

The thing's method

Multiple Museum Practices: The Museum as Cornucopia,
Oslo, 25.10.2016

Henrik Treimo





Mechanical physics! After all we are gathered at the Tecnical Museum. As you can see from the photo here, this is a lake at a mountain top. You might also see, potential energy?

If someone decides to release this lake, and transform it into electric power, it will be connected to a network of other actors, and take on multiple uses and effects. The effects in society will go beyond anything that the initiativ takers at the hydro power station could imagine. The lake, though would still be there, although slightly changed maybe. At least, it would have taken on some new meaning.



The thing's method is a collaborative research project between the Museum of Cultural History, the Museum of Oslo and the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology. Together we are exploring a methodic practice to connect the museum's main purposes and social interventions. Hence, the ambition is a method for working with exhibitions that relates research, collection work and outreach activities with a societal role of being inclusive to actors outside the museum walls. The project that runs from 2015 – 2017 is funded by the Norwegian Arts Council, and we are committed to a particular focus on how museums can embody a democratic ideal of sharing the research and production of history and contemporary stories. We work through experiments. For the moment there are five different projects going on.

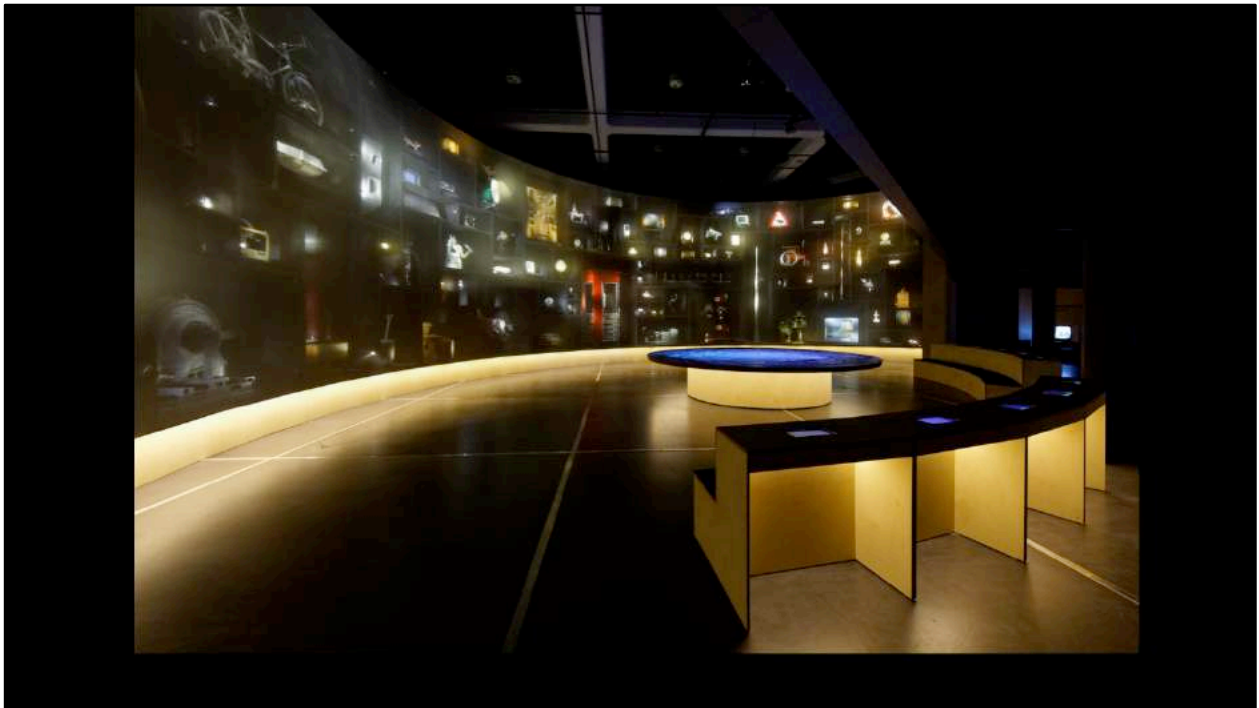
The thing's method is about detecting, evoking and working with the network of relations to the objects. This implies that we think of objects as dynamic elements, as unstable, responsive and as products of those relations they are part of and which they evolves through with humans and other objects. Such a view upon the material world sides with insights from the field of science and technology studies and humanities concerned with the study of the world through material practices. Where objects are *not* conceived as static, factual and detached from the society

