

## Trans-museology: inspiring a musealising gaze on the everyday

This is my home. Or rather, this is a picture from my livingroom back in 2014 when I posted this photo on Instagram, as a submission for the campaign #deldit2014/ 'share your 2014'.

The campaign was initiated by Den Gamle By – an open-air museum of urban history and culture in Århus, Denmark – in relation to a planned new exhibition representing 2014.

At the time, the curators of Den Gamle By were still working to complete the collection of objects for a newly opened section of the open-air museum depicting urban life in 1974. In this work, they had experienced significant challenges in obtaining everyday items from our recent past, because modern-day consumer culture had encouraged us to throw away and replace old household goods rather than make do and mend. So now the museum was trying to secure current artefacts for the future exhibition while the objects were still in circulation, and also sought to obtain a rich documentation of the details that define a home and make up a cityscape.

To this end, the museum engaged the public in the curatorial process: They publicised a list of wanted items, they conducted an online survey on interior style, and they also sent out this call for submissions of photos on Instagram. Under the common hashtag #deldit2014, participants were asked to share photos of their homes and everyday lives: the contents of their fridge; casual street observations; the layout and lived-in mess of a living room.

I start with this example, because what I want to talk about today is how this present-day, everyday life has become a subject for cultural and curatorial interest, and also how museums may think about and work towards making this ordinary life present itself to us or become present for us as culturally interesting. And I will do this through a combination of theoretical considerations and examples of this phenomenon that I have come across in my research for a PhD thesis on 'mobile museology', where some of these ideas we discussed originally.

One point of departure for this exploration is Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's article 'Aesthetic experiences in everyday worlds', in which he writes:

[...] remember some of those moments in which what we consider to be a thoroughly normal everyday experience all of a sudden appears in a new, exceptional light, in the light of aesthetic experience. These are moments that make sudden changes happen through a switch in the situational frames within which we experience certain objects. We suddenly think of food as "artsy food", we suddenly see clothes as "fashion", we suddenly begin to appreciate an "elegance" in the solution of a mathematical problem, or we are suddenly surprised to hear a rhyme that we have inadvertently produced while speaking. Under which specific conditions do such switches occur, and how do we return from them, if ever, to the more pragmatic everyday attitudes? (Gumbrecht 2006:302)

However, contrary to Gumbrecht, what I wish to focus on is not so much the sudden, incidental occurrence of such switches, but rather how museums may deliberately attempt to 'flip the switch', so to speak, by way of curatorial or communicative strategies.

Looking at one's home with the eyes of a curator, as participants were asked to do in the #deldit2014 campaign, I would thus suggest that it may indeed appear 'in a new, exceptional light', when not only the aesthetic qualities of objects, but also their cultural significance may start to become apparent. In this light, or through this lense, furniture and family heirlooms can be seen to bear witness to cultural tastes and social heritage, and personal quirks and preferences turn out to be influenced by greater cultural trends.

Just as we recall bygone fashions when flicking through a family album, we may suddenly recognise our present day surroundings as 'so 2017' or in this case, 'so 2014'. Thus, the home transforms into an aesthetic, ethnographic display, if only for the duration of the gaze.

### The everyday as culturally interesting/blurring museum boundaries

A campaign such as #deldit2014 is current in that it taps into the widespread trend for life sharing on social media. But it is also a reflection of how the concept of musealising the present has a strong currency in the current museum climate.

This trend is related to the new museological interest in breaking down barriers between museums and the surrounding society, and to the long-running desire to remodel the museum institution in opposition to earlier associations with exclusivity, elitism and authoritarianism. It is thereby rooted in the feminist and post-colonial criticism that made museums aware of their crisis of representation. In response to this criticism, cultural history museums in particular have been working towards including more voices and more cultures, so that not just high culture and national events but also common culture and everyday life – and women, and minorities – now have a place in the museum.

So even though we still come to museums to experience the curious or the sublime, to be moved by art or to experience or learn about other cultures and times past, we also increasingly expect to find some reflection of our own lives in the museum. We want recognition, and we like to find something that we recognise and can relate to in the museum, to find ourselves as part of the cultural story.

