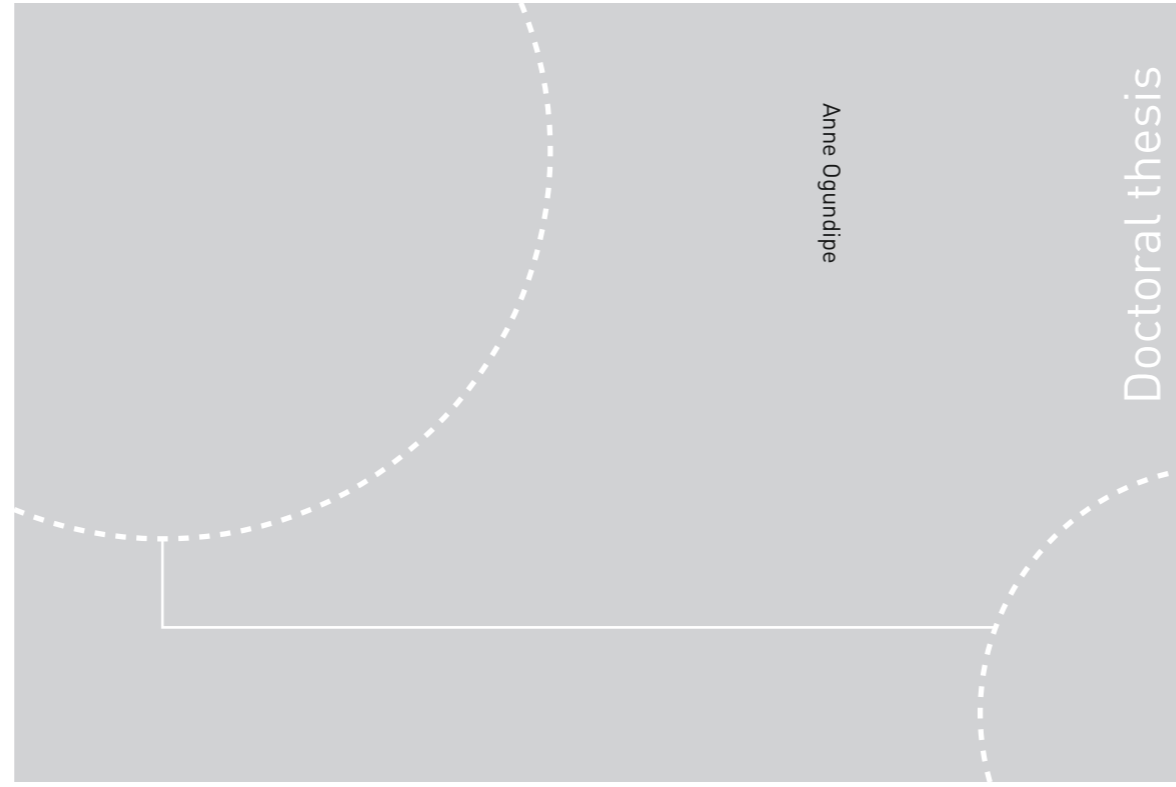


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Anne Ogundipe

Doctoral thesis

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On the Matter of Participation

Examining a Nexus of Agency, Affordance,
Atmosphere and Affect in Onsite and Online
Art Museum Environments

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Science and Technology

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Philosophiae Doctor
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Acknowledgements

This thesis is about expanding the notion of participation in the context of art museums. More precisely, it is about acknowledging and emphasizing the more-than-instrumental contribution of environments and technologies in the participatory processes that unfold when a museum visitor encounters a work of art. It is about challenging contemporary participation discourse, wherein the human visitor is designated the “participating” or “non-participating” party. As I will argue, however, the museum visitor is not the only one with the agency to shape the encounter as such. Also contributing is a nexus of human and nonhuman participants that includes the museum institution, staff and environment, the artwork, other visitors, the sociocultural norms that influence visitor behavior in museums, as well as mediating technologies and interfaces. All of these entities – but none of them in isolation – contribute to determine how the encounter will unfold and which directions it will take.

One can easily draw parallels between the above scenario and the PhD research process. This thesis is not a product of solitary work, because I have not written it in isolation. From my supervisors and colleagues, and the theorists and theories and I have leaned on, to the computer and the peaceful office space I have been lucky enough to call my own, I am greatly indebted to a range of humans and nonhumans who have facilitated, inspired, encouraged and in other ways guided my research.

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Use of Images

Depictions of Artworks and Mediating Environments

All photographs included in this thesis are my own, with the exception of those depicted in screenshots from the Astrup Fearnley Museum app, DigitaltMuseum and Instagram. All photographs and screenshots are lawfully published in accordance with Norwegian copyright law¹ and, where relevant, with the courtesy of the following institutions:

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Sverresborg Trøndelag Folk Museum
The Astrup Fearnley Museum
The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation
The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design

Screenshots of the Instagram photographs and feeds of individual users are included in this thesis with their gracious permission.

Depictions of Individuals

All photographs of onsite museum environments primarily illustrate the case study artworks and the exhibition contexts I discuss, and I have taken the photographs in manners that are meant to ensure the anonymity of any depicted individuals. Photographs that include individuals are lawfully published in accordance with Norwegian copyright law.²

¹ *Lov om opphavsrett til åndsverk mv.* §37 section one: “Offentliggjort kunstverk og offentliggjort fotografisk verk kan gjengis i tilslutning til teksten i kritisk eller vitenskapelig fremstilling som ikke er av allmennopplysende karakter, når det skjer i samsvar med god skikk og i den utstrekning formålet betinger.”

² *Lov om opphavsrett til åndsverk mv.* §104 b: “Fotografi som avbilder en person, kan ikke gjengis eller vises offentlig uten samtykke av den avbildede, unntatt når [...] avbildningen av personen er mindre viktig enn hovedinnholdet i bildet.”

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Introduction

Proposing a Diversity Perspective on Participation

“The participatory condition names the situation in which participation – being involved in doing something and taking part in something with others – has become both environmental (a state of affairs) and normative (a binding principle of right action).”

Barney et al. 2016b, vii.

Key Contribution, Background, Aim and Scope

Participation has been the vogue in museums for the last few decades. Its pedestal placement in museum policy, practice and literature corresponds to a normative view of a successful museum visit, according to which visitors should be active, in one way or another. Often, visitors are expected to participate in the form of specific projects, exhibitions or educational efforts. More often still, these initiatives utilize new media and digital technologies.

What, one may ask, might be overlooked through the prevailing focus on the overtly “active” participation of visitors? In this thesis, I suggest that it may be the less overt, but – perhaps – equally significant activity generated by, in and through the digital technologies meant to facilitate and encourage participatory efforts. By predominately focusing on the actions of human perceivers, and by viewing digital technologies as instrumental and inert tools, one risks devaluating modes of being that are not overtly active and overlooking the participatory contribution of nonhumans. In other words, one risks homogenizing what it means to participate and ignoring the fuller range of technological influence on human bodies and behaviors.

Key Contribution

From a perspective of aesthetics understood as sense perception (*aisthesis*), my key contribution to participation discourse in museums is a conceptual framework for analyzing aesthetic encounters between museum visitors and museum objects. Through this framework, which I refer to as the “participation nexus,” I want to challenge the contemporary

participation paradigm and account for some of the diverse ways in which digital technologies may facilitate, but also shape and transform, the encounters they are part of. The participation nexus articulates the multidirectional participatory processes between museums, museum visitor and museum objects, as well as, crucially, the technologies and environments that mediate and shape aesthetic encounters.

Background

With a reigning notion of participation that emphasizes the active engagement of museum visitors, the onus of participation is often placed in two ends. The first is with the visitor, who is generally understood as either passively attending or actively participating. The second is with the museum institution, which either manages to set the stage for participatory action or fails the task. In the museum/visitor relation, the museum is the inviting party, calling on visitors to participate. After the museum has made its invite, visitors may take it or leave it: They either participate or refrain from doing so.

This active/passive dichotomy characterizes prevailing understandings of the notion of participation, not only in the museum sector, but in contemporary culture and society. Following newfound possibilities for engagement brought on by digitization, active participation has been established as a normative condition. Of course, as noted by Darin Barney, Gabriella Coleman, Christine Ross, Jonathan Sterne and Tamar Tembeck (2016b, vii), human beings have been “participating” throughout the whole of human history, just by living and acting in the world. However, what is unprecedented is

the degree and extent to which the everyday social, economic, cultural, and political activities that comprise simply being in the world have been thematized and organized around the priority of participation *as such*. (ibid. vii)

Simply put, people are expected to make use of participatory possibilities in all areas of life, and what seems to count as participation – including in museums – is increasingly tied to observable activity. Behavior construed as active is the normatively good, baseline standard for the notion of participation, whereas behavior construed as passive is its negative polar opposite.

Aim

The above outline of the current participation paradigm is, of course, a simplification, and I will devote the first chapter of this thesis to paint a more nuanced picture of it. For the time being, however, this initial sketch will serve as an introduction to the aspects of the paradigm that I challenge in the present project. The aim of this thesis is twofold. The first aim is to address and problematize the normative, dichotomist separation between participation and

non-participation in museum environments. Admittedly, recent literature on museum participation does emphasize the value created by participatory efforts for so-called “participating” and “non-participating” museum visitors alike (e.g. Simon 2010). Still, the very notion of non-participating visitors alludes to participation being a matter of either/or. Contemporary discourse on museum participation is characterized by the guiding forces of a reductive active/passive dichotomy, a limited view of agency (as something solely tied to human perceivers) and a linear chain of causation.

This brings me to the second aim of the thesis, which is to expand the notion of participation from pertaining solely to the actions of human perceivers, to comprise multidirectional flows of agency constituted by what I will refer to as a “nexus” of human and nonhuman participants. Taking art museums as my point of departure, I seek to broaden the notion of participation so that it factors in the diverse ways in which onsite and online museum environments, mediating technologies, visitors and works of art all take part in aesthetic encounters. Such an expanded notion of participation opens the possibility of exploring the agencies exerted by the technologies often tasked with fulfilling participatory ideals, just as it highlights the creative, transformative powers of exhibition contexts, digital platforms and, not the least, the artworks as such.

Scope

In response to the participation paradigm as it manifests itself in the museum sector, this thesis is not about participation conceptualized as an event placed in the preferred end of an active/passive scale. Rather, it is about the diverse ways participation can occur in the relational encounter between a museum visitor and a work of art. It is also about the diversity of the participants – both human and nonhuman – that contribute in making participatory processes unfold.

It may not seem controversial to argue that participatory encounters are diverse, and that it may be beneficial to examine processes of taking part in something with an aim of dissecting this diversity. Like participation, however, the notion of diversity is both problematic and complex. In museums, diversity is commonly used in connection with audience development (Dewdney, Dibosa and Walsh 2013, 61), specifically as it relates to engaging demographically diverse audiences and targeting underrepresented visitor segments such as ethnic minorities and youth (Gran et al. 2018, 73). Diversity is a buzzword that shapes audience research, museum work and the aims and content of cultural and museum policy (Haugsevje, Hylland and Stavrum 2016, 79). However, the term has also been accused of being vague and “pacifying”, as Jonathan D. Katz (2017, 88) puts it. Speaking of diversity

might inadvertently “enable us to avoid talking about specificities”, to avoid grappling with the “complicated, “uncomfortable, [...] preconceptions” (ibid. 88) that shape participation discourse. While raising the flag of diversity might make it easy to “ignore the fact that there are competing agendas among us” (ibid. 88), as Katz argues, it may also shine a light inside the black box that contains the complexities of participatory relations. That is, on what is often overlooked or taken for granted in participation discourse. The black box of participation, I argue, concerns how participatory relations are engendered by the co-constitutive presence of diverse sociocultural structures, environments and a range of human and nonhuman agents, their differing and, at times, competing capacities and agendas.

When I speak of the diversity of participation and the diversity of participants, then, I do not only refer to demographically diverse segments of museum visitors, which seems to be the norm in the museum sector. I also refer to the diversity of human and nonhuman agents that take part in and contribute to shape a given encounter. This is an expansion of the notion of diversity in a museum context, which moves beyond its confines within museal departments concerned with audience development (Gran et al. 2018, 73). It moves toward concerns related to what Anne-Britt Gran, Nina Lager Vestberg, Peter Booth and Anne Ogundipe (2018, 61) refer to as “techno-cultural” and “aesthetic-expression” dimensions of diversity. The former refers to diversity as it pertains to the interrelation and experience of formats, programs, interfaces and metadata. The latter refers to diversity as it pertains to the plurality of forms and contents. To discuss participation in the context of these diversity dimensions is to consider the reciprocal relations in museum environments, and to attend to the diverse ways in which visitors, exhibited artworks, technologies and environments take part in, shape and constitute aesthetic encounters.

By considering the “techno-cultural” and “aesthetic-expression” (ibid. 61) diversity dimensions of aesthetic encounters, the scope of analysis in this thesis primarily concerns aesthetic participation as it is constituted by both humans and nonhumans. Put simply, the present project is an explorative expansion of the reigning notion of participation, which includes a shift in focus toward dimensions of participation that are largely unaddressed in a museum context. However, while my aesthetic approach to museum participation challenges what I argue to be a normative active/passive dichotomy in contemporary participation discourse, it is not necessarily a shift away from participation understood as activity. Rather, it highlights that activity is not necessarily overt, visible or immediately discernable, and that participation describes more than the actions of human visitors. It is important to emphasize that actions, as Peter-Paul Verbeek (2009, 255) puts it, are not merely *human* actions; they are the products of diverse, complex interactions between human and nonhuman agents.

To date, the *raison d'être* of participatory efforts in museums is tied to museum political ideals of democratization, activation, inclusion and diversity. What then, one may ask, are the political consequences of approaching participation in such a manner? What is, for example, the aesthetic-political consequence of considering the participatory roles of artworks, and the participatory contribution of the museum environments and digital interfaces through which they are mediated? Might this expansion of the notion of participation potentially engender new ways of thinking about processes of democratization – and about museums as democratizing institutions? For now, I will leave these questions hanging, only to pick them up again toward the end of the thesis. More pertinent, in this introduction, is the question that guides the thesis throughout.

Research Question, Theory and Method

Today, museums strive to make use of the newfound possibilities offered by digital platforms. On one hand, demands to do so come from inside the museum. There, contemporary discourse on the political and social roles of museums, commonly referred to as new museology (McCall and Gray 2014), encourages museums to abandon traditional collection-centered museum models and seek new ways of engaging visitors (Elffers and Sitzia 2016, 39–40; McCall and Gray 2014, 20–21). On the other hand, demands to make use of digital technologies come from outside the museum institution, in the form of cultural policy. As Ole Marius Hylland (2017, 65–66) notes, most Western European countries share the assumption that producing and distributing culture is a public responsibility, which includes making cultural heritage accessible.

Research Question

In part, museums explore new forms of visitor engagement and new modes of accessibility by digitizing their collections and making them publicly accessible online. For art museums, what is particularly relevant in this regard is how digitization may work to diversify aesthetic encounters with the artworks in their collections. Here, I am especially interested in what digitization contributes to participatory processes that include works of art in both onsite and online museum environments, in terms of difference, divergence or variance. Therefore, my research question is as follows:

How, and to what extent, does digitization contribute to diversify relations between human and nonhuman participants, including their modes of participating, in onsite and online aesthetic encounters?

Theory: A New Materialism Influenced by Postphenomenology

The research question just presented builds on the premise that participatory relations may exist between a wide range of agents, including museum visitors, artworks, museum environments and technologies. This thesis thus becomes situated within a philosophical project of considering the co-constitutive, agentic forces of humans and nonhumans, and the agency of digital technologies. When seeking answers to the research question, I therefore find a theoretical perspective anchored (primarily) in new materialism and (secondarily) in postphenomenology to be particularly productive. While there are certain tensions between new materialism and postphenomenology, the common ground between these theoretical developments, as I will go on to explain, is potentially fruitful.

One can consider both new materialism and postphenomenology to be oriented toward posthumanism. In the sense I use it here, posthumanism refers to a paradigm shift, a historical development which has, in the words of Cary Wolfe (2010, xvi), made it “increasingly impossible to ignore” the embeddedness of human beings in a range of networks of life forms and technologies. As of late, several theoretical “subdisciplines” (Weiss, Proppen and Reid 2014, xvii) have emerged, in which attempts are made to reject anthropocentrism and traditional hierarchical ontologies. While such developments converge and diverge with regards to their philosophical allegiances and ontological understandings of human/nonhuman relations, they are aligned in maintaining that humans and nonhumans are fundamentally entwined, in one way or another. The posthumanist stance of considering “the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world” (Wolfe 2010, xv) particularly resonates with the research question posed in this thesis. And the insights of new materialism – with added lessons from postphenomenology – will be helpful in answering it.

New materialism – understood here as a feminist development within posthumanism (Ferrando 2013, 26) – makes up the principal theoretical tenet in the present study. As such, it is the field to which the thesis mainly gives its contribution. I should note, however, that new materialism does not encompass a singular approach or topical interest, nor does it refer to any one set of ideas (Coole and Frost 2010; Coole 2013; Connolly 2013). Still, there are unifying interests among new materialists, who tend to evoke processes of materialization “in which matter literally matters itself”, as Diana Coole (2013, 453) puts it. New materialism offers novel, applicable articulations on more-than-human processes, relationality and the generativity of matter. In the context of this thesis, new materialist theory is particularly relevant as it tears down the traditional subject/object divide and gives an “active” status to

what is traditionally thought of as inert, passive and non-participatory. For new materialists, the human perceiver is not thought of as sovereign and autonomous, exerting agency upon the objects around them and putting in motion linear chains of causation (Coole and Frost 2010; Coole 2013). Instead, new materialism recognizes the generative forces of (for instance) artworks, environments and technologies, and the ways in which human and nonhuman agents shape each other.

One can argue, however, that in their staunch disavowal of anthropocentrism, new materialists tend to focus more on identifying and emphasizing forms of nonhuman agency, than they do accounting for how nonhuman agencies may affect human experience. As I examine museum visitors' encounters with works of art, I must also take into consideration how human perceivers may *experience* art. To supplement my new materialist engagement, I therefore look to postphenomenology.

Postphenomenology is a philosophy of technology that converges with new materialist perspectives (Aagaard 2017, 527) when it comes to their concern with more-than-human agency. However, postphenomenology offers an additional – and in this project necessary – emphasis on the sensuous, qualitative dimensions of lived experience (ibid. 527) as well as the participatory role of media and mediation. These are aspects that new materialist perspectives are less concerned with, but that I would argue are at the crux of the potentially diversifying forces of digitization. Therefore, I infuse my own new materialist perspective with lessons from postphenomenology, which serve to highlight the experiential aspects that cannot go unaddressed in a study of aesthetic encounters.

The theoretical perspectives just outlined help pinpoint divergences and parallels between digital and non-digital modes of participation and the potential diversification of participatory processes that digitization may engender. It is my hope that a new materialist framework informed by postphenomenology may reveal the complex entanglements that constitute aesthetic encounters. Moreover, that it will provide novel insight into the relational processes and transformations that constitute onsite and online artwork mediation, and the ways in which embodied visitors, environments, artworks and digital technologies materially manifest, take part in and shape aesthetic encounters.

Method: A Media Aesthetic Approach from the Perspective of a Critical Museum Visitor

My analytical method is notably influenced by the postphenomenological undercurrent of the theoretical framework. I retain a core aspect of postphenomenologically oriented approaches, namely a focus on concrete case studies, which reflects postphenomenology's commitment to

the “empirical turn” (Rosenberger and Verbeek 2015, 32). In two case studies, I discuss specific works of art as encountered in onsite and online contexts. Examining these works, I maintain a methodological approach, which, as I will explain, resonates with the trajectories of both new materialism and postphenomenology.

In addition to the approach I will go on to outline, I draw on a 2017 survey carried out by the *Digitization and Diversity* research project, which mapped attitudes toward participation among 81 Norwegian museum directors. I reference this quantitative study in selected parts of chapter 1, using it to identify common traits of the contemporary participation paradigm more so than facilitate the alternative perspective of this thesis. Therefore, I will only make a brief methodological account of the *Digitization and Diversity* survey, limiting it to the relevant chapter. In what follows, I outline the qualitative method that dominates the thesis, and which I utilize in the main analysis part of the project.

Because my concern is predominately aesthetic, and because I aim to articulate and disentangle the entanglements of participatory relations in aesthetic encounters, I take on a media aesthetic (Hausken 2009; 2013; 2016; Mitchell 2015) analytical approach from the perspective of what Margaret Lindauer (2006) terms a “critical museum visitor.”

What I call my media aesthetic analytical approach adheres to the empirical orientation of postphenomenology. It entails empirical observation and description through what Liv Hausken (2009, 20) terms “media sensitive” analyses of contemporary phenomena. Crucially, the approach entails a sensitivity toward materiality, which resonates with the theoretical focus and concerns of new materialism, and which makes it possible to discuss nonhuman agency and processes of materialization. In addition, the approach entails an attentiveness toward aesthetic experience, mediation and the role of the media through which something appears and is perceived (Hausken 2009; 2016). As such, the method also facilitates the necessary emphasis on lived experience and mediating technologies maintained by postphenomenology.

I should note that media, in this context, does not primarily refer to mass media, social institutions or cultural formations (Hausken 2016, 86). What media refers to in the broader sense that I use it is a general mediality constitutive of the human being as a biotechnical lifeform (Mitchell and Hansen 2010, ix). This understanding of media follows theorists such as W.J.T Mitchell and Mark B.N. Hansen (2010) as well as John Durham Peters (2015) and Liv Hausken (2009, 2013, 2016). I will expand upon the notion of media shortly, but this brief outline hopefully makes clear that my methodological approach attends to museum

exhibition contexts as mediating situations that emerge from relations between museum institutions, artworks, gallery environments, digital interfaces, embodied visitors and so on.

In my media sensitive analyses, taking on the perspective of a critical museum visitor allows for the necessary dissection of specific mediating situations as grounds for aesthetic encounters. From the perspective of a critical museum visitor, I reflect on how onsite and online mediating situations “implicate an ideal visitor” (Lindauer 2006, 204) and how the encounter between such a visitor and the mediated artwork may occur. Notably, this is a very different endeavor than analyzing the reactions of, for instance, actual visitors or specific visitor segments (ibid. 204). As a critical museum visitor, I examine the spatial and temporal conditions the situation offers, what objects are present in the onsite and online exhibition contexts, in what ways and for what purposes. I also explore what is not exhibited: What is kept off display, out of sight or reach, and what is left unarticulated (ibid. 204) in the mediating situation.

Analytical Point of Departure and Terminology

Because my analytical point of departure is aesthetic encounters as they may unfold in specific mediating situations, I want to expand briefly on the concepts of “aesthetics” and “media” in the context of this thesis.

The Aesthetic Encounter as a Mediating Situation

The concept of aesthetics I put to use can be traced through media aesthetics to environmental aesthetics and is tied to late twentieth-century critical responses to the traditional emphasis on aesthetics as a philosophy or art. Environmental aesthetics disputed the notion that aesthetic perception exclusively belonged to the realm of art. Instead, it emphasized the significance of natural (and later built and human-influenced) environments for humans as sensory beings and highlighted human interaction with and dependence on their surroundings in aesthetic experience (Bø-Rygg 2007, 11, 21; Hausken 2016, 85). Drawing on such ideas, the notion of aesthetics I maintain recognizes the aesthetic contribution of mediating technologies and environments.

Relevant in understanding the notion of media in this regard is Marshall McLuhan’s seminal *Understanding Media* (1994 [1964]), which serves as a still-relevant reminder that a given medium affects society and human experience not only through the content it mediates, but through its formal and technological properties as a medium. Also relevant is Friedrich Kittler’s acknowledgement of media as that which “determine[s] our situation” (Kittler 1999, xxxix). In other words: Media is what makes up the infrastructural basis and condition for our

experience and understanding (Mitchell and Hansen 2010, vii). Media refers not only to that which conditions the aesthetic encounter, but that which makes it possible. It refers to the material medium of the artwork, to the mediated and mediating embodied human perceiver, and to the entirety of the environment which the two are embedded in – the “vehicle in the middle of things”, as Peters (2015, 46) puts it. Central in this thesis is an examination of objects, bodies, phenomena and situations as, to borrow the words of Hausken, “complex expressions of mediation” (Hausken 2016, 86).

Understanding media and mediation, in this perspective, does not only entail understanding individual mediums (e.g. photography or a smartphone). It also entails “understanding *from the perspective of media*” (Mitchell and Hansen 2010, xi), as Mitchell and Hansen note. One cannot dismiss media as something neutral, subordinate or supplemental to whatever information they convey (ibid. vii). Instead, as my new materialist framework influenced by postphenomenology maintains, one must take seriously the agentic contribution of media technologies in shaping aesthetic encounters that work as mediating situations.

Returning to the concept of aesthetics, I follow the trajectories of environmental and media aesthetics in employing a conceptualization of aesthetics that does not exclusively concern works of art. Here, the meaning of aesthetics is derived from the Greek term *aisthesis*, which refers to a general theory of historically and culturally embedded sense perception (Berleant 2005, 26-27; Berleant 2016, 2-9; Bø-Rygg 2007, 17-21; Hausken 2016, 85). Within this notion of aesthetics, human perceivers are embedded in sociocultural environments they continuously engage with in a multisensory fashion (Hausken 2016, 85). This understanding of aesthetic engagement is not confined to works of art but is applicable in equal terms to a wider range of phenomena, such as built and natural environments, and objects in popular culture (ibid. 85).

On Aesthetics-as-Aisthesis and Artwork Encounters

The aesthetic encounters I examine in this thesis, however, do occur vis-à-vis works of art, both in onsite art museum environments and through devices and online platforms where artworks are mediated. The encounters I discuss are between human perceivers, works of visual art and a range of other agents taking part in these encounters. In other words, I turn a conceptualization of aesthetics conceived to broaden the scope of aesthetic consideration beyond the confines of the art world, right back to the analysis of artwork encounters. The reason for this reversal is simple. To examine participation as the co-constitutive presence of the human and nonhuman agents that take part in aesthetic encounters, one must direct analytical attention beyond the artwork. Therefore, I direct such attention toward the aesthetic

encounter as a mediating situation – and toward the participatory entanglements and interplays that constitute both the encounter as such and the entities in it. In an effort to expand the notion of participation by acknowledging the distributed agency (e.g. Coole 2013; Gries 2015; Bennett 2018) in museum environments, I will consider how museum visitors and artworks alike shape each other in ongoing processes of becoming. Employing a notion of aesthetics-as-aisthesis allows for analytical consideration of how perceptions and sensations are shaped by the processes that engender the aesthetic encounter.

However: When analyzing aesthetic encounters with art, one cannot overlook the status of the artworks as, precisely, art. Museum visitors encounter these objects relating to them as artworks, and in doing so, visitors carry with them preconceived notions of how the objects before them mediate meaning and how they should experience and understand them. The artwork status carries with it historical, theoretical and conceptual appendages, and the works discussed in this thesis also enjoy the added status of “museum objects” – carrying with them sociocultural conventions pertaining to how museum visitors should approach them.

I should therefore clarify that my objective is not to theorize how museum visitors engage with certain types of artworks or genres of art. Instead, I examine specific case study artworks with a theoretical-methodological framework that places analytical weight on how these works are mediated and encountered in specific techno-ecological environments. That is, how they are exhibited and displayed within mediating ecosystems of technological and biological environments and arrangements. These include the interplays between human perceivers, the material properties of the artworks and the architectural features of the exhibition venue, as well as exhibition technologies, design structures and digital platform interfaces. In the case study analyses, the artistic interests, strategies and movements, as well as the conceptual ideas and art historical references tied to the relevant works must still be noted, insofar as they contribute in shaping the encounter as such. While the artwork status of the case study objects is a key frame of reference, examining art encounters in a perspective of aesthetics-as-aisthesis opens a space of inquiry in which I will consider artworks *through* technologies, but also, crucially, *as* media technologies.

Historically, understanding art as media is hardly a new conception. Analyzing works of art by considering the medium through which they appear has especially been prevalent following the advent of media technologies of mass recording and distribution, as noted by Ina Blom (2013, 69). From this perspective, artworks are tied to modes of production, linked to the diverse manners in which specific technologies “discipline bodies and produce ways of seeing and thinking” (ibid. 69). Here, I retain this perspective while employing a conception

of aesthetics-as-aisthesis. The media aesthetic stance opens possibilities to examine artworks as engendered by, and aesthetically encountered through, specific environments, platforms and mediating technologies.

Speaking of Digitization: Notes on Terminology

The media aesthetic approach allows me to consider what happens when technologies that are not necessarily artistically motivated or initiated intervene in and mediate the encounters between human perceivers and works of art. As art museums digitize their collections, artworks become subject to the technologies and interfaces that will mediate them. These mediating formats and forms may be characterized by allegiances to museum objectives of democratizing cultural heritage, large-scale digitization and dissemination of a range of objects, as well as standards of registration, cataloging and digital representation. It is pertinent to consider how these allegiances align with artistic and curatorial perspectives, strategies and interests, as well as audience reception. What happens to an artwork in its digitized mediation? What characterizes the encounters between online visitors and digital surrogate objects?

These questions contain several terms that I want to address before approaching the questions as such, namely the concept of “digitization”, the notions of “onsite” and “online” museum environments, as well as the “visitor and the “digital surrogate object”. Starting with the first, “digitization” is a conceptual term that is used interchangeably with “digitalization” in a range of literature, as J. Scott Brennen and Daniel Kreiss (2016, 556) note. Distinguishing between the concepts, Brennen and Kreiss define “digitization” in relation to the material, technical processes of converting analog information to digital bits of 1s and 0s. The converted digital information can in turn be mediated and expressed in various ways, through various materials, systems and platforms. “Digitalization”, on the other hand, is defined in relation to the increase in and use of digital technologies, and to the ways in which spheres of social and personal life are (re)structured through digital media infrastructures and modes of communication (ibid. 556-557).

If one were to treat “digitization” and “digitalization” as distinct concepts, these are the basic differences between them. I must stress, however, that these terms are closely associated and that they are, as mentioned, commonly used interchangeably. So much so, in fact, that the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) applies both of the definitions I have outlined to each term. Notably, the conceptual meaning of “digitization” is ranked first in the definition of both “digitization” and “digitalization,” and according to the OED, “digitization” is the term most frequently used (OED 2010a; OED 2010b). Based on the conceptual overlap of these notions

and their relative frequency of use, I use “digitization” in both meanings outlined here. I am concerned with processes of mediation involved both in producing, disseminating and encountering digitized artworks in specific online environments, as well the implementation of digital technologies in onsite environments. As such, this thesis examines the mediating roles of digital technologies (but also of bodies, institutions and other human and nonhuman agents) in aesthetic encounters both onsite and online.

By “onsite” museum environments, I refer to the bricks-and-mortar museum buildings in which museum objects are exhibited. By “online” museum environments, I refer to the internet-based, networked digital platforms (such as websites and apps) in which digitized museum objects are displayed. With regards to the human perceivers that move within these environments, there has been a tendency in discourse on onsite museums to differentiate between three terms: “audiences” (people who might consider going to the museum), “visitors” (people who actually go to the museum) and “users” (people who use the museum for professional purposes) (Gran et al. 2018, 60; Hooper-Greenhill 1994a). The applicability of the term “audience” for online encounters is contested (Gran et al. 2018, 60). A central objection to the use of the term is that “[t]here is no ‘audience’ for Web sites, simply people who use the Web for their own purposes”, as Darren Peacock and Jonny Brownbill (2007, para. 32) argue. Online encounters with museum objects also render the distinction between visitors and users redundant because, as Gran et al. (2018, 60) note “it is perfectly possible to enjoy a curated online exhibition while almost simultaneously performing a research query of the museum catalogue”. Because “users” may imply professional and/or recurring use, I will refer to those who encounter museum objects both onsite and online as precisely “visitors”.

Finally, this brings me to the notion of the digital surrogate object. From a digital heritage perspective, one distinguishes between objects that are “digitally born” and “digital surrogate” (Parry 2007, 68). Digitally born, according to UNESCO’s Charter for the Preservation of Digital Heritage (UNESCO 2003), are types of objects for which “there is no other format but the digital object” (UNESCO 2003, 75). Or, as Ross Parry (2007, 69) explains, “there is no parent of which they are a digital manifestation”. Such objects comprise, for instance, digital art, websites, digital journals and digital tools (UNESCO 2003, 75; Parry 2007, 68). Digital surrogate objects, on the other hand, are “converted into digital form from existing analogue resources” (UNESCO 2003, 75). There is no value judgement, then, in my use of the term “digital surrogate object”, which is not meant to evoke any negative connotations concerning the surrogate as an “inferior” substitute. Rather, I use the term in reference to the relation between the digitized object (e.g. a photograph of an artwork)

and the analog artwork. This relation, in turn, may be consequential for how online visitors approach, understand, interpret and experience the digitally mediated artwork.

From a museum perspective, questions pertaining to the experience of digital surrogate objects may be linked to a historically extensive, checkered and changing discourse on the relations between original objects on one side and copies or reproductions on the other (Fyfe 2004; Cameron 2007; Brenna, Eriksen and Bjørnerud Mo 2017; Eriksen 2017). Museological integrity and the culture of the modern museum have long been tied to notions of material evidence, authenticity and originality, with rigid distinctions between originals and reproductions, as Fiona Cameron (2007, 52) notes. Traditionally, these categories have been placed in a hierarchical relation, where, very simply put, the original work is favored, and the reproduction is devalued and deemed inferior. What Cameron aptly refers to as the “idea and process of distancing” (ibid. 52) museums from non-original objects can be associated with Walter Benjamin’s critique of mechanical reproduction and his notion of aura (ibid. 52), which concerns what supposedly “withers in the age of the technological reproducibility” (Benjamin 2003, 254). Questions of what is lost in processes of reproduction have been particularly directed toward reproductions of artworks because, as Gordon Fyfe notes,

the moment of their consumption often invites questions as to what is present to the gaze [...]. The reproduced image is vulnerable to the charge that a complete meaning is absent or that the original meaning is subverted. (Fyfe 2004, 51)

Today, however, “the age of the technological reproducibility” (Benjamin 2003, 254) as it was theorized by Benjamin does not quite resonate with present-day-life (Brenna, Eriksen and Bjørnerud Mo 2017, 1). Modern day technologies make not only copies, but also the means to make them, accessible in scopes and manners that are both new and radical (ibid. 2). And what’s more, (museum) objects are increasingly considered as being contingent, relational, polysemic and fluid (Cameron 2007, 54).

To highlight the fluidity of museum objects, I take the mediating situations of onsite and online art museum environments as my empirical point of departure. I examine how aesthetic encounters and participatory relations with the same work of art may differ in onsite and online mediations. I do this not to theorize what makes a “good” or “successful” digital surrogate object. Nor do I want to uphold the onsite museum environment as a normative standard, i.e. a space that offers modes of experience that online environments should necessarily strive to emulate in their mediation of the digitized work. Rather, I want to examine what characterizes specific onsite and online artwork mediations and the aesthetic encounters and participatory relations they make possible, in order to specify the aesthetic contribution of the digitization and digital mediation of these artworks.

The Participation Nexus

With a media aesthetic approach from the perspective of a critical museum visitor, I aim to dissect how “the individual features of an exhibition work together to create a whole” (Lindauer 2006, 206). In other words: I examine how the human and nonhuman participants that constitute the mediating situation contribute to the aesthetic encounter and discuss how they may influence it. This requires concepts that help articulate the multidirectional relationality of the aesthetic encounter and that contribute productively to analyses of the possibilities that are engendered by the entanglement of environments, technologies, artworks and visitors. The framework I refer to as the participation nexus consists of four distinct but interrelated notions: *agency*, *affordance*, *atmosphere* and *affect*.

Agency, Affordance, Atmosphere and Affect

Agency refers to the power to act, influence, suggest, generate or transform and is the principal notion of the nexus. The idea of agency seeps through the remaining nexus notions, which elaborate on the agentic capacities (e.g. Coole 2013) of and relations between the human and nonhuman agents that constitute the aesthetic encounter. Affordance refers to the relational action-possibilities that arise when agents meet, i.e. what the museum, the mediated artwork, the gallery room, the visitor or the platform interface can *do*. Atmosphere concerns the conditioning, enveloping impact of the museum gallery and the digital platform environment on these doings, while the notion of affect concerns the ways in which more-than-human processes of transformation may be sensed and felt in moving bodies.

Working with the Nexus rather than Actor-Networks or Assemblages

Novel ways of conceptually approaching and theorizing relations that connect or associate human and nonhuman agents have been developed within various theoretical and philosophical perspectives. New materialist philosopher Manuel DeLanda has further developed the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of assemblage, and the actor-network-theory (ANT) of anthropologist and sociologist Bruno Latour³ is another example. Because DeLanda and Latour both have a marked presence in new materialist thought, and because I

³ ANT is an established perspective in science and technology studies, but gains the clearest new materialist presentation in the later work of Latour (Fox and Alldred, forthcoming).

assemble the participation nexus from such a perspective, I want to clarify why I construct the nexus, rather than following either assemblage theory or ANT.

ANT and assemblage theory (much like my nexus) hold relational worldviews wherein the world consists of associations between human and nonhuman agents, actions result from disparate elements coming together, and the whole is considered more than merely the sum of its parts (Müller and Schurr 2016, 217). But, among these agents working together, what about the medium? When considering the diversity of participatory relations enabled by digitization, one must consider the agency of the mediating technologies. The diversity of such technologies constitutes what Hausken refers to as “reservoir[s]” of various technical premises, semiotic systems, genres, modes, stylistic conventions, academic discourses, scholarly interests and types of knowledge (Hausken 2013, 41; Hausken 2016, 86). Importantly, such reservoirs affect the aesthetic encounters they are part of.

What assemblage theory and ANT lack – and here I agree with Claus Pias (2016, 25) – is specific attention toward the roles and affects of mediality and media technologies.⁴ When analyzing the participatory possibilities that occur when disparate or similar agents work together – in what DeLanda refers to as assemblages, what Latour names actor-networks and what I label nexus – it is important to be attentive toward the configurations of the correlations between the agents that are analyzed. As Pias notes, it is vital to refrain from reducing these configurations to social or technical networks, or to the manners of their cultural self-description (ibid. 25). When considering the relations between museum visitors and works of art, one cannot overlook the conditioning of these relations as constituted by mediated and mediating entities. It is to emphasize the aesthetic encounter as part of a mediating situation that I assemble the participation nexus.

Theorists who argue that matter is agentic have differing ontological understandings of processes of mattering and becoming (Coole 2013, 457). A distinction between the conceptualization of agency in the participation nexus and the notions of agency in assemblage theory and ANT is that my understanding of agency is (post)phenomenologically inclined. Relevant in this regard is that I consider participation a defining attribute of perception. To understand perception as inherently participatory is to acknowledge that

⁴ Latour does touch upon mediation somewhat more readily, see e.g. Latour 1994. For discussion on the potentials and limits of ANT in theorizing the connectives enabled by media, see Couldry 2008.

perception always involves an interplay between what is perceived and the perceiving body, as David Abram (1997, 57) notes in his reading of Merleau-Ponty. But assemblage theory and ANT are frameworks not readily compatible with phenomenological influence. While Latour, for instance, rejects the attempts of phenomenology to bridge the gap between humans and nonhumans, it is precisely in (post)phenomenology that I find fruitful conceptions of the human perceiver and technological mediation. These conceptions facilitate examination of the relations between human and nonhuman agents in terms of culture, behaviour and experience, aspects that to varying degrees are unemphasized in assemblage theory and ANT (see Verbeek 2005, 165; Aagaard 2017, 527).

Latour's critique of phenomenologists is that they, to no avail, are anchored in human intentionality (Latour 1999, 9) and remain stretched between the subject pole and the object pole (Latour 1993, 57-58). Indeed, classical phenomenologists, in striving to overcome the subject/object divide, do not deny the existence of subjects and objects, and they do take as their point of departure for inquiry a human intentional stance (Smith 2003, 187; Verbeek 2005, 163). I would argue, however, following Verbeek (2005 [2000]) and Don Ihde (2009), that the problem of maintaining subject and object poles is largely overcome in a postphenomenological perspective.⁵ While Latour argues that phenomenology is too concerned with networks that are interhuman, or those that occur between humans and nonhumans, postphenomenology includes a third agent in such network chains: The artefacts that mediate human/nonhuman or human/human relations (Verbeek 2005, 165). Thus, postphenomenology necessarily considers how these agents are mutually constituted in the mediating situation (ibid. 165). A nexus framework based on a new materialism influenced by postphenomenology thus opens the possibility to consider processes of mattering, embodiment and bodily perception vis-à-vis the mutually constitutive roles of technologies in personal, social and cultural life (cf. Ihde 2009, 23).

Case Studies

Through my media aesthetic, critical museum visitor approach, the nexus makes it possible to analyze the material and technological, but also the social and cultural aspects of the

⁵ Arguably, the problem of subject-object poles is also overcome in the work of classical phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whom I will return to in the theory chapter of this thesis.

participatory relations that unfold through the mediated works of art I will discuss. In what follows, I will account for the two case studies that forms the basis for my discussion.

On the Norwegian Context and the Choice of Online Environments

Both case studies in the analysis part of the thesis are situated in the Norwegian museum field. This field, in keeping with international trends, is colored by cultural policy ideals of participation, cultural democracy, diversity, and widespread access to cultural content (Gran et al. 2018, 62; Haugsevje, Hylland and Stavrum 2016, 79). Digitization has radically transformed the media landscape, and as such, it has brought newfound possibilities for museums to achieve such ideals. When examining digitized art and online museum environments, Norway is a relevant context. As Gran et al. (2018, 60) note, its population is “highly digitized” and digital infrastructure is widespread.

