

Olga Preiss interviews Johanna Schüller

On the road with the *For real?* mobile exhibition – Insights from the tour team. Part 1: Brandenburg tour

The *For real?* project would not have been possible without its lead project manager Johanna Schüller. Right from the start in autumn 2022, she guided, coordinated and supervised the work together with Dr. Katalin Krasznahorkai, the lead curator for the Brandenburg Association for Culture and History, and Professor Björn Stockleben, who led the project's partner team at the Film University Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF.

Project management here did not mean following a ready-made plan. On the contrary – there were no templates. The team developed, tested and adapted everything on a step-by-step basis, and if needed, went back to the drawing board. Johanna Schüller held everything together: from developing the VR experience to forming the teams, from planning the tours to designing the exhibition, and finally to carefully guiding the workshops. Moreover, she was literally responsible for setting the tour in motion – first through Brandenburg at the wheel of the van pulling the trailer, and then, with a freshly acquired commercial vehicle license, on the Germany-wide tour at the helm of a truck.

Olga Preiss joined the team as tour manager at the start of 2025. She promptly learned the processes used for the tour in Brandenburg, made and maintained contacts to all the partners at the nationwide stops, and organized the entire logistics, including booking the hotels, planning the programs and coordinating the workshops. She too quickly acquired a commercial vehicle license and took the wheel of the 7.5-ton truck just a few days later.

In their conversation, Johanna Schüller and Olga Preiss shed light on the background of the *For real?* project – from its beginnings in Brandenburg (on the following pages) to its tour through Germany (from page 241 onwards).

Olga Preiss (OP): Johanna, how did the idea arise to take these volumetric Holocaust survivor interviews on a tour through Brandenburg, and what were the first steps?

Johanna Schüller (JS): The Brandenburg Museum had already been working on new technologies for teaching and learning history as part of the SPUR.lab project.¹ These activities also involved close contact with the Film University Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF. From 2019 to 2022, Christian Zipfel had made volumetric videos of twelve Holocaust survivors there – 3D interviews, in other words, that give you the sense they're sitting right there with you. The problem was that these interviews, with their enormous sets of data, couldn't really move around.

We asked ourselves how the interviews could be put to use. The idea was to embed them in an educational format and see whether we could bring the survivors together with pupils. At the same time, we at the Brandenburg Museum wanted to reach out to different regions, especially to places that don't have many cultural opportunities with new technologies. That's how we got the idea of a mobile exhibition – which people could see on market squares or outside museums or libraries. An exhibition you couldn't miss.

OP: That sounds like quite an ambitious start. How did you go about developing the VR application?

JS: We began in the autumn of 2022 and had until the summer of 2023, or just about nine months. In that short period of time, we had to develop the VR application, design the mobile exhibition, create an educational program and plan the Brandenburg tour.

For me it was important to have all the specialists there from the start: the experts in education, curatorship and technology. We were constantly in contact with each other so could combine everyone's knowledge. Here's one example: we developed the questions for the survivors together with a 9th-grade class at the Voltaire School in Potsdam. The pupils read the interview transcripts, watched the videos and drew up their questions. That gave us a shortlist which we evaluated and confirmed with the survivors, the advisory council and the project team. We ultimately selected ten questions, which can now be seen in the VR interviews.

OP: You decided to use a white backdrop for the interviews, which some people found off-putting. Why?

JS: That was a very deliberate decision. We didn't want a constructed backdrop or special effects. Our priority was on the survivors them-

1 From 2020 to 2023, SPUR.lab explored the use of interactive digital technologies to develop new narrative accounts of the Nazi concentration camps in Brandenburg. See the project website at: <https://www.spurlab.de/en>.

selves and their stories. The white background clearly shows that this was a recording situation, not a room in real life. This meant we could incorporate critical reflection on the medium right from the start: how are these interviews actually made, and how do we look at them?

OP: And how were the plans going for the mobile exhibition?

JS: We worked with the agency die freybeuter to develop a mobile pavilion. Everything fit into a trailer: the equipment, furnishings and VR stations. With the van and the trailer, we could set it all up in 45 minutes – on a market square, outside a library, in a pedestrian zone, wherever.

