Making things matter

Meaning and materiality in museum displays

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Abstract: *An international and trans-institutional study, the present postdoctoral project analyses the production of prehistory, art history and cultural history in various museum displays in Berlin, Copenhagen, London and Stockholm, from c. 1880 to c. 1920. The collection galleries and permanent exhibitions are analysed as interfaces of meaning and materiality, with a focus on the different concepts of knowledge that were brought into play when making history, namely scholarly knowledge, aesthetic experience, didactic learning, technical expertise and notions of how to live well. More specifically, the project combines two theoretical perspectives, the poetics of display and displays as mediations, and analyses how museums made history through more or less locally decided interconnections of moral models, display techniques, historical remains and reproductions, and didactic, epistemological and aesthetic ideas. The three-year project, 2015–2018, is conducted partly in the aforesaid cities, and chiefly at the Centre for Museum Studies, IKOS, University of Oslo.*

Keywords: Meaning and materiality, concepts of knowledge, knowledge production, prehistory, art history, cultural history, museum displays.

The present postdoctoral project focuses on the period when museum curators across Europe began to address issues on how to produce knowledge in museum displays for the newly identified mass audiences. Didactic concepts and display techniques from popular education, art academies and world's fairs were brought into play in museums during the latter half of the nineteenth century, introducing new ways of creating *permanent exhibitions*, in addition to the established *collection galleries*. Various kinds of room interiors and object exhibitions were established, of which some

types are still produced today, although with other narratives, for example the *American Wing Period Rooms* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, reopened in 2009 with new rooms added, and *Modern Society* in 1975, five (re)constructed buildings opened in 2012 at Jamtli, a major open-air museum in Östersund, Sweden.

Around 1900, narratives presented in both permanent exhibitions and collection galleries, that is to say, in *museum displays*, were regarded as lasting scholarly knowledge in the fields of prehistory, art history and cultural history.

Fig. 1. The Ceramics Gallery of the Danish Museum for Decorative Art, Copenhagen. Illustration: Emmery Rondahl, 1896. Photo: National Library of Norway.

Certainly, curators and scholars considered the continuous addition of new discoveries to the established room interiors or series of objects as an improvement of this knowledge. Their overarching project, however, was not to remake the concept of scholarly knowledge, but to make this knowledge more detailed and nuanced as well as accessible to and meaningful for the so called mass audiences. These knowledge processes were remarkably varied in different museum displays, as scholarly knowledge were – or were not – combined with other concepts of knowledge, such as aesthetic experience, didactic learning, technical expertise and notions of how to live well.

In the present project, the recognition of the

range of historical and semantic meanings as well as exhibitional and object materialities of prehistory, art history and cultural history will be used, together with an awareness of the different concepts of knowledge, as a horizon in which the specific analyses are situated (cf. Koselleck 1972, Janik 1996, Gumbrecht 2004). Exploring the ways of building knowledge in museum displays, from c. 1880 to c. 1920, the project will, firstly, analyse the new didactic concepts and display techniques, and, secondly, explore how they were intertwined with aesthetic and epistemological concepts and display techniques of the same period. How were prehistory, art history and cultural history built in museum displays with new

visitor groups in focus, and by intertwining didactic, aesthetic and epistemological notions with moral models, display techniques and historical remains and reproductions? How did these museums make things matter by interconnecting specific meanings and materialities, thus creating various collection galleries and permanent exhibitions?

AN INTERNATIONAL AND TRANS-INSTITUTIONAL STUDY

The overall purpose of the postdoctoral project is to analyse the various ways to build

prehistory, art history and cultural history between c. 1880 and c. 1920 in the collection galleries and permanent exhibitions of the following museums: Kaiser Friedrich-Museum, Kunstgewerbemuseum, Königliche Museum für Völkerkunde: Prähistorischen Abteilung and Museum für deutsche Volkstrachten und Erzeugnisse des Hausgewerbes in Berlin; Dansk Folkemuseum, Det danske Kunstindustrimuseum and Nationalmuseet in Copenhagen; British Museum: Department of British and Mediaeval Antiquities and Ethnography and South Kensington Museum, later Victoria and Albert Museum, in London; Nationalmuseum:

Fig. 2. *The Hindeloopen Room in the Museum of German National Costumes and Domestic Industries, Berlin. Illustration: Ewald Thiel, 1899. Photo: State and University Library Bremen.*

136 Konstslöjdfadelen, Nordiska Museet and Statens Historiska Museum in Stockholm.

The project thus focuses on the complex area of collection- and exhibition-making internationally and trans-institutionally. With the aforesaid concepts of knowledge in focus, it explores why some of the established types of museum displays were *maintained* in certain museum settings, whereas, in other museum settings, they were *replaced* with new types. Hence, the project discusses the following three open, broad questions: Why did the museums mentioned above decide to *change* or *maintain* their displays, and how did they shape practices of their decisions? Were there major paradigmatic changes in display-making that took place in a broad variety of museums in Berlin, Copenhagen, London and Stockholm? Or, were the changes in display-making, or the maintenance of certain types of museum displays, limited to specific localities, specific sorts of museums, specific scholarly disciplines or specific art movements?