A «thing» can mean both assembly and object



The oldest meaning of the concept thing, in English, German and Nordic languages concerned an assembly brought together to discuss disputed matters of concern (Latour and Weibel, 2007). The thing represented physical and judicial meetings in which people whom were concerned, assembled to sort out *things that matter* to them. This old meaning of thing has undergone a process to becoming physical objects, or *things as matter*. Which is how we know it from daily speech, as in "that thing over there". (Kenneth Olwig (2013). The wisdom that found we found useful, is that things can be both *matter of fact* (as in object) and *matter of concern*.

As Latour among others, have noticed; "in the context of the discourse about material things it is important to understand that they first gain social meaning and identity when mooted in meetings, discourse and debate. When we made the exhibition *Thing – Technology and Democracy* in 2014, we experienced how objects from the museum collection easily could be transformed into *matter of concern*.



Thing – Technology and Democracy was the 100 years anniversary exhibition for the Technical Museum. Our aim was to make an exhibition where we (the museum) should not be the experts on our matters of fact, and teach people how they were related to questions about technology and democracy. The heart of the exhibition was this thingplace. Surrounded by a huge shelf with 100 objects from our collection – all relevant to the topic. The audience were invited onto the exhibition floor to take part in discussions about 8 unsettled technologies starting out from 8 objects (such as a DNA sequencer, a drone, a 3D-printer). The discussions were prepared by the Technical Museum. Our aim was to make an exhibition where we should not be the experts on our matters of fact, and teach people how they were related to questions about technology and democracy. The heart of the exhibition was this thingplace. Surrounded by a huge shelf with 100 objects from our collection – all relevant to the topic. The audience were invited onto the exhibition floor to take part in discussions



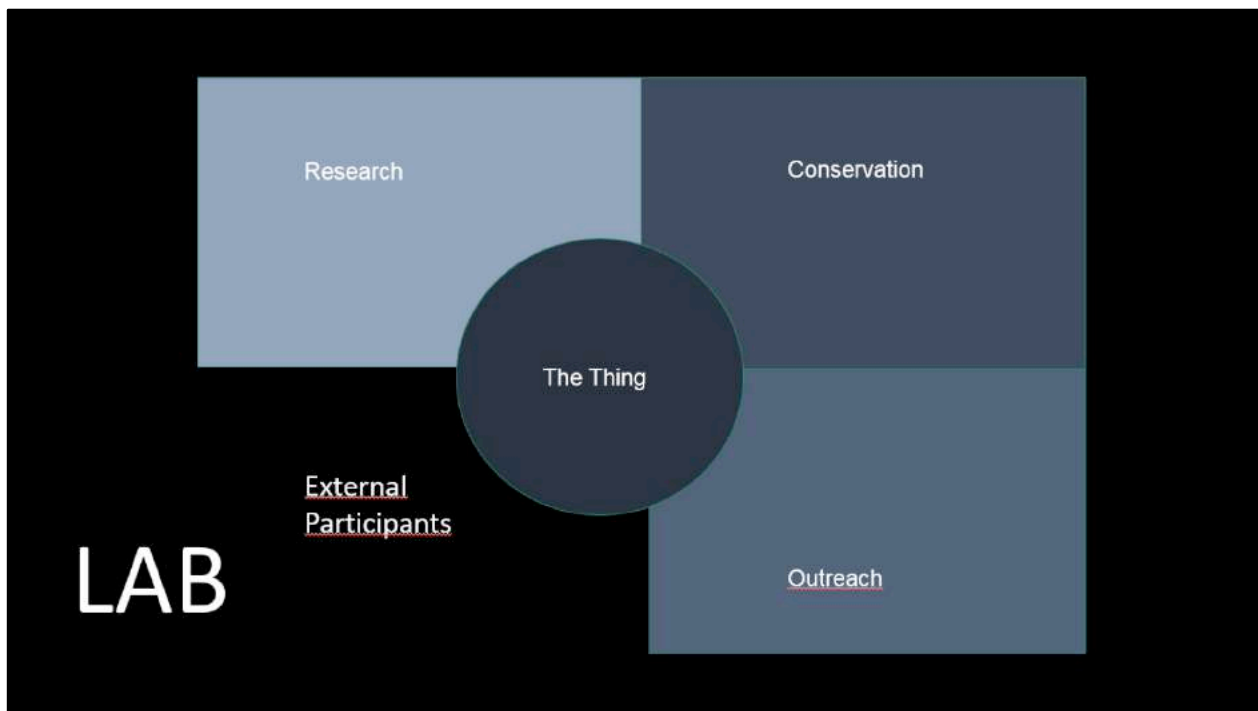
One of the objects was as you can see, this robotic seal. To an increasing degree such creatures are being used in healthcare – particularly for people suffering from dementia. Each discussion was initiated by a short introduction and a question. Its quite, it is soft and it makes comforting murmuring sounds, and even recognises the user: Would you like your old mama, or your grand daddy to have such robot if they were ill? the questions became more complicated, as robotic technology does not start or stop with this little thing.



