

CONCLUSION



Figure 6.1. Group picture of the twenty-seven Europeans in 'It's Our History!'
© Museum of Europe

The Musealization of the Witness

Between October 2007 and May 2008, on the occasion of the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Rome Treaties, the Brussels-based non-profit organization Museum of Europe staged the exhibition 'It's Our History!'.¹ Originally designed as the opening exhibition for a bigger museum of European history, it was on display in a slightly altered form under the title 'Europa – To nasza historia' in Wrocław² during the summer of 2009. Its subject was the history of European integration from 1945 to 2007 (cf. Charléty 2006; Mazé 2008; de Jong 2011; Kaiser, Krankenhagen and Poehls 2014).

As indicated by the title 'It's Our History!', it was the Museum of Europe's aim to show the history of European integration as a history from below – a history of Europe's citizens. The exhibition started in the lobby with an introductory 'manifesto' stating that 'the History, with a capital H, of European construction is inextricable from our own personal history, that of each European citizen. It is not the reserve of those who govern us'.³ This concern for a history of the people was realized in the use of '27 ordinary citizens from the 27 countries of the European Union' (Museum of Europe 2009: 23) who told episodes from their life stories in video tes-

timonies distributed throughout the exhibition. Here, the Estonian Anto Raukas, for example, related his participation in the so-called ‘Phosphorite War’; the Spaniard Juan Fernandez Aller remembered Tejero’s coup d’état in 1981; and the Czech Ludvik Hlavacek recalled how he signed ‘Charter 77’.

If video testimonies can still most frequently be found in Holocaust and Second World War Museums, their presence in the ‘It’s Our History!’ exhibition shows that they are now also used to represent positive histories such as that of European integration. If the musealization of video testimonies is, as I have argued, a global assemblage, then their presence in the exhibition ‘It’s Our History!’ is a sign of this. Although the exhibition did of course have a very different focus than exhibitions in memorial museums analysed here, similar patterns could be observed. I will therefore here use ‘It’s Our History!’ to retrace the main findings of this study.

Collecting

‘My own life story has reached a climax when I myself became an object in Europe’s history’, observes Andreja Rither, one of the twenty-seven witnesses to history in a blog that the Museum of Europe published alongside the exhibition ‘It’s Our History!’⁴ Turning life stories into objects of history is, as we have seen, the main aim behind the practices of recording and collecting video testimonies. Recording and collecting video testimonies means trying to preserve for eternity a memory based on communication – and with this memory, the bodies of witnesses to history. Andreja Rither is a museum professional. She was the Slovenian Minister of Culture and is the former director of the Museum of Contemporary History in Celje. In her video testimony, she is filmed walking through a flea market and choosing objects for her museum. Andreja Rither’s video testimony represents collecting: the collecting that she herself carries out, saving objects from the rubble of Europe’s past, as well as the work carried out by the collaborators of the Museum of Europe when they chose her and the other twenty-seven Europeans for the exhibition.

Unlike museums such as the Neuengamme Memorial, the Bergen-Belsen Memorial, or Yad Vashem, the Museum of Europe could not fall back on a collection of prerecorded video testimonies. There is, as yet, no equivalent of the Fortunoff Archive or the Shoah Foundation for the history of the EU.⁵ Even the project of the Museum of Europe ended with the collection of the twenty-seven video testimonies. The video testimonies were thus meant as part of the canon of European history right from the beginning.

However, not unlike projects that collect testimonies of Holocaust survivors, the video testimonies of the twenty-seven were recorded in order to give voice to the people, in opposition to the official statements of the politicians. Andreja Rither and the other twenty-six Europeans were presented for the first time in the second room of the exhibition. Here, a group picture showing them in elegant attire covered a whole wall (Figure C.1). In its educational guide, the Museum of Europe compared this picture to the so-called ‘family pictures’ taken of the heads of state at EU summits (Museum of Europe 2007: 2). By remediating official pictures of heads of state, the Museum of Europe put the twenty-seven Europeans’ life stories on the same level as the official documents of EU history and made them representatives (‘Vertreter’) of this history.

The aesthetics of the video testimonies in ‘It’s Our History!’ did not fully follow the scheme of a monochromatic background and a focus on the face that I have observed in the case of most video testimonies. Although the group picture of the twenty-seven Europeans had a black background, in the individual video testimonies, the witnesses to history were shown walking through their home towns, surrounded by their friends and colleagues. Even here, however, the interviewer remained hidden and the focus was often on the face or the upper part of the witnesses’ bodies. With the group picture and the video testimonies, the Museum of Europe illustrated the EU’s motto ‘Unity in diversity’. Unity came to the fore in the group picture, diversity in the individual video testimonies representing (‘vertreten’) the individual stories of common Europeans and that of the countries that they come from.

