

## 'Permanent Displays' as Unsettling Layers of Epistemologies, Politics and Aesthetics

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### Abstract:

This article argues that museum exhibitions often are formed through multiple layers. It presents readings of two contrasting exhibition narratives, the ethnographic display at the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo and the national history exhibition at Lillehammer Museum. While the latter speaks about the national self, the museum in Oslo addresses the nation's radical other. Despite this contrasting thematic focus, they have much in common. As centres for research and dissemination of knowledge, they are connected to the development of the academic disciplines of history and anthropology. This evolution with its shifts and ruptures are visible as traces, or layers, in the exhibitions. We argue that such multi-layered museum exhibitions may be understood as intersections of shifting disciplinary knowledge regimes, curatorial practices, and concrete political agendas. Such layers may appear as unintended subtexts that often create a sense of 'unsettlement' within museum exhibitions.

**Key words:** Museology, 'permanent displays', exhibition aesthetics, politics, epistemologies, exhibitionary layers, curatorial practice, National history, ethnographic exhibitions

### Introduction

Has the critical examination of museums that has been occurring over the last decades gone idle? This opinion has recently been voiced by several scholars and museum curators (Thomas 2016a, Wæhle 2017). According to Espen Wæhle, curator at the Norwegian Maritime Museum in Oslo, such critical museum studies once represented a necessary wake-up call. But now, as he sees it, the same arguments 'have been repeated over and over again for several decades without any acknowledgement of how the museum world in fact has awakened, been in a strong movement, and fronted considerable renewals' (Wæhle 2017: 135). He finds support in Nicholas Thomas recent book *The return of curiosity: What museums are good for in the 21st century*, where he encourages the restoration of playfulness and curiosity as approaches within museum studies (Thomas 2016b). A polarity is thereby established between curiosity on the one hand, and the critical deconstructive research ethos of contemporary museology on the other. This raises two questions: First, is it really the case that critical museology is incompatible with enthusiasm, curiosity and aesthetic sensitivity? Second, is it correct that current museologists fail to recognize an awakened museum world?

We reject the polarity of the first question, which not only seems constructed, but also highly unproductive. Critical perspectives have unquestionably opened up for new kinds of innovation, experimentation and stimulating visitors' experiences on the museum scene. But this process has also had its limitations. Thus, our answer to the second question is that the alleged awakening primarily has materialized in temporary exhibitions (Ramskjær 2018), while it to a lesser extent has influenced the more 'permanent' or 'basic' displays. Understandably, this is connected to the fact that such exhibitions generally are costly to produce. Moreover, they need to resist obsolescence in multiple senses, aesthetically, politically, epistemologically, and in terms of relevance and actuality.

The above arguments also call for a closer inspection of the relationship between academic museological interrogation and the professional practices in the museum. Even though the primary aim of academic scrutiny not necessarily is to impact museum practice, such external approaches may open up new forms of curatorial actions and understandings.

However, instead of the mere generalized institutional criticism that has tended to dominate museum studies, we hold that there is still a need of closer analyses that also take the museum exhibition as such more seriously. Furthermore, we propose that permanent exhibitions may be seen as multi-layered composites. Their layers are not only reflections of shifting knowledge regimes and concomitant changing curatorial practices, but are also related to concrete political agendas, such as state formation or post-colonial critique. Such layers may work as unintended subtexts, appendages, or deposits deriving from past epistemologies and practices. When set against current disciplinary concerns, the signatures from the past often create a sense of 'unsettlement'.

In this article we explore the exhibitionary layers and the tensions they cause by analyzing two contrasting exhibition narratives in Norway, the national history exhibition at Maihaugen, Lillehammer Museum and the ethnographic display at the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo. While the first speaks about the national self, the museum in Oslo addresses the nation's radical other. Despite this contrasting thematic focus, these institutions have much in common. They are both sites for the construction and dissemination of knowledge and have evolved with reference to disciplinary development of their related scholarly fields. But prior to analyzing our case exhibitions, it is necessary to clarify in methodological terms what it means to identify their different layers, the origin of these layers, and, finally, also to situate them in a wider context.

### Reading exhibitions

Museum exhibitions are multi-medial and multisensory constructions, consisting of objects, images, texts, design elements, scenography, sound, smell etc. (Bal 1996: 3; Kratz 2010: 15). Together they form a staged totality that may be challenging to analyze. As Mieke Bal points out, museum narratives are established in two ways: by objects exposed with accompanying information, and through the sequential character of the museum visit (1996: 4). The exhibition narrative is shaped by the way the visitor walks through the museum space, a movement that establishes coherence between the different elements. Mapping the main narrative is essential: Is it chronological or fragmented, with few or none interpretational cues, or is the visitor guided along the objects in a way corresponding to what Donald Preziosi terms a linear choreographed representation? (Preziosi 2011: 50).

However, analyzing exhibitions does not only entail a focus on the exhibitionary aesthetics, or the ways of telling. Asking questions about power and representation is also essential: whose stories are told – and to whom are they directed? Thus, both the exhibitionary poetics and politics are important (Karp & Lavine 1991, Lidchi 2006). It is necessary to be sensitive to more or less explicit subtexts. Moreover, exhibitions may also carry inconsistent, ambivalent and sometimes also contradictory elements. The myriads of details are often loaded with certain values (Kratz 2011) and shaped by particular historiographies and epistemologies. The balance between the inherent and inevitable tension between entertainment and the production of knowledge should be considered, as exhibitions also form part of the leisure industry (Beier-de Haan 2011: 196).

