

De-scripting a Museum's Presence and Atmosphere: An Exhibition Experiment

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to study ways of highlighting presence and atmosphere in a concrete museum setting by means of H.U. Gumbrecht's presence theory, Gernot Böhme's definition of atmosphere and Madeleine Akrich's and Bruno Latour's script theory. The article is based on an exhibition experiment conducted at Faaborg Museum in Denmark where an artwork was exhibited in a temporary room with a door inviting visitors to enter one by one. The experiment was an attempt to highlight presence and atmosphere by de-scripting the museum's script. Twenty-one qualitative visitor interviews show that the enclosure was successful in turning the visitors' attention to the atmosphere of the museum space and the artwork itself. A significant number of visitors described in their own words their experience as a state of presence and these experiences were closely linked with the physical and social space of the museum.

Key words: Script, presence, atmosphere, Gesamtkunstwerk, social space

Introduction

In tandem with studies of affect, materiality and embodied experience, 'presence' and 'atmosphere' have in recent years gained a lot of attention in the humanities including museum studies (Bencard 2014; Bjerregaard 2015; Böhme 2013a; Gumbrecht 2004; Nancy 1993; Packer 2008; Runia 2006). However presence studies and atmosphere studies are seldom concerned with the experience of presence in concrete settings – even if scholars stress the importance of sensory experience. Accordingly, the aim of this article is to examine presence and atmosphere in a concrete museum setting by drawing on museological and experimental exhibition design approaches (Basu and Macdonald 2007; Gumbrecht 2004; Nancy 1993; Runia 2006). The article is based on an exhibition experiment conducted at Faaborg Museum in Denmark from autumn 2017 to spring 2018. The realization of the experiment was a small, temporary exhibition room with a door, a chair and a painting with an invitation to visitors to enter one by one across from a small 'waiting room' where visitors could sit and read while waiting their turn (Figures 1-4). The experiment was an attempt to highlight presence and atmosphere by *de-scripting* the museum's script, after French sociologists Madeleine Akrich and Bruno Latour's script theory (Akrich and Latour 1992).

The investigation involved a combination of museum analysis, exhibition experimentation and qualitative visitor interviews. The theoretical framework for the article is based on museological, aesthetic, sociological and phenomenological studies from Madeleine Akrich and Bruno Latour, anthropologists Paul Basu and Sharon Macdonald, art historian Charlotte Klonk, literary theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, philosopher Gernot Böhme, psychologist Steinar Kvale and others. The exhibition experiment was designed by the author as part of a three-year research project examining the relation between presence, art and museum.¹

The first half of the article concerns the theoretical basis of the exhibition experiment. The theoretical part examines presence as an object of study, the exhibition experiment as practice, the script theory including 'de-scripting' as method, atmosphere as a parameter in visitor studies, and lastly the research site as a 'Gesamtkunstwerk' and a social space. The second half of the article concerns the actual construction and evaluation of the exhibition experiment,

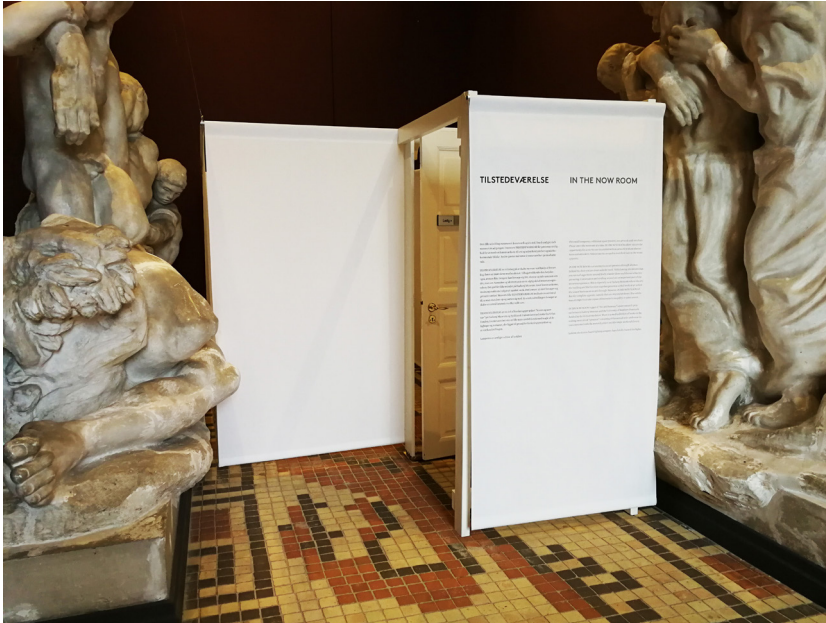


Figure 1. The temporary room. Photo: The author.



Figure 2. Inside the temporary room surrounded by Kai Nielsen's sculptures. Photo: The author.

which was built as a white cube and a space of solitude in an attempt to de-script the museum as Gesamtkunstwerk and a social space. The effect of the exhibition experiment is evaluated by means of 21 visitor observations and interviews.

