

Bringing the Atlantic Wall into the Museum space. Reflections on the relationship between exhibition making and academic research.



Photo Henrik Treimo

Conference Texts and Things, at the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology

Oslo, 16.-17.1.17.

By Henrik Treimo

In this presentation, I will talk about how exhibition making can be a generator of knowledge and understanding by a combination of academic and artistic research and means. My arguments will be based on an empirical case – a workshop on “big things” that the Museum did in collaboration with students from the Academy of Scenography. The workshop was part of the research project the “Things method”, aiming to contribute to the development of the exhibition Grossraum.

The participants in the workshop were (five BA-students, a MA-student, their supervisor, one advisor from the Directorate for Cultural Heritage, three museum curators and a photographer). The workshop was run in the Museum’s LAB. The LAB is an experimental space in this building. It was launched in 2014 as a strategy to give answers to the widely discussed question of how to integrate research and exhibition making. The aim with the LAB is to answer to this question empirically by developing innovative research-based exhibitions. Researchers, artists, as well as diverse stakeholders and audiences come together in this process. The exhibition Grossraum has been the first big scale project in the LAB.

We believe that there is an untapped research potential in the amalgamation of academic research and exhibition making. As I hope to show in the following, this potential lies in the collaborative engagement with texts, things and space. The common goal of creating a bodily experience of the researched knowledge in space – which is obviously different from writing a text, is the glue that keeps everything together.

In what follows, I will first introduce the workshop as part of the research project and the exhibition. I will exemplify how the research concepts work with our theoretical approach on objects as relational things. And, I will end with some reflections on the interactions on the interactions between art and research and exhibitions.

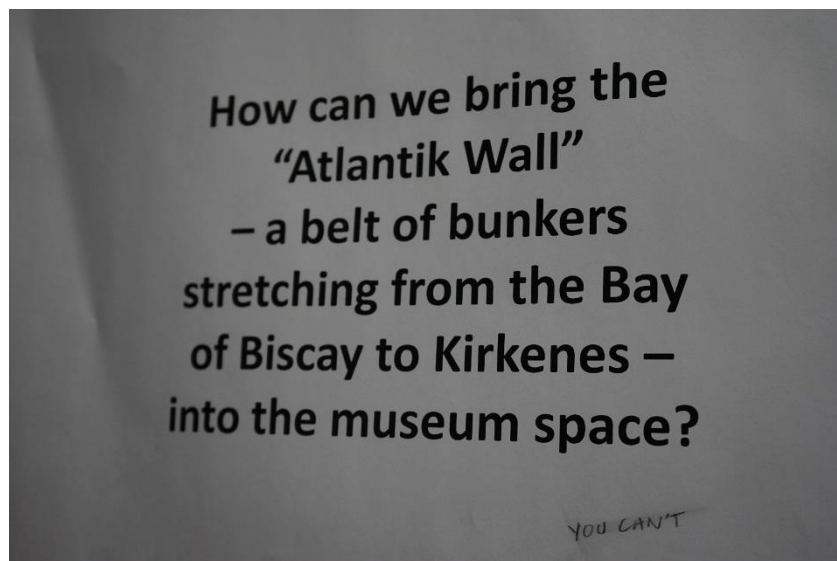


Photo, Håkon Bergseth, NTM

During some chilly and rainy days in October 2015 a group of scenography students and museum curators went on an excursion to the Atlantic Wall, near the city of Tønsberg, about a hundred kilometers south west of Oslo.

The tour was the very first encounter with the ‘big thing’ that was the focus point of a two weeks workshop with the title: ‘Big things and Grossraum’

The question that we set out to research was “How can we bring the Atlantic Wall – a belt of bunkers stretching from the Bay of Biscay in the south up to Kirkenes in the north – into the museum space?”



To bring it physically here, well, as one witty visitor replied to our question on a poster – “You can’t!” Of course we could not! When we went on our mission, we had some particular scholarly researched concepts in mind, as well as a theoretical approach to objects as relational things, and the artistic aim of transforming the Atlantic Wall into an experience for the visitors.



First, the research concepts stemmed out from the curator's involvement in the research project "The Political Economy of Forced Labor: Organization Todt in Norway during World War II" (2010–2017), and his desire to come up with initial ideas, themes, and topics for the related Grossraum-exhibition.

Concepts like *scale* and *dimension* emerged as an approach to understanding the Nazi regime's "politics of space". These concepts were further invigorated through collaborative workshops around other objects, such as rail tracks and granite stones; remnants of other gigantic construction projects.

So, this Atlantic Wall exercise was just one of the things that went into the Grossraum-exhibition, itself nested within and outside the research project.