The online environments examined in the case studies are the Astrup Fearnley Museum app and the web museum portal DigitaltMuseum. The Astrup Fearnley app has been developed as an educational tool for onsite visitors to the privately funded Astrup Fearnley Museum in Oslo. DigitaltMuseum is a publicly funded online platform for the digitized collections of all public Norwegian and Swedish museums of art and cultural history. In this thesis, I focus solely on the Norwegian version of the platform.⁶

The Astrup Fearnley app and the DigitaltMuseum web portal are relevant case study objects insofar as they exemplify prominent modes of access to digitized museum content. The utilization of smartphone apps in the interpretative and educational media services of museums have rapidly increased with the popularization of app technology in the last ten years (Economou and Meintani 2011; Tomiuc 2014). Today, app mediation has been established as a vital mode of digital mediation in onsite museum environments. Illustrative of this, is the fact that 8 of the 15 projects supported by Arts Council Norway’s program for digital development in museums in 2015 and 2016 involved app development (Borgen 2016). Alongside the popularization of app technology, the last decade has also seen the rise of cultural heritage web portals that offer immediate and combined access to the collections of several museums or other cultural institutions. Such platforms, as noted by Gran et al. (2018, 58) may be publicly funded, as is the case for DigitaltMuseum and comparable portals such

⁶ The Norwegian version of DigitaltMuseum is accessible via www.digitaltmuseum.no.

as Europeana and the French Gallica, or they may come in the “platform capitalist” (Srnicek 2017) form of Google Arts and Culture.

As app and portal-based modes of mediation, the Astrup Fearnley app and DigitaltMuseum exemplify differing “techno-cultural” and “aesthetic-expression” (Gran et al. 2018, 61) diversity dimensions. The platforms offer environments with potentially diverse possibilities for visitors and works of art to participate in aesthetic encounters. Although both platforms are situated in a Norwegian context, the digital and museological development, possibilities and challenges they bring to light are arguably supranational. Thus, the relevance of the case studies in this thesis extend the national context, as both platforms illustrate the ongoing digitization of museums. DigitaltMuseum in particular, as Ole Marius Hylland (2017, 64) notes, demonstrates overarching, internationally relevant challenges in articulating cultural policy for digital museums. The Astrup Fearnley app and DigitaltMuseum are also interesting objects of study because they represent early developments in Norwegian digital museum infrastructure, albeit to varying degrees. They also both exemplify prominent entryways into digitized art museum collections, and yet, next-to-none analyses have been conducted into these platforms from a predominantly aesthetic perspective.

The Astrup Fearnley Museum App

To date, the Astrup Fearnley app has yet to be subject to any in-depth academic study. Upon its launch in 2016, the museum introduced it as “Norway’s first complete museum app” (Astrup Fearnley Museum 2016a, my translation) and made it freely available for the iOS and Android mobile operating systems via iTunes and Google Play respectively. However, the Astrup Fearnley app is not the Astrup Fearnley Museum’s first involvement with app technology. Between 2012 and 2013, the museum took part in developing the app project Kunstporten, which could be considered a precursor to the development of the museum’s own app some years later. The Kunstporten app was a collaborative effort between seven Norwegian art museums (Varvin et al. 2014),⁷ and would come to be replaced with a browser-based web portal in 2016. Among the reasons for the end of the Kunstporten app were challenges tied to the varying external conditions the collaborating museums operated

⁷ The Kunstporten app project involved the Astrup Fearnley Museum, the Munch Museum, Lillehammer Art Museum, Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Drammen Museum, Haugar Vestfold Kunstmuseum and the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design (Varvin et al. 2014). In 2016, the National Museum and the Munch Museum withdrew from the project (Liven 2016).

under (Liven 2016). Other reasons included limitations in budget, as well as limited technological knowledge and human resources to create app content and keep the app updated for new and changing exhibits (ibid.).

Notably, these are recurring challenges tied to the use of mobile technologies in museums. These factors contribute to make large-sized institutions the most common users of app technologies, as they are financially able to afford the upkeep of such technologies (Tomiuc 2014, 37). The Astrup Fearnley Museum is one such institution, and frequently updates the app as new exhibitions are staged. Developed for a single museum, one can reasonably consider the app to be a digital infrastructure made to suit the museum specific profile, needs, ideology and educational approach of the Astrup Fearnley Museum.

Although the specificities of museum apps vary greatly, they often share an aim of enhancing visitor experience and engagement. As such, the implementation of smartphone apps in museums must be viewed in relation to the ideals of new museology, which emphasizes the development of new styles of expression and visitor engagement, and the importance of delegating decision-making powers to visitors. For instance, the Kunstporten app was intended to facilitate the needs of visitors who did not necessarily want to follow a guided tour but preferred to choose the order and pace at which they explored museum collections (Varvin et al. 2014, 275-278). Similarly, the Astrup Fearnley app does not provide exhibit maps or suggested routes. Instead, its aim is simply to give onsite visitors the possibility to explore the museum's collection and provide easy access to information about the artworks they encounter (Astrup Fearnley Museum 2016b).

DigitaltMuseum

Compared to the Astrup Fearnley app, the DigitaltMuseum platform has gained considerable academic attention. However, research has largely concerned perspectives other than the predominantly aesthetic. In the course of the last few years, studies have examined the museum portal in contexts that include museal image collections and the construction of national identities (Engebretsen 2013), digital reproductions and challenges for cultural policy (Hylland 2017), computer culture and copyright (Ekström 2017), Nordic digital initiatives and web museum users (Wold and Ween 2018), cultural consumption and visitor usage (Gran et al. 2018) and aesthetic visitor participation (Ogundipe 2018).

DigitaltMuseum (which translates directly to "Digital Museum") is based on and developed from the module-based collection management software Primus. The Primus project began in 1996, sparked by an initiative from the Norwegian Museum Authority. In 1998, the system

launched after being developed through the collaborative efforts of a group of Norwegian museums (Hylland 2017, 69), aiming to make a collection management system for the entire museum sector. At the time, the early establishment of a common cataloguing standard put Norway in the digital forefront, and the development of a common software usable by museums of all sizes was unique in a European context (Gleinsvik, Wedde and Nagell 2015, 19). The predecessor to DigitaltMuseum, the PrimusWeb module, was based on the idea that the online presence of museums should include some form of collection access (Hylland 2017, 69). The short-lived PrimusWeb was launched in 2008 but was relaunched the following year under the name DigitaltMuseum. Today, the technical development of the DigitaltMuseum platform is conducted by the museum-owned company KulturIT.⁸

At the time of DigitaltMuseum's launch, activity in the Norwegian cultural-political landscape ran high, especially with respects to addressing the potentials of digitization (Gran et al. 2018, 59). In this regard, Norwegian cultural policy aligned with developments in the EU, where a prototype version of Europeana launched in late 2008 (ibid. 59). One can also view DigitaltMuseum's 2009 launch in relation to the publishing of two pivotal cultural policy white papers published the same year by the Norwegian Ministry of Culture and Church Affairs (now the Norwegian Ministry of Culture) (ibid. 63). The white papers (the first concerning digitization as such, the other concerning the museum sector, see Norwegian Ministry of Culture and Church Affairs 2009a; 2009b respectively) both stress the democratic value of digitizing and disseminating cultural content. Congruently, the objective of DigitaltMuseum is to make museum collections

available to anybody who is interested, regardless of time or place. It is hoped that it will now be easier for these collections to be used for image searching, in-depth research, studies, education and for the mutual development of knowledge." (DigitaltMuseum n.d. a)

DigitaltMuseum is a digital, but also a "cultural-political infrastructure" (Gran et al. 2018, 63). Besides the platform working as a supplement to traditional museums, one can consider its development a pre-emptive effort by the cultural authorities of a small country to avoid "Googlization" (Vaidhyanathan 2011) of its cultural heritage (Gran et al. 2018, 59). For Norwegian museums today, making digitized content publicly available is near tantamount to

⁸ KulturIt is owned by the Norwegian institutions Anno museum, Museene i Akershus, Museene i Trøndelag, Lillehammer Art Museum, Norsk Folkemuseum - The Norwegian Museum of Cultural History and Jærmuseet in addition to the Swedish museum Nordiska museet.

publishing information on digitized collection objects on DigitaltMuseum, as noted in a 2017 report from the Office of the Auditor General of Norway (2017, 80). This speaks to the importance of DigitaltMuseum, which per April 2019 provides access to more than 2.3 million digitized objects.

On the Choice of Case Study Artworks

The digitized collections mediated in the Astrup Fearnley app and DigitaltMuseum differ in size, but both platforms contain a great many artworks that could potentially serve as relevant case study objects. They both contain works that exemplify the breadth and complexity of museum collections, as well as the breadth and complexity of the contemporary visual arts field. Admittedly, speaking of the visual arts field as a whole is somewhat problematic, because the very notion of visual art is ambiguous. The lines of demarcation between the various forms of expression that may belong within the category of visual art are blurry, and visual art continues to be influenced by other art forms, such as music, theater and architecture (Halmrast et al. 2018, 97). Moreover, the visual arts field comprises a diverse range of artistic positions, movements, agendas and forms of aesthetic expression. According to Arts Council Norway, the latter includes

painting, photography, textile art, jewelry art, ceramics, glass art, drawing, graphics, sculpture, video/film/documentary, installations, site specific and relational expressions, sound art, performance, web art, street art, artists' books and photo books" (Arts Council Norway 2018, my translation).

Furthermore, visual art can be "object based or come in the form of actions, events and situations" (ibid., my translation). Among this breadth of possible expressions, how am I to choose what kind and which specific works of art would be especially relevant to examine?

The complexity and compositeness of the visual arts field render it highly problematic to claim that any single work is typical or illustrative of the field as whole. This, in combination with the complexity and specificities of digitization technologies, digital mediation platforms and art museum collections and institutions, renders it equally problematic to view the digitization and platform specific mediation of a single work to be illustrative of all the possible challenges and potentials tied to the practice of digitizing visual art in a museum context. This is to say that the works I have chosen to examine are merely examples. They are examples of visual art, of art museum objects and, in digitized form, of digital surrogate objects. They are not the only possible or relevant case study objects, and different works (in terms of artistic context, conceptual framework, form of expression etc.) would serve to illuminate the research question in differing ways. Still, the scope of the thesis demands a selection to be made. I find the works I examine – namely Felix Gonzalez-Torres's

consumable candy installation “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) and Siri Hermansen’s pair of plaster cast sculptures *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* – to be both relevant and interesting for several reasons.

The most straightforward reason is their analog-born status, their material form of expression, and their three-dimensionality. Because digitizing visual art is tied to the production and platform specific mediation of analog-born works converted to digital surrogate objects, it is particularly interesting to examine works with well-established challenges tied to the process of their digitization. Relative to two-dimensional expressions, such as paintings, analog photographs or drawings, three-dimensional objects are somewhat difficult to digitize. They are usually digitally photographed and mediated in the form of flat images on a screen (Gran et al. 2018, 61). Comparably, the loss of information is less when digitizing two-dimensional works, because they can be scanned or digitally photographed with relative ease, with the image as such ostensibly staying intact. For this reason, I choose to analyze works that comprise complex three-dimensional forms of expression which are radically transformed through digitization.

Onsite, encountering “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) is to be faced with a large pile of tiny candies covered in shiny cellophane paper. When unwrapped, the cellophane makes a crackling sound, before revealing the hard, white candy inside – which tastes something like peppermint. Using the Astrup Fearnley Museum app, the tactility of the stiff cellophane paper is replaced with the familiar touch of one’s own mobile phone. The crackling sound of cellophane is replaced with the female voice of a museum employee. The app mediates the aesthetic encounter as such, through narratives tailored to young and adult visitors. And for only one of these groups, the taste of the candy is mentioned.

Onsite visitors encounter *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* as a pair of sculptures lying side-by-side on the gallery room floor, surrounded by a select constellation of curated works. On first glance, the sculptures look like real-life, crumpled-up sleeping bags. On second look, one will recognize that they are not at all made of fabric, but of a hard, uninviting material. On DigitaltMuseum, *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* are separated. They are mediated on their own object pages in the form of what is immediately recognized as photographic images. In their virtual proximity are more than two million diverse, digitized museum objects, from the collections of a range of museums.

The differences I have outlined between onsite and online encounters with the chosen works may serve to facilitate discussion of the experiential aspects of digital mediation. Additionally, they illustrate particular challenges of digitizing three-dimensional objects –

such as changes in spatial and temporal experience, and changes in the scale of digital surrogate objects. Furthermore, the digital mediations of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) and *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* also highlight the aesthetic contribution of the unique, mediated materiality of surrogate objects.

The second reason for my choice of case study artworks is that they – as mediated in the onsite exhibition contexts I will discuss – encourage distinctly differing forms of participation. “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) is emblematic of the “active” notion of participation tied to the current participation paradigm. *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)*, on the other hand, arguably invite more traditional forms of visitor behavior, what would generally be considered “passive” spectatorship. The analytical consideration of works and onsite exhibition contexts that suggest differing participatory relations opens comparative dimensions. It allows for analyses of the potentially transformative, diversifying forces of digitization via artworks that seemingly have little in common, but whose agential, affording, affective and atmospheric presence are drastically changed by digitization.

This brings me to the third reason for the inclusion of these particular works. In the analysis part of the thesis, I will argue that not only the specific material structures of these works, but also their artistic contexts and conceptual frameworks are challenged, extended or in other ways transformed by digitization and the platform specific environments through which they are mediated. In the following, I outline the works and their relevance in brief, leaving thorough accounts of them to be made in the analysis chapters.

“*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) (Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 1991)

Cuban-American artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s candy installations are generally understood as participatory art: an umbrella term for works that in one way or another directly involve the audience, as they facilitate physical or social interaction (Bishop 2012; 12-13; Elffers and Sitzia 2016, 42-43). “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*), which is part of the collection of the Astrup Fearnley Museum, consists of a pile of candy which visitors may help themselves to. In doing so, they become part of the work as such, the process of its vanishing and its dispersion into moving bodies.

As a case study object, this work is interesting insofar as it highlights how digital mediation may expand and diversify modes of participation that are already recognized as “participatory” according to the current participation paradigm. Moreover, the case demonstrates how an expanded notion of participation may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of both the overt and non-observable visitor responses that “*Untitled*” (*Blue*

Placebo) invites. In this case study, I discuss how the specificities of an onsite context contribute to engender participatory relations surrounding “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) – and how these relations may differ when the aesthetic encounter is guided by the app mediation of the work. A central question is how the app, mainly through its audio guides, may shape the aesthetic experience of museum visitors and their possibilities to engage with “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*), and, simultaneously, how the app shapes the possibilities of the work to affect museum visitors and the museum environment.

In the chapter on “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*), I also touch upon how the Astrup Fearnley Museum app contributes to legitimize the use of personal, digital devices in the onsite environment, and affords access to social media sharing. A notable question in this regard concerns how social media facilitates and expands the work’s artistic device of dispersion, as visitors are given tools to produce and share new mediations of their encounter.

Sleeping Bag (Big) and Sleeping Bag (Small) (Siri Hermansen, 2005)

Norwegian artist Siri Hermansen’s pair of figurative plaster cast sculptures, *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)*, are part of the contemporary art collection of the publicly funded National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, which was housed in the Museum of Contemporary Art (part of the National Museum) until 2017.⁹

While “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) hinges on obvious forms of visitor participation (i.e. touching, eating), *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* resist comparable physical engagement. In this case study, I discuss how participatory relations do not only arise between a visitor and a single work of art, but among the visitor and virtual constellations of exhibited objects. I discuss the artistic and museal displacement of the sleeping bag – from an object of travel, warmth and shelter to exhibited plaster sculpture – and how the onsite mediating situation affects the participatory presence of the artwork.

In DigitaltMuseum, I argue that the sleeping bags once again become displaced, both through the form of photography and through the contextualization of a web museum portal formulaically designed to display a variety of digitized museum objects, more so than

⁹ The Museum of Contemporary Art closed in September 2017. From 2020, the contemporary art collection of the National Museum will be housed in the museum’s new Oslo venue, which is currently under construction.

curating digitized art. In this case study, I discuss the virtual object constellations the sleeping bags become part of through DigitalMuseum and how the interface contributes to structure the relations between the digitized content and the visitor.

The Importance and Difficulty of Non- anthropocentrism

Analyzing onsite and online aesthetic encounters with “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) and *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and (*Small*) from a perspective that considers the nexus of relations in the mediating situation, entails decentralizing the museum visitor in the encounter. To seriously consider the impact of mediating environments and technologies – and, in particular, digital technologies – on aesthetic encounters with these works, a non-anthropocentric perspective is not only helpful, but necessary. It is necessary insofar as the encounter involves a range of entangled bodies, objects, systems and technologies that human perceivers cannot fully control (Hoel and Carusi 2018), and whose agency cannot be considered subservient to that of the visitor. The museum visitor is not, however, decentralized to diminish or remove the agentic, co-constituting human perceiver from the equation. Rather, their decentralization serves to emphasize a distribution of agency in a diverse range of entities. Furthermore, it serves to assert a perspective in which I consider human perceivers, nonhuman agents (e.g. works of art), mediations, technologies and environments with equal analytical seriousness – but not necessarily with equal analytical prominence.

The latter point needs clarifying. Analyses of mediated artworks and the aesthetic encounters onsite and online visitors have with them are inextricably tied to the human estate and (necessarily) to the human perceiver. In examining the encounter between a visitor and a work of art, these are two agents that are of particular analytical significance, and as such, they will be weighted in the case study analyses. This, in turn, entails a perspectival challenge. How am I to avoid the pitfalls of anthropocentrism when the analytical scope demands particular attention toward the relation between the human perceiver and the artwork?

Relevant in this regard is, as mentioned, that I elaborate on the new materialist acknowledgement of the generative, transformative powers of matter and nonhuman agents (Coole 2013, 453; Gries 2015, 104), by taking into account postphenomenological considerations of the entwinement between subject and object. Informed by postphenomenology, my theoretical stance involves a take on relationality in which the human and nonhuman agents taking part in an aesthetic encounter are engendered in reciprocal relations. They are entities that emerge from the relation and mediating situation that constitute them (Verbeek 2005, 163). Admittedly, certain tensions remain between the

perspective of new materialism on one side – which tends to focus on nonhuman agency – and the experiential perspective of phenomenology on the other. Nevertheless, a new materialist perspective informed by postphenomenology makes it possible to speak of subjects and objects (so long as one remembers that they are not pregiven, but always entwined and born out of the mediating situation), and to consider the onsite and online visitor as part of ongoing processes of becoming.

The danger of falling into an anthropocentric trap does loom when I give the human perceiver some degree of analytical prominence. Simply acknowledging this threat does not necessarily entail that I will entirely avoid it. This thesis is an explorative attempt to apply a non-anthropocentric analytical framework to case studies that very much concern the human estate and the human experience. Therefore, the objective cannot be to avoid anthropocentrism at all cost. Rather, it is to acknowledge that being entrenched in anthropocentrism may hinder a necessary grasp on the diverse participation of nonhuman forces in museum environments. The non-anthropocentric understanding of participation I propose – as will be made clear through the course of chapter 1 – is very different from the notion of participation that dominates contemporary participation discourse.

Outline of Chapters

In chapter 1, I outline the current participation discourse in fields relevant for the participatory ideals, logics, rationales and practices of art museums. I offer critical perspectives on the normativity of the anthropocentric active/passive dichotomy of the current participation paradigm and highlight an overarching focus on digital technologies as instrumental visitor tools rather than mediating technologies that contribute to shape the aesthetic encounter as such. I conclude by arguing for a move beyond the active/passive construct and an exploration of the diversity of human/nonhuman participation in aesthetic museum encounters.

In chapter 2, I account for the theoretical and methodological grounding of the thesis and the conceptual framework that I will apply in the case study analyses that are to follow: the participation nexus. I explain the conceptual tools of agency, affordance, atmosphere and affect and explicate their analytical contribution. I conclude with methodological considerations concerning analytical application of the nexus through a media aesthetic, critical museum visitor approach, narrowing the scope of research and explicating the role of the researcher.

In chapters 3 and 4, I conduct analyses of the two case study artworks. In chapter 3, I discuss “Untitled” (*Blue Placebo*) as mediated in the Astrup Fearnley Museum exhibit *The World is Made of Stories* (2015-2017) with and without the use of the museum’s app. In chapter 4, I examine *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* as mediated in the Museum of Contemporary Art exhibit *Poor Art – Rich Legacy* (2015-2016) and DigitaltMuseum.

In chapter 5, I move toward possible answers to the research question. I also discuss challenges and potentials of the theoretical and methodological approach of this thesis and what my approach and the case studies I have conducted might fail to illuminate. I end the thesis by discussing the possible aesthetic-political consequences of an expanded, non-anthropocentric concept of participation.

Chapter 1

On Current Participation Discourse

A Critique of the Contemporary Participation Paradigm

“In fact, online participation has tended to be conflated with contributing a ‘voice’. ‘Speaking up’ has become the dominant metaphor for participation in online spaces [...]”

Crawford 2009, 526.

1.0. Chapter Introduction: Digitization and the Participatory Turn

Long established yet ever-growing interests in participation among museum scholars and professionals have not risen in a vacuum, and talk of participation is not a preoccupation specific to the museum sector. Discourse on museum participation is intertwined with tenets of democratization, collaboration and user-engagement emblematic of what is commonly referred to as the participatory turn, which comprises societal, political and cultural shifts, sparked by the development and popularization of new media and digital technologies. Literature addressing this shift (e.g. Jenkins 2006; Jenkins et al. 2009; Delwiche and Henderson 2013a; Barney et al. 2016a; Chilvers and Kearnes 2016; Denecke et al. 2016; Rasmussen 2016) focuses on newfound possibilities for civic, social, political, aesthetic and cultural participation engendered by a media landscape transformed by digitization.

The tenets of the participatory turn permeate contemporary culture, society, cultural policy and the museum sector at large, which are spheres that affect the ideas and ideals of participation in art museums. In this chapter, I outline prominent traits in contemporary participation discourse as it pertains to these fields. I draw on a range of texts, including participation literature spanning media studies, cultural studies and museum studies, as well as cultural policy documents. Additionally, I draw on a 2017 survey carried out by the *Digitization and Diversity* research project, which mapped attitudes toward participation among 81 Norwegian museum directors. In this material, there is arguably a general emphasis on human participants being actively engaged, using digital technologies as instrumental means to a participatory end. I

conclude the chapter by calling for a different understanding of participation. One that is not anchored in an anthropocentric active/passive dichotomy, but that considers the agentic and co-constitutive role of embodied human beings as well as nonhuman agents.

1.1. Societal and Cultural Perspectives: Living in a Participation Culture

Consensus among scholars discussing participation in light of digitization is that notions of participation saturate social and cultural life. Emblematic of this is the rise of what Henry Jenkins, Ravi Purushotma, Margaret Weigel, Katie Clinton and Alice J. Robison (2009) refer to as “participatory cultures”, wherein thresholds for artistic expression and civic engagement are low. In participatory cultures, there is support for creating and sharing, and those taking part in them experience some degree of social connection with one another (Jenkins et al. 2009, xi). Participatory cultures are diverse, and as Jenkins et al. note, they may come in the form of “affiliations” in online communities such as Facebook, message boards and game clans, or “expressions” such as digital sampling, fan videos and fan fiction. They may also take the form of “collaborative problem solving”, of which Wikipedia is a prominent example, or “circulations” that shape the flow of media, like blogging or podcasting (ibid. xi-xii).

The multitude of participatory cultures and their widespread reach indicate a consequential shift in the media landscape, brought on by digital technologies. What have emerged are not only new ways of creating, distributing, sharing, consuming, experiencing, analyzing and evaluating content, but new ways of being in the world. One example is the phenomenon of “networked individualism” (Rainie and Wellmann 2012): A social operating system in which people function as connected individuals rather than embedded group members. The home is now a base for networking with the world, as each family member keeps separate and personal connective gadgets (ibid. 12).

The participatory turn has also brought new, creative possibilities for media production (see e.g. Manovich 2008; Manovich 2017), self-expression and exploration through social networking sites, blogs and vlogs, enabling, for instance, selfie-culture¹⁰ and online DIY-culture¹¹. These

¹⁰ Selfie-culture encompasses the widespread taking and sharing of selfies, engagements with image-making technologies, self-imaging strategies and consumer-based devices (see e.g. Rettberg 2014; Murray 2015; Ogundipe 2015; Prøitz and Eliassen 2016).

participatory phenomena also constitute new directions in activism, raise questions of what “counts as politics”, and broaden the scope of “what is possible as politics” (Harris 2008, 482) for younger people, and especially for younger women, who have been underrepresented in more conventional modes of political practice (ibid. 481–482).

Utopian and Dystopian Outlooks on Participatory Cultures

The transformative powers of participatory cultures have overt sociopolitical ramifications, leading to what Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer Jacobs Henderson (2013b, 3) maintain is the usurpation of established hierarchical institutions like newspapers, universities and television stations by, for instance, social media sites, independent publishers and collaboratively sustained knowledge banks. Offering a handful of examples, Delwiche and Henderson point to citizen journalists, who report on the goings-on in their local communities, and to humanitarian workers and activists who have come to use geo-mapping technologies to better coordinate relief-efforts in the wake of natural disasters, monitor political elections and identify potential environmental disasters. They also point to the actions of information transparency proponents, who take to social media and websites such as WikiLeaks to publicly disseminate classified documents, and to dissidents in repressive regimes, who utilize distributed communication technologies to rally and organize political opposition (ibid. 3–4).

Notably, most of the cases provided by Delwiche and Henderson are shining examples of the good brought on by participatory cultures, illustrative of the informational, political and democratic fruitfulness of digital participation. Their examples are characteristic of a techno-optimist perspective, in which digitally sparked participation challenges the political, social and cultural status quo in strive for some form of betterment. From such a perspective, participatory practices enabled by digitization provide new opportunities for knowledge creation and dissemination, enabling collaborative forces powerful enough to topple established institutions, hierarchies and repressive regimes.

Generally, participatory practices enabled by digitization are understood to bring at least some degree of power to the people. If democracy is a form of government that entails an extent of political equality among people (Held 2006, 1), participation is potentially a democratizing

¹¹ DIY-culture encompasses the technology-enabled practices of young people (on online platforms such as e-zines and blogs) that are not political in a conventional sense, but are still politically and socially aware (Harris 2008, 481–482, 485).

force, because it may serve to distribute power. Indeed, distribution of power is at the core of the notion of participation, and discussing participation ultimately implies speaking of actors and their positions of power toward each other, as Nico Carpentier (2016) argues. It also implies speaking of technologies and infrastructures of production and distribution “within the context of their specific social, political, historical, and economic conditions” (Carpentier 2016, 8). Speaking about participation, then, forces consideration of the agency of not only human actors, but also of the nonhuman agents (institutions, infrastructures, mediating technologies, networks) taking part in practices labeled participatory. Through the notion of participation, the relations and involvements constituting connectivity and collectivity are brought to the forefront (Pias 2016), directing attention toward the complexities that arise when digital technologies enable participation.

While digitally enabled participation may contribute to betterment for individuals, communities and societies, there are reservations to its positive impact. One might, like Delwiche and Henderson (2013b, 4), worry over the lack of anonymity and privacy in the midst of ubiquitous connection, question whether intellectual property laws might inhibit access to and communication in participatory networks, or wonder whether some forms of digital participation merely serve as a cloak of fundamental passivity. One might also, like Terje Rasmussen (2016, 67), question the value of digital forums in the public sphere and note negative (side) effects of online participation ranging from unequal opportunities for participation, isolation of issue-based groupings, increased polarization of debates and incivility in discussions. And one could, following several recent studies, be concerned that automated digital technologies (such as social media bot accounts) now participate in coordinated online disinformation campaigns in attempts to disturb democratic processes on behalf of adversarial regimes (see e.g. Howard and Kollanyi 2016; Gallacher et al. 2017; Howard et al. 2017).

Worth noting is that literature on the potentials and/or challenges for digitally enabled participation tends to be colored by what Andrea Sartori refers to as “a rhetoric halo that either magnifies or decries [the effects of digitization] on established practices” (Sartori 2016, 428). The introduction, diffusion and popularization of technological innovations tend to be surrounded by this “halo”. Often, as Sartori suggests, rhetorical discourse concerning digital media lies one step ahead of empirical reality, projecting utopian technological futures which

generate critical reactions (ibid. 437). This seems to be the case for digitization as it pertains to the participatory turn. Utopian narratives are followed by dystopian outlooks, and ultimately, both perspectives characterize discourse on the participatory turn and participatory cultures. Nevertheless, the positive potentials and empowering forces of digitization constitute common themes across a range of fields¹² that reference digitally enabled participation, from political philosophy to art (Literat 2016; Lutz and Hoffmann 2017). A normative ethos is thus formed wherein participation is viewed as both good and necessary.

From Participatory Cultures to Participation Culture

Human beings have become entwined in participatory cultures (in plural) to an extent that the ethos of participation both encompasses and extends specific participatory cultures. Participation permeates daily life, and as such, a broader participation culture¹³ (in singular) has emerged. Every time someone snaps a selfie, likes a Facebook post, uploads a YouTube video or consults blogs, forums or collaboratively updated websites in search of life advice, dinner recipes, book reviews, restaurants or dentists, they engage in participation culture. People also have increasingly close-knit relationships with the handheld, mobile consumer-based devices that enable their participatory practices, most notably the smartphone. So much so, that such devices have been theorized as being in a symbiotic relationship to human bodies (Cooley 2004; Lister 2014; Ogunidipe 2015). Possibilities for participation have become such an integral part of many people's lives that some may feel incomplete if they were to find themselves without access to the devices and networks they have become accustomed to. It is almost difficult to imagine that, in the words of Delwiche and Henderson, for most of history, "human beings were unable to instantly find answers to questions such as 'How long can I safely store cooked chicken in the refrigerator'" (Delwiche and Henderson 2013b, 3–4).

¹² In a variety of fields, researchers discuss the *participatory* turn, but they rarely refer to each other (Kelty 2013, 23). Ioana Literat (2016) addresses the isolation of disciplines in participation discourse in her recent cross-disciplinary review of participation scholarship and new media, which pertains to the fields of political philosophy, cultural studies, art and education.

¹³ While Delwiche and Henderson refer to this phenomenon as "*participatory* culture" (2013b, 3, my emphasis), I refer to it as "*participation* culture," so as to distinguish it more clearly from the "participatory cultures" examined by Jenkins et al. Theorists have also discussed participation culture under other terms, such as "the participatory condition" (Barney et al. 2016b) and "the participation paradigm" (Livingstone 2013). Though the latter term pertains specifically to what Sonia Livingstone argues to be a paradigm within audience research, it does concern the tenets of participation culture as I outline them here.

Immersion in participation culture, of course, amounts to more than relying on Google to solve everyday queries. Contemporary participation culture – or the “participatory condition” (Barney et al. 2016b), as Barney et al. label the phenomenon – designates being involved or taking part in something, usually with others, as not only a state of affairs, a descriptor of the status quo or our current doings. What is prevalent in what one may understand as the current participation paradigm is a normative ethos which expresses what people *should* be doing. Participation as such has become generalized to an unprecedented extent, and the notion now works as an organizing principle for human life (ibid.) Participation culture is, as put by Erich Hörl, (2016, 93) an “omnipresent, political-aesthetic-social-medial phenomenon” of which we are all part, all the time.

The Active/Passive Dichotomy: Refuted and Resurrected

The extensive participation culture in which human beings are constantly embedded has not come about overnight. Its emergence has been gradual, and looking to the recent past, debates about participation in a variety of fields were especially prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s (Carpentier 2012, 165). In the visual arts field, as Claire Bishop (2012, 77–104) notes, participation was frequently thematized, often by artists who explored tensions and conflicting demands between individual authorship and agency on one side, and collective authorship and directorial control on the other. While some artists would enthusiastically embrace participation, others were vocal in rejecting the notion, viewing it as a form of artistic coercion (ibid. 79). Illustrative of these positions are two examples offered by Bishop from the French student and worker revolt in May 1968 (ibid. 79). The first, an anonymous graffiti piece spelling out the slogan *être libre en 1968, c'est participer* (in English: *to be free in 1968 means to participate*) contrasts the second, more skeptical work by the Atelier Populaire. The now famous poster depicts a hand holding a pen, underscoring a statement that plays on French conjugation rules while criticizing the outcome of participation: *Je participe, tu participes, il participe, nous participons, vous participez, ils profitent* – which translates to *I participate, you participate, he participates, we participate, you participate, they profit*.

These 1960s and 1970s perspectives on participation encompassed themes similar to current outlooks on participation: Its democratizing potential was welcomed, while worries over the negative effects of participatory demands loomed. Nevertheless, participation was primarily hailed as a promising new *modus operandi* that offered grand potentials of interactivity (ibid. 79). Viewed in light of digitization, the embryonic stage of participation culture, understood as an omnipresent and normative organizing condition, can be dated to the mid-1980s (see Delwiche and Henderson 2013b, 4). Admittedly, shifts toward digital technologies begun earlier

– and created a range of participatory potential before the 1980s, both in the art sphere and in other fields. Still, it is not until this point in time that personal computers started to become fixtures in the homes of ordinary citizens, the use of the internet precursor ARPANET grew in military institutions and universities, and digital communities began to see the light of day (ibid. 4). At the same time, a growing body of research also began to challenge traditional views of mass media audiences (particularly television audiences) as being largely passive (ibid. 5).

Among those championing such views (e.g. Jenkins 1988; Jenkins 1992; Ang 1991) around this time were Stuart Hall and John Fiske, both situated in the tradition of British cultural studies. Hall challenged the traditional, linear sender/message/receiver model of mass communication by arguing that meaning is not exclusively determined by the sender, the message is not transparent, and the audience must not be understood as passive recipients (Hall 2006; Procter 2004, 59). He emphasized that personal experience and individual background play into the ways audiences decode (i.e. interpret) media messages, thus highlighting the “active process” (Procter 2004, 61) of which audiences are part. Fiske also refuted the orthodoxy of screen theory, according to which audiences are inactive receivers of input (Fiske 1990, 62), by arguing that their power to interpret TV narratives makes them empowered producers.

At the time, the ideas of Hall and Fiske were groundbreaking. They challenged the top-of-the-hierarchy placement of media producers and the presumed passivity of audiences. With scholars such as Hall and Fiske, perspectives emerged wherein the audience had power to resist, subvert and recode signs in ways that might differ from the original intentions of the program creators. Although they originally referred to television viewers, such perspectives have become vital for scholars imagining utopian relations between technology and democratic culture, wherein everyone participates in (more or less) equal terms in the processes of cultural production and meaning-making (Katyal 2006, 489-490).

Fast-forward from the eighties and nineties, when interests in reconsidering and elevating the roles of previously presumed to be “passive” cultural consumers were spiking, contemporary participation discourse has resurrected old conventions of the active/passive dichotomy. With the establishment of the internet and mobile devices that enable constant connectivity and interactivity, and a subject that is not only receiving, but also creating, re-elaborating, commenting and sharing, active/passive distinctions are increasingly difficult to define. Yet, the focus seems to remain directed toward forms of participation that are overtly active. To participate is more often than not equated with behavior construed as active, rather than behavior construed as passive. It is equated with commenting, “liking” and sharing rather than “lurking”, which, as Kate Crawford (2009, 526) notes, is a commonly used disparaging term

describing those present in public online spaces without contributing content, or without “speaking up”, as Crawford puts it. It is precisely “speaking up”, as she argues, that has now come to be the prevailing metaphor for participation in online spaces (ibid. 526).

Similarly, there seems to be an activity bias in research on online participation, as Christoph Lutz and Christian Peter Hoffmann (2017) point to a one-sided focus on observable activity. Consequently, scholars are again finding themselves challenging, problematizing or adding nuance to the active/passive divide, or suggesting it be abandoned altogether (see e.g. Crawford 2009; Lutz and Hoffmann 2017). Crawford, for example, criticizes notions of “voice-as-democratic-participation,” shifting attention instead toward listening “as a significant practice of intimacy, connection, obligation and participation online” (Crawford 2009, 527), effectively “elevating” a practice considered “passive” and giving it an “active” status:

If we reconceptualize lurking as listening, it reframes a set of behaviours once seen as vacant and empty into receptive and reciprocal practices [...]. It reflects the fact that everyone moves between the states of listening and disclosing online; both are necessary and both are forms of participation. (ibid. 527–528)

Reconsidering the value of practices previously thought of as “passive” is vital to grasp the possibilities for participation brought on by digitization. Adhering to an active/passive dichotomy that is arguably a restrictive and reductive construct, and that has already been challenged a number of times, does little to advance discussions on digitally enabled participation.

1.2. Cultural Policy Perspectives: Digitization, Democratization, Diversity

In contemporary debates on cultural and museum policies, the meaning of participation and its implications in policy-making have become especially relevant. For the last decades, participation has emerged as a central keyword for museum policy and grassroots driven museum reforms (Brenna 2016, 36; Haugsevje, Hylland and Stavrum 2016, 79-80). In Nordic countries, in comparable European countries and to varying degrees in a broader international context, there has been a participatory turn in cultural policy (Virolainen 2016; Sørensen 2016; Kortbek et al. 2016; Bonet and Négrier 2018). One may, however, argue that while discourses on participation are present in official cultural policy documents, other discourses are still dominant, such as those of innovation and administrative effectiveness (Valtysson 2017). Nonetheless, there is a marked emphasis on ideals of participation in contemporary cultural policy, though the extent to which participatory discourse permeates it is country and region dependent.

The reason for the focus on participation in cultural policy is twofold, as argued by Lluís Bonet and Emmanuel Négrier (2018). First, cultural participation has emerged as a contemporary issue through technological, economic and sociological currents, in which reciprocal relations in decision-making and production (co-deciding and co-creating) are emphasized. In other words, cultural and museum political interests in and focus on participation mirror concerns of the broader participatory turn. The second reason for the centrality of participation in cultural policy ties into the societal and cultural turn toward participation. Models of governance have evolved toward demands for active citizen participation, cultural democratization, development and diversity, placing the notion of participation at the forefront in cultural policy (ibid.). It is worth noting that when cultural political emphasis on participation includes notions of democratization and diversity, they are often tied to objectives of broadening the demographics attending cultural activities. From this perspective, the active/passive divide serves a purpose of quantifiability, although, as I will go on to argue, certain aspects of it remain problematic.

The Active/Passive Dichotomy and the Problem of Non-participants

In a cultural policy context, the active/passive dichotomy is tied to an international discourse wherein non-participants – which often, but not exclusively, are taken in the meaning of non-users or non-visitors – are considered a problem (Balling and Kann-Christensen 2013; Kann-Rasmussen and Balling 2015). One can relate the negative view of non-participants to favorable views on cultural participation, the value of which is undisputed. Taking part in cultural activities is considered beneficial for individual citizens, largely because it is thought to increase their quality of life and contribute to strengthen social community and democracy (Haugsevje, Hylland and Stavrum 2016, 80).

Characteristic of this prevailing outlook on cultural participation is the Official Norwegian Report *Kulturutredningen 2014* (Norwegian Ministry of Culture 2013), whose mandate was in part to discuss the *raisons d'être* of cultural policy by weighting the connections between cultural policy and societal development.¹⁴ In it, the importance of cultural participation is clearly noted:

¹⁴ The chief mandate of *Kulturutredningen 2014* was to assess the cultural policy platform *Kulturløftet*, launched by the Labour, Socialist Left and Centre parties in 2004.

Participation in cultural activities provides experiences for the individual as well as the possibility to evolve as a human being and a citizen. Cultural activities provide arenas for belonging and social community. (ibid. 10, my translation).

The report goes on to emphasize that cultural participation is important for learning to constructively take part in communities of disagreement,¹⁵ which is a prerequisite for a functioning democracy (ibid. 10). This sentiment is explicitly echoed in the more recent cultural policy white paper *Kulturens kraft – Kulturpolitikk for framtida* (Norwegian Ministry of Culture 2018, 15-16).

Cultural participation, then, is viewed as a democratic cornerstone, and to build and develop democracy, inclusion of demographically diverse participants has come to be vital. In a Nordic perspective, participation has been among the core objectives and concepts shaping cultural policy for the last 20-30 years, alongside notions such as democratization, diversity and inclusion (Haugsevje, Hylland and Stavrum 2016, 79). Illustrative of this is the focus found in the museum white paper *Framtidas museum* (Norwegian Ministry of Culture 2009b), which is still governing in the Norwegian museum sector. The white paper stresses that museums are to reflect the multicultural society and the diversity of perspectives and realities constitutive of it, both in employment, exhibition programming and visitor demographics (ibid. 123–124).

There is a similar emphasis on demographic diversity in international museum policy, with a particular focus on children and youth (see e.g. Haugsevje, Heian and Hylland 2015; Hylland and Haugsevje 2016), and, as is the case in *Framtidas museum*, on cultural participation among minority groups. Moving from Norway to the United Kingdom, an example that is illustrative of the latter focus is the cultural diversity policy directives implemented by Tony Blair's New Labour government after it came to power in Britain in 1997. Their directives, as Andrew Dewdney, David Dibosa and Victoria Walsh (2013, 12) note, were based upon the ideal that all individuals and communities should have equal access to and possibility to participate in arts and culture. A direct outcome "was that publicly funded arts organizations were required to monitor participation by race and ethnicity and performance indicators were generated against which funding was considered" (ibid. 12).

¹⁵ The report uses the Norwegian term "uenighetsfellesskap," which refers to a group of people with differing opinions seeking to solve a problem or a challenge through a common process (Iversen 2014, 12).

In such monitoring, and in commonly conducted surveys on participation and cultural habits, the active/passive divide is made relevant. Knowing which visitor segments are participating, i.e. who are active in the sense of attending, is useful to museums and policymakers alike. However, there are problematic aspects of discerning between those who are active and passive in the sense of attending and non-attending, as well as implementing the notion of participation as a fix-all in social inclusion and demographic diversity discourse. The New Labour policies, for example, received a fair amount of criticism from the left, who argued that the policies served to conceal social inequality by rendering it merely cosmetic rather than structural (Bishop 2012, 13). Such calls for the arts to be socially inclusive may represent a simplification of social structures and, as Bishop argues, a primary division in society between an included majority and an excluded minority. According to the discourse of social inclusion, the solution is simply to cross this boundary from excluded to included, i.e. from non-participant to participant (ibid. 13-14).

While some, then, may view “active” participation as a benign cultural political buzzword, it contains normative notions of what it means to take part in not only a given cultural activity, but in society. The concept of non-participants is also problematic because, as Gitte Balling and Nanna Kann-Christensen (2013, 67) note, people categorized as such can still be cultural participants in non-institutional settings, engaging in cultural practices that are not commonly viewed as cultural “activities”. In these critiques of established conceptualizations of passivity/activity, problems once again surface regarding what “counts” as participation.