Exhibiting

Each video testimony in ‘It’s Our History!’ was accompanied by an object – either a personal one or one that was in some way connected to the history of the country of a given witness. Thus, next to the Hungarian Gyula Csics’ video testimony, one could see the diary he kept during the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, when he was only twelve (Figure C.2). In the video testimony, Csics could be seen flicking through the pages of this diary, an exhibit not unlike Zofia Zajczyk’s doll in Yad Vashem and Yvonne Koch’s gloves in the Bergen-Belsen Memorial. As with the examples from Yad Vashem and the Bergen-Belsen Memorial, the visitors were encouraged to believe in Csics’ testimony because they saw the diary, while the diary itself proved the genuineness of the testimony. The video testimony and the object authenticated each other.



Figure 6.2. The video testimony with Gyula Csics in the ‘It’s Our History!’ exhibition © Museum of Europe

As in Yad Vashem and the Imperial War Museum, ‘It’s Our History!’ also included several reconstructions of interiors and exteriors. One of those reconstructions was a Sabena DC-6, the plane used to fly Belgian nationals out of the Congo after the country’s independence. Like the railway carriages in Yad Vashem and in the Imperial War Museum, the Sabena DC-6 had been cut up at angles. On the plane, visitors could hear audio testimonies with Belgian witnesses of the decolonization of the Congo. The audio testimonies in the Sabena DC-6 made apparent the effects of decolonization on Belgian nationals. At the same time, the combination of testimonies and the reconstruction located the events in the past. Not unlike in Yad Vashem and in the Imperial War Museum, the visitors’ experience was in this way both authenticated and de-authenticated. Bringing the events of the past to the fore through reconstruction and personal stories, the exhibition also helped to authenticate the teleological exhibition narrative that showed the history of Europe as culminating in the European integration process, as well as the exhibition unit as an adequate representation of this narrative. Finally, the Museum of Europe also added historical film footage of, for example, the fall of the Berlin Wall or the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaucescu to the video testimonies.

Also in ‘It’s Our History!’, the video testimonies were therefore used both as primary and as secondary museum objects. They functioned on

the four levels of authentication defined in Chapter 4: they helped to authenticate other objects; the teleological narrative that concentrated on showing how the European integration process lead to an EU in which all Europeans can happily live together; the exhibition aesthetics that concentrated on both official documents and popular culture; and the visitors' experience of reliving the different stages of the integration process while at the same time locating them in the past.

Communicating

Although the witnesses to history in 'It's Our History!' were supposed to represent 'ordinary Europeans', they had, in fact, rather extraordinary stories to tell. They had been active in the resistance against the regimes in Eastern and Central European states and were actively involved in 'building Europe' (Shore 2000). Wolfram Kaiser (2011: 393) has observed that the twenty-seven witnesses to history in 'It's Our History!' 'clearly appear to have been neatly selected and arranged so as to cover most of the EU's objectives and policies' and that they 'predominantly come from well-educated middle- and upper-middle class professionals; in other words, from more transnationally socialized and oriented elites who profit most socio-economically and culturally from European integration'. In fact, the diversity shown in 'It's Our History!' was predominantly national diversity. As in the memorial museums analysed in this study, witnesses to history were omitted if they were likely to compromise the exhibition narrative or seemed foreign to the exhibition's main target audience – precisely those well-educated white middle and upper-middle-class professionals that are represented by the twenty-seven Europeans. The individual video testimonies were put together in such a way that each one of them ended with a reflection on the EU. Although small criticisms could occasionally be heard, most of the witnesses – clearly prompted by the interviewers – praised the European integration process.

Thus, not unlike in the Museo Diffuso, all of the witnesses to history were presented as role models for visitors. The most symptomatic example of this was Roger Lavis and Philip Cozette, the representatives of France and the United Kingdom. Lavis and Cozette had their fifteen minutes of EU fame when they shook hands at the junction of the construction sites in the Channel Tunnel between Calais and Dover. In their testimony, the manual work that represents the beginning of the European integration process in the coal and steel factories, and the fictional bridges on the euro banknotes that join European countries, come together in a concrete act of

tearing down natural frontiers between the peoples of Europe. This was of course long before any talks of a possible or an actual 'Brexit'.