The response and the level of the discussions were beyond what we would have imagined! People whom had never met before took part in discussion concerning technology, science, politics and culture – and truly made the museum's matter of fact into matters of concern!

We learnt:

1. The museum can be an arena for discussions and constitutions of matters of concern – starting out from objects in the collection.
 2. The audience can definitely take part in the co-production of knowledge and new insights about our collections.
 3. The museum was indeed turned into a stage of small subsequent parliaments!
- This experience we took further and elaborated, when we decide to make a permanent LAB for experimental exhibition making at the museum.



The LAB is both a physical space and a concept. As you can see from this figure, it is set up with a particular layout. The physical space comprises of three zones to spatially and conceptually arrange the collaborative work of researchers, conservators, and artists – as well as external participants. In addition, there is a roundtable space for discussing ideas among the core participants, invited external collaborators, and audiences. We refer to this zone as the “Thing” to underline that the collaborative knowledge generation rests on connecting ideas, perspectives, and different kinds of knowledge.

The principle is simple: things are of concern to the museum. Things run through three main purposes of the museum. Things relate to various actors outside the museum, and hence they are potential assemblies.

The work in the LAB, should always try to start with objects and work out from them.

Whom does the *thing* call upon?



For the Thing's method we do this a little bit differently in the different museums and for the different experiments. Still, a general question is:

How do we start? TM er en «bottom up» method. Instead of starting with the idea for an exhibition and then select objects to represent that idea, we aim for starting with things and ask for whom they call upon? (at least in theory). The list of participants relating to any object could potentially be very long, so a methodic challenge relates to whom should participate, how many, and on what premises?

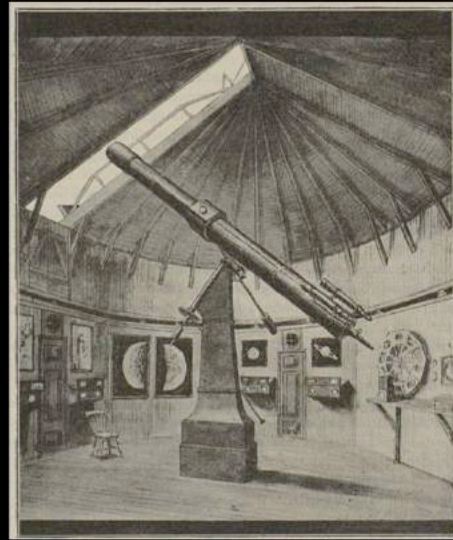
Here you can see representants for the Congolese community in Norway, whom was invited in as curators for a new exhibition on the Congo-collectio at the Cultural History Museum. You also see professor of history of science and medicine Nick Hopwood scrutinizing «skeletons in the closet» at Technical Museum – that project is just about to start up.

In the following example that I want to share with you, on the Olsen's telescope. It all started from another angle. An object the museum had in its collecteion, called upon an artist, Marius Engh, whom you can see on the photo next to parts of Olsen's telescope, down to the left. Before we continue with what happened, let me introduce this object to you.