A final analytical movement is to situate the particular exhibit within its institutional context. This also involves considering the dynamic relations between all involved actors and related cultural practices: the museum's history and profile, the different epistemologies at play, interests, tensions, conflicts and preferences. Actions and choices made by the participating parties are all integrated in this common institutional field. As Michael Baxandall argues, the exhibition forms a field where at least three different actors independently are brought into play: object makers, exhibition makers and visitors (Baxandall 1991). Such relations are far from static, but complex, dynamic and vulnerable (Vergo 1989). However, as the first step when analyzing exhibitions is to see, experience, and articulate, let us turn to the exhibitions in question, to identify the layers formed by the various relationships, structures and tensions mentioned above.

### History of the nation as a multimedia time travel

Our first example, the exhibition *Slowly the country became our own* at Maihaugen, Lillehammer Museum, north-east of Oslo, is the most recent, ambitious attempt at exhibiting the history of Norway in the shape of a grand, totalizing narrative. Originally the exhibition was mounted as part of the cultural programme for the Winter Olympics at Lillehammer in 1994, but was also intended as a permanent installation. Now, decades later, the exhibition is still a main attraction in the museum. This museum is otherwise an outdoor museum with an impressive collection of buildings and objects from Norway's pre-industrial rural past. It was established in 1904, inspired by the world's first open air museums, Skansen, which had been opened near Stockholm in 1891.

Nevertheless, *Slowly the country became our own* did not draw on Maihaugen's vast collection, but was given a theatrical, postmodern design typical of its time. It was formed as a scenographic construction: a series of tableaux, or exemplary scenarios from Norwegian history, stretching from the Ice Age to the present. Thus, the exhibition offers a time travel in Norwegian history. Using effects, light, sounds, scents, images, slideshows and models, it aims to appeal to all senses, something which also is emphasized on the museum's website:

On your way through history the scent of tar tickles your nose as you pass by the boat builder from the Viking age. The wooden boards squeak as you walk over the pier in Lofoten. Your body shakes at the blast of a torpedo when your gaze is directed towards the daily life during World War II. Accompanied by the rhythm of the Rolling Stones, you walk through the post-war period<sup>1</sup>

The chronological walk-through narrative invites the visitors into the lifecycle of the Norwegian nation. The audience follows a pre-determined path through the 1200 square meter wide exhibitionary space. Glaciers from the Ice Age mark the starting point. A crack in the glacier leads into history and the closed universe of the exhibitionary space (Fig. 1). The cool air, the



Fig. 1. From *Slowly the country became our own* at Maihaugen Museum, Lillehammer 1994. Curators: Magne Velure/Olav Aaraas. Design: Gudmundur Johnsson. Photo: Camilla Damgård. Reproduced with permission from Maihaugen Museum.

bluish walls, and the sound of melting ice are gradually replaced by photographs of landscapes and nature, bird cries, running water and suggestive 'indigenous-sounding' music with drums and song. The first 'Norwegian', a long-haired woman (a naturalistic mannequin) appears. Dressed in fur, she is scraping a piece of animal skin. Further along, other scenarios meet the eye, such as a man puddling iron, and a horse with a plough (Fig. 2). These and other figures are all set in the context of landscapes or interiors painted on the museum walls (Fig. 3). Every tableau has its own soundscape, such as a crying baby in the Iron Age section, and, shortly after a panorama of Viking ships on the fjords, the mumbling sound of praying monks in the Medieval era.

The exhibition thus forms a story, where the glacier as an acting subject becomes the first to plough the land and prepare the space for people. Then the land takes over: It rises and starts to breathe. Nature becomes culture, and Norway is born. After its dramatic birth, the nation may begin the life that lies ahead, represented as the different stages of human life (Nyaas



*Fig. 2. From Slowly the country became our own at Maihaugen Museum, Lillehammer 1994. Curators: Magne Velure/Olav Aaraas. Design: Gudmundur Johnsson. Photo: Camilla Damgård. Reproduced with permission from Maihaugen Museum.*

1995:31). Thus, the nation's life-cycle starts with the blooming innocence of childhood, the Viking Age and the early Medieval period, and progresses through four centuries under Danish rule (1396- 1814). This period, often called 'the 400 years' night' by Norwegians, is labelled as 'a good night for gathering strength' in the exhibition. The next life-cycle stages are the 'teenage rebellion,' and the struggles for independence in 1814 and 1905, which marked Norway's liberation from Danish and Swedish rule respectively. This life cycle stage is manifested by leading figures of Norwegian national romanticism, such as a tableau of the artist Gerhard Munthe standing with painting brush, easel and palette in front of a beautiful Norwegian landscape. Finally, the narrative moves toward adulthood and the mature, yet also alienated, Norwegian life of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The process of industrialization is marked by a glimpse into the melting-hall of one of the country's earliest industrial sites. An audio-visual show follows, inviting the audience to take part in the everyday life of ordinary Norwegian families during World War II and the German occupation.



