermore, interviews with curatorial staff and spectators and spectator observation as well as associated archival material on objects in museums will be consulted. Therefore, methods involve observation and interview techniques as well as curating and provenance research. If possible, a project could be convened with a local museum (e.g. the Anger Museum, Erfurt) to test out various displays of religious objects. This set of material will not only allow us to understand better the proposed concept of ritualising and the impact of repetition and memory, but also how spectatorship is influenced by its environment, namely, how to describe, exhibit, and display objects.

References

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