

“Tell Me Your Stories”, presentation at the ICOM MPR congress, Sept. 2, 2019, Kyoto

by Peter Stohler, Director and Head of Programmes Grimmwelt Kassel

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Abstract

In the face of the European refugee crisis culminating in 2015, the challenges confronting state and society and the consequent new role of cultural institutions in the public discourse, GRIMMWELT Kassel initiated the integration project “Tell Me Your Story” (2016–2019). It was funded by the Federal Government and focused on promoting transcultural dialogue via Grimms’ fairy tales and the ancient, world-wide tradition of story telling.

Materials for a culturally sensitive exchange were conceived and tested in workshops with more than 400 participants – made up of refugees and local residents –resulting in 9,000 boxes distributed across Germany and used in some 150 institutions, and also available for download online.

GRIMMWELT Kassel introduced the project to the public in an exhibition taking place from August 2018 to February 2019.

The presentation showcases GRIMMWELT’s involvement in a project that aimed at the refugees’ inclusion and active participation via multilingual workshops so as to foster dialogue at eye level with participants from different nationalities, cultures and languages. Throughout Germany, it sparked a new approach to migration and had a much stronger and more sustainable effect than any traditional exhibition.

It also resulted in GRIMMWELT introducing new formats such as guided tours, panel discussions, concerts and outreach projects.

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“Germany is a strong country. The motive with which we approach these matters must be: we have managed so many things — we can do this.” Ladies and gentlemen, you recognise one of the best-known, frequently repeated quotations in recent history. I am of course quoting Angela Merkel addressing journalist during the federal press conference on 30 August 2015, when the migration crisis had reached its peak with 1.3 million refugees reaching Europe. GRIMMWELT Kassel opened on the 4th of September, only four days after Angela Merkel’s famous pronouncement. This is of course a coincidence and yet, there is a link, as it marks the beginning a local art institution involved in a crisis on a global scale. It will be important during my talk to bear this connection in mind.

The Brothers Grimm, ladies and gentlemen, are first and foremost known for their fairy tales, which they collected and wrote down by listening to people in their native county of Northern Hesse. Over the years, these fairy tales have been translated into numerous languages and are known all over the world. GRIMMWELT houses the famous annotated copies of Grimm’s “Children and Household Tales” from 1812. With extra-large margins, they were specially made for the brothers so that they could write down their comments for later emendations to the tales. 14 years ago these copies became part of the “UNESCO Memory of the World” register.

Although most people associate the Brothers Grimm with fairy tales, they were also linguists and political activists. They belonged to the renowned “Göttingen Seven”, a group of professors who rebelled against the Hannoverian king and were consequently let go from their posts so that they had to relocate to Berlin. Jacob Grimm was also a member of the First German National Parliament in Frankfurt’s St. Paul’s church in 1848. I do not want go into more detail about their activities here, but I would like to stress that when we talk about the Brothers Grimm there is always a political aspect as well.

Taking their cue from both Grimm’s involvement in fairy tales and politics, in 2016 GRIMMWELT launched a project called “Tell Me Your Stories”. Lasting almost three years from 2016 the beginning of this year, it was initiated by my predecessor Susanne Völker, the former director of Grimmwelt, and was inspired by the global tradition of

fairy tales and storytelling in general. The project's goal was to reach out to refugees and local people, breaking through the language barrier and create an intercultural exchange – a dialogue between diverse people on a par with each other.

To achieve this, the project was divided into several phases. The first phase consisted of workshops to which migrants who had only recently entered the country and local inhabitants of Kassel were invited to participate so as to enter into a dialogue via shared memories of fairy tales and stories in general. This exchange should take place in a relaxed atmosphere, far from the pressures of everyday life and language, as it was expressly addressed at refugees with little knowledge of the German language, and the exchange should be on an equal footing. The project claimed to offer the possibility of “turning the ‘I’ unsettled by exclusion and prejudice into a creative ‘we’”. You see, ladies and gentlemen, the goals were quite ambitious and idealistic.

More than 400 refugees from 16 countries participated in a number of workshops that took place at GRIMMWELT only shortly after its opening. The workshops concentrated on elements and subjects taken from fairy tales but that were applicable to people's lives. “Flying Castles, Magic Gardens and Stairways to Heaven – Experiments in Architecture and Fairy Tales” for example looked at architecture, houses and dwelling. It was hosted by the museum's architect. “The Town Musicians” was based on music as unifying element, hosted by a professor at the School of Arts in Kassel. Another still focused on the subject of the family and family constellations, as they play a crucial role in all societies and are treated in many fairy tales where there is often talk of stepmothers and substitute families. And finally, “Animal Tales” looked at the relationship between humans and animals. This too is a subject that again and again crops up in fairy tales but of course also plays a role in everyone's life.