*Fig. 3. From Slowly the country became our own at Maihaugen Museum, Lillehammer 1994. Curators: Magne Velure/Olav Aaraas. Design: Gudmundur Johnsson. Photo: Camilla Damgård. Reproduced with permission from Maihaugen Museum.*



*Fig. 4. From Slowly the country became our own at Maihaugen Museum, Lillehammer 1994. Curators: Magne Velure/Olav Aaraas. Design: Gudmundur Johnsson. Photo: Camilla Damgård. Reproduced with permission from Maihaugen Museum.*

A sign with the word 'end of the road' marks the entrance to the post-war-period. The development of the Norwegian welfare state is the focus, represented by a car, the Volkswagen Beetle (Fig. 4), and a modern dental office. Pop music and modernist suburban architecture add to the historical 'colour'. Yet the exhibition does not paint an altogether rosy picture of this period. A drug addict in a subway entrance points to those excluded from the benefits of the welfare society. Western affluence is also contrasted with the new global realities: the ruined Berlin Wall, famine in Africa, atom-bomb testing, the Vietnam War, and finally also the environmental crisis, represented by a pile of garbage. Adding to the sense of alienation in this section, is the 'shock' of 'us' confronted with 'others'.

In simple terms, the message of the Lillehammer exhibition seems to be that the country, Norway, was there as a lump – just waiting for the ice to melt, so that the nation could be realized. Then a few Norwegians came tumbling out from somewhere, as the first seeds of a population that over the centuries slowly produced the Norwegian nation. They worked steadily on this nation-building project, only temporarily disturbed by Danish rule and German occupation, until Norway, finally, is confronted with the global realities of our time.

*Slowly the Country Became our Own* has maintained its popularity among tourists and visiting school children in particular since 1994. When it opened it was praised as radical and innovative. In hindsight, however, it is worth questioning whether the exhibition was ground-breaking also in a historiographical sense. Let us therefore take a closer look at the historiographies at work in this exhibition.

### Exhibition and historiography

When history as a scholarly discipline was in the making in mid-nineteenth century Norway, the ties between the university, the museum and the venues of national politics were close. Many museum and university scholars were, in addition to their professional activities, politically engaged. These first Norwegian historians did not pay much attention to the centuries of Danish rule. On the contrary, they were interested in themes and periods that could rhetorically connect to Norway's earlier independence (Skålevåg 2011: 175). Their making of the historical discipline was thus filtered by the legitimacy of their own battle for political independence in the present.

The work of Johan Ernst Sars, who was appointed professor in history at the University in Oslo (then Kristiania) in 1874, exemplifies this historiographic position. In his approach to Norwegian history, Sars tried to establish lines of connections by mapping internal causes conceived as continuous development. The nation's progression towards a state was the core concern. With the help of biological metaphors, the nation was construed as a natural entity. Thus, he managed to tie old and new history together in one single rhetorical figure (Skålevåg 2011: 196). A similar rhetoric is set in motion in *Slowly the country became our own*, where the application of an evolutionary model in the tradition of Sars makes it possible to speak about Norwegian history, including the eras when the Norwegian state was non-existent.

As a young nation, Norway did not get its constitution and independence until 1814 and 1905 respectively. In strict terms, *Slowly the country became our own* could therefore have started with these two important historic events. Yet, we may recognize Sars' historiography in the way the exhibition represents the country's evolution as a life span, stretching from the birth in the Ice Age to the adulthood of the present modern national state.

But it is also possible to trace other and more recent Norwegian historiographic tendencies in this narrative. The exhibition addresses a wide spectrum of political, economic, social and cultural issues related to Norwegian history. These tendencies point toward an attempt at transporting the totalizing historical approaches of the post-war period into the museum space. Furthermore, there are traces of the so-called modern grass-roots history; in other words, the New Social History tradition from the 1960s. In the spirit of Norwegian social democratic ideas, the exhibition takes the perspective of ordinary peoples' everyday life (Skålevåg 2011: 196-209). This is clearly stated by the museum's director, Olav Aaraas, in the foreword of the exhibition catalogue: 'This exhibition is not about great battles and conquests, about radiant princes and great commanders in the field. On the contrary, it exhibits the everyday life of the people who has lived in this country through thousands of years. That is an important history' (Aaraas 1994: 7).

Still, as noted above, while *Slowly the country became our own* emphasizes the importance and pertinence of its own particular take on history, it simultaneously carries the postmodern acknowledgment of its constructedness, and of being one approach to the past among many possible others. It comments on itself as such, through design elements that include allusions to fairy tales, inclusion of poetic text-elements and anachronisms. One example of such an anachronism, or a deliberate break with the chronological time-travel structure, is easily spotted in a model that declares itself as a representation of the Norwegian coastal city of Bergen from around 1850. Here a modern boat made of plastic speeds through the fjord, past characteristic nineteenth century sailing ships.

These features were perhaps included as an effort to come to terms with the demands presented in the museum debates at the time of its construction. In these debates it was frequently called for exhibitions that were more ironic, humorous and less pretentious (Nyaas 1995: 93-105). Nevertheless, despite such traces of more recent historiographic tendencies and attempts at postmodern distance and irony, the overall narrative of the Lillehammer exhibition is solidly placed within the frames of traditional Norwegian historiography with the nation as a core concern.

However, this is not particular to Norwegian historiography. In nineteenth century Europe, history as a scholarly discipline emerged simultaneously with a growth in nationalism. The young discipline was instrumental in the processes of rooting the new nation-states in history (Fossat et al 2009, Baldwin 2004).