This article's initial interest in presence is stimulated by one of the main challenges facing museums today. According to Charlotte Klonk (2015: 20), museums today need to find a more meaningful balance between interpersonal communication and private contemplation. Some researchers in philosophy and presence studies argue that spaces for presence, dwelling or aesthetic intensity have grown smaller in Western culture. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, for example, believes that the new and increasing attention towards presence is a symptom of its absence from contemporary culture (Gumbrecht 2004: 99). People long for presence because today's society leaves little room to experience it. Similarly author and art dealer Michael Findlay has recently argued in *Seeing Slowly* that contemporary art audiences need to slow down and 'just look' rather than concern themselves with wall labels, scholarly books and the opinions of others (Findlay 2017).



Figure 3. Inside the temporary room. Photo: The author.



Figure 4. The sculpture gallery, Faaborg Museum. Photo: The author.

From another perspective, museum researchers emphasize that museums and other cultural institutions need to accommodate users with different needs and preconditions, including those visitors who cannot simply 'let go' and indulge themselves, as Gumbrecht suggests, in aesthetic intensity in front of an artwork or an artefact. In *The Object Stares Back*, American art historian James Elkins argues that there is no such thing as 'just looking'. Looking is deeply embedded in cultural structures and social relations (Elkins 1997: 31).² Asking museum-goers to 'just look' can therefore be seen as blind to both the diversity of museum-goers and the governmentality of the museum. Navigating between these two positions, I argue that museums should have room for aesthetic contemplation – regardless of the embeddedness or otherwise of looking – but these efforts to create spaces for contemplation must not forget that museums are authoritative institutions of knowledge, social spaces, vehicles in the cultural economy and much more. Museums have never been neutral containers for artworks and artefacts.

De-description as strategy

The experimental exhibition room was designed as a de-scripting of the rest of the museum. The strategy of de-scripting the museum was developed as part of a small series of experiments examining artworks and museum spaces as sites of 'presence' using presence studies in combination with art theory and museology.³

Theoretical studies of presence describe 'presence' as a momentary aesthetic intensity involving both intellectual and bodily faculties. In *Production of Presence* Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht characterises presence as a negation to meaning: 'Presence and meaning always appear together, however, always in tension. There is no way of making them compatible or of bringing them together in one "well-balanced" phenomenal structure' (Gumbrecht 2004: 105). According to Gumbrecht, the experience of presence momentarily pauses the production of *meaning* brought about by interpretation. In this vacuum without meaning the experience of presence can produce a [...] state of being lost in focused intensity' (Gumbrecht 2004: 104). Gumbrecht describes the experience of presence as a vacuum without [...] the institutional propagation of ethical norms [...] (Gumbrecht 2004: 102) in Western culture. Motivated by the theoretical writings about presence, I set out to transform a part of the museum in order to study the premises of presence in an art institutional setting.

Experiments in exhibitionary practices coupled with visitor observations have become a common research method in recent years following a number of 'turns' in the humanities including 'the ethnographical turn in contemporary art and criticism' (Foster 1996: 181) and a 'performative turn' in museum exhibition practices (Basu and Macdonald 2007: 12). Paul Basu and Sharon Macdonald study exhibitionary practices as sites of research in *Exhibition Experiments*, where the two authors draw on Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer's definition of exhibition as a research practice that 'make[s] visible the invisible' (Basu and Macdonald 2007: 2). Yet this display of knowledge should not be regarded as an unveiling of some hidden truth. Rather than reproducing knowledge, the exhibition experiment practices should be seen, according to Basu and Macdonald, as a site for knowledge generation (2). This definition of exhibition design informed the use of script theory and 'de-scripting' as research method.

De-scripting as research strategy was inspired by Madeleine Akrich and Bruno Latour's notion of the *script*. Akrich and Latour introduced the concept of the script as a method for analyzing technical objects but the concept is also applicable when analyzing museums. It enables researchers to study museum experience as material as well as a sum of functions and actions (Rung 2013).

According to script theory the museum exhibition should be regarded as an assemblage of material objects, people, space, ideas, and texts in an architectural setting encouraging visitors to look, walk and behave in specific ways and in a specific order (Latour 2005; Akrich 1992; Akrich and Latour 1992). Visitors often follow the museum's script to a certain degree while also actively interpreting the script (Akrich and Latour 1992: 262). The concept of the script was developed within the framework of Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, however here I will use the concept of the script without further considerations into Latour's theory about actors, agents and networks (Latour 2005; Akrich 1992; Akrich and Latour 1992).

A breakdown situation or a [...] deliberate experimental branching (either at the individual

or the collective level)' (Akrich and Latour 1992: 260) can reveal the inner workings of a set-up. The study at Faaborg Museum was a deliberate case of experiment branching aimed at studying the inner workings of a museum setting – more precisely those material qualities and social organizations producing (or weakening or blocking) presence in a museum setting. I therefore used Akrich and Latour's script theory as a de-scriptive strategy in an attempt to accentuate a specific part of the museum space rather than attempting to create a space that was outside or antithetical to the museum. De-scripting made it possible to study visitors in an unusual setting while remaining within the cultural, social and physical space of the museum.

