

Searching for a Posthuman Ecology of Representation

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When Hans Christian Andersen published his first collection of fairytales in 1835 critics were alarmed by the lack of formative qualities and moral lessons in the stories (Anonymous 1836, 13). Instead of handing down lessons, explaining the meaning of the story or the world for the reader, Andersen seemed to do quite the opposite in his fairytales, playing on forms of textual doubleness that counteracted and frustrated any attempt to establish a final, meaningful moral lesson when turning that last page.

For me, as a curator in charge of exhibitions at the Hans Christian Andersen Museum, such an understanding of Andersen's fairytales raises important questions of representation, especially now since the museum is undergoing a complete transformation, being rebuild from the ground up to change it from a typical biographical museum into a house of fairytales. Yet, looking at how the communicative relationship between institution and visitor is presented at ICOM's very own website in their description of key museological concepts, the museum, as an institution, seems almost juxtaposed to the fairytale world of questions and fantasy, stressing transmission and unilateral assimilation of knowledge (Desvallées & Mairesse, 2018, p. 30)

Such ideas of information as something which can be passed on from the active institution to the passive visitor have been questioned from many different perspectives (Rancière, 2009, p. 13) – not least of which by the ecomuseums of the 1970s and the emergence of New Museology in the late 1980s (Vergo, 1989). By embracing participatory practices and focusing on visitors' knowledge production, the idea has been to reform the museum into a democratic, communal institution, thereby empowering people (Ibid., p. 3; Simon, 2010, p. ii-iii). But although they are clearly different museological positions, they all seem the same in the sense that they advocate an anthropocentric world view cherishing and celebrating man's ability to amass, manipulate and create objects and materials. As such, objects and material play a role in which their value primarily is that they point back to man's hierarchical dominance. By using Andersen's fairytales and the challenge of representing their performative aspects, I wish to shed new light on the museum itself and its democratic potential by questioning the very nature of the exhibition space, museum text, and the role of objects. As such the new museum we are currently building is both an institutional critique and an exploration of the radical democratic potential of exhibitions.

Spatial encounters

One of the most important principles in developing the strategies for representing the fairytales in the new museum has been to stage the fundamental tensions and ambiguities of the fairytales instead of providing an authoritarian interpretation of them. As Andersen often highlights the fairytales as constructions, thereby establishing a play between words as both content and material which challenge the stories as conveyers of meaning and truth, so we, as readers, immerse ourselves in the rich imagination of Andersen, only to be thrown back out of the fantasy whenever Andersen shatters the illusion. By doing this, they are an act of opening up, where the usual and well-known is made special and begs to be seen anew. To create this spatially means exploring the performative relationships as they appear in the fairytales. The staging of the fairytales has therefore been structured on contradictions and ambivalence, on emptying central signs of their content while giving weight to the understated, on making ambivalence

and doubleness tangible to make the playfulness inherent in each of the fairytales visible.

The staging of “The little Mermaid” is an example of how architecture and scenography come together to create an experience (instead of representation) of the fairytale. From the garden above you can see through a small pool of water into the fairytale realm below. Likewise, from below you can see a cutout of the sky through the pool of water. At the same time the pool of water acts as a filter: Combined with the light from above, the water creates a ripple effect on the walls which emphasises the experience of being submerged. As such the scenography presents itself as a unique encounter between visitor, fairytale, scenography and architecture. The story told is never completely the same – the meeting between visitor and fairytale is always new – since the light from outside changes during the day and the season. And because the pool is enveloped by a mirroring of the hedges above ground, the eyes of the visitor are naturally drawn upwards, following the vertical axis from underwater to ground to air. In the underwater space, the little mermaid is absent and as such the space becomes an empty stage for the longing gaze of the visitor. By doing this it is no longer a representation of the story of the little mermaid but an architectural and scenographical performance which allows visitors to spatially experience the longing of the little mermaid.

