

Pictures at an Exhibition – and Beyond. Review of the ‘Reset Modernity!’ exhibition, 16.04.2016 – 21.08.2016, ZKM, Karlsruhe, Germany.

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‘Reset Modernity!’ is an impressive exhibition curated by Bruno Latour, Martin Guinard-Terrin, Christophe Leclercq, and Donato Ricci at the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) in Karlsruhe, Germany.¹ It is the third exhibition that Latour has co-curated in this space, (or perhaps being mindful of *Laboratory Life* (Latour & Woolgar 1986), we should say ‘this place’). The first two were *Iconoclash* (2002) and *Making Things Public* (2005), both curated with Peter Weibel. This exhibition is also the fourth product of the ‘An Inquiry into Modes of Existence’ (AIME) project: in 2012 we saw the publication of the AIME book and the website,² then in 2013 the staging of a series of workshops, ending with a two-day conference in Paris in 2014. As the fourth instalment, ‘Reset Modernity!’ exhibits a wide range of images, videos, installations, and texts loosely following the themes of the AIME project, leading the visitor through several truth regimes or modes of existence associated with Western modernity.

Crucial to viewing the exhibition is the ‘Field Book’, presented as a companion throughout our visit. With text in both German and English, it informs us that the path through the exhibition space is divided into ‘six procedures, each allowing for a partial reset [of modernity]’. Attempting to elicit active engagement on the part of the visitor, it notes:

As the name ‘field book’ indicates, you are invited to do a bit of research yourself. In each procedure you will find a sort of workplace, called a ‘station’: this is where you will find more information and where you can discuss the path of the inquiry.

Our review takes at face value the exhibition as an opening onto possibilities for doing further research. At first we had tried to be compliant visitors, following the structure of the exhibition from beginning to end, but it was not long before we found ourselves on a somewhat different trajectory. In the first part of our review we narrate this unplanned journey, which was triggered by our experience of the exhibition. In the second part, we then re-consider the exhibition in light of this journey and where it led us.

Experiencing the Exhibition

What brought us to Karlsruhe was our own collaborative research project titled ‘Landscapes of Democracy’, which aims to contrast various places and practices associated with democratic politics in Germany (especially Berlin), and Australia (especially Indigenous Australia). ‘Knowing landscapes’ is one of our central analytic concepts, so while the entry point to the exhibition is very clear, we were immediately drawn to a reprint of a nineteenth century painting of a river enclosure. The

item occurs early in the exhibition, as part of 'Procedure A - Relocalizing the Global'. Explaining this, the Field Book notes 'it is important to show the gaps separating the many different instruments and the legions of skilled engineers and scientists. They are those who would need to assemble different viewpoints in order to guide the observer from galaxies to atomic particles' (Latour et al. 2016: 5).

The reproduced painting we are pulled up by is by Caspar David Friedrich, perhaps the most famous German romantic painter, showing a spot by the Elbe near Dresden. Although it was painted in 1831, the scene reminds us of a digital photograph. Not only the colours, which capture an exceptionally calm, beautiful moment right after sunset, but also the way the perspective curves, creating a fisheye lens effect. The Field Book text tells us that the curving perspective makes this painting quite special, as it generates an impossible vantage point: we are, it seems, at once in, on, and above a particular 'spot', the river itself constituting the background. We are almost floating in the warm air; we can almost smell the sour mud; we can almost hear the birds and the bugs, circling excitedly above the water before the dark settles.

Then, on the same wall, there is an almost identical copy of Friedrich's painting. This print is black and white. In this contrast alone already some of the beauty is gone. But, as the Field Book points out, there is more to be noticed. The main difference lies in the straightened or flattened perspective. The horizon is straight, the proportions are 'correct', and we are no longer floating between heaven and earth. Rather, we are forced to stand on the ground with both of our feet, and observe the place that once had such a strong effect on Friedrich. What could be the purpose of this imperfect copy? It is as if the two images were to illustrate Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison's (1992) argument about different understandings of objectivity: the first tries to stay faithful to the skilled and gifted observer's view, while the second tries to stay faithful to the place itself. In this second objectivity the river, the trees, the clouds, the mud flats—they all become parts of an invisible inventory amenable to management by science.

We spend an unusually long time discussing these two images. Pulled so deeply into the contrast of this exhibit, it is difficult to do justice to the rest. Nevertheless, we do make an effort to return to the start and are happy to discover subtle references to early STS works along our way through subsequent procedures. We are shocked by five identical images of a quarry, the making of which required platinum extracted from one ton of ore. We are amused by a robotic arm that draws us an up-to-date map of the glacier that constitutes the natural border between Austria and Italy. And we are impressed by an installation that shows a speech by U.S. president Barack Obama at a Methodist church meeting, along with the audience's reactions and a conversation analytical transcript. Our passage through the exhibition however does not comply with the elaborate instructions given in the Field Book; we fail to fully connect the partial resets of each of Procedures A-F. Our discussions keep coming back to the two depictions of the river Elbe.

Leaving the exhibition we go to the ZKM bookshop. We notice there is a thick catalogue associated with the exhibition, edited by Bruno Latour and Christophe Leclercq (2016). One of the chapters is dedicated to Friedrich and his 'Large enclosure'. The author, art historian Joseph Leo Koerner (2016), explains that the spot in Friedrich's painting is called Ostragehege, located not too far from Dresden city centre. Friedrich used to live nearby and knew the river well. His painting is clearly a testimony of his love for the place. The other painting, we learn, is a catalogue entry prepared by Johann Philipp Veith for the Art Association of Saxony. It is not an artwork *per se*, but a record that documents the Association's acquisition of Friedrich's original in 1832. To our great surprise, in Koerner's chapter we discover a third version of the painting by South African artist William Kentridge. This version, made in 2014, is a charcoal drawing based on the 'Large enclosure': the colours are still missing but this time the curves are back. The paper Kentridge uses for this drawing apparently comes from the ledger of the 1906 cash book of Johannesburg's Central Administration Mine. This unusual medium suggests to us that the river and its curves are not the whole picture, since under the surface there are even

larger forces at play – the forces of capitalist development.