Cultural Participation and Digitization

In *Kulturutredningen 2014*, the problem is tackled by employing a relatively broad understanding of cultural participation:

Cultural participation encompasses [...] more types of activity than what is usually considered individual activity in a cultural political sense. To participate in cultural life does not only refer to playing an instrument, singing in a choir or to organize a cultural event, it also refers to being part of the arts and culture audience. Going to a concert, the theater or a museum, listening to an album, reading a book – all of these activities are part of the exchange of ideas, values and feelings that cultural life is made up of (Norwegian Ministry of Culture 2013, my translation).

Although cultural participation is largely limited to established practices or institutional settings in this report, groups typically understood as “passive” consumers, such as book readers or museumgoers are viewed as participants. However, they are not defined as *creative* participants and, as noted by Brita Brenna (2016, 40), creative participation is not discussed in the report until it touches upon the matter of digital technologies. Digital media and the internet have contributed to “new cultural forms of expression, new forms of creativity and participation in cultural life” (Norwegian Ministry of Culture 2013, my translation), the report states.

Similarly, in its more recent take on participation and digitization, *Kulturens kraft – Kulturpolitikk for framtida* ties digital technologies to “creative initiatives and new ideas” (Norwegian Ministry of Culture 2018, 49, my translation). However, the white paper also relates digitization to a general notion of cultural participation, stating that digital technologies may be used to disseminate art and culture in new ways, thus facilitating “a not yet fully realized potential for cultural use and cultural participation in the population” (Norwegian Ministry of Culture 2018, 40, my translation). The white paper goes on to argue in favor of the (seemingly instrumental) importance of tying together analog and digital forms of cultural expression, so that use of digital culture may also lead to increased use of all forms of culture (ibid. 40).

The emphasis found in these two cultural policy documents are, albeit to varying degrees, symptomatic of both the active/passive divide and the instrumental role attributed to digital technologies in much of the literature on the participatory turn. Generally, such literature differentiates between “passive” cultural participation (such as mere museum attendance) on one side, and active and creative participation (often expressed through digital projects) on the other (Brenna 2016, 40). As is the case in *Kulturens kraft – Kulturpolitikk for framtida*, digital technologies tend to be viewed as instrumental tools to facilitate cultural participation, not only in digital environments, but also with traditional, analog forms of expression. These ideas, as we shall see, are also present in the museum sector.

1.3. Museum Perspectives: Polysemic Notions of Engagement

Museum scholars continuously highlight the importance of participation (e.g. Simon 2010; Runnel and Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2014; Brenna 2016; Knudsen 2016; McSweeney and Kavanagh 2016; Noy 2016; Black 2018). In the last decades, theorization on museum participation has been vast and varied, linking the notion to a range of often-interrelated objectives and practices. These include – but are not limited to – strives toward creating museum relevance (e.g. Black 2005; Black 2012; Simon 2010; Nielsen 2015), social interaction, interpersonal or device centered interactivity (e.g. Heath and vom Lehn 2010; Simon 2010), as well as museum education and marketing efforts (e.g. Hooper-Greenhill 1994b; Hooper-Greenhill 2000, Elffers and Sitzia 2016).

Despite museum literature frequently employing the notion of participation, the term remains ambiguous. Are museumgoers participants by default, as suggested in *Kulturutredningen 2014*? Or does museum participation require specific forms or degrees of activity from those visiting? As early as 1970, Carole Pateman (1970, 1) declared the notion of participation near void of any precise, meaningful content, and as the term has come to be used more widely, it has been

further diversified. Today, the notion of participation encompasses various meanings and practical forms in museums, resisting clear-cut definitions. It is thus difficult to assert what participation really entails, and how it is generated (Brenna 2016, 36).

New Museology and Active Attitudes toward Participation

In museums, understandings of participation are tied to understandings of cultural participation, which, as we have seen, are also polysemic. Historically, cultural participation has taken on different meanings. As noted by Anna Elffers and Emilie Sitzia (2010, 39), some of these have come in the forms of institutional goals, such as seeking out and including more demographically diverse audiences, increasing the number of people visiting museum institutions, stimulating cultural education and bringing culture and museum content to local communities. In recent years, there has been a preferential shift in museums toward more active forms of participation. This shift is an international trend (ibid. 39-40), arisen in answer to the social, cultural and digital developments of the participatory turn. Also contributing to the turn toward active participation in museums are the ideals of new museology. Constituting a discourse on the political and social roles of museums, new museology calls on museums to engage with communities, be visitor-oriented and develop new styles of expression, leaving collection-centered museum models behind (ibid. 39-40; McCall and Gray 2014, 20-21).

Using a metaphor suggested by Michael A. Fopp (1997, 143), one could say that museums used to be like medicine: a pill that was beneficial for the cultural well-being of visitors, but which had a bitter taste and a side effect of drowsiness. Now, museums have grown to be enjoyable. The public, as Fopp notes, no longer has to hold their nose while taking their museum medicine, because the pill has been sweetened by a variety of measures, including marketing, catering and comfortable chairs (ibid. 143). Not the least, it has been sweetened by the participatory efforts constituting the current museum paradigm. Today, museums delegate decision-making power to their visitors in strives to balance power relations and to democratize and decolonize the museum institution. Museums offer possibilities for the visitors to contribute, redistribute, co-create and interact with, for instance, museum educators and collections.

Among those spearheading such efforts is Nina Simon, who in the influential *The Participatory Museum* (2010) offers detailed participatory techniques for cultural institutions. Simon effectively puts the active/passive divide to the forefront by urging museums to invite visitors to “actively engage as cultural participants, not passive consumers” (Simon 2010, i-ii). Advocating a perspective wherein participation is largely viewed as collaborative projects and social engagements, Simon regards museum visitors as potential creators, redistributors and remixers of content. Visitors should receive tools to contribute, share content and connect with

the institution and other visitors, she suggests, arguing that doing so will make them feel like engaged and respected participants (ibid. 3–4).

Answers given by Norwegian museum directors in a 2017 survey may illustrate that the “active” attitude toward participation maintained by Simon as a trait that is typical of the contemporary museum paradigm.

Active Attitudes toward Participation among Norwegian Museum Directors

The survey was carried out by the research project *Digitization and Diversity: Potentials and Challenges for Diversity in the Culture and Media Sector*. Between June and August 2017, the 131 leaders of Norwegian museums who were registered as members of the Norwegian Museums Association answered the anonymous, self-administered survey.¹⁶ The survey concerned their attitudes toward onsite and online audience participation and use of social media. It contained a series of quantitative Likert-scale questions, as well as open-ended questions providing some qualitative insight. After incomplete forms and responses from non-museum directors were removed, responses from 82 museum leaders (62.6% of Norwegian museum leaders) remained. The majority of the leaders (93.8%) were directors of museums of cultural history and art museums.¹⁷

Among the surveyed museum leaders, a clear majority thought of audience participation as important, both for achieving institutional strategic objectives and in terms of achieving audience satisfaction.¹⁸ When asked what they took audience participation to entail, most referenced the activity and activation of museum visitors as being central. Active attitudes toward participation were expressed in a number of ways, with some museum directors explicitly using the terms “active” or “activating”. One museum director stated, for instance, that participation entails “active participation from the audience, physically”, while another

¹⁶ Quotes from the respondents appear in my English translations.

¹⁷ 79% were directors of museums of cultural history, 14.8% were directors of art museums, and the remaining were directors of museums of natural history (3.7%), museums of photography (1.2%) and museums of archaeology (1.2%).

¹⁸ 79% of the directors found participation to be “fairly important” or “very important” for institutional strategic objectives, while 86.5% found audience participation to be a “fairly important” or “very important” means of achieving audience satisfaction. None of the museum directors responded that participation was “unimportant” or “somewhat unimportant” in achieving institutional strategic objectives, and 21% gave a neither/nor response. Similarly, no one responded that participation is “unimportant” in achieving audience satisfaction. Only 1.2% thought of it as “somewhat unimportant” in this regard, and 12.3% gave a neither/nor response.

defined participation as “all audience interaction that contributes to audiences being more than just passive receivers.” Some responses used phrasing that in other ways were characteristic of Simon’s “active participants,” for instance by speaking of audience involvement in exhibition development, and two-way communication between the museum and the visitor. Emblematic of these responses was the director who referenced Simon by name:

See Nina Simon. An engaged audience who experiences the museum as relevant and contributes to tell their stories, e.g. by providing objects, taking part in events or contributing to exhibition projects. Visitors who get in touch with each other and the museum staff. Visitors who ask questions and give feedback.

Several museum directors tied active participation, exclusively or in part, to the use of digital technologies and platforms. One director, for instance, equated participation with “activation of the audience and response to what we publish online”, while another thought a central aspect of participation to be “that the audience communicates with the museum, either when they are there or through digital channels”. A third director simply stated that participation entails “interactivity, physically and/or digitally”. Another museum director more expressly demonstrated the importance given to forms of participation that are overtly active, by noting that participation entails “that the audience, through dialogue with the museum, and by responding to what we have online and in DigitaltMuseum, is especially active and shows it”.

The museum directors who related the notion of audience participation to “mere” museum attendance (exclusively or in combination with active attitudes), were in a minority. These directors often expressed more active views on participation when referencing digital technologies. This pertained to using social media, or various forms of online feedback. Illustrative of these responses is the museum director who distinguished clearly between onsite and online participation, stating that “[...] in the museum, it is physical, that they show up. In terms of digital, I think actively, that you comment or like (not just passively register things)”.

Although about half of the museum directors surveyed (51.1%) answered “no” when asked whether their institution leaned on explicitly articulated understandings of audience participation,¹⁹ their own understandings of the notion expressed active attitudes. Construed as normative outlooks on the active/passive divide, these are perspectives in which passivity is

¹⁹ The remaining directors responded that their institutions adhered to understandings gained from collegial discussions (25.5%), seminars, courses or conferences (21.3%), policy documents (21.3%), museum literature (16%), and “other” (8.5%). Multiple answers could be given to this question.

frowned upon, and participation designates observable engagement. Two-way communication and cooperation between audiences and institutions, audiences' contribution to collection knowledge, social interactions and feedback through digital platforms are forms of participation frequently emphasized by the museum directors surveyed in this study.

The attitudes of these museum leaders are emblematic of how museums view the internet as a space for encounter (Laws 2015, 45). They are also emblematic of the current paradigm of "active" participation. One may wonder, however, whether active attitudes toward participation sufficiently consider aspects of the object/visitor encounter that are not interpersonal and communicative. Can the notion of participation be of use in understanding human-object relations that are not commonly understood as "active"? Can it be of use in understanding how objects, technologies and other nonhuman agents take part in and shape museum environments and the encounters within them? With regard to the first question, one answer given in the *Digitization and Diversity* survey illustrates that active attitudes toward participation may leave room for forms of participation that are not overtly active. This museum director, while concerned with audience feedback, also points to more inconspicuous forms of participation:

To give audiences engaging offers in museums, where they are also heard and given the chance to give feedback. Participation can be to listen, read, touch and feel, and to learn an activity or a craft.

The problem is not, necessarily, that active attitudes toward participation inherently exclude other understandings and practical forms of engagement. Nor is it that they fully ignore "non-participants." Simon, for example, references those who do not wish to participate (in the observably active ways maintained in the current paradigm). There will always be visitors not comfortable sharing their story, striking up a conversation with a stranger, or consuming content generated by other visitors (Simon 2014, 4). The point, according to Simon, is that institutional goals are additive rather than oppositional, and that participatory techniques serve as added tools "for the cultural professional's toolbox" (ibid. 5).

Participation as an Instrumental Means

Still, viewing specific forms of participation – namely "active" participation – as instrumental "tools" or means to achieve something specific is not entirely unproblematic. I am not arguing that museums cannot conduct participatory projects with the intent to gain specific outcomes. It is important for museum institutions to have a clear understanding of how participatory efforts can benefit both the museum visitor and the museum institution. Focusing on participatory efforts because, in the words of Simon, "visitors will like it", is, as she argues, to trivialize the

mission-relevance of participatory projects (ibid. 16). Or as Sonia Livingstone (2013, 24) puts it: “[O]ne does not participate, or seek to increase participation, merely for the sake of it”.

However, a side effect of viewing “active” participation as a tool is that the instrumental role of participation may come to be what ultimately matters. Considering the conditions of the participatory turn, participation has already become a goal in and of itself. Participation is, as Brenna notes, not only a “cultural mantra” but also a “parameter of quality” to which museums and policymakers measure the importance and value of whatever museal activity they are assessing (Brenna 2016, 37, my translations). Today, participation has become a means to achieve a range of museum rationales. Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Pille Runnel (2014a) offer a mapping of these co-existing rationales of museums as cultural, economic and public institutions. While Simon argues that museum objectives are additive, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Runnel (2014a, 40-41) emphasize that they may also be contradictory and conflicting.

As a cultural institution, the role of the museum includes collecting, preserving, interpreting and mediating content to the public. Following these rationales, there are many reasons for wanting audience participation, such as opportunities to make engaging exhibitions enriched by visitor input (ibid. 42). The driving force for encouraging participation changes when viewing the museum as an economic institution. Here, the main objective is monetary profit, and while the cost of organizing participation-centered projects may be high, participation can be profitable by attracting visitors and supporting marketing measures (ibid. 42-43). For the museum as a public institution, participation is politically-democratically motivated as museums become sites of engagement and mobilization through public campaigns or education efforts (ibid. 43-44).

Participatory efforts, which support cultural, public and economical museum rationales, contribute to the exploration and implementation of modes of visitor engagement that are congruent with the calls of new museology. But if the forms of participation considered to be important or relevant are homogeneous – in the sense of encompassing so-called “active” participation – museums may risk limiting their participatory exploration. As cultural and public sphere institutions, museums can be, as noted by Barry Lord (2007, 8), cultural accelerators, places for the creation and display of new and novel ideas. This requires that museums are open to diverse approaches and avoid static ways of thinking (ibid. 8). One may ask, then, whether discourse on participation in museums has stagnated, resting comfortably on an understanding of participation as an observable activity.

When speaking about participation as an instrumental means, I cannot go without mentioning perspectives in which digital technologies are viewed as participatory technologies, and the

examinations such perspectives may exclude. Digital technologies are frequently discussed in literature on museum participation, both as tools in the museum building and as grounds for dissemination of museum content in digital museum spaces such as apps, websites, social media or museum portals (e.g. Tallon and Walker 2008; Christensen 2011; Halpern et. al. 2011; Jensen 2013; Kidd 2016; Knudsen 2016; Valtysson 2017). Recurrent themes in discussions concerning digital technologies and participation are how new technologies can spark learning, interactivity, involvement or engagement both onsite and online.

There are, however, differences in attitudes concerning the value of onsite and online participation. The answers given by the Norwegian museum directors in the *Digitization and Diversity* survey illustrate this. When asked to rank advantages of audience participation onsite and online from “most” and “second” to “third most important”, the directors could choose from seven categories: the audience gains information, the audience gains social interaction, the audience learns something, the audience experiences something, the audience is inspired to make (repeat) visits onsite, the audience is inspired to make (repeat) visits online, and the museum reaches new audiences.

Regarding onsite visits (figure 1a), the three advantages most often found to describe both the “most” and “second most important” gains from audience participation by survey respondents, were that the audience learns something, that the audience experiences something and that the audience is inspired to make repeat visits onsite. In the “third most important” category, participation inspiring repeat visits onsite and participation providing experiences are again recurring among the top-three choices, alongside the institution reaching new audiences.

Comparing these answers to those given on online environments (figure 1b) such as apps, social media platforms and websites, there is a shift in priorities. Online, the three aspects most often found to be “most important” were that the audience gains information, that the museum institution reaches new audiences and that the audience learns something. The latter two aspects recur among the top-three advantages in the “second most important” category, alongside audiences being inspired to visit the onsite museum. Moving to the top advantages in the “third most important” category, inspiring visits to the onsite museum and reaching new audiences were again advantages frequently chosen, in addition to inspiring (repeat) online visits.

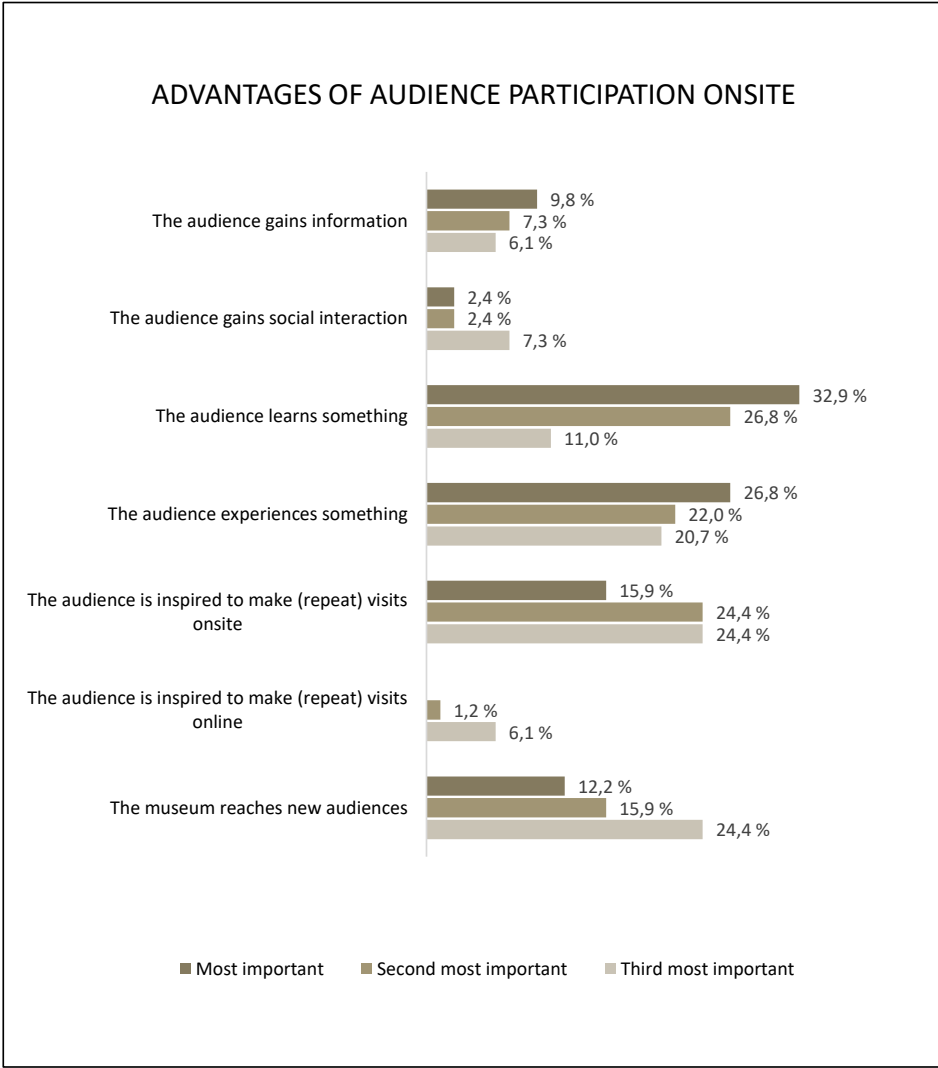


Figure 1a: Norwegian museum directors' ranking of advantages gained from audience participation onsite. The percentages make up 100% for each category of importance.

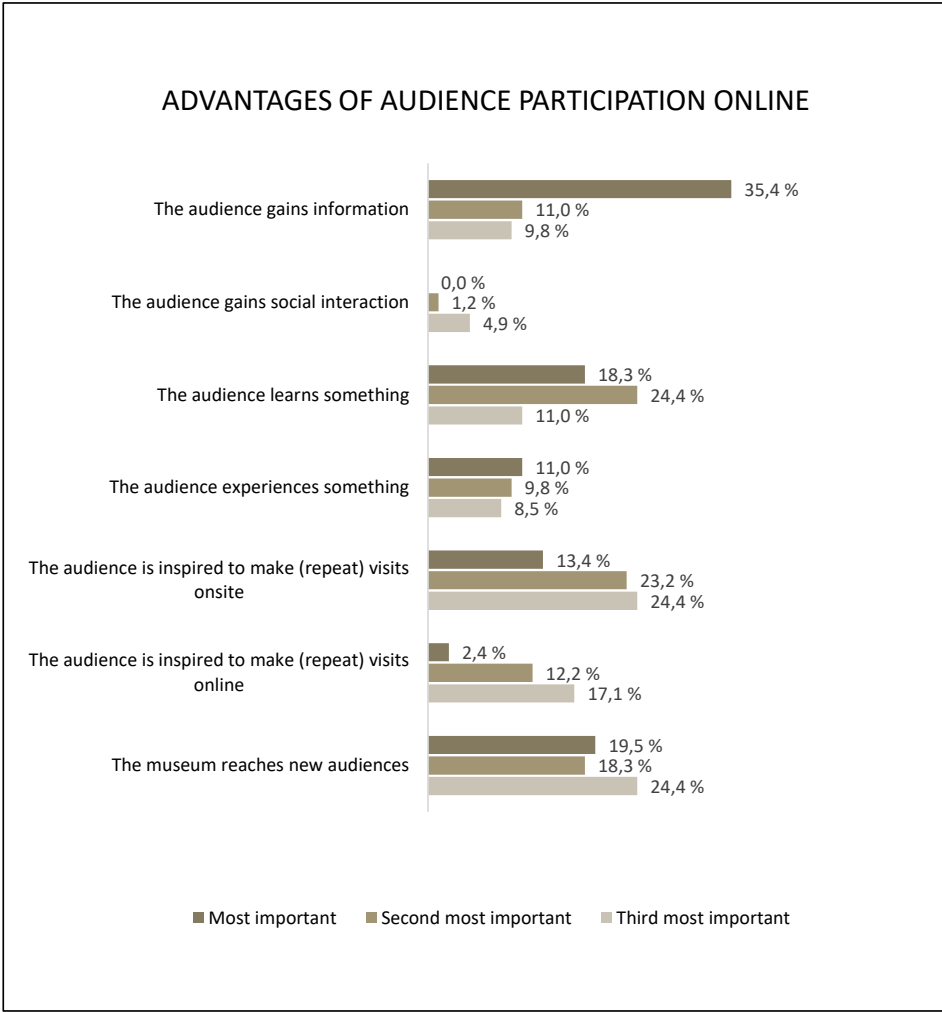


Figure 1b: Norwegian museum directors' ranking of advantages gained from audience participation online. The percentages make up 100% for each category of importance.

Overall, the survey shows that the museum directors generally found it important that onsite participation serves to facilitate learning, provide experiences and inspire return visits to the bricks-and-mortar museum. Online, however, the museum directors found it more important that participatory efforts lead to audiences gaining information, the museum reaching new audiences and the audience learning something. Furthermore, online participation inspiring *onsite* visits was more important for museums leaders than it inspiring recurring *online* visits. It was also more important that participatory efforts onsite sparked some form of (meaningful) experience for the audience, than audiences having some form of experiential gain online. Interestingly, social interaction through participation was not deemed particularly important neither onsite nor online.

The findings of the *Digitization and Diversity* survey can be read alongside the findings of a 2017 report made by the Office of the Auditor General of Norway, which reviewed efforts to digitally disseminate and facilitate cultural heritage collections in Norwegian museums, libraries and archives in the period of 2010-2015. The report notes that the social media platforms and websites of Norwegian museums tend to contain information about opening hours and activities in the onsite museum space, rather than efforts to disseminate and facilitate digitized museum collections (Office of the Auditor General of Norway 2017, 83–84). Overall, the findings of these studies point to museum professionals primarily viewing digital environments as information channels and platforms for communicating with visitors and inviting them the onsite museum. Digital platforms are to a somewhat lesser degree, it seems, considered as environments that may provide aesthetic experiences of museum content.

Similar perspectives can be traced in museum literature, where online participation is often regarded as a supplement to onsite visits and focus is on communication, discussion, sociality, collaboration and interpersonal interactivity (e.g. Schick and Damkjær 2013; Lotina 2014; Gronemann, Kristiansen and Drotner 2015; Laursen et al. 2017). This is characteristic of active attitudes toward participation, and one could argue that the somewhat narrow field of vision present in such attitudes leaves little room for expanding what “counts” as participation.

Participation, the Aesthetic Encounter and Museum Materialities

With regards to the complex interrelations of human perceivers, museum environments and digital technologies, it is challenging that active attitudes anchored in the active/passive divide dominate contemporary museum discourse. By weighting, for instance, interpersonal interaction, other relations may risk being put on the back burner. What about, for example, the complexities of individual experience in encounters with museum objects? In the case of Simon,

who tends to emphasize the social museum experience, she does make thorough mention of the importance of personalization, individual experience and personal fulfillment in participatory efforts (e.g. Simon 2010, 18, 33–84). Her perspective, however, can largely (though not exclusively) be read as a personalized means to a more social or “active” end. Simon writes, for instance, that “being treated as an individual is the starting point for enjoyable community experiences” (ibid. 39) and discusses, at one point, museum artefacts as relevant in participatory efforts not for their aesthetic value, but for their ability to spark conversation (see ibid. 127).

Arguably, the active attitude toward participation has its limits in terms of problematizing the relation between the museum visitor, the museum object and the onsite and online environment in a fundamental way. Museum objects, as Brenna notes, seem to be increasingly removed from a participatory discourse largely characterized by social relations (Brenna 2016, 49). Calling for new ways to co-theorize objects and participation, Brenna suggests the need for an object-based participation theory, where attention toward participation and attention toward materiality are combined (ibid. 50). Similar calls have been made in other fields, particularly in political philosophy and science and technology studies. Noortje Marres and Javier Lezaun note that “a proper consideration of the materials and devices of public participation seems overdue” (Marres and Lezaun 2011, 490; cf. Marres 2012). In a context of aesthetics, this thesis attempts to answer such calls.

The status quo is that museum objects and sociality have been separated and placed in different political and museal departments (Brenna 2016, 49). A similar separation, I argue, concerns participation discourse and discourse that concerns aesthetic museum encounters and the interrelations of museum objects and visitors. In-depth discussion of the material complexities and the relations between the museum objects, environments and visitors that take part in aesthetic encounters are not prevalent in participation literature. Conversely, these aspects and relations are more extensively theorized in literature that expressly addresses aesthetic experience and visitor-object relations, largely in the museum building, but, as of late, also in online environments. In such literature, materiality, embodiment and the status of the museum object also tend to be more problematized (e.g. Dudley 2010a; Dudley et al. 2012). Discussions of object engagements, materiality and aesthetic experience through digital technologies and online environments are especially present in literature on digitized heritage collections, museums as virtual spaces, remote visitors and the status of digital surrogate objects (e.g. Cameron and Kenderdine 2007; Parry 2007; Parry 2010; Taylor 2010; King, Stark and Cooke 2016; Kidd 2016; Kidd 2018). Literature on digitized cultural heritage increasingly understands museum visitors as embodied agents both onsite and online (Kidd 2016). While the agency of

the nonhuman entities and technologies taking part in these encounters are seemingly given less attention, perspectives do emerge, in which online environments are considered not only as pathways to physical interaction onsite, but to a different kind of experience in and of themselves (see e.g. King, Stark and Cooke 2016). Additionally, some museum theorists begin to view museums and visitors as technologically mediated and co-constructed through online platforms (e.g. Gronemann, Kristiansen and Drotner 2015).

While concerns of aesthetics, materiality and participation at times merge in museum literature (e.g. Kidd 2016; Kidd 2018), discourse on participation and discourse on museum materialities and aesthetics do not overlap to any great extent. There is arguably a discursive gap between digitally enabled “active” and social participation on one side and discussions of mediated museum materialities, embodied human agents and nonhuman agency on the other. This thesis attempts to merge a focus on participation and attentiveness toward the complexities and materialities of aesthetic encounters. A consideration of digital technologies not as inert, instrumental tools, but as participants which engender new realities and relations, may contribute to relevant, non-anthropocentric insight into aesthetic encounters with museum objects.

1.4. Art Museum Perspectives: From Individual Engagement to Collaboration

Art museums are relevant arenas for discussing participation in terms of the relations, materialities and technologies that constitute aesthetic encounters between human and nonhumans. In the visual art sphere, relations between artworks and those who experience them are continually addressed. Relevant in this regard, is that there are operational logics in art museums that distinguish them from other museums (Elffers and Sitzia 2016). Museums of contemporary art may work with living artists, who influence the forms of participation their work triggers. Artists may isolate themselves from the exhibition or be present (in one way or another) in the artwork, in workshops or artist talks. Additionally, autonomous and instrumental views on art also influence how art museums understand the notion of participation. Such factors, as Elffers and Sitzia (2016, 40) note, have contributed to make the participatory practices emblematic of the participatory turn less common in art museums than in, for example, science centers and children’s museums, which participatory efforts are more commonly associated with (ibid. 40; Simon 2010, 5). In the course of the last decades, however, art museums have become increasingly interested in the forms of participation tied to the current participation paradigm (Elffers and Sitzia, 40; Simon 2010, 5).

Mapping Art Museum Participation

Mapping the definitions by which art museums understand participation, Elffers and Sitzia (2016, 41–51) distinguish between perspectives of education, marketing, curatorship, and art and artworks. While marketing perspectives overlap with the economic museum rationales outlined by Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Runnel, one can place the remaining categories mapped by Elffers and Sitzia under the cultural and public sphere museum domains.

In museum education, participation is tied to museological ideals of democratization. Participatory efforts take the forms of visitor-centered and inclusive practices and aid the personal or collective development of visitors by activating them, providing meaningful educational experiences and creating visitor communities (ibid. 46–48). In marketing, participatory efforts serve to bring in sufficiently large numbers of visitors and diverse visitor segments, while providing relevant experiences (ibid. 48–51). From a curatorial perspective, the reach of participation may go beyond the onsite museum, as the curator focuses on creating, transmitting or challenging overarching stories or meanings, engaging visitors in long-lasting processes of reflection (ibid. 44–46). And in the realm of artists and artworks – the realm that most staunchly distinguishes art museums from other museums – participation has long been thematized. Modernist artists began to abandon some of their authorial authority when the interpretations of those experiencing the artwork came to be understood as an inherent part of it (ibid. 41–42). Illustrative of this perspective is Marcel Duchamp’s claim that “a work of art exists only when the spectator has looked at it” (Furlong and Gooding 2010, 23).

Debates on participation in the art sphere continue, with participation referring to a multitude of concepts and practices, ranging from engaging a single visitor in processes of meaning-making to physical engagement and social interaction that collectively engage multiple visitors (Elffers and Sitzia 2016, 42–43). Participatory art, an umbrella term for art that directly involves the audience, has contributed to open art museums to certain forms of participatory practices, such as discursive and dialogic projects (ibid. 42–43; Bishop 2012, 2).

Participation According to Participatory Art

Trondheim Art Museum’s *Participation. Without You There Is No Art* (January 22–May 7, 2017) is one example of an art museum embracing participatory art. According to a promotional text, the objective of the exhibit was to move beyond mere spectatorship and the traditional role of the distanced, “passive” museum visitor:

The role of the visitor at an art museum is traditionally a relatively passive one; a spectator looking at artworks with a certain distance. The exhibition *Participation* embodies a desire and an intention to lower the threshold for a wider audience to experience contemporary art. All the works [...] rely on audience participation. The works invite the spectators to take part and get involved, physically and practically, with an aim of encouraging reflection. The participation aspect of the exhibition is twofold: some of the artworks invite introspection and involvement on an emotional level. Others demand the spectator to complete the artwork by getting involved, physically or otherwise. (Trondheim Art Museum 2017)

While employing the active/passive dichotomy and frowning upon the “passive” side of it, the museum defines participation broadly: as various kinds of emotional, physical and practical visitor involvement with the exhibited works. Additional nuance is offered in the onsite wall text: “Even in front of a painting quietly hanging on the wall, we use ourselves when engaging with the work”, the text states, before asking whether it is “at all possible to face art in a passive manner?”.²⁰ Reviewers, however, argued that the exhibit failed to follow up on these questions. They called for the inclusion of works that do more to problematize human engagement (Bjerkan 2017) and for the museum to historicize and reflect on the artworks and the conventions they rely on (Borgersen 2017).

Also interesting in the context of this thesis, is how Trondheim Art Museum strives to broaden perspectives on what it entails to participate, while simultaneously adhering to the active/passive divide when defining the exhibit and the forms of engagement taking place in it. The museum includes introspection and emotional engagement, but emphasizes activity and visibility:

[The exhibited works] allows us to take an active part when encountering art. We become co-creators of the artworks, and suddenly we, the public, are visible in the exhibition space in a completely different manner.²¹

Works that exemplify the museum’s take on participation, as well as the breadth of the participatory works they exhibited, are *Over and Over, Again and Again* (2004) by Mariele Neudecker, Erwin Wurm’s *One Minute Sculptures*, and *Konsekvensanalys* (2016) by Bella Rune. Neudecker’s work consists of three fiberglass tanks placed in a row, each containing a landscape made from materials such as water and salt. When a visitor positions themselves in front of the first tank, their line of vision is directed through the remaining tanks, and the miniature landscapes form an interrelated whole. Wurm’s *One Minute Sculptures* is the

²⁰ Wall text in *Participation. Without You There Is No Art*, Trondheim Art Museum, 2017.

²¹ Wall text in *Participation. Without You There Is No Art*, Trondheim Art Museum, 2017.

collective title of several works that invite the visitor to perform various tasks. The visitor is presented with everyday objects accompanied by small drawings or written instructions of what to do. In *Shell* (2010), for example, the visitor is asked to be a sculpture: Using two large plastic tubs, they must crouch down in one tub while covering their head with the other. In Rune's *Konsekvensanalys*, a text on a wall asks the visitor to download and use an augmented reality app. When the visitor directs their phone toward the exhibited works in the museum, images and text appear on the screen, overlapping with the elements in the room.

These works exemplify how participatory art encompasses diverse forms, artistic strategies and subject matters: From Neudecker's exploration of landscape through technology and mediation, and Wurm's humorous-yet-critical displacements of everyday objects to Rune's augmented reality explorations of movement, encounter and modes of vision. A common feature, however, is their not-so-subtle emphasis on activation and co-creation, which are central aspects of participatory art. Social relations are also commonly thematized in participatory art (among these works, Wurm's *One Minute Sculptures* have the most overt social implications). The topic of social relations was especially present in the 1990s, which marked a participatory or social turn in arts, linking participation to various forms of collaborative practices. To contextualize this turn, I turn to two prominent voices speaking on the artistic interests in and practices of participatory art from different perspectives.

One of these belongs to curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud, who were among the proponents of participatory art in the 1990s. Informed by the impact of technological development on artistic production, he made an early attempt to describe common features of contemporary artistic practices. In his at-once descriptive and prescriptive theoretical framework – mostly developed in *Relational Aesthetics* (2002 [1998]) – he coins the term “relational art”, describing it as “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context” (Bourriaud 2002, 113). One can understand the ontological claim of relational aesthetics to be an expansion of the notion of art beyond the material object, by including the human relations tied to the production and reception of art (Miller 2016, 167). Social context is thus vital for Bourriaud, who argues that “the work of every artist is a bundle of relations with the world, giving rise to other relations, and so on and so forth, ad infinitum” (Bourriaud 2002, 22).

While Bourriaud champions participatory art in an attempt to emancipate artistic practices from object-centered and commercialized conceptions of art by emphasizing social relations, art historian and critic Claire Bishop takes a critical stance on both Bourriaud's conception of relational art and the broader interests of participatory art. She argues that Bourriaud fails to call

into question the quality of the relations he brings to the forefront. How are we to decide, she wonders, what comprises the “structure” of a relational artwork? Is it detachable from the subject matter of the work? Is it tied to its context? (Bishop 2004, 65). Bishop also questions the ethos of participatory art. Often, she argues, those working on participatory projects are praised for their authorial renunciation, as one views their “humble lack of authorship” (Bishop 2012, 23) as being democratic and ethically good. Participatory and socially engaged art, Bishop argues, has become near exempt from art criticism (ibid. 23, 25).

1.5. A Call to Move toward a Diversity Perspective on Participation

Without necessarily agreeing or disagreeing with Bishop’s critique as directed toward Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics, I argue that her critique as such is applicable to the tenets of the participatory turn. Bishop says, in critique of Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics, something that could also be said of the contemporary participation paradigm: “[...] all relations that permit “dialogue” are automatically assumed to be democratic and therefore good” (Bishop 2004, 65). Although, as we have seen, utopian and dystopian outlooks both characterize current participation discourse, it is the positive, empowering and democratizing potentials of participation – especially participation enabled by digital technologies – that persist across fields.

The parallels between Bishop’s critique of Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics and the notion of participation as it is broadly employed today also lie in a favoring of the active side of the active/passive dichotomy. What Bourriaud’s conceptualization of the “relational” in relational art entails, according to Bishop, is a form of (inter)activity that is viewed as superior to mere spectatorship, which is considered disengaged and passive (ibid. 62). Noting this, Bishop argues the consequence to be that the relational artwork is assumed to be “political in implication and emancipatory in effect” (ibid. 62). Similarly, participatory endeavors, within the current participation paradigm, are viewed as key in broadening visitor demographics and emancipating institutions and visitors alike from authoritative and collection-centered museum models. What I want to challenge here, is the devaluation of or lack of emphasis on encounters that are not typically considered participatory. The problem of the active/passive dichotomy employed in participation discourse is its reductiveness in upholding a simplistic opposition between active and passive forms of engagement, as well as its normativity in favoring the former.

As we have seen, participation activity biases have been pinpointed in web and social media research (Crawford 2009; Lutz and Hoffmann 2017), and voices critical of a one-sided emphasis on active participation in the museum sphere are now starting to be heard (Brenna 2016).

Leaving the active/passive dichotomy behind in favor of a notion of participation that considers the diversity of participatory relations enabled by digital technologies and mediations, allows me to discuss artworks that are not commonly perceived as participatory or relational. It also serves to further problematize the relations between museum visitor and museum object, between onsite and online environments, and between analog and digital modes of exhibition. The expanded notion of participation I suggest takes into account mediated techno-ecological relations and processes of non-linear causality. Moreover, it considers humans and nonhumans as agentic participants that shape the encounters they take part in. This understanding, I argue, may contribute to bridge the gap between participatory discourse on one side, and perspectives of aesthetics and digital object engagements on the other.

As mentioned in the introduction, my research question concerns how digitization contributes to diversify participatory relations in onsite and online museum environments. That is, how possibilities for participation brought on by digitization engender new relations or relations that differ from or expand on those found in exhibition contexts not hinging on the use of digital technologies. Needed in the coming case study analyses, then, are analytical tools anchored in a conception of relationality that accounts for the co-constituting roles of both human and nonhuman agents in an aesthetic encounter, including mediating environments and technologies.

Chapter 2

The Participation Nexus

A Framework for Analysis of Participatory Relations in Aesthetic Encounters

“[...] the materialist turn is an invitation to direct our attention once again to the material world; to plunge into its vibrant forms; to think afresh about the manifold ways human animals encounter, are affected by, respond to, destroy, rely upon and are generally imbricated with matter [...].”

Coole 2013, 468.

2.0. Chapter Introduction: Developing the Participation Nexus

In this chapter, I develop a conceptual framework, which I coin the participation nexus, and which I will apply in the case study analyses that are to follow. I use the Latin term *nexus*, because it describes both the core of something and that which ties something together: A point of connection that links entities to each other. The participation nexus is a relational network of theoretical concepts for the analysis of real-world entities and their entangled relations. Here, *nexus* refers both to the conceptual framework as such, and to the participatory relations in the encounters I will analyze. The nexus is theoretically anchored in a new materialist framework, informed by postphenomenology, to be applied in media aesthetic analyses from the perspective of a critical museum visitor. Accordingly, my theoretical-methodological approach is one in which the human perceiver is decentralized but not removed, and attention is paid toward the interrelations of human perceivers, works of art and modes of mediation.

In an art context, the term “*nexus*” is commonly associated with Alfred Gell’s art nexus, a network model of the social relations in which artworks are embedded. While drawing inspiration from Gell’s model, the participation nexus to be developed here differs from the former in that it articulates the roles of and relations between specific entities, technologies and environments, and the ways in which they mutually shape each other. As a critical museum visitor (Lindauer 2006), whose aim is to dissect and analyze the participatory relations of exhibition- and platform-specific mediation situations where the case study artworks take part, I need concepts to aid in my endeavor. I need conceptual tools that help articulate the

multidirectional relationality of the aesthetic encounter, that reveal the participatory contribution of entangled environments, technologies, artworks and visitors, and that highlight the experiential possibilities that occur through such entanglements. To this end, the participation nexus comprises the notions of *agency*, *affordance*, *atmosphere* and *affect*.

2.1. The Nexus Framework: Agency, Affordance, Atmosphere and Affect

Each in their own way, the participation nexus notions concern more-than-human relations and processes, and articulate various aspects of the complex interrelations between the human and nonhuman participants in aesthetic encounters. This chapter explicates their respective analytical contributions. Toward the end of the chapter, I proceed to discuss the practical, analytical application of the conceptual framework. First, however, I want to outline the content of each of the concepts in the participation nexus, and the reasons for their inclusion in it.

Outlining the Nexus

Agency is the most obviously relevant concept in the participation nexus. The very premise of the questions asked in this thesis concerns the participatory involvement of humans and nonhumans in aesthetic encounters and thus hinges on recent approaches that see agency as distributed (e.g. Coole 2013; Gries 2015; Bennett 2018) across a broad range of participants, human as well as nonhuman. Here, the notion of agency concerns the capacity to act or to affect acting in aesthetic encounters, i.e. the power to put something into motion, to transform, cause change, instruct, invite, suggest, interrogate, and so on. In the participation nexus, the concept demonstrates that such power does not exclusively belong to human perceivers, which, as I will return to, distinguishes it from Gell's art nexus and its preoccupation with the doings of human beings. Considering both human and nonhuman agency allows for discussion of what it means to act in an aesthetic encounter: Who and what are agentic participants, and under which conditions do they participate? Following the notion of agency with which I operate, an artwork is not only agentic insofar as it triggers aesthetic judgement or meaning-making. Rather, in mutually constitutive processes of becoming where the artwork exposes itself to visitors – and visitors expose themselves to the artwork – they shape each other.

