Hadwig Kraeutler: Otto Neurath. Museum and Exhibition Work: Spaces (Designed) for Communication. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2008, 289 pp. ISBN 978-3-631-55973-4.

"Museums of the future [...] ought not to be as I would like to have them, but as the visitors and users would want them if they knew what makes a museum." Otto Neurath's vision in 1933 of the future development of the museum as a public space, and as a pedagogical and social project, gives a good idea of why he is often mentioned in handbooks on the history of museums. But considering the rapidly growing number of studies since the 1970s of Neurath as a philosopher, economist and sociologist – the literature on his many exhibition projects is still very small. These projects and his writings on museums have usually been treated as a slightly anecdotal part of his career; a separate, straightforward and practical undertaking, only indirectly linked to his supposedly more serious and theoretical pursuits. The exception is the fairly large literature on ISOTYPE, the standardised graphic language for visual education, developed in the latter half of the 1920s at the "social and economic museum" in Vienna. However, rather than analysing ISOTYPE as an integrated part of Neurath's many-faceted museum project, these studies have mostly treated the exhibitions as a given, as the historical circumstance for the birth of a new kind of graphic design.

Hadwig Kraeutler's book *Otto Neurath, Museum and Exhibition Work: Spaces (Designed) for Communication* is the first monograph that focuses exclusively on his museum work. The study aims to provide a more complete

picture and a better understanding of his projects in this area, but also to "assess its value for current discussions on museum issues" (p. 19). A "general hypothesis" throughout the analysis is that Neurath's political philosophy both "brought about" his museum work and "was causal for basing it so profoundly and soundly on a clear principle of user-orientation" (p. 20). Thus, the focus of her investigation is to explore his ideas on the public museum's communicative role in society, and Kraeutler approaches the exhibition work as an application of his more well-known philosophical and sociological writings. No doubt, these ways to frame the study are well chosen, and combined with her thorough empirical work in the archives they promise a highly interesting analysis.

Indeed, the book does provide rich general descriptions of a fascinating exhibition programme as well as valuable examples of some of the exhibitions that Neurath and his collaborators produced in Vienna and later in exile in Amsterdam. After making a permanent exhibition on economic, social and demographic development in the City Hall of Vienna in 1927, they completed many different projects during the 1930s: temporary exhibitions of current affairs in an empty corner store in Vienna, an exhibition of Rembrandt's art from strictly sociological perspectives in an Amsterdam department store, and a package of exhibition material on tuberculosis in five thousand sets for local American venues, just to name a few. Kraeutler also offers many good and interesting examples of recurrent themes in Neurath's work, such as his critique of object fetishism at traditional museums. Her reading of the exhibitions through his positions on epistemological and sociological issues suggests many connections.

The strengths of the study, however, are more in the scope of the analysis than in specific results.

At a very basic level, a more thorough editing of the book would have been warranted. The many repetitions of perspectives, general descriptions of Neurath's work, and broad historical characterisations do not contribute to the precision of the analysis. In addition, previous research is not discussed in any comprehensive manner. A systematic discussion of the state of the art – including important recent studies that are missing, such as Nader Vossoughian's or Sibylla Nikolow's – would have made Kraeutler's arguments and results a lot more distinct. Several questions regarding method can also be raised. Given the study's emphasis on Neurath's making of communicative spaces, why are the various exhibitions (chapter 4) studied as material phenomena in such a brief way? Why not use the documentation in the Reading archive to analyse the visual pedagogy and politics of an exhibit in some detail? And, as a historical analysis of his museum politics, why is the rich historical context of museum debate, visual pedagogy and educational politics in the first decades of the 19th century so limited? As a result, his project becomes much of an isolated phenomenon in this analysis, an almost unique predecessor of modern museum work.

The less developed historical perspective also has bearing on the aim of the study: to contribute to discussions on ways of involving the visitors and modes of communication in museums today. An evaluative approach to Neurath's exhibition work certainly makes it possible to give him the status of pioneer or forerunner. But if the object is to contribute to contemporary discussions, in what ways do we get new perspectives on the assumptions and

arguments of our time without understanding what specific problems his projects were aimed at solving? What set of skills were the visitors in his exhibitions supposed to learn and why? If we are not to just reinforce the line of arguments in museum policy debates today, historical studies need to provide opportunities for reflexivity. To conflate the rationality of his project with similar contemporary contexts by talking about his "success" according to our standards, his "foresight" or his "understanding" of pedagogical problems in the light of recent discussions, is to lose a lot of critical potential. An engagement with the difficult issues of the present is surely a good motive for studying Neurath, but it seems reasonable to believe that he could be not just an inspiration, but also a way to approach the genealogy, meaning and politics of code words such as emancipation and participation in contemporary debates about museums. These considerations aside, Hadwig Kraeutler's book is a valuable contribution to the literature on Neurath and on museums and exhibitions in the interwar period.

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