When this group of students were invited into the project to explore the Atlantic Wall and how it could be transformed into a visitor experience, we had *these researched concepts* in mind. The real question then was; how can the Atlantic Wall be represented in the exhibition for the visitors to experience scale and dimension?



Photo, Håkon Bergseth, NTM

Second, as already mentioned, we came there with a theoretical understanding of objects (see i.e. Latour, 2005, Latour and Sánchez-Criado, 2007). The Wall is an unimaginable huge object. Yet, it can be theoretically approached as any other object. In this sense, the Atlantic wall is out there as a physical object. You can climb it and kick it! At the same time, it is an assembly of numerous human actors, techniques, and materials. For example, 300 000 men took part in the construction, an enormous amount of iron and concrete were supplied, it also played different roles; politically, logistically, as military defence, and more.

Our approach was inspired by material culture studies and science and technology studies, where objects are conceived as *dynamic* elements in a continuous flow of activity. They are

seen as *relational things*. Which means, that a thing can be conceptualized as the dynamic product of their relations. As pointed out by Bruno Latour and others, the ancient meaning of thing is an assembly, but today it also carries the meaning of a concrete object. In our approach we try to take advantage of both these meanings of a thing.

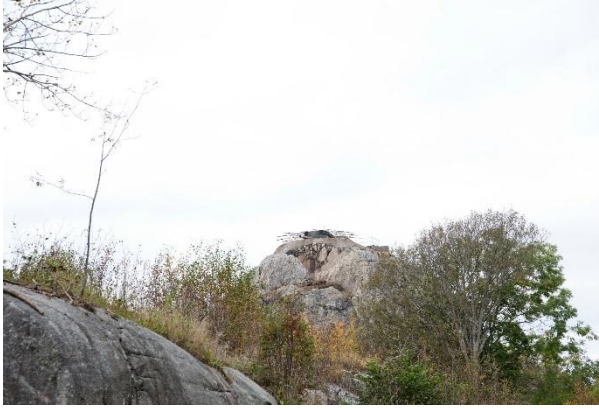
So how should this wall be represented in the exhibition? What should be the speech of the wall?

We want visitors to experience the wall as scale and dimension. Would a scale model then do the job? What a lot of silence that would be from all other actors that have been part of the assembly! What about the massive Todt-archive, with plans, drawings, instructions and so on, or all the prisoners and soldiers that died while constructing it, or fighting on it? Or all the stories told about it in academic and popular literature? Or its representations in art? What about all those who in one way or the other, are affected by these constructions today?

This is some of the theoretical backdrop and questions for why we conducted this fieldwork. We wanted touch and scratch the physical object and explore some of the relations these bunkers engage in. Hoping to find new information and for other stories to emerge.

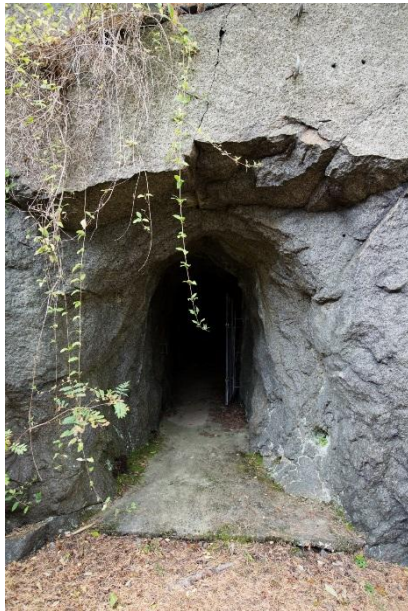
For example, today the Atlantic Wall is a physical memory of the war. It is not intact, but due to its construction methods, it is still massively present. It was, and will probably always be a part of the landscape along the coast. It is part of people's horizon. It functions and is used as a place for dwelling and walking the dog, as hideout for youngster who want to party and paint graffiti, for informal groups of military enthusiasts, and as an object for documentation by the local Directorate for Cultural Heritage. It is even there as bodily memories for those who experienced the sound of the canons.





Photo, Håkon Bergseth, NTM

During our visit, we had an appointment with a representative of the Directorate for Cultural Heritage who did registrations of the building masses, with the help of a local volunteer. That gave us access to the inside of the bunkers ...



