

Conference at the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology,
Oslo, 16–17 February 2017

Texts and Things: The Nazi Politics of Space Exhibited

The exhibition *Grossraum – Organisation Todt and forced labour in Norway 1940–45* opens at The Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology on February 16th 2017. The exhibition results from amalgamation of extensive scholarly research and experimental exhibition making. In partnership with the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), the Museum wishes to use this occasion to invite scholars from different fields and backgrounds to discuss novel ways of integrating research, exhibition making, and outreach activities.

Even if Organisation Todt (OT) was an important agent in the German war economy, the organization constitutes a blind spot in the research about National Socialism. Neither OT's institutional role in the Nazi economic system, nor its responsibility for mass employment of prisoners of war and forced labors have been studied thoroughly. Headed by the engineer Fritz Todt and the architect Albert Speer, OT in Norway was responsible for numerous civil and military construction projects during the war. Coastal fortifications, airfields, roads, power plants, and a 1200-kilometer railway to the Arctic Ocean, were to integrate Norway into the new European order, the Nazi *Grossraum*. Serving as a tool for the Nazi politics of space, OT's reinforced concrete structures became the foundations for exercising power and domination on a transnational scale. Totally dependent on its violently recruited workforce, OT enrolled Norway into an economic system based on the enslavement of millions of people.



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The 440 shelf meters of historical material made available through the newly opened OT-archives in Oslo constitute an important source of knowledge about forced labour not only in a Norwegian, but also in a European context. Since 2011, the archives have been the basis of an NTNU-led research project titled *The political economy of forced labour: Organisation Todt in Norway*. Communicating new knowledge through the exhibition has been an integrated part of the research project right from the start. At the same time, it has been clear that the exhibition, drawing upon sources other than written documents, investigates the phenomenon from other angles and perspectives. Through the

newly established LAB, an experimental zone at the museum, scenographers and artists, diverse museum professionals, and external actors have been invited in to take part in exploring the research material and spatial aspect of the topic.

This unique combination of archival research and exhibition making addresses the tantalizing question of how museums can be a fertile place for knowledge generation. Museums work with material objects to facilitate experience, exploration and understanding through exhibitions. Unlike texts, exhibitions can generate and display knowledge that is open to diverse readings and interpretations. Still, this is not a straightforward process or practice.

The question concerning the epistemic value of working with objects and collections is central to a collaborative research project run by the museum LAB called *The thing's method*. Inspired by the "material turn", the project investigates object-oriented museum practices and the reconceptualization of objects as relational *things*. As Bruno Latour reminds us through the exhibition "Making Things Public" (2005); a *thing* indicates both an object and an assembly. Objects conceptualized as things are relational and contested, and here, we believe, lies their energizing potential for methodological development.

Multidisciplinary collaboration, following the network of things, inquiring the relations a thing engages in, pushes the museum to relinquish some of its power to define the direction of what to be researched, and what to be displayed. Through this practice, new narratives take shape. For example, the granite stone carved in Norway to decorate the façade of Hitler's triumphal arch in Berlin is put on display to materialize the Nazi politics of space. Carrying other representations as well, the stone opens up stories of the collaborative Norwegian stone industry, or the collapsing logistics set up to transport monumental stones to Germany. As the museum visitor will learn, the stone also connects to current everyday life, as it was located in a private garden where it served as a decorative bench.

We believe that the amalgamation of exhibition making and academic research allows for cross-fertilization through new theoretical investigations, new research questions and diverse interpretations. This carries the potential for original and innovative knowledge creation at the intersection of texts and things.