Performance text

To avoid both explication and the distancing of text, the museum has explored new ways of communicating. By treating text as material objects, they become set pieces rather than something external to the different fairytale scenes. For example, in staging “Clumsy-Hans”, text is presented in the form of a tabloid newspaper, in “The Snow Queen”, they are shattered words on the floor, and in “The Princess and the Pea”, they are in the form of lengthy traditional museum text panels claiming expert knowledge and truth when *explaining* how it is feasible that a princess really can feel a pea through twenty mattresses. Also, by employing new audio technology it is possible to create a binaural experience in which voices are not an accompanying and distancing overlay to the spatial experience but embedded therein. By doing so it is also possible to emphasise the unique oral and tonal qualities of Andersen’s writing and play through the different ways Andersen creates distance and intimacy, using, for example, humor and irony. Furthermore, it allows the museum to create a world in which a multitude of voices are present, just as it is in Andersen’s fairytales. Objects come alive and speak, offering often contrasting perspectives to the narrated voice of Andersen – each claiming truth. As such, the museum gives credence to the idea of polyphony rather than singular authoritarian communication. Thus, by offering conflicting perspectives, by being spatialised and embedded in the scenography on the same level as an object, a showcase or a set piece, text becomes something more than a vessel for content. Just as Hans-Thies Lehmann describes the role of text in postdramatic theatre, it becomes a system of signs that is “more presence than representation, more shared than communicated experience, more process than product, more manifestation than signification, more energetic impulse than information” (Lehmann, 2006, p. 85). Therefore, the significance of text does not as much reside in the supposed meaning it conveys but in its performative aspects. The same, I would argue, is true in Andersen’s fairytales, and thus we strive for creating an experience of the expressiveness and performance of something different than yourself, but not something from which you can derive final meaning. In the same manner, it is through its act of making something visible, through the spatial distribution of unique voices, the call-response dialogue and deconstruction of these voices, the expressiveness and tonal qualities, that text becomes a sensuous bodily experience.

Beyond objecthood

In the new museum, objects disrupt and defamiliarise, they protest and answer back. They do not merely want to be on display for others and are no longer representations, metonymies, pointing to an underlying meaningful whole. Instead focus shifts from what they represent to how they represent it. They do this by highlighting the materiality they are bound by and offering contrasting perspectives. As such notions of hierarchy and meaning are destabilised since there is no privileged point of view, each perspective isolated in its own limited vision and defined by its own materiality. Self-absorbed and petty, they are often unable to see past their own noses. This way pen and inkstand for example keep quarreling, even when they are displaced and taken from the fairytale and put on display in the museum, still discussing who is the true author of the words on the page.

In Andersen's world objects may strive for autonomy and claim to be something more than just objects, but they can only do so in a manner that objectifies them. The fairytales are therefore characterised by a fundamental doubleness. On one hand, the fairytales do not so much express thing-power as mourn their inability to truly achieve such a thing. On the other hand, they fail gloriously in a way that may not coalesce into a final meaningful whole, but that displays a semiotic abundance and take delight in performativity, creation, and playfulness as they fall apart. Following this, I see potential in Jane Bennett's ideas of object agency and thing-power. Seeing it as play-pretend rather than ontological truth allows the museum to let the different voices of objects to come to the fore, not merely as a form of mourning, but also as a playful celebration of difference and multivocality. A new materialist perspective allows the museum to play, recognise and not least stage human participation in a shared, vital materiality (Bennett, 2010, p. 14). In such a museum man is no longer the absolute center of the universe but being confronted with a fundamental decenteredness allowing what Hannah Arendt has shown is a certain form of thinking to appear: Bridging the abyss to others, or in Arendt's term "visiting" (Disch, 1994, p. 157). Visiting allows you to: "think your own thoughts but in the place of somebody else," permitting yourself to experience the disorientation that is necessary to understanding just how the world looks different to someone else" (ibid.).

The new museum, as well as Andersen's fairytales, are such places of disorientation, calling the visitor or the reader into question, asking him or her to consider yet again what it means to be in a world full of others. In this sense, the true democratic potential of both Andersen's tales and the exhibition as a phenomenological experience resides in the ways they stage and perform an experience of that which is different to oneself. Concerned neither with maintaining the museum institution as authority nor with homogenizing difference into sameness through inclusive and participatory practices, such a form of museology is exploring the museum as a performative site of wonder and questions – both a practicing and production of difference.

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