Photo, Håkon Bergseth

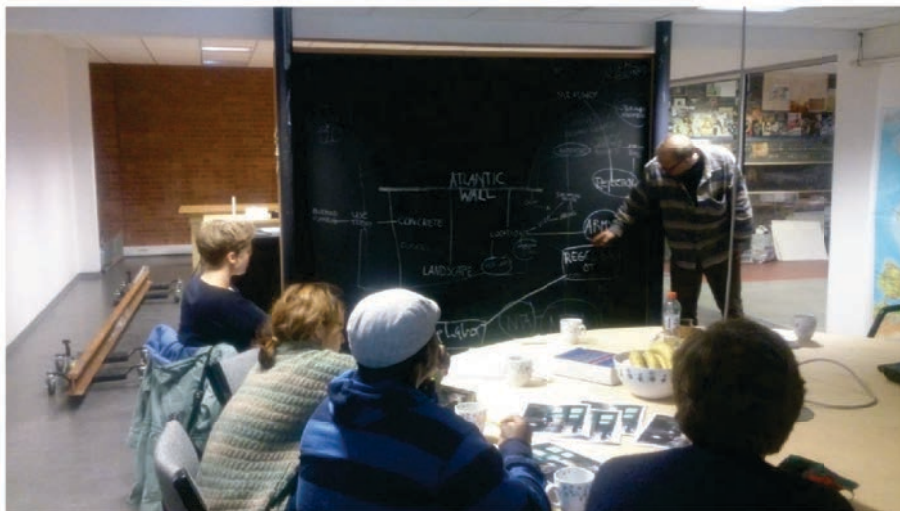
...And also to the hidden location of two grave headstones, where two Russian prisoners of war, who had died during their work on the Wall, used to be buried. We discovered that the graves were used as a memorial site – by unknowns. We also discovered that there was nothing left to be seen of the prisoner camp where the forced laborers lived.



Photo, Henrik Treimo

The LAB – Texts, things and space

Back from the fieldwork, the students and the curators gathered in the Museum's LAB to translate our findings and experiences into concepts that would work along the exhibition theme. Now our question was: Which relations and stories should be singled out and transformed into experiences for the visitors?



Photo, Henrik Treimo

This is a critical moment in the exhibition development: These workshops are where the knowledge and insights from the academic research and the artistic research meet and converge into “exhibition research”. The curator’s researched findings and concepts will meet the artistic eye and fresh insights beyond the academic interpretations (see i.e. Putnam, 2009). It’s an important moment of translations and mutual exchange between content and spatial thinking. Sometimes the outcomes of these workshops are materialized, in other workshops they are just steps on the way in the continuous amalgamation of texts, things, and space.

In this particular workshop the students were allowed to think without considering the practicalities and without too many constraints regarding space. The results were displayed as five conceptual models outside the LAB.



Photo, Håkon Bergseth, NTM

The models showed different experiences we had with the Wall. Very briefly:

- One model were on the experience of the heaviness and durability of the materiality.
- Another on the simultaneous feeling of being protected and vulnerable – to see and be seen.
- A third on the post-war stories about the horrifying physical sensation of the big canons being fired.
- A fourth on the silence surrounding the area today concerning the forced laborers that died in the production of these structures.
- And a fifth model on the contemporary use of the Wall by youngsters.

None of these models can be found in the Grossraum exhibition, but visitors will recognize elements. Some of the experiences and ideas were further developed through discussions between the curator, the scenographer, the architect, and the exhibition builders. The bodily experience with the bunkers and the materiality became important for the scenographic development of the exhibition. As the scenographer Alexandra Mendez observed when we visited the Wall, the aesthetic of the bunkers affected the way we perceived and moved our bodies: Although the entrances were high, we all felt a need to bend and keep our heads low.

Also, the feeling of being exposed and secure at the same time, has been transformed into a visitor experience. As, have the concrete and the strength of these structures and the ephemeral sound.

All of these represent *aesthetic experiences* for the visitors to relate to the theme and the narrative in the exhibition. But very much so, through their imagination. The scenography hints, teases, sometimes even forces, the visitor into experiences that triggers her imagination. The whole scenography for this exhibition is researched and developed for the visitor to take part and enact the narrative through bodily movement in space: To move fast, slow, to bend, to investigate, and stop to take in the displayed objects and get deeper into the narratives.

Scenography as art arranges an environment around a theme, topics, and displayed objects in the exhibition. It's a deeply unrealistic environment created to give the visitors an aesthetic experience evoked through their senses. According to John Dewey, who wrote the book *Art as Experience* (1934), aesthetic perception, for example seeing something, may create an experience, that at its best signifies complete interpretation of the self and the world. Through art, memories and earlier experiences are carried into the present and deepen the understanding of things and events. Scenography, as pointed out by Serge von Arx (2015), carries this potential to make visible what is not there to be seen.

If we presume Dewey is right in that aesthetic experiences are of crucial importance for humans to makes sense of the world we inhabit, and that knowledge and reason alone is not enough; then museums and exhibitions have a unique potential through combining knowledge and art.

Exhibition research

As the title of this talk suggests, I will now reflect a bit more on the relationship between research and exhibition making.

