Altona: Between land and sea

Vanessa Hirsch

Vanessa Hirsch is a curator at Altonaer Museum, one of the largest regional museums in Germany. The museum presents the cultural-historical development of the Elbe region around Altona, Schleswig Holstein and the coastal areas of the North and Baltic Seas. The collection contains graphics, paintings, textiles, toys and cultural-historical objects from the fields of arts and crafts, shipping, life, and work in the countryside and in the city. The institution was founded in 1863 as a regional museum for the then independent city of Altona. Today, Altona is one of the seven boroughs of Hamburg. In the following piece, Vanessa Hirsch describes her curatorial work at the institution. She begins by outlining key aspects of Altona's history and its special relationship with the river and the regional hinterland, before moving on to discuss three recent exhibitions. All three exhibitions were multi-faceted projects, using works of art to gain insights into the historical past. Through these displays, Hirsch reflects on the agency of regional cultures in the global age and their capacity to nurture contemporary mythologies.

Altona was an independent city from 1664 to 1937, until it was merged with Hamburg. Today, Altona is one of Hamburg's seven districts. In 1664, Altona was given a town charter by the Danish crown to encourage growth as a port city and a site for commerce and manufacture. Geographically, the city of Altona was extremely close to Hamburg. As a port city, Hamburg had been a centre of trade and commerce in Northern Europe since the middle ages. The idea in 1664 was to create a competitor to Hamburg in its direct vicinity. The Danish crown hoped to increase taxes by stimulating trade in Altona. In 1664, the Danish ruled the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein. Altona was part of the duchy of Holstein. Hamburg and the region south of the Elbe did not belong to the Danish sphere of influence.

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In order to encourage people to trade in Altona, the town chapter allowed things that were forbidden not only in Hamburg but in most other European cities as well. The port was made Northern Europe's first free port. Manufacturers of goods were not forced to join a guild, which made mass production, which was strictly forbidden in Hamburg, possible. Furthermore, and most importantly, freedom of faith was guaranteed. These unique conditions attracted immigration, especially by those who were not allowed to practice their faith in Hamburg: Jews, Calvinists, Catholics, Mennonites. Some, like the Sephardic Jews or Mennonites, were extremely well connected all over Europe and established prospering trading houses in Altona. During the last three centuries, however, Hamburg has always been the far more successful port city, relegating Altona to a mere borough. Nevertheless, Altona is very proud of its legacy as an open city that welcomes foreigners. Today, most of Altona's inhabitants describe themselves as being open-minded, as being a little bit different.

The River Elbe connects Hamburg and Altona with the North Sea, and its riverbanks were used for the ports of Hamburg and Altona. For centuries, the Elbe was perceived as a gateway to faraway regions all over the world. Historically, the river was used to connect the cities with their hinterland. Agricultural goods like vegetables, fruit or corn from regions like *Vierlande* or *Altes Land* reached the towns' markets by boat. In comparison, Altona's ties with its hinterland were always much closer than Hamburg's. The reasons are political: Hamburg has always been an independent city and the surrounding regions were subject to different rulers. Altona, by contrast, was part of the duchy of Holstein; from 1640 onwards, the Danish kings were dukes of Schleswig and Holstein. So, there was no political separation between the city and its hinterland: Altona was part of a region that also shared a cultural history.

Culturally, the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein are shaped by their closeness to the sea. The goods produced in the region were traded in Altona. In regional culture, the sea is understood as a promise. New and extremely fertile land can be gained by diking, agriculture can be exported as ports are close. On the other hand, the sea is a huge threat, as floods can destroy everything in a matter of hours. The sea brings wealth for seamen or fishermen; at the same time the profession is dangerous and ships can easily sink. Since the early nineteenth century, the sea has attracted tourists, still a source of wealth today. As for the maritime business, during the last decades,

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there has been a decline in Schleswig-Holstein. Smaller ports along the coasts, engaged in the import/export business, have closed their doors, and fishing has been reduced continually. In contrast, Hamburg's port is doing quite well. Altona's commercial port closed during the 1980s, only a cruise terminal and small marinas remain.[1]

Altona's history is not the same as Hamburg's, which is why it is still worth telling. Altonaer Museum was founded in 1863 by local citizens and run privately until 1888. In 1901, a new regional museum was opened right in the prestigious centre of the town to educate the workers living in Altona about the cultural history of Schleswig-Holstein and the traditions of its pre-industrial society. We still maintain this mission, although we use a twenty-first-century perspective that deconstructs narratives about traditions and elitist views on society. In the following pages, I will describe how this influences my museum work. I will focus on three exhibitions that were mounted in the last decade. The first exhibition, titled *In flux. A panoramatic view on the river Elbe*, offered a multi-disciplinary view on Altona's relationship with the river Elbe; *Quiet peasants and sturdy fishermen? Northern Germany in photography* analysed Altonaer Museum's collection of historic photographs; *Better Living in Altona? City Development in the 20th and 21st Century* gave an overview of urban development in the district of Altona. These exhibitions have one aspect in common: contemporary art was an integral part in exhibitions that dealt with historical topics.