Recognizing aesthetic encounters in museum environments, and museums as such, as material processes, this thesis is situated in a growing discourse that explores the contribution of posthumanist-oriented approaches and ideas of nonhuman agency to museological theorization (e.g. Cameron 2015; Cameron 2018; Bergsdóttir 2016; Bergsdóttir and Hafsteinsson 2018). Such exploration may help to reveal which agents and “constellations of relationships [which] get to matter” in museum environments, “and which do not” as Arndís Bergsdóttir (2016, 127)

puts it. But while the notion of agency is helpful to conceptualize the processes of mattering (in every sense of the word) that constitute the aesthetic encounter, it does not sufficiently account for the diverse ways in which humans and nonhumans shape each other. It emphasizes (for instance) that artworks contribute to shape museum visitors, but does not explicate the “doings” of the artwork per se. While agency is the principal tenet in the participation nexus, the notions of affordance, atmosphere and affect further elaborate on the agentic, co-constitutive roles of human and nonhuman agents.

Affordance refers to the potential world of action that opens when agents meet. The notion pertains to the agentic capacities that arise in specific encounters and emphasizes dimensions of use and usability. What, exactly, can artworks do, through the conditions of their materiality and the mediating environment? With whom or what can they do it? And what can visitors do under the mediating conditions of their own body and the environment through which they encounter the artwork? To view the aesthetic encounter as a nexus of participation is to consider the co-constitutive encounter between a museum visitor and a work of art as an exchange that is inextricable from the techno-ecological environment. The action-possibilities formed in these encounters are conceptualized through the notion of affordance.

Atmosphere, in turn, shines a light on the environment as a conditioning, permeating sensation in the aesthetic encounter. Atmospheres are embodied immersions in and attunements with material worlds. They are the sense of the characteristic manifestation of the constellation of agents in a given environment. The notion of atmosphere concerns the mood or character of an environment and the ways in which it may suggest certain emotions or actions. The analytical application of atmosphere allows for attention to be directed toward the diverse ways in which agents can be spatially and temporally present as they affect each other.

Affect, in the participation nexus, can be understood as the unstructured, constantly shifting potential of the mediating situation, emerging as corporeal intensities sensed in moving bodies. Feeling and emotions are inextricably tied to affective intensities and affective changes. To consider affect in an analytical manner, also reveals how the nexus-notions converge: The notion of affect contributes to articulate the atmospherically conditioned movements, transformations and processes of becoming that occur in relational encounters with art, where agentic participants afford each other virtual opportunities for change.

Explicating Agentic Flows: On the Choice of Nexus Notions

By combining the focus constituted by the notions of agency, affordance, atmosphere and affect, and by examining the interplay of perspectives rising from their combination, I hope to grasp

key dimensions of participatory relations as they form in mediating onsite and online museum environments. Here, affordance, atmosphere and affect contribute to account for and explicate some of the ways agency comes to be distributed and expressed in aesthetic encounters. As I will return to in the final chapter of this thesis, these are not the only possible or relevant analytical concepts one could use to explore agentic flows in museum environments. Still, I find affordance, atmosphere and affect to be particularly relevant in this study for three reasons.

The notions are relevant, first, because they articulate in more detail what it means for agency to be distributed as they explicate the agentic flows that may occur in the mediating situations I analyze. Second, because these notions, while relatively distinct, are also interconnected. Their conceptual relations make them productive tools in a nexus approach that draws on the analytical potentials and insights that stem from looking to both conceptual and material webs of connections. I have begun to suggest some of the relations between agency, affordance, atmosphere and affect in my outline above, and their interconnectedness will be made clearer throughout this chapter. Furthermore, ties between the participation nexus concepts have already been articulated in literature situated in a range of fields within the human sciences. Examples are conceptualizations of affective atmospheres (e.g. McCormack 2008, Anderson 2009; Anderson 2014; Bissell 2010; Edensor 2012; Shaw 2014; Stephens 2016; Michels and Steyaert 2017; Bille and Simonsen 2019), co-examinations of human and/or nonhuman agency and affordance (e.g. Withagen et. al. 2012; Withagen et al. 2017; Culpepper 2018; Weichold 2018) and co-examinations of agency and affect (e.g. Roberts 2012; Maxwell and Aggleton 2013; Hillis 2015; Maddison 2015). Examples also include studies that make use of several of the nexus notions, for instance combining the analytical potentials of affordance, atmosphere and affect (Falconer 2017).

The final reason I find affordance, atmosphere and affect relevant in explicating the flows of agency in museum environments, is that they recur in literature concerned with the more-than-human processes that unfold in museums. In museum contexts, notions of affordance have been thematized in studies on exhibition design (Allen 2007; Monti and Keene 2016), exhibit- and visitor interaction and meaning-making (Rowe 2002; Reich and Parkes 2005; Achiam, May and Marandino 2014), visitor needs (Mortensen, Rudloff and Vestergaard 2012), virtual exhibition environments (Andujar, Chica and Brunet 2012; Graf et al. 2015) and museum digitization (Tim, Pan and Ouyang 2018). As for notions of atmosphere and affect, they are used – often in combination – to examine the role of the exhibition environment in visitor experience as well as the moods, emotions and sense of presence engendered by exhibition design and museum objects appearing in curatorially staged constellations (see e.g. Turpeinen 2006; Forrest 2013;

Turner and Peters 2015; Bjerregaard 2015; Wiil 2015; Thobo-Carlsen 2016; Madsen and Madsen 2016; Madsen 2017).

Both in and outside of museum contexts, there are variances in how theorists approach, understand and conceptualize agency, affordance, atmosphere and affect. The principal tenet in the participation nexus is, as mentioned, a notion of agency as dispersed among a range of entities. Here, I look to new materialism and postphenomenology (as well as postphenomenological readings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty) to articulate this conception of agency. As for the remaining concepts in the participation nexus, I look to theorists whose articulations of affordance, atmosphere and affect may be read as further explaining agentic distribution in aesthetic encounters. Theorists who have either originated the terms or prominently contributed to their development in the last decades influence my understanding of these notions. When it comes to affordance, I draw on the work of James J. Gibson (2015 [1979]), who coined the neologism of affordance in his ecological theory of visual perception; and when it comes to atmosphere and affect, I draw on the works of the philosophers Gernot Böhme (1993; 2000; 2013; 2017) and Brian Massumi (1993; 1995; 2002; 2014; 2015), respectively.

In what follows, I am additionally informed by theorists who offer updated or supplemental perspectives on the nexus notions, particularly as they pertain to mediation and digital technologies. Such perspectives are helpful, as I set out to articulate understandings of agency, affordance, atmosphere and affect that will hopefully be fruitful in case study analyses that aim to uncover how digitization may contribute to diversify participatory relations in aesthetic encounters.

2.2. Agency

The traditional way of understanding the encounter between a museum visitor and an exhibited museum artefact is as a relation between a human agent and an inert material object. The encounter is the moment the object is perceived and sensorially experienced by a visitor, and a common question in this regard is how the visitor may be provoked, bored, educated or inspired by the exhibited object (Dudley 2010b, 3). Is it a result of contextual information, exhibition design and the visitor's own interpretation? Is it tied to their sensory engagements with the material thing? It may well be a combination of these factors, because museum artefacts are not alone. They exist as interactions with visitors, with other objects and with the museum environment. Visitor experience hinges on navigation through curatorial narratives and user interfaces, made up by display technologies and contextual information, as well as the mediated object, the mediating situation and culture it is part of, and the visitor's subjective response to it

– which is also culturally and socially embedded. When all these factors shape the aesthetic encounter, one may ask: Is the human perceiver the only agent in it?

In the participation nexus, agency is granted to both humans and nonhumans. More precisely, agency is distributed among, for instance, human perceivers, artworks, technologies, mediums, structures and institutions, all of which affect the relations they are part of. To account for this concept of agency and what it contributes in the analyses of aesthetic encounters, I first want to note how it differs from more traditional conceptualizations.

Traditional ideas about agency and matter rest on the work of René Descartes and on dualisms of mind and body, and human and object. Descartes's seventeenth century definition of matter as a substance extended in space, constituted by its physical properties, is the basis for modern notions of nature as measurable, quantifiable and, notably, inert (Coole and Frost 2010, 7). In this mode of thinking, material objects are only put into motion through encounters with external forces, according to a linear logic of causation. Distinguishing human subjects from passive matter, modern philosophers have in various ways theorized human self-awareness, generally regarding humans as autonomous agents capable of self-movement, with the power to manipulate material objects and thus dominate their environment (ibid. 7-8). Alongside the development of Cartesian thought, museum practices of collecting, curating and exhibiting have advanced, and to some degree, such practices remain influenced by Cartesian dualisms through modes of classification and visual ordering, and through logics in which visitors are thought of as individual, autonomous subjects (Cameron 2015, 19).

The traditional understanding of agency expresses, following Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (2010, 8) “an ethos of subjectivist potency”, which new materialism criticize, and from which the conceptualization of agency in the participation nexus differs. My departure from traditional understandings of agency is tied to my critique of the anthropocentric activity bias in the current participation paradigm. When focusing on the “active” participation of human visitors, one risks devaluating forms of participation that are not overtly active and overlooking the participatory roles of nonhumans. One risks not detecting the diverse range of forces that are at work in and around human bodies (Bennett 2010) and homogenizing what it means to participate.

An examination of participation in museum environments would thus do well to consider what Sara Ahmed (2010, 30) describes as “the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds, and the drama of contingency, how we are touched by what we are near.” If, as I suggest, one can understand participation as relations between co-constitutive human and nonhuman agents, unfolding as processes of non-linear causality, it is still relevant to ask questions of how museum visitors may experience exhibited artworks and engage in affective

relations with them. One way to seek out answers is to scrutinize how artworks, mediating technologies and environments are acting out their “touching” of not only visitors, but of each other. To understand participation as human and nonhuman agents relationally taking part in techno-ecological environments, one must disentangle “the messiness” (ibid. 30) of these relations. Before attempting to do so in the analysis part of the thesis, I first want to define what relationality entails in this context and account for the status of human and nonhumans as agentic participants.

Speaking of Art and Agency

Speaking, as I will do, about art and agency, I want to briefly pick up on the theorization of Alfred Gell and his take on nonhuman agency in *Art and Agency* (1998). Gell’s aim is to create an anthropology of art tied to the social-relational matrix in which artworks are embedded, taking as his point of departure that art has no intrinsic nature independent of its relational context (Gell 1998, 7). In short, Gell attributes agency to persons and things that initiate “events caused by acts of mind or will or intention, rather than the mere concatenation of physical events” (ibid. 16). He argues that art objects “never emerge as agents except in very specific social contexts” (ibid. 17), which is the crux of the matter. Artworks, for Gell, are “not ‘self-sufficient’ agents, but only ‘secondary’ agents in conjunction with certain specific (human) associates” (ibid. 17). Gell distinguishes between “primary agents” (intentional beings) and “secondary agents” (artefacts such as artworks), “through which primary agents distribute their agency” (ibid. 20).

With this distinction, Gell has been criticized for both doing too much and not quite enough with objects (Chua and Elliott 2013, 13). There are those who claim that Gell takes object agency too far, arguing there to be a fundamental difference between what human beings think an object is capable of doing, and what an object can actually do (Morphy 2009). Others note an inclination toward anthropocentrism: That people and their intentions remain Gell’s primary reference points (Miller 2005), and that he fails to revise commonsense notions of things and persons (Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007). Here, I am aligned with those wanting the primacy of human agency to be challenged further than what is the case in *Art and Agency*.

There are, however, similarities between Gell’s art nexus and the participation nexus. The naming of the latter is both a nod to the inspiration provided by the former and a declaration of independence from it, marking a different kind of theorization on the encounters human beings have with art. Let me start with the similarities. The participation nexus, like Gell’s art nexus, takes artwork encounters as its point of departure and views agency as relational and context-dependent, as opposed to classificatory and context-free. Like the art nexus, the participation

nexus is concerned with the fleeting contexts and predicaments in which agency may be attributed to both human and nonhuman entities. However, unlike the art nexus, the participation nexus takes the mediating conditions of the techno-ecological environment of the encounter into consideration. It broadens the scope of examination beyond social relations, while not excluding the role of sociality. The participation nexus also dethrones the “primary” human agent, without removing human agency from the equation.

Indeed, human beings are considered participating agents and their role in the aesthetic encounter an important one to analyze. However, in both onsite and online art museum environments, there is more at play than the agency of the visitor. Namely, the techno-ecological processes of mattering and mediation in which the visitor and the artwork are entangled. By analytically exploring aesthetic encounters as constituted by processes that extend human agency, the participation nexus aligns with emerging demands in posthumanist-oriented approaches to decenter the human agent traditionally thought of as sovereign and autonomous.

Art and Distributed Agency: A New Materialist Perspective Informed by Postphenomenology

Calls to decenter human agents stem from the realization that humans are entangled in arrays of networks (technological, social, economic etc.) (Wolfe 2010, xv). This entanglement leads to an “augmented relationality” (Thrift 2008, 165) between technology and biology. Their constant companionship makes it apparent that new media technologies may shape and engender relations, and reduce, regulate, control and exploit them (Hörl 2016, 96). This makes questions of relationality increasingly relevant. Addressing the multidirectional agency at work in aesthetic encounters is important for understanding participation as emerging from (and as) the synergies, co-operations and entanglements of human and nonhuman entities in a techno-ecological mediating environment. Seeking to understand the human agent as always embedded, embodied and relational, constituted by, constitutive of and constantly evolving with multiple forms of life and technologies (Wolfe 2010; Nayar 2014; Braidotti 2016), the participation nexus is built on a new materialism influenced by postphenomenology.

The former is helpful to articulate the active aspects of matter and processes of mattering. In a new materialist perspective, matter is not passive and inert, put in motion by external agents (as it continues to be in Gell’s framework). Instead, matter is considered agential, vibrant and dynamic, containing its own forces of transformation (Coole 2013, 453). This is not to say that new materialists (necessarily) ascribe things with something akin to consciousness. Certainly, my perspective is one that accepts the idea that only human beings “reflect deeply upon mortality and the place of the human estate in the cosmos” as William E. Connolly (2013, 400)

puts it. There is a fundamental difference, then, between human beings and, for instance, a work of art. This, however, does not mean that an artwork is inert.

A work of art is an agent whose generative powers are tied to the ways in which the artwork generates meaning, but also to how it engenders novel modes of being (Rosiek 2018, 32) through its material presence. Aesthetic encounters with art must thus be understood in terms of both meaning and matter. The materiality of art engenders and shapes the discursive, and vice versa: Through discourse, one can make sense of matter (Golańska 2017). Analyzing aesthetic encounters with works of art in a new materialist perspective, where the agentic, generative forces of matter are recognized, opens the possibility to analytically approach the *work* of art as such (Bolt 2004; Golańska 2017). That is, how art *works* as material processes characterized by doings. The artwork affects, transforms, instructs and so on. While a more traditional notion of an artwork considers it a passive, inert object, as something which serves as a vehicle for the ideas of the artist, a new materialist perspective acknowledges that “matter as much as the human has responsibility for the emergence of art” (Bolt 2012, 6), as Barbara Bolt puts it. New materialism shifts the analytical attention beyond the representational functions of the artwork, toward its creative forces and processes of material becoming (Golańska 2017).

When examining such processes, a relevant consideration is the entwinement of phenomena that in a historical perspective have been classified as distinct (Coole 2013, 453-454). For instance, when an artwork is digitized and depicted on a laptop screen in the form of a photographic image, agency is dispersed in the laptop, the mediated artwork as such, the photograph of it, the digital interface and the online visitor. Relevant questions in this regard are how the agency of the artwork is affected by the agency of the formats and forms through which it is mediated, and how the aesthetic sensibilities of the visitor are directed by the mediated materiality of the artwork and the agency of the interface.

Considering agency as dispersed across diverse networks, entities and processes, makes it possible to identify forms of agency that move beyond anthropocentric perspectives and challenge traditional classifications and dualisms still present in the museum sphere. Rather than viewing subjects and objects as pre-given entities that merely come to engage in relations with one another, my perspective acknowledges that these agents “are what they are by virtue of the way in which they realize their existence in their world”, as Verbeek (2005, 163) puts it. Concurrently, the world of human beings – in this case the artworks and surrogate objects they encounter and the onsite and online environments they move through – “is what it is by virtue of the way in which it can manifest itself in the relations humans have to it” (ibid. 163). Following Verbeek, the participation nexus maintains a postphenomenological stance that does not

construct a connecting line between distinct subject and object poles but allows these poles to emerge from their connection. When analyzing the relations that constitute artwork encounters, it is nonetheless helpful to understand them through notions of “visitors” and “artworks”. But what cannot be forgotten is that these entities are already entwined in the moment a relation between them exists (ibid. 163-164).

Existing in an always-entwined relation to their environment, the only means a human being has of identifying themselves and the world around them is their immediate bodily perception, which, following Merleau-Ponty, is the horizon of human experience (e.g. Merleau-Ponty 2014, 84, 147, 244). Here, my postphenomenological understanding of embodiment is indebted to Merleau-Ponty (cf. Aagaard 2017, 526) but also to recent readings of his work which emphasize that humans participate in a distributed system of agents that stretches beyond the human perceiver (Hoel and Carusi 2018). This system – or nexus, as I would have it – consists of entities with their own relative autonomy and agency, which the perceiving body is not in full control of (ibid. 61). The human perceiver – in this case: the museum visitor – is thus part of a distributed system of diverse and entangled bodies, environments, technologies and symbolic systems that shape each other (ibid. 62). With this in mind, case study analyses can begin to consider the diverse ways in which mediation guides perception.

Moving from an “Ethos of Subjectivist Potency” to an Ethos of Diversity

Relevant to my understanding of distributed agency, is the mutuality in the relation between the human perceiver and the world, and what Merleau-Ponty refers to as a “double belongingness” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 137) of the body. The body is both sensing and being sensed, both subject and object. Merleau-Ponty’s example of his two hands touching each other, alternating between touching and being touched (ibid. 141-142, 147-148) illustrates this. This reversibility, as Hoel and Carusi (2018, 55) note, is made possible in the gap between “toucher” and “touched”. Temporally and spatially, these experiences do not fully coincide, and “touching” and being “touched” can only be defined as experiences “in their divergence from each other” (ibid. 55). The perceiving body is a co-constitutive part of continuous processes of divergence and differentiation, engendering “specific dimensions of a lived environment with a particular range of possibilities of actions, interactions and perceptions” (ibid. 55-56).

The participation nexus places analytical focus on the particular and diverse range of possibilities within a given mediating situation. Rather than an anthropocentric “ethos of subjectivist potency” (Coole and Frost 2010, 8), an ethos of diversity shapes this analytic focus. I direct attention toward the diverse range of participants and the diverse ways in which they participate. I do so, because diversity has an ontological significance (Jensen 2007, 199). As the

work of Merleau-Ponty indicates, viewing subjects as self-contained may lead to a self-referential morality (ibid.). When discarding the “ethos of subjectivist potency” (Coole and Frost 2010, 8), a perspective opens where value is not reserved for certain “supreme beings” (Jensen 2007, 199-200), but is understood as expressions of relations between diverse agents.

2.3. Affordance

While the notion of (distributed) agency is the underlying current in the participation nexus, the notion of affordance surfaces as an expression of specific agentic capacities. Coined by psychologist James J. Gibson (2015 [1979]) as part of his ecological theory of perception, affordance pertains to the potential contribution of a given participant in the encounter with another. Ideas of nonhuman agency – especially those containing questions of what technology does to users – are indebted to Gibson’s notion of affordance (Bucher and Helmond 2018, 242; Latour 2005, 72). Nonhuman agency, as Latour notes, refers to the diverse ways that nonhumans are able to “authorize, allow, *afford*, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on” (Latour 2005, 72, my emphasis). These abilities hinge on reciprocal relations, because affordance, in Gibson’s words, refers to “the complementarity of the animal and the environment” (Gibson 2015, 119). Affordances are not constituted by the animal alone, or by the environment alone, but by the interplay between them. Thus, the notion of affordance arguably carries with it a perspectival character of being, permeated with an underlying idea of agency.²² Notably, however, Gibson did not offer any in-depth account of what agency entails in his theoretical framework. Still, I maintain that his general conceptualization of affordance is congruent with ideas of distributed agency, because it both considers how human and nonhuman entities invite (but not cause) action and behavior (Withagen et al. 2012) and highlights the participatory role of environments.

Affordances as Virtual Possibilities for Action

It is possible to read quite a lot into the notion of affordance, as it is characterized by elusiveness (Webster 2002, 43) as well as contestation tied to its epistemological and

²² The reciprocal relation constituting affordance resonates with the Merleau-Pontian articulation of the ambiguous role of the body in our experience (as both subject and object). Affordance, as John T. Sanders puts it, “encapsulates [...] both the necessary perspectival character and the primitive meaningfulness of the world, and thus makes its contribution to the program that is most closely associated with Merleau-Ponty” (Sanders 1993, 298).

ontological status (Dohn 2009, 152). One reason is that Gibson's significant accounts of affordance were both brief and limited in number (Webster n.d.; Webster 2002, 44-49).²³ Still, the basic aspects of affordance are straightforward:

If a terrestrial surface is nearly horizontal (instead of slanted), nearly flat (instead of convex or concave), and sufficiently extended (relative to the size of the animal) and if its substance is rigid (relative to the weight of the animal), then the surface *affords support*. It is a surface of support, and we call it a substratum, ground, or floor. (Gibson 2015, 119)

Affordances arise from properties, such as size, rigidity and weight, but one must not confuse affordances with properties as such. Affordances refer to the physical-geometric properties of the environment and everything in it, and the environment's relation to a particular species or individual and their behavior. A floor is "stand-on-able" for "quadrupeds and bipeds", as Gibson puts it, and also "walk-on-able and run-overable", but not "sink-into-able like a surface of water or a swamp" (ibid. 119). The affordances of the environment establish the actions and consequences that are possible for a specific animal in their encounter, and the environment constitutes numerous and diverse affordances for numerous and diverse animals: A floor affords different possibilities for a person and a fish.

While affordances refer to the possibilities of an environment, they do not cause specific behaviors to occur. Actions are not caused or elicited by stimuli, they are a means to utilize possibilities, and affordances contribute to constrain, control or invite behavior (Reed and Jones 1982, 411; Withagen et al. 2012, 252). In this sense, affordances are opportunities for action that are at once objectively present and relational. They are not only conceptual possibilities for action, but something that exists in the world (Dotov, Nie and de Wit 2012, 31). And because they are constituted by the properties of an environment, affordances exist independently of the agent that brings about their actualization. Simply put, a particular tree will afford climbing to a squirrel, regardless of there being a squirrel around (ibid. 31).

Employing updated Perspectives on Affordance Theory

Focusing on the relation between environments and animals, Gibson strives to understand what it is about the environment that allows animals (including human animals) to directly perceive

²³ Another reason is that the notion of affordance grew from Gibson's approach to perception, which departed from standard (dualistic and causal) understandings of environment-animal relations (Heft 1989, 1, 6), and was developed in the context of an ongoing dispute between cognitivist and ecological traditions of psychology (Dotov, Nie and de Wit 2012, 37).

it. As a result, his theorization tells us more about the environment than the animal (Dotov, Nie and de Wit 2012, 31). Moreover, Gibson's account of affordance is most readily applicable to features of the ecological environment with species-specific and transcultural significance, and theorists disagree on the analytical application of affordance theory on features that are significant only in a particular sociocultural context (Heft 1989, 1).

As Gibson's framework may not be immediately applicable to the techno-ecological environments I examine in this thesis, updated insight on the relevance of affordances on digital technologies and sociocultural contexts is necessary. Helpful in this regard are Taina Bucher and Anne Helmond (2018). Mapping the ways media and communication theorists have (re)conceptualized the notion of affordance, they make a relevant point: That while all conceptualizations of affordance build on Gibson's theorization, they differ with regards to where and when affordances materialize and what affordances actually afford. For example, while Gibson locates affordances in terrestrial surfaces, theorists who focus on digital interfaces sometimes view affordances as properties of the technological design (see Norman 1999). Here, I follow Bucher and Helmond in adhering to a "relational and multi-layered approach to affordances" (Bucher and Helmond 2018, 242-243), which avoids reducing affordances to properties, and focus on their multidirectionality. Hence, I consider both what technology does to humans and what humans do to technology (cf. *ibid.* 242).

A multilayered approach to affordances entails examining whose (whether human or nonhuman) action possibilities come into play and "how those action possibilities come into existence by drawing together (sometimes incompatible) entities into new forms of meaningfulness" (*ibid.* 243). In this regard, I situate the human perceiver in a broader sociocultural and eco-technological context than the Gibsonian animal. The participatory relations afforded in onsite and online encounters with artworks are recognized as fleeting and dependent on factors that are not limited to the surfaces of the terrestrial environment, but include mediation, cultural and social norms, and visitor's expectations and perceptions.

Perceived, Hidden and Expected Affordances

Another updated, relevant approach to affordance theory is Donald Norman's (1999) notion of *perceived affordance*. Situated in the field of design studies, Norman laments designers' misuse of Gibson's concept, noting that designers think that by placing

an icon, cursor, or other target on the screen, they have added an "affordance" to the system. This is a misuse of the concept. The affordance exists independently of what is visible on the screen. Those displays are not affordances; they are visual feedback that advertise the affordances. (Norman 1999, 40)

While acknowledging that equating the visible signage of the affordance with the affordance as such is a misuse of Gibson's notion, Norman also admits that "affordances are of little use if they are not visible to the user" (ibid. 41). This leads to him coining the concept of perceived affordances. That is, what end-users perceive to be possible actions. Perceived affordances emphasize that interfaces have the power to encourage and constrain certain action through their design (Bucher and Helmond 2018, 236). Also relevant in this regard, is William Gaver's (1991) concept of *hidden affordance*, which refers to affordances that are not immediately perceptible, because there is no available information pointing to them. Hidden affordances must be "inferred from other evidence" (Gaver 1991, 80), for example through actions that make them appear. On a website, for instance, hidden affordances may be revealed when visitors perform a mouse-over action (Bucher and Helmond 2018, 237).

In this thesis, the notions of perceived and hidden affordances are relevant because they contribute to articulate the possible discrepancy between what museum visitors perceive as possible and what is actually possible in both onsite and online mediating situations. In the participation nexus, I view such affordances in light of the social norms that are prevalent in museum environments and which dictate (to some degree) how visitors should behave, or how they think they should behave. For example: If an artwork is not enclosed by a fence or display case, the "touchability" of the object is, strictly speaking, an affordance in the Gibsonian sense. But the visitor might not perceive it as such, because the social and cultural conventions of museum environments usually inhibit visitors from touching exhibited objects. Similarly, if museum visitors are allowed to touch the exhibited objects, the affordance of touchability may appear hidden (albeit in plain sight), because visitors are unaccustomed to this possibility. Hence, possibilities for participatory relations hinge on the interplay between affordances and social and cultural conventions.

Participatory possibilities are further complicated with the digital mediation of artworks, and in that regard, it is relevant to speak of *expected* affordances. Following Peter Nagy and Gina Jeff, there is a need to better incorporate "the material, the mediated, and the emotional aspects of human-technology interaction" (Nagy and Jeff 2015, 2). What I will refer to as expected affordances emerge between what Nagy and Jeff summarize as visitors' "perceptions, attitudes, and expectations; between the materiality and functionality of technologies; and between the

intentions and perceptions of designers” (ibid. 5).²⁴ It is imperative to consider the action possibilities that arise in onsite and online aesthetic encounters, but also the expectations and attitudes visitors have when entering these environments. Visitors “may have certain expectations about their communication technologies, data, and media that, in effect and practice, shape how they approach them and what actions they think are suggested” (ibid. 5), as Nagy and Neff note. Distinct expectations may also be tied to artworks and exhibits. What visitors expect when entering exhibits of neo-classical art and contemporary, participatory art, would likely differ. Similarly, expectations to a museum’s website and Instagram account would also differ. The notion of expected affordances highlights that the expectations of visitors shape artwork encounters and that visitors may approach the same artwork in varying manners, depending on the mediating situation.

2.4. Atmosphere

The action-possibilities of a mediating situation also hinge on atmospheres. Somber and playful atmospheres, for instance, invite different behaviors. Simultaneously, atmospheres stem (in part) from the behaviors they invite. Considering this seemingly paradoxical condition, what, one may wonder, is atmosphere really? Atmosphere refers to gas layers that surround the earth, but in everyday language, one uses the term to describe something akin to the character, mood or ambiance of an environment. This latter form of atmosphere is located at the level of sensation. It is also constituted by an openness that makes it difficult to fully grasp. Although this could be analytically challenging, atmosphere is also a fruitful expression of that which is, in the words of Arnfinn Bø-Rygg (2007, 20), “undetermined, [...] difficult or unspeakable” with regards to artworks and environments.

Atmosphere as Emerging from the Entwinement of Nexus Participants

In the participation nexus, the notion of agency establishes that agentic capacities are distributed in a range of co-constitutive agents, while the notion of affordance pinpoints the concrete action possibilities that arise when agents meet. Atmosphere, in turn, sheds light on the character or mood of a nexus of participatory relations, touching on the interrelated whole more than individual agents. Atmosphere ties the nexus together, as it emerges through the nexus

²⁴ I use the term “expected affordances” rather than Nagy and Jeff’s “imagined affordances”, though in reference to similar themes. I am hesitant to use “imagined affordances”, because “imagination” is a philosophically loaded concept and “expectations” may be a more accurately descriptive term.

environment and the participants in it. It emphasizes that ecological environments, technological configurations, systems, institutions and ideologies exist within ambiances or moods specific to them. Moreover, it highlights that these moods may affect the relations that constitute an aesthetic encounter.

To consider atmosphere is to acknowledge the importance of the environment in the museum experience, and to further examine the status of the participants involved in the aesthetic encounter. Museum objects are clearly important in museums, but a perspective that considers atmosphere must question whether they are the main media of museum experience (Bjerregaard 2015, 74). I have already detailed the fruitfulness of decentering the human perceiver in order to consider the agency of a broader range of participants in an aesthetic encounter. However, decentering the artwork may be equally important for such an aim to be fulfilled. To that end, the notion of atmosphere forces analytical consideration of how artworks and other participants are present in spatial constellations (*ibid.* 75-76), and how they affect and are affected by their environment (Böhme 2017, 40).

Atmospheres are conditioned by the flows of agency and affordances in a given environment, while simultaneously conditioning agentic forces and the actualization of affordances. To understand this multidirectionality, a brief look at Gernot Böhme's phenomenologically anchored ecological aesthetics is helpful. Central in Böhme's theorization is a criticism of perspectives that consider atmospheres to be internal states (Böhme 1993, 119). In that regard, he makes three claims that resonate with the new materialist, postphenomenologically influenced framework of this thesis. First, he posits that atmosphere is not anchored in a subject-object dichotomy, defining it instead as an intermediary concept. Second, he emphasizes that the human perceiver is always bodily and spatially situated. And third, he departs from the classical ontology of a "thing", according to which "form is thought of as something limiting and enclosing" (*ibid.* 121). What Böhme argues is that things also exert external effects, radiating into the environment, taking away its homogeneity and filling it "with tensions and suggestions of movement" (*ibid.* 121).

Böhme's notion of atmosphere resonates with the new materialist anchoring of the participation nexus, which emphasizes, as Coole notes, that "porous membranes, rather than fixed boundaries" allow systems and entities "to interact with and transform one another" (Coole 2013, 456). My use of the Böhmian conceptualization of atmosphere thus pushes it in a direction toward new materialism which Böhme is not commonly associated with. I believe it possible to consider his account of the external effect of "things" (which I understand to be both nonhuman and human entities) as demonstrating "porous membranes" (Coole 2013) at work.

With this in mind, I follow Böhme in understanding atmospheres as “spaces, in that they are ‘tinctured’ through the presence of things, of persons or environmental constellations” (Böhme 1993, 121). This entails a non-linear, non-hierarchical entwinement of agentic forces and affordances. Atmosphere is an “intermediate phenomenon” (Böhme 2013, para. 5). It is something both “thinglike” and “subjectlike”, and “something that proceeds from and is created by things, persons or their constellations” (Böhme 1993, 122). A new materialist perspective further emphasizes the multidirectional agency and processes of becoming that engenders atmosphere, understood as the characteristic manifestation of co-constitutive agents in a given environment.

On Atmospheres Online and the Challenges of Articulating Atmosphere

The character of atmosphere is tied to the aesthetic production of particular receptions (Böhme 2017, 39), which is central in curatorial practice. The curator chooses artworks that generate something – a concept or a certain sense of reality – that transcends each individual work (Bjerregaard 2015, 75). When a work of art becomes part of different exhibitions, the spatial constellation through which visitors meet the work changes, which again brings forth new atmospheres and new possibilities of experience. One can see, then, how onsite museum gallery rooms are “furnished” (cf. Gibson 2015, 71) with diverse agentic forces, affordances and atmospheres in ways similar to terrestrial environments. For instance, they may contain barriers closing off access to certain objects, and artwork arrangements that influence the spatial behavior of visitors (Tröndle 2014; Tröndle et al. 2014). But what of online environments? If atmospheres are “spheres of the presence of something, their reality in space” (Böhme 1993, 122), one may ask what constitutes online atmosphere, compared to its onsite counterpart.

Spatial metaphors tied to online environments (i.e. “cyberspace”) contribute to notions of how online visitors, in the words of Nishant Shah, “travel to a mythical land behind the interface, leaving behind their real bodies and having out of the worldly experience” (Shah 2012, 13). Here, however, I take as my point of departure an assertion that online environments may be considered actual, dimensional sites of mediation in which one can be present. Online environments, as Bucher and Helmond (2018, 243) note, are “composed of pathways and features in their own right”. They mediate interactions and relations between various parties, and serve as digital intermediaries, drawing together and negotiating between stakeholders with their own agendas (ibid. 243). In the Norwegian museum portal DigitaltMuseum, for instance, some of the stakeholders are the displayed objects, the visitors (end-users), the developers and the museum institutions that exhibit their digitized collections on the platform.

When analyzing digitized art as mediated through such online environments, one must acknowledge that the negotiations occurring in them may constitute conflicting agentic forces. The artistic expressions, positions and interests mediated through the digitized artwork are entwined with other positions and interests, which may not be artistically motivated. When articulating the atmospheres of online environments, one cannot, for example, only consider the photographic depiction of a given artwork and the atmosphere it exudes. It is equally important to consider the atmosphere of the interface. No two online environments are alike, though many of them use similar features. Social media platforms, for example, often utilize “likes” and hashtags (ibid. 243) but arguably have their own specific atmospheres.

For instance, one might experience the atmosphere of Twitter as hectic and contentious. It largely consists of continuous bursts of short statements, and, as Brian Ott (2017, 59, 61) notes, the platform environment privileges discourse that is simple, impulsive and uncivil, conditioning users to act impetuously. Conversely, one might experience the atmosphere of Instagram as peaceful and creative, as it structures its image content in orderly grid formats and encourages use of editing tools and filters. What emerges on Instagram is, following Lev Manovich (2017, 81), a specific aesthetic comprising scenes that are “visually perfect, emotional without being aggressive, and subtle as opposed to dramatic”. Instagram encourages “slowness, craftsmanship, and attention to [the] tiniest details” (ibid. 95). Comparing Instagram to the more fast-paced Twitter, then, illustrates how online environments may have very different atmospheres indeed.

While the experience of a given atmosphere may be striking, pinpointing its sources can be challenging. Acknowledging that atmosphere cannot be reduced to its simple parts is key in using the notion as an analytical tool. One can only attempt to articulate the character of an atmosphere²⁵ and to describe the agents that contribute to its emergence (Albertsen 1999, 8). Because atmosphere is tied to spatially and temporally situated experience and emerges as a sense of presence conditioned by bodily movement, it is ephemeral, unstable and difficult to grasp (Bjerregaard 2015; Madsen and Madsen 2016). When someone begins to search for the source of the atmosphere they experience, they might direct their attention toward the specific

²⁵ While atmospheres are, in part, “subjectlike” as Böhme (1993, 122) puts it, a group of people can discuss a given atmosphere and agree on its character if their aesthetic sensibilities are socioculturally similar. If they diverge too much, the individuals in the group may perceive differing atmospheres (Albertsen 2012, 70; Bille, Bjerregaard and Sørensen 2015, 34).

material properties of the individual objects that take part in the encounter. This, however, is not sole source of atmosphere. So, while considering atmosphere allows for the analytical spotlight to shine on the participating role of the museum environment, fully explaining atmospheric presence is difficult. Under scrutiny, the experience of it might slip away.

2.5. Affect

Grappling precisely with the instabilities, movements, multidirectional flows of agency and relational (ex)changes in and among the nexus participants in an aesthetic encounter is the last notion in the participation nexus: Affect. When Böhme (1993, 199) describes atmospheres as “affective powers of feeling”, he articulates a link between the notions of atmosphere and affect that he is not alone in making. Affect is a term that often finds its way into discourses on atmosphere, and vice versa. Notably, atmosphere has been a recurrent notion in academic focus on affect during the last decade, where it is often used to articulate individual moods or the accumulation of affect (Bille, Bjerregaard and Sørensen 2015, 35). Teresa Brennan (2004, 1), for instance, describes affect as what happens when the atmosphere of the environment “gets into” the individual.

In affect literature, the notion of atmosphere is often taken for granted, as Mikkel Bille, Peter Bjerregaard and Tim Flor Sørensen (2015, 35) note. Affect tends to be viewed as something “like” atmosphere, and atmosphere, in turn, is “rarely scrutinized as exactly that which shapes and is shaped by the affective presence that is under examination” (ibid. 35). This invites a relevant question, tied to my understanding of atmospheres as embodied immersions and attunements in and with material worlds – that is, as the sensed, characteristic manifestations of the co-constitutive agents in onsite and online environments. What, one may ask, is the affective presence shaped by and shaping such manifestations?

Maintaining the Openness of Affect

Concise conceptualizations of affect are a rarity, it is an abstract notion that is difficult to realize in language (Shouse 2005; Spinney 2015). Consequently, there are different usages and theoretical stances concerning affect, each with different theoretical and analytical implications (Gibbs 2012, 150). Among contemporary understandings of the term, three are prominent. Affect is generally theorized as 1) a field of pre-personal/pre-cognitive/pre-conscious intensity, 2) feelings, as this intensity registers in a sensing body, or 3) emotions, understood as sociocultural expressions of this felt intensity (Shouse 2005; McCormack 2008, 414). Here, I understand affect as largely pertaining to the first conceptualization: As an intensity, an

expression of change in capacity, which in turn may engender feelings and emotions. In this sense, affect is, as Eric Shouse puts it,

what makes feelings feel. It is what determines the intensity (quantity) of a feeling (quality), as well as the background intensity of our everyday lives (the half-sensed, ongoing hum of quantity/quality that we experience when we are not really attuned to any experience at all). (Shouse 2005).

While I largely view affect as such intensity, I also follow Derek McCormack in recognizing the analytical value of “attending to and through the differentiated nature of affectivity” (McCormack 2008, 414). First, because sharp divisions between differing conceptions of affect may be unproductive (Edensor 2012, 1105; Bondi and Davidson 2011, 595). Second, because maintaining the openness of affect allows the affectivity of atmosphere to be understood in ways that engage more-than-human relations and processes, while simultaneously directing attention toward how these relations and processes are potentially sensed in moving bodies (McCormack 2008, 414). This perspective will also contribute to remedy what Anna Gibbs (2012, 152-153) notes is the handicap suffered by the humanities as a whole when refusing to consider affect as something more than culturally constructed emotions and feelings, separated from bodies and materialities.

While affect concerns more-than-human processes of transformation, the ties between emotion and affect are still relevant when seeking to understand processes of affective change that involve the impact of artworks on museum visitors. Here, I largely lean on the theorization of prominent affect theorist Brian Massumi (1993, 1995, 2002, 2015), who, like Brennan, asserts that affect and emotions are linked. Massumi stresses, however, that affect and emotion follow different sets of logics and pertain to different orders. Emotions are subjective, sociolinguistic fixings of the qualities of a personal experience (Massumi 1995, 88). Or in simpler terms, emotions are affective intensities which are “owned and recognized” (ibid. 88). It is through emotion, then, that affect – understood as pre-cognitive intensity – registers in the embodied perceiver. Still, as Massumi notes, emotion is only a “very partial expression of affect,” because “not one emotional state can encompass all the depth and breadth of our experience of experiencing” (Massumi 2015, 5). Affect cannot, then, be “reduced to” (ibid. 4) emotion, as the ability to affect and be affected involves multidirectional processes of change:

[w]hen you affect something, you are at the same time opening yourself up to being affected in turn, and in a slightly different way than you might have been the moment before. You have made a transition, however slight. You have stepped over a threshold. Affect is this passing of a threshold, seen from the point of view of the change in capacity. (Massumi 2015, 4)

The capacities a body carries with it, following Massumi, are constantly changing, and its ability to affect and to be affected (“its charge of affect”) is not something fixed (ibid. 4). There

is thus a multitude of ways in which bodies can affect and be affected. And by “bodies”, I refer not only to human bodies but to the range of agents in the aesthetic encounter, including works of art and digital interfaces. One can understand this multitude in terms of potentiality. “Affect as a whole,” as Massumi writes, is the “co-presence of potentials” (ibid. 5). Worth noting is also that individual action or expression is bound to emerge from this range of potentials and to be registered (i.e. felt) consciously in human perceivers: “One ‘wills’ it to emerge, to be qualified, to take on sociolinguistic meaning, to enter linear action-reaction circuits, to become a content of one’s life” (ibid. 91). For human perceivers, the affect and the feeling of affective transition are not “two different things”, but rather “two sides of the same coin” (ibid. 4).

Considering the ties between emotion and affect, I understand affective movement to be the scaffolding that supports, in the words of Constantina Papoulias and Felicity Callard (2010, 35), “our reflection on our experience”. It is in this sense that affect is pre-personal/pre-cognitive: It proceeds, as Papoulias and Callard put it, “*directly* from the body – and indeed between bodies – without the interference of limitations of consciousness, or representation” (ibid. 35).