Museums are products of the same processes. According to Peter Aronsson, national museum narratives are based on ideas of history as linearity, and of the formation of institutions and states as teleological (Aronsson 2011). Norway was only one of many new nations seeking historical identity after the dissolution of old empires. Thus, the narrative structure of *Slowly the country became our own* as well as its implicit historiography carries features that are not particular to the Norwegian context. As we shall see in the following, this also applies to theatrical exhibitionary aesthetics.

### **Time machine, theme park, and other national museum stories**

In 1994, *Slowly the country became our own* was considered innovative and refreshing in aesthetic terms. Today however, it appears outdated. The illusionary magic is gone. The once so radical elements of postmodern self-reflexivity including the kitschy-colour scheme of the panoramas, the scenography elements in cardboard and Styrofoam, as well as naturalistic mannequins of the displays (now slightly worn), have lost their seductive power. What thus becomes visible is how the exhibition carries the burden of its own historicity, its rootedness in the Disneyesque time-machine concept of the 1980s and 1990s.

According to Colin Sorenson, historic theme park 'time machines' gain their popularity by inviting the visitors into an entertaining experience of the past, with Disneyland as a prominent example (Sorenson 1997). Created as a manifestation of Americanness, it offers 'a bright, attractive conspectus of the nation's memories, stereotypes and fantasies, a sharable childhood for everyone, whatever the individual realities of race and creed might be' (Sorenson 1997: 62). In such displays, it is not history as linearity that is emphasized, but the craving for a close, sensuous encounter with certain points of time in the past, and the return to something that was once was there and now is lost. This desire for the past is accommodated by 'real', physical, sensory experiences of these distant pasts. *Slowly the Country Became Our Own* clearly caters for such memory cravings, but is at the same time anchored in nineteenth century linear nationalist historiography. As noted by Ilaria Porciani, this alternation between the past as event and linearity is a common feature of historical museums in general (Porciani 2015). The popularization of history in the museum space tends to involve the shifting between history and memory.

However, at Maihaugen, Lillehammer, such shifts between and linearity, history and memory are not novel as curatorial strategies. The institutional context is here important, as *Slowly the Country Became Our Own* is situated within one of Norway's first open air museums. It was only with the emergence of these museums, Anne Eriksen argues, that a distinctive national culture was defined in Norway (Eriksen 2009). Norway's open-air museums, including

the one at Lillehammer, was inspired by the founder of the Nordic Museum in Stockholm, Artur Hazelius (1833–1901) (Rentzhog 2007).

Hazelius aimed at providing his open-air museum with popular appeal by presenting the object collections within a realistic frame, as *tableaux vivants*. In its time this construction was featured as an 'ethnographic garden' (Rentzhog 2007: 24). The houses were populated, first by mannequins, later by living humans dressed in traditional costumes. In this way the museum paradoxically sought to mirror a lost reality, while at the same time inviting its audience to engage in an alluring escape from reality, in combination with theatre performances, dances, parties and other forms of entertainment (Rentzhog 2007: 33). A visit to the open-air museum offered learning as well as emotional experiences. Like Hazelius, Anders Sandvig (1862–1950), who founded Maihaugen, also had ambitions of creating an image of life in the past through realistic illusions. The aim was to provide the museum experience with authenticity, an encounter with 'real life' as it was lived before the rural houses were relocated to the museum (Eriksen 2009, Rentzhog 2007).

There is thus a continuity between the time travels of the open-air museum, and the exhibition experience offered by *Slowly the Country Became Our Own*. Similar to the way the open-air museum, Maihaugen, invites its visitors to wander back in time through its materiality (objects and buildings), this exhibition involves physical encounters with the past. Even so, the theatricality of *Slowly the Country Became Our Own* and its absence of authentic objects represent a totalizing evolutionary ambition that exceeds the efforts of its open-air predecessors.

Not to forget, this representation of Norwegian history and culture was obviously also connected to the exhibition's role as promotor of Norwegianness during the 1994 Winter Olympics. Despite the celebration of the exhibition's innovative features, there were also critical voices to be heard. Basically, the massive commodification of the national 'us' in the exhibition as well as in the Olympic cultural programme in general, became the subject of heavy debate. Many argued against the underlying notion of an inherited primordial national identity (Johansen 1995: 13), in line with the contemporary international critique of such forms of banal nationalism (Billig 1995).

Moreover, recent tendencies in both critical museology and historiography, also point to how nationalist historiography and historical representations tend to obscure important processes that make a nation a nation. The growing awareness of the transnational connections makes the notion of an autonomous nation-state highly problematic (Cohen and O'Connor 2004). A pivotal point in this line of argumentation is that nationalistic historiography has tended to harmonize processes that involve conflicts and complexities (Gardner 2004: 12). Thus, important histories are not told, as for example in the case of Norway and the history of the internal colonialization of the indigenous population, the Sámi peoples, in Northern Norway, or Norway and Norwegian citizens' participation in European colonialism. Also, by establishing the territorial borders of the nation state as a frame for analysis, those outside these borders inevitably become 'the others' (Fossat et al. 2009: 11). Let us turn to our second case, an exhibition that, on the contrary, is designed to represent the nation's others.

### **A disturbing bricolage**

Our second exhibition, *America. Present. Past. Identity.*, is the most recent permanent ethnographic display at the Museum of Cultural History. Opened in 2008, this exhibition focuses on the First Nation peoples and minority populations of both North and South America. Its thematic emphasis is identity, cultural heritage and human rights. The exhibition combines a conventional object-focused design with more contemporary anthropological perspectives. But what happens in the encounter between these current academic perspectives and anthropology as it unfolds in the museum space?