Exhibition *In flux. A panoramatic view on the river Elbe, 2006*

Altona's history has always been closely tied to the river. In 1536, a fisherman from Hamburg was in search of a new business and opened a small inn on the Elbe riverbank, right at the border that separated Hamburg from the duchy of Pinneberg; according to one local legend, Altona's name is an allusion to its location 'all to nah' or 'all too close', to Hamburg. A small pier was added and soon developed into a place for trade; it came to be known as the Altona

1 On Altona's history, see, among others, the following two books: Holmer Stahncke, *Altona. Geschichte einer Stadt* (Hamburg: Ellert & Richter Verlag, 2014), 9-11; Hans-Jörg Czech, Vanessa Hirsch, Franklin Kopitzsch eds., *350 Jahre Altona. Von der Verleihung der Stadtrechte bis zur Neuen Mitte (1664–2014)* (Hamburg and Dresden: Sandstein Verlag, 2015).

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Fischmarkt and has been the centre of Altona ever since. Over the years, the riverbank developed into a harbour. In 1664, Altona was given a town charter and its residents started taking up long-distance trade. The town prospered and grew, especially during the eighteenth century.

In 2006, the museum team decided to mount an exhibition about Altona. A short discussion revealed that the most important thing about Altona was its special relationship with the river. We therefore focused on the Elbe as our subject. We wanted to give a multidisciplinary, panorama-like view of the Elbe, yet focus exclusively on the part flowing through the district of Altona, as our institution is dedicated primarily to the history of Altona. The objective was to gain new insight into the history of the city by mixing disciplines, such as politics, economics, biology, as well as literature and the arts. The introductory section in the first room was called 'On the river'. Here, our visitors were given background information on the ships that are such an integral part of the scenery: trading vessels, their cargo bringing the world into town. Which types of ships were used over the centuries, what was typical cargo, where did it come from and who sailed the ships? A second room focused on the themes eminent 'Along the riverbanks': tourism and recreation. Tourists and locals alike enjoy the views, people take strolls, use the beaches, some even swim. A third room was dedicated to the world 'Under the river', focusing on eels as these are typical for the river ecology near Hamburg. Biological background information was mixed with cultural history, including regional fishing techniques, local recipes for eel-soups, interviews with fishermen.[2]

We chose an interdisciplinary perspective, mixing art history, political history, economic history and cultural history with biology. The objects on display were diverse, too: paintings, prints, photographs, ship models, porcelain, textiles, children's toys, taxidermy objects, as well as 100 litres of Elbe-water. To add another layer of meaning, we asked a group of students from the local art academy to contribute their perspective. Over the course of one year, they did their own research and developed artworks. In the end, we were able to show twenty works of art in a wide range of media: film, sound, installation works, paintings and drawings, and sculpture. For instance, a sound installation by Marte Kießling greeted the visitors by using tapes from

2 Baerbel Hedinger, ed., *Alles im Fluss. Ein Panorama der Elbe* (Hamburg: Altonaer Museum, 2006).

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the Ship Greeting Station Welcome Point at Wedel-Willkommhoeft, which is a tourist destination on the riverbank. Karsten Wiesel's video work showed all the impressions of a person taking a boat ride from Altona's fish market to Willkommhoeft. Silke Silkeborg, Willem Mueller and Yoonjoo Cho depicted the landscape close to the Elbe in paintings and drawings. Almut Gryptra's work *Exzellentes strong hand mammut* uses worn working gloves found near the river to sculpt a dress onto her own body. All these student works were shown in various sections of the exhibition, their subject matter matched with the thematic sections in the exhibition. One installation work even went on public display outside of the museum. Paul Sochacki's *Loreley*, a neon sculpture, was erected in a public park famous for offering the best views of the river, and of the Port of Hamburg.

Fig. 1: Paul Sochacki, Loreley, 2006 © Historische Museen Hamburg, Altonaer Museum

The work alludes to the myth of Loreley, as described in the famous poem by Heinrich Heine. A beautiful young woman sits high on a rock near the river

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Rhine, singing while combing her long blond hair. The skippers on the river get so fascinated by this sight that their ships founder on the nearby cliffs. Sochacki transferred the myth from one famous river to the other. His neon Loreley was meant to lure the seamen on the freighters passing by on their way to the Port of Hamburg. The artist's choice of material refers to the neon signage at St. Pauli and its famous nightclubs, traditionally places where sailors can spend their money. In the exhibition, a sailor's way of life and their traditions was one of our topics in the section 'On the river'. For the museum, the public sculpture was a great way to integrate a part of our exhibition into the everyday life of the Elbe. The sculpture was part of the park for ten years. It had to be dismantled in 2016 when the council needed the location to present other works of art. In general, the students' artworks worked very well. They commented on the historical topics with fresh eyes and an artistic perspective. To me, this was a perfect approach for our multi-disciplinary exhibition.[3]