Affect as Growing out of Mediation

Understanding affect as intensity, independent of opinions, meaning, beliefs, intentions and ideology, something outside of conscious awareness, is a theoretical point of contestation. Ruth Leys (2011), for instance, argues that the distinction between affect on one side and emotion and meaning on the other cannot be sustained, and that some affect theorists adhere to the false opposition between mind and body, though they claim to condemn such dualisms. Massumi specifically, Leys argues, “comes across as a materialist who invariably privileges the ‘body’ and its affects over the ‘mind’ in straightforwardly dualist terms” (Leys 2011, 468).

In this thesis, however, the new materialist and postphenomenological ground I lean on allows a rethinking of the division between subject-object and mind-body as something that grows out of mediation, rather than preceding it. In this sense, embodied existence is framed by multiple affective layers. Following Rosi Braidotti, I view both the artwork and the embodied human perceiver as “a surface of intensities and an affective field” (Braidotti, quoted in Dolphijn and Van der Tuin 2012a, 33). The artwork and the human perceiver emerge through continuous interaction with other affective fields through diverse mediating situations. And while the human body is a prominent site of affect, the source of affect can be external (Thrift 2004; Anderson 2006), which makes context an important element in affective processes. This paves the way for questions regarding what determines the affects that aesthetic encounters may have

on a human perceiver, as well as questions of how the same artwork may contribute to different affects, depending on the mediating situation.

2.6. Applying the Participation Nexus in Case Study Analyses

Before starting on the case study analyses, I want to address two methodological considerations regarding the analytical application of the participation nexus. The first pertains to narrowing the object of study in a framework where multidirectional agentic flows and co-constitutive relations between entities are emphasized. The second concerns my own participatory role in the case study analyses.

Narrowing the Analytical Scope

New materialism upholds an emphasis on open systems, entanglements, transformations, connections and associations, and tends to shift agency away from recognizable actors (Coole 2013, 456), notably including human perceivers. New materialist perspectives thus pose certain challenges for the humanism which is at the heart of much qualitative inquiry, as qualitative methods tend to focus on (the interpretation of) human actions and voices (Fox and Alldred, forthcoming). One such challenge is identifying the object of research beyond the new materialist focus on open systems (ibid.). With regards to the participation nexus, a pertinent question is this: When multidirectional flows of agency, a range of relational affordances, atmospheres and affective processes in the aesthetic encounter must be taken into consideration, where does the object of analysis end? How does one draw productive boundaries and articulate a necessary narrowing of the analytical scope?

In this thesis, the objects of analysis are works of art, as mediated in onsite and online museum environments, and the aesthetic encounters and participatory relations these mediations make possible. Because such analysis concerns (and is inextricably tied to) the human estate, the perceptual field of the human visitor must also be taken into consideration. Here, I take a pragmatic (in the colloquial sense of the word) analytical perspective and narrow the analytical scope to what may shape the experiential site of mutual exposure between the artwork and the visitor. By that, I refer to the given onsite or online mediating situation and what may appear, with some prominence, in it. In an encounter between a museum visitor and a work of art, some agents will more clearly contribute to the aesthetic experience than others, as they are more weighted in the site of mutual exposure.

The Participatory Role of a Critical Museum Visitor

Through a media aesthetic approach to empirical observation and description, I draw analytical attention toward how something may appear as such in a specific mediating environment, first and foremost by analyzing what is taken to be the experience of the mediated artworks (cf. Hausken 2009, 12-14; Hausken 2016, 88; Ihde 1979, 30-31). In my analysis, I have relied on pre- and post-visit research into the relevant museums, platforms and artworks, my own *in situ* experience and field notes taken as what Lindauer (2006) refers to as a critical museum visitor.

A critical museum visitor differs from the “typical” and “ideal” visitors that exhibition developers sometimes envision:

A typical visitor represents the average of all visitors in terms of education, socioeconomic status, racial or ethnic identity, and previous museum experience, whereas an ideal visitor is one who would be ideologically and culturally at home in the exhibition or politically comfortable with the information that is presented. (ibid. 204)

Vis-à-vis the case study objects, I take on the role of a third visitor category proposed by Lindauer: The critical visitor, who enters the museum environment with the objective to study how the features of an exhibition – or what I refer to as a mediating situation – “collectively implicate an ideal visitor” (ibid. 204). This, as Lindauer notes, is an entirely different endeavor than assessing visitor reactions and “characterizing the typical visitor” (ibid. 204). In congruence with the tenets of new museology and new museum theory, the critical museum visitor aims to understand how, and through what means, museum exhibitions that illustrate certain aesthetic concepts, cultural phenomena, historical or biographical events also enact social and material relations of power (ibid. 205). Within the context of this thesis, relevant questions in this regard concern what the mediating situation explicitly asserts and emphasizes, what it implies and what it excludes or suppresses (cf. ibid. 213). What is unattended to, or left unexpressed? Which concepts, objects, bodies, technologies, features or structures are pushed – or push themselves – to the forefront of the aesthetic encounter? Which – if any – participants dominate the mediating situation? How do these participants work within the situation, how do they influence the aesthetic encounter, and, importantly, to what end?

Approaching such questions, I use my own experience as an analytical point of departure. In a new materialist framework informed by postphenomenology, this is the crux of the matter: I participate in the analysis as such, but also in the phenomena I analyze. When a phenomenon (e.g. a mediated artwork) is analyzed, the person analyzing the phenomenon is always also implicated in it (Barad 2007, 27; Hausken 2009, 18-19; Gries 2015, 70; Fox and Alldred, forthcoming). When I insert myself into the mediating situations I describe, my own participation (influenced by, for instance, my body, social and cultural background, academic

objectives and tools of research) contributes to shape both my understanding of the case study artworks and the case study artworks as such. Just as the artworks and mediating situations contribute in shaping me.

Works of art are not determinate things with fixed characteristics that can be interpreted without being influenced, but phenomena that exist as a part of ongoing processes of materializations and reconfigurations (Gries 2015, 70). Such processes, as Laurie Gries notes, “are not frozen when we conduct our research” (ibid. 70). It follows from this that knowledge is situated (Haraway 1988; Barad 1996). Using a specific method or theory will only serve to establish one particular perspective on the object being studied. This is what Karen Barad (2007) refers to as an “agential cut”. But as Barad notes, it is precisely because research is produced through human engagements that researchers can gain knowledge about phenomena relevant to the human estate (Barad 1996; Fox and Alldred, forthcoming).

Taking on the role of a critical museum visitor, I make “agential cuts” (Barad 2007) through the framework of the participation nexus, when examining the case study artworks as they appear in specific mediating situations. In the process, some aspects of the artworks and the onsite and online environments will be highlighted, while others will be overlooked. This is the case for all research methodologies, as they “cut” the phenomena they study in different ways (Fox and Alldred, forthcoming). But by making this explicit, I want to highlight that the descriptions I make and the analysis I conduct are not (and cannot possibly be) exhaustive. I can only trace and describe some of the participatory relations the artworks I discuss contribute to engender, as they circulate in different modes of existence and mediating situations. In doing so, I hope to uphold a new materialist responsibility vis-à-vis the workings of the artworks – as well as the workings of the bodies, environments and technologies they are mediated through – by emphasizing their relationality and transformative power.

Chapter 3

“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)

As Mediated in the Astrup Fearnley Museum and the Astrup Fearnley Museum App

“In the museum, you are usually not allowed to touch the artworks, but if you want to, you are allowed to touch, smell and taste this artwork.”

Audio guide for children in the Astrup Fearnley Museum app.

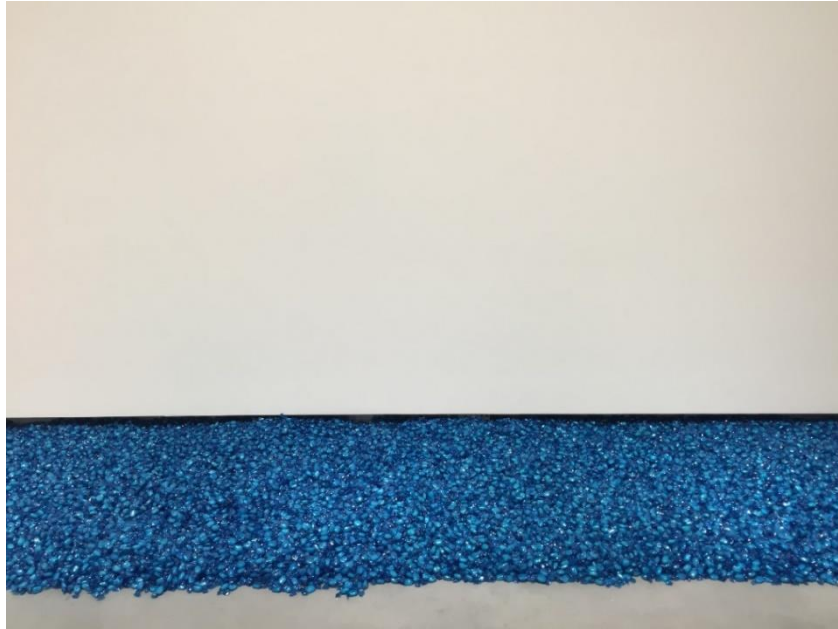
3.0. Chapter Introduction: The Art of Mediating Tension

“Untitled” (Blue Placebo) (1991) consists of 130 kilograms of candy, individually wrapped in bright blue cellophane paper. It is one of several similar installations by Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957-1996), whose work was both grounded in and extended notions of minimalism, postminimalism and conceptual art (Kwon 2006, 293). Gonzalez-Torres’s candy installations are often referred to as candy spills, candy stacks or candy piles. The delectable pieces are the artist’s “Willy Wonka vision[s] of postminimalism” (Kennedy 2007, para. 1) and consist of piles of artwork-specific, commercially available candy. In the case of *“Untitled” Blue Placebo*, the work is made of pieces of hard, white candy with a taste reminiscent of peppermint.

The candy spills might take the forms of carpet-like geometric shapes or mountain-like piles of various sizes. They can be placed in corners or in the middle of the floor. But what they all have in common is a simple artistic device: Visitors are free to help themselves to the pieces of candy that materialize the works. When doing so, they become part of the work and the process of its disappearing. As Gonzalez-Torres has put it:

Without a public these works are nothing, nothing. I need the public to complete the work. I ask the public to help me, to take responsibility, to become part of my work, to join in. (Gonzalez-Torres, quoted in Bishop 2008, 115)

Having consumed the candy, visitors disperse the art beyond the confines of the exhibition venue. In the case of *“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)*, one such venue is the Astrup Fearnley Museum in Oslo, where it is part of the museum’s permanent collection.



Figures 2a-b: Felix Gonzalez-Torres. "Untitled" (Blue Placebo), 1991. Candies individually wrapped in blue cellophane, endless supply. Overall dimensions vary with installation. Ideal weight: 130 kg (286 lb.) © Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Courtesy of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation and the Astrup Fearnley Museum.

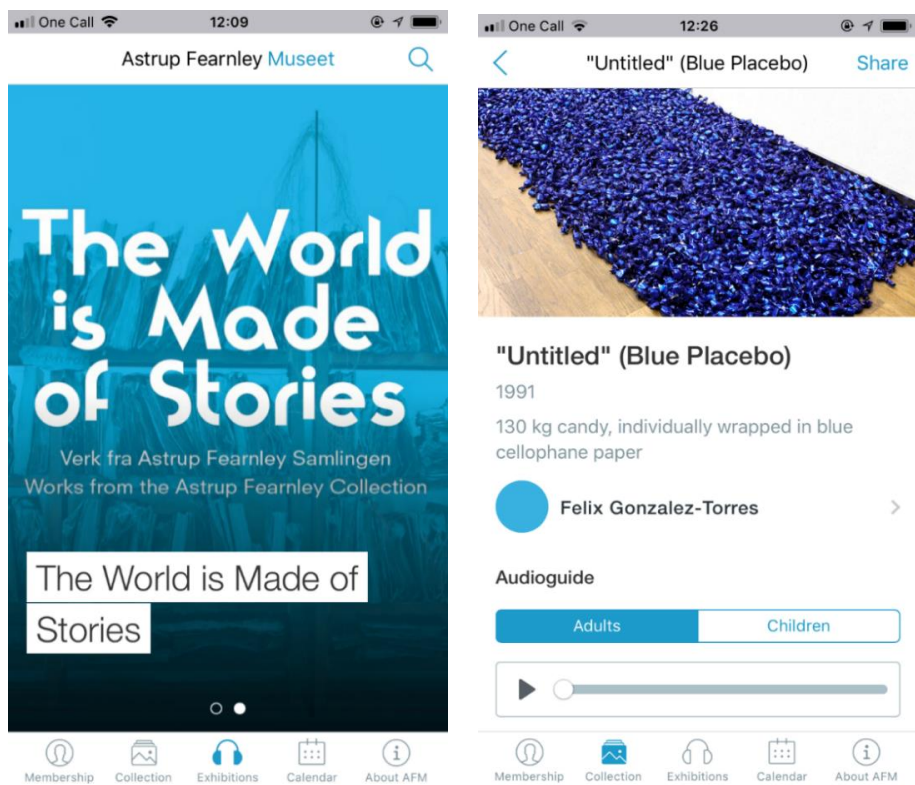


Figure 3a-b: The home page of the Astrup Fearnley Museum app during The World is Made of Stories (left) and the object page of "Untitled" (Blue Placebo) (right).

In this chapter, I examine “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) as it was mediated in the Astrup Fearnley Museum exhibit *The World is Made of Stories* (figures 2a-b), with and without the Astrup Fearnley Museum app (figures 3a-b). *The World is Made of Stories* lasted from December 4, 2015 through December 31, 2017. My discussion is based on my own two approximately two-hour-long visits on December 27, 2016 and February 25, 2017 and my use of the iOS version of the app as it was operational from late 2016 throughout 2017. I have also relied on my own field notes and photographs. Because the museum regularly removed and replaced the exhibited works throughout the exhibition period, I should note that the artworks installed near “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) were the same in both of my visits. In addition to basing the discussion on my own critical museum visitor perspective, I occasionally refer to literature that addresses aesthetic encounters with Gonzalez-Torres’s candy spills. This helps to highlight how the particularities of the mediating situation may emphasize or downplay conceptual and sensory aspects that are commonly theorized as relevant for Gonzalez-Torres’s candy works.

The World is Made of Stories was a non-themed exhibit of artworks from the Astrup Fearnley collection, which the museum describes as an “agglomeration of works by artists who occupy key positions in the [contemporary visual arts] field” (Astrup Fearnley Museum n.d. a). In the exhibit, Astrup Fearnley encouraged the visitors to use the museum app, which has been developed as an educational tool for visitors (Astrup Fearnley Museum 2017). A museum blog post published when the app first launched touts the possibilities it affords, noting that visitors

[...] can easily read about the art or listen to sound files about the artworks in the exhibition and through that use their own mobile as an audio guide. You can explore the Astrup Fearnley Collection and both save and share your favourite artwork. The app makes it easier to stay updated on what’s on, talks and new exhibitions, - and to become a member of our Art Club. The app has its own section just for children with sound files for all the exhibitions, and information on what’s on for children and families. (Astrup Fearnley Museum 2016b, para. 2)

As this text suggests, the objective of the app is to provide visitors of all ages easy access to information about the works they meet onsite. In this chapter, I will focus my discussion on how the app may shape participatory relations tied to “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*). Specifically, how and what it contributes to the aesthetic encounter by mediating the very encounter as such.

Regardless of the app, onsite encounters with “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) and the participatory relations that unfold hinge on several factors. One of these is the material form of the artwork. Notably, this is not fully predetermined, although Gonzalez-Torres did outline the basic provisions of his candy spills in work-specific, written certificates. Through these certificates, Gonzalez-Torres informed collectors and curators about the conditions under which his works were to be (re)produced. On the certificate for each installation, he could list, for instance, its

original dimensions and the brand names or colors of the candy that were to be used. The certificate could also include language stating that a similar type of candy may be used, should the original candy be unavailable. Additionally, the certificate could include the “ideal” weight of the work at the time of installation. Ultimately, however, the weight at which the work is installed at any given time is a choice and a responsibility of its owner or authorized borrower.

What Gonzalez-Torres did not attempt to do, then, was to outline all of the variables that might be consequential for the installation of his candy spills. He could very well leave the shape of the installation unmentioned, and as Sandra Umathum notes, he would refrain from “specifying whether visitors should be informed of their permission to take the candy, or whether the candy ought to be continuously replenished as it disappears” (Umathum 2011, 96). There is thus a purposeful openness that characterizes the conceptual aspects of Gonzalez-Torres’s works (ibid. 96). This openness, in the words of Miwon Kwon (2006, 299), designates the owner of the work a “privileged interpreter of the artist’s intentions”. With this in mind, there is a significant institutional and curatorial involvement in generating the mediating situation in which visitors experience “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*). Indeed, a notable feature of the candy spills is that they allow for experiences that are shaped by particular decisions concerning the ways in which the artworks are able to direct the actions of the museum visitors (Umathum 2011, 95). These decisions were not solely made by Gonzalez-Torres and are not solely guided by the work as such (which lacks a fully predetermined material form). The participatory relations tied to “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) also depend on the particular way it is exhibited. The possibilities for participation offered by the work are tied to the agentic capacities of a range of entities. These include the material work (the pile of candy on the floor) and the museum visitors.

This is a nexus of participation, however, that is not unique for Gonzalez-Torres’s candy spills. As I have argued, aesthetic participation in the encounter between museum visitors and works of arts always arise from multidirectional flows of agency. Simply put, the visitor-artwork relation extends beyond these two agents, as they are constituted both by each other and by their techno-ecological environment. What is notable about the candy spills, however, is that the agentic flows constituting the works are already (to some extent) part of their conceptual structure. Also notable are the prominent agency – and thus power – exerted on this encounter by the Astrup Fearnley Museum and its curators. Agentic forces are especially discernable through the inclusion, exclusion and mediation of information pertaining to “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) both in the gallery room and in the museum app. These mediations shape what one can reasonably understand to be the central participatory element presupposed in and afforded by

the work: The affective act of visitors helping themselves with candy, contributing both to its vanishing and to its distribution.

Notions of affectiveness and affectedness are highly relevant for “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*). The work was conceived in 1991, when Gonzalez-Torres lost his partner, Ross Laycock, to AIDS-related illness. Five years later, the artist would succumb to the same disease. Like several of Gonzalez-Torres’s works, one can understand “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) to be a metaphoric expression of the affective tensions between, in the words of the artist: “the fear of loss and the joy of loving, of growing, of changing, of always becoming more, of losing oneself slowly and then being replenished all over again from scratch” (Gonzalez-Torres, quoted in Bishop 2008, 115). While Gonzalez-Torres was not specifically referencing “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) here, the sentiment expresses what the installation potentially materializes: Transformations of embodied human beings. One may think of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) as a double portrait of Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock. The ideal weight of the work, 130 kilograms, is especially relevant in that regard, because it is popularly understood to have some correlation to Laycock’s body weight. Or, as suggested in the Astrup Fearnley Museum app,²⁶ to be equal to what was, at one point in time, the combined bodyweight of Laycock and Gonzalez-Torres.

According to the records of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, the artist never spoke directly on “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*).²⁷ As mentioned, there is an openness to this work that contributes to the development of new meanings and contexts with each new installation. Rather than necessarily reflecting the specific intentions of the artists, interpretations such as those mentioned above characterize the narratives surrounding the materialization of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*). And from a new materialist perspective, where meaning and matter are very much entwined, “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) and its gradual vanishing by the hands and mouths of museum visitors may suggest some form of symbiotic relationship. Be it between museum visitors and the work as such, or between Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock. One may also understand the work as pointing to the destructive forces of AIDS, to ethical questions concerning consumption and consumerism, or to the slow passing of both Laycock and Gonzalez-Torres. In any case, “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) suggests processes of materialization,

²⁶Audio recordings on “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) in the Astrup Fearnley Museum app, accessed on December 13, 2017.

²⁷E-mail correspondence between Caitlin Burkhart of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation and myself, January 2019.

dispersion and transformation. As put by Martin Guinard-Terrin, the candy in Gonzalez-Torres's candy spills are

dispersed among the public, like cremated ashes in the wind — in a perpetual ceremony carried out in the ambivalence between the sadness of a funeral ritual and the lightness of the innocent pleasure of eating a candy.” (Guinard-Terrin 2011, 21)

The most obvious affordance of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*), namely that the museum visitors can pick up a piece of candy and eat it, expresses the ambivalence Guinard-Terrin refers to. However, this ambivalence is not only present when the act of taking and consuming the candy is actualized. It is present through the affective tension that occurs when the visitors first encounter the installation. What they are faced with is the co-presence of conflicting potential. Do they take a piece of candy or refrain from doing so? Do they contribute to the vanishing of the work and of the bodies of the artist and his partner, or do they suppress their sweet tooth, refuse what the artwork affords and leave the installation as they found it? Contributing to the difficulty of making such choices is the mediation of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) in the sociocultural sphere of the museum environment. It inflicts on visitors certain norms and codes of conduct pertaining to their behavior. Such regulations are embodied through the watchful eyes of museum hosts and the behaviors of other visitors. At play in the onsite atmosphere, then, are conflicting suggestions expressed in and through the environment – e.g. touch/do not touch – and the affective transitions and emotional responses they entail.

As the material aspect of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) is ultimately affected (changed/shaped) by visitors, the visitors are in turn affected by the work and their mutual environment. Questions of how this mutual affectiveness may be altered by accessing the digitized mediation of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) in the Astrup Fearnley Museum app are central in this chapter. The app, I will argue, is agentic in that it makes hidden affordances perceivable to visitors. Thus, it opens new possibilities for participation and new potential affects. It does so in part by containing information on the freedom of visitors to help themselves with pieces of candy. Additionally, it does so by mediating – and narrating – the encounter between the visitor and “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) in particular ways, notably through two audio guides. One of these is aimed at adults, the other at children and youth. Both recordings narrate, in what is intended to be real-time, the encounter with “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*). “You find yourself in a museum and you know that

you are not supposed to touch the artworks”,²⁸ a serious voice tells adult visitors. “Look at that artwork! Can you see what it is made of?”²⁹ the same voice asks young app users, in a more upbeat tone. Already, one can discern differences that are relevant to the participatory relations that may form in the encounter.

While new materialists tend to be concerned with “agentic force without a narrative embedding” (Coole 2013. 456), as Coole puts it, I want to emphasize the simultaneous forces of narrativity and agency. Narrativity is prominent in “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*), insofar as the love story of Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock, cut short by the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, is tied to the work as such. Additionally, narrativity is a prominent feature in the mediation of the installation both in the museum app and in *The World is Made of Stories*. As detailed in the previous chapter, my understanding of agency especially concerns the ways in which nonhumans are able to do things (encourage, forbid, suggest and so on). This, however, does not exclude taking into account how humans, nonhumans and their mutual environments may also convey meaning and affect each other in a more conventional, social constructivist sense. New materialism, after all, can “accept social constructionist arguments while also insisting that the material realm is irreducible to culture or discourse” (Coole and Frost 2010, 27), as Coole and Frost note.

The potential atmospheric impact, affects and affordances stemming (in part) from the narrative framing of an aesthetic encounter are not tied solely to the agency of a (human) narrator, conveying a meaningful sequence of events. The power and autonomy of the narrator, following Helen Oakes and Steve Oakes, “is mitigated by their relationship with other humans and by the influence of nonhuman elements and forces” (Oakes and Oakes 2015, 744). My analysis, then, considers the meanings one can reasonably attribute to “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) and its exhibition context through messages conventionally communicated in the app or in the onsite environment. Additionally, however, it also considers how the techno-ecological environment contributes in shaping the narrative of which the encounter with “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) is part, “the relative veracity of the narrative and the interdependent relations between the narrator, the narrative, other narratives and the external world” (ibid. 744).

²⁸ Audio recording for adults on “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) in the Astrup Fearnley Museum app, accessed on December 13, 2017.

²⁹ Audio recording for children and youth on “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) in the Astrup Fearnley Museum app, accessed on December 13, 2017, my translation.

As I will touch upon toward the end of the chapter, the mediation of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) in the Astrup Fearnley Museum app builds on long-established “techno-cultural” (Gran et al. 2018, 61) conventions of handheld visitor technologies. One could thus argue that the app does little to diversify the forms and mediums through which artworks are accessed. Still, the connectivity of the app, its social media sharing shortcuts and its mere existence encourage and legitimize visitors “fiddling” with their phones in the museum environment. New narratives may be engendered as visitors re-mediate “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) in social media platforms that contribute to filter visual representations (Rettberg 2014) through new media forms and situations (Manovich 2017). The artistic device of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) – the dispersing of the candies beyond the confines of the museum – becomes extended to mediations of the work in social media.

3.1. “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) in the Astrup Fearnley Museum and the Astrup Fearnley Museum App

The Astrup Fearnley Museum opened in 1993, and in 2012, the museum moved from the Kvadraturen area in Oslo, where it neighbored the Museum of Contemporary Art in one of the oldest areas of the capital. Now, the museum resides in Tjuvholmen, a newly established waterfront district. The abandoned industrial site turned sleek restaurant and culture hub borders Aker Brygge, which, following historian Finn Holden (2014), was synonymous with *Nouveau riche* financiers in the yuppie era of the 1980s. One might make similar observations of present-day Tjuvholmen, and housing prices in both of these city center areas make living there reserved for the wealthier inhabitants of Oslo. Still, recent city development projects have led to a waterfront promenade that is widely accessible and much used by the public (Holden 2014, 106-107, 134-135). There, the privately funded³⁰ Astrup Fearnley Museum is located next to the Tjuvholmen Sculpture Park, with works by artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Anish Kapoor and Franz West.

³⁰ While the Tjuvholmen district and the Astrup Fearnley Museum building are both relatively new, the museum was founded on (and is still funded by) the “old money” of the distinguished Fearnley and Astrup families (see Bjercknes 2012). As such, the museum has a tight-knit, long-lasting relation to wealth.



Figure 4: The Astrup Fearnley Museum.

The park and the museum are closely entwined, and according to the architectural statement, the museum experience begins well before the visitors enter the building:

The Museum starts outside: the park is an organic game of canals, bridges and lawns where sculptures of the Selvaag collection are displayed in the nature and in the Piazza. Once inside the visitors experience the temporary exhibition of the Astrup Fearnley Museet in a big double-height space, where natural light is filtered from a glass roof. Following level by level a sequence of smaller art spaces is linked by a bridge, leading the view towards the park and the Piazza, connecting the inside with the outside. [...] This is like a little city where the visitor can be in contact with nature, take a swim, enjoy urban life, while contemplating art. [...] This is meant to be a place for silence and meditation, but also somewhere to meet people or just enjoy a cup of coffee, while looking at boats sailing in the Fjord (Astrup Fearnley Museum n.d. b).

Reading much like a travel brochure, the text underscores that Astrup Fearnley is what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2000) would refer to as a “commercially positive” museum: An institution aware that it is expected to meet standards of excellence not only with regards to its core mission, “but also as a business that provides a service” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2000, 10). The museum complex with the characteristic glass roof and amenities performs itself as an art destination that excels both in exhibiting contemporary art and in providing visitors with a multitude of enjoyable experiences, emphasizing both social and personal visitor engagement.

What the museum building performs and narrates is characteristic of what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett refers to as “performing museology” (ibid. 10), where institutions take on a self-reflexive position regarding their own operation. From a materialist perspective, this is relevant for museums as sites of social and corporeal practices, because art museums and exhibitions instill in their visitors various modalities of acting and sensing (Leahy 2016). What the Astrup Fearnley building performs, then, contributes to shape the participatory relations occurring in onsite encounters.

On the Matter of Narrativity in *The World is Made of Stories*

Also shaping participatory relations are the guiding hands, metaphorically speaking, of the museum and its curators in structuring a given exhibit. In *The World is Made of Stories*, one such structuring effort was done through a wall text, in which the museum emphasized a specific notion of narrativity:

Nobody can see, perceive or apprehend the whole world on their own. We all learn about the world through others, through different kinds of stories told by the media or by individuals. The exhibition ‘The World is Made of Stories’ is a constellation of narrative works that tell private and public stories. Together, they make up a multi-layered narrative referring to different times and geographical places. It is a story about art history, urbanism, politics, memory, sexuality and violence, religion and aesthetics, to name just a few of the themes that the artists have addressed in their works using a variety of materials, techniques and narrative structures. ‘The World is Made of Stories’ offers a polyphony of voices, objects and images, which enlighten while also raising important questions.³¹

In the museum’s own narration of *The World is Made of Stories*, the visitors were told that storytellers were on display: Objects that would somehow convey something. Two aspects are notable here. The first is the hint of essentialism in the wall text’s suggestion that narrativity was a common trait among the exhibited artworks, as if the works possessed the trait of narrativity. This assertion runs counter to the relational worldview of new materialism, in which matter is generative through encounters, associations and interactions (Coole 2013, 456). The second notable aspect is that while the wall text attributed some form of agency to the exhibited artworks, it did so while focusing on narrativity in the overly simplified sense of conveying a message. The exhibited works were purported to hold agency insofar as they had “voices,” figuratively speaking, holding powers of storytelling that could serve to raise questions. The text arguably maintained a notion of anthropocentrically inclined secondary agency, akin to what

³¹ Wall text in *The World is Made of Stories*, the Astrup Fearnley Museum, 2015-2017.

Gell describes in *Art and Agency*. The role of the artists was emphasized: The themes surfacing in the exhibition were purportedly addressed *by* the artists, *in* the works. While the museum acknowledged the Gellian agency of the exhibited works, it did not address the notion of agency I am primarily concerned with here: The agency which artworks possess to encourage and influence visitors and their environment, in other ways than by communicating meaning.

What the museum narrated to visitors in *The World is Made of Stories*, was first that the exhibiting artists told stories through the exhibited works, and second, that there was some form of predetermined meaning in these works, waiting to be found by the visitors. Third, the museum did not address its own agentic (in any sense) capacities, its structuring power of the museum experience. In the wall text, the museum refrained from emphasizing its own role as technology and medium, appearing instead as a neutral conduit.³² This runs counter to performing museology, where the museum is not, as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes,

a place to which one brings technology, but [...] a technology in its own right [...], a set of skills, techniques, and methods. Think of the museum as a distinctive medium, not as an empty vessel for all kinds of musealia. Consider it as a medium in its own right (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2000, 11).

In a performing museology, the museum performs itself “by making the museum qua museum visible to the visitor” (ibid. 11). While the Astrup Fearnley Museum qua museum and medium was not made immediately visible for the visitor in the wall text of *The World is Made of Stories*, institutionally exerted agency seeped through pivotal aspects of the exhibit. It was materialized in (for instance) the exhibition design, the object labels, the iPods which the visitors could borrow at the reception, and the curatorial selection and arrangement of the exhibited artworks that contributed to the multimedial museum environment. The museum environment conveyed meaning and suggested action via conventional communication (e.g. via object labels), but also through object constellations, sociocultural museal gestures and what I would refer to as, borrowing the words of Coole, “styles of comportment that carve[d] out architectural and emotive spaces of engagement” (Coole 2005, 129).

³² I note this to describe the mediation of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) in *The World is Made of Stories* and the role of the museum – both as purported by the museum and as understood in the analytical perspective of this thesis. I do not make note of the museum’s lack of emphasis on its own agency to make a normative claim concerning whether or not museums should make the agency they exert (and have always exerted) noticeable to visitors.

In this sense, institutional agency was dispersed, materialized, embodied, externalized and spatio-temporally situated in the museum environment. It constituted a field of agentic forces where the objectives of the institution, the intentions of the artists and the visitors, and the affordances of the artworks achieved efficacy through (inter)action (cf. *ibid.* 129). But in *The World is Made of Stories*, the guiding hand of the museum worked in ways that were not always noticeable, as I will argue is the case with “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*).

“*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) in *The World is Made of Stories*

The gallery where “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) was exhibited is spacious, with white ceilings and light gray concrete flooring. A row of windows covered with blinds take up part of one of the white walls. In a corner, a closed-off stairway leads to large double doors of glass. But in *The World is Made of Stories*, none of these elements stood out in any significant way. The architectural features of the room did not draw attention to themselves, leaving it with a white cube (O’Doherty 1986) aesthetic. “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) was installed on the floor near a corner (figures 5a-b). From afar, it was difficult to make out its material substance. Stepping closer, what first appeared to be a shiny textile or a rug of some sort, revealed itself to be a large quantity of small pieces of candy, spread thick in a rectangular shape. Although the corner placement of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) was inconspicuous, the size of the installation, its bright blue color and the shiny texture of the cellophane paper made the work stand out.

The noticeability of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) was strengthened by it being one of only four works that were not wall-mounted. One was the sound installation *Oh Egypt* (Trisha Donnelly, 2004-2005), a slowed-down recording of a voice repeatedly uttering the phrase “oh Egypt”, playing once every hour. The two others were *Human Statue* (Frank Benson, 2005) and *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* (Jeff Koons, 1998), both installed near “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*). *Human statue* depicts a naked man covered in sheer silver paint. The sculpture practically glistens, much like the porcelain surface of Koon’s work, which is among the museum’s signature collection pieces. According to a museum blogpost, an often-asked visitor question is “excuse me, where is *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*?” (Astrup Fearnley Museum 2014, my translation and emphasis). Commonly associated with the Astrup Fearnley brand, the baroque-inspired, kitschy depiction of the singer and his pet chimpanzee is likely to draw visitors into the space.



Figures 5a-b: "Untitled" (Blue Placebo) on December 27, 2016 (top) and February 25, 2017 (bottom). As visitors help themselves to pieces of candy, the shape and size of the installation change, as indicated by the rounded corners of the work in the bottom image.



Figures 5c-d: Installation views of “Untitled” (Blue Placebo). Also pictured, fig. c, left to right: Stranger #54 (Glenn Ligon, 2011), Double America (Glenn Ligon, 2012) and Human Statue (Frank Benson, 2005). Fig. d, left to right: Human Statue (Frank Benson, 2005), USA First Class (Counterfeit) (Gardar Eide Einarsson, 2013), Train #1 (Karl Haendel, 2008), London Calling (Tom Sachs, 2004) and Michael Jackson and Bubbles (Jeff Koons, 1988).

The artworks in the room were accompanied by small plaques mounted on the wall nearest to them. These object labels all suggested that visitors who would like to know more about the works should speak with the museum hosts or download and use the museum app. If need be, the labels assured, visitors could borrow an iPod at the reception. The object labels additionally contained information on the artwork and/or the artist. For instance, the plaque accompanying *Human Statue* drew parallels to street performers wearing metallic costumes. *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* was purported to speak to the surrealist aspects of a culture obsessed with celebrities. And *Double America* (Glenn Ligon, 2012), a neon installation spelling out the word “America” in two differing iterations, was said to represent segregation in American society.

The themes highlighted by the museum curators through the selection of these works and the texts written about them were diverse. As such, “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) was placed within a multifaceted context, among objects that were formally, materially and thematically differing. However, one could discern certain similarities among some of the exhibited works. Several of them invite reflection (at times critical or contrarian) on American or Americanized culture and society, consumerism and celebrity worship. Emblematic of this were the works of Ligon (expressing poignant sociopolitical criticism) and Koons (embracing expressions of kitsch long frowned upon by the art elite). Another example is the silkscreen work *USA First Class (Counterfeit)* (Gardar Eide Einarsson, 2013). The two large canvas prints depict a grid of near-identical grayscale details of the American flag, based on real and imaginary postal stamps. Each image has the word “counterfeit” printed in red capital letters diagonally across it and the words “USA first-class” horizontally printed in black capital letters along the bottom.

“*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) does not contain visual references to American society as explicitly as Ligon’s *Double America* or Einarsson’s *USA First Class (Counterfeit)* do through text and symbolism. But in *The World is Made of Stories*, there were visual parallels between the surface of the thin, glossy cellophane paper in Gonzalez-Torres’s work and the shiny surfaces of *Human Statue* and *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*. These works were covered in layers of shine that masked whatever was beneath. In *The World is Made of stories*, a statue of a man and a monkey wearing golden costumes, a male figure covered in silver paint and sugary candy dressed in shiny blue paper contributed to an atmosphere where one was made to reflect upon the status of the objects encountered, or what they might mask. Titles containing words like “placebo” and “counterfeit” further contributed to such a sentiment.

In the case of *“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)*, the atmospheric sense that the work was hiding something was highlighted through its object label. Cryptically, it noted that “[a] deeper meaning is concealed behind the pile of sweets on the floor.”³³ The text only alludes to what this “deeper meaning” might be, by noting that the work was completed the same year Gonzalez-Torres lost his partner to AIDS, and that its title was a commentary on the treatment given to AIDS patients. It would be easy, then, to read the plaque as hinting at a critique of the American pharmaceutical industry, hidden in Gonzalez-Torres’s installation. But what was not revealed by the museum in its analogue mediation of the work, was the artistic device employed in it: That visitors may help themselves to pieces of candy. In the Astrup Fearnley Museum app, however, this information was readily available.

“Untitled” (Blue Placebo) in the Astrup Fearnley Museum App

When opening the app, simply named *Astrup Fearnley Museet*, visitors are met with an image (or images) of the exhibition poster(s) for the exhibit(s) currently on display (figure 3a). Along the lower edge of the screen is a menu panel that affords a range of options, such as browsing the museum collection, viewing exhibitions or viewing the event calendar. The home page which appears when visitors open the app is the “exhibitions” page. When scrolling down, one may choose between viewing lists of past and future exhibits. In the app, visitors can find *“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)* in several ways, for instance by navigating to the exhibition page of *The World is Made of Stories*. This page contains hyperlinked entries for the exhibited works, consisting of images, work titles and artists’ names. Clicking the images leads to separate object pages for each work, one of them being *“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)* (figure 3b). Searching for Gonzalez-Torres by name is another option. This leads to what I will refer to as his “artist page”, with biographical information and hyperlinked images of his works in the museum’s collection.

The object page of *“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)* prominently features a high contrast color photograph depicting part of the installation. It also features a link to the artist page of Gonzalez-Torres and textual information on the work (title, year, material and weight). Near the bottom of the screen visitors will find two tabs, affording options to choose between an audio guide for adults and an audio guide for children. The two recordings contain a voice that speaks

³³ Object label for Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s *“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)* in *The World is Made of Stories*, the Astrup Fearnley Museum, 2015-2017.

of the material properties of the work and contextualizes the installation. The audio guides, which I will return to in more detail at a later point in this chapter, present biographical facts on Gonzalez-Torres and interpretations of the work's title. Notably, the audio guides also direct attention toward the situation visitors find themselves in when encountering the installation in the gallery room, thus mediating the encounter as such.

3.2. Encountering “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) without the App

Before touching on how the app mediates the aesthetic encounter, I want to discuss the encounter as it may unfold without the app. For visitors to *The World is Made of Stories* who were unfamiliar with “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) or with the artistic device of dispersing employed in many of Gonzalez-Torres's works, the possibility to take a piece of candy would be a hidden affordance. To be more precise, the affordance of picking up a bite-sized piece of candy to eat would, strictly speaking, be perceivable. Yet, there was little in the mediating situation that suggested that actualizing this possibility would be socially acceptable. Touching exhibited works, after all, is usually not allowed in museum environments. Moreover, information announcing that visitors were, in fact, free to help themselves to pieces of candy was not included in the object label. For visitors that were familiar with “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) and/or the work of Gonzalez-Torres, on the other hand, the mediating situation would be different. For such visitors, the central affordance of the installation would be both readily perceivable and recognizable as an actual possibility to be carried out. For these two groups of visitors, then, the aesthetic encounter with “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) and its affordances would likely be affective in differing ways.

Uninitiated and Initiated Visitors

Let me begin with visitors with no prior knowledge of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) or Gonzalez-Torres. These “uninitiated” visitors would encounter the pile of candy spread out on the floor in a museum environment with an almost sacral atmosphere, characterized by the traditional distanced spectator. The exhibited works were in no way cordoned off, but the orderly, prim and proper white cube aesthetic of the gallery room, the prevailing norms of acceptable museum behavior and the watchful eyes of the museum hosts (or guards, depending on one's perspective) effectively left the artworks untouchable. As far as these uninitiated visitors would know, none of the exhibited works in the room allowed for physical interaction. To reference chapter 1, the antithesis to the atmosphere in *The World is Made of Stories* would be the *Participation* exhibit at Trondheim Art Museum. There, the museum actively sought to avoid the distanced spectator by exhibiting overtly “participatory” works and by emphasizing that the

engagement and action of visitors was central. This was not the case in *The World is Made of Stories*.

Here, the aesthetic experience of uninitiated visitors would be colored by their limited knowledge of what they could and could not do vis-à-vis “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*). Consequently, their encounter with the installation would most readily afford forms of participation hinging largely on visual perception. Uninitiated visitors could examine the work, look at the color and texture of the cellophane paper and try to make out the color of the candy inside. They could imagine how a piece of candy would feel in their hand and how it would taste. They could also reflect on the potential meanings of the work. If uninitiated visitors were to read the plaque on the museum wall, they might, for instance, ponder what the work expresses with regards to AIDS treatment. For these visitors, however, what is arguably the most pivotal affordance embedded in the artistic structure of the work remains hidden. Gonzalez-Torres’s candy spills do not overtly make their availability to visitors known in an exhibition context. Rather, the work “seduces” (Umatham 2011, 94) visitors, calling them closer and urging them to have a taste. As such, uninitiated visitors could very well be tempted by the candy in front of them and wonder if they might be allowed to have a taste.

For uninitiated visitors in *The World is Made of Stories*, it would be obvious that the work afforded consumption. But whether taking a piece of candy was actually allowed, was less clear-cut. The uncertainty uninitiated visitors might have experienced as they stood faced with “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) would add an affective tension to the aesthetic encounter. A tension between what visitors knew they could do (observe the work from a certain distance) on the one side, and what they might have felt compelled to do, or wondered whether they were allowed to do, on the other. Which was picking up and eating a piece of candy. In this regard, “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) differs from, for instance, the *One Minute Sculptures* of Erwin Wurm exhibited in the *Participation* exhibit. The guidelines encouraging physical interaction were part of the material structure of Wurm’s installations, in the form of drawn or written instructions detailing how visitors could be part of the works. In contrast, “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) does not contain such explicit instructions. Instead, the candy installation materializes implicit encouragement. The delicately wrapped pieces of sugary substance are appealing, tempting and seducing, and afford being picked up, unwrapped and eaten. The handy size, light weight and chewable texture of the candy make these acts easily achievable by museum visitors.

