The Materiality of Museum Politics

Reflections on objects and agency in contemporary museum practice[1]

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The problem of museums and their objects

The focus on community involvement in museum practices may to a large extend be perceived as a reaction to the museums' apparent obsession with objects. In the recent debate on museums and exhibitions there has been a call for museums to focus on people rather than objects, and in the same vein museums are encouraged to shed their scientific authoritative voice and open for a more democratic approach to the museum as a public arena.

In a gross simplification the problem of the relation between museums and their objects can be seen as twofold: Not only have museums physically appropriated objects from communities all around the world but through the museumification processes of registration, classification and display, museums have also appropriated the intellectual rights attached to objects, and the right to contextualise the meaning of objects.

In other words, we may see the relation between museums, collections and communities as one of appropriation and alienation. Ethnographic museums have appropriated objects from populations all over the world and presented them in ways that have alienated the objects from the populations that originally produced and used these artefacts. Therefore, the ongoing focus on community relations may also be seen

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as an act of re-appropriation, giving the right to contextualise objects back to their original constituencies.

With the representational debate that has paved it's way into the museum world from the 1980's and onwards, not only the possibility of but also the power relations involved in representing culture through objects has been contested from both inside and outside the museum. Therefore museums have also recently tried out many different ways to deal with their objects.

At the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde in Leiden, Netherlands, the objects are foregrounded as objects of art, while the curatorial voice of the museum is limited to registration texts to be found on touch screens. In this sense all attention is attracted to the objects themselves (and, one may argue, the interior design of the museum) which may be seen as a way of giving the voice back to the objects, and through them the cultures that produced these objects.

At the Museum of World Cultures in Gothenburg, Sweden, the director Jette Sandahl has argued that since the objects of the museum's otherwise well-acclaimed collections do not reflect contemporary topics, these collections should not form the basis for the exhibitions presented at the museum. Therefore the main attraction at the museum's opening in late 2004 was an exhibition on 'AIDS in the age of globalization'. This exhibition showcased contemporary art works, video installations, NGO informational material, but none of the kind of objects we normally relate to museum collections.

In North America particular attention has been paid to establishing exhibitions based on collaboration with the exhibited communities. This kind of exhibition has probably been pioneered by the work at Museum of Anthropology at UBC in Vancouver but also exhibitions such as 'African Voices' at National Museum of National History in Washington DC and the much talked about National Museum of the American Indian can be seen as proponents of this kind of exhibition.

This is all well and fine. What I would like to raise a case against, though, is the tendency to see the objects of museum collections as somehow opposed to community interests, or indeed to 'people' as such, and in the call for 'de-museumification', which, I take, points to the need for tearing down both the discursive authority and the physical limitation of the traditional museum institution.

I am fully aware of the highly questionable histories of many colonial museum collections and I am definitely positive towards the idea of strengthening relations between museums and communities with all kind of extra-museal activities. Still, I will question if the focus on de-museumification and de-objectification actually ignores a great potential in museums, and if they reflect an understanding of objects that to some extend reproduces the static picture of the traditional society that the representational debate and community based directions in museum ethnography originally wanted to tear down.

In this paper I will make two arguments. First, I will argue that ethnographic museum may profit from new perspectives in the anthropology of art and material culture that focus on the agency of objects rather than on objects as cultural identity markers or cultural communicators.

Second, I will argue that the museum, by playing on its particular relationship to objects – and by sticking to its bounded space – can play a vital role in what we may

call the ‘tangibilization’ of an otherwise disintegrated public discourse. By doing this museums may also offer a vital platform for the exposure of community interests to the wider public.

Objects and agency

The idea of objects and agency may be seen as a response to the efforts to categorize objects in almost grammatically meaningful schemes. A large part of the anthropological interest in objects has tried to fix objects either according their functional aims or as bearers of messages that could be deciphered by the skilled analyst.

The recent anthropology of art, particular since Alfred Gell’s posthumously published work *Art and Agency*, breaks with the aesthetic and semiotic understanding of art works and focuses instead on the relational aspect, drawing on Mauss’ classical theory of the gift. Like the gift carries the spirit of the donor – that can be distributed in time and space – so, Gell argues, the art object carries the intentionality of the artist (Gell 1998: 12-26). By producing a work of art the artist is capable of spreading his or her intentions in time and space.

