

**BLINDSPOTS:**  
**UNEXPECTED EMOTIONS CAUSED BY AMPUTEES IN A MEDICAL MUSEUM**

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No doubt, museums are emotional places and curators strive for emotional reactions in their audiences. Nevertheless, the curator's idea may reach the public in a disfigured way and cause completely unexpected emotional reactions. This was the case with exhibiting contemporary art on disability in the Pauls Stradiņš Museum of History of Medicine which instead of comprehension and compassion caused confusion and repulsion far beyond the museum walls.

The Pauls Stradiņš Museum of the History of Medicine was founded in 1957. The museum has a collection of more than 200,000 items, a large part of which consists of the vast amount of materials on the history of medicine donated to the state by Doctor Pauls Stradiņš (1896-1958) towards the end of his life. The permanent exhibitions are still organized following the ideas of Stradiņš –by chronologically revealing the progress of medicine. From the contemporary perspective today the permanent exhibitions have nowadays become a “museum within the museum”.

Each year the museum opens several temporary exhibitions, organises events and lectures, striving to define its identity, attract new audiences, and facing the challenges of the museology of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. During the last few years the museum has engaged in collaboration projects with other creative industries to revive the historical bond between art and medicine in contemporary context and to bring forward issues of public interest. In our

conference abstract we discuss a case study of the exhibition *Blindspots* which took place at the Pauls Stradiņš Museum in summer 2017.

In the exhibition *Blindspots* the museum collaborated with Latvian art collector Maris Vitols (*Māris Vītols*) organising the first solo exhibition by the internationally acclaimed Polish artist Artur Zmijewski (*Artur Żmijewski*) in the Baltic States. Zmijewski believes that art should illuminate the blind spots in society's field of vision. His solo exhibition assembled films and photos dedicated to representing people with physical impairments and their capability for integration in today's society. In his works the artist involves people with physical impairments in various practices not only encouraging them to transcend the boundaries of their everyday experiences, but also calling for the viewers to question the roles commonly assigned to people with physical impairments. As the art critic and theorist Bojarska argues:

“In this new framework, the experience of the disabled has become analogous with that of women, people of colour, non-heterosexuals and queers. Zmijewski's socially applied artistic labour focuses on working against the blind spots of the otherwise very self-assured community of the onlookers. Meticulously he studies the moments of exclusions and critically investigates the rules of inclusion, and provides space for the forms of self-expression of hitherto unwelcomed subjects such as humans whose abilities are limited.” (1)

With *Blindspots* the museum broadened its audience, reaching out not only to medical professionals or those interested in history, but also to those interested in contemporary art, disability studies, and people who have never been interested in any of these fields. Zmijewski's artwork occupied not only the temporary exhibition halls, but was integrated in the permanent exhibitions in relationship with historical artefacts testifying to developments in medicine. Such intervention promoted the contextualization of the history of medicine in contemporary context, marking a shift away from the medical model of disability toward social model of disability. (2)

In the permanent exhibitions the museum visitor can find, among other exhibits, medical instruments, prosthesis, abstract drawings or dioramas of medical procedures, but the real human being, the person with impairment itself, is missing. Disability is revealed only from the medical perspective, excluding the personal experience, life stories and interpretations that people with impairments have made of their lives. In this sense the history of people with impairments can be regarded as a “hidden history”. (3) As it is argued in

museum studies, exclusion from the museum display has a far-reaching social impact:

“Omission from the museum does not simply mean marginalization; it formally classifies certain lives, histories, and practices as insignificant, renders them invisible, marks them as unintelligible, and thereby, casts them into the realm of the unreal.” (4)

During the exhibition, several events were organised to raise awareness of the importance of disability studies and how an individual life can be affected by the ways disability is perceived. To name one, a lecture by professor of Anthropology Don Kulick (Uppsala University) was held about his book “Loneliness and its opposite: sex, disability, and the ethics of engagement” (2015). He has researched how the state politics on disability affect life of people with impairments and the understanding of disability in general, arguing for social justice where every person can live in dignity and flourish. Also Baiba Baikovska, a doctoral student in Information and Communication Science at the Rīga Stradiņš University, shared her research about how understanding of disability changes according to political regime, arguing that the use of the concept of disability illustrates not only attitude towards people with impairments, but also constructs their everyday reality.

After the exhibition was opened it caused public outrage over the exhibition poster, which was already banned previously by the Ministry of Health and never appeared on the museum facade.

One of Zmijewski photographs from An Eye for an Eye series (1998) was chosen for the exhibition poster. In it we can see two naked men standing together in a brotherhood of bodies where one of them is “lending” his leg to the other man who is missing one of his legs, in this way forming an unusual double human being. Rather than asking for equal loss (an eye for an eye) in this very intimate cooperation the artist shows mutual dependence and an opportunity to provide mending not only by means of medical procedures but those of assistance and empathy.

As Pauls Stradiņš Museum is an institution subordinated to the Ministry of Health, the ministry used its legal power and a few days before the opening of the exhibition banned the poster from being displayed on the museum facade. Although ministry officials were informed about the concept and content of the exhibition and they publicly invited people to visit the exhibition, at the same

time they argued for a change of the planned poster because it seemed to be “ambiguous” and “raising discomfort”.

Soon after this announcement and with the help of journalists and television, the exhibition became “scandalous”. Heated discussions started about the censorship of art, aesthetics of contemporary art, a naked body in public space and proper display of people with physical impairments. While art critics and theorists, and one of the organisations for people with impairments in Latvia praised the exhibition, another similar organization stated that the exhibition poster has nothing to do with disability:

“There is no message concerning disability in this poster or anything that would in any sense benefit the public understanding of disability, not to even mention a positive perception of disability.”

Under the articles about the exhibition and on social media we can find quite emotional comments stating that contemporary art is ugly, reasons why it is not worthy looking at, that the poster is dangerous for children and displaying people with impairments manipulated by artist in an unethical way; and some homophobic commentators made the poster to be perceived as propaganda of homosexuality:

“It is not the disability to blame for the provocative strangeness of the exhibition: naked men are put together in such positions that we cannot misunderstand it to be anything other than propaganda of homosexuality. Apparently it is a sweet prelude of the upcoming “Baltic Pride” next year (...).”

In this tense situation the museum staff was challenged to communicate not only the idea behind the poster, but also to take a side for progressive ways of understanding disability and to fight prejudice and unequal treatment.

The “scandalous” publicity of the Blindspots and emotionally charged discussions about the planned poster, firstly, were manifestations of how the history of people with impairments is a hidden history and of how a new understanding of disability enters public awareness, causing confusion and tense emotions because of hardships in recognising the habitual conception of disability. Secondly, the case of Blindspots illustrated the museum’s unique place in mediaspace and its potential to have an important impact beyond the museum walls.

Emotional debates around the exhibition evidenced that the museum reached and engaged with a much larger audience than those who came to the exhibition. So the museum informed public opinion. As Sandell puts it:

“If we see museums as part of the broader mediaspace, (...) museum narratives can be best understood not simply as texts containing fixed messages (to be accepted or rejected) but rather as resources (among others in the mediaspace) available for audiences to make use of in constructing their own meanings.” (6)

It is not the aim of our thesis to measure or judge the impact Blindspots had on society. With this case study we rather intend to show the capacity of the museum to reach broad and diverse audiences and the necessity to be prepared to take an active role in fighting prejudice, cultivating communities of care and supporting advancement of human rights values. Museums have never been neutral and in the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is important for museums not only to host discussions or tolerate alternative opinions, but also to take sides and contribute to broader social and political processes.

#### REFERENCES

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