For uninitiated visitors, the obstacle lies in the mediating situation of the *World is Made of Stories*, which does little to suggest that they can physically engage with the work. There is nothing in the atmosphere or the social context of the onsite environment which suggests that

visitors can help themselves to the candy that materializes the installation. To illustrate the uncertainty one might experience vis-à-vis “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*), I want to quote an anecdote told by Umathum. The experience she describes is that of an uninitiated visitor:

The first time I encountered one of these installations, not knowing anything about them, I did not feel that the candy was offered to me. I remember that I really wanted to take a piece and so began scanning the exhibition space for surveillance cameras. I then kept an eye out for museum guards and waited until all the other visitors had eventually left the room. Only when I was reasonably certain that my attempt to ‘steal’ a piece of candy would not be noticed by anyone did I quickly pick one up and immediately leave the ‘scene of the crime’. (Umathum 2011, 94)

This anecdote – Umathum’s own narrative – plays into the overarching narrative that surrounds Gonzalez-Torres’s candy spills. It is characterized by the material affects of forbidden temptation, seduction and want. For Umathum, her self-proclaimed lack of knowledge of the candy spill and the absence of an explicit offer highlighted the seductiveness of the installation. She felt confronted with “the code of behavior in art institutions and [her] desire to undermine it” (ibid. 94). Whether uninitiated visitors act on the seductiveness of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) or adheres to the common social norms of museums is a personal choice. But for some, I am sure, Umathum’s act of “stealing” a piece of candy would be considered far too brazen.

The museum’s choice of not making key information on “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) immediately accessible for visitors is an interesting way of exhibiting the work. It is affective, as visitors are confronted with the tensions Umathum describes. They are challenged to act on their own accord or to discover the artistic device employed in the work in some other way than by reading a plaque on a wall. It is also a way in which the museum exerts its agentic capacity, by expanding what has been theorized as a central aspect of Gonzalez-Torres’s candy pieces: A prompt to those attending an exhibit to be aware of their environment and situation. One can understand this to be a “beholder’s ethic” (Bourriaud 2002, 56), to borrow a term used by Bourriaud. Descriptions by theorists who recount their own experiences of attending exhibits where Gonzalez-Torres’s candy spills were displayed are illustrative of how the mediating situation of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) are ethically affective.

Often, theorists describe observing the gluttonous actions of initiated visitors – i.e. visitors who are aware of the artistic device of dispersing the art. Marie De Brugerolle (2010, 58) describes visitors scooping up candy with plastic coffee cups, simply because they were free. Similarly, Umathum (2011, 95) describes an exhibit where the object label invited visitors to “eat up”, whereupon visitors took “almost as much as they could carry”. Bourriaud (2002, 56) recounts a comparable experience, with visitors “grabbing as many candies as their hands and pockets could hold”. In these situations, however, some visitors would not help themselves to any

candy. Such behavior has been theorized as aversive reactions to greediness (Umatham 2011, 95), or as a reluctance to be the first to take a piece of candy (Bourriaud 2002, 56).

To contribute my own anecdote, I very much felt like the only initiated visitor in both of my two visits to *The World is Made of Stories*. On each occasion, several other visitors paused to look at “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*). Some of them read the object label, some of them took pictures. But none of them bent down to take a piece of candy. That is, apart from two little girls who visited the museum with an older woman. And it was not until the museum host informed the two small children that they were actually allowed to have some candy (to their great surprise and joy), that they each sat down on the floor to carefully choose a piece. For me, however, reaching down to touch the installation felt uncomfortable. Most of all because I worried what uninitiated visitors might have thought of me, had they caught me “stealing” a piece of art.

The situations above illustrate the ethical tension brought on by “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*). Much like Gonzalez-Torres’s other candy spills, the installation works to question the relationship visitors have with power. It challenges their sense of moderation, conscience and responsibility (cf. e.g. Bourriaud 2002, 56-57; De Brugerolle 2010). If every visitor were to exercise their right to help themselves to the candy installation, the material incarnation of the work would cease to exist.

The Institutionally Enacted Veil of The World is Made of Stories

The beholder’s ethic that is at work when visitors encounter “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) in *The World is Made of Stories* is engendered by distributed flows of agency. Contributing to these flows is the material “pull” or seductiveness of the installation. Also contributing is the sacred museum atmosphere characterized by the traditional social norms and codes of conduct of museum spaces. Moreover, visitors’ self-moderation or indulgence, and what one might perceive to be looks of approval or disapproval from museum hosts and other museum visitors, also play their parts. For visitors encountering “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*), the ethical questions sparked by these agentic forces would be affective in varying ways, depending on whether the visitors knew that they could physically touch the artwork.

Visitors aware of this fact – initiated visitors – were promptly faced with ethical questions. As De Brugerolle (2010, 58) points out, “It makes a difference if I take one candy or if I take ten. [...] It’s a matter of obscenity and responsibility”. Moreover, considering the sweets in terms of “proliferation and loss, of white blood cells and the HIV virus, the act of taking them is made with a more acute conscience” (ibid. 58). Knowing that one can take a piece of candy, then, does not necessarily entail one being comfortable doing so. Does one really want to be part of

the vanishing of the sugary embodiment of Gonzalez-Torres and his partner, making them disappear once again?

Uninitiated visitors, on the other hand, were unknowingly placed behind an institutionally enacted veil. In *The World is Made of Stories*, the museum effectively left the possibility to actualize the most pertinent affordance of the work hidden. It was concealed both in the Astrup Fearnley Museum app – which I will return to – and in museum hosts and other visitors. Utilizing the app, interacting with museum hosts or observing other visitors helping themselves to pieces of candy would lift the veil. Uninitiated visitors, then, could potentially become initiated. Some uninitiated visitors, however, may not use the app, speak with hosts or encounter “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) alongside other visitors. Thus, they would remain uninitiated. These visitors would consequentially be excluded from experiencing an aesthetically transformative aspect of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*). Still, they would not be exempt from facing ethical conflicts, and could, for instance, experience feelings of forced self-restraint.

The questions facing uninitiated visitors would not be tied to the ethical problems of invading or disrupting the symbolic bodies of Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock. These are problems that hinge on knowing that physical engagement with the installation is a central conceptual element in “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*). They also hinge on knowing that the Astrup Fearnley Museum considers the installation to be the sugary embodiment of Gonzalez-Torres and Laycock at a point in time where Laycock’s body suffered the deteriorating effects of AIDS. Unaware of these connections, uninitiated visitors were blocked from becoming physically involved in “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*)’s materialization and thematization of the body politics of the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. At least in ways similar to initiated visitors.

Arguably, the overarching distinction between the experiences of uninitiated and initiated visitors in *The World is Made of Stories* is this: Uninitiated visitors, not knowing that they could physically touch the installation, would primarily have to decide whether to disrupt the social order of the museum environment. Initiated visitors, who knew that taking a piece of candy was allowed, would primarily have to decide whether to disrupt the work as such and be a direct part of the processes conceptually thematized in the installation.

Admittedly, my analysis of the aesthetic encounters that initiated and uninitiated visitors might have with “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) is simplified. Knowledge of and interest in “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) and/or the oeuvre of Gonzalez-Torres is not necessarily a case of either having it or not having it at all. These are complex and ever-changing properties that are difficult to quantify. Hence, the categories of “initiated” and “uninitiated” are dynamic and fluid. What my

simplified analysis does, however, is shine a light on some of the ways in which participatory relations tied to “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) are shaped by a range of agents. Importantly, these agents – be it the artist, the visitors, the museum environment, the curators, the museum hosts or the pile of candy on the gallery room floor – may express conflicting interests, suggestions, wants and demands. Visitors in *The World is Made of Stories* were pushed toward making disparate choices: Take a single piece of candy, take a fistful of sweets, wait for the museum hosts to turn their back before making a move, refrain from touching the artwork, and so on.

Social Processes of Transition and Transaction

The accumulated interests (and suggestions etc.) of the agents participating in the mediating situation of *The World is Made of Stories* are affective in the sense that they constitute a virtual co-presence of potentials (cf. Massumi 1995, 2002, 2015). As museum visitors are confronted with the potential afforded by “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) – i.e. the potential to move and be moved, act and be acted upon, and interpret and reflect in a range of manners – they become entangled in processes of transition. Which in turn results in acts being made. One such potential act is picking up a piece of candy. This act, again, opens new potentials for acting, and new potential for transactions between the artwork and the visitor.

The affective processes of transition and transaction which occur in aesthetic encounters with “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) neither depend on nor negate the thematic or conceptual aspects of the work. Realizations concerning what the installation may represent (the bodies of the artist and his partner, love, death, AIDS medication etc.) are also affective. In any case, the affectiveness of the work may trigger emotional responses from visitors. From virtual potentiality, individual action or expression is bound to emerge and be registered (i.e. felt) consciously. “One ‘wills’ it to emerge, to be qualified, to take on sociolinguistic meaning” (Massumi 1995, 91), as Massumi puts it. But in such affective processes of transition, transaction and emerging meaning-making and emotional content – how is one to view the role of the visitors’ relations to each other, as they encounter “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*)?

It is generally recognized that social interaction is a critical factor in the museum experience (Heath and vom Lehn 2010; Galani and Chalmers 2010; Falk and Dierking 2012). People often visit museums in a social group and devote a considerable part of their attention to the people they are with (Falk and Dierking 2012, 148). Even solo museum visitors are sensitive to the behavior of others, although their interaction is indirect, following the socioculturally constructed museum environment (Heath and vom Lehn 2010; Falk and Dierking 2012). Visitor interaction in museums, then, influence what visitors choose to look at, how they approach

exhibits, the ways in which they explore and examine exhibited objects and the conclusions that they draw (Heath and vom Lehn 2010, 266). Considering this, an encounter with *“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)* also concerns what one conventionally understands as social relations. That is, relations between (human) subjects. In a new materialist perspective, however, sociality is not limited to the conventional understanding of the term. Rather, dynamic processes in which subjects and objects are constituted always have a social, collective dimension. Particularly relevant in this regard is sociologist Karin Knorr Cetina’s notion of “object-centered sociality” which concerns the sociality of human perceivers and objects.

When a human perceiver is faced with an object whose character is changing and unfolding (Cetina 1997, 14), the encounter is constituted by a “sequence of lacks” (ibid. 16). The self, understood as a structure of wanting, loops its desire through the object and back again. In this movement, the self becomes extended by the object, which provides a continuation of the structure of wanting through its incompleteness (ibid. 16). Conceptualizing this movement as being mutually providing, Cetina describes sociality as a phenomenon in which

the subject takes over the object’s wants – as a structure of wanting, the subject becomes defined by the object. Conversely, the articulation of the object is looped through the subject: as a “structure of lacks”, [...] the object receives the kind of extension that the subject determines (ibid. 16).

Following Cetina, an aesthetic encounter with *“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)* is social in a manner that extends conventional notions of sociality. The agentic capacity to affect (and consequently, to be affected) is distributed among participating human and nonhuman agents who both “lack” and “want”. Understanding *“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)* as a “structure of lacks” (ibid. 16), the work invites participation in order to be fulfilled and is not materially defined (i.e. complete) without the intervention or interrogation of a human perceiver. The material articulation of *“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)* relies on the presence, acts and choices of other agents, such as museum visitors, curators, museum hosts, the environmental conditions set by the institution and the museum building and so on. In turn, the visitor is defined by their engagement with *“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)*. One could, for instance, think of visitors grabbing a fistful of sweets as greedy and self-serving, either ignorant of or ignoring the symbolic gravity of their actions.

While considering the encounter between a visitor and *“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)* as being social is important to grasp the participatory relations that occur, the conventional notion of sociality cannot be overlooked. As I have mentioned, the importance of interpersonal relations is not unique to *“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)*, as they generally play into visitors’ encounters with museum objects. Following Simon (2010), however, some museum objects are especially equipped to lend themselves to interpersonal, social experiences. What Simon refers to as

“social objects” may be “an art piece with a subtle surprise that visitors point out to each other in delight” (Simon 2010, 127). *Untitled* (Blue Placebo) is thus a textbook example of a social object. It is not obvious solely from the material properties of the installation, or the museum atmosphere, that visitors can help themselves to the sweets in front of them. Hence, the “subtle surprise” of finding out may serve as a conversation starter. In this sense, the museum’s decision to make the artistic device of *Untitled* (Blue Placebo) a hidden affordance in *The World is Made of Stories* contributed to expand the “sociality” of the work. If initiated and uninitiated visitors encountered the installation together, the latter could have let the former in on the “secret” aspects of the work.

The materially enacted agency of the institution, for instance in the form of a carefully articulated object label, contributes to the transactional qualities of *Untitled* (Blue Placebo) as a social object. Such objects facilitate exchanges among those encountering them, because they allow for “transference of attention from person-to-person to person-to-object-to-person” (ibid. 129). This illustrates how interpersonal relations shape individual encounters with museum objects. In the multidirectional participatory relations constituting *Untitled* (Blue Placebo), what is transferred in these relations are not only attention, meaning or information, but affect. Helpful in explaining what I mean by this, is Teresa Brennan’s (2004) theories on the transmission of affect. In ways similar to Massumi, Brennan notes that feelings are “sensations that have found the right match in words” (Brennan 2004, 5) and that one can consider emotion to be a physiological subset of affect (ibid. 5-6).³⁴ Her main point is that affect can be transmitted. For instance, a person can become energized when in the company of friends and be drained by cumulative environmental – what I would call atmospheric – stressors (ibid. 6).

The concept of transmission of affect resonates with new materialist thought, because it emphasizes that there is no rigid distinction between individuals and the environments and atmospheres they move through. This, however, does not render irrelevant the personal, emotional response of the museum visitor, because affects are not registered in a vacuum. “If I feel anxiety when I enter the room, then that will influence what I perceive or receive by way of an “impression” (a word that means what it says)” (ibid. 6), as Brennan puts it. This sentiment

³⁴ Comparison between the affect theories of Massumi and Brennan is not an objective here. Still, I should note that their views are similar with regards to aspects relevant to the present discussion, insofar as Massumi understands emotion as a “partial expression of affect” (Massumi 2015, 5).

highlights the affectiveness of atmosphere and of the role of the museum environment in the transitive processes of visitors being affected by and affecting “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*). It also demonstrates how visitors may affect each other: “If I emit one emotion and you emit another, we may both of us take onboard the effects of this new composite” (ibid. 51).

The transmission of affect is possible because the mediating situation of the human perceiver, their thoughts and their body “do not form a screen between him and the world” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 62), to quote Merleau-Ponty. As I noted in chapter 2, the human perceiver and their surroundings come to be through their mutual relation. In other words, bodies “open” onto each other, which entails that there is a collective aspect to all behavior, as Hoel and Carusi (2018) note. As they put it, “the movements of individual beings are inscribed into a visible structure that is seen by others as expressive, that is, something that is recognized as a behavior that others can take up and adopt” (ibid. 56). Considering the collective aspect of behavior, one may understand the presence of museum visitors as constituting openings to novel ways of participating. As the opening of bodies onto each other entails an openness to the transmission of affect, it follows that feelings are not internal states. They are phenomena that are publicly available through behaviors and expressions. As Merleau-Ponty notes in *Sense and Non-Sense*:

We must reject that prejudice which makes “inner realities” out of love, hate or anger, leaving them accessible to one single witness: the person who feels them. Anger, shame, hate and love are not psychic facts hidden at the bottom of another’s consciousness: they are types of behavior or styles of conduct which are visible from the outside. They exist *on* this face or *in* those gestures, not hidden behind them (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 52-53).

Following Merleau-Ponty, the distinction between feelings (the intensity of affect as registered in a sensing body) and emotions (the sociocultural expressions of feelings) is dissolved. What ultimately matters is the spatiotemporal closeness of affect, feelings and emotions – regardless of whether one understands emotions as partial expressions (like Massumi) or physiological subsets (like Brennan) of affect. What is relevant here, is that there is always an affectivity in the participatory relations constituting “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*): Complex, multidirectional processes of transition, transactions and transformations, and emotional responses that involve the artwork, the visitors and the mediating situation.

In the onsite mediation of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*), the complexity of the notion of participation becomes highlighted. It is not as simple as viewing visitors helping themselves to pieces of candy as actively participating, and visitors who refrain from doing so as being non-participatory or unengaged. Being faced with “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*), is to be confronted with the affective, atmospheric forces of the interests and highlighted affordances expressed in the material work and the human and nonhuman agents surrounding it. This confrontation is

inherently participatory: The participating agents literally take part in it, regardless of whether the “participatory” act of taking a piece of candy is actualized.

3.3. Encountering “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) with the App

When the Astrup Fearnley Museum app becomes part of the aesthetic encounter with “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) in *The World is Made of Stories*, several questions arise. What does the app mediation add to the encounter and what is limited or removed? Do the affordances of the app and the atmospheres it might conjure somehow change the agentic capacities of this artwork to affect, and the ways it can be affected?

A Redoubling of Experience

As mentioned, the objective of the app, from the perspective of the Astrup Fearnley Museum, is to function as an onsite educational tool for visitors. Vis-à-vis “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*), the app is one of several ways for visitors to gain knowledge of the principal affordance and conceptual aspect of Gonzalez-Torres’s installation: That they can take pieces of candy from the pile of sweets on the floor. In part, the participatory role of the app is determined by the information provided in the exhibit context. For example, if information on the core affordance of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) was included on the object label, one could arguably consider the app less vital for learning about, understanding and experiencing the work.³⁵ In the onsite environment of *The World is Made of Stories*, however, the role of the app is increasingly significant, because the central affordance of the work is hidden.

When using the Astrup Fearnley app, not all the content on the object page of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) would contribute in a meaningful way to the aesthetic experience of the work. The photograph of the installation, viewed on a smartphone, is small and non-zoomable, and the colors of the image are somewhat “off” compared to the onsite iteration of the work. The photograph does not reveal any details of the artwork that were hidden from sight in the onsite encounter. Thus, the photograph would mainly serve as an identifier, letting visitors know that the object page provides information on the installation in front of them. For visitors not having

³⁵ This was the case in the earlier Astrup Fearnley exhibit *Good Morning America*. There, “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) was exhibited with an object label stating that visitors “are invited to help themselves to one of the sweets, thereby taking part in the artist’s great loss” (object label for Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) in *Good Morning America*, the Astrup Fearnley Museum, 2015-2016).

read the object label, the app's information on the name of the artist and the title of the work might be of interest, and navigating to the artist page of Gonzalez-Torres provides relevant information that is not present elsewhere. The app reveals that the works of Gonzalez-Torres are often based on perishable materials made to be distributed, and that when such works are "activated" by visitors, formal characteristics are dissolved and the idea behind the artwork comes forth.³⁶ But what is this idea, visitors might wonder. The Astrup Fearnley Museum's answer lies in one of the audio guides on the object page of "*Untitled*" (*Blue Placebo*).

In the version of the app operational in 2017, there were two audio files available. I will primarily discuss the recording aimed at adults. However, I will also touch upon the one aimed at children, because there are relevant differences between the two in terms of how the app mediates materiality and invites participation. Judging from the young, female voice(s) in the recordings, the person reciting the respective scripts might be the same, although it is difficult to say with certainty. The voice in the adult aimed audio guide says the following:

Felix Gonzalez-Torres. «Untitled» (Blue Placebo). 1991.

You find yourself in a museum and you know that you are not supposed to touch the artworks. But what do you do when you stand in front of a work that consists of a huge pile of delectable candies? Do you help yourself to as many candies as there is room for in your pockets, or do you refrain from touching the work until you see another person reach down and pick up a candy?

Here, the artist confronts us with an ethical dilemma, and causes us to reflect over our relationship to authority and to the heavily guarded art museum. Yet, the hard candies wrapped in shiny blue paper also have a deeper meaning. Note that Gonzalez-Torres has put the «Blue Placebo»-title in parenthesis. In Latin, the term «Placebo» means, «to please». However, in the context of medicine, the term is used for pills, which have no traceable effect, yet, which nevertheless often seem to work. Gonzalez-Torres experienced the death of his partner Ross to AIDS the same year as this work was created, and the blue candy drops can be understood as a commentary over the medical treatment for AIDS-patients.

Whenever this artwork is presented in the museum, there is but one important instruction. And that is, that altogether the candy must weigh 130 kilos. This was the combined weight of Gonzalez-Torres and his partner. When we help ourselves to the shining candy, in a way, we partake in the artist's great loss.³⁷

The audio guide provides information which makes perceivable for the visitors the affordance that is hidden from them, albeit in plain sight: That they are allowed to take a piece (or more) of

³⁶ The artist page of Felix Gonzalez-Torres in the Astrup Fearnley Museum app, accessed on February 25, 2017.

³⁷ Audio recording for adults on "*Untitled*" (*Blue Placebo*) in the Astrup Fearnley Museum app, accessed on December 13, 2017.

candy. It also offers an interpretation of what happens if visitors chose to do so, stating that they will take part in the artist's loss. This narrative may affect the aesthetic experience of visitors, influence the choices they make and how they come to understand and view the work.

However, the audio recording does more than provide information and interpretation of "*Untitled*" (*Blue Placebo*). In real-time, as visitors stand faced with the blue mass of candy on the museum floor, the voice descriptively paints a picture, so to speak, of the mediated situation they are in, effectively re-mediating it. "You find yourself in a museum and you know that you are not supposed to touch the artworks," the woman begins, as if holding a mirror in front of the eyes of visitors. The ethical dilemma she describes might be well known for museum patrons already familiar with Gonzalez-Torres's candy spills. And it might be new information for first-time viewers of his work. Either way, visitors are forced to acknowledge the dilemma of the situation they are in. "What do you do when you stand in front of a work that consists of a huge pile of delectable candies," the woman asks. She recites the question slowly, calmly, seriously. She clearly enunciates each word, emphasizing their individual meaning and the reality of the question, not leaving much room for ambiguity. Her voice makes it difficult for listeners to escape the seriousness of the question.

The audio guide makes indifference toward the installation increasingly difficult, because it puts the role of the listener into question. Granted, museum visitors being confronted with their own wants, the affordances of the artworks in front of them and the questions triggered by the encounter is a core aspect of many of Gonzalez-Torres's works. Still, these artworks may not always be able to engage visitors. I want to exemplify this by way of Gustav Borgersen's (2017) review of the *Participation* exhibit in Trondheim Art Museum. In his review, Borgersen recalls the opening day of the exhibit. While there, he overhears a woman speak in reference to one of the exhibited works, Gonzalez-Torres's "*Untitled*" (*NRA*) (1991), which was on loan from the Astrup Fearnley Museum. As is the case for "*Untitled*" (*Blue Placebo*), visitors can help themselves to parts of "*Untitled*" (*NRA*), which consists of a stack of posters. "I'll just grab a couple of the Gonzalez-Torres posters" the woman said according to Borgersen – "the last one I had was ruined the last time we moved" (Borgersen 2017, 62, my translation).

Similarly, visitors who encounter "*Untitled*" (*Blue Placebo*) for the second, third or fourth time may be less affected by it than they were in their first encounter. Like the woman in Borgersen's anecdote, they might still go through the motions of what the work expects of them, pocketing a piece of candy before hurriedly moving on to the next artwork. For such visitors, the confrontation of the interests and suggestions of the agents surrounding them (viewed as potentially affective forces) may not take hold. If, as Sara Ahmed (2010, 30) suggests, one can

understand affect in terms of “how we are touched by what we are near”, the app’s audio guide affords a closer connection between the visitors and “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) as an aesthetic and affective object. It does so by emphasizing conflicting choices on how visitors may act in response to the candy installation, embedding the affordance of the artwork in a mediated narrative. Thus, the audio guide may jolt moral judgement, making visitors aware of the transitory aspects of their encounter. It may push them from affecting/being affected toward recognizing the affect and emotionally experiencing it. As Massumi notes, “the experience of a change, an affecting-being affected, *is redoubled by an experience of the experience*” (Massumi 2015, 4, my emphasis). By articulating the choices visitors are faced with, the audio guide might trigger such a “redoubling”: An added intensity, a qualitative depth to the experience. As such, the app potentially contributes to incite both affective movement and emotional response.

Early in the recording, the audio guide narrates the conflicting acts of helping oneself to pocketfuls of candy or refraining from touching the work, presenting these as possible choices for visitors to make. However, it is not until the end of the recording that the voice reveals the crucial fact: That helping oneself to candy is an affordance that can be actualized, as opposed to a theoretical possibility where the act that is physically afforded is prohibited by institutional rules. While this information is hinted at, rather than explicitly stated, one is likely left with the impression that helping oneself with sweets is allowed. Alternatively, listening to the audio guide could spark further uncertainty in visitors who might question what the voice in the app means, and if they really are meant to physically reach out and touch the work. A consequence of such uncertainty may be the strengthening of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) as a social object (in the sense attributed to the term by Simon), sparking further conversation between visitors.

From Inviting Cognition to Inviting Sensation

In accordance with the reigning participation paradigm, participatory efforts in museum education are generally hailed as inclusive and visitor-centered, as I noted in chapter 1. Among the objectives of participation in this context is to provide tailored experiences that somehow activate visitors (Elffers and Sitzia 2016, 47-48). In the Astrup Fearnley Museum app, the tailored narrations to adults and children/youth mediate the materiality of the work in different manners and invite differing forms of action and reflection vis-à-vis the artwork.

In the children’s audio guide, which is only available in Norwegian, one hears the voice of a young woman, similar to that in the recording aimed at adults. But while the voice speaking to adults is serious and assertive, though still kind and calm, the voice addressing young visitors

lacks this serious demeanor. It has an energized eagerness to its tone, and a sense of curiousness as it articulates a series of questions:

Look at that artwork! Can you see what it is made of? The artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres has made an artwork of candy. The blue candies are spread out on the floor like a shiny blue ocean.

The artist made this work in remembrance of his partner, and it consists of 130 kilos of candy – the same weight of the artist and his partner combined.

What do you think it feels like to touch this artwork? What sound do you think it makes? What does the candy taste like? Go ahead, try it! In the museum, you are usually not allowed to touch the artworks, but if you want to, you are allowed to touch, smell and taste *this* artwork.³⁸

It is not unusual for the tone and content of information directed toward children or youth to differ from that aimed at adults. Controversial or difficult topics may require museum educators to reflect on what information to include or omit, and how information is broached and presented. Such reflection is important to ensure that the target audience is able to process the information they are provided in constructive ways. In the case of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*), difficult subject matters associated with the work range from (queer) sexuality and AIDS to death and politics. These are sensitive topics, but it is notable that the audio guide for children makes no mention of any of them at all, as these themes are generally understood to play pivotal roles in approaching, understanding and appreciating the work.

The recording omitting as much as a hint of controversy appears more clearly when looking at an inaccuracy in my above translation of it. In the original Norwegian reading, the word used in place of my translated term “partner” is “kjæreste” (for instance in the sentence “the artist made this work in remembrance of his partner”). In Norwegian, “kjæreste” is the commonly used, ungendered term for the English terms “boyfriend” and “girlfriend.” One may consider “kjæreste” to be a more neutral term than the Norwegian word “partner” which, when used romantically, may commonly (though not always) refer to a same-sex partner. In comparison, the adult aimed recording speaks of Gonzalez-Torres experiencing “the death of his partner Ross to AIDS”. By avoiding gendered references, and references to death and disease (save for the subtly included “in remembrance of”), the audio recording for children omits core dimensions of the work.

³⁸ Audio recording for children and youth on “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) in the Astrup Fearnley Museum app, accessed on December 13, 2017, my translation.

Although one can only speculate on the reasons for these omissions, they do not necessarily stem from wanting to “shield” younger audiences from difficult topics. Art education for children generally relies on approaches that are not primarily cognitive, and which may engage children in creative acts vis-à-vis “adult” artworks (Solhjell 2001, 177). Younger children, in particular, tend to approach objects with a sense-based attention to the here-and-now (Samuelson 2013, 47-48). It is not strange, then, that the audio guide for children gives weight to sense-based experience and the materiality of the work, inviting young visitors to engage by listening to, touching, smelling and tasting “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*). Still, such a weighting is not entirely unproblematic. Asking children to dive headfirst into the artwork, telling them to act without also telling them to reflect, may contribute in creating a reality where art serves to satisfy needs instead of challenging perceptions, as Kristine Ketola Bore (2017) argues. One may ask what purpose it serves, or what value it creates, when children are asked to reflect upon the taste and smell of the candy on the floor, without them knowing that what they are tasting can be equated with someone’s vanishing body and someone’s loss.

One can understand the vanishing of the candy in “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*), as it is eaten by museum visitors, as acts of transubstantiation (Searle 2000). The term refers to an actual (as opposed to a merely symbolic) transformation of the bread and wine used in the Eucharist rite³⁹ into the body and blood of Christ. In an article on the meaning and use of ordinary food in Eucharist, theologian Edward Phillips (2017) shares a relevant anecdote of religious educators teaching Catholic children about the Eucharist rite. The educators did not have a difficult time convincing the children that the consecrated host (the wafer used in the rite) was the body of Christ. They did, however, have a hard time convincing the children that the wafers were, in fact, bread. “Perhaps”, Phillips writes, “this was merely a Catholic joke to illustrate the point that communion wafers did not look, feel, or taste like ordinary bread, implying that it should” (Phillips 2017, 24).

The Astrup Fearnley Museum does not attempt to convince visitors of any age that what is laid before them are the actual bodies of Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Ross Laycock in the material form of cellophane-wrapped candy. At least not with the same insistence of the educators in Phillips’s anecdote. But as a medium (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2000), the museum points to the

³⁹ The Eucharist is by some denominations referred to as the Holy Communion.

pile of candy and asserts that it is 1) art and 2) that one of its physical attributes – its weight – is the sugary manifestation of two specific human bodies. For visitors, the voices speaking in the app’s audio guides are the embodiments of the museum institution. They carry weight that, in a sense, is comparable to that of a Catholic priest proclaiming that the strange-looking piece of bread one has been handed is the body of Christ.

In the ritual that is an art museum visit,⁴⁰ the authority which the audio guide voices speak with is significant. While it is up to the visitors to interpret what their eating a piece of candy entails, the audio guides narrate the bodily connections of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) in ways which incite differing responses. Adults are told that there is an equation between the weight of the work and the weight of the artist and his partner. They are informed of Laycock’s AIDS-related death and given an interpretation of the meaning of the word “Placebo” in the title of the work. Adult visitors are also told that they take part in the artist’s loss when they consume the candy. Among these, only the first piece of information is conveyed to young app users.

I have already argued that the adult-aimed audio guide may afford a stronger connection between museum visitors and “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) as an aesthetic and affective object by mediating conflicting choices. While the app does not present its young listeners with the same choices, and it does not explicitly address the ethical aspects of taking a piece of candy, it does imply the latter in two instances. First, when the weight of the work is equated with human bodies and again when listeners are told that even though museum objects cannot usually be touched, this specific work is an exception. Although young listeners are primarily told to act (by helping themselves to candy) and sense (by savoring the touch, taste, smell and sound of the work), the audio guide may also spark questions of meaning, consequence, transition and morality. It may make young visitors ask themselves why they can touch this artwork, but not the others. They might wonder why the weight of the artwork is important, or what happens if they take a piece of candy and the weight of the installation changes. Or they might ponder how big a pile of candy their own weight would produce. Although the children’s recording omits central contextual information, it provides enough information for such questions to be asked, and for the embodied action vis-à-vis the work to be reflected upon.

⁴⁰ As Carol Duncan (2005, 78, 81-82) argues, art museum experiences have a ritual character, formed by the spatial environment and elements of performance, purpose, contemplation and transformation.

While the audio guide for children mainly works as a push toward sense perception, the audio guide for adults largely pushes toward cognitive efforts, interpretation and intellectual reflection. The two audio guides available in the app thus invite differing forms of visitor participation. In part through the information they include and omit, and in part through how they narrate and voice this information: With a serious, contemplative tone for adults, and a tone of gleeful curiousness for children and youth. There is a mind/body divide of sorts between the two versions. From a participatory perspective, the recordings invite vastly differing forms of engagement, although they both encourage visitors to eat a piece of candy from the pile, be it implicitly or expressly. Unsurprisingly, the form of participation encouraged for children is playful and explorative. For adults, it is contemplative. More surprising, perhaps, is that the agency of the child and the agency of the artwork (i.e. what these entities *do*) receive close to equal emphasis in the children's recording (e.g. "look at that artwork" / "what sound do you think *it makes?*"). In the adult's audio guide, the narration shifts to weighting the agency of the visitor. Here, the ethical dilemma of their situation, and how it affects the visitor, are the emphasized aspects.

Focusing on adult visitors, this invites the question of what is lost when the adult-aimed audio guide does not give greater emphasis to both the sense-based experience and the agentic forces of the artwork. So far, I have argued that the audio guide for adults may highlight the affectiveness (the transition from one state to another) of the aesthetic encounter between a visitor and "Untitled" (*Blue Placebo*). However, the audio guide may also serve to obfuscate this aspect of the work by intellectualizing the act of taking a piece of candy. A closer look at how the installation conceptualizes states of transition may be clarifying in this regard.

I have already argued that an aesthetic encounter with "Untitled" (*Blue Placebo*) designates sequences of lacking and wanting (Cetina 1997). This understanding does not only entail that the artwork as such is constantly shifting and unfolding, but that visitors are as well. There is a mutually affective incompleteness to both "Untitled" (*Blue Placebo*) and the human perceiver. And, as has been theorized by Bishop (2008, 115), Gonzalez-Torres's candy spills particularly express the incompleteness and lack of autonomy of the latter. Museum visitors exist as "an effect of being-in-common with others" (ibid. 115) as Bishop puts it. The relations that the candy spills contribute to establish, then, are engendered by the dynamic unfoldings of being-in-common, and of co-creation, materialization, disappearance and transition. The sweets, alluding to vanishing bodies, are dispersed into the bodies of visitors, in transitions infused with mortality as well as eroticism (ibid. 115). As Gonzalez-Torres puts it,

I'm giving you this sugary thing; you put it in your mouth and you suck on someone else's body. And in this way, my work becomes part of so many other people's bodies... For just a few seconds, I have put something sweet in someone's mouth and that is very sexy (Gonzalez-Torres, quoted in Bishop 2008, 115).

It is clear, then, how one can understand the act of consuming the body of another, in the form of a piece of candied art, to be transitory. It is affective in the sense that it causes the passing of a threshold (Massumi 2015, 4): A shift from one state to another. Or rather, a shift from one state to several consecutive states. Whether the candy melts on the tongue and slowly dissolves before being gulped down the throat toward the stomach, or is rapidly chewed and crushed into sharp, tiny pieces as it blends with saliva in a sugary mixture that is ultimately swallowed, it has not disappeared. It has transitioned, become something else. And so, in a way, has the visitor, as the two are combined in a whole new way.

The act of consumption – which is both crude and sensual, involving teeth and tongue, saliva and organs – is an important part of the transition of both the work and the visitor. So is the sound of the cellophane paper being unwrapped, the smell of the candy, the feeling and taste of it inside the mouth, and the affects and emotions these sensations elicit. Similar in character, the sweet smell and taste of the bright white pieces of candy are reminiscent of camphor, menthol or peppermint. While the smell is subtle, the taste is strong, but ambiguous. Is it a pleasant taste? Is it nauseating? Is it the taste of love or sickness? The affects, emotions, memories and associations brought forth by eating a piece of candy contribute to further shape the aesthetic encounter with *“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)*.

Eating a piece of candy is central in the audio guide for children, which focuses on smell, taste and touch. In the audio guide for adults, however, the act is left entirely unmentioned. The adult-aimed recording only references picking up a piece of candy, noting that this will make the visitors part of the artist's loss. Arguably, the audio guide for adults narrates and mediates the actions of the visitors in a clinical, intellectualized way, which obfuscates the bodily and sensory aspects of *“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)*. Gonzalez-Torres's use of sweets implicates saliva, which gives his candy spills a transgressive edge, especially if one considers the public's anxiety toward bodily fluids when the AIDS epidemic peaked in the late 1980s (Bishop 2008, 139). Directing aesthetic sensibility toward how the candy feels and tastes in the mouth is not merely an entryway into acts of reflection that suit the way children process art. Nor are these “childish” considerations in a derogatory sense. Rather, such considerations hinge on sensory processes tied to the themes raised by the work. Yet, they are not addressed in the audio guide for adults, which provides an intellectualized take on the transformative act of taking part in the work's artistic device.

Nevertheless, the app's mediation of "*Untitled*" (*Blue Placebo*) might make the affectiveness of the work take hold in visitors. That is, to make it recognized and felt. Both audio guides differ from the information given on the object label in *The World is Made of Stories* in terms of information content, narrative structure and medium. Crucially, the audio guides are the vocal manifestations of the Astrup Fearnley museum. Experientially, there is an affective difference between reading a text (only "hearing" one's own voice when reading it) and listening to the voice of another. Listening to the audio guides, the visitors can take in the emotions expressed in each recording (cf. Brennan 2004, 51), and a transition from one state to another occurs, potentially transforming the atmosphere that characterizes the encounter and the affective presence of "*Untitled*" (*Blue Placebo*). Of course, the eagerness and curiosity in the children's audio guide do not necessarily render the atmosphere in *The World is Made of Stories* appearing as free, open and experimental as that of the *Participation* exhibition at Trondheim Art Museum. Nor do they necessarily render young listeners eager and curious. But the app taps into the affectiveness and emotions that "*Untitled*" (*Blue Placebo*) and the onsite mediating situation engender, and it contributes to produce new composites and openings for the participating agents to affect and be affected.

Same Sound, New Wrapping?

The audio guides are prominent features of the Astrup Fearnley Museum app, but how does the app mediation of "*Untitled*" (*Blue Placebo*) differ from traditional audio guides? From a diversity perspective, does the app bring something new to the table? Audio guides have held a longstanding presence in museums, as handheld audio technology was first developed and introduced in the 1950s. The very first handheld visitor guides were the Stedelijk Museum's Short-Wave Ambulatory Lectures (1952). The lectures were what Loïc Tallon describes as "a closed-circuit shortwave radio broadcasting system in which the amplified audio output of an analog playback tape recorder served as a broadcast station" (Tallon 2008, xiii). Transmission happened via a device receiving radio signals – a *loop aerial* – installed at various locations in the gallery rooms. Ambulatory Lectures were recorded onto magnetic tapes and subsequently broadcast through the aerial. When inside the loop, visitors would pick up the signal through headphones attached to a portable radio receiver (ibid. xiii). Although the system was a technological achievement at the time, it had its downsides. Visitors with a receiver were only able to listen to the same specific portion of commentary at a time (ibid. xiii-xiv). Consequently, in the words of Tallon, "groups of visitors would move through the galleries and look at exhibits as if guided by an invisible force, in complete synchronicity" (ibid. xiv).

Historically, the “invisible guiding force” has been a recurring worry in discourse on handheld visitor technologies. Illustrative of this is the warning given in a 1960s Museum Journal review:

It is a fact beyond a doubt that a great many visitors like to wander at will, stand and stare, and equally dislike any breath of regimentation. There is a danger that with the wide application of mechanical gadgets the quality of visitors may suffer. There are many who would be dismayed if they saw throughout the building people with black boxes around their necks pass by with a faraway expression in their eyes... guided by some mysterious forces they walk, turn, and stop in almost synchronized precision before exhibit after exhibit. (“Editorial” in *Museums Journal* no. 60, August 1960, 112, quoted in Tallon 2008, xx)

Despite technological advancement, the potential disadvantages of using handheld guides have remained much the same. Today, concerns tied to the use of handheld guides relate to visitors being too focused on the device to take notice of their environment, their peers and the exhibited objects – or alternatively, only gravitating toward the objects that are covered by the guide (Lanir et al. 2013, 444-446). Additional concerns relate to lack of visitor control of the experience and limited possibilities for personalization in “one-size fits-all implementations” (Roussou and Katifori 2018, para. 4). Although these are generally recognized as relevant concerns, they do not stand uncountered. While some studies indicate that digital visitor technologies work as possible distractors, Ben Gammon and Alexandra Burch (2008, 39) point out that “there is considerable counterevidence” that well-designed visitor technologies can “increase visitors’ engagement with other objects”. And as Tallon notes, “handheld digital technologies have the potential to mediate personally rewarding museum experiences that no other medium can replicate” (Tallon 2008, xviii).

Continuous developments in hardware, software, functionality and content creation have made increasingly powerful handheld guides possible, better utilizing the potential of handheld media (Tallon 2008, xiv). This potential is tied to the personal relation between the device and the user. With the converging technologies of mobile phones, digital cameras and portable media players, handheld technologies are firmly in the hands of a wide public, and museum visitors are increasingly literate and comfortable with these modes of engagement. These are technologies, as Tallon notes, “with which users have a ready-made, intuitive relationship” (ibid. xviii). For museums using app technology to tap into this relationship, added positives are that visitor-owned devices are cost-effective and may be used as both onsite and offsite resources.

Because the Astrup Fearnley Museum app is developed as an onsite guide, I have focused my analysis on onsite use. Still, I would like to add a brief note on the offsite encounters the app enables. In *The World is Made of Stories*, the app served to deepen the experience of visitors by highlighting the affectiveness of “Untitled” (*Blue Placebo*). The offsite role of the app may be similar, although there is a shift in the participatory role of its content. When accessed onsite,

the photograph of the installation mainly confirms that app users have found the object-entry corresponding to the work they have encountered in the gallery room. For offsite app users, however, this image is their only visual access to “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*), unless they venture on to other digital platforms where the work is mediated. Because the audio guides in the app provide descriptive accounts of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) and the possibilities of onsite visitors, it may be easier for offsite app users to gain an emotional connection with the work. This is especially the case for those listening to the audio guide for adults, wherein the voiced descriptions of the choices onsite visitors must make emulate the affectiveness of being confronted with the presence of the installation. Additionally, there are encyclopedic qualities to the app: It provides information on “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*), Gonzalez-Torres and the artworks shown alongside the candy spill in current and previous Astrup Fearnley exhibits. As such, the app may work to enrich the experience of both onsite and offsite visitors.