The research strategy was also a method for studying the atmosphere in a concrete setting. Atmospheres or ambient conditions at museums have rarely been subject to museum studies, although visitor studies such as Australian psychologist Jan Packer's research at Queensland Museum found that ambient conditions were remarkably important to museum visitors:

They offered general comments about the 'atmosphere' or ambience, and specifically identified elements such as lighting, space, temperature and noise [...]. Interestingly, the ambient conditions were so important to the museum experience, that the most often-cited detractor was the crowding and noise associated with visiting school groups (Packer 2008: 40).⁴

The latest annual Danish visitor survey showed that the article's case study, Faaborg Museum, was highly appreciated for its atmosphere. The average visitor score for 'atmosphere' was 9.1 out of 10 compared to the national average score 8.7 for art museums.⁵ However the national visitor survey neglected to define 'atmosphere' from the perspective of both visitors and the institution and furthermore seemed to presume that all atmospheres were good atmospheres.

According to research on 'atmosphere' the definition of atmosphere is much more complicated. In Gernot Böhme's writings aesthetical atmospheres are described as typical intermediate phenomena bordering subjecthood and objecthood (Böhme 2013b). British anthropologist Tim Ingold describes aesthetic atmospheres as the coming together of person and things: 'they are not objective yet they inhere in the qualities of things; they are not subjective yet they belong to the sensing beings' (Ingold 2015: 77). Both Böhme and Ingold describe atmospheres as phenomena that cannot be fully understood as something subjectively inside nor as something objectively outside but rather as phenomena in-between the objective place and the subjective space of the visitor.⁶

The experience of atmosphere as intermediate phenomena is not, according to Böhme, necessarily vague or weak. On the contrary, it can '[...] bathe everything in a certain light' (Böhme 2013b: 2). Moreover, Böhme links atmosphere to presence studies by defining atmosphere as a 'mindful physical presence in space' (Böhme 2013b). Atmospheres, it appears, have the ability to attune visitors' sensibilities towards the material matter, air, light, sound, odours as well as social interactions in a room (Böhme 2013a: 27).⁷

Finally the attention on atmospheres is also a means of accentuating the embodied perspective of the observer. Böhme's definition of atmospheres as all-encompassing phenomena stresses a need to study the visitors experience as enmeshed in both material matters and social space. The strategy of de-scripting the museum was therefore a means of qualifying previous visitor surveys as well as an attempt to study concrete, site-specific examples of museum atmospheres as possible sites of presence. This exploratory approach, I believe, will add to our understanding of presence and atmosphere beyond a commonsensical or vague idea of the two phenomena as feel-good experiences.

The case study: *Gesamtkunstwerk* and social space

This case study focusses on two distinct characteristics of the museum. The characterization of the museum as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* focuses on aesthetic properties of the (physical) historical building, including its collections of artworks and furniture, as well as colours and material matter. The characterization of the museum as social space focuses on the notion that museum experience is shaped by other visitors, museum personnel and cultural codes of conduct. The former characterization of the museum as *Gesamtkunstwerk* is specific to



Figure 5. The small painting gallery, Faaborg Museum. Photo: Hélène Binet.



Figure 6. The small dome gallery, Faaborg Museum. Photo: Hélène Binet.

the Museum in question, while the latter characterization of the museum as a social space refers to all museums. The aim of this two-part characterization is to describe the script of the particular museum in order to de-script it afterwards.

Faaborg Museum is a small art museum located in southern Denmark and built to house the output of an artists' colony known as 'The Funen Painters'. The museum building was originally designed in the early 1910s by Danish architect and ceramicist Carl Petersen (1874-1923). Today it is considered an architectural landmark of Nordic Classicism and a prime example of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* where visual arts, architecture, furniture design and graphic design are united in a total experience.

German composer Richard Wagner described the 'Gesamtkunstwerk' in his programmatic treatise 'The Art-Work of the Future' (written between 1849 and 1850) as an ideal synthesis of the arts meant to create a unified whole (Finger *et al.* 2011). Since Wagner, a number of artists and artist collectives have used the notion of the 'Gesamtkunstwerk' to describe installations, exhibitions and events combining sound art, visual art, performances, architecture etcetera, and Russian-German philosopher Boris Groys has described the classical avant-garde's ideal museum as a 'Gesamtkunstwerk' in opposition to the taxonomies and organization of traditional museums (Boris Groys 2013). In the following the term is used broadly as an aesthetic strategy to create a unified experience by combining several art forms.

In this context the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is integral to the understanding of the museum as a *script* leading visitors through galleries in vivid colours of bright green, Chinese vermillion, cobalt blue, *caput mortuum* and Italian Red, into a small dome gallery built as a small scale version of the Pantheon in Rome, through narrow passages and finally into the high-ceilinged Sculpture Gallery (Figure 5-7). The museum is tucked between other buildings, and asymmetrical passages and corridors make it difficult to get an overview of the place.

