RESEARCHING MUSEUM MATTERS THROUGH DESIGN

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ABSTRACT
The project 'Mobile Mediation of Fashion by Museums' explores how museums may use mobile media to frame current culture and facilitate museum experiences outside the museum. The project also, and as importantly, seeks to address the implications of such forms of mediation for the museum’s objectives, role and identity. The method developed in the project takes inspiration from critical design, holding that design may not only provide solutions, but can also be used to identify problems, questions and assumptions inherent in a field. Presenting the project’s problem field, research design and some of the challenges experienced in the ongoing process, this paper will offer work-in-progress considerations on using design methodology in the humanities, arguing that design may serve as a relevant tool for critical inquiry into museological matters of concern.

INTRODUCTION: EMERGING MUSEOLOGICAL FIELDS
'Mobile Mediation of Fashion by Museums' addresses two current developments in museums. One is the establishment of fashion as a field for cultural studies and hence a subject area for museums. The other is the growing interest in digital and mobile/social media as tools for cultural dissemination. Both are seen as potential catalysts for widening the museum’s public appeal and accessibility (Melchior 2012, Skot-Hansen 2008), thus catering to the prevailing ('new') museological paradigm, outlined in Weil’s (2002) dictum 'From Being about Something to Being for Somebody'.

Understanding mobile media as media that enable the actualisation of museum matters outside the museum and the exchange of knowledge between institutions and the public, opens up new opportunities for mediation. The possibilities are manifold, although not straightforward: augmenting a reality that has no place and is in perpetual flux, as is the case for fashion, has its own challenges, and inspiring an appreciation of the cultural significance of everyday objects without the help of the museum context can be tricky.

Designing for new types of museum experiences is problematic in more than one way, however. Aligning inclusion and interaction with curatorial goals and standards may prove difficult, and thus expose conflicts of interest and diverging ideas and ideals for the museum. But as importantly, innovations in mediation change the way we understand museums. Moving towards a distributed, medialised or community centred ‘post-museum’ practice may strengthen the social function of the museum, but could also undermine the function of the museum as a space of otherness and quiet contemplation (Hooper-Greenhill 2000, Dubuc 2011, Foucault 1967). What’s more, whilst museums exert themselves to offer digital experiences and invite dialogue, the public is seemingly less than keen to participate (Lynch 2013, Katz et al. 2011).

This is, however, not simply a problem in need of a solution – as if there were such a fix – but a problem that may inspire a constructive, critical stance in the museum community. It is therefore not the sheer facts of present day museum media usage that will help us understand the position and possible future of the museum. Instead, as suggested by Latour (2004) it is the matters of concern relating to the issue that are of the essence, namely, what makes museums feel compelled to match the digital offerings of the surrounding society and what would be the result if they did?
DESIGN AS TOOL FOR ANALYSIS

As argued by Lenskjold (2011) design methods can be used to articulate such matters of concern, for example by mapping the objects, people and events that have brought the issue into being, or in scenarios projecting possible futures and their consequences. This articulation is not only relevant in a design context, however, but can also inform research in the humanities. The inquisitive approach of the critical design tradition may thus not just serve to produce ‘provotypes’ for design anthropology (ibid.), nor necessarily have the exhibition of speculative artifacts as the end result, as suggested by Koskinen et al. (2011), summing up what they describe as the ‘Showroom’ program of design research. In this project, I propose that the creative design process itself may also be used as a form of analysis. Asking questions with design and suggesting the shape of possible futures can thus produce new insights into the scope, limits and pitfalls of a field, and how they reflect on the context. Used in this way, design methodology can add another dimension to a hermeneutic analysis in the humanities, shedding light on new details and aspects that in turn inform the overall understanding.

In the scope of this project, the objective is to:

a) explore and make concrete the field of possibilities for mediating fashion as culture outside the museum with mobile media, through the ideation of exemplary concepts
b) examine how this type of mediation compliments or challenges the (Design)museum’s praxis, self-image and curatorial/educational objectives
c) discuss the implications in a museological and cultural context

Looking to explore mediation formats that are as yet non-existent and trying to understand a subject area defined by a complex interplay of cultural politics and -practices, positions in cultural studies, and developments in and perceptions of digital culture, I will combine design based research with humanistic analysis. This overall approach in the project is illustrated in a ‘hermeneutic spirograph’ (fig. 1); my modification of the circle or spiral usually associated with hermeneutics, pointing to the assembled nature of my research area and the dialectic process drawing together diverse theoretical fields and methods.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND RESULTS TO DATE

The empirical research for the project falls in three parts or stages, as illustrated in figure 2. Part one focuses on generating inspiration and gaining insight into the perspectives of prospective users through a combination of individual semi-structured interviews, cultural probes and a workshop with user informants. Part two involves explorative design work carried out by the researcher, seeking to ideate relevant concepts for mediation as well as augmenting the understanding of the field and uncovering potential problems. In part three, the concepts will serve as conversation pieces in a workshop with museum professionals aimed at eliciting their views and assumptions regarding new media mediation.