In contrast to the chronological order of the Lillehammer exhibition, the main structuring principle of *America. Present. Past. Identity.* at the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo is geographic. Visitors wander along the four walls, beginning with North America, and continue their journey through Central America and the Caribbean, before ending in South America. The middle of the room is dominated by a couple of large, airy cases displaying clothing associated

with the different peoples of the continent, carefully placed so that they mirror the geographical area of the corresponding cases along the wall.

Entering the room, the first object that meets the eye is a big wooden mask carved by a contemporary artist from the *Nisga'a* people of the North West Canada. Texts and photographs tell the story of the artist, the mask, its original use and how it ended up at the museum in Oslo. This presentation serves as an introduction to the famous potlatch ritual, as it has been performed both in the past and in the present. It also tells the story of how the income the artist earned by selling the mask was spent on a potlatch in connection with the erection of a totem pole as part of the opening of the *Nisga'a* people's own parliament.

In this way the mask serves as an exemplary object connected to the struggle of First Nations peoples around the world to protect and strengthen their identity, cultural heritage and living conditions. Multiple stories of these contemporary struggles are then addressed throughout the display. Information about cultural practices alternates with stories of the disappearing rainforest or more recent revitalizations of rituals. The focus on the issues of concern for the peoples represented expands the conventional ethnographic exhibition as a map of the world and offer perspectives from current work in anthropology.

While the exhibition seeks to present contemporary anthropological perspectives, it is nevertheless shaped by the museum's available collections. Even though the collections have been recently complemented by more modern acquisitions, many of the objects and photographs originate from late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus, the nature of the America collections, once established to provide an encyclopaedic overview, affects the display in significant ways. Naturally these reflect the priorities of past collectors, who selected objects that they perceived as 'typical' of particular indigenous peoples. As a result, Native Americans are represented through objects which have iconic status in the Western imagination, such as the totem pole for the North West coast, or the feather headdress and ceremonial pipe or 'peace pipe' for the North American prairie peoples. Although partially muted, the history of these artefacts is embedded in the display scenarios encountered by the visitor, as well as the history of the museum and the scholarly disciplines attached. Notably, such objects on display may contradict the intended contemporary perspectives on identity.

Obviously, it has been a major challenge to present a whole continent in a room of approximately 200m<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 5). In this broad geographical frame, information of cultural practices alternates with stories of the disappearing rain forest or more recent revitalization of rituals. The display includes a significant amount of text, often presented as charts, either on the walls or within the cases. The texts reveal the exhibition makers' awareness of the dilemmas presented by the nature of the collections. In each case there is a presentation of a 'before' and 'now', which contrasts with the characteristic use of a timeless 'ethnographic present' (Fabian 1983) common in conventional ethnographic displays.

Thus, the more abstract issues addressed in the textual framing contrast markedly with the museums other and older permanent ethnographic displays. For instance, whereas the Americas display addresses the contemporary struggles for identity and rights, the Arctic display on the same floor, which opened in 1993, works in a classic ethnographic mode of timeless, functional and descriptive categories such as hunting, fishing methods, or types of housing. There is also a sharp visual contrast between the Americas and Arctic displays. The Arctic display is marked by its extensive use of ethnographic tableaux. Framed by large photographs, the models, mannequins and ethnographic objects are presented as a series of scenes showing various aspects of the life worlds of Arctic peoples. The emphasis here is different forms of ecological adaptation, livelihood, settlement pattern and nomadism, social organization and ritual practice. The photographs contribute significantly to the effort of presenting peoples and life forms in their 'natural' habitat. In the Americas display, the walls are lined with copies of the museum's original display cases (Fig. 6). But this exhibition also features contrasting cases of newer design with large glass surfaces and discrete and unobtrusive metal frames. Whereas the overall design in the Arctic display is aimed to parallel and accord with the anthropological narratives of life-ways, the design in the Americas display, on the contrary, with its conventional museum cases, does not in itself support the message expressed in the presented texts. Thus, the central exhibition story is not primarily told objects, but by the use of texts and photographs.



*Fig. 5. Exhibition shot from the Americas display, 2008. Curator: Michel Tisdell. Project leader: Tone C. S. Karlgård. Design: Torill Mugaas. Photo: Ann Christine Eek. Reproduced with permission from Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.*

The combination of old and recent objects, contemporary and historical photographs, and old and new design elements such as the display cases, all contribute to make the display appear as a bricolage, in multiple senses. But this multifaceted composite also carries a tension. The design and the intended message move in different directions. Thus, the exhibition as a whole appears as a compromise; as an attempt to combine traditional exhibitionary practices with a contemporary knowledge paradigm to which it does not belong and even resists.

Together with the other permanent ethnographic displays, the Americas display indicates how the ethnographic display not only is a genre in change, but also, as it has been for the last decades, but also in a state of crisis. The museum staff are highly aware of the challenges involved, especially in connection to the permanent displays which were installed between 1993 and 2008. The anthropologists in particular expresses a major concern for what they see as a gap between contemporary anthropology and the nature of the permanent displays. According to one staff member 'All anthropologists agree that the permanent displays do not work.' The staff members identify several dimensions of the displays as particularly troublesome. Some argue that regionally or geographically based exhibitions are long outdated, while emphasizing the impossibility of presenting an entire continent in one room: 'Presenting Africa on 200m<sup>2</sup> is a difficult thing to do. Imagine presenting Europe in 200 m<sup>2</sup>. But this is what we do'.