Faaborg Museum is also – like other museums – a social space. Museum visitor



Figure 8. Johannes Larsen: *Niels Hansen in Nordskov*, 1886. 38 x 30 cm. Oil on canvas. Faaborg Museum.

museum. In artist and art critic Brian O'Doherty's *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (1976), the exhibition rooms in modern museums were described as symptoms of Western rationality and ocularcentrism. These rooms were, according to O'Doherty, a means of creating a non-space or ultra-space without the constraints of physical space, embodied sensations and other disturbances from outside the artwork itself (O'Doherty 1999).

In recent years other scholars have sought to amend the critique by pointing out that white cube aesthetics were also a practical precaution for frequent and easy re-arrangements of artworks, texts and other materials.¹¹ Partition walls and flexible hanging systems made it possible to change easily the script, so to speak, of the exhibitions. In addition, as Charlotte Klonk has pointed out, the walls of the white cube were rarely really white, more often grey, beige or off-white and the display of artworks were often creative and asymmetrical (Klonk 2009: 217). Yet even though the modern museum's white walls were far from neutral – far from being a non-space – the white spacing does emphasize the individual artwork as separated pieces in a grid-like flexible system. The white or off-white cubes are, I argue, an aesthetic system that highlights selected artworks as more or less isolated entities.

The presentation of artworks as discrete and independent from the room is aesthetically and ideologically contradictory to the historical *Gesamtkunstwerk*'s synthesis of different art forms. While it is possible to re-arrange artworks in the rich-coloured galleries at Faaborg Museum, every re-arrangement must be highly sensitive to the different dimensions and characteristics of the rooms. In this experiment I attempted to reconfigure the white cube by means of isolation and modulation rather than focus on shapes (cube or non-cube) or colours (white, off-white

or *caput mortuum*). The de-scripting of the museum was therefore an attempt to de-script the unity and monumentality of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* by building a transitory, modular room with a single work of art. Paper walls were chosen in order to build lightweight, flexible partitions with an opaque quality as opposed to the monumentality of the gallery.

The painting on display was Danish artist Johannes Larsen's 'Niels Hansen in Nordskov' from 1886 and commonly known as 'the wallpaper man' due to the pervasiveness of the wallpaper behind the man being portrayed (Figure 8). The painting was chosen as the artwork on display for practical and aesthetic reasons. The practical reason was that the painting was not part of the permanent exhibition at that time. The aesthetic reason was that I found the portrait painting to have a strong immediacy due to the direct stare of the man in the painting. Onlookers did not need to know the background story of the painting or its painter in order to experience the immediate eye-to-eye contact with the subject of the portrait. Because of this immediacy, the painting had previously been subject to another study of presence and paintings examining the effect of portrait paintings with outward-looking stares.¹²

The surrounding sculptures became on-lookers to the construction and subsequently in-lookers into the room, jutting their heads up from behind the paper walls (Figure 2). The temporary room would stand out against the deep-coloured room but it would never resemble a *non-space* after O'Doherty's portrayal of the white cube. The white cube's ability to highlight artworks as discrete made it possible to accentuate a small part of the gallery.

Solitude was the second point of orientation in the de-description of the museum as *Gesamtkunstwerk* and social space. The conceptual idea of building a space of solitude was based on visitor observations and auto-ethnographical observations in German curator Susanne Pfeffer's ONE ON ONE group exhibition at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin in 2013.¹³ The group exhibition consisted of several white boxes with works of contemporary art, and visitors were encouraged to enter each room one by one. Before entering the box, visitors were instructed to hang a 'do not disturb' sign outside a door leading into the box. Inside visitors were alone with readymade objects on plinths, live performers and even a desert environment with palms and painted blue skies. The setting invited visitors to 'just look' but this act of looking, in some cases at least, would also self-reflectively turn the attention of visitors to the act of looking in itself. The momentary breakdown of the museum as a social space allowed for a study of the inner workings of the set-up following Akrich and Latour's script theory (Akrich 1992; Akrich and Latour 1992).

KW's de-description of the social space was used as inspiration in the work of de-scripting the script of Faaborg Museum by installing a door with a vacant/occupied sign alongside a wall text encouraging visitors to enter alone. However, as opposed to KW's boxes, the temporary room was not completely closed-off. Visitors could close the door but sounds and light would come through the thin paper walls, through the chinks, the gap between the floor and the walls and the open space above the walls. The door and walls established an enclosure built to highlight a certain area of the museum rather than establishing a new space. This accentuation of space was part of the experiment's initial aim of studying visitors experience of presence and atmosphere in a museum setting. The room was an attempt to create a 'fold' rather than an annex to the museum.

