

“Poor Luxembourg?”

Visions of poverty at the MHVL

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“Reicher Mann und armer Mann standen da und sah’n sich an. Und der Arme sagte bleich: Wär ich nicht arm, wärst Du nicht reich.” This quotation from Bertolt Brecht can be seen on a mirror displayed at the exhibition “Poor Luxembourg?”, currently held at the Musée d’Histoire de la Ville de Luxembourg (MHVL). The Museum whose objective is to document not only the history of Luxembourg City, but also to address the social concerns of its population, touches here on a contemporary issue in times of economic crisis and globalisation. As a matter of fact, poverty, especially in a wealthy country like Luxembourg, tends to be overlooked or banished to distant times or countries. The exhibition’s title “Poor Luxembourg?” asks a question and confronts the visitor with contemporary and historical aspects of poverty and, above all, tries to elicit self-reflection. The following article will take a close look at the exhibition’s layout, and will explore in how far “Poor Luxembourg?” and the methods used by the team around the curator Marie-Paule Jungblut were able to achieve their goal.

“Poor Luxembourg?”

Following the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion in 2010 and almost simultaneously with the exhibition “Armut – Perspektiven in Kunst und Gesellschaft” held at the Stadtmuseum Simeonstift and Rheinisches Landesmuseum in Trier in 2011, the MHVL launched its exhibition “Poor Luxembourg?”. “Are you poor or are you rich?": these are the opening lines. The Museum defines its aims as follows:

“The exhibition Poor Luxembourg? gives you insights into the various dimensions of poverty in Luxembourg and the world, from the time when the ‘Social Question’ has been raised around 1850 until today. [...] Accordingly, the Luxembourg City History Museum aims to critically present the criteria for

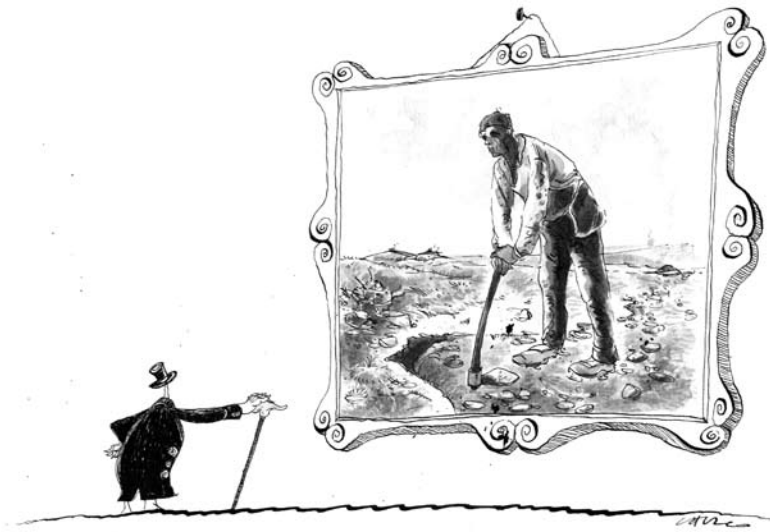
assessing and defining poverty and offers a historical overview of this complex topic.” (MHVL 2011)

The theme of the show undeniably provides a major way for the Museum to fulfil its social role. Unlike the Trier exhibition, however, this show’s title concludes with an interrogation mark, thus confronting the visitor directly with a series of questions: poor Luxembourg? Is Luxembourg a poor country? What does it mean to be “poor” in Luxembourg? These questions and the title are obviously in line with the MHVL’s intention to “critically present the criteria for assessing and defining poverty”. The visitor is asked to respond actively to the exhibition and find his/her own answers to the question posed, and here the Museum appears to move beyond a simple, didactic mode of communication.

There is, however, already at this stage, a sense of “distance” which makes itself felt. The cover of the catalogue as well as the photographs which accompany the opening lines are taken from Tony Krier’s 1954 social documentation *Reportage über Armenwohnungen in Luxemburg-Schleifmühle* (see p. 60). The use of more than sixty-year-old black-and-white photography as figurehead for the exhibition relegates the issue of poverty not to a distant part of the world (like those countries which are, unfortunately, still often referred to as “Third World”), but to a distant era, especially for all those visitors born after the nineteen-fifties. A picture from 1954 is probably as remote to Luxembourgish twenty-somethings as a contemporary image from South African townships. So the title may be “Poor Luxembourg?”, but from the beginning, the visitor gets the impression that

From the beginning, the visitor gets the impression that poverty remains a remote phenomenon.