Ethnographic realism as a dominant exhibitionary technique is also considered problematic. As one curator comments: 'The more realistically we present other peoples, the more ethical problems we stumble into'. Another problem is the way the collections and exhibition conventions are rooted in colonial culture and European worldviews, with its inherent stereotypes and exoticism: 'We provide glossy images of something born out of European myths and European dreams'. 'There is so much annoying in these exhibitions that you just have to close your eyes and walk by' were among the comments made to us.

The frustration the museum anthropologists express is not unique: The discomfort is widely shared among museum curators more generally, and is connected to the crisis of representation that marks contemporary ethnographic museums. As Alice Conklin has remarked,

'Curators of ethnographic museums today recognise the problem of past efforts of representation of other cultures but have yet to resolve them' (Conklin 2002: 290). The divergence between contemporary anthropology and ethnographic displays leads Dahl and Stade to suggest that the current crisis of representation in the museum is 'not so much one of representing others as representing anthropology – or representing anthropology's self-reflective, theoretically complex representation of others' (Dahl & Stade 2000: 170).

### The Making of Norwegian Anthropology and its Entanglement with Museum Practice

In some ways, the whole history of Norwegian anthropology is embedded within the design of the Americas display. On the one hand, it draws on historical curatorial practices of typologically ordered objects in line with the orientation of Norwegian anthropology toward German anthropology in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. On the other hand, it shows traces of the break with this German influence and the establishment of modern anthropology in the post-war period.



*Fig. 6. Display case from the Americas exhibition, 2008. Curator: Michel Tisdal. Project leader: Tone C. S. Karlgård. Design: Torill Mugaas. Photo: Ann Christine Eek. Reproduced with permission from Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.*

The ethnographic exhibitions at the museum in Oslo, for a long time a national centre of ethnographic research, were modelled on those in German museums. The exhibition halls were organized geographically, with one hall for each continent, filled with rows of display cases. The display cases were intended to draw as little attention as possible from the exhibited objects and were designed to function as a laboratory for the systematic and comparative study of material culture. Ethnographic specimens were the prime source for the study of 'man', with the fundamental premise that cultural difference was above all connected to geography (Zimmerman 2001). The German influence was mixed and even contradictory. It ranged from the Romanticist notion of 'Volkgeist', a national character given by nature or geographical origin; to the idea of diffusionism in terms of an emphasis on the origin of culture traits and their spread from one society to another (hence the ordering of objects into types). Evolutionist ideas drawn from German physical anthropology reflected in a geographically based cultural hierarchy, were also important (Eriksen 2008). The Americas exhibition refers to these earlier practices of presenting objects systematically, both according to geographic origin and types of objects.

However, it also includes fragments of tableaux and scenography, rooted in another era, the major change in exhibition practices at the museum in the 1970s. Prior to this change, and following the more general intellectual watershed in Norway after World War II, Norwegian anthropology turned from its German orientation towards British anthropology. Accordingly, Norwegian ethnographers increasingly conducted fieldwork, and became social anthropologists. Anthropology continued to thrive, refine and develop in Norway during the 1950s and 1960s, both in terms of method and theory, a development that also influenced the museum with its growing staff of anthropologists and students. The influence from British anthropology began to leave its mark on the temporary exhibitions and, slowly, also on the permanent displays. At the same time, the disturbance of the systematic typological ordered objects increased. Occasional contextualizations appeared in some of the display cases, such as fragments of ethnographic scenes, with mannequins or other scenic elements.

This transformation of the exhibitionary order became more radical during the 1970s and 1980s. The process was headed by Fredrik Barth, professor at the museum from 1974 and a leading figure of Norwegian anthropology at the time. Barth and his colleagues aimed at renewing the exhibitions in all senses, providing a more up to date, systemized, and sharpened content (Fig. 7). As Barth himself wrote in an internal note in 1976: 'The museum must during the years to come put much effort into the permanent exhibitions, which for some time now have become increasingly obsolete and scientifically unacceptable'.<sup>2</sup> The museum should be, he argued, an arena for modern anthropology, and thus replace, as he wrote, 'cultural history or old perspectives such as diffusionism'.<sup>3</sup> The exhibitions had to change accordingly. Research and exhibitions should be brought back together.

In order to realize these ambitions, the anthropologists needed help. In line with the general tendency of professionalization within museums at the time, they hired designers. The main objective of the museum was also reformulated:

The central task must be to convey to the visitors a sense of cultural variation and the plurality of human life that may contribute to the understanding of our own time, and actively bring these perspectives to a largest possible audience.<sup>4</sup>



*Fig. 7. Deinstalling the permanent exhibitions. Photo: probably Elisabeth Sletten. Reproduced with permission from Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.*

The aim was to 'give rich and correct information' – but also influence 'the visitors' attitudes by fighting against irrational prejudices and create understanding of the values of other cultures'.<sup>5</sup> Thus, by showing realistic scenes of alternative modes of life elsewhere, the ambition was to enforce the power of the display so that visitors would reorient their understanding of their own reality as well as others'.