Christian Holberg Gran Olsen
(1835 – 1921)

Fotograf, ukjent, NTM arkiv



Folkeobservatoriet, Slottsparken
(1885 -1898)

Illustrasjon, Gunhild Wexelsen (1843-1896)

The telescope was made by the Norwegian instrument maker Christian Olsen. It was introduced to the public in 1886, when Olsen opened Europe's first public observatory in the Royal Park in Oslo.

The telescope was the largest in Scandinavia: 7.5 metres long with lenses 370 mm in diameter, providing 11-1200x magnification.

The observatory and the telescope instantly became a major public attraction. Olsen showed visitors moon craters, cyclones on Jupiter and the rings of Saturn.

The observatory was a place for entertainment. For Olsen, however, there was also an important religious dimension. The telescope served to prove the existence of God.

In the mid-1890s the observatory in the Royal Park was closed down. In 1912, it was



Folkeobservatoriet, Abelhaugen,
Slottsparken (ca 1890)



Folkeobservatoriet, Holmenkollen (1912 – 1921)

Fotograf skjent, NTM arkiv

Christian Olsen died in 1921. The telescope was then taken apart and stored in different places. (Discussions about the fate of the telescope involved several groups of actors: Olsen's family, local authorities, different ministries, the University of Oslo, and the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology.)

As years went by, the pieces of the telescope lost their former sheen, the painting disintegrated, and parts even disappeared. Stored away in the museum, the telescope became a fragmented object.



The public observatory. Re-opened as housing and atelier for artist, 2013. Artist Marius Engh, first artist in residence, 2013. He contacted the museum, asking us about the telescope – and we planned to start a joint project working of art and museum starting out from the building and the telescope.



Start; releasing the parts of the telescope from the shelves in the storage. Where has been for almost 100 years! (since 1946 at the Technical Museum).



LAB ved NTM. Foto, Henrik Treimo, 2014

Dispersed on the floor in the LAB for the audience to see, and as a starting point for our multi-disciplinary engagement with the object as thing.



LAB-work on research (archives), collection work (overview, condition of the object etc), outreach (artistic conceptualisation), external participants (example, professor in history of scientific instruments)



Reconstruction of *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, Robert Smithson, 1965. Reconstructed by Marius Engh in the LAB-workshop. A first test of a concept for a possible bridge between the old telescope and the public observatory – through contemporary conceptual art.

FOLKEOBSERVATORIET

26.8 – 25.9

Utstillere ved Teknisk Museum:

DRONEBRYGG / SERINA ERFJORD / ANE METTE HOL / NEXT LIFE / CHRISTIAN
HOLBERG GRAN OLSEN / PETER SHIRE / MARTINE SYMS / VIKRAM UCHIDA-
KHANNA / LARS MONRAD VAAGE / JENNIFER WEST

Utstillere ved Folkeobservatoriet i Holmenkollveien 119:

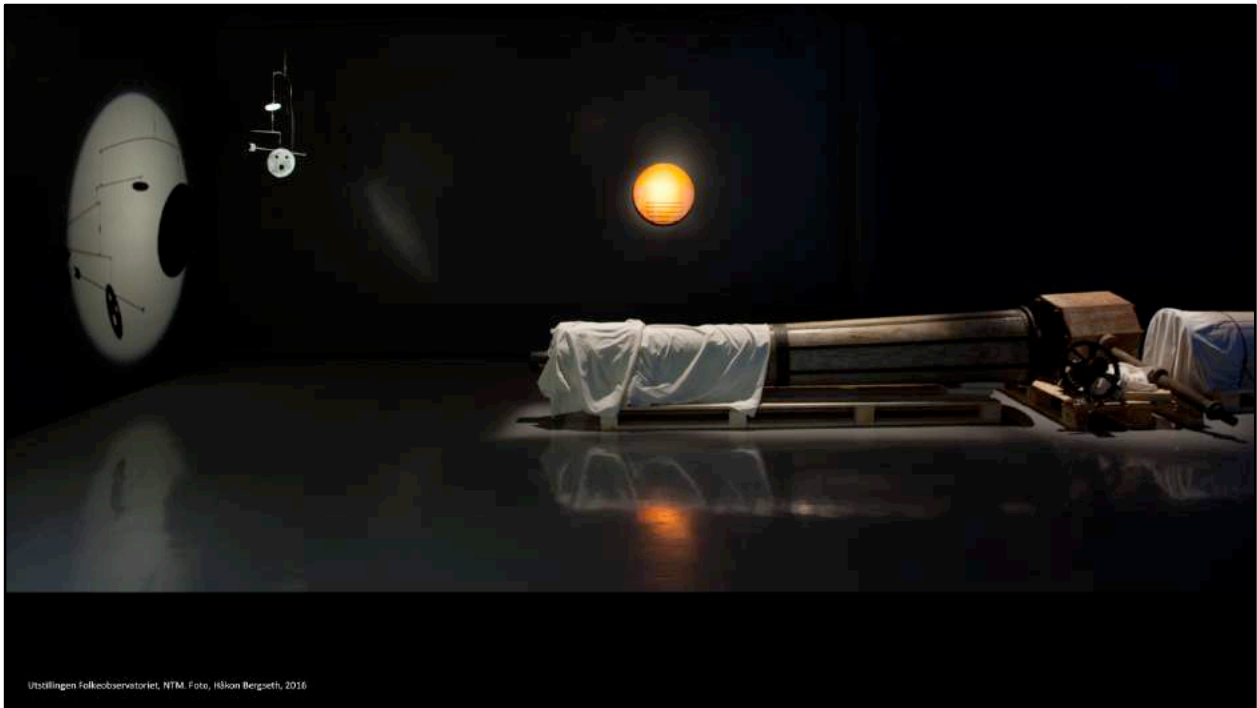
BJØRN BJARRE / HAI NGUYEN DINH / MAGDALENA SUAREZ FRIMKESS /
MICHAEL FRIMKESS / TARJE EIKANGER GULLAKSEN / MARK HAGEN / WERNER
HERZOG / LLOYD KAHN / PETER SHIRE / PAOLO SOLERI / OSCAR TUAZON

Kuratorer Marius Engh og Jordan Rosenfeld i samarbeid med LAB, Teknisk museum



Billedkunstnernes Vederlagsfond

Exhibition «Folkeobservatoriet» (public observatory) opens. Featuring 20 conceptual artists. A bridge between the historical fragments of the observatory and the telescope. Conceptual idea: a new public observatory where people can gather to see unexpected things and wonder about, art, technology, the museum – society and maybe also themselves?



Udstillingen Folkeobservatoriet, NTM Foto, Håkon Bergseth, 2016

Telescope – as it was taken out from the storage. Here on display as an art object by the instrumentmaker CHG Olsen + «Love is» og «Sun pocket» by the American artist Peter Shire



Activ conservator laboratory in the exhibition. Appropriation – yes, things' method is a lot about that. Still as you can see, the museum holds back – question mark!