In August 2023 we opened the exhibition in Potsdam, together with the survivor Ruth Winkelmann. That was a very special moment. And then we set off. At six locations in Brandenburg we held workshops for school groups in the morning, then opened the exhibition to everyone in the afternoon. It was an incredibly exciting time – we didn't really know how people would react.

OP: Was there one part of the tour through Brandenburg that really stands out?

JS: Lots of them. We had more than 1,500 pupils and 350 other visitors. Many people told us their own stories – about their childhood, the post-war period, life in the GDR. One encounter in Pritzwalk really struck me. An elderly couple came to the exhibition, and the woman told me afterward that her parents were Jewish and had survived the Nazi terror in hiding. For her it was very moving to meet Jewish survivors in virtual form – and in her own home town, together with young people.

OP: What were the workshops for the pupils like?

JS: We developed the workshops together with Dr. Wenke Wegner, a media educational specialist. Each one started with an introduction to the technology, and then the pupils formed small groups and went through a series of stations: the VR experience, reading the survivors' biographies, a book table, reflection tasks and discussions. It was important for us to go beyond just the facts about the Nazi period, and to think about what it means to pass on personal experiences.

Many of the young participants told us they felt like they were sitting alone in a room with the survivor. That also depended a lot on their age and prior knowledge – there are some big differences between 9th and 12th-graders.

OP: The project combines technology, history and education. How did those different perspectives fit together?

JS: At first it was a challenge, but also incredibly exciting. We all learned from each other. For me with a humanities background, the technical side was new. But our close ties – especially with the Film University – helped us weave the different perspectives together. That gave the project its unique strengths.

OP: Looking back, what went really well on the Brandenburg tour, and what were the challenges?

JS: We evaluated the tour in great detail – with questionnaires, workshops and feedback from experts. One very positive point was simply the access to this topic, and the technology that attracted a lot of young people who might not otherwise have been that interested. But we also realized that the groups were very different. For future tours we want to adapt the educational program more – for different age groups, levels of previous knowledge, and whether the young people come on their own initiative.

There was also a lot of interest from adults. Many of them wanted their own program. And we realized we should be drawing closer connections to present-day experiences of forced migration and persecution.

OP: What makes the *For real?* project so unusual in your opinion?

JS: There are these three components: an exhibition on wheels, the cutting-edge technology in an educational setting, and the research that accompanied it with clear empirical and evaluative methods. In addition, there was an exchange of ideas at a large conference. Which meant we were contributing to the overarching question of how to remember the Holocaust when the people who witnessed it are gone.

At our conference in 2024, when Aleida Assmann gave the keynote address, we realized that the project is taken very seriously and is opening new avenues of discussion. It showed that *For real?* is something truly special.

Schüller, Preiss: On the road with the *For real?* mobile exhibition Part 1 – Brandenburg tour



Fig.1: Ruth Winkelmann during a Tagesschau TV interview at the opening of the exhibition in Potsdam, August 2023 (© Johanna Schüller)

Fig.2: Visitors try the VR experience in Kyritz, September 2023 (© Nadine Redlich)





Figs.3 and 4: The mobile exhibition on the market square in Kyritz, September 2023 (© Nadine Redlich)

Johanna Schüller, specialist in Judaism, Polish language & literature and media science, studied in Potsdam and Warsaw with a focus on the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish cultural history. Traineeship at the Topography of Terror Documentation Centre, curatorial work for multiple exhibition offices, project coordination for the *BERLIN GLOBAL* exhibition at the Humboldt Forum. Since 2022 lead project manager of the *For real?* mobile exhibition from the Brandenburg Association for Culture and History.

Olga Preiss, director, producer and tour manager. Studied sociology, psychology and photography in Bielefeld. Entered film via documentaries, music videos and advertising. Since 2014 independent work in cultural production, film directing and tour management. Numerous projects that combine documentary narratives with visual sensitivity. Tour manager for the Germany-wide *For real?* exhibition from the Brandenburg Association for Culture and History.