Expanding the Artistic Device of Dispersion through Social Media

Handheld digital devices for museum visitors encompass a range of media and functionalities. Multimedia tours, digital cameras, MP3 players and mobile phones are all grouped in the same category as audio guides (Tallon 2008, xiv). While there is no single term that categorizes these disparate technologies, one can discern three distinguishing features: They are digital, mobile and personal (ibid. xviii). The Astrup Fearnley Museum app is thus part of a spectrum of technologies where the basic affordances are the same: Handheld devices that afford looking at and/or listening to multimedia content while moving through exhibition spaces. There is little in the app’s interface or functionality that separates it from comparable handheld visitor technologies, as they build on the same “techno-cultural” (Gran et al. 2018, 61) conventions.

What is interesting in the case of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*), however, is that the Astrup Fearnley Museum app designates a multi-layered participatory invitation. The museum invites participation by hiding the scope of the affordances of the artwork in the app, leaving it up to the visitors to discover its “secret”. But the museum also invites participation by simply encouraging visitors to use the app, and thus their personal devices. In *The World is Made of Stories*, there was an atmospheric openness to using smartphones in the museum environment. To offer an illustrative anecdote, most of the visitors who paused to look at “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) during my visits did not take a piece of candy, but many of them held out their phones to snap a picture.



Figure 6: A museum host watches as two visitors appear to be photographing “Untitled” (Blue Placebo) and Human Statue (Frank Benson, 2005). Also pictured (left to right): Presidential Seal (Tom Sachs, 2004), Stranger #54 (Glenn Ligon, 2011) and Untitled (Portrait) (Richard Prince, 2014).

When the smartphone and photographic practice become participants in the aesthetic encounter, one may ask whether photographing “Untitled” (Blue Placebo) is a distracting or distancing act. Does it somehow hinder the engagement of visitors with the artwork? As Kristin Diehl, Gal Zauberaman and Alixandra Barasch (2016) suggest, this may not be the case. Taking photographs may increase “the extent to which one attends to and is immersed in the experience itself” (ibid. 120) because it potentially directs “greater visual attention to aspects of the experience one may want to photograph” (ibid. 119). And as noted by Jill Walker Rettberg, everyday photographic practice works as a way of “heightening our own daily experiences and making them special to ourselves” (Rettberg 2014, 26).

Photography has long been about preserving perfectly captured moments for posterity, freezing the past (Barthes 2001 [1980]) and forever embalming what has been (Bazin 1980 [1945]). With the advent of digital photography, the popularization of smartphones and ubiquitous connectivity, this has changed. Now, digital photography works, as Mette Sandbye points out, as “at the same time a social practice, a networked technology, a material object and an image” (Sandbye 2012). Photography now mediates presence, a sense of the here-and-now (Sandbye 2012; Villi 2015), and the instantaneous sharing of photographs through social media has

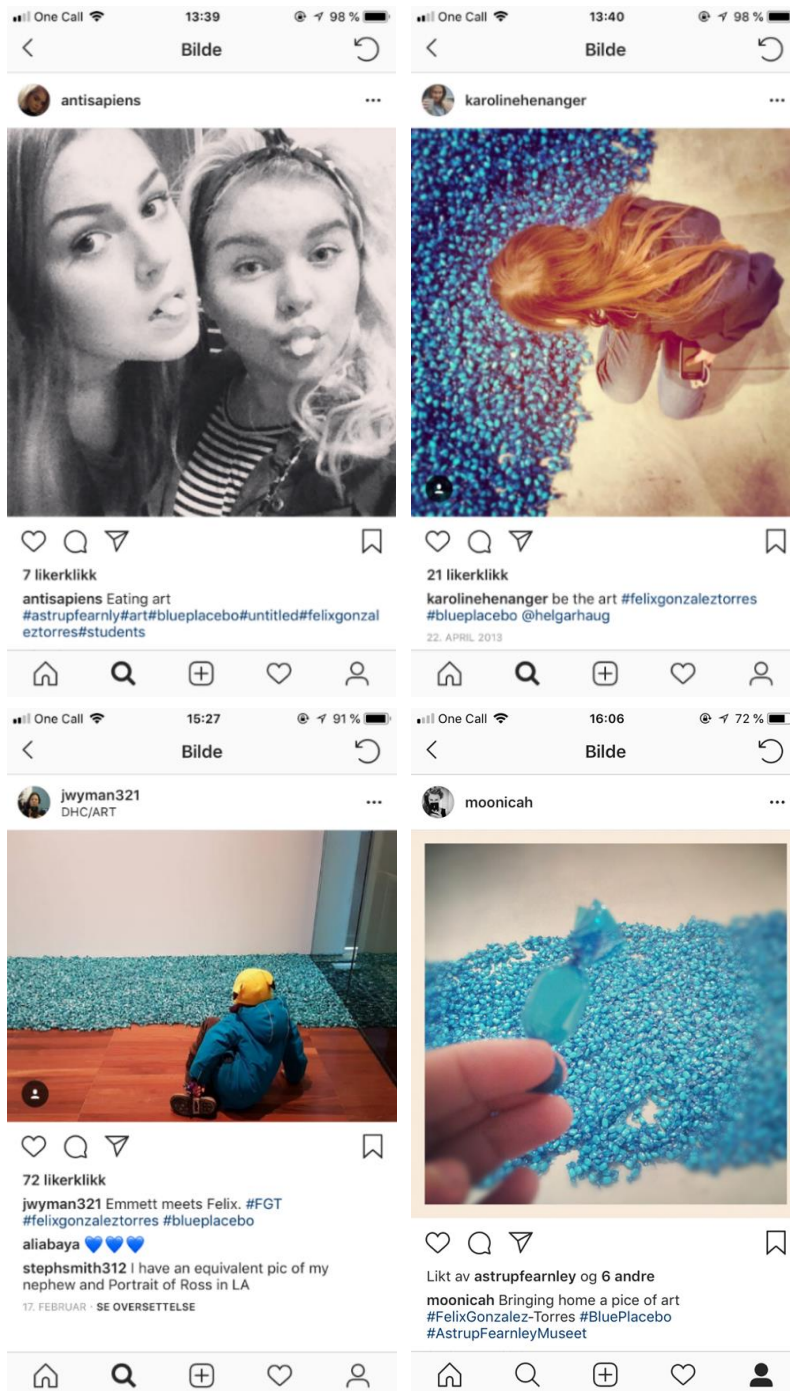
become embedded in photographic practice. The Astrup Fearnley Museum app further encourages social media sharing through an in-app shortcut that affords users easy access to the social media apps installed on their phone. Notably, taking and sharing photographs of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) in social media contributes to expand the artistic device of dispersion to an online environment that did not exist when the artwork was first conceived. Museum visitors may now digitize and re-mediate the work in their own visual and narrative framing, using photography, aestheticizing filters, text and hashtags. The popular image-sharing platform Instagram demonstrates how such re-mediation may occur.

Instagram was released as an app in 2010 and has become the embodiment of the new era of personal mobile photography (Manovich 2017, 11). From a single device, users can capture, edit and publish photographs, search for and view the photographs of other users and interact with them by liking and commenting (ibid. 11). As Lev Manovich points out, Instagram users tend not to situate themselves outside of the scene they photograph. Instead, they are “*in the scene, in the situation, in the moment*” (ibid. 125), narrating their own life and encounters:

[Instagram photos are] similar to video games which use first person/third person narrator. In the case of Instagram, the narrative is about the author travelling through the game world, encountering other people and objects, participating in interesting situations, and having emotionally satisfying experiences. Like a person navigating worlds in a game—and unlike a tourist observing from a distance—contemporary Instagrammer is immersed in the experiences, moments and situations. (ibid. 125)

The personal encounters of onsite visitors, as I have touched upon, always and already have a social dimension. But through social media, these encounters take on another layer of sociality. Mediated through Instagram, museum visitors and “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) both take part in new composites, new nexuses of participation structured by hashtags such as #blueplacebo, #art and #FGT. One such composite is the mediated entanglement of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) and appropriation artist Elaine Sturtevant’s repetition of Gonzalez-Torres’s installation.

In *Gonzalez-Torres Untitled (Blue Placebo)* (2004, see figures 7 e-f), Sturtevant replicates the candy spill in a manner that is subtly inexact and near-indistinguishable from Gonzalez-Torres’s work. There are ties and tensions between the two artworks, as Sturtevant’s appropriation further elaborates on the questions of authenticity, materialization and transformation already raised by the consumable yet always replenishable, disappearing yet always re-appearing “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*). On Instagram, these works are virtually entangled in search results for, among other hashtags, #blueplacebo.



Figures 7a-d: Gonzalez-Torres's "Untitled" (Blue Placebo) on Instagram. Screenshots taken July 10, 2018 on an iPhone 6. Images found using #blueplacebo.

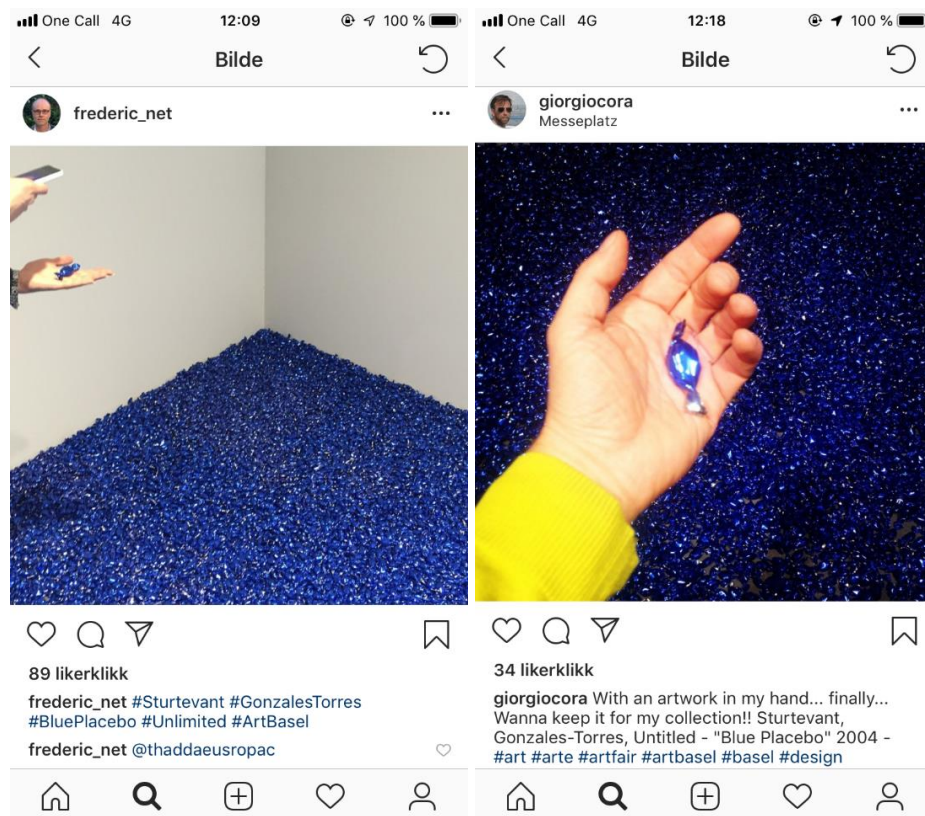


Figure 7e-f: Sturtevant's Gonzalez-Torres Untitled (Blue Placebo) (2004) on Instagram. Screenshots taken January 2, 2019 on an iPhone 6. Images found using #blueplacebo

Rather than being exhibited alongside each other in a curatorially staged and artistically contextualized environment, the virtual presence of Gonzalez-Torres and Sturtevant's works is structured by the agency of the Instagram interface. Arguably, the interface works to further conflate the two installations, as its mediation makes it difficult to distinguish which work is depicted in a given image. The perhaps most telling distinction between them is the presence of the hashtag "Sturtevant" beneath some of the images that depict the appropriation-based work.

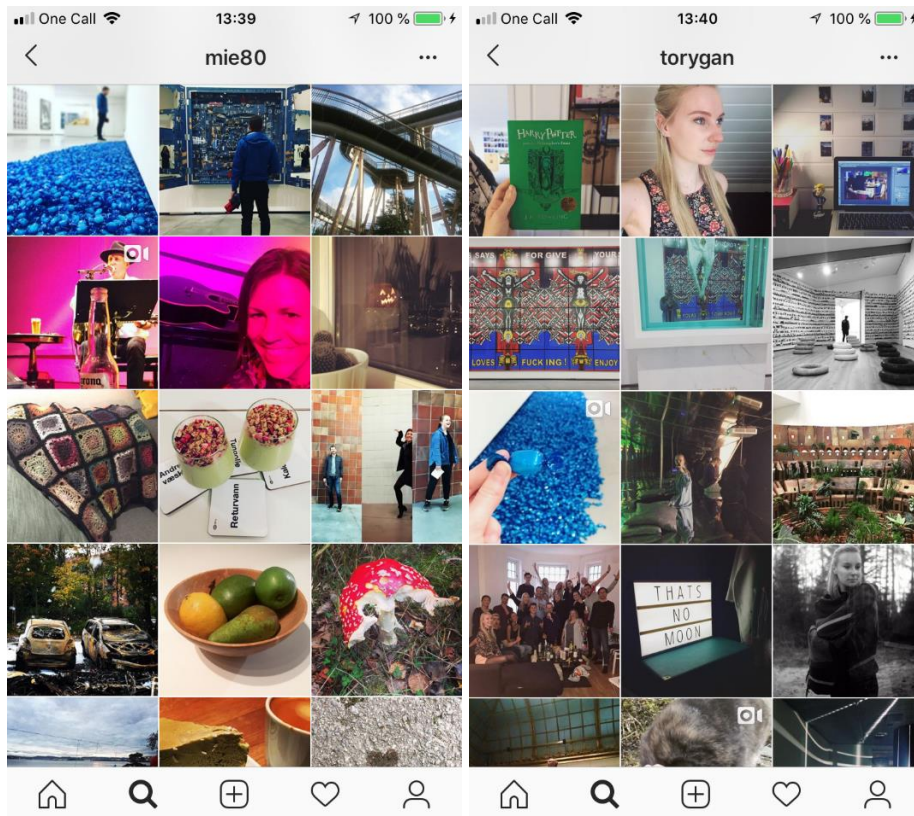
Another nexus of participation engendered by Instagram is the convergence of *Untitled* ("Blue Placebo") with the personal re-mediations and narratives of museumgoers. These are shaped by the messages conveyed by visitors through captions or hashtags, such as "eating art" or "Emmett meets Felix" (see figures 7a and 7c), and by the aestheticized and filtered forms in which the images of *Untitled* ("Blue Placebo") appear. When taking a photograph with a smartphone, the app the picture is taken with often suggests running the photo through a filter. Filtered images, as Rettberg notes, show "ourselves, or our surroundings, with a machine's

vision” (Rettberg 2014, 26), making selfies and everyday snapshots seem hazed and unfamiliar. This illustrates how technology filters visual representations (ibid. 26, 28), and how it may participate in the Instagram re-mediation of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*).

While filters are now so commonly used that their defamiliarization effect may wear off, rendering filtered photographs a cliché, “seeing ourselves through a filter” still allows us “to see ourselves anew” (ibid. 26), as Rettberg puts it. As visitors capture and re-mediate onsite encounters with “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) on Instagram, the artwork is dispersed not only in new ways, but in new media forms. As mentioned in chapter 2, the Instagram aesthetic is characterized by craftsmanship and visual perfection (Manovich 2017, 81). As such, one may consider “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) especially “Instagrammable,” a term colloquially used in reference to something that is visually compelling enough that it is “worthy” of sharing on Instagram. The shiny, almost sparkling, blue cellophane paper and the bite-sized candies of Gonzalez-Torres’s installation are not only inviting to the senses of sight, touch and taste. They are also inviting to the smartphone camera and to the Instagram aesthetic.

The Instagram aesthetic may be more about mediating moods and atmospheres (Manovich 2017, 119) than it is about narrativity and storytelling. Still, the narrative framing of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) on Instagram contributes to affect the work as such. There, the artwork becomes part of what one might understand as narratives of the everyday. When users publish photographs to their Instagram feeds, each image appears in a formulaic grid-formation, alongside what is often – in terms of content – a great variety of other photographs. These image composites form narrative mosaics. They illustrate points of interests in the lives of museum visitors who curate their own presence on the social media platform.

On Instagram, then, “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) may work to suggest something about the Instagram user who shared a photograph of it, more so than prompting the “beholder’s ethic” (Bourriaud 2002, 56) that was emphasized in the *The World is Made of Stories*. In the presence of selfies, photographs of food, cars, pets, outdoor excursions and other everyday objects and occurrences, the mediated candy of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) gains a long-lasting virtual presence that runs counter to the vanishing of the onsite installation. Still: While images of museum visitors holding up pieces of candy continue to live on the internet for the foreseeable future, the affective and atmospheric presence of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) is shorter-lived on Instagram than it is onsite. As Instagram users scroll through (what may appear to be) near endless feeds of images, the virtual presence of the candy installation continues to be fleeting.



Figures 7g-h: Narratives of the everyday: “Untitled” (Blue Placebo) as mediated on the Instagram feeds of users mie80 and torygan. Screenshots from Instagram taken July 11, 2018 on an iPhone 6.

3.4. Chapter Conclusion

“Untitled” (*Blue Placebo*) is affective in the sense that it elicits transition(s) – both in the artwork and in the visitors. At the heart of this elicitation is the artistic device of the work: The dispersing of the candy that materializes the installation. However, it is not only the act of helping oneself to a piece of candy that is participatory. Visitors being affected by the possibilities of this act, and its personal, social and moral implications, is a form of participation in its own right. Central in this is the participation of the work itself and its affordances, as well as the affordances of the mediating situation. Shaped by (what may appear to be) the conflicting interest of the artwork, the visitors, the museum hosts and other nearby agents, the virtual act of consuming a piece of candy is affective, regardless of whether it is actualized.

In *The World is Made of Stories*, “Untitled” (*Blue Placebo*) invites visitors to consume what is presented by the Astrup Fearnley Museum to be the sugary embodiment of the artist and his partner. One could compare the invitation made by the work to the Eucharist rite and the act of

transubstantiation, save for a relevant difference. The consequences for unworthily partaking in the Eucharist rite are dreary: “For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body” (1 Cor 11:27-29, KJV). In contrast, there is hardly a right or wrong way for visitors to take part in the ritual of *“Untitled (Blue Placebo)”*. Visitors can pocket a couple of pieces of candy. They can give the installation a hurried glance as they walk past it. They can slowly unwrap a single piece of candy before eating it, savoring its smell and taste. Regardless, these acts all play different parts in the participatory relations of the artwork and the mediating situation it is part of. While the work might invite self-examination, reverence and contemplation in remembrance of the bodies it purportedly materializes, there are no “unworthy” ways in which visitors may engage with it.

Similarly, it is difficult to pinpoint any explicitly right or wrong ways of digitizing museum objects for mobile app dissemination. Focusing on the audio guides in the app, I have been somewhat critical with how these guides focus on certain aspects of *“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)* leaving other, equally pivotal aspects unaddressed. That being said, it is impossible (and, from a museum education perspective, likely undesirable) for handheld visitor technologies to address or encompass every possible theme, interpretation or aspect of a given artwork.

The Astrup Fearnley Museum shapes the experience of its visitors by including and excluding information, by conveying particular narratives and by staging onsite and online mediating situations which push visitors toward specific acts and forms of meaning-making. The mobile app contributes to this, in part by building on long-standing “techno-cultural” (Gran et al. 2018, 61) conventions for museum education efforts through handheld visitor technologies. Its aesthetic value, then, does not lie in it being technologically or functionally innovative, or contributing to “techno-cultural” (ibid. 61) diversity in museum education efforts. Rather, the value of the app is tied to the diversity dimension of “aesthetic-expression” (ibid. 61), as the app contributes to diversify the situation through which visitors may approach, understand and experience *“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)*.

The diversification offered by the app is especially consequential for uninitiated visitors. In *The World is Made of Stories*, they must infer the scope of what *“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)* affords from the museum atmosphere, the behavior of other visitors or museum hosts. Through the app, the vocal embodiment of the museum participates in a way that makes the scope of the affordance more readily perceivable. Moreover, the app mediation of *“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)* emphasizes the “experience of the experience” (Massumi 2015, 4), arguably redoubling the affectiveness of the artwork. The audio guides further contribute to diversify the ways in which

visitors approach *“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)*, by suggesting differing approaches and modes of aesthetic sensibility vis-à-vis the two demographics the audio guides target.

There are also diversifying aspects to the connectivity of the app. Its social media sharing functions and the way in which the Astrup Fearnley Museum encourages onsite visitors to use their personal digital devices open new possibilities for aesthetic participation that include social media networks, interfaces and users. Through their smartphones, museum visitors gain the power to re-mediate *“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)*. By doing so, visitors contribute to expand the artistic device of the artwork in processes of capturing, filtering and sharing that render the candy installation mediated through their own aestheticized everyday narratives. These participatory relations, however, may owe more to online participation culture, social media and handheld mobile technology as such, than they do to the digitization of *“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)* in the Astrup Fearnley Museum app.

Chapter 4

Sleeping Bag (Big) / Sleeping Bag (Small)

As Mediated in the Museum of Contemporary Art and DigitaltMuseum

“As a place holder for identities past and present, the sleeping-bag becomes a container for the embodiment of [...] histories, including the histories of its own making.”

Bailey and Barber 2015, 49.

4.0. Chapter Introduction: Sleeping Bags Not for Sleeping, Encountered in Spaces Not for Camping

In 2005, Siri Hermansen (1969–) made two plaster cast sculptures with titles that resonated with their figurative form and relative size: *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)*. Respectively, the size of the sculptures coincides with an adult-sized and a children-sized sleeping bag, measuring 50 x 200 cm and 40 x 100 centimeters. The white painted sculptures are part of the collection of the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design in Norway. They are also included in the web museum portal DigitaltMuseum, which constitutes the main point of access to digitized collections from Norwegian museums of art and cultural history (Ogundipe 2018, 56; Gran et al. 2018, 58-59). In this chapter, I will discuss the sleeping bags as they are mediated in both of these museum environments.

The onsite mediating situation I examine is *Poor Art – Rich Legacy. Arte Povera and Parallel Practices 1968–2015* (figure 8). The exhibit was on display in the Museum of Contemporary Art (a former venue of the National Museum) from March 13, 2015 through August 14, 2016. As in the previous analysis chapter, my discussion is based on my own two, approximately two-hour long visits to the exhibit on June 11 and 28, 2016, as well as my field notes and photographs. In my discussion on the sleeping bags as mediated in DigitaltMuseum (figures 9a-

b), I refer to the version of the site operational in 2018 (DigitaltMuseum v.4). Toward the end of the chapter, I will also take a comparative look at the online mediation of the sleeping bags in the National Museum's own website⁴¹ as it was operational in the same timeframe.⁴²

Encountering *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* onsite, one will quickly realize that they are “white and hard” and “completely useless” (Olsson 2006, para. 4, my translations) as art critic Tommy Olsson puts it. This may seem like a harsh devaluation of Hermansen's work, but it is not. It is merely pointing out the obvious: These artefacts are not the padded body-length bags made of fabric with which one commonly associates sleeping bags. Although they do resemble “actual”, usable sleeping bags made of fabric, they are plaster cast sculptures. They do not afford a human body cozying up inside them; they do not afford sleeping, camping or any such activities, and neither do the onsite and online environments where museum visitors encounter them. While these facts might seem banal, they are crucial for analyzing the onsite and online encounters *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* participate in. These sculptures represent a specific kind of artefact – the sleeping bag – materialized through a physical substance that effectively differentiates and alienates the artworks from the object they most closely resemble. The plaster firmly designates the sculptures as something “other than”, despite the artworks being perfectly cast into the shape of crumpled-up sleeping bags with every detail down to the zipper teeth meticulously in place.

The materiality of these works solidifies their positions as what I will label intermediary agents. That is, agents that negotiate between and are engendered by differing, or even incompatible forms of being, materialities, positions and practices. As such, I understand *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* as material sites of affect – as transitional intensities materialized. These works historicize and bring into contemporaneous discourses and encounters several sets of practices. One of these is the practice of plaster casting, which from an art historical perspective references longstanding traditions of object replication and dissemination. Another – what I would argue to be the most prominent – is the multitude of materials, practices, environments, events and sociocultural customs associated with the sleeping bag as such.

⁴¹ Accessible via www.samling.nasjonalmuseet.no.

⁴² All screenshots from DigitaltMuseum and the National museum's website were taken on May 12, 2018 via Google Chrome. All references to searches conducted in DigitaltMuseum and the National Museum website were conducted on the same date.



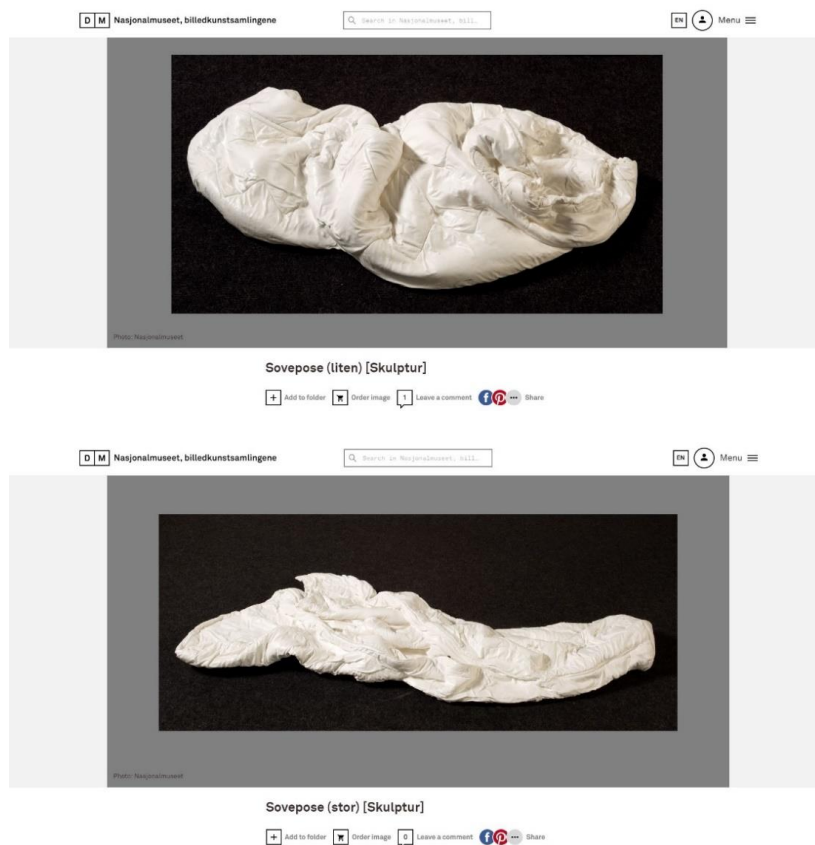
Figure 8: Siri Hermansen. *Sleeping Bag (Big) and Sleeping Bag (Small)*, 2005. Plaster and spray paint. Dimensions: 50 x 200 cm. and 40 x 100 cm. © Siri Hermansen. Courtesy of the Norwegian Visual Artists Copyright Society and the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design.

The sleeping bag is as an object of travel, migration, movement and transition. It is a vessel used by and shaped for human bodies when transitioning and moving in time from night to day, or moving in space from one place to another. The sleeping bag, as put by Rowan Bailey and Claire Barber (2015, 50), “serves as place holder [sic] for identities past and present through its material resonance in the landscape”. As a placeholder, the sleeping bag holds diverse historical and cultural contexts, spanning from its earliest incarnations in places such as modern-day Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Mongolia and southern Russia, via its use among explorers of Antarctica, to worldwide mass production and circulation in times of military conflict (ibid. 50). The sleeping bag is an artefact tied to history, materiality, human bodies and identities, and to the landscapes and practices in which it has been and is currently being used.

In *Sleeping Bag (Big) and Sleeping Bag (Small)*, an object of utility becomes visual art. In the onsite museum environment, the sleeping bag is displaced, materially, temporally, spatially, and contextually. Fabric is mediated through plaster. A soft, malleable object of movement and transition is hardened and, in a sense, frozen in time. Campgrounds are mediated through gallery rooms. And the range of practices and atmospheres associated with the sleeping bag becomes contained within museal contexts of exhibition and display. The sleeping bag as such

becomes situated within specific discourses and currents in contemporary art and within overarching themes in Hermansen's artistic project, such as contemporary strategies for adaptation and survival (see Hermansen 2016). Furthermore, the sleeping bag becomes placed within exhibition-specific curatorial narratives, modes of presentation and, as I will discuss, exhibition-specific nexuses of agents, affordances, atmospheres and affects.

Through processes of digitization and online mediation, the sleeping bag is displaced once again. Fabric mediated through plaster becomes re-mediated through pixels on a screen, and one can construe the photographs of each sculpture as being frozen moments in and of themselves. In this chapter, my claim is that the digital displacement of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* entails a shift in participatory relations. This shift stems from a DigitaltMuseum mediation that engenders agency, affordances, atmospheres and affects that differ from the onsite exhibition context I will discuss, and from the National Museum's website.



Figures 9a-b: *Sleeping Bag (Small) and Sleeping Bag (Big) in DigitaltMuseum.*

In DigitaltMuseum, the sleeping bags are not primarily displayed as artworks situated among other artworks in a curatorial constructed context. They are mediated as isolated museum objects, distanced only by a couple of mouse clicks from the diverse collection of museum objects in the DigitaltMuseum environment, whose affordances and atmosphere are more archival than museal. Considering Böhme's claim that what humans first perceive is "neither sensations nor shapes or objects or their constellations," but "atmospheres, against whose background the analytic regard distinguishes such things as objects, forms, colors etc." (Böhme 1993, 125), it is notable that what onsite and online visitors would immediately perceive are arguably different things – in a very literal sense.

4.1. The DigitaltMuseum Interface

Sleeping Bag (Big) and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* are objects closely bound to each other: Their material and subject matters are identical, their titles and sizes play off one another and they are similar in form. Onsite, curators typically install them side by side, and what visitors encounter is a pair of sleeping bags. In DigitaltMuseum, however, *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* are mediated alone, depicted in separate photographs, displayed on separate object pages. Their mode of display is in accordance with the cataloguing information registered by the National Museum in Primus, the widely used collection management system from which DigitaltMuseum gathers information. And according to the information made available on DigitaltMuseum, *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* are individual artworks. So, while onsite visitors can glance across the room and immediately perceive the presence of both artworks, DigitaltMuseum visitors must search for them.

Searching DigitaltMuseum

On DigitaltMuseum, one possible means of encounter is to discover the sleeping bags by chance, e.g. if the photographs of the sculptures should appear among the objects in the DigitaltMuseum home page collage (figure 10a). The content of the collage consists of an ever-changing selection of DigitaltMuseum objects. A chance encounter could also occur if visitors conduct an unfiltered search using the general term "sleeping bag". In this case, the object entry for each sculpture will appear among the other search results, which mostly consist of historical photographs of "actual" sleeping bags or of people camping (figure 10b). Other ways of finding *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* include searching for them by name or by searching for Siri Hermansen, which presupposes that visitors already know of the works or the artist. Visitors cannot, however, include both works in a single search, nor is it possible for them to find the sleeping bags by searching for the titles of exhibits they have been part of.

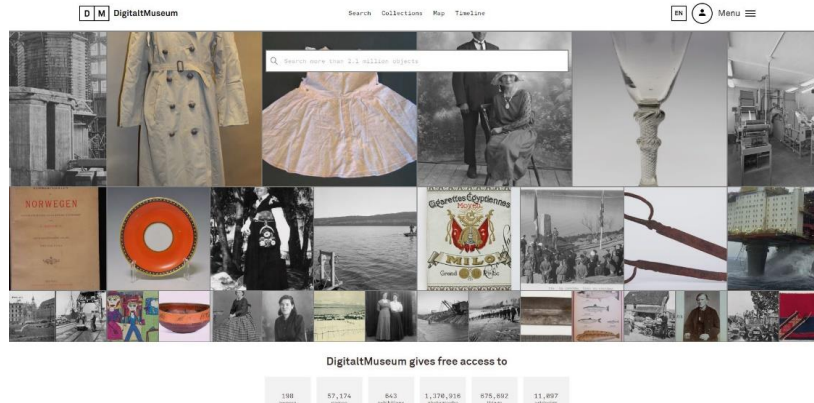


Figure 10a: The DigitaltMuseum home page, featuring a centrally positioned search bar.

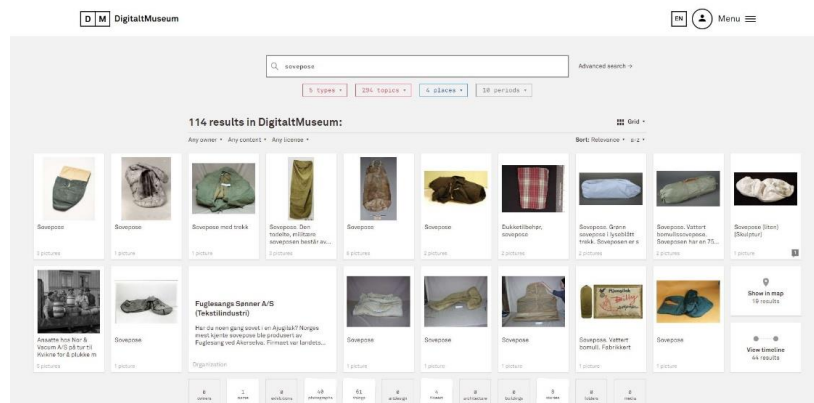


Figure 10b: A May 12, 2018 unfiltered search for the Norwegian term “sovepose” produced 114 results. Most of them were photographs of actual sleeping bags.

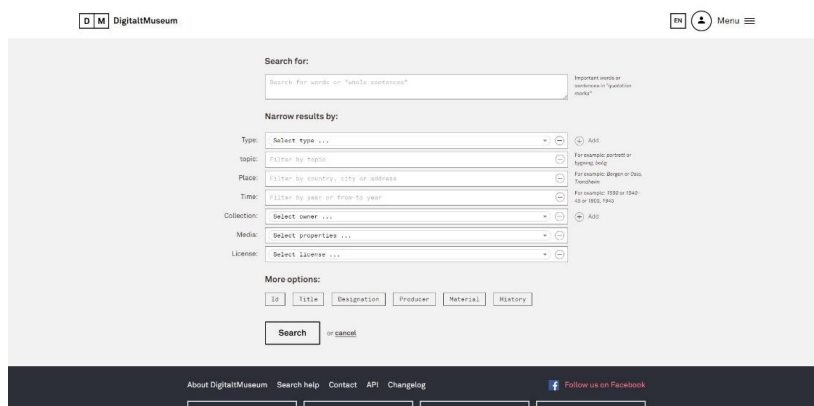


Figure 10c: From the DigitaltMuseum advanced search page, visitors can filter searches according to a range of parameters, such as collection owner, topic, place and time.



Figure 10d: “Employees at Nor & Vacum A/S on excursion to Kvikne to pick cloudberries – departure and homecoming”. Photograph by Schröder from the collection of Sverresborg Trøndelag Folk Museum. Screenshot from DigitaltMuseum.

Visitors who find *Sleeping Bag (Big)* or *Sleeping Bag (Small)* by way of search can navigate directly from the object page of the artwork to the object page for the next search result produced by their initial search. Hence, whether it is possible to navigate from *Sleeping Bag (Big)* to *Sleeping Bag (Small)*, or vice versa, depends on the parameters of the initial search. When institutions add objects to DigitaltMuseum, the order search results appear in changes. Consequently, the object entries visitors can navigate between depend both on their manner of search and on contingency. These factors determine whether visitors are able to find both sleeping bags, as they might not appear on the same search result page.

Let me offer a few examples. On May 12, 2018, I conducted two filtered searches, respectively using the English term “sleeping bag” and the Norwegian term “sovepose”, while limiting the scope to the National Museum’s collection. The searches yielded two results: Hermansen’s sleeping bags. Because *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* were “neighboring” objects in the search results, I could instantly notice their presence and navigate between them. In a third search, I used the Norwegian term “sovepose” (figure 10b) while searching the entire DigitaltMuseum database. Only *Sleeping Bag (Small)* appeared on the first page of the search results. Entering the object page, the interface afforded direct navigation to another object entry (figure 10d). The digitized photographs and newspaper facsimiles in this entry, whose title translates to “Employees at Nor & Vacum A/S on an excursion to Kvikne to pick cloudberries – departure and homecoming”, are part of the collection of Sverresborg Trøndelag Folk Museum. The first black and white image depicts a group of smiling men and women anno 1953, gathered in the back of a vehicle. Loaded onto it are wooden barrels and a few rolled-up sleeping bags.

Virtuality as a Fundamental Mode of Exhibition Practice

I will return to the Kvikne photograph and its relevance shortly, but I first want to touch on the DigitaltMuseum platform as an exhibition venue. Because online exhibition space is effectively unlimited, DigitaltMuseum can have all their digitized material exhibited “at all times” (Gran et al. 2018, 58). But although all DigitaltMuseum objects are always accessible, their presence is virtual, which is a term often used to describe digital realms. Popularized in the 1990s, the notion of “virtual reality” described cyberspace as artificial or illusionary, as something different than “actual” reality. In this thesis, however, virtuality describes a mode of potentiality conditioned by spatial and temporal situations (Müller 2002; Dziekan 2012; Massumi 2014). This concept of virtuality resonates with new materialists thought, because it concerns the potentials that are engendered from relations that exist between events. It concerns instances of interactions, rather than distinct, autonomous objects. As such, virtuality designates a formative dimension (Massumi 2014, 55) of the distributed agency at play in aesthetic encounters.

Understood as a mode of potentiality, virtuality is fundamental in exhibition practice. In the early days of digital museums, to emphasize the participatory role of online environments largely meant to acknowledge that the virtual display mode of the web was another venue for contextualizing museum objects (see e.g. Müller 2002). While this is still a valid point, such a perspective frames the participatory potential of online environments through their usefulness as tools. This implies an anthropocentric stance where digital platforms are inert infrastructures through which human perceivers may endow meaning to museum objects. Even to date, the participatory potential of digital media is often tied to an emphasis on the use of networked environments in a tool-like fashion (Light et al. 2018, 420). While one can certainly consider DigitaltMuseum to be a digital tool, one must also acknowledge the active, generative and platform-specific potency of the platform. Its virtual mode of display, i.e. the ways in which the platform contributes to engender the potential emergence of diverse events, relations and constellations, is crucial for its mediation of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)*.

Well-Established “Techno-Cultural” Conventions

The DigitaltMuseum mediation of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* is constituted largely by their respective object pages, which are identical. To avoid juggling between the sleeping bags, I will take the object page of *Sleeping Bag (Small)* as the basis for my discussion on the online mediation of the sculptures.



Photo: Nasjonalmuseet

Sovepose (liten) [Skulptur]

[+](#) Add to folder
 [x](#) Order image
 [1](#) Leave a comment
 [f](#)
[p](#)
[+](#) Share

ARTIST: Hermansen, Siri
 TITLE: Sovepose (liten)
 IDENTIFIER: NNMK.2006.0016
 CREATION DATE: 2005
 MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES: Gips, spraymaling
 DIMENSIONS: Ca. 40 x 100 cm
 ACQUISITION: Kjøpt 2005

INDEXING TERM: [Bilidende kunst](#)

TITLE:
 NOR: Sovepose (liten) [AVIKSET](#)
 ENG: Sleeping Bag (Small) [AVIKSET](#)
 NAK: Skulptur
 DETAILED LEVEL: Enkeltverk

MATERIALS: Gips/kalk/kritt
 TECHNIQUES: Støpt Bemaitt

[+](#) Add a comment or suggest edits

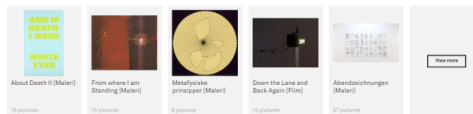
History

PRODUCTION: 2005
 ARTIST: Hermansen, Siri
[+](#) Add a comment or suggest edits

OWNER OF COLLECTION: Nasjonalmuseet for kunst, arkitektur og design
 INSTITUTION: Nasjonalmuseet for kunst, arkitektur og design
 DATE PUBLISHED: December 16, 2015
 DATE UPDATED: September 30, 2017
 DPM-CODE: 021046108653
 UUID: B793C043-CBF8-4CD4-932D-A6D2C3088650

TAGS:
[For adding tags, log in.](#)

Q There are 25,850 results for «Bilidende kunst» in Nasjonalmuseet, billedkunstsamlingene:



W Wikipedia

Wikipedia:Target/Arkiv/2016/Desember; Norges største ledertalenter Dette er kommet en serie nye artikler med ledertalenter kåret år for år foka Norges største ledertalenter 2015. Jeg er i tvil o...
Wikipedia:Target/Arkiv/2012/Februar; Villi någon översätta? Hej! Jag lästade ov mistag upp den tyckens artikeln Vette Backman på WP-bokmål i stället för WP-svenska. Är det någon som vill översätta...
DigitaltMuseum; DigitaltMuseum er en felles, database over samlinger i norske og svenske kunst- og kulturhistoriske museer. Tjenesten ble etablert i 2009 etter en prøveperiode. Databasen utvikles og driv...

Figures 11a-c: Screenshots of the object page of Sleeping Bag (Small) on DigitalMuseum, depicting a photograph of the sculpture, social media sharing options, catalog information, hyperlinked images to other artworks in the collection of the National Museum and hyperlinked Wikipedia excerpts.

The object page of *Sleeping Bag (Small)* (figures 11a-c) has the same visual layout as every DigitaltMuseum object page: On top, there is a menu bar and a photograph of the sculpture. Beneath the image are the title of the object, links to social media sharing options and icons indicating other action possibilities (e.g. “order image”). There is also a list of catalog information, commenting options, hyperlinked excerpts from relevant Wikipedia articles⁴³ and another menu bar. Clearly, DigitaltMuseum exemplifies what theories on new media tend to point out, as noted by Anne-Britt Gran, Nina Lager Vestberg, Peter Booth and Anne Ogundice (2018, 61): A convergence of all forms of pre-existing media in the digital interfaces of contemporary computational communication technologies. The “techno-cultural” (ibid. 61) consequence of this convergence is twofold: Digitization homogenizes “the form through which cultural objects and events are experienced” while also encouraging “diversity of content through the ease and speed of distribution through digital networks” (ibid. 61). DigitaltMuseum embodies this dichotomy: The platform represents a variety of digitized museum content through the same format, “consisting of flat, captioned images on a backlit screen” (ibid. 61).