The two points of orientation were also a means of slowing down visitors. A chair in the middle of the temporary room encouraged visitors to take a seat in front of a painting, thereby making 'pausing' a central theme of the exhibition. The aim of slowing visitors down was initiated by museum studies showing that average museum-goers spend about 17 seconds looking at an artwork, including reading the label on the wall (Smith and Smith 2001; Smith, L. F., Smith, J. K., and Tinio, P. P. L. 2017).¹⁴ The installation of a private exhibition room was therefore an opportunity to experiment with ways of encouraging museum-goers to slow down and spend more time in front of selected artworks.¹⁵

The qualitative interviews

The two-part installation with an enclosure and a waiting room was evaluated using visitor observation and qualitative interviews with 21 visitors during the course of three days in the final week of its opening.¹⁶ Faaborg Museum is a small museum and the 21 interviewed and

observed visitors were the total number of people going into the temporary enclosure during the time of my observation. The observation aimed to capture how much time each visitor spent in the enclosure. All visitors agreed to be interviewed when they came out of the enclosure. These 21 visitors were part of a minority: the majority of museum-goers (approximately three out of four) would pass by the two-part exhibition installation with only a quick glance at the room, the text and the surrounding sculptures.¹⁷

The interviews were based on 11 questions including: four questions about age, occupation, place of residence and museum visit frequency; and seven focusing on the visitor's experience of the room, their activity and which senses the exhibition had activated.

These semi-structured qualitative interviews were inspired by Steinar Kvale's research method in *InterView: An introduction to Qualitative Interviewing* (1996). The qualitative interview method enabled a limited number of museum visitors to talk in-depth and relatively freely about their experience without fitting into predetermined categories as in larger surveys and statistics (Kvale 1996; Lønstrup 2013; Roald 2015). The interview data was analyzed using Kvale's interview method, explored in detail in *Doing Interviews* (2011). This method involves coding, condensation and interpretation of meaning. Coding involves attaching one or two keywords for categorization. Condensation involves an abridgement of meanings expressed by interviewees into shorter sentences. The meaning of interpretation goes 'beyond a structuring of the manifest meanings of what is said to deeper and more critical interpretations of the text.' (Kvale 2011: 108). According to Steinar Kvale's methodology the number of interviewees is of less importance whereas importance is put on the qualitative articulations delivered and observed during the interviews (Kvale 1996).

The visitors' experience of time

The interviews revealed an interesting discrepancy between 'actual' time and the visitors' estimation of time spent in the room. I would discreetly measure each visit to the temporary room with a stopwatch.¹⁸ The watch showed that the average visit lasted 1 minute and 20 seconds, counting from the opening to the reopening of the door. The longest visit lasted 3 minutes and 19 seconds in the room while the shortest visit lasted 10 seconds.¹⁹ The qualitative interviews touched upon the visitor's subjective experience of time spent in the room through the question 'Please would you estimate how long you have spent in the room?' The visitors' average estimation was 2 minutes and 3 seconds, which was nearly 1 minute or 54 per cent longer than the time measured by the stopwatch. Just over three quarters of the interviewed visitors overestimated their time spend in the room while a quarter (five visitors) underestimated the duration of their visit.

The study of visiting time demonstrates that visitors stayed significantly longer in the room with the artwork – both in actual and estimated time – compared to studies of visitors looking at artworks in a traditional museum setting (17 seconds).²⁰ The interviews suggest that visitors stayed as an effect of the experience and that this experience made the visitor slow down.

The visitors' experience of space

The interviews revealed another interesting discrepancy in regards to the visitors' experience of space. Fifteen visitors described the room as constructive towards a 'calm', 'concentrated' and 'contemplative' experience in front of the artwork. Two visitors described the experience of the portrait painting as a chance to see the painting 'one-on-one', while others described their experience of the painting as 'intense', 'intimate', 'surprising', with 'a great presence' and a good opportunity to 'catch the eye' of the painting. A 51-year-old IT employee described his experience as a 'time machine' taking him back to the specific time and place of the portrait painting:

I felt myself being transported to that time [of the painting]. He was simply a human being, you know? I tried to get eye-contact with him across centuries [...]. It was great but also a bit intimidating.

A few visitors said that the room and the chair allowed them to 'block out everything else' making room for concentration and contemplation. Two visitors said that the room had little or no effect

on them while two visitors described their experience as 'spiritual' and 'transcendental'. Eight visitors emphasized the room's white colour as distinctive from the rest of the museum. The room was, according to one visitor, 'definitely an alien element in the museum'.

In conclusion, the majority of visitors found the room to be moderately or highly conducive to concentration and aesthetic contemplation. However the visitors also emphasized the room as an integral part of the museum. Ten visitors described, in different terms, the room as fleeting or ephemeral. A few visitors would, for example, describe how the air drag from the door would make the paper walls flap. Six visitors noticed how the surrounding sculptures jutted up from behind the paper walls, thereby making their heads appear to be looking in – and three of these visitors described the 'peeking' sculptures as eerie (Figure 2). Two visitors indicated that they felt as if under surveillance: 'I wondered whether or not there were cameras watching the room' one visitor said. The previously mentioned IT employee described the experience as unfamiliar:

It was nice not to be disturbed [...]. I didn't feel entirely alone. It was good but also an unfamiliar experience. Usually you are also studying the other guests, right? You are also affected by the other guests and what they're looking at.