This may seem quite straight forward, but what is central to the argument is that the art object is not necessarily the kind of objects we have usually called ‘art’ in our categorisations of museum objects. An art object in this perspective is any material object that is capable of carrying social intentionality (Gell 1998: 13-17). Gell argues that the trap may be seen as the archetypical art work since, by looking at the trap, the spectator is capable of deducing the intentions of the person that has produced the trap – how he or she wants the animal to be attracted to the object, and how the trap will catch the prey. In other words, by use of a material object, the artist has externalised his or her mind into the social world (Gell 1996).

Furthermore, the trap is an archetypical art object since the aim of the art object is exactly to entrap the spectator, to catch his or her flow of consciousness and impose the social intentionality of the artist on the spectator.

The British museum anthropologist Michael O’Hanlon has used the concept of agency to describe how museum collections embody what he calls ‘frozen agency’. While museum collections have often been described as stores of looted goods or chambers of ghost-like objects that have been detached from their ‘natural’ social

environment, O'Hanlon argues that while this is true for many collections, we do find a number of collections in our museums that act as 'genuine intercultural documents' embodying both the agency of the collector and of the local communities (O'Hanlon 2001:214-215).

O'Hanlon reflects on how his own collection of artefacts from Papua New Guinea actually reproduces the social organisation of the people he collected among. Because his main informants were quite clear about from whom and where he was going to collect his objects, the collection actually reflects the patrilineal organisation of the society of his informants, more than his own scientific outset (2001:215-218).

Amiria Henare (2005) has detected the agency of objects in the old James Cook collections found in Scottish museums today. Through a sort of archaeological scrutiny of the objects and the techniques used for producing the textiles in these collections, she is able to trace the interactions between local communities and European discoverers already at the time of Cooks first visits.

These examples may sound unbearably academic, but they point to the fact that while for many years we have been in the habit of perceiving museum collections as mere colonial appropriations that may only come to life when offered to display in exhibitions on contemporary (political) concerns, a return to a more detailed scrutiny of these objects and the related archival material may in fact propose a *historicity* (Hirsch & Stewart 2005) of the interaction between local communities and collectors that go beyond the stereotypic image of oppressor and oppressed that has been so central to ethnographic exhibitions for many years.

Furthermore, these interactions are not merely historical events, but continue up to the present. At a recent visit at the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver I was told how local communities had sanctioned the display of certain ceremonial objects in the museum's open storages since these objects might potentially harm young and uninitiated members of the tribe. At the same place the museum staff had also agreed to handle rattles used for ceremonial activities only in such a way that they did not make any noise and thereby activated their inherent spiritual forces.
In this sense museum objects continue to be absolutely pivotal to the interaction and the understanding of the nature of the relation between the museum and the communities, an understanding we may expand on by returning to our collections and make them objects for further studies.

Making things public

The second general point I would like to make concerns the museum and the exhibition as a limited space.
In her recent work in Scottish-Maori relations and their presence in contemporary museum collections and exhibitions, Amiria Henare (2005) traces how objects became focus not just for imperial and interpersonal exchange during the time of imperial settlement in New Zealand. Objects were also central to the development of the epistemologies that legitimated the processes of colonisation.
In the dawning of evolutionary thinking, Henare traces what she calls an 'object-based epistemology'. The ethnographic artefacts of the colonies were not simply seen as illustrations of established theorems but were intimately involved in the development of ideas about the evolution of mankind and, later on, the spread of ideas and inventions through cultural interaction. The fact that it seemed possible to classify objects according to the materials used, the skills needed for producing them, and their functional aims generated the idea of the evolution of mankind.
We all know too well how this in practice resulted in the establishment of the ethnographic museum as an institution of Western self-celebration, stripping the objects of their social embeddednes and re-installing them in the evolutionary museum display.
What I would like to stress, however, is the potential of objects in generating human thinking and in the establishment of both concrete and imagined social relations. The

idea of ‘object-based epistemologies’ points to the centrality of objects in human thinking – *how we are thinking through things*.

While this idea may sound a bit far fetched to some, in a gathering of museum people like here, it should not be that distant. I guess most of us have experienced in the process of making an exhibition how the ideas we have discussed first really settle when somebody makes a drawing – that is, an object – we all can relate to, or when objects are taken out of the store, and we experiment with how to arrange them.