The museum's most radical move was to discard the display cases that had remained in place since the opening of the building in 1904. The objects were thus liberated from the cases and given a new role. No longer the primary focus of the display, they should have, together with photographs and other elements, expressed and dramatized holistic anthropological study. The exhibitions should have presented scenes from small scale societies instead of scattered objects. These stagings were carried out using dioramas and tableaux. In highly realistic terms they represented models of houses and compounds populated by mannequins.

Contemporary anthropology would then permeate the displays by subjecting local worlds to strict and objectifying analyses, organized in sub-themes such as gender relations, social status, economic exchange and social control. In this way, the displays were intended to recreate particular socio-cultural settings and provide rich presentations of different cultures and societies. In this way a form of scientific realism was added as an extra layer to that of ethnographical spectacle.

The minutes from the planning meetings held by Barth and his team show how the anthropologists considered it crucial that these sub-themes should reoccur across all the displays, in order to enhance their scientific value. This comparative method shifted from material typologies to human relations. As a consequence of these curatorial strategies, the objects lost their privileged position in the museum space: 'The collections of objects have a very limited value for research', Barth wrote in the note from 1976.<sup>6</sup> But he nevertheless admitted that they were valuable as props, or, as he wrote, for 'illustrative and pedagogical tasks'. No longer objects of scientific value, the objects became means to create illusions of the actuality and identity of particular places, and to fill this imaginary space with a sense of presence of people elsewhere. The idea was to draw the visitors into another world.

Barth and his team made several moves in order to maintain anthropological control. They emphasized for example that the exhibitions should, as far as possible, be based on the involved anthropologists' own research. Furthermore, diagrams, maps and, not least, texts framed the vivid ethnographical scenes with facts. This way of attempting to align the ethnographic displays with modern anthropology was part of a larger international development, prompted in particular by museums influenced by British anthropology.

### **Paradoxes and past layers**

In one sense the exhibitionary practice introduced at the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo in the 1970s represented a new kind of awareness of the fact that the choice of exhibition techniques and aesthetic composition really matters for the message one seeks to communicate. The former rows of crammed display cases were considered as unfit to communicate the new forms of anthropological knowledge. The major aim of such exhibitions, was, as we have seen, to mimic an original but absent social world, a world where ethnographic objects only are fragments of a larger totality (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 19-21).

However, one could ask to what extent these exhibitions really represented a paradigmatic shift. As observed by Sharon Macdonald and Paul Basu, 'very little innovation is without precedent in contemporary exhibitionary practice' (Macdonald and Basu 2007: 12) Although the exhibition language was altered in the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo, there were significant continuities that contributed to the reproduction of aspects of past knowledge and practice.

First, this form of staged realism was not new. Ethnographical tableaux and dioramas as a genre have roots at least back to the early nineteenth century (Griffiths 2002). Used both within and outside the museum context, the genre is often emphasized as an example of the close ties between the world of entertainment (such as human zoos and the ethnographic spectacles at the world exhibitions) and the scientifically-oriented museum world (Brenna 1999, De l'Estoile 2003, Røkkum 2005). Although aimed at updating curatorial practice in line with scholarly developments, the curatorial reform manifested in the new displays of the 1970s

and 1980s in the museum in Oslo, paradoxically evolved as a hybrid of nineteenth-century dioramas or tableaux anchored in colonial culture, and the contemporary anthropological study. It may seem highly contradictory to choose the theatrical strategy of the world fairs and human spectacles in an effort to bring the ethnographical exhibition in tune with contemporary anthropological research.

Second, the exhibitions also maintained the traditional geographical framing of the permanent ethnographic displays. Whereas the archaeology displays in the same building are organized chronologically, place remains the main structuring principle of the ethnographic displays. This spatial composition based on geographical regions represents the strongest thread of continuity in the museum's ethnographic displays. Furthermore, the museum as a gallery of non-European nations is in itself a legacy of an imaginary geography rooted in colonial anthropology (Driver 2001, Pels 2008).

This legacy is based on certain ontological assumptions of human identity and difference. Thus, human diversity is visualized and understood in terms of spatially discrete units – of people with a distinct and separate cultures. This way of mapping the humanity is further connected to the fundamental division between the Western and non-Western world.

Making ethnographic exhibitions as a map of the non-Western world contributes to perpetuate assumptions of the world pertaining to past ontologies and epistemologies. This is one of the main reasons why ethnographic museums continue to be highly problematic, as is evident in the critiques of Musée Quai Branly in Paris (Dias 2008; De l'Estoïle 2003 Price 2007). In fact, archive material at the museum in Oslo revealed that, in spite of the proclaimed aim to base the exhibitions on contemporary anthropological research, in practice, the museum anthropologists also used texts written in the late nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries as background material when making the exhibitions, and indeed used nineteenth and early twentieth century photographs to support this. However problematic, this was considered a necessity perhaps, as the displays covered the non-Western world, including areas uncovered by contemporary anthropology. This creates tensions within the authoritative statements of the museum. Yet, one could ask whether the cartographical organization of the exhibitions necessitates such old ethnographic perspectives, with a little bit of this and that in relation to form and content.

Third, at a time when Norwegian anthropologists, not least Fredrik Barth, were concerned in their own research with explaining social dynamics and change, the monographic displays they produced seemed to apply a strikingly static British structural-functionalist perspective (Shelton 2001). They were largely ahistorical, presenting societies as unchanging, as well as untouched by colonialism, modernity or modern state formations. Time freezes in these exhibitions. The focus was on adaptation and internal integration, not process and change. The rationality and functionality of life-ways elsewhere were emphasized. It seems paradoxical that the permanent displays reproduced perspectives that carried the very visions and notions of culture and society from which the anthropologists distanced themselves.