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[...] the awkward gap between the exhibition's theme and the people it mentions and the place and the people who planned and visit it

while there may certainly be aspects of poverty in Luxembourg today, it remains a remote phenomenon.

Although an important part of the exhibition is devoted to a historical perspective, "Poor Luxembourg?" also tends to give a global approach to the issue of poverty. It is a big show that takes up almost two thirds of the whole museum and the size allows a large number of aspects to be addressed. In order to make it more intelligible, the exhibition is divided into five different blocks.

Block One

"Luxembourg today: poverty behind a rich façade" takes a contemporary outlook on poverty and society. In the first room, the visitor discovers what it means to be "poor" in Luxembourg today: shelves with no-name products are displayed. These are not the shelves from any supermarket, but from "social shops" which are sponsored by the State and allow people with little means to buy their everyday products cheaply. Wall labels explain in detail how these shops function, and give worldwide figures about poverty. More specifically, the official criteria for poverty in Luxembourg are outlined, and explanations given are concluded by the statement that poverty is always relative, at least in a wealthy country.

The visitor then enters a second room, one of the oldest rooms of the museum. The beautiful parquet floor, the immaculate white walls and the high ceiling with its decorative mouldings stand in complete opposition to the installation on display. A sort of tent made of pieces of cloth and wooden planks fills almost the entire room (see p. 60). It reminds the visitor of the shelters constructed by homeless people. The tent has five different entries, and in each of these spaces an issue relating to poverty today is displayed: homes for people in difficulties, social housing, prison life, homelessness, and a project

for helping young mothers in need. Each topic is illustrated with the case study of a specific person accompanied by photographic, documentary and audio material. While the "social shop room" may appear removed from "real" life, the "tent room" involves the visitor in a unique and direct way. The fact of walking into the tent's small spaces in order to have a look at the documents evokes the claustrophobic feeling that living in such a shelter may imply. Furthermore, the photographs and the taped voices show that these are people who actually live in our society.

This "active" experience allows audiences to construct and negotiate their knowledge of poverty. But visitors' responses can be diverse; the contrast between elegant room and shabby tent can either increase or diminish the sense of distance. Questions about one's own position in society can be raised. Attention may be drawn to the awkward gap between, on the one hand, the exhibition's theme and the people it mentions and, on the other hand, the place and the people who planned and visit it.

Block Two

The visitor then moves on to the second block "Poverty and humble living, 1850-1940" which constitutes the historical part of the exhibition. A wealth of textual, documentary and photographic material is displayed here. The Museum tries to give a global view of what the life of a great part of the population looked like when poverty was a "mass phenomenon". The historical background is presented, and issues relating to peasantry, the emergence of the iron and steel industry, stock market crashes, World War One, bad harvests and emigration as well as the life of beggars and vagabonds are dealt with. Different aspects of everyday life are highlighted: housing conditions, eating habits, food shortages and stockpiling, soup kitchens and illnesses to name but a few.



Tony Krier, *Reportage über Armenwohnungen in Luxemburg-Schleifmühle* (1954)



Photo taken at the exhibition at the MHVL

A case study is provided by the glove factory Reinhard, founded in 1882, which employed one thousand workers and seamstresses, thus being the largest factory in Luxembourg at the time. Descriptions of working conditions and child labour are displayed together with Michel Sinner's painting *Cosette* (1863, see p. 62), the character from Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables* (1862) which symbolises the life and martyrdom of a lot of children in the nineteenth century (Figure 3).

Especially interesting is the display of one of those highly elaborate gloves produced by the factory Reinhard. The contrast between the demands of the upper class and the working conditions of the lower classes could not be more obvious. This is also the first time in the exhibition that a critical aspect is evoked. It seems evident that if poverty exists, there must be another side of the coin. What is missing at this point is the question of responsibility. Who was responsible for the exploitation of the destitute? And what was the attitude of the Government? It seems like the visitor is welcome to feel empathy but is not being encouraged to be too critical. To counterbalance this negative portrayal of certain members of the upper class, examples of charitable organisations founded by wealthy patrons are immediately provided.

Thinking back to the first block, the social shops and the different issues mentioned in the "tent", one might wonder if poverty is not somewhat defined in this exhibition by what the society or, more specifically, the government and the wealthier part of the population do for the poor. On the one hand, poverty is brought close to the visitor, especially through the account of individual people's destinies, but on the other hand, the charitable organisations on display function as self-legitimation for the "other" part of society and prevent the visitor from being too involved and critical.