Four visitors were disturbed or distracted by sounds from visitors talking and walking by. Outsiders were unable to see visitors in the room but visitors could hear outsiders.

The visitors' descriptions were highly sense-oriented towards air, sound, colours and materiality including *subject-like objects*: peeking sculptures and portrait paintings staring back at visitors. These sense-oriented descriptions of objects and space indicate that the experience in the room was far from ocularcentric. On the contrary, the average visitor appeared to be highly attentive to the objective as well as social and subjective qualities of the museum experience. Visitors described – in different words – the room as a space for presence but this space was simultaneously traversed with sounds and light as well as social and cultural codes.

This ambivalent experience is not necessarily in conflict, I would argue, with the intention of creating a contemplative space. The same visitors who emphasized the chinks, the air drags, the sculptures and the noise from outside also described their encounter with the painting as intense, intimate, concentrated and so forth. These discrepancies were not found between visitors but often within the visitor's description of their experience. A 17-year-old pupil succinctly summed up the discrepancies of the 21 interviews:

The chinks are a bit disturbing but it is also a calm pause [from the rest of the museum]. You feel both out in the open because the room is white and in an enclosure because you're in a room. It is peaceful but it is also a bit titillating.

The 17-year-old spent 2 minutes and 30 seconds in the room, which is almost twice as long as the average 1 minute and 20 seconds.²¹ The interviews revealed that the room was experienced as something in-between the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and 'the white cube' and in-between private as well as social space. The visitors described the room as both a withdrawal from the museum as well as an integral part of it. This in-betweenness being neither inside nor outside was necessary for the experiment's ability to study the specific atmosphere of the museum. According to the interviews, this accentuation of the room was constructive in turning the attention of visitors to the social and physical space of the museum.²²

During the days of observation, several museum-goers at Faaborg Museum would independently de-script the experiment's de-description of the museum by entering two by two, peeking in or ignoring entirely the two-part installation. The 21 interviewed visitors were following the script inasmuch as they would enter one by one yet a minority of the interviewees would also go off-script by *not* closing the door (one visitor), *not* sitting in the chair (two visitors) or looking at the gallery's ceiling or through the chinks. One of the interviewees for example – a museum technician at another museum – revealed that he was mostly looking at the stucco in the high-ceilinged gallery room.

Whether or not visitors were sticking to the script of the experiment – by entering one by one, sitting, and taking their time in front of the painting – they apparently never left the museum as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* and a social space. They were making their own 'user-scripts' in accordance with the institution's script as prescribed by the script theory (Akrich 1992: 208-

209). The setting was unusual to the visitors but the majority of interviewees would move and behave as encouraged by the door, the chair and the overall script of the experiment.

The de-scripting of the museum was successful inasmuch as the majority of visitors described the enclosure as something out of the ordinary in terms of appearance or/and experience. Fifteen visitors described their experience of the artwork as concentrated and constructive towards experiences of presence which in various degrees correspond to H.U. Gumbrecht's description of presence as a 'state of focused intensity' (Gumbrecht 2004: 104). The visitors' descriptions also revealed a heightened sense of their surroundings suggesting that the room was instrumental in turning the visitor's attention towards the atmosphere of the museum as well as their 'mindful physical presence in space' after Gernot Böhme. The descriptions of the atmosphere were not entirely positive and carefree but rather an intermediate phenomenon involving different modes of attention including curiosity, contemplation, titillation and a sense of eeriness.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to study ways of highlighting the potential of presence and atmosphere in a museum setting. The research objectives – aesthetic atmospheres and experiences of presence – are challenging phenomena to study. Presence has been described as a momentary state of attention that escapes analytical scrutiny (Gumbrecht 2004: 98-104). Atmospheres have been described as intermediate phenomena presiding over both the physical place and the social space (Böhme 1993). The exhibition experiment was a means of de-scripting the script of Faaborg Museum to reveal and examine the inner workings of the museum as a place for both contemplation and social interaction. The article focused on two key aspects of the museum in question – the museum as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* and as a social space – to formulate two points of orientation in the work of de-scripting of the museum. The outcome of the experiment was a two-part installation: an enclosure with suspended paper walls, a single artwork, a chair and a door with a vacant/occupied sign across an open space with chairs and a small library. The enclosure was not a new space but a smaller reconfiguration allowing visitors to experience the museum in a new and slightly distorted way.

The twenty-one qualitative interviews revealed that the visitors spend significantly longer in the 'de-scripted' areas compared to the average time spend on artworks in a traditional museum setting that museum studies have identified. The visitor interviews also revealed that the semi-private enclosure was instrumental in turning the visitors' attention towards the museum as an assemblage of people, space, texts and material objects. Visitors noticed the drag of air, the sounds, the colours and the materiality of the room as distinctive compared to the rest of the building. The enclosure was not fully detached from the museum or the museum script and this ambivalence of the room – being in-between a private enclosure and the museum as a social space – appeared to be productive for the experience of presence. The experiences discussed above were not produced in a vacuum outside of an institutional setting. They were deeply embedded in the material, cultural and social organization of the museum.