Furthermore, while the exhibition makers sought to subject the display to a strict anthropological control, one may question how total this control actually was. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues that this genre of display may in itself function to disturb the intended message. As she writes,

[...] mimetic displays may be so dazzling in their realistic effects as to subvert curatorial efforts to focus the viewer's attentions on particular ideas or objects. There is a danger that theatrical spectacle will displace scientific seriousness, that the artifice of the installation will overwhelm ethnographic artifact and curatorial intention (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1996: 21).

The aesthetic conventions framing the displays may direct the visitors gaze in a way that is in excess of the curators' objectives. Thus, drawing on an aesthetic practice so profoundly rooted in nineteenth century popular culture, might have unforeseen consequences.

Finally, to return to our main case, the Americas display at Museum of Cultural History: This exhibition exemplifies how the ethnographic display not only is a genre in flux, but also, as it has been for the last decades, in a state of crisis. The discomfort expressed by the museum staff in Oslo is connected to the crisis of representation that marks contemporary

ethnographic museums in general, fuelled by developments within anthropology as well as postcolonial critique.

### Ruptures and Continuities

Exhibitions articulate meanings through qualities of which their makers do not have full control. They may carry unintended subtexts, appendages or depositions deriving from past epistemologies and practices. Peter H. Hoffenberg describes how late nineteenth-century exhibition design developed as a 'self-referential exhibition tradition, with its own sense of memory and history' (Hoffenberg 2001). His observation may be extended to exhibitions in general. Sharon Macdonald likens the museum to an autograph book 'whose pages have been filled over many years, perhaps containing signatures whose original significance and meaning is now faded or lost on today's readers' (Macdonald 2001: 137).

It is precisely such signatures from the pasts that create the 'unsettlement' within the exhibitions discussed in this article. They keep the past alive in ways that may work against and even undermine contemporary perspectives in the displays. This is the core of the current crisis of the ethnographic display, and also the problem of national history displays: Accumulated layers of an unsettled past embedded in exhibitionary practices contribute to perpetuate aspects and visions of past epistemologies or knowledge regimes. It is not least through the aesthetic practices, such as exhibition organization and design that permanent exhibitions continue to be haunted by conventions and ideas of earlier times and contribute to create discrepancies between current status of academic knowledge production and museums as disseminators of knowledge. Both of our cases expose, in various ways, how the encounters between different traces of past and present disciplinary and aesthetic concerns create a sense of unsettlement. But our Norwegian cases are by no means unique to the Norwegian setting. The unsettlement we have described is echoed in the museum landscape worldwide.

The relationship between epistemology and representational practices is intricate. This complexity is evident in our case studies, as they expose tensions and contradictions between contemporary and past projects in the museum. The exhibitions materialize ruptures and continuities, as well as different and oppositional agendas and views of what a museum is and should be, and what exhibitions should do. They bear within them traces of both the history of the museum and the disciplinary history of history and anthropology – as well as layers of historical and aesthetic interaction.

Let us finally return to the starting point of this article. As we see it, contrary to what some of the recent criticism against critical museology have argued, critical scrutiny does not exclude the recognition of how museum exhibitions nevertheless continue to enrich, inform, fascinate and entertain. They also stimulate our curiosity and imagination. The French author J.M.G Le Clézio, who in 2011 curated an exhibition at the Louvre that combined a wondrous fascination with critical perspectives, describes his museum experience in the following way:

Museums are world, do not doubt it. Born out our coincidence, or if the word frightens, shaped like ourselves, through the imagination. Floating objects united by the wave and set in motion by the river flow, and through the will to conquer, theft, heritage and exchange. Nothing is stranger to them than chronology and order. It is the meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on the dissection table... Through their weak logic and ephemerality, they gain new life, a truth, a power. The worlds they came from, where are they? Forgotten, erased, transformed to dust, together with the hands, eyes and faces that created them (Le Clézio 2011).<sup>7</sup>

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Our translation. Original text: "På din veg gjennom historien kjenner du lukta av tjære river i nesen når du passerer båtbyggeren fra vikingtiden. Det knirker i plankene når du går over brygga i Lofoten. Kroppen ristes når torpedoen sprenges

mens blikket er rettet mot hverdagslivet under andre verdenskrig. Med rytmene til Rolling Stones går du gjennom etterkrigstiden." Lillehammer Museum's website: <https://maihaugen.no/Opplev-Maihaugen/Utstillinger/Langsomt-ble-landet-vaart-eget>, accessed 24.10.2019.

- <sup>2</sup> Fredrik Barth, "Universitetets etnografiske museums oppgaver: noen retningslinjer for avklaring og prioritering" (The tasks of the university's ethnographic museum: some guidelines for clarification and priorities), Unpublished note, 1976, in Torill Mugaas' archive 1989, Historical Museum, Oslo.
- <sup>3</sup> Barth, Mugaas' archive 1989, Historical Museum, Oslo.
- <sup>4</sup> Barth, Mugaas' archive 1989, Historical Museum, Oslo.
- <sup>5</sup> Barth, Mugaas' archive 1989, Historical Museum, Oslo.
- <sup>6</sup> Barth, Mugaas' archive 1989, Historical Museum, Oslo.
- <sup>7</sup> Our translation.

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