In 'It's Our History!', the patterns of the musealization of video testimonies that I have analysed in Holocaust and Second World War museums are once again apparent. First, the video testimonies of the twenty-seven Europeans were collected as representatives of larger entities: the history of the EU, that of all of the peoples of Europe, as well as that of the individual countries that they came from. Second, the video testimonies with the twenty-seven were used as a combination of primary and secondary museum objects and were put into a relationship of mutual authentication with other exhibits. Third, the video testimonies were used in order to communicate the history of European integration as a history that improved the lives of the European people. The visitors were to leave the exhibition as good EU citizens. For this purpose, they were presented with individuals that they could easily identify with.

Extending Communication into the Future

As the example of 'It's Our History!' shows, the time span between a historical event and recording and exhibiting video testimonies is becoming shorter and shorter. While it took thirty-five years for the first video testimonies with Holocaust survivors to be recorded and another twenty years for them to be used in museums, video testimonies are now often recorded only a couple of years or even weeks after the events they describe and they have become a favourite tool in museums and exhibitions on contemporary history. To give only a few examples other than the exhibition "It's Our History!": not unlike the Museo Diffuso, the Villa Schöningen, a museum on the history of the Glienicke Brücke, the border between East and West Berlin that served as a spot to exchange captured spies, has recorded video testimonies as its main exhibition element. The Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland exhibits video testimonies with witnesses to history of several important events in Germany's history. Like the Museum of Europe, the Visitors' Centre of the European Parliament in Brussels shows video testimonies with European citizens, while the European Solidarity Centre in Gdansk exhibits video testimonies with witnesses of the Polish resistance against communism.

This proliferation of video testimonies in museums on contemporary history not only relates to the fact that better and cheaper technology has made recording and exhibiting them easier. After all, we would not need to use this technology for the purpose of recording and exhibiting video

testimonies. For the moment, the musealization of video testimonies is the climax of a long history of mediation and remediation of the figure of the witness to history, which started with the Eichmann trial and has led to what Annette Wieviorka has called 'the era of the witness'. Over the years, remembering individuals were turned into legitimate carriers of cultural memory and legitimate historiographical sources. The fear of losing the last witnesses of events that are considered as important has now touched other events than the Holocaust and the Second World War as well: our present-day memorial culture has problems accepting the natural disappearance of communicative memory.

The introduction of video testimonies into museums signifies a change in: memorial culture; the reception and use of testimony; the conception of what a museum object can be; as well as the museum experience itself. For one, the transition from communicative memory to cultural memory (Assmann 1992) is being subverted. As we have seen, with the musealization of video testimonies, a media representation of communicative memory has become part of cultural memory.

Second, in the museums, video testimonies become what Krzysztof Pomian has called 'semiophores'. They enter the realm of salvation and of signification. As exhibition items, video testimonies are fragmented and put together in such a way as to communicate different didactic messages. In museums, the functionalization of video testimonies that started in TV documentaries is taken to a new level. While the viewers of TV documentaries have to follow the pace of the documentary, in museums the video testimonies can be viewed over and over again. While TV documentaries are broadcast once or twice, as museum objects, video testimonies are presented over a long period of time. They have become integral elements of an institution that has been specifically created to salvage vestiges of the past for the future and that imbues them time and again with new messages and new data.

Third, the introduction of communicative memory into the realm of cultural memory signifies a transformation of the conception of what constitutes a museum object. The remnants of the past that museums salvage have tended so far to be material vestiges or photography and film. They have either been 'objets laissés' or 'objets souvenirs' (Thiemeyer 2010: 267ff). Video testimonies are what we could call 'objets mémoires'. Like objets souvenirs, video testimonies are produced in order to remember an event. Unlike objets souvenirs, which are produced in the moment, video testimonies are produced at a temporal distance from the events that they are intended to memorialize. Video testimonies are souvenirs of past events, but they are also representations of our present-day memorial culture.

Fourth, the musealization of video testimonies has therefore also transformed the institution museum. Museums have the function of remembering the past. Thus far, they have done so by exhibiting silent objects that are given signification with reference to the didactic goals of the museum. With video testimonies, the present has entered museums. The witnesses to history in the video testimonies look like the visitors' parents and grandparents. The museum objects that have been taken out of everyday use and introduced into the realm of signification are now linked with the present memory of those objects and the time that they come from.