These ambivalent descriptions suggest that contemplation and social interaction are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The experiment showed that museum spaces for contemplation do not need to be sealed off from the rest of the museum. It is possible to create contemplative spaces as part of the museum's script and social space. Nevertheless the experiment's de-scripting made it possible to study the museum and its visitors from another perspective.

The experiment failed to produce or highlight states of presence as a 'vacuum' and a bracketing of 'meaning' after H.U. Gumbrecht's definition of presence. The experiment did nevertheless highlight a selected area of the museum as a potential space for presence even though this space never appeared to be free from the overall script and governmentality of the museum. It is questionable that museum experiments can ever escape their institutional setting. I argue – on the basis of this experiment – that exhibition experiments can modify but never bypass the social and cultural codes in museums.

This exhibition experiment had a number of limitations. It was conducted in only one museum with a limited number of interviews. In addition the design of the experiment was adjusted to the specific research site and should be re-adjusted if it were to take place in another

museum setting. These circumstances should be kept in mind when interpreting the results.

The experiment's gentler distortions of the museum script were successful in turning the visitors' attention towards matters and museum settings that are often overlooked. From the findings in this study I propose that museums consider 'presence' and 'atmosphere' integral to the social and cultural workings of the museum rather than building new rooms for contemplation. The experiment at Faaborg Museum suggests that experiences of presence can be generated by an attentiveness to the museum as both a physical place and social space. Smaller de-scriptions and accentuations of selected spaces are enough to push the attention of visitors towards subtler qualities of the museum space.

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Appendix A

Interview form for visitors to Faaborg Museum's *In the Now Room /Waiting Room*

date

Quantitative time of visit (stopwatch):

Please would you estimate how long you have spent in the room?

Qualitative time:

What was your first impression of the room??

Did you sit in the chair?

The artwork: What is your impression of the painting?

Around the artwork: What is your impression of the room?

How did you feel being alone in a room with an artwork?

Stepping out: What was your impression of the museum when you came out of the room?

How often do you visit art museums (per year)?

May I ask you how old you are?

May I ask you what you do?

[Sex]: M/F

Where do you live?

Appendix B

Appendix b: Data from 21 qualitative interviews with visitors to In the Now Room at Faaborg Museum conducted the 25th, 26th and 27th of April 2018.						
Quantitative time (minutes)	Qualitative time (minutes)	age	occupation	Frequency of museum visits per year	Place of residence	Sex
115	180	41	student	3.5	Odense	M
70	120	66	retired textile conservator	12	Svendborg	F
70	120	63	social worker	5.5	Aalborg	M
17	30	12	retired fire brigade chief	12	Køge	M
60	120	66	retired nursery schoolteacher	50	Copenhagen	F
60	120	63	biologist	15	Copenhagen	F
36	25	61	biologist	12	Copenhagen	M
	90	51	IT head of department	3.5	Lejre	M
65	120	65	pensioner	9	Gilleleje	M
60	30	48	architect	12	Lejre	F
	120	21	communications associate	7.5	Copenhagen	F
150	130	17	boarding school pupil	10	Odder/Lejre	M
199	180	62	Graduate in forestry	10	Odense	F
80	150	71	pensioner	4.5	Copenhagen	M
100	180	66	pensioner	6	Copenhagen	F
135	180	25	Museum manager	17.5	Kerteminde	M
66	60	48	nurse	8	Vissenbjerg	F
100	90	23	architect	10	Copenhagen	M
84	300	69	missionary	1	Faaborg	M
40	120	26	shop assistant	12	Copenhagen	F
10		84	retired missionary	0	Esbjerg	F
1517	2465	1048		221		
1 min. 20 sec.	2 min. 3 sec.	49.9 years		10,5 visits	11 male/10 female	

Notes

- 1 The 'Art and Presence' research project was a collaboration between Faaborg Museum and the Department for the Study of Culture at the University of Southern Denmark. The research project was supported by the VELUX Foundation.
- 2 Jonathan Crary has also argued for the ideological embedment of sight. In *Techniques of the Observer*, Crary states that there '[...] never was and never will be a self-present beholder to whom a world is transparently evident.' (Crary 1992: 6). See also Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel's seminal study of museum visitors in *The Love of Art* (1969) and Carol Duncan's *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (1995).
- 3 The research project also worked with experimental museum mapping and sound installation.
- 4 See also Bond, N.; Packer, J. (2010)
- 5 The Danish Agency for Culture's National Survey of Museums. See The annual survey for Faaborg Museum 2017 (in Danish): https://slks.dk/fileadmin/user_upload/0_SLKS/Dokumenter/Museer/Fakta_om_museerne/Statistik_om_museer/Brugerundersogelse/Brugerundersogelse_2017-19/Rapporter_2017/Museumsrapport_2017_-_Faaborg_Museum_06-02-18_.pdf, accessed 29 June 2018.
- 6 The use of "in-between" should be understood here with reference to British anthropologist Tim Ingold's use of 'in-between' as opposed to switching 'between' two fixed and contrasting states (Ingold 2011: 83).
- 7 Madsen, T.A. 2017: 127. See also Ingold's critique of Böhme's characterization for neglecting air as an important spatial element (Ingold 2015: 73-78).

