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within Cultures of History, 3–5 July 2014**

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## **Conference Report**

### **Living History as Experience: Performative Practices within Cultures of History**

#### **3–5 July 2014, Centre for Contemporary History Potsdam**

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For three days in July, there was a lively discussion on 'Living History' in diverse fields of contemporary representations, held during the interdisciplinary conference *Living History as Experience: Performative Practices within Cultures of History / Geschichte als Erlebnis: Performative Praktiken in der Geschichtskultur*.

The conference was organized by Stefanie Samida and Georg Koch, Centre for Contemporary History Potsdam (ZZF), and the Ludwig Uhland Department for Historical and Cultural Anthropology, University of Tübingen (D), as part of the research project 'Living History: Re-Enacted Prehistory Between Research and Popular Performance' funded by the VolkswagenStiftung.

Specialists in Living History and Heritage Studies from diverse, mainly German universities and research institutions presented inspiring papers, based on theoretically informed and methodologically sound research and case studies, all working towards the common goal of understanding performative history presentations.

The diverse talks mainly focused on interpretations of historical facts re-lived and experienced through bodily experiences and performative acquirement. Performance as incorporation through bodily effects can be found in the diverse types of Living History events, such as movies, computer games, (Civil War) re-enactments, medieval markets, carnival or themed walks, just to name a small variety of the richly presented phenomena. In recent years participation of a wider public increased through a high degree of performance, or, to put it other way round: performance increased through participation.



Fig. 1: Frank Bösch opening the conference.

The conference was divided into nine sections, each comprising two talks. The opening talks by Frank Bösch (ZZF Potsdam, D; Fig. 1) and Bernhard Tschofen (University of Zurich, CH), both principal investigators of the aforementioned research project 'Living History: Re-Enacted Prehistory Between Research and Popular Performance', introduced the theoretical approaches towards experienced history.

Frank Bösch discussed how people participate in (public) events such as final soccer games or political speeches, which they judge as meaningful to future history. From the producer's side, events of this kind are – at the same time – arranged to seem dignified to be handed down for future generations. Bernhard Tschofen gave several examples of interdisciplinary ways of dealing with the performative appropriation of history and connected them to each other. His special emphasis was on the connections between media, academy and popular practices.

This introduction was followed up by a focus on 'Bodily Experience'. Stefanie Samida provided examples from a Roman Caracalla campaign by a re-enactor group called Numerus Brittonum, which was performed in summer 2013. The hike of about 140 km showed the attempt to recall history by acting in the manner once practiced. The fieldworker recorded interesting behaviour regarding the use of plastic water bottles because of the need for water and observed conflicting views within the group of what aspects should be authentic and what crosses their self-made line of rules of interpreting history. She also showed that the body in this context becomes a media of self-awareness.

The second talk of that section had to be cancelled.

In the afternoon section, Anja Dreschke (University of Siegen, D) presented her video ethnographic work on the so-called 'Kölner Stämme' ('Cologne Tribes'), groups that connect and participate in historic re-enactment, amateur ethnology and (neo-)shamanism in the tradition of the Cologne Carnival. Parts of her video work caused a lively discussion, trying to understand the motivation of these hobby-historians, who on the one hand start from a well-educated basis but on the other nonetheless enact performances for their own pleasure and delight.

René Gründer (Baden-Wuerttemberg Cooperative State University Heidenheim, D) followed the discussion in the footsteps of the re-enactor groups, but focused on neopagan traditions, who tend not to present their practices for an audience, but stay within their group. Their representatives use alleged historical facts and connect them to new or deeply interpreted meaning, which Gründer was able to show.

In the final presentation of the day, Mads Daugbjerg (Aarhus University, DK) pointed out an example of American Civil War re-enactment in Gettysburg and the relentless quest for what he called the "ultimate vicarious experience". The talk explored reenactors' social and material aspirations, which act in an embodied way to deal with the past. Opposed to the reenactors' attitude an antagonistic way of dealing with the past was introduced by the federal US National Park Service's 'Battlefield Rehabilitation' programme, including for example replanting historic woodlot and orchards.

Speaking about Gettysburg, Thursday's section on 'Historical Re-Enactments' dealt with this American battle again: Wolfgang Hochbruck (University of Freiburg, D) showed that re-enactment is a phenomenon that goes back much farther than thought: even veterans of that battlefield found ways of revealing their actions in forms of ritualized war games.

Eugen Kotte (University of Vechta, D) discussed re-enactment as cultural practice, arguing that performative practices within re-enactments present valuable results for science but are also beneficial in an economic sense since they aim for profitable, spectacle events and touristic magnets.