Museums also increasingly seek to become part of the everyday life of its public by creating social events and cultivating museum spaces as recreational hangouts and by reaching out to educational institutions and local communities. At the same time, museums are trying to transcend their institutional settings, both in the physical and virtual space, to be present online or to engage users in collaborative programmes, and to unlock the provenance and significance of cultural artefacts encountered in everyday life.

Andreas Huyssen, back in 1995, saw what he termed *museumphilia* as a symptom of the postmodern condition, caused by our desire for experiences of the out-of-the-ordinary. Yet, the current trend for musealising the mundane could indicate a narcissistic yearning for experiencing the extraordinary in the ordinary everyday, seeing ourselves and our lives as experience-worthy.

As a reflection of this yearning, even outside the museum field, there is also an impulse to musealise the everyday and to frame the commonplace as culturally interesting by using museum techniques. One example of this is the 'Museum of the Mundane', which is actually a branding campaign for a design

agency, that attaches museum-style labels to urban objects in London and New York, things like ATMs, manhole covers or traffic lights, with information about their design history and significance.

In a similar vein, the miniscule 'Mmuseumm' in New York exhibits prosaic objects on Instagram and in a disused lift shaft, presenting itself as a "modern natural history museum dedicated to contemporary global archeology".

And in relation to the film '20.000 Days on Earth', about the singer Nick Cave, a website called 'The Museum of Important Shit' was launched, asking people to share pictures and stories of the trinkets and knick-knacks that had particular, personal meaning for them.

These concepts are reminiscent of Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk's 'Modest Manifesto for Museums', in which he states that

"We don't need more museums that try to construct the historical narratives of a society, community, team, nation, state, tribe, company, or species. We all know that the ordinary, everyday stories of individuals are richer, more humane, and much more joyful."

Together, these initiatives show up a pattern of interest in a 're-enchantment' of the mundane, or a belief that the everyday is actually rather enchanting if only we care to see it.

So, what we see is a cultural interest in current, everyday culture, both within the museum field and the academic world, and also outside the museum, where museum concepts are used to frame the mundane. And in this exchange, the boundaries between museums and the surrounding world are starting to blur.

Now, of course, Pamuk's manifesto is an interesting one, given that it is written in relation to a work of fiction, the Gesamtkunstwerk made up by the novel 'The Museum of Innocence' and the museum by the same name in Istanbul. So what this museum represents is in reality not an 'ordinary, everyday story' of an individual, but a fictional drama about obsession, that is actually more creepy than innocent.

And, notably, in the novel, the protagonist asks the writer Pamuk to write his story for him. Because having a story, and being able to tell it, is not one and the same. Storytelling is a craft that relies on the ability to select, organise, frame and communicate what is significant, in a way that is also dramatically or aesthetically engaging.

Much like curating. So even though Pamuk also claims that "If objects are not uprooted from their environs and their streets, but are situated with care and ingenuity in their natural homes, they will already portray their own stories", sometimes we need museums to help us see the cultural history that we are living, to provide a framework or a lense for experiencing the everyday in a new light.

### **The museum experience > a musealising gaze**

This is what can happen in the exhibition, where the isolation of objects, the techniques of display, and also the architecture and ambience of the museum helps to focus our attention. Here, the *gravitas* of the surroundings leads us to expect and accept that the artefacts presented to us by the museum curators must carry cultural weight. Expecting to find clues to this significance, we look at museum objects more attentively than we do everyday objects, and consider their meaning according to context. According to art historian Rune Gade, the impact of the museum space is so significant that

[...] when entering the museum a transformation takes place, which serves to separate the world outside and within the museum. One is prepared for a change of perception, and this transformation from an everyday situation to a museal situation can be staged more or less dramatically, elegantly and affectively. The passage through the museum entrance paves the way, so to speak, for a certain receptive mode, which potentially helps to constitute the museum space as a particular room for reflection. (2006:27) (my translation)

Of course, the transformative powers of the museum foyer are not always or necessarily as profound as Gade suggests. Still, something happens in the museum, something that helps us look closer, and maybe appreciate or even experience aesthetic qualities and cultural narratives.