Let me begin by saying, that the academic research that has been invested and the knowledge presented in Grossraum have come from reading texts and archives. Furthermore, they have been molded, enhanced, and reinvigorated in the meeting with the scenographer, and other collaborators through a series of workshops and encounters with materiality and things. The shared goal of a spatial product has been of immense importance for the collaborative research process (the exhibition research). Hence, new perspectives, insights and knowledge of the materiality and ideology involved in the war economy have emerged through the interdisciplinary exhibition making process. These novel insights are expressed in space, and have also been transferred back into texts of the academic research, through publications that will result from the research project.

But, let us use this occasion to open this up a bit more; to explore what exhibition research could be.

I would like to stress, at this point, that the research that was done by the curator as an academically trained historian, has been of tremendous importance to the resulting knowledge

that is presented in the exhibition. New discoveries about the Todt-organisation and their Norwegian collaborators, actions, names, numbers and other historical facts have been carved out. Furthermore, and central to us here: The curator's concepts, such as *scale* and *dimension*, emerged from his reading and analyses of the Todt-archives and other written sources. An interesting point to be emphasized when we talk about exhibition research is: Where does this take place and what does it add?

I have already suggested that exhibition research takes place when the curator's researched knowledge and concepts meet the artistic research in a joint aim for an expression in space. But, even before that, something very important happened. Namely, the development of concepts for the exhibition. It is then necessary to ask if the curator of this, or any researched exhibition, would have come up with the same scholarly insights if the aim was to publish a text? And then, what happens when the curator's concepts become topic for artistic research and ideas?

We think these questions are important to explore and discuss, regarding what kind of knowledge that can feed back into the academic research, and what kind of knowledge that goes into the exhibition, and what do the visitors take away?

Another pertinent question to ask is, if the result of this collaborative research process is actually knowledge. To be certain, the academic evaluation criteria do not acknowledge this as a research product. The academic standard for research can be described, to quote (Niedderer, et al., 2006: 4), as a "practice with original contribution to knowledge, and where this knowledge should be transferable and communicated unambiguously."

The problem then, with having exhibitions evaluated as research, relates in particular to the premise of unambiguously transferred knowledge. The dilemma is obvious. If we make exhibitions with so many guidelines and so much context as would be needed to have every visitor read and interpret the content in the same way (as academic research demands), then it turns into a "written text" in three dimensions. We would miss out the essence of what an exhibition can add to experience and understanding through the use of our senses.

The question of how much context should be brought into an exhibition, that is how authorial it should be, will be a matter of taste, but also a matter of concern. If the topic is highly contested, let's say it is an exhibition on colonialism, race, or the Nazi-regime, the balance is significant.

The point is, that the unique combination of knowledge and art can make the experience of an exhibition into something that goes beyond mere recognition and learning. As Ken Arnold (2016) has argued, the exhibition is also a stage for perception and aesthetic experiences that encourage visitors to grasp life-enhancing insight. Museum programming, he claims, is about making aesthetic experiences for visitors. By doing so, exhibitions can be a room for experience and reflections, and individual investigations that leads to understanding. Arnold has suggested to substitute the concept of *knowledge* with *understanding* in describing the

possibility museums have to do research through the involvement of an active visiting audience.

So, to conclude. The described workshop, which in no way was extensive regarding the importation of the Atlantic Wall in the exhibition, demonstrates how the amalgamation of extensive scholarly research and experimental exhibition making happens. The LAB-method insists upon the joint effort of melting together the museum curator's perspective with the "artist's eye". The resulting exhibition should not be a flat compromise, but a powerful third position. When the dialogue is fruitful and the parties agree upon a common vision, exhibition research and knowledge production takes place at the intersection of academia and art.

Literature

- Arnold, K. (2016). "Thinking things through: reviving museum research." In *Science Museum Group Journal*. Issue 5. (<http://journal.sciencemuseum.ac.uk/browse/issue-05/thinking-things-through/> 10.3.2017).
- Arx, S. von, (2015). "On Scenography." Pp. 34-38 in *Responsive Listening: Theater Training for Contemporary Spaces*, ed. Eeg-Tverrbakk, C. and Ely, K. New York: Brooklyn Arts Press.
- Dewey, J. (1980 [1934]). *Art as Experience*. New York: Perigee Books.
- Latour, B. and Sánchez-Criado, T. (2007). "Making the 'Res Public'" In *ephemera*, vol. 7(2): 364-371
- Latour, B. (2005). "From realpolitick to dinpolitick or how to make things public." Pp. 14–43 in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Latour, L. and Weibel, P. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Putnam, J. (2009). *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium*. London, Thames & Hudson.