
**Ways of Dwelling:
Crisis – Craft – Creativity.**
13th congress of SIEF in Göttingen, Germany

Between the 26th and the 30th March of 2017 the *Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore* (SIEF) had for the 13th time invited its members to join them for their biennial congress. This time the University of Göttingen had been chosen as the location and almost 800 researchers from Europe and beyond had followed the call to congregate in the medieval university town

under the banner *Ways of Dwelling: Crisis – Craft – Creativity*.

Already by early Sunday afternoon the congress had the central campus in a firm grip and while some were still setting up their very own temporary dwellings in the hotels of the city, others were already in queue to collect their conference bags, mingling, or looking for a free seat in the main auditorium to take in the opening ceremony and the first keynote. The latter one did embrace all of the elements featured in the title of the congress: a crisis, countered with craft

and creativity. The keynote by the Amsterdam-based artists Dirk Jan Visser and Jan Rothuizen took the listeners with them to a refugee camp in Northern Iraq. Showing excerpts from their digital installation *Refugee Republic*, Visser and Rothuizen emphasized how the daily lives of the refugees belied narratives of helplessness and passivity. On the contrary they pointed out how for instance their entrepreneurial activities in the camp may even be understood to be the first signs for the emergence of an entirely new city.

In the four days that followed also the other keynotes explored the subject of dwelling, of being and feeling at home, from various perspectives and with differing emphases. João de Pina-Cabral from the University of Kent used his keynote to analyze the impact of austerity measures in Southern Portugal. He noted, how under these adverse circumstances out-migration to Lisbon or to Central Europe is often understood to be the only chance for the young to better their situation. Still, many remain bound to their home town through a sense of responsibility and emotional attachment. This also, he explained, because the town and its familiar people are the only real certainty and security accessible to them.

In the keynote on Tuesday, Trevor Marchand from SOAS went looking for the concept of dwelling in the works and practices of the London-based artist Andrew Omoding. He talked about how for Omoding the studio work with other artists represents a refuge from a hostile environment. Marchand showed how the art studio offers Omoding not only a supportive community of fellow artists, but also how the practice of producing art itself – as dwelling in artwork – is providing him with stability, safety, and the feeling of being at home.

The keynote on the next day, given by Maja Povrzanović Frykman from Malmö University, was in turn an interesting presentation about the role of everyday objects and material practices in transnational migration processes. Povrzanović Frykman analyzed in her presentation how such objects establish connections between different homes and enable the continuation of familiar practices, which create experiences of stability and continuity for people on the move. Hence,

she found, they are of central importance for the creation of a sense of homeliness.

Alongside the keynotes, the audiovisual program, the various working groups and meetings, the poster sessions, the excursions and the general assembly, the congress consisted of 17 thematic streams covering several subject areas of ethnology, folklore studies, and anthropology. According to the conference handbook there were at times up to 21 panels taking place simultaneously. Hence, considering the large scale of the event, the organizing committee of the congress most certainly has to be complimented for having managed it very well to arrange and communicate the vast program in a comprehensible and logical manner.

For myself, those four sunny spring days in Göttingen have been filled with glimpses into research topics ranging from how Wicca practitioners reclaim urban space in Berlin to clashes surrounding major infrastructural projects, from the ways in which people inhabit digital space to translocal living practices, from the relationships between homes and the materiality of books to the rural home as a site of production and, of course, many more. The wide array of different topics was bound together well through the shared focus on the idea of dwelling. With it the organizers chose a central concept and leitmotif for the congress that is both timeless and topical and presumably has some meaning to most researchers dealing with aspects of everyday life.

From the many presentations I had the pleasure to see during the congress the following ones have left the strongest impressions. Firstly, the film screening *Three Art Probes – between Art Practice and Cultural Analysis* by Robert Willim from Lund University has to be mentioned. In the screening Willim presented three of his video works that all were examining the intersections between art and cultural analysis, and he offered a compelling and different take on the process of doing research this way. Also the paper *Proximate strangers: caring remotely on the west coast of Scotland* by Mackenzie Cramblit from Duke University left a positive impression. In it, Cramblit gave intriguing and vivid insights into the daily life of an isolated community in which the man-

aging of remoteness and the care for others are the primary ways for sustaining itself. Furthermore, Johann Mueske from Deutsches Museum in Munich presented an interesting study with his paper *When the future looked old: new social-cultural movements, and the re-scaling of an infrastructure in "Paradise" (Constance, 1960s-80s)*. In his presentation Mueske talked about the successful protests of citizens against plans for building an Autobahn through a neighborhood of Constance, a city in the Southwest of Germany. His paper showed how in conflicts like this one competing ideas about the quality and meaning of a place become manifest. Also materially, for which for instance the remnants of the over-sized bridge built for the ultimately unfinished Autobahn can be taken as a symbol.

The four conference days had passed by very fast and, at least for myself, it was almost within the proverbial blink of an eye that the last day and the closing event had arrived. At said last evening Hermann Bausinger, professor emeritus at the

University of Tübingen, explored the aging process, novel categories of old age(s), and the development of housing conditions in his closing keynote *Dwellings and Dwindlings*. Afterwards, the concluding remarks by Beate Binder from Humboldt University Berlin, Walter Leimgruber from the University of Basel, and by the congress convenor and host Regina Bendix of the University of Göttingen officially closed the congress, and then released the delegates to prepare themselves for the conference banquet and the final party later that night. Over the course of the four days it was also announced that the 14th SIEF congress will be taking place 2019 in Santiago de Compostela in Spain. Lastly, it can also be revealed that during the congress Helsinki too has officially thrown its hat in the ring to be considered as a possible location for the 15th SIEF congress in 2021, which may be a piece of information of particular interest for the readership of this publication.

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