Svetlana Alpers has even described the museum as 'a way of seeing', in her article by the same name. She describes how what she calls the museum effect; that is, "the tendency to isolate something from its world, to offer it up for attentive looking and thus transform it into art like our own" (1991.:27), not only gives preference to, but also produces objects of visual interest, by way of musealisation and display. Moreover, she argues that museums provide a place where our eyes are exercised. What the museum does is thus to encourage, and also install in the visitor, a certain way of looking.

Other scholars have similarly taken interest in this particular 'museum gaze': Huysen, for instance, talks about 'the museal glance of reenchantment'. Stephen Greenblatt argues that this gaze is a distinctive achievement of our culture, allowing for experiences of 'resonance and wonder'. And Sandra Dudley, in 'Encountering a Chinese Horse' reminds us how the visual experience can even have a visceral effect, as we imagine how an object might sound or smell or feel to our touch.

So we have in the museum a certain cultural and architectural framework and a certain ambience. We use particular techniques of selection, design and display to let objects stand out and to amplify both their cultural significance and their material, aesthetic qualities. And we have this particular, and particularly attentive museum gaze that is not merely looking but seeing and sensing. All of these can help us have intense and rewarding experiences of material culture in the museum.

But if we think, with Alpers, of the museum not as a place but as a way of seeing – then maybe we could also think of the museum gaze instead as a musealising gaze: a way of looking at objects that we may have learned and exercised in the museum, but which we could also 'switch on' outside the museum, in the everyday? Thinking in terms of a musealising rather than a museum gaze, lets us understand the experiential framework as a mental state rather than a physical space.

For Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, the transcendence and continuity of the gaze into the everyday world is thus a natural consequence of exhibiting the mundane. Much like Alpers, she understands the museum effect as affecting the viewer's gaze, and says that:

Once the seal of the quotidian is pierced, life is experienced as if represented: the metaphors of life as a book, stage, and museum capture this effect with nuances particular to each metaphor. Like the picturesque, in which paintings set the standard for experience, museum exhibitions transform how people look at their own immediate environs. The museum effect works both ways. Not only do ordinary things become special when placed in museum settings, but also the museum experience becomes a model for experiencing life outside its walls. (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991:410)

Now, the idea of a 'musealising' gaze is ofcourse not really original, nor very far-fetched. It could indeed be argued that this attentive gaze, this urge to contemplate the meanings and materiality of objects is the very reason why museums were built in the first place. And as Gumbrecht reminds us, we may also spontaneously experience the 'switch' outside the museum, the intensity of aesthetic experience as provoked by everyday objects.

### Examples, perspectives, conclusions

But as suggested in the introduction, the notion of a musealising gaze could perhaps inspire museums to think about how to trigger this gaze by providing a framework or a lense for viewing the everyday in the light of cultural heritage.

#deltdit2014 I believe was a good example of this. And I would like to end this presentation with a few other examples of how museums have designed curatorial or communicative strategies to transcend into the everyday – not to analyse these examples here, but merely as inspiration for a discussion on the scope for and value of such initiatives for audiences and institutions.

In 'The Exhibition Lab', an exhibition at Designmuseum Denmark, curator Laura Liv Weikop examined the effect of exhibition design by exhibiting designed household items according to different paradigms. The 'affective paradigm' resulted in the exhibit shown here, which accentuated or imitated the everyday connection, and also allowed visitors to pick up and handle the objects on display. So here the everyday context is made present in the museum to remind us of how objects of design are part of our everyday lives.

The 'Shoe Obsession' exhibition at the Museum at Fashion Insitute of Technology in New York back in 2013 took another approach. Here, the exhibition style, shown left, very strongly aimed to present or produce the shoes on show as objects of visual interest. However, curator Valerie Steele had chosen to include shoes that we also at the same time on sale at Saks Fifth Avenue, a few blocks away (who happened also to be the show's sponsor, but that's another story).