As we leave the bookshop, we wonder about the three images and how they relate. To use the language of the AIME project, they might be recognised as emblems of three modes of existence: art [FIC], science [REF] and politics [POL]. Multiple truth claims about a singular place: is this the inquiry we need to pursue to reset modernity? To recognise multiple, distinct and inter-relatable ways of making truth claims? Somehow we feel something is still missing. What is it? Experience of the embodied here and now? Taking the Field Book's encouragement to do a bit of research ourselves, we decide to travel to Dresden to find the large enclosure. Our idea is not to overwrite the 'Reset Modernity!' exhibition, but to playfully extend it beyond the walls of the ZKM.

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Getting to Dresden is not difficult (even though one of us had to travel half the globe in order to even be in the vicinity), but how do we find the place depicted by the three images of Friedrich, Veith, and Kentridge? We know the area is called 'Ostragehege': it lies about 2 kilometres out of the city centre, on the south bank of the Elbe, west of a bridge called Marienbrücke. According to the German version of the relevant Wikipedia entry,³ in Friedrich's time it was part of a larger floodplain. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the flow of the river was regulated, so that the area could be further developed. Some of the subsequent development projects were the establishment of a massive slaughterhouse, a harbour, and several sports clubs. These days, the Ostragehege is better known as a protected natural habitat of about 35 species of fish – at least this is what our quick online research tells us.

We arrive at Dresden around noon. From the main station we go straight to the Marienbrücke and continue our extended exhibition tour westward along the river. We walk for several hours in the summer heat, stopping from time to time at small inlets and beaches to skip stones, watch the fish, smell the mud, and listen to the birds and the bugs. We also take some time to sit down, chat, and make a few notes and drawings

of our own. However, as the evening comes closer, there is a lingering sense that while we have made the effort to travel here, we have not succeeded in finding what we were looking for: the spot that Friedrich loved – or so the story goes.

If we wanted to experience Friedrich's sublime nature, perhaps it would have been better to go to the Neue Galerie in the city centre, where the original of the 'Large enclosure' is on display. We suspect art museums might be more appropriate sites to engage with nineteenth century landscape paintings than the places they depict. What then about the corrected reality of Veith's almost identical copy? The rationality of the straightened lines and perspectives that was once associated with a landscape well known to science, is also difficult to celebrate in the Ostragehege. As it turns out, the area was a primary target during the bombing of Dresden in 1945; the slaughterhouse constructed in the early twentieth century was the site where Kurt Vonnegut was imprisoned in the last days of the Second World War. These days, there are hardly any visible traces left of the devastation described in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), but it is also impossible to un-see them as we walk past the remnants of the huge industrial complex. It is tempting to claim we can sense the larger forces of capitalist development Kentridge captures so well in his drawings (see a recent exhibition at the Martin Gropius Bau in Berlin),⁴ but we feel ill-equipped to access them. Our time is running out, as we need to catch the last train to Berlin. We are tired and confused. We somehow feel we had a better understanding of the place *before* we travelled here.

Reviewing the Journey

What might we make of this journey? The promise of Friedrich's, Veith's, and Kentridge's images as they were displayed in Latour et al.'s exhibition and catalogue is that they sensitise us to multiple truth regimes – the felicities of divergent modes of existence associated with art, science, and politics, among others – held together by the work of a curatorial team in a singular place. Staying true to these multiple truth regimes, so to speak, and finding better ways of holding them together, might help us reorient ourselves in a world where

our modern devices and institutions seem to be less and less adequate. However, when visiting the Ostragehege, the clashing and melding of multiple truth regimes was not what we found. Rather, it was the inchoate happening of a place, the experience of a place, which was radically unknown to us. It pushed back and exposed the naivety of our initial assumptions.

We felt we needed to leave the exhibition, and travel beyond Karlsruhe, if our review of the exhibition was to take seriously the moves it had proposed. Our journey, in turn, showed that engaging with this place as a 'knowing landscape' would require far more than what might be called 'epistemic tourism': a quick trip to Dresden and an afternoon's stroll along the Elbe. It also revealed that collectively resetting modernity would require more than six sequential procedures that identify, and therefore permit partial shifts, in defined modes of modern epistemic practices.

Along our journey, we failed to reset modernity because we were unprepared for the pushing back of the place that necessitates us to also be knowingly involved in at least some of the stories that might be told about it.

Does our failure shed bad light over 'Reset Modernity!?' It depends on how we understand the purpose of the exhibition. If it is to offer visitors a guide that effortlessly extends space beyond the walls of the ZKM, rendering every place potentially as reset-able as a museum or a laboratory 'no-place', then we suspect our confusion as trained STS scholars is collective. If, however, the purpose is to encourage visitors to take the insights of forty years of STS to new places, to send them on a walk and make them sweat, then our unplanned journey shows that the exhibition works. We are still discussing, and we are grateful for the experience.

References

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Notes

- 1 <http://zkm.de/en/event/2016/04/globale-reset-modernity> (accessed:22.8.2016)
- 2 <http://modesofexistence.org> (accessed: 22.8.2016)
- 3 <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ostragehege> (accessed: 22.8. 2016)
- 4 http://www.berlinerfestspiele.de/en/aktuell/festivals/foreign_affairs/fa16_kentridge/fa16_kentridge_1.php (accessed: 22.8. 2016)