'Science and Staging' was the topic of the sixth section. Miriam Sénéchau (University of Freiburg, D) presented an eyewitness account published in a contemporary journal and written by an archaeologist. She described the preparations and actual solstice celebration of

a Germanic procession in the Grunewald stadium in Berlin in 1933, organized by the National Socialist German Workers' Party. Using comparisons with similar events of that time to decipher signs, symbols and actions found in her sources, Sénéchau demonstrated that science, politics and appearance in media of history of the Third Reich are aligned.

Sven Kommer (RWTH Aachen University, D) showed how participants of the 'medieval scene', i.e. hobby medievalists and re-enactors, have to present a highly specific behaviour and knowledge to be part of that scene. This is used to distinguish themselves from other (spiritualized) scenes. Qualitative interviews have shown their methods of using academic sources and popular culture to acquire information on their chosen time period of interest.

Sarah Willner (University of Tübingen, D), PhD candidate in the 'Living History' research project, opened the afternoon session on 'Emotions and History'. She described her fieldwork on the themed walk to the find location of the mummy 'Ötzi'. Her results illustrate that the practice of hiking becomes an approach to learning about the history of the spot through participation in or observation of performances. She showed how atmospheres are appropriated to become part of the individualized picture of such heritage sites.

Juliane Brauer (Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Berlin, D) described and commented on a role-play at the Schulmuseum Leipzig. She demonstrated how much all participants (including the museum employees) are affected by their intrinsic body narratives. Her reflections point towards a critical usage of the results of such entertaining practices and questions whether it is possible to obtain results that are free of personal historical experience. Her case study led to a generalized and highly stimulating discussion on the aim to generate a sense of historical facts through pre-given roles.

The following section was entitled 'Featuring History' and focused on media representations and their reception. Georg Koch, another PhD candidate from the project, spoke about his findings regarding TV documentations of prehistoric subjects. He showed that 'histotainment' is also a historic process, which became part of a society orientated towards science and events.

Manuela Glaser (Knowledge Media Research Center, Tübingen, D), reported her findings on psychological reactions towards historical topics presented in movies and TV documentaries. Her results pointed towards a connection between the language of pictures and the creation of emotions. This way, she was able to decode how entertainment and knowledge acquisition occur simultaneously. She pointed out how emotional appeal, personalization, personification and visualization affect the degree of understanding for consumers.

On the third day, 'Historical Sites of Entertainment: Visual and Real' were discussed by Angela Schwarz (University of Siegen, D) and Karlheinz Wöhler (Leuphana University of Lüneburg, D).

'HisTourism' was the catchphrase of Wöhler's talk, starting with the assumption that market economy does not care about whatever modalities of historical knowledge exist at sites, but about their economic value as attractions. He came to the conclusion that historical sites provoke a sense of experience, a feeling of authenticity, completeness, entirety, loaded with atmosphere. Schwarz spoke about computer games, such as Assassin's Creed, and asked what kind of history is presented. She further questioned the so-called 'open world games' which understand themselves as historical touristic attractions.

After a coffee break, the last section before the final discussion started. 'Historical Sites of Remembrance' was opened by Susanne Brandt (Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf, D), with a presentation of 'Remembrance on Battlefields of World War I'. By discussing the idea taken for granted for a long time that objects and sites are able to present the past in the most authentic way, she also showed that sites connected to loss are often politically instrumentalized. With the opening of many museums since the 1990s at the former western front, there were many sites opening their doors, mirroring those places to be touristic sites that are well integrated in those regions. She further questioned how history is emotionalized, not precisely connected to the historic facts.

A forced labour camp on the shut down airport Tempelhof in Berlin was the focus of Antonia Davidovic's (Christian-Albrechts-Universität Kiel, D) cultural anthropological research about the circulation of knowledge and narratives on archaeological findings. She described diverse performative practices spotted during that fieldwork, e.g. reactions of visitors at archaeological excavations or reactions in the media.



*Fig. 2: The audience and a camera observing the presentations.*

In general, the conference was very well organized. Despite the dense programme, enough time was arranged for coffee and lunch breaks, which allowed for further discussion. In many of the contributions, it became clear that the materiality of sites and the design of performative actions determine each other. The participants in such practices – no matter if they are acting as historical figures or playing computer games – undertake their role as a bodily task, they are committed to what they do, they feel a sense of obligation to their topics and practices.

As the conference went on and deeper discussions followed the talks, many speakers started their talks by announcing that if time had allowed, they would have changed their talk in reaction to the constructive discussions. This positive feedback continued and kept a lively conversation during discussion periods, as well as during coffee breaks and dinner, partly planning future workshops, looking for similarities and differences in specific fields.

The conference even embodied what Frank Bösch discussed in his opening talk: the World Championship quarter-final Germany versus France was shown and watched by many of the participants – this way maybe ‘doing history’?