Fig. 1: Model of hermeneutic design/analysis process

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Fig. 2: Three-part research design

Part I was completed with the participation of eight informants; all female, aged 20-41, with a self-proclaimed interest in fashion and new media. Of these, all eight were interviewed individually; six responded to the cultural probe and four also participated in the workshop. The material produced was intended to serve as inspiration only for the continued design process, not to be analysed as ethnographic data. Following Gaver’s (2004) suggested ‘probology’ approach, i.e. valuing uncertainty and subjectivity, the cultural probe was designed to inspire creativity and aesthetic pleasure, and sought to explore connections between fashion, media, urban- and popular culture and everyday life. Asking for personal notions rather than factual

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1 The blogpost http://blatryk.wordpress.com/2012/06/11/mode-medier-museer/ was distributed via social media (snowball sampling) as a call for participation, laying out the open-ended sampling criteria

2 For images and detailed descriptions of the cultural probe please visit http://blatryk.wordpress.com/2012/06/29/cultural-probe-for-fashion-media-and-museum-mediation/
documentation, the returns were accordingly playful and moot, defying objective analysis (fig.4).

Fig. 3: Cultural probe

The participants’ heightened awareness of fashion and social media due to professional or educational experience, however, meant that their contributions in interviews and the workshop were akin to those of expert informants. As such, they were not representative of a general user group, yet their viewpoints had great value as inspiration for the continued process, and really pinpointed some of the challenges and contradictions inherent in the field.

The probe returns thus revealed a preference for analogue over digital activities, even for this media savvy group; and the desire to invite participation to shed light on stories not told by the dominant narrators of fashion was matched by equal concerns regarding how to filter contributions in order to secure a high quality of content. Similarly, a curatorial narrative was regarded as the essential contribution from museums in the overwhelming stream of content, viewpoints and sources found online. In this way, the findings mirrored matters of concern uncovered in the theoretical research, whilst adding the ambiguity of real life perspectives, so crucial to design.

Fig. 4: Selected probe returns

OBJECTIVES FOR CONTINUED RESEARCH

At the time of writing, the project is in stage two of the research process, meaning that I am working to conceptualize ways to frame fashion as cultural heritage with mobile media. To aid this ideation, I am collating theoretical conundrums with the generated material and visual inspiration in a design journal; an approach developed in this project with inspiration from methods in fashion design. Using aesthetics as a means to sharpen more freeform ideas, the intention is for the sketchbook to provide some resistance, thereby promoting reflection and progression. Furthermore, to compensate for the drawbacks of solitary exploration, I am looking to spar with designers and peers who can stimulate this process and give critique on my ideas and methodology.

Fig. 5: Journal for design exploration

The outcome of this stage should be twofold. The tangible product is a small handful of concept sketches, which can trigger debate in the workshop planned for part three of the research cycle. Adopting Mazé & Redström’s ambition “not to converge upon a single problem or solution, nor to provide a roadmap to a particular preferred future, but to materialize a territory of possible viewpoints as a basis for curating—and catalyzing—a conversation in the here and now” (Mazé & Redström 2008 p. 66), the intention is to create designs that are open-ended, balancing appeal and aversion. The more intangible, but as essential, outcome is the exploration of the field and uncovering of problems that will inform the later stages of research.

As described above, design is thus seen not only as a tool for problem solving or problem setting, but also as a tool for analysis; a way of examining the subject area. Finally, workshop two will bring together curators, researchers and communicators from Designmuseum Denmark in order to discuss the concepts and implications for the museum if realized. My expectation

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3 I studied fashion design at Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication from 2001-3. However, as the program focused more on creative development than reflection on methodology, I have no references for this approach.
is that viewpoints about mobile/social museum mediation within the group may differ strongly, and so
my aim is to draw out these diverse understandings and use them as springboard for a discussion of my field and related problems in museology. It is thus not the empirical findings but a contribution to the theoretical discourse that informs current museum developments that is the objective of my thesis, as well as the development of a design methodology for research in the humanities.

CONSIDERATIONS AND CONCLUSION

As much as I see the benefits of using design as a tool for critical inquiry into my problem field, I am also aware of the difficulties and dangers in following this approach. Whereas research in the humanities is predominantly carried out through individual projects, the design field has a strong tradition for collaborations in teams or institutional research programs. Pursuing design research as a solo enterprise outside such frameworks may be hazardous. As mentioned above, I am therefore keen to both engage in more informal exchanges and to obtain qualified critique from a mentor with experience in design research.

Still, after ensuring the validity of my design research, the real challenge may lie in successfully presenting these insights as a contribution to museology. Although originating in the humanities, most research in the field currently relies on empirical user studies and social science methodologies, studying existing museum projects (Villadsen & Drotner 2012). Yet, to counter the development of a formulaic understanding of museum research and question prevailing museum dogmas, it may be fruitful to look for other ways of producing knowledge in this field.

Design research, by nature ‘generating more ideas than we have received’ (Latour 2004, p. 248), is well posed to deliver a critique that does not deconstruct but which carefully assembles arenas for discussing matters of concern by presenting alternatives to the dominant discourse, heeding Latour’s call for rethinking critical approaches in the humanities (ibid.). The design research ‘detour’ in this project may then turn out to be a shortcut to new understandings with relevance for museums.

REFERENCES


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