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ECOCRITICAL EXPERIMENTATION WITH OBJECT THEATRE AT A MUSEUM

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ABSTRACT

Human activity has globally affected the earth's climate and ecosystems. The museum sector has agency in representing topics of societal significance and climate change. The experiment presented here, took place at a history museum to re-work human subject positions in the museum.

The method of object theatre with a departure in an ecocritical perspective was evaluated. The result shows that the method might retain a colonial perspective towards animals and nature. Still, the method brings a change in who is the subject in the story, a possible shift in perspective and an incentive to care and act. The participants talk about the experience of a less abstract relationship to the object's origin and life cycle and a curiosity or a discovery of a knowledge gap. The method can be used to bring a greater attention to the needs of nonhumans in collaborative and participatory design processes.

MUSEUMS IN ANTROPOCEN

The Anthropocene can be defined as the time when human activity has globally affected the earth's climate and ecosystems. It includes indicators as global climate change, shifting global cycles of the weather, widespread pollution, radioactive fallout, plastic accumulation, species invasions and the mass extinction of species (Ellis, 2018). Museums has since long been encouraged to take a greater role in exploring things that matter in the world (Koster, 2006). The research of Fiona Cameron investigates the agency of the museum sector in representing topics of societal significance and climate change. She describes that museums are ideally placed to concretely re-work human subject positions and frame and promote posthuman theories and practices of life through curatorial practice. Natural history and history museums frame specific subject positions and relations i.e., the ordering and exhibiting in museums are principally understood in terms of human subject/object relations, between humans, human others, non-humans, and technology through exhibition (Cameron, 2018). With Anthropocene as a backdrop, museums are thus inspired by the ontological and epistemological shift that has taken place in the field of environmental humanities and the responsibility to be relevant in a turbulent world. Therefore, museums develop new public practices and exhibitions (Cameron, 2015; Nordbäck and Rotbain, 2022).

DESIGN AND BIOINCLUSIVE ETHICS

The experiment ecocritical object theatre studied here, is grounded in a bio inclusive ethic which conceptualizes nature as a collective of human and nonhuman living beings that pursue their own needs while allowing and enabling other living beings to pursue theirs. In an overview over bio inclusive collaborative and participatory design, Emilija Veselova and İdil Gaziulusoy (2021) points out that the anthropocentric values are strongly manifest in the dominant discourse and practice of design and that stakeholder participation in design processes further supports satisfaction of human needs and wants. The authors show that over time, the design approaches has diversified, in for example co-design, participatory design, participatory innovation to address various aspects of participation. Despite this diversification, the dominant anthropocentric value base remained.
They argue that collaborative and participatory design processes tend to focus on the needs of humans and human-made systems and leave out considerations about natural nonhumans. They also point to the opportunity to include nonhuman perspectives in collaborative and participatory design processes since the processes encourages and supports the representation and participation of different perspectives (Veselova and Gaziulusoy, 2021).

Arturo Escobar (2018) mirrors and expands on this idea when he discusses the ontology of design in his book Designs for the Pluriverse. He talks about a critical mass of designers that redefines design completely from its conventional meaning, a meaning tied to capitalism and modernity. Design is instead becoming a political technology; he points out that design then moves to become a space for really thinking deeply about societal change transformation towards sustainability. Design is in the ecocritical object theatre interpreted as a participatory process of investigating, understanding, reflecting upon, establishing, developing, and supporting mutual learning between multiple participants in a collective “reflection in action” (Simonsen and Robertsson, 2012) to support a societal transformation towards a sustainable future.

Theatre is another concept in the ecocritical object theatre. In this experimentation theatre is understood in a certain way: as participatory theatre. Participatory design and participatory theatre as used in this context is closely related. Participatory theatre approaches engage with communities and facilitate group processes in which multiple stakeholders come together to explore a theme or a question together through theatrical methods. Participatory theatre works with people’s ability to imagine together and immerse themselves in fictitious play yet recognise and reflect on themselves through the theatrical setting. It enables a blend between reality and fiction. It can also be said that theatrical ways of working do not try to give answers or solve problems, but instead pose questions and make us reflect upon challenging dilemmas (Friis et. al. 2015; Ryöppy 2020).

THE ECOCRITICAL OBJECT THEATRE EXPERIMENT

The ecocritical object theatre experiment took place at a history museum and was an attempt to re-work human subject positions in the museum. The museum’s exhibitions are designed with sections displaying objects that represent historical events chronologically from ancient times to the present. Here the story of man is told with man in a subject position through, for example, periods of iron extraction, the introduction of new science, and progress in modern era. There are built environments in the museum to support the visitor to identify with man in history. In the encounter with the museum's exhibitions, the visitor fills in the blanks based on what is “served” but there is something missing, for example the possibilities to identify with the animals’ and nature’s stories.

Redesigning an exhibition requires money and resources that starved museums do not always have. This research investigates a method to introduce nature and animals as subjects in representations of history. It is a method that in first-hand does not change the form and structure of the exhibitions but brings the opportunity to open for other voices.