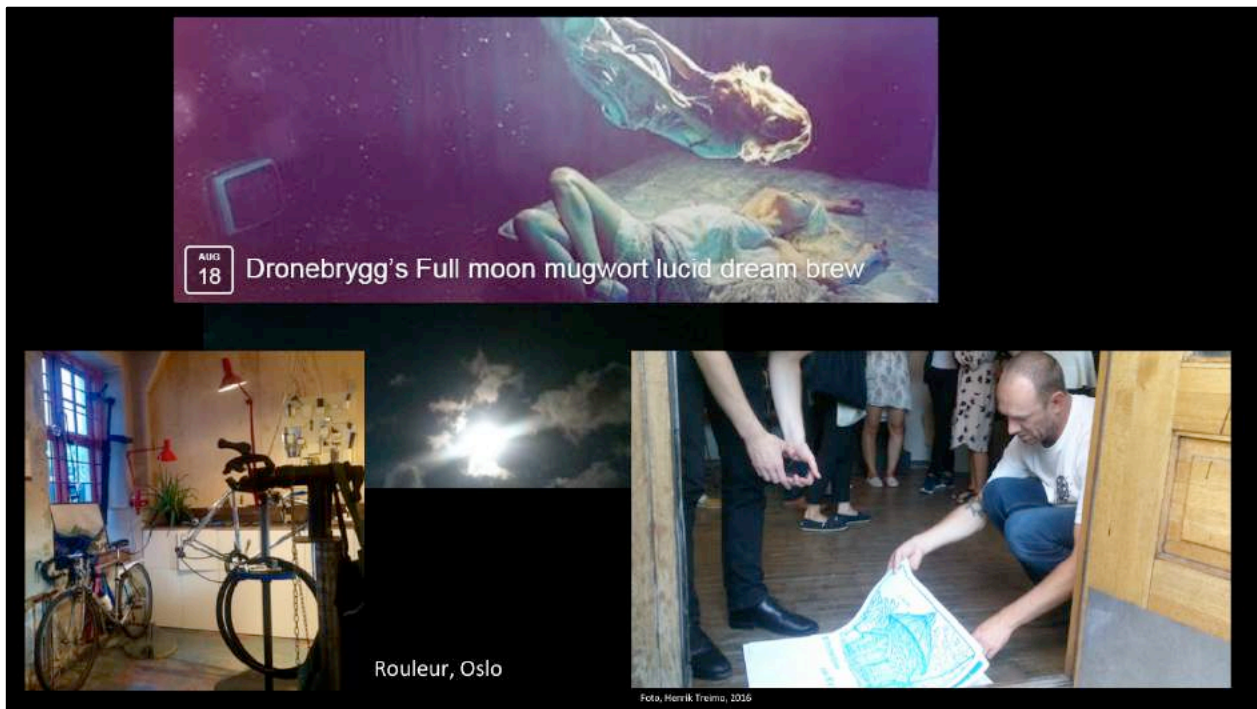


Åpningen av Folkobservatoriet. Foto, Håkon Bergseth, 2016

More than 200 for the opening. Sculptural garden and contemporary art.

Results

- Research – biography of the telescope
- Conservation work – conditions and future
- New relations to the telescope



Outreach is about connecting and creation and activation of relations to the collections. The method, with its openness and including ideal, will potentially relate to unknown actors, places and perspectives. As shown here, for example to a bicycle bar. The reason for this event was that one of the participating artists happened to produce a new (possibly hallucinogenic) brew for the exhibition. And it was important as an artistic intervention that this brew was launched under full moon. That happened to be one week before the opening of the exhibition.



Et annet eksempel på kobling var stjerneikkertverkstedet som duoen Aksvik og Salhus rigget til som et supplement til utstillingen. flere hundre barn og voksne fikk lage sin egen stjerneikkert, ved museet og ved observatoriebygget i Holmenkollen. Another example of outreach as connecting, was this telescope workshop created as an add on to the exhibition. Several hundred people, kids and families, used the opportunity to make their own telescope at the Museum and at the Obsevatory.



«En vandring gjennom historie, teknikk og poesi, fra Holmenkollen til Teknisk Museum»

Dagbladet

NRK P1+ «Frokostradioen»

NRK P2 «Ekko»

MORGENBLADET
Kunstkritikk

(...)

New audiences, new perspectives on the telescope and the museum. Also contact with Olsen's relatives – whom will open their private archives for us.

A new ethnography?

- The exhibition work has activated new relations to the telescope, far off the exhibition premisses.
- A new ethnography that does something? (Ssorin-Chaikov. 2013)

- 1) 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, by whom and what to be displayed. Through this practice, new stories take shape. Stories encompassing people and perspectives, which are not part of the presently "known" identity of a thing emerges into the foreground and enrich the exhibition projects.
- 2) What happens to the museum objects when they have taken on new meaning, being shaped and also shaped society in new ways. Are they original in a new way?
- 3) What is emphasized here is that in the meeting between the co-produced knowledge and conceptual art, especially scenography, something new emerges, a new ethnography which is not merely a description, but carries a generative potential often far beyond the museum's grounds (see Ssorin-Chaikov, 2013a). What is emphasized here is that in the meeting between the co-produced knowledge and conceptual art, especially scenography, something new emerges, a new ethnography which is not merely a description, but carries a generative potential often far beyond the museum's grounds.

Thank you !

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