As a tentative point of departure, the project analyses and compares three types of productions of prehistory, art history and cultural history through the use of the historical meanings and exhibitional materialities of the following concepts: 1) *history as a popularized and true image of times past*, produced during the second half of the 1800s through *atmospheric* interiors and cottages with historical and reproduced objects; 2) *history as popular science*, produced in the late 1800s and early 1900s through *non-atmospheric* interiors with *authentic* objects; 3) *history as science and scholarly knowledge*, produced in the latter half of the 1800s and the early 1900s through *non-atmospheric* collection galleries and period rooms with *authentic* objects. In consequence, the following concepts are vital for the study: *popular/popularized, authentic/true and*

atmosphere/mood (*Stimmung; stämning*). As museum-relevant focal points, these concepts provide the project with its pertinent research tools, that is, concepts that are precise enough to limit the scope of the international and trans-institutional study, yet multi-faceted enough to enable the analysis of the diversity of history-making in displays.

A COMBINATION OF MUSEOLOGY AND HISTORY OF SCIENCE AND IDEAS

The museum as a place of learning, science and art has been studied in previous research, although not all three areas within one study. The work of art as a gateway to aesthetic experience and to an art historical search for knowledge has been described as the corner stone for the Altes Museum in Berlin and for the reorganization of the National Gallery in London (Wezel 2003, Klonk 2009). For example, Elsa van Wezel writes that Schinkel, the architect of the Altes Museum, “assumed that art was not exclusively historical, but also ‘time-transcending’”, or, in other words, that it was both a source of human knowledge and a revelation of the eternal divine (2003:52). This aesthetic notion of an eternal side of art was linked both to the idea of art as making modern humans happier and of art museums as places of rest. Similarly, museums of ethnography and cultural history around 1900 have been described as situated between science and art, however deploying other ideas of scholarly knowledge and artistic design than the aforesaid art museum (Conn 1998, Stoklund 2003, Bäckström 2012). In my thesis (2012), I have for example shown how “ideal realism” in aesthetics and “naturalism” in epistemology were intertwined with artefacts, thus creating museum cottages at the open-air museums in Stockholm, Copenhagen and Christiania

(present day Oslo), which were presented as ethnographically correct and morally uplifting for museum visitors.

Comparative analysis, in an international setting, have been the method of two extensive research programmes, conducted 2008–2011 (Meijers *et al.* 2012) and 2010–2013 (Aronsson 2011). These programmes have however not focused on the construction of knowledge, for example issues addressed in the present postdoctoral project about didactic, aesthetic, epistemological, technical and practical elements of history-making in museums, and the significance of their immaterial and material sides in collection galleries and permanent exhibitions. Instead, their focus has been on the uses of the past by various ways of constructing identity and nation, for example on the study of “local variations on the theme of ‘national identity’” (Meijers *et al.* 2012:2) and on national museums, “defined and explored as processes of institutionalized negotiations where material collections and displays make claims and are recognized as articulating and representing national values and realities” (Aronsson 2011:1).

The new museology of last decades has studied museums and their displays as places of a knowledge production and dissemination situated within and to a high degree determined by historical, political, aesthetic and/or social conditions (Vergo 1989, Hooper-Greenhill 1992, Bennett 1995, Conn 1998, Macdonald 1998, Penny 2002, Whitehead 2009). The production of knowledge in museums has been analysed and contextualized in such studies – certainly in various ways, for example by emphasizing the history of museums as practice and “effective history”, without a founding origin and a developmental flow, and as discursive formations within an “episteme” (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, Bennett 1995). Current research on museums also comprise

studies that focus on museum curators as historical agents, and changes in museum interiors as products of more or less conscious ideas on the part of these curators (Klonk 2009), but also, as Steven Conn puts it, by “treating museums as the sites of intellectual and cultural debates, where the prevailing cultural ideas and assumptions of [...] society were put on display and where changes in those assumptions were reflected” (1998:12f.). Hence, the broad field of new museology comprises both discourse analysis and hermeneutical interpretation, of which the present project with its focus on meaning and materiality is closer to the latter. “In such a model,” writes Johan Fornäs, “materiality is not an alternative to meaning, but its irreplaceable partner. For human beings, there is no materiality that is not immediately surrounded by clouds of signification” (2012:511f.)

Many museological studies limit their scope to one kind of museum (art museums: McClellan 1994, Klonk 2009; science and natural history museums: Macdonald 1998, Beckman 1999; folk and cultural history museums: Hillström 2006, Jong 2007). The present project finds its *raison d'être* when it problematizes these historically drawn boundaries by taking a broader spectrum of museums into account and analysing their displays trans-institutionally as places where various concepts of knowledge were brought into play when constructing prehistory, art history and cultural history. Albeit the present project has a trans-institutional character, its approach of analysing displays through concepts is close to the research ambition described by Charlotte Klonk. For example, Klonk states that concepts – in her case *experience*, in my case *knowledge* – are far “from being trans-historical” and that they “are susceptible to quite dramatic change” (2009:9). In concurrence to her statement “that

Fig. 3. The Dalecarlia Room in the Nordic Museum, Stockholm. Collotype: Justus Cederquist. Postcard, c. 1907.

experience has a history, and gallery rooms are good places to find it" (2009:9), I argue that knowledge has a history, and that museum displays are good places to find it.