Exhibition *Quiet peasants and sturdy fishermen? Northern Germany in photography, 2015*

This exhibition aimed to offer an insight into the Altonaer Museum's huge photographic collection. In order to document the regional culture of Northern Germany more than 100.000 photographs had been collected at Altonaer Museum, starting in 1901. Most of these pictures were taken between 1860 and 1950. They depict various local traditions, houses, ships, and tools used for typical crafts. We observe fishermen on their boats, farmers taking in the harvest, women spinning yarn, men and women wearing regional costumes.

To many viewers, these photographs seem to depict the most common stereotypes that come to mind when they hear the keyword 'Northern Germany'. Among the museums' collections, these photographs were not regarded as art. For internal classification, recording aspects such as where and when the picture was taken and the specifics of the local tradition it documented was deemed more important than noting the photographer's name. In total, the collection was meant to be used as a visual encyclopedia of local

3 Dirck Möllmann, 'Laengsseits. Zeitgenoessische Kunst in der Elbe-Ausstellung', in: *Alles im Fluss. Ein Panorama der Elbe*, ed. Baerbel Hedinger (Hamburg: Altonaer Museum, 2006), 66-71.

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culture. Yet, despite this seemingly prosaic use, a great part of the pictures was taken according to the standards of the Pictorialist movement in photography and therefore has a close connection to nineteenth-century painting. By exhibiting photographs and paintings together, we were able to prove that the source of the stereotypical image of Northern Germany as portrayed in the photographic collection of Altonaer museum is part of the aesthetics of nineteenth-century painting.

Fig. 2: Wilhelm Dreesen, At work, 1891 © Historische Museen Hamburg, Altonaer Museum

Yet can the same be true for today? Do the same stereotypes still influence our contemporary perception of the landscape and its inhabitants? Is there anything 'typically local' in the age of globalisation, where the same furniture is sold everywhere? What is a foreigner's view of Northern Germany? Is there a perspective for the future? We invited Polish photographer Agnieszka Rayss to do her own research on these questions by travelling through the region. During her stay, she created a series of photographs that analyse how museum collections construct reality and influence the perception of a region.

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Fig. 3: Agnieszka Rayss, Untitled, 2014 © Agnieszka Rayss

Museums isolate objects from their original context. By combining these isolated artefacts, they create their own interpretation of their subject matter. Agnieszka Rayss adapted this museological method. Her series of photographs was exhibited together with the photographs from the museum's collections. Although her pictures have no direct relationship with these historical photographs, her view of Northern Germany is influenced by the past.

The photographer started her research in the storage rooms of various museums in Hamburg, those fascinating rooms where all objects not on display are arranged according to age, genre, material or size. In order to be preserved for centuries, the artefacts are wrapped in paper or hidden under textile coverings. Once they are stored, they will never again be used for their original purpose. We see the portrait of a male figure, whose surface is covered by a very thin fleece layer. There is another textile form, but with a carved horn protruding from it, there is an object wrapped in hessian cloth that is reminiscent of a coffin, a wooden box with a large label, wooden toy horses. Then, nature is visible: a potted plant, jars from a biological collection

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containing plants and fish. Then we see a mural depicting trees and exotic birds, and, finally, a beach.

In total, Agnieszka Rayss's pictures summarise the way regional museums work by isolating their main topics. The most typical characteristics of a region are its past and present inhabitants. It is men who create typical artefacts ranging from the wooden box to the carved unicorn. Nature, as represented by biological objects, of course, is another defining aspect for a landscape, as certain plants or animals are typical for a region. Constructed reality, such as a mural depicting a landscape, influences our imagination. Finally, we see a beach at Timmendorfer Strand, the only 'direct' view of a piece of landscape in the series. It can be concluded that Agnieszka Rayss's way of seeing a landscape is influenced by the past. Her view is based on knowledge derived from dealing with various local museums. The present and, consequently, the future, are rooted in the past.

The various museums she approached during the course of her research are used as a knowledge base for her project. According to her, their collections seem to define what is typical for Northern Germany. The photographer adopted their construction of reality in order to transform that construction into her own imagery. She obviously did not want to comment directly on today's stereotypes – instead, she asked about the methodology of historical and museological work, and adopted it for her own camera work. Her images shape a museum-like collection with an artist's approach.[4]

Exhibition *Better Living in Altona. City Development in the 20th and 21st Century, 2018*

This exhibition gave an overview of the history of housing and city development in Altona. A historic tour presented the most important phases of the urban development of the past 130 years: the struggle against the housing shortage around 1890, the creation of healthy housing space for all in the 1920s and the 'co-ordinated' housing policy under National Socialism. After 1945, the vision of a green and car-friendly city was central; from 1965, the focus was on the creation of new centres on the city's outskirts. The urban

4 Vanessa Hirsch, ed., *Quiet Peasants and Sturdy Fishermen. Northern Germany in Photography* (Hamburg: Junius Verlag, 2015).