The DigitaltMuseum homogenization refers not only to similar modes of web display, but to analog forms of object representation where images and text are presented in comparable manners. The portal’s user interface consists of searchable object entries and paragraphs of catalog information next to an image and is comparable, for instance, to an encyclopedia. As such, DigitaltMuseum builds on well-established “techno-cultural” (ibid. 61) conventions with which people are generally familiar (Ogundice 2018, 63-64). This familiarity is tied to the interface environment, but also to photography (digital or digitized) being a common medium through which art is encountered online (ibid. 63). Furthermore, the DigitaltMuseum interface retains ideals of universal design, as the platform aims to be accessed, understood and used by everyone, no matter their age or ability (Gran et al. 2018, 74). This is crucial for DigitaltMuseum as a public platform, and while online access does not altogether remove the barriers some might have for seeking out museum objects, such barriers have “been moved from the doorstep to digital skills” (ibid. 74). Both the sociocultural background and technical ability of online visitors are among the factors that shape their encounters with digitized art. Visitors’ perception of the affordances of the DigitaltMuseum environment is both technologically

⁴³ On May 12, 2018, the Wikipedia excerpts on the object pages of both sleeping bags were irrelevant to the works, containing, for instance, an excerpt from the Wikipedia article on DigitaltMuseum and archive pages from Wikipedia: Torget (the Norwegian version of the Wikipedia: Village pump).

configured by the platform and socially constructed. In other words, visitors' perception of what they encounter through DigitaltMuseum depends on their expected affordances, i.e. their beliefs and expectations of what the platform offers.

Expected and Unexpected Encounters

In DigitaltMuseum, *Sleeping Bag (Small)* is situated among a variety of digitized museum objects. On the platform, fine art reproductions are placed alongside mugshots, historical portraits and architectural views (Gran et al. 2018, 61). An encounter with *Sleeping Bag (Small)* technically affords navigation to this range of digitized content – and thus to object encounters that may potentially join in and affect the participatory relations which *Sleeping Bag (Small)* is part of. How these other objects affect the aesthetic encounter with *Sleeping Bag (Small)* depends in part on how they come into view, the expectations of the visitor and the resonance between the object in question and *Sleeping Bag (Small)*.

A relevant example of this are the affordances offered by the clickable arrow to the right of the photograph of *Sleeping Bag (Small)* on its object page. The arrow points out of frame, toward something that is out of sight. It suggests the possibility to navigate somewhere. But where, and to what? The placement of the arrow, right next to the artwork, may suggest the possibility of further encounters with the work. Visitors may reasonably think that a click on the arrow will lead to additional photographs of the sculpture, perhaps taken from other angles or in an exhibition setting. Clicking the arrow, however, leads to another object page altogether. As mentioned, the content of this new object entry, and whether it is relevant to *Sleeping Bag (Small)*, depends on the manner of search that has led the visitors to the mediated artwork in the first place. For instance: Visitors who entered the object page of *Sleeping Bag (Small)* via the search results for “sovepose” on May 12, 2018, would be led to the Kvikne images. A series of photographs from a 1950s berry picking excursion, seemingly unrelated to *Sleeping Bag (Small)*.

If one perceives the “next” arrow to suggest the possibility of further encounters with *Sleeping Bag (Small)*, being unwittingly led to an unrelated object entry would prove one's expected affordance to be false. Consequently, one might perceive the new and unexpected encounter as an unwelcome confrontation with irrelevant content, brought on by the platform interface. However, such chance encounters initiated by the DigitaltMuseum interface might also contribute in historicizing and contextualizing *Sleeping Bag (Small)*. The Kvikne images portray the every-day use of sleeping bags and serve as material traces of the historical, sociocultural and geographical landscapes in which sleeping bags have been utilized. The photographs bring these practices into the here-and-now encounter. One may thus ask: Could

the affectiveness of the artistic displacement of the sleeping bag, which occurs through *Sleeping Bag (Small)*, be emphasized as the work is mediated in proximity to the Kvikne images?

Considering affect as what Massumi refers to as the “passing of a threshold, seen from the point of view of the change in capacity” (Massumi 2015, 4), the displacement of the sleeping bag in *Sleeping Bag (Small)* is already grounded in affective movement. The sleeping bag sculptures are material manifestations of changes in capacity: Intermediary objects which are engendered by and negotiate between diverse practices, materialities and modes of being. The artworks act as material manifestations of a range of phenomena and their sociocultural histories, agentic capacities, affordances and so on. So if, following Massumi, an entity is defined by the constantly changing capacities it “carries with it from step to step” (ibid. 4), *Sleeping Bag (Small)* carries with it traces of the affordances of a textile sleeping bag, without actually affording sleep, travel, movement or any such activity. The artwork conducts a constant balancing act between conjuring the sleeping bag and foregrounding the artwork’s presence as an artistic representation. It shifts between evoking imagery of soft textile, shelter, travel, migration, nomadism, camping, military employment (and so on), and guiding the attention of human perceivers toward its own material making. Its hard, unmalleable surface is a constant pointing gesture toward its otherness.

However, the affective charge of *Sleeping Bag (Small)* is not constant. As Massumi notes, the ability of an agent to affect (or to be affected) is not fixed (ibid. 4). For DigitaltMuseum visitors, the balancing act that *Sleeping Bag (Small)* carries out through its presence is mediated in an interface environment that is unstable. The interface offers a virtual nexus of diverse object participants (i.e. a collection of digital surrogates) whose presence may or may not occur. The specific interface environments where one encounters *Sleeping Bag (Small)* (e.g. in search result constellations or through back-and-forth navigation between the mediated sculpture and the Kvikne images) affect the affectiveness of the artwork.

In an encounter where both *Sleeping Bag (Small)* and the Kvikne images participate, the latter might contribute to swing the pendulum of aesthetic sensibility in visitors between actual sleeping bags (and the multitude of uses that they afford), and the artistically motivated presence of *Sleeping Bag (Small)*. The tensions between these phenomena may be thus be amplified. Another possible outcome, however, is that one will immediately perceive historical photographs depicting the smiling employees of an oil company as unwelcome participants in the aesthetic encounter with a work of art. One may perceive the images as unexpected and unwanted intruders in the perceptual field structured by the DigitaltMuseum platform. As such, the intruding objects might be discarded as irrelevant or distracting.

One can compare this to what happens when someone is playing a video game and the gameplay abruptly ends due to an interface failure. In video game failure events (from glitches and poorly designed artificial intelligence to hardware failure), the “flow state” of the player is disturbed, as Eugénie Shinkle (2013) argues. The notion of flow refers to gameplay as a creative activity, a process of discovery in which the participating player is immersed. Flow states, as Shinkle notes, indicate a correspondence between the capabilities of the player and their chances of successfully completing a task. In other words, a flow state is a state of control, and in the game, control is asserted by both the player and by the gameworld. To quote Shinkle, when a player enters the gameworld, their “choices and actions [are] limited, and [they] are bound to the terms of engagement of the interface as a visual system and a material artefact” (Shinkle 2013, para. 24). When the interface works properly, it becomes a bodily extension, and the human perceiver becomes “seamlessly articulated with an intelligent machine” (ibid. para. 24).

In these respects, the DigitaltMuseum interface has much in common with gameworld interfaces. As Martin Engebretsen (2013, 73) argues, the object pages of DigitaltMuseum offers a relatively high degree of “flow”. While the museum portal is hardly immersive in the same way a video game would be, the DigitaltMuseum interface offers a cohesive environment, a perceptually coherent world for visitors to navigate. So, when a visitor’s expected affordances vis-à-vis the interface are broken, their state of flow is interrupted. In the case of the Kvikne images, visitors go from having their aesthetic sensibilities directed toward a mediated work of art, to being transported to a neighboring environment (the object page of another surrogate object) in the DigitaltMuseum ecology, by no intention or want of their own.

Though this transportation is not an interface failure per se, the “envelope of perceptual experience” (Shinkle 2013, para. 25), as Shinkle puts it, is nonetheless ruptured. The flow of the encounter with *Sleeping Bag (Small)* is disrupted. Such an event may break the bond between a DigitaltMuseum visitor and the technology of DigitaltMuseum, leaving the visitor powerless as the underlying technology is exposed. What confronts the visitor is no longer a meaningful form or succession of forms which they control. Instead, they are confronted by a DigitaltMuseum interface that acts like a “depersonalized power, a technological other” (ibid. para. 25). The visitor’s response may not be characterized by logic and reasoned perception, but by a visceral reaction, an affective charge (ibid. para. 25). From this perspective, the charge of affect does not add to the aesthetic encounter with *Sleeping Bag (Small)*, but rather takes away from it, inhibiting the visitor from engaging with the mediated work.

The above scenarios exemplify how the DigitaltMuseum interface has the agentic capacity to structure participatory relations. It does so by contributing to determine which surrogate objects

participate in the aesthetic encounter. The interface conditions the possibilities for visitors to approach and interpret the artworks and it shapes the premises for the affectiveness of the encounter. These premises hinge on the object pages of the interface being isolated sub-environments in the DigitaltMuseum ecology. The majority of the DigitaltMuseum content is at any given point hidden from the visitor. Much like the entirety of the game form is unavailable to the player at once, because it is generally encountered through what Shinkle refers to as a “series of finite elements” (ibid. para. 16). In accordance with DigitaltMuseum’s virtual mode of display, the visitor navigates between a finite series of object pages: Isolated, enclosed environments within the larger interface ecology of the platform. While the entirety of the DigitaltMuseum interface forms a cohesive perceptual world in which *Sleeping Bag (Small)* is situated, the artwork is not mediated as part of a stable or cohesive nexus of participating museum objects. Its connection to the rest of the content in DigitaltMuseum is fleeting, short-lived and separated by the interface boundaries of each isolated object page. When encountering *Sleeping Bag (Small)*, then, access to *Sleeping Bag (Big)* is a hidden affordance that may not be actualized. Onsite, however, these factors change.

4.2. The Sleeping Bags in *Poor Art – Rich Legacy*

In contrast to the object pages of DigitaltMuseum, one can describe the mediating situation of *Poor Art – Rich Legacy* as more “open” than isolated. The onsite context included a constellation of curated works, which facilitated mutual material resonances and flows of agency that shaped the presence and affectiveness of the plaster sculptures. Such agentic flows became a prominent part of what contextualized these works for visitors, especially as the sleeping bags were exhibited without much textual information directly pertaining to them. Their object label simply read:

Siri Hermansen
Sovepose (stor) og *Sovepose (liten)* /
Sleeping Bag (Big) and *Sleeping Bag*
(Small), 2005
Gips / plaster
ca 50 x 200 cm og / and ca 40 x 100 cm⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Object label for Siri Hermansen’s *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* in *Poor Art – Rich Legacy*, the Museum of Contemporary Art, 2015-2016.

Presenting visitors with briefly noted catalog information as opposed to interpretative texts, the Museum of Contemporary Art largely refrained from speaking on behalf of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)*. Instead, they are left to “speak” for themselves. They do so through their material presence in space, the ways in which they “go forth” from themselves (Böhme 1993, 122) as part of continuous, multidirectional flows of agency and affect. And in these flows, the staging of atmosphere plays an important part. Because atmospheres exist between the human perceiver and the environment, the making of atmospheres is “confined to setting the conditions in which the atmosphere appears” (Böhme 2013, para. 10), as Böhme notes. These conditions are “generators”, and atmospheres can be staged by utilizing generators to make possible the appearance of a phenomenon (ibid. para. 10). While the material structures of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* stay the same regardless of the exhibit, the atmospheres they co-constitute rely on more than the sculptures as such. Atmospheres depend, as Bjerregaard puts it, on

the manipulation of the space in which the object appears. [...] we are faced with a near endless amount of choices concerning how to let the object go forth from itself by use of lighting, the organization of the space around the object, the way audiences may approach the object etc. (Bjerregaard 2015, 77)

Curators create different atmospheres by utilizing a range of various efficacies from the same material objects, an example which is the display of the same work of art in different exhibits (ibid. 77). In *Poor Art – Rich Legacy*, then, the sleeping bags were spatially mediated through an exhibition specific atmosphere.

The Impact of Arte Povera

Poor Art – Rich Legacy marked the 25th anniversary of the Museum of Contemporary Art. The exhibit was a nod to the museum’s early acquisition policy, which focused on Arte Povera, Land Art, Minimalism and Conceptual Art (Eckhoff and van der Ley 2015). *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* were part of the thematic section *Nomads: Man and Nature*, which highlighted the Arte Povera movement’s attentiveness to natural resources. The wall text in the *Nomads* room revealed the likely intent of the curators to stage an atmosphere that resonated with the theme, by relating the exhibited works to traces of settlements and indigenous ways of life:

Nomads move from place to place in search for new pasture for their livestock. They dismantle and bear their dwellings to the next settlement. People also migrate to where raw materials and jobs can be found. Having exhausted nature’s resources in one place, they move on. The traces and remnants they leave behind might come to be collected by anthropologists and archaeologists.

In their social criticism, artists have at times romanticized indigenous ways of life – as a way of paying tribute to the anti-bourgeois. Several arte povera artists were preoccupied with the urge to preserve natural resources and to study nature’s own capacity for recycling and renewal. [...] ⁴⁵

Practices of nomadism and outdoor-living comprised a distinct spatial presence in the mediating situation of the *Nomads* room. Several of the exhibited works represented forms of shelter and often contained “natural” substances (in a prosaic sense), which further evoked a sense of nature. The exhibited works resonated with the unconventional practices of Arte Povera artists, who would utilize a range of material and immaterial substances. This could include organic matter, industrially manufactured goods and immaterial substances such as sound and moisture (Morris and Flood 2016, 16). Here, visitors found materials that were especially characteristic for Arte Povera: simple, organic substances and artisanal, low-tech materials. Glass and brushwood were especially prominent. Namely because they were the main components in Mario Merz’s spatially enveloping installation *Movements of the earth and the Moon on an Axis* (2002). The igloo dominated the gallery room (figures 12a-c) as well as the thematic and material presentation of the exhibit (Ekeberg 2015). Almost as attention-grabbing, however, was Lara Schnitger’s 2005 installation *Fuck You/Fuck Me Goddess* (figure 12d). The brightly colored textile tipi stood in contrast to the clean glass surfaces and stringent shape of the igloo. The latter, in muted, neutral tones of sheer glass and brown brushwood, appeared as an authoritative but gentle giant next to Schnitger’s more abrasive piece.

⁴⁵ Wall text in the *Nomads: Man and Nature* room of *Poor Art – Rich Legacy*, the Museum of Contemporary Art, 2015-2016.



Figures 12a-b: The Nomads-room seen from both of its two doorways. Sleeping Bag (Big) and Sleeping Bag (Small) with Mario Merz's igloo installation Movements of the earth and the Moon on an Axis (2002).



Figure 12c-d: Installation shots of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)*. Also prominently depicted are Merz's igloo installation and Lara Schmitzer's *Fuck You/Fuck Me Goddess* (2005).

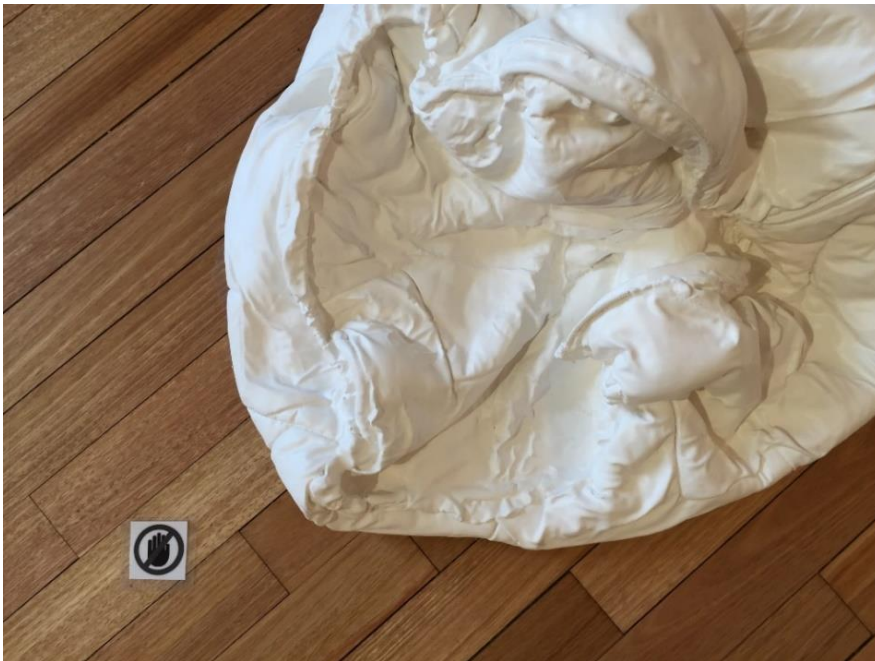


Figure 12e-f: Top image: Detail of Sleeping Bag (Big), with detail of Sleeping Bag (Small) visible in the upper right corner. Bottom image: Detail of Sleeping Bag (Small) with a “do not touch” sticker to the left.



Figure 12g: Detail of Sleeping Bag (Small).

Soft Power and Subtle Subversiveness

Near the center of the floor, *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* lay between two eye-catching installations: An igloo and a tipi. Although the sleeping bags were dwarfed by the installations on either side of them, they possessed a subtle subversiveness, a slowly emerging affective presence. Inconspicuous and modestly sized, they asserted their presence by exercising a more demure and less authoritative command of the visitors and the museum environment. In the *Nomads* room, the agency of the sleeping bags was expressed through what is commonly referred to as “soft power” (Nye 2004; Yano 2013; Dale et al. 2017, 24-25). That is, the ability of an agent to get what it wants not through coercion – e.g. by dominating the perceptual field of visitors who enter the room – but through attraction (Nye 2004, x).

The realistic, yet unfamiliar and not-quite-lifelike materialization of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* appeared oddly enthralling. There was a strangeness to the undeniably hard, useless objects on the floor, in that they at once suggested and rejected the same affordances. As material embodiments of shelter, warmth and refuge, traces of such possibilities seeped through their fabric-like plaster folds, yet they could not be actualized. The odd

simultaneous suggestion of possible and impossible affordances might have drawn curious visitors closer. Leaning in close, one would notice the meticulous details of the sculptures. Rows of tiny zipper teeth, whose uneven surface lacked the smooth appearance of metal. Air bubbles that had formed in the plaster when the sculptures were made. These details were traces of the process of plaster casting as well as the sleeping bag, its conditions of use and its symbiotic existence with human bodies. As if to emphasize this, the zipper of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* is left open (figure 12e), exposing the side of the bag that would have touched the skin of the person using it, had it been an actual, useable object. The opposing affordances and modes of being held by a textile-based object of utility and a plaster cast artwork characterize *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* as works of art. These oppositions and the tensions between them are key in understanding the affective relations the sculptures potentially engender. To better explain the potential affectivity of the sleeping bags, I want to make a brief digression to a project far away from the Museum of Contemporary Art and *the Poor Art – Rich Legacy* exhibit – both in terms of time and place.

Being Put in the Place of Virtual Others

The Sleeping Bag Project was a student enterprise that took place in 2010, in the University of Huddersfield, England. Students in an undergraduate textile craft program salvaged, laundered, embellished and customized discarded sleeping bags found at music festival campgrounds. When finished, they donated the re-designed sleeping bags to the homeless. *The Sleeping Bag Project* is relevant, because it, following Bailey and Barber (2015), highlights that the relation between the maker of the sleeping bag and its user is engendered by material processes of exchange. For example, the student project encouraged consideration of the broader historical, social, political and economic factors that contribute to the condition of homelessness (Bailey and Barber 2015, 66). As the students crafted the sleeping bags, the constant presence of the abstract concept of homelessness allowed them to connect to the phenomenon of homelessness as such, rather than invading the personal and private space of a displaced person (ibid. 66). In this exchange, the tangible sleeping bags worked as conduits: The abstract concept of homelessness was “carried by the sleeping-bag [sic] into the space of the maker” (ibid. 66), as Bailey and Barber put it. In *The Sleeping Bag Project*, the re-designed sleeping bags served as segues between their makers and their future users, and between “[the] affective capacity to put oneself in the place of the other” (ibid. 65).

The artistic and museal displacement constituted by *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* facilitates comparable affectiveness. Encountering the sleeping bags, a change in capacity occurs. What opens up is the possibility to sense the absence of virtual others: Sleeping

bag users who are indicated by the presence of the plaster sculptures, but who are not there. In the *Nomads* room, museum visitors were effectively put in the place of a wide range of virtual others and with the multitude of landscapes and human ways of life associated with the sleeping bag. While physically absent, these people, landscapes and practices also took part in the aesthetic encounter. The virtual sleeping bag users, who were arguably foregrounded through the agentic plaster cast conduits, could have a range of identities. But they would always be a couple, as indicated by the “Big” and “Small” pairing of the plaster sculptures. An adult and a child, perhaps? Maybe backpackers, hikers or tourists? Or they could be homeless, migrants or belong to other marginalized groups, who for some reason or another would need to bring sleeping bags on their journey. Ultimately, visitors to *Poor Art – Rich Legacy* were faced with works of art which refused to offer the same affordances as their form suggests. And as if the solid plaster surface’s resistance toward human bodies was not enough to deter visitors from attempting to reach out and touch the works, “do not touch” stickers on the floor served as additional deterrents – as affective signs of what the sleeping bags and the confines of the gallery room did not afford.

So far, I have made a point of the affective and affordative tensions between actual sleeping bags on one hand, and *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* on the other. But one cannot only consider such tensions to stem from the material structure or form of the works, or from the artistic context in which the plaster casts were situated. Additional factors come into play, and the suggestions and rejections of the sleeping bag sculptures are further emphasized in the exhibit-specific atmosphere of *Poor Art – Rich Legacy*.

Traces of Nature in a Low-tech, Arte Povera Environment

When describing atmosphere, architectural features are a well-suited point of departure, because spatial dimensions matter in atmospheric presence. Churches, for instance, tend to be of a scale that evokes a sense of grandeur and awe, and so do central halls in classic bank buildings (Biehl-Missal 2013, 363). The latter example is relevant, because the Art Nouveau inspired building that housed the Museum of Contemporary Art, from its opening in 1990 to the closing of the venue in the fall of 2017, previously housed the National Bank of Norway.

Construction of the building, filled with symbolically charged decorative elements, finished in 1906, the year after the union between Sweden and Norway was dissolved. As such, the building reflects the political situation Norway was in at the time of construction and its newfound status as an independent country (Hellandsjø 2015, 73-74). For an institution that at the time of establishment wished to be a relevant exhibition venue for international

contemporary art, repurposing the building was challenging (ibid. 73-74). The Museum of Contemporary Art wanted artists to give the building “new life in dialogue with the art it was about to house” (ibid. 78, my translation) as Karin Hellandsjø puts it. For this, it looked to Arte Povera. Arte Povera artists, after all, were accustomed to working with characteristic spaces.



Figure 13: The Museum of Contemporary Art.

In the *Nomads* room of *Poor Art – Rich Legacy*, however, the presence of the building was toned down rather than given “life”. The stripped-down, simple interior of the room contrasted the intricacy of the ornamental elements in the grand first floor bank hall. The *Nomads* room was closer to the white cube. Artist and art critic Brian O’Doherty, who coined the term, describes the white cube as a neutral, white painted room, with wooden or carpeted floor “so that you can click along clinically, or [...] pad soundlessly, resting the feet while the eyes have at the wall.” (O’Doherty 1986, 15). The white cube aesthetic of the *Nomads* room added a sense of being in a space staged for exhibition purposes, and an atmosphere that was clinical and traditionally museal. Simultaneously, however, the atmosphere was characterized by some of the non-traditional, radical elements of Arte Povera. Namely what art critic Jonas Ekeberg (2015) notes is the movement’s oppositional stance toward the modern and industrial. The closeness between the exhibited works and the outdoors contributed to an atmosphere that emphasized that which is anti-commercial and low-tech. In the exhibition catalogue, curator

Andrea Kroksnes (2015, 9) emphasizes that Arte Povera artists often sought to give new life to the old and outdated, while rejecting the goods and gadgets of consumer capitalism. This idea was prominent in the *Nomads* room, where low-tech, no-frills exhibition design met objects with the same characteristics. Here, the only trace of digital technology was the QR codes adorning some of the object labels referencing the exhibited works.⁴⁶

Dominating the room was the presence of “natural” materials such as wood, clay, stone and plaster,⁴⁷ representations of human habitats and means of shelter, as well as woodland and mountainscape photographs by (respectively) Giuseppe Penone (*Alpi Marittime*, 1968-1973) and Marianne Heske (*Healing Mountain*, 1979). The placement of the artworks afforded effortless strolling among them, as there was plenty of space and air between each piece. The natural light which entered through five large windows further contributed to the emergence of a sphere of material resonance and affective movements. That is, to an atmosphere that one could describe as an enveloping corporeal and spatiotemporal sense of nature and calm. Contributing to the sense of calm was the merged sounds from two video works installed in nearby galleries, seeping into the *Nomads* room. *Figures (Some analogies surveyed, and organized into concrete poetry and conceptual film forms, on dates between 2001-2011)* (Gerald Byrne, 2001-2011) was shown on a 16 mm projector, which produced rapid clicking sounds. The clicks melted with the muddy, muted voiceover in a video of the earthwork sculpture *Spiral Jetty* (Robert Smithson, 1970). In the *Nomads* room, these barely audible sounds were a constant presence, a calming background noise, an indecipherable, almost inaudible humming in the distance. This humming provided a sense of serenity, but also a murmuring tension, a lingering presence which kept the room from ever being completely silent.

In *Poor Art – Rich Legacy*, visitors encountered *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* in an environment that alluded to scenarios in which one would stumble upon actual sleeping bags: in campgrounds, in the makeshift habitats of the homeless or in refugee camps. An atmosphere emerged akin to what one might experience when hiking through the woods on a well-trodden

⁴⁶ QR codes, or Quick Response Codes, are machine-readable labels which contain information on the objects they reference. In *Poor Art – Rich Legacy*, the QR codes linked to relevant audio guides. The object label of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* did not contain a QR code.

⁴⁷ These materials include Bård Breivik’s *History I* and *History II* (1972) and Iver Jåks’s *The Small Siedi I (Den lille seiden I)* (2002). Breivik’s works consist of boxes with small, man-made and natural objects, such as fossils and clay pellets. Jåks’s work is made of pieces of reindeer antler and wood.

trail. This metaphorical trail was, as I will soon elaborate on, marked by the tensions of human absence.

The Felt Presence of Human Absence

First, however, I want to draw a few parallels to DigitaltMuseum. Both the museum portal and the *Poor Art – Rich Legacy* exhibit demonstrate the virtuality of museums. As I have argued, the virtual display mode of DigitaltMuseum engenders visitor encounters with *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* that necessarily occur in succession with a diverse range of digitized content. Always available, but not always present content contributes to varying degrees and in varying manners to the virtual affects of visitor encounters with the sleeping bags. On DigitaltMuseum, the sleeping bags are isolated and their ties to other content is short-lived and fleeting. Comparably, the *Poor Art – Rich Legacy* exhibit made up a more stable environment of mediation. There, the exhibited works stayed the same throughout the exhibition period, and the mediating situation hinged more prominently on the generative functions of the exhibited works. In general terms, the virtuality of onsite exhibits largely concerns the potentiality of the exhibition context as such, and the diverse and differing nexuses of participants surrounding an artwork as it becomes part of different exhibits.

Through the exhibit-specific context of *Poor Art – Rich Legacy* and the artwork status of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)*, onsite visitors were virtually put in touch with the process of plaster casting. In the *Nomads* room, the plaster in *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* contributed to a material resonance with the other exhibited works. As was the case for most of the materials in this room, plaster is low-cost and low-tech. It is also a familiar medium among Arte Povera artists, some of whom would utilize plaster casting as historicizing statements (Bann 2007, 213). The use of plaster and the making of plaster casts for artistic purposes has a versatile history. What has conditioned and dominated the general perception of plaster casting for the last hundred years, however, are collections of reproductive plaster casts (Fredriksen and Marchand 2010, 3). Historical examples of plaster used a reproductive medium for absent originals include Roman replication of Classical Greek works, which contributed to the massive spreading of Greek art into the Roman world (Fredriksen 2010, 26). In a sense, plaster replicas worked as a medium through which cultural heritage was disseminated, comparable to the DigitaltMuseum of today.

The coherent constellation of works in the *Nomads* room foregrounded the materiality of the medium, but also a sense of absence. The sleeping bags contributed to this through both form and format. Arguably, the sculptures carried with them a perceptual conditioning that evoked the historical use of the plaster cast as a surrogate object. That is, an object that stands in place

for another, and which, by its very presence, alludes to and emphasizes the absence of this other object. In the case of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)*, it is the absence of the “real” sleeping bags that is felt in space, as well as the absence of the bodies that would use them. Adding to the sense of human absence were the centrally placed works: The tipi, the igloo and the sleeping bags, all suggesting human habitats, all void of human presence. The generative function of these works merged, and what was foregrounded in one of them would appear, by extension, with greater prominence in the other. The coherent whole of the onsite environment was characterized by human existence and dwelling, and by the human beings that were implied in many of the works, but who were not visibly depicted.

Notably, Hermansen’s work focuses on themes akin to those manifested in the *Nomads* room. In the project *Bipolar Horizon*, for instance, she examined Pyramiden, a Russian coal-mining settlement in Svalbard that was abruptly abandoned in 1996. Detailing the material traces of the settlement, she notes that

[t]he place creates an impression of being suspended in time, making it almost possible to believe that people will return at any moment to resume their activities. [...] one finds a library containing many thousands of books, a music room and ballet studios. At the hospital, medicine still stands on the shelves and medical journals languish on the desks. The flats still contain furniture, and cuttings about music groups and cars still hang on the walls of children’s bedrooms. (Hermansen 2013, para. 2).

While it would be interesting to discuss *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* as part of Hermansen’s oeuvre, it is not a discussion of relevance here.⁴⁸ Still, I include the quote above because it speaks to the affects of the plaster sleeping bags, which are amplified by the presence of other works in the *Nomads* room and the sense of human absence that these works generate. Engrained in the material form of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* is a sense of time suspended. In the *Nomads* environment, where seemingly abandoned artefacts stand quiet and motionless, as if they are waiting for their human inhabitants to return, this suspension is emphasized. As Hermansen puts it (with regards to *Bipolar Horizon*), “it is as if the people were torn out of their lives leaving behind all the objects associated with their existence as monuments of no value” (ibid. para. 3). In the *Nomads* room, the atmospheric affect was

⁴⁸ Such an undertaking would be interesting, as there is not much literature on Hermansen’s artistic practice, and even less on *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)*. The text providing what could be the most thorough insight into Hermansen’s work is *The Economy of Survival* (Hermansen 2016), the thesis she wrote while being an Artistic Research Fellow at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts. In it, Hermansen details interests in societal transformations, survival and adaptation strategies (Hermansen 2016, 4), themes that are emblematic of her work (see Bernsdorff 2017).

palpable, evoking a sense of frozen time and abandonment, which contributed to raise reflective and interpretative questions of the value and status of objects as they pertain to human use, presence, modes of living and existence.

A Foregrounding of Virtual Histories

The participatory relation that forms between *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* when the sculptures are exhibited side by side is one of similarities, contrasts and unanswered questions. These two sculptures, identical in many ways, are distinguishable only by the exact forms in which the plaster is cast and their relative size. Yet there are tensions between them, as they conjure into the present the human relations that the pairing of these sleeping bags suggests, as well as the affective absence of the imagined human bodies that have left the bags behind. Questions evoked by the side-by-side installation of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* very much concern this lack of human presence. The abandonment of the sleeping bags in a crumpled-up state may suggest a number of possible scenarios. What landscapes and events have they been used in? Have they been left in a hurry? Who do they belong to? These considerations entail a specific affectivity, tied to the simultaneous presence of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)*. The affectivity held by these agents represents what, in a sense, is a “reversal” of affective movement.

Affect, as mentioned in chapter 2, is commonly theorized as an unqualified, a-subjective intensity. Affectivity concerns what Patricia Clough calls “a bodily readiness, a trigger to action” (Clough 2012, 23), and what Massumi notes “has to do with modes of activity, and what manner of capacities [bodies] carry forward” (Massumi 2012, 7). To use the words of Clough, affect serves as a “vehicle from one dimension of time to another” (ibid. 23). That is, a movement which brings virtual futures into the present. In the case of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)*, their affectivity is also tied to the virtual histories they bring into the present. As such, they not only work as openings toward potential futures, but also toward could-have-been pasts. The sleeping bags, through their co-existence, conjure the virtual historical capacities, narratives and chains of events tied to their duality and the possible relations between those who left the artefacts behind. The environments through which *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* are mediated shape this form of affectivity. That is, the openness toward virtual possibilities. As part of *Poor Art – Rich Legacy*, the affective tensions between the two plaster sculptures punctuated an atmosphere characterized by calm, peaceful naturescapes. This, in turn, emphasized an eerie sense of abrupt human abandonment.

4.3. The Sleeping Bags in DigitaltMuseum

Comparing the DigitaltMuseum display of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* to their presence in *Poor Art – Rich Legacy*, their online mediations are formed on the basis of other interests. While the collection of the National Museum and the curatorial concerns tied to Arte Povera bring about their mediation in *Poor Art – Rich Legacy*, their inclusion in DigitaltMuseum stems from cultural political objectives to digitally disseminate and provide public access to cultural heritage. As such, one can understand the publicly funded DigitaltMuseum platform as a “techno-cultural” (Gran et al. 2018, 61) embodiment of cultural policy objectives, and thus, as an expression of the structural agency exerted by government institutions and policymakers. DigitaltMuseum works, as Gran et al. note, as a “cultural-political infrastructure” (ibid. 63) that supplements traditional bricks-and-mortar museums.

Arguably, the mediation of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* in DigitaltMuseum is antithetical to their onsite presence in *Poor Art – Rich Legacy*. In the latter, the works were exhibited as part of an atmosphere characterized by the Arte Povera movement’s affinity toward organic, low-tech materials, natural environments and hand-crafted production processes, as well as the rejection of the consumer and commodity focused world of high-tech goods and gadgets (Kroksnes 2015, 9). Conversely, DigitaltMuseum is the locus of digitization efforts of Norwegian cultural heritage, in every practical sense. It constitutes a platform where the technological and practical constraints, concerns and conditions brought on by mass digitization largely guide the mediation of cultural heritage objects. As mentioned, the forms of cultural objects are homogenized as “flat, captioned images” (Gran et al. 2018: 61) in the DigitaltMuseum interface, and catalog information rather than curatorial interests structures the display of these images.

For *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)*, the consequence is that they are displayed on separate object pages, following their catalogue registration as individual artworks. The affectivity of their simultaneous presence is lost, as is any artistic, art historical or curatorial contextualization. The isolation of the sleeping bags in DigitaltMuseum is threefold (Ogundipe 2018, 65): On their object pages, they are isolated from contextual information, save for basic catalog information. In their photographic depictions, they are isolated in space. And in both, they are isolated from other artworks, most notably each other.

Spatial Presence in the Mediation of Sleeping Bag (Small)

Taking the DigitaltMuseum mediation of *Sleeping Bag (Small)* as a point of departure, one can argue that it may induce affects, emotions and reflections that differ from those afforded when

the sculpture is exhibited alongside its sister work, *Sleeping Bag (Big)*. The mediated form and materiality of the empty plaster sleeping bag continue to suggest human abandonment and a suspension of time. Its lone presence highlights the absence of its imagined user, the particular individual whose body would have fit into it. The size and title of the artwork suggest that it was cast from a child's sleeping bag. Thus, the affects of the artwork changes. From evoking the virtual histories and relations between two human beings when installed alongside *Sleeping Bag (Big)*, the isolated presence of *Sleeping Bag (Small)* conjures the imagined presence of a single human body. A child that is no longer there. DigitaltMuseum visitors may imagine a variety of stories concerning the solitary presence of *Sleeping Bag (Small)* – some surely void of any gloom or melancholy. However, these are arguably moods that are brought to the surface in a photographic depiction whose atmosphere is both dark and somber. In the DigitaltMuseum photograph, *Sleeping Bag (Small)* is shown lying centered on a dark, heather gray carpet, photographed almost directly from above. The sleeping bag surface appears smooth under the harsh lighting, leaving the plaster looking slick, almost slippery. The color scheme of the image is sparse and bleak, and the white painted plaster contrasts the carpet, which forms a dark, uniform background.

While the online mediation of *Sleeping Bag (Small)* does not spatially engulf visitors in the same way an onsite environment does, it may still produce an affective atmosphere. Because images do not only have the power to depict (for instance) a melancholic scene, but also the agency to produce the melancholic sense of presence they evoke and to exert a subtle, but potentially affective influence on visitors (Böhme 1993, 124; Biehl-Missal 2013, 360). Arguably, the photograph of *Sleeping Bag (Small)* exudes a somber atmosphere. Secluded in darkness, the sculpture is an eerie figure, empty and crumpled-up, with the (imagined) child who might once have used it nowhere to be seen. If the atmosphere of the *Nomads* section of *Poor Art – Rich Legacy* constituted a calm and airy sense of nature, the atmosphere conjured by the DigitaltMuseum mediation of *Sleeping Bag (Small)* is one of darkness and isolation.

However – because the sculpture is mediated through a platform that does not offer an artistically motivated atmosphere, one can also argue that the affectivity of the artwork may be more open-ended in its online mediation than in its onsite mediation. In DigitaltMuseum, the perceptual field of the visitor is no longer structured by the curatorial staging of the museum environment, and they are free to experience and reflect upon *Sleeping Bag (Small)* as part of a wider range of phenomena. This is not to say that this is a form of freedom that is absent from the onsite exhibition context. Nor is it to say that the DigitaltMuseum mediation of *Sleeping Bag (Small)* is a “neutral” representation of the artwork (it is not – a point I will return to shortly). But the lack of an artistically motivated, curated atmosphere, as well as the absence of

Sleeping Bag (Big), impose affective and interpretative conditions on the DigitaltMuseum visitor. Encountering the isolated mediation of *Sleeping Bag (Small)*, one might, for instance, ponder why the word “small” is included in the title of the work (Ogundipe 2018, 65). The screenic mediation of the isolated sculpture contributes to such questions being raised, because the size of the plaster sculpture cannot be felt in space. This does not mean, however, that *Sleeping Bag (Small)* does not exert an external effect. The artwork does go “forth from itself” (Böhme 1993, 121), radiating into the platform environment and filling it with tension (ibid. 121). Outdated claims of the late 1990s and early 2000s suggesting that digital environments altogether eliminate the physical dimension and that “bytes have no aura”⁴⁹ (Müller 2002, 26) as Müller has argued, are now cast aside. Today, the sense of presence and immediacy surrounding digital reproductions are generally acknowledged (see e.g. Pink et al. 2016; Geismar 2018).

On DigitaltMuseum, the interface affords visitors the possibility to grasp and study the mediated surface of *Sleeping Bag (Small)* up-close, as one may zoom in and out of the photograph. While reaching out and touching the plaster surface of the sculpture is afforded neither onsite nor online, both the onsite and online mediations afford a visual perceptibility that evokes an imagined haptic sensing of the object. The DigitaltMuseum mediation also affords a radical expansion of accessibility, compared to bricks-and-mortar museum exhibits, allowing for new modi of reception (Gran et al. 2018, 74). When the aesthetic encounter is moved from the public sphere to private spaces (ibid. 74), online visitors are free to examine, contemplate and interpret the artwork without having to consider the (perceived or actual) sociocultural constraints of the museum environment. Such as having to keep a certain distance to the exhibited objects.

While the photographic depiction of *Sleeping Bag (Small)* on DigitaltMuseum is distanced from the plaster sculpture, it nonetheless offers an immediate connection to the materiality of the artwork. The mediated white plaster surface of *Sleeping Bag (Small)* is what first confronts the visitor entering the object page. The static folds and crevices of the sculpture – and the frozen moment they suggest – stand out in the object page environment. The mediated form of the artwork makes up a considerable part of the object page layout, which renders *Sleeping Bag*

⁴⁹ In Walter Benjamin’s conceptualization, aura is something that is absorbed into one’s embodied state of being (see e.g. Benjamin 2003, 255; Böhme 1993, 117-118). As such, it is a concept that resonates with the notion of atmosphere. Böhme notes that aura not only designates a sacred halo emanating from original artworks. Rather, it is the “more” of an artwork (or other objects), something that emphasizes that “what makes a work an artwork cannot be grasped solely through its concrete qualities” (ibid. 116). Aura, for Böhme, is “atmosphere as such” (ibid. 122).

(*Small*) more attention-grabbing than what was the case in *Poor Art – Rich Legacy*. Contrasting the soft power exerted by its onsite presence, *Sleeping Bag (Small)* dominates the perceptual field of the DigitaltMuseum visitors, as the close-up photograph provides a close encounter with the sculpture. However, while the close encounter afforded by the zoomable photograph may encourage aesthetic engagement, the limited perspective it offers may also work to the detriment of such engagement. The depiction of *Sleeping Bag (Small)* is reduced in size, proportion and perspective compared to the plaster sculpture it mediates, and the DigitaltMuseum mediation does not afford the possibility to examine the artwork from the perspectives of one’s own choosing. In this regard, the agency of the DigitaltMuseum visitor is limited, insofar as their visual perspective is predetermined.

DigitaltMuseum as a Web-based White Cube

The ostensibly neutral manner in which the photograph of *Sleeping Bag (Small)* is taken – with the isolated sculpture appearing against a dark background – can be likened to the white cube aesthetic. The white cube, as O’Doherty notes, is

[u]nshadowed, white, clean, artificial – the space is devoted to the technology of esthetics. Works of art are mounted, hung, scattered for study. Their ungrubby surfaces are untouched by time and