MUSEUM DISPLAYS AS INTERFACES OF MEANING AND MATERIALITY

Attempting to understand the forms of museum displays on their own terms at a profound moment of change – a typical pursuit in media archaeology and media history – the present project focuses on the combination of an analysis of *meaning* and *materiality* (Fornäs 2012, Parikka 2012). Hence, the project takes as its starting point the theories of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and looks upon the

museum display as an "interface of meaning and materiality" (2004:12). As Gumbrecht states, it is not possible to keep "a meaning complex" separated from its "mediality, that is, from the difference of appearing on a printed page, on a computer screen, or in a voice mail message" (2004:11f.). The museum display is clearly a medium that carry messages too, for example historical, aesthetic, moral or heritage narratives shaped by the selection of pertinent concepts, display techniques and historical remains and reproductions.

To be able to investigate the various ways to build prehistory, art history and cultural history in museum displays, as well as to focus the study, the project combines two theoretical perspectives: *the poetics of displays*

and *displays as mediations*. On the one hand, it examines the “poetics” of museum displays, thus assuming, as Stephen Bann puts it, “that it is possible, in certain special circumstances, to reconstruct the formative procedures and principles which determined the type of a particular museum, and to relate these procedures to the epistemological presumptions of our period” (1984:78). On the other hand, the project examines, in accordance with media history, museum displays as specific mediations (Ekström 2004). Concerning the term “mediation”, Anders Ekström writes that it does not only refer “to how science is represented, but to how the practices of science are actively adjusted to a media situation and its presumed logic. In that sense, the exchange with different audiences affects both how science is carried out and how it is depicted, something that may be analysed in terms of style or ‘performativity’” (2004:16f.).

The combination of the two theoretical perspectives makes the present study of the museum display as a wickerwork of various ideas, techniques and artefacts possible. To take all of this into account is important when analysing the diversity of ways to build prehistory, art history and cultural history in museum displays – ways that cannot, *in a simple way*, be linked to the boundaries between different scholarly disciplines, between different art movements, between different kinds of museums and between different countries. In addition, the concepts of *popular/popularized*, *authentic/true* and *atmosphere/mood* operate as museum-relevant focal points for the two theoretical perspectives, hence establishing the scope of the study. “Concepts are”, Reinhart Koselleck writes about conceptual history, “concentrations of many semantic contents” (1972:20). Consequently, the project analyses, in accordance with Helge

Jordheim, “the historical and semantic layers inherent in these concepts” (2009:15), that is, the aforesaid concepts of the project, with reference to didactic, epistemological and aesthetic practices of the period. Moreover, informed by Gumbrecht’s thoughts on materiality (2004), it analyses the *material and exhibitional* layers inherent in the aforesaid concepts, with reference to specific mediations, display techniques and historical remains and reproductions at the museums.

The project thus deploys a method of analysing the “materialities of communication” (Gumbrecht 2004:18), but also of analysing the “range of meanings” (Koselleck 1972:19) in these concepts. It also conducts comparative studies with an international and trans-institutional width. Clearly, in comparison to the extensive research programmes presented above, the present project is much more limited in scale when conducting its comparative analyses of the museum displays in the four cities. The study initially discusses the intertwinement of meaning and materiality in various types of knowledge production in museum displays. Then, it will discuss the ideas in didactics, epistemology and aesthetics of the period, which contributed in giving the concepts of *popular/popularized*, *authentic/true* and *atmosphere/mood* their meanings; this part will be limited to a study of current research about the historical meanings of the concepts (Trägårdh 1990, Wellbery 2003, Ekström 2004, Knaller & Müller 2005, Mairesse & Deloche 2011, Haag 2012). Finally, the historical meanings, as well as the exhibitional materialities, will be used as doorways to an in-depth analysis of the source material on the history-making at the museums in Berlin, Copenhagen, London and Stockholm.

In light of the purpose, theory and method, the present postdoctoral project addresses

140 two research questions: How did the aforesaid museums build prehistory, art history and cultural history by combining specific notions of *popular/popularized*, *authentic/true* and *atmosphere/mood* in their collection galleries and permanent exhibition between c. 1880 and c. 1920? How did they intertwine the immaterial and material sides of these notions with different concepts of knowledge, such as scholarly knowledge, aesthetic experience, didactic learning, technical expertise and ideas of how to live well? With these two research questions, the project is able to discuss the overarching problem of how these museums made history through their displays with new visitor groups in focus. How did they make things matter in their museum displays?

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