PARTICIPATORY OBJECT THEATRE WORKSHOP

In 2022 two groups explored the ecocritical object theatre’s possibilities to include nonhuman stakeholders in the representation of history. Two workshops took place in the current exhibitions. The two groups were surrounded of objects, environments, sounds, and smells related to the history of the county from ancient times to the to the 21st century. There were in total forty participants in the workshops. One group consisted of researchers, artists, writers, and museum professionals. The other group brought together museum educators and exhibition curators from mid-Sweden from both communal, regional, and private museums. The exploration embraced object theatre in the exhibitions followed by a group discussion. During the group discussion the author of the paper took fieldnotes. The discussions were situated in the exhibitions in spaces dedicated for group reunions. Those spaces can be described as small, built-in amphitheatres, shielded by walls.

The exploration with the museum educators and exhibition curators was additionally followed up by an online questionnaire. Seven participants took part in that.

The participating exhibition producers are the ones who are responsible for the form and development of the exhibitions, and they were interested to explore the exhibitions from an ecocritical perspective and reflect together with others on how the exhibitions could be developed. For their part, the educators, artists, writers, and researchers wished to develop methods and stories for sustainability issues in public work in the frame of a larger project. There was a common goal for the participants to develop different practices for sustainability.

In this study the guiding questions were: How can the ecocritical object theatre’s possibilities to include nonhuman stakeholders in the current exhibitions be understood? In which way might the method acknowledge nonhuman contributions in the cultural history? The research also aimed to study if the method gave possibilities to acknowledge any damage historical events might cause to nonhumans.

The ecocritical object theatre experiment workshop was developed around three phases:
• Phase 1: The individual journey in the exhibitions
• Phase 2: Sharing life stories in pairs
• Phase 3: Collective reflection

PHASE 1: INDIVIDUAL JOURNEY IN THE EXHIBITIONS

The aim of an object life story is to invite people to tell a story about the whole life of an object. The first step is an individual journey in the exhibition (see Figure 1). The journey starts with the encouragement: — Take a walk in the exhibitions. Choose an animal, a piece of nature or a thing to which you are drawn.

Originally, the first phase was articulated as to search for an object you are drawn to, a phrasing used in an earlier development of the method (Schaeffer et al. 2020). The very word object (although in the museum world it also includes animals and elements of nature in the collections) led to an exclusion. It did not create a sufficient push for the human participants to feel free to choose to be an animal or a plant or another part of nature. At the subsequent workshop, the question was modified and instead solely being asked to look for an object, animals and nature was more clearly articulated as a possibility in the individual journey.

PHASE 2: SHARING THE LIFE STORIES IN PAIRS

The participants (A and B) paired up around one of the chosen animals, pieces of nature or a thing (see Figure 2). If possible, they were encouraged to hold the chosen object in their hand or, if that was not possible, touch it or stand close to it. During the first round, B listened carefully while A had some minutes to tell the life story of that object, from the day it was “born” until today, including how the object ended up in the museum. The person telling the story was the object. So, A stuck to the first-person perspective, and used the “I” form. A imagined the whole history of that object, which might include past experiences of being extracted, produced, sold, distributed, found, used, reused, misused, abandoned, or disposed.

The story also included thoughts on the question: — What will happen with me in the future? The stories are not only based on the object’s traits like the looks, weight, material, size, or age, but also the feelings and emotions that the objects are associated with and the relations that becomes a part of the story and different endings of the life (see Figure 3). In this part of the
workshop the sound from many people talking was increasing in the exhibitions in both workshops.

**PHASE 3: COLLECTIVE REFLECTION**

In the second story the crow articulated the difficulty to reach the humans with its experience of life and the inability/deafness of people to let the experiences of animals and nature into their lives and into their exhibitions and history.

"During my time at the museum, I learned human language. Me and my four bird friends talk in bird language. But in human language I can't get through. So lately I have thought out a new way to connect with people so they can connect with nature. I work with the gaze and with thought transference. It actually works well."

**RESULT**

The method opened for an inclusion of nonhuman voices within the current exhibitions and unlocked perspectives of various experiences of the nonhumans – and acknowledges fictitious nonhuman stories and nonhuman contributions. It also gave possibilities to acknowledge the damage historical events might cause to nonhumans. Three examples of stories from the workshops will be presented here: the crow, the work overall and the wood.

**THE CROW**

The life story of the crow (see Figure 5). The crow was in focus for two human participants and the life experience of the crow was formulated in diverse ways. The first story was touching on the feeling of being important when in earlier days it was classified and given a number.

"From the beginning I was in a school collection. I was someone, I had a special number, I was classified. Here in the science room, I am no longer an individual, but a representative of an idea. You don't even see the note anymore."

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**THE WORK OVERALL**

"I am an unused work overall. I'm unused, what does that mean? I come from the oil, deep in the earth."