I will suggest that we may expand the idea of an object-based epistemology to the exhibition itself. One place where I think they have done this with some success is at the NMAI in Washington. Here, the exhibition ‘Our People’ on Native American history opens with a display of pre-columbian anthropomorphic figurines. Opposed to this we have the wall of gold installing gold and silver objects from the collections like a radiating sun. In other words by the use of objects we are, in a single image, presented with the populations living in the Western hemisphere before 1492, and the object of desire that attracted new populations.

What I find interesting in this display is also the way it implicitly plays on the powerful agency of the objects. The statues incarnates the persons of the ‘un-discovered’ world reclaiming their existence, and the gold reflects how the presence

of a much desired material was central in establishing the relations between populations from what was at that time different worlds.

These ideas are further developed as one walks around the corner. The wall of guns plays on the agency of guns in the history of the Americas. Guns have been potent agents in acts of repression, rebellion, intertribal warfare, and the subsistence of populations all over the continent.

I will argue that by using objects and the museum space for creating such potent images in a public space the museum can make up a central space for the exchange of ideas between different parts of the population.

In this way the museum may also reinvent its position as a central place for what Bruno Latour has called *making things public* – that is, creating tangible things out of a dispersed public debate, and creating a *thing* in the old norse conception of the word as a gathering of both people and subject matters (Latour 1995: 14-17). In the catalogue for the exhibition *Making Things Public – Atmospheres of Democracy* at the ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany, Latour argues that political debate today is so dispersed and de-centralised that we need gatherings to re-collect political life.

As such he has argued for the museum as a central space for creating public spaces that do not just assemble people but also create images of the social life we are all a part of. While public discourse have dispersed into debates on ecological, economical and social issues establishing each their expert area with each their key experts, Latour argues for the need to re-assemble social life to reflect on how water, for instance, is not just an environmental concern but just as much a social, political and economical one. And the museum as a public space producing tangible things out of our common concerns offers a privileged space for creating such assemblages.

To do this, we will have to accept the museum as an artificial quasi-ritual space that exactly thrives from demarcating itself from the normal flow of social life. If processes of de-museumification try to break down the limits between the museum and 'the world outside' we may just as well argue for the potential in up-keeping a clear demarcation of the difference between the museum and ordinary social life. In this sense the power of the museum lies exactly in creating images that draw to the front the currents of social life that we do not reflect upon in our everyday activities.

Summary

In this paper I have argued that ethnographic museums may profit from an understanding of objects that focus on agency. The idea of agency turns our attention to the way objects operate in social interactions. In this sense objects are not to be categorised according to their proposed role in some kind of material culture (in the sense of reflecting an immaterial mental culture), but are rather understood as integral parts of the creation, destruction and reconstruction of social worlds.

Furthermore, I have argued that the museum should be careful not to tear down the physical and conceptual borders between the museum and the surrounding society. Working with the museum as a quasi-ritualistic space, we may be able to reinvent the museum as a space for tangible presentations of dispersed discourses. This should be done with an eye to not only creating conceptual assemblages, but also concrete, physical assemblages of people concerned with the subject matters presented in the museum.

In sum, what this all come up to in relation to the question about museums and communities is a questioning of the concept of *representation*. The representational debate was a critique against the Western hegemonic representation of other cultures through a Western, scientific perspective. This caused the development of two general approaches to making ethnographic exhibition from the 1980's and onwards: the critical museology, exhibiting the distorting representational practices of the museum; and the community exhibition involving the represented communities more or less directly in the development of exhibitions.

I don't have any case against the participation of 'outsiders' in projects based at the museum. But we have to be aware that while former styles of ethnographic exhibition have displayed distorted images of non-Western populations, the idea of self-representative community exhibitions entails a risk of simply flipping the coin and creating another kind of reification of culture. Surely, this kind of reification is based on a 'We are' rather than a 'They are' – but still a reification of certain groups of people. Such an approach carries the risk of presenting the exhibited communities as encultured populations opposed to the de-cultured rationalised general audience.

To radically oppose the reifying mechanisms of the museum I will suggest that we should deal with the ways in which people all over the world (both They's and We's) use objects and materials to come to terms with the social world in stead of using objects to create representative images.

This may look like the end of a concern of museums with communities to some. But rather, I will argue, it will suggest a road to integrate the We and They in the ongoing creation of social worlds of which the objects in museums have been and still are a central part.

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