



# Dissolving objects: Museums, atmosphere and the creation of presence



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## ABSTRACT

This article takes its point of departure in the current attention to the materiality of objects in museum display. Recent literature (Classen and Howes, 2006; Dudley, 2010, 2012; Pye, 2007) has stressed the need for museums to focus more explicitly on objects and their capacity to create experiences. While appreciating this approach the article argues that in order to understand the perspectives opened by such experiences, we need to go beyond a focus on objects as such. On basis of analyses of two ethnographic exhibitions it is argued that rather than the objects per se, what is at the root of museum experience is atmosphere – the in-betweenness of objects and subjects. Rather than making the absent (past or distant) present, atmosphere creates a presence as such, an affective space which disturbs our everyday concepts of the world. This perspective makes it possible to consider the museum not as a storehouse of the past, but as a bridgehead (Runia, 2006) to the future, allowing us for a short while to imagine futures that go beyond our present conception of the world.

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## 1. Introduction

The recent decades' orientation towards materiality and the agency of objects has spurred a renewed interest in ethnographic museums and exhibitions as objects for research. While the critical Museology of the 1980s and 90s (Ames, 1992; Clifford, 1996[1988], 1997; Shelton, 2001; Vergo, 1989) primarily focused on the political environments of ethnographic collections in Western museums, the re-invigoration of material culture in anthropology has turned the museum into a site for research on concrete, material practices (Bouquet, 2001; Bjerregaard, 2009a; Henare, 2005; Hetherington, 2003).

In terms of exhibitions the material turn has opened for a reconsideration of the role of objects as effective means in and of themselves rather than mute carriers of information or 'world-views' (Gell, 1992, 1998; Henare et al., 2007). If objects have the capacity to cause effect this effect should not be obliterated by textual exegesis and academic meaning making.

Thus, several authors have argued how a close encounter with objects may create a more intimate and empathic relation to the past or the distant (Dudley, 2010: 4; Wehner and Sear, 2010: 153). In this sense, the exhibition is turned into a sensate, even emotional encounter, rather than a didactic or critical exercise.

This concern with the concrete qualities of objects in museums is most welcome as it opens up for a layer of museum experience that has often been suppressed by arguments on relevance and meaning. However, while the attention to object agency (Gell, 1998), the tactile qualities of objects (Classen and Howes, 2006; Pye, 2007), and arguments of the capacity of objects to be concepts in themselves (Henare et al., 2007) have helped us to acknowledge the importance of the concrete qualities of objects rather than placing them within systems of meaningful communication, I will question what I consider an overemphasis of the power of the individual object.

Objects are obviously essential to museums, but the question is whether the objects, and the stories they carry, are the main media of museum experience. I will argue that in all our concern with objects we have to a certain degree neglected the role of *space* as a focal point for understanding museum experience. Attending to space we are led to consider the power of *atmosphere* and accordingly the status of the museum object changes from a concern with what the object may tell us or what it may express to a concern with how the object may fill a space.

To make this argument I will draw on Böhme's distinction between *Realität* and *Wirklichkeit* (Böhme, 2001: 56–8), and argue that exhibiting may, in fact, be about dissolving objects. That is, rather than appearing to us as a recognizable entity, which we may isolate and define, the object is turned into physical extension, tincturing a space. This dissolution can only take place through

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manipulating the space in-between objects and in-between objects and audiences, i.e. through staging atmosphere.

This distinction between *Realität* and *Wirklichkeit* has hardly been discussed in terms of contemporary museums of cultural history. However, I will argue that this distinction is at the crux of curatorial practice. Curating is, basically, a practice based in the idea of montage (Empson, 2013; Schüssler and Mes, 2013; Bjerregaard, 2013). The curator selects and installs works that for one or the other reason are capable of generating something (an idea, a concept, a reality) that transcends the individual works.

To look at how this transcendence may occur *Hall of Northwest Coast Peoples* at American Museum of Natural History in New York, and *Villa Sovietica*, which was on display at Musée d'ethnographie de Genève in 2009–10, will be used as cases.<sup>1</sup>

In conclusion, I will argue that attention to atmospheres and presence as the object of exhibitions will stress the potential for exhibitions not only to represent the past, but work as 'bridge-heads' (Runia, 2006) towards the future; destabilizing experiences that allow us to imagine a world beyond the present.