The similarities in display techniques in the museum and the department store were startling, and it was not entirely clear who was imitating whom. But of course, at the museum, the objects were behind glass, whereas in the department store one could handle shoes from the very same batch as those which were displayed in the museum. Cultural artefacts in one context, commercial products in the other.

When I went to see the exhibition, and from there straight to Saks, I even plucked up the courage to try on a pair of spiked Louboutins, that were completely out of my price range (feeling like a total imposter).

In this way, I was able to feel for myself the quality and craftsmanship, and the physical effect of these killer heels on my posture, my walk, and psychologically on my sense of self. In other words, what had at the museum been a curatorial claim, became a lived experience. What's more, the detached aesthetic objects in the exhibition became grounded in a very concrete material and social context, thanks to the hefty price-tag.

And yet, I would probably not have gone to Saks at all, had it not been for the exhibition, and would definitely not have come with the same interest or insight, had it not been for the curator's vision. It was the juxtaposition of the museum context and the commercial context that made a holistic understanding of the complexity of these cultural objects possible.

So, for me, this exercise in window-shopping at Saks became one of the most profound museum experiences I've ever had.

But trans-museal triggers or switches don't need to be anchored in an onsite exhibition. As evident in the #deldit2014, new technologies and new cultural practices offer new opportunities for museums. Also, the everyday can not only be framed in a cultural history perspective.

Hence, the National Gallery of Denmark's Instagram campaign #chasingsilence invites participants to capture motives and atmospheres that are distinctly 'Hammershøi'; a Danish painter renowned for his austere and somewhat melancholy artworks. It is surely not a coincidence that this campaign has now been relaunched just as autumn approaches, and we suddenly recognise this greyscale world all around us, not least in the older parts of Copenhagen. #chasingsilence thereby gives a framework for seeking out this art perspective, or for recognising and sharing these moments of elegant sadness.

And we don't even necessarily need to focus on the visual. An example of this could be the National Museum of Denmark's recent call for all Danish citizens to write a diary on September 6<sup>th</sup> and upload it to the museum's website. This initiative is thus part of a collection strategy that will allow historians of the future to understand everyday life experiences from the present day. But at the same time, much like #deldit2014, 'Del din dag' also invites participants to see their own everyday story as part of a larger cultural narrative, and may also inspire them to experience particular mundane details as suddenly significant or extraordinary. In the words of Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, "One becomes increasingly exotic to oneself, as one imagines how others might view what we consider normal" (:410).

Finally, it is also easy to imagine a campaign like 'Museum of the Mundane' being instigated instead by a city museum, and interesting to wonder what kind of things should then be given attention. All sorts of objects can thus be understood as cultural entities comprising material properties and discursive information, or, as poetically put by Lorraine Daston, as "nodes at which matter and meaning intersect." (2004:16). But not all objects communicate with equal levels of insistence or clarity, and both what they are and how they mean is open to interpretation and depending on cultural contexts. As viewers and interpreters, we each bring to the encounter a set of understandings, some of which are based in personal experiences and sensibilities, while others are socially encoded or collectively shared. And not everyone will care for the communicative powers of everyday objects. Thus, ironically, even the idea of musealising the mundane does not mean equal access for all.

Still, like their musealised counterparts, everyday objects are also cultural objects, open to aesthetic experience, and ripe for thinking with. In everyday use, we rarely consider these qualities – my bookcases simply hold my books, and I don't tend to consider the design values or cultural connotations of my kitchen bowl when mixing batter for pancakes. Indeed, imagining that the objects of our everyday lives should constantly call attention to cultural meanings is neither feasible nor desirable. Still, in the rare and fleeting moments that something considered trivial presents itself or is presented to us as significant, when we switch from glancing mode to gazing mode, the inherent 'meaning-ness' of things becomes meaningful. Through the lense of #deldit2014, my home looks a little more exotic to me.

This is the promising prospect of trans-museal mediation: to harness the musealising gaze and inspire aesthetic and cultural experiences in and of the everyday.