The second example is a working garment, thought to be a work and protective overall (see Figure 6). Its reflection evolves around the fact that is “born” and produced in a tissue with a lot of polyester in it, about 50 years ago. A great effort and nature resources were used when producing the synthetic fabric. Despite all
these effort, energy, and resources the working garment was never used.

This story acknowledges the nonhuman perspective and the contributions of nature. In the group reflection afterwards the fictitious story of the overall opened a reflection about a possible knowledge gap. Do we actually know where the material polyester come from, is it oil or is it something else? The garment helped to open a reflection of missing knowledge and missing stories from an ecocritical perspective in the exhibitions. The relation between progress, industrialism, materialism, and its effect on nature in the modern society was not covered in the exhibitions.

THE WOOD

Staying with a part of the exhibition and talking from an I perspective was for some participants a strong experience. One participant was drawn to a piece of wood (see Figure 7). The participant expressed: I was the wood; I felt such tenderness. I started to cry when I talked about my life.

In the collective reflection afterwards, there was a conversation related to this story of the piece of wood. It was about the role of the woods in the area and the clearing of forests that were needed to produce iron. How important the charring wood was and to get it almost all the forests disappeared, and new lands had to be taken.

OTHER REFLECTIONS OVER THE MEETOD

The relations between the objects and human history came forward in the collective reflection session. One participant expressed the deep experience of being a container for gasoline and the wakening memories of the smell in the childhood in northern Sweden. There was reflection over the fact that the method was a “a way to bring objects back to life” and the workshop was filled with lust and not a feeling of “do homework”.

The method engaged one participant to ask more questions, when being in the role of the listener:

“I found the dramatized way of telling makes it easier to make the description more engaging. It is also good that you, as a listener, ask yourself more questions when the subject spoke in the I-form.”

Museum educator E

One reflection in the group was also that staying with a story of an object is a new way for them to work. It evoked empathy and tenderness. In the conversation a change in relation was put forward, a feeling of a different relationship with the “things” said that they become more valuable. The feeling of an urge, and I
feel an urge to take care of them in another way was also entering as a topic in the discussion.

One participant reflected afterwards about the feeling of fun and again the knowledge gap related to mining in Sweden:

"It was a fun way to use my general knowledge in areas that were close at hand based on the chosen subject. In my case the item was a spur forged in iron (I think). The story I improvised included topics such as history, crafts and mining, and set me thinking about my knowledge in those fields. For example, I became curious to find out more about the Swedish mining industry before the big mining boom in the 19th century. I strongly believe that this method can produce a similar effect in others."

Museum educator B

The change of perspective and sustainability was also touched upon.

"The method meant that I had to put myself into the perspective of a thing. It was a good way to change perspective and I think that is very important in the climate change. Being able to fit into someone or someone else's world view. Then it was fun to play theater, of course!"

Museum educator C

DISCUSSION

This method creates a space for reflection on stories other than those that the history museum usually talks about. The participants created the narrative themselves. It is possible to criticize the method since it is still humans who breathe life into the objects and through their limited knowledge, they animate the story with their imagination. That could mean that the participants with this method retain a colonial perspective towards animals and nature. Once again, we use the animals and nature for our pleasure or enjoyment. It is true that it is the human who plays the narrator in the experiment and becomes the bird, the overall, the wood and so on. Following Matthews (2006) arguing that the materialistic knowledge about nature rooted in anthropocentrism must be supplemented and even subsumed by more metaphysical, poetic, secular views on matter and nature, the method open for a poetic and imaginative relation to matter and nature. In the ecocritical object theatre there is a change in who is the subject in the story. Instead of looking at the animals and nature, the human participant imagines, in a way a perspective from inside the animal, out of the booth, from the place in the exhibition, from the place of the wood on a wall and thinks back to the forest where it stood. The method brings a possible shift in perspective and an incentive to care and act. In the shift in perspective, new experiences arise. For example: compassion and empathy with the animals and nature, and the objects become more valuable because the person has devoted time and attention to it. The objects relational story comes forward, interwoven with childhood memories and not a kind of thing that could be left behind, but taken care of. The experiment talks about the experience of a less abstract relationship to the object's origin and life cycle or alternatively a curiosity or a discovery of a knowledge gap. The stories focus both on the past, on the present and a possible future. These kinds of experiences could be a small step to inspire us to re-imagine our society. As a development it would be possible to introduce scientific research related to nature and animals and to global warming.

CONCLUSION

The method opened for an inclusion of nonhuman voices in the current exhibitions and for various experiences of the nonhumans. This method is a way for humans to scrutinize which design goals stem from dominant worldviews and getting in touch with objects (matter and nature) and their history. The method opens a path for the expression of the emotional aspects of objects, allowing to reflect on current temporal social norms. The method also gave possibilities to acknowledge the damage historical events, like iron production, might cause to nonhumans.

The method can be used to bring a greater attention to the needs of nonhumans in collaborative and participatory design processes. Further research is needed to study more in detail in which way the method could be developed to acknowledge nonhuman stories and contributions to the representation of history in museums.

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