The 15 workshops were then documented on film and evaluated by specialists, everything eventually resulting in a so-called multimedia box. This box contains for example a book with fairy tales translated into 13 languages – many more languages than GRIMMWELT usually translates its materials into –, as well as an audible version of the tales in 13 languages on a USB stick. There were 9000 copies of this box sent out to 300 institutions all over Germany. You can imagine, ladies and gentleman that a project of this size markedly exceeds the financial costs of a normal museum project, and it indeed amounted to the considerable sum of 1 million euros. It was directly

supported by the German Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, who made possible a project that otherwise would have been unthinkable for a medium-sized museum.

The end of the project was marked by an exhibition that presented the results in documentary form. It closed its doors at the beginning of this year. The exhibition was – I think I am allowed to say this from my vantage point as an exhibition organiser and museum director myself –problematic as the organisers decided to completely omit the voices of the refugees. Protection of privacy was clearly given precedence over the interests of the visitors. Neither could the refugees be seen nor heard in any way nor were there any, not even anonymous written accounts mentioning them. For me this was a significant omission as the core of the project was missing, and it made it also very difficult for the visitors to understand the project. On the other hand, in terms of longevity, one has to praise the project for making its multimedia box available as a download free of charge, so that anyone who wants to organise a workshop anywhere in Germany can get it easily and for free, downloadable on GRIMMWELT's website. This is of course quite an extraordinary service.

This, ladies and gentlemen, brings me to the conclusion of my talk. To sum up I think we can say that the integrative project "Tell Me Your Stories" showcases in exemplary form how an old cultural heritage such as the telling of fairy tales can be brought into today's world and used to deal with contemporary societal issues. This indeed is GRIMMWELT's basic claim, to acknowledge the cultural and historical importance of the themes it presents but go beyond this and draw a connection to contemporary society. The organisers of the project also wanted it to be an intercultural exchange where participants meet as equals – they called it a two-way street and stressed that it should be inclusive instead of just integrative, and lead to added value on both sides.

The legacy of the project has come to pose quite a challenge for GRIMMWELT, as the financial support is no longer available but we still want to implement the new forms how to convey exhibitions to the public tested in "Tell Me Your Stories". Thus, we have only just had an exhibition where the materials were translated into six languages, far exceeding our normal German/English versions. These new forms will not increase visitors's numbers, but they are important in terms of content and represent an ideal that should be adopted in today's museum work.

For me, the project has been particularly beneficial in terms of network. Today, we have a wider reach, those institutions who ordered one of our multimedia boxes know us, and the project created many co-operations with local partners such as the School of Art but also various citizens' associations, district centres, social educators, integration initiatives and teachers of integration classes. They were all involved in one way or another, and the project would have not been possible without them. I do of course hope that this project will find imitators in Germany, although maybe on a smaller scale.

Right now I cannot say for sure what we will do with these structural inputs and how it is going to change our work in future, all I can say is that it will. I cannot present to you any tried and tested solutions yet, but I can tell you about a small change that has recently taken place. You may know about the tense political situation in Germany in general but especially also in North Hesse where we witnessed the murder of a local politician, most likely committed by right-wing radicals. We are now part of a campaign that was, surprisingly enough, launched by a large oil and gas corporation called Wintershall. They created a slogan we adopted and put on our entrance door. It consists of a sign we use for when we are open or closed, and instead of just "open" and "closed" this sign reads "Open to Diversity" on the front and "Closed to Exclusion" on the back.

Thank you very much!

Biography Peter Stohler

Born in 1967, Peter Stohler studied art history and film in Amsterdam, London and Zurich, followed by further studies in cultural management at the University of Basel. As representative for cultural affairs in Basel (2007–2013) he was responsible for promoting the visual arts, film, video, photography and music. Prior to this role, Stohler held positions as curator and director at the Museum Bellerive in Zurich, the Haus für Kunst Uri in Altdorf and the Centre pour l'image contemporaine in Geneva. From 2013 to 2018 he managed the Kunst(Zeug)Haus Rapperswil-Jona, Switzerland. Since 2019 he has been director and head of programmes at GRIMMWELT Kassel (Germany).

Peter Stohler has written and published several books on art, photography and contemporary design. Among his latest publications are From Anselm to Zilla. The Peter and Elisabeth Bosshard Collection of the Foundation Kunst(Zeug)Haus, Lars Müller Publishers, Zurich 2017, the first comprehensive catalogue of this collection,

Anna Amadio: Dear Colour (Christoph Merian Verlag, Basel 2018) and Red Hood, Blue Beard: Colour in Fairy Tales (Arnoldsche Art Publishers, Stuttgart, 2019). Peter Stohler regularly publishes reviews for the Swiss art magazine Kunstbulletin (Zurich), among others on the biennials of Istanbul (2017) and Oslo (2019) as well as on art projects in public spaces.

Stohler is a member of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Photographie (DGPh), Kulturpolitische Gesellschaft e.V., ICOM, CIMAM and AICA, as well as a jury member of the Grimmpreis University of Marburg and the Kunsthochschule (University of Art and Design) Kassel.