## 2. The radical challenge of atmosphere to museums

Atmosphere is not a new term in the world of museums. The theatrical staging of public displays was a concern already in the early years of modern museums (Crawley, 2012: 14), and atmospheric terms as 'cold' or 'warm', 'welcoming' and 'exclusive', 'clear' and 'opaque' often turn up when museum staff discuss sketches or mountings in exhibitions.

In this sense we may think of atmosphere as the excess of the real (Böhme, 1995: 21) that may not be transported by the museum object per se and which cannot be confined to the information that may be referred to the object. To the archaeologist this could be the experience of 'the spirit of the place' when the object appears from the ground, placed in the larger frame of the landscape. To the ethnographer, it may be related to the fragrances, temperature or intensity of activities to which the object is related in its place of origin, but which often seems unavoidably lost when the object is put on display in the museum.

But atmosphere is not only a concern to the curator trying to convey an idea or a sense of a place. In fact, one may wonder whether audiences are more affected by the atmospheres in the museum than by what they are supposed to learn. Think, for instance, of James Fenton's poem on Pitt Rivers Museum, famously quoted by Clifford (1996: 216–7), where even museum labels leave their purpose of conveying information, adding instead to the baroque anguish and attraction of the exotic space:

Entering

You will find yourself in a climate of nut castanets

A musical whip

From the Torres Strait, from Mirzapur a sistrum

Called Jumka, 'used by aboriginal

Tribes to attract small game

On dark nights', a mute violin,

Whistling arrows, coolie cigarettes

And a mask of Saagga, the Devil Doctor,

The eyelids worked by strings

(Fenton, 2004: 307)

Likewise, Danish author Klaus Rifbjerg, has reflected on the eeriness of museum visiting (Rifbjerg, 1998) based in his childhood memories of visiting the National Museum in Copenhagen:

I have probably been anxious, probably I had been told about what I would see and why it was important to visit the museum. But for good reasons the anticipations were vague and the shock when you entered the collection of ancient history up the stairs on your left hand was correspondingly terrifying and awe-inspiring. It must have been by the end of the 1930s, when not only the objects on display but the entire museum smelled of old age and the lighting seemed so dim adding to the eeriness, which the rows of bones and skulls in showcases evoked in the child.

(Rifbjerg, 1998: 97, my translation)

What these two accounts of exhibition experiences point to is the capacity of the museum to generate a kind of embracing experience, wrapping the visitor in an atmosphere, which seems to have a much more lasting effect than the information accounted for. Somehow, this atmosphere also seems to dissolve the individual objects at display allowing them to become part of the general experience of *space*.

Still, while recognized as a central issue to exhibition making and visiting, I think it is fair to say that atmosphere has generally been considered only as the icing on the content cake – a somewhat additive layer on top of the scientific information or the political message the museum is supposed to deliver.

In a recent article Sandra Dudley makes a most welcome critique of the tendency of museums to overload exhibitions with text and meaning rather than facilitate for intimate encounters between audiences and objects. She describes in detail her encounter with a Chinese bronze horse in an art gallery:

I was utterly spellbound by its majestic form, its power, and, as I began to look at it closely, its material details: its greenish colour, its textured surface, the small areas of damage. [...] I still knew nothing at all about this artefact, other than that it clearly represented a horse and that I guessed it was made of bronze; nonetheless, its three-dimensionality, tactility and sheer power had literally moved me to tears.

(Dudley, 2012: 1)

This experience clearly makes an argument for a powerful potential of engagements with objects in exhibitions, which goes beyond any objective of transferring meaningful information. While such an emotional encounter amplifies the museum experience, one may ask what the aim of such an emotional encounter would be. Towards the end of the article, Dudley argues for this intimacy as a way of reducing the distance between museum visitor and the world from which the object originates:

Active, two-way engagements between people and things that are as full, material, and sensory as feasible [...] are rich with possibility. Partly, this is because they will enrich the ways in which visitors are able to connect with the people, stories and emotions of the past. More radically [...], the experiential possibilities of objects are important in themselves.

(Dudley, 2012: 10-1)

<sup>1</sup> I will emphasize that these two exhibitions will not be applied as regular ethnographic cases, following the intentions and internal political struggles of exhibition making. They will simply be used to give some substance to what it may mean to 'dissolve objects' and create 'presence' in museum displays.

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