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development of the 1970s, determined and executed by the citizens themselves, segued into the developments of today. During the last two decades, Hamburg's population has been growing steadily and more housing space is needed. For larger new construction projects, the 'mix of thirds' is the rule: one-third subsidised apartments, one-third rental apartments, one-third apartments for sale. Major development projects, for instance, the construction of new neighborhoods, such as 'Mitte Altona' from 2010 to 2018, are accompanied by extensive participatory processes for citizens. Yet, protests against some projects are very common. These protests, but also the participatory processes that are now an official part of urban development schemes, are a direct result of the 1970s when residents in Altona-Ottensen started to protest against development schemes presented by the authorities.

A special focus in the exhibition was put on citizen's movements of the 1960s and 1970s. In the late 1960s, the city planners were led by the ideals of 'urbanism through density' and a car-friendly city. High-rises were meant to offer cheap and comfortable living space on the city's outskirts. Special plans were made for one of Altona's most central quarters: Ottensen, with its Wilhelminian constructions, was supposed to undergo a large-scale reconstruction, necessitating the demolition of large parts.

Fig. 4: Asmus Henkel, Building site, 1982 © Asmus Henkel

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An urban planning study presented in 1969, intended to turn Ottensen into the office town 'City-West'. The residents of Ottensen did not acquiesce to the large-scale renovation plans without a fight. They founded citizens' initiatives and demanded the renovation of the old buildings. The plans for 'City-West' were officially abandoned in 1973. Many residents modernised their houses and apartments autonomously and added bathrooms and central heating. Many artists lived in the area, attracted by low rents and huge spaces in abandoned factories. Over the years, former industrial sites were turned into residential buildings or used as offices. Yet the citizens continued to keep a critical eye on developments. They advocated protection of the historic buildings and demanded that more greenery be added to the neighborhood. Today, Ottensen is one of the most sought-after and pricey areas in Hamburg.[5]

One of the many artists living in Ottensen during the 1970s was Michael Bauch. He took part in the protests that were so typical for this era. In 2017, his installation *Mein Dorf Altona* (My village Altona, 1980) was offered to Altonaer Museum as a gift.

Fig. 5: Michael Bauch, Mein Dorf Altona (my village Altona), 1980 © Historische Museen Hamburg, Altonaer Museum

5 Holmer Stahncke, *Altona. Geschichte einer Stadt*, 334-339.

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The artist had used relics of a building in central Ottensen to create a red gate. The object was a great addition to the museum's collection, as the motif alludes to Altona's coat of arms with its characteristic open gate. As part of the exhibition 'Better Living in Altona', Bauch's installation was used to illustrate Ottensen's citizen's movement and arts scene with a work by one of its participants. Visually, it worked very well near a historic photograph depicting the entrance gate to a much-debated building site.

Of course, there is a difference between Michael Bauch's installation and the works by Agnieszka Rayss or Paul Sochacki. *Mein Dorf Altona* (1980) is a work of art that is shown in a context where photographs, leaflets or newspaper articles from the same era are exhibited. The installation works as a strong visual signal next to objects that illustrate the way we would deal with historical source material. In a way, the installation summarises this content and offers an aesthetic approach. The latter works by Rayss and Sochacki were commissioned especially for specific exhibitions. The artists were asked for a contemporary perspective on historical topics, to comment on pictorial stereotypes as Agnieszka Rayss did, or to find a contemporary approach to the myth of the sailor. Strikingly contemporary in a context consisting of very old objects from the museum's collections, Agnieszka Rayss's pictures can be read as an invitation to museum visitors to think about their own present-day approach to the topic of the exhibition. One conclusion for the viewers could be that all imagery, past and present, is the result of constructions. Paul Sochacki's installation, on the other hand, transported an important fraction of the content of a complex interdisciplinary exhibition on the perception of the river Elbe right to the riverbank. Besides, it entered everyday life at a site where locals and tourists gather to take in the view and relax. Both commissions are an important curatorial tool to connect historical subject matter with the present. Many museum visitors find a spontaneous connection to these recent works of art. In the next step, they can find an intellectual connection with events or cultural phenomena that are long past. In a way, the artists paved the way for museum visitors, because their contemporary artistic projects have done just that – with striking visual results. In addition, these works offer an emotional approach to museum visitors by making the past relevant to today's viewers and visitors. And this is what a historical museum is supposed to do.

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