The glove also shows that high-quality pieces from the upper class are more likely to survive, be collected and recorded. Does this not automatically bias the visitor's view of the past? Similarly, the photographs shown were not taken spontaneously, but under the direction of a photographer. The image always reflects the photographer's choice of subject, camera angle and lighting conditions and the effect he/she wants to achieve, even in social documentary photography like Tony Krier's. Consequently, even an apparently realistic picture can never be impartial. In an exhibition that is meant to be thought-provoking, it is important to point out this kind of construction of reality, and this aspect, especially the media's view on poverty, is briefly explored in block three.

Block Three

"Visions of poverty: between accusation and voyeurism" draws the visitor's attention to the ambiguity that images of poverty involve. Social documentary photography of the nineteenth and twentieth century as well as contemporary documentary short films are shown. The showpiece of this block is a magic lantern from 1890, which is displayed along with some slides illustrating the story of *The Little Match Girl* (1905). In the MHVL's small cinema, visitors can watch short films from the beginning of the last century. The wall labels further explain that social reportage is not a modern phenomenon, but that it has existed for almost two centuries. On the one hand, their function is to draw attention to social inequalities and generate feelings of compassion and charity among the viewers but, on the other hand, they also serve to satisfy the curiosity and craving for sensationalism of the privileged.

Here, visitors might reflect on their own social position and identity. From whose point of view do we see these documents? Which side of the camera are

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we on and why? “Identity” is a malleable concept and is primarily defined by difference. We construct our own identity by differentiating ourselves, as individuals or as groups, from the “other”. Museums can help us to become aware of these processes of identification, but they should also remind us that what we see is the product of the curator, the professional and social group he/she represents and the views and values he/she transmits. The contrasts in the manner of display (the “neatness” of the location compared to the exhibition’s theme) and the fact that, in addition to the curator, most of the museum’s visitors undoubtedly belong to a more privileged social group than the people referred to, adds to a sense of distance and lack of real engagement and identification.

Blocks Four and Five

The themes of blocks four and five, then, although partially well illustrated, sometimes look like repositories for topics and documents that did not fit in another part of the exhibition. Furthermore, it becomes increasingly difficult for the visitor to identify the different blocks because of the sometimes confused thematic structure and the series of small rooms in which the exhibits are displayed.

Block Four addresses “Reactions to poverty and counter-measures” and brings up issues as diverse as labour unions, job centres, National Insurance, statistics about unemployment and crime, Europe as an island of affluence and destination for a lot of immigrant families and so forth. On the stairs leading to the last block “Self positioning: how rich is my life?”, visitors are confronted with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. This was the first and only time during the two-hour visit, in which the author of this article

took part, that the group of participants showed active engagement. Maslow’s theories were viewed critically by some and a lively discussion about the definition of “basic” human needs ensued.

In the final part of the exhibition, issues and problems concerning affluent societies like insolvency, luxury, credit cards, counterfeits and lotteries are examined. By hitting the mallet of a “Ring the Bell” game, the visitor has the possibility of situating his/her income in comparison with Luxembourg’s society as a whole. It is open to debate though if there would not have been other ways of involving visitors more actively. For example, there is no mention, neither in the museum nor in the catalogue that, apart from the case studies, other members of the population have been consulted or involved in the planning of the exhibition. Including the thoughts and experiences of visitors and non-visitors alike would certainly have been a relevant and useful addition to this show in particular.

Conclusion

“Poor Luxembourg?” is without doubt a very interesting and wide-ranging exhibition. It is, moreover, an important show because it fulfils a social objective and addresses an issue that concerns every member of society. The visitor does not only get a contemporary and historical view of “poverty” but he/she is also prompted to active participation in the form of self-positioning and identification.

The major drawback, however, is that this process of identification and involvement is somewhat inhibited by certain aspects of the exhibition’s context and content. In some cases, the contrast between the

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neat and pleasing rooms of the museum and the hard and tragic events on display calls for an increasing awareness of social injustice. In other cases, though, this disparity prevents the visitor from engaging fully with the topic: “poverty” just seems too distant.

As mentioned earlier, meaning is made by difference, and this is exactly what Bertolt Brecht’s quotation implies. It is not a coincidence that the verse is written on a mirror: there is no poverty without wealth. “Poor Luxembourg?” effectively shows many facets of poverty, but fails to show the “other” side. And when the more privileged members of the population are mentioned, it is first and foremost a vehicle for charitable self-justification. The MHVL could, for example, have juxtaposed images of luxury to the images of poverty. It is this disequilibrium caused by the absence of the “other” that hinders real identification.

Despite these minor shortcomings, “Poor Luxembourg?” remains a laudable exhibition in that it dares to address a problematic and neglected issue in a wealthy country like Luxembourg. ♦

Michel Sinner’s painting *Cosette* (1863)



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