- 8 Visitor studies and statistics show that visitors usually visit art museums in the company of others. In a Danish context, a national study from 2015 showed that only 7% of visitors came alone (Jensen 2015: 64). Visitor surveys at the National Gallery in Denmark from 2017 show that 12% of visitors came alone and these studies are confirmed by other Danish surveys. See Rung 2013: 169-170 and the annual survey for The National Gallery 2017 (in Danish): https://slks.dk/fileadmin/user_upload/0_SLKS/Dokumenter/Museer/Fakta_om_museerne/Statistik_om_museer/Brugerundersogelse/Brugerundersogelse_2017-19/Rapporter_2017/Museumsrapport_2017_-_Statens_Museum_for_Kunst_06-02-18_.pdf, accessed 29 June 2018.
- 9 See sense-ethnographical user studies by Tina Anette Madsen in 'Walking and Sensing at Faaborg Museum' (Madsen, T.A. 2017: 124-141). See also Ingold's anthropological writings about walking and way-finding: See for example Ingold 2013: 125-140.
- 10 Rung's studies at the National Gallery of Denmark also show that accompanied visitors spend a little longer in the galleries compared to solitary visitors (Rung 2013).
- 11 Charlotte Klonk argues that the white cube should be seen as a matter of flexibility rather than a rejection of the body of the beholder (Klonk 2009: 216-218).
- 12 See 'Moving Eyes. The Aesthetic Effect of Off-centre Pupils in Portrait Paintings' in *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology* (forthcoming) (Madsen, T.V. 2019).
- 13 I visited the exhibition in 2013. The concept of 'auto-ethnographical observations' refers to British ethnographer Sarah Pink's sense-oriented research. In *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, Pink describes auto-ethnography as sensory participation: '[...] a method that allows ethnographers to use their own experiences as a route through which to produce academic knowledge.' (Pink 2015: 97).
- 14 In the 2017 study Smith, Smith and Tinio found that the time spent on artwork was reasonably unchanged. What changed was how visitors would spend their time, now also taking selfies as well as reading labels and looking at the artwork.
- 15 This part of the experiment was based on the premise that artworks take time. Art historians and others have long argued for the importance of in-depth looking (Elkins 1997; Findlay 2017). However Mette Rung's museum visitor studies at the National Gallery in Denmark shows that the visitors' appreciation of artworks are not necessarily proportionable with the time spend in front of the piece (Rung 2013).
- 16 The room (title: Tilstedeværelse/In the Now Room) was open to visitors from 5 September 2017 to 29 April 2018. Visitor observations and interviews were conducted in the waiting area across from the enclosure. The individual visitor was asked to participate in the interview for research purposes when they returned to the waiting room from the enclosure. All except one agreed. When one interview was over, and my notes were revised, I would return to the enclosure where I would wait for another visitor to re-enter and so forth for roughly four hours a day. The qualitative interview format was based on Steinar Kvale's methodology (Kvale 1996) and museum studies by Ansa Lønstrup (Lønstrup 2013: 153-171). See the questions in appendix (a). The average age of the 21 interviewees (11 men and 10 women) were 49,9 years old spreading from 17 to 84 years old. The average visitor paid 10,5 visits to museums a year. See the datasheet from visitor study in appendix (b).
- 17 Based on visitor observations in April 2018.
- 18 See appendix B.

- 19 The visitors were unaware that I would measure the duration of their visit but it is nevertheless possible that visitors would stay longer in the room in order to prepare themselves for the succeeding interview. It is also possible that visitors would hurry in order to make room for others and participate in the interviews before returning to their company. As precaution I would refrain from giving any instruction other than ask them to go in and then answer a few questions afterwards. This approach was partially based on Steinar Kvale's methodology (Kvale 1996). See also Tone Roald's *The Subject of Aesthetics: A Psychology of Art and Experience* (Roald 2015: 83-98).
- 20 See appendix b.
- 21 The two visitors who said that the room had little or no effect spend 40 seconds and 1 minute and 5 seconds respectively. This is shorter than the average time of visits to the temporary room but longer than the average time spend on artworks according to museum visitor studies (Smith and Smith 2001; Smith, L. F., Smith, J. K., & Tinio, P. P. L. 2017).
- 22 If the room had been completely closed-off it is reasonable to assume that the visitors would not have been disturbed by noise. However this experiment would presumably not have been able to turn the attention of visitors to the material properties of the museum space including sound.

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