However, video testimonies will be the 'objets laissés' of a present-day memorial culture. Video is a medium that ages quickly and video testimonies that have been recorded during the 1990s already look old. In twenty years' time, all video testimonies that are being recorded today will inevitably suffer the same fate. It remains to be seen what will happen to them once they no longer show representations of people remembering in the present, but rather representations of people remembering in the past.

In fact, that moment might already have come: together with the USC Institute for Creative Technologies, the USC Shoah Foundation has developed a hologram of a Holocaust survivor. The prototype of the project shows the survivor Pinchas Gutter who has been interviewed during three hours while being filmed by seven high-speed cameras (de Jong 2015; Körte-Braun 2015; Knoch 2017). During the interview, answers to one hundred questions of which the director of the Shoah Foundation, Stephen Smith, thinks that they will still be asked in one hundred years, were recorded (Maio, Traum and Debevec 2012). Around ten to twelve technologically even more refined holograms are planned for the future. In collaboration with the USC Institute for Creative Technologies and the USC Shoah Foundation, a similar project, The Forever Project, is being carried out at the National Holocaust Centre and Museum in Laxton (Sherwood 2016).⁶ The holograms show the witnesses to history sitting in a chair and can be projected into a room. Visitors can directly ask them questions.

The motivations for recording and exhibiting holograms are comparable to the motivations advanced for recording and exhibiting video testimonies. Thus, the National Holocaust Centre and Museum in Laxton has recently published a trailer in the style of a Hollywood fantasy movie to raise further funds for its project.⁷ A voice-over can be heard saying:

For the longest part of the century, they have lived quietly amongst us. Men and women sharing their powers. The power to move, inspire, guide and teach. The power to open eyes. Transform lives. Change their future. The power to build a

better, kinder, safer world. Ordinary men and women with extraordinary strengths. If only they also had the power of immortality. Now, through the power of 3D technology, we can all keep their stories alive. Because these are the men and women who know the truth about mankind. A truth that needs to live forever. Truth Forever.

The newest project of the USC Institute for Creative Technologies combines the hologram with Pinchas Gutter with a digital reconstruction of Majdanek Extermination Camp. This installation is shown in a set that consists of a bed of gravel covered with mirrors. The set designer David Korins ('The Incredible, Urgent Power of Remembering the Holocaust in VR' 2017) wanted:

for the space to reflect its environment and also each person's reaction: There are so many emotional onramps that people have with regard to this subject matter that I think I would be presumptuous to try and prescribe ... My hope is that the kind of environment we've created allows for anyone's attachment to history, whether it's incredibly specific or it's just a vague idea, can have a place to live.

Thus, for the moment, the trend seems to go in the direction of making the feigned communication between witnesses to history and visitors seem ever more realistic, as well as to create immersive digital spaces for the visitors. While with the first video testimonies, the hope was that they would be particularly appealing to an audiovisual audience, in the case of the holograms, the hope is that they will be particularly appealing to a future digital audience. Like the video testimonies once were, the holograms now seem particularly apt to reproduce the dialogic structure of communicative memory (Maio, Traum and Debevec 2012). Like in the case of video testimonies, the medium is to disappear behind representation and the viewers are supposed to become 'immediate tertiary witnesses'. Like the video testimonies, the holograms are supposed to transpose the witnesses to history into a future that is defined as 'forever'. As in the case of the video testimonies, the witnesses to history are given an educative function – they are even endowed with the special power of being able to secure world peace. Hence, while the media change, the desire to save communicative memory for the future is still met with ever more urgency.

Notes

1. The exhibition was on show from 26 October 2007 to 12 May 2008 in the Brussels exhibition space Tour et Taxis.

2. The exhibition was on display in the Hala Stulecia from 1 May 2009 until 5 August 2009. The Polish 'To Nasza Historia' is a direct translation of 'It's Our History'.
3. This is the wording that was used in the Wrocław version of the exhibition. The museum texts were altered considerably for the exhibition in Wrocław; when referring to the museum texts, I will here refer to the Wrocław version of the exhibition.
4. The blog is not available anymore. It could be found at: <http://blog.expo-europe.be/andreja-rither-museologue-et-piece-de-musee>.
5. However, the European University Institute is carrying out several oral history projects with politicians, diplomats and executive officials, as well as individuals working at the European State Agency: <http://www.eui.eu/HAEU/EN/OralHistory.asp>.
6. The project website can be found at: <https://www.nationalholocaustcentre.net/interactive>.
7. The trailer can be found at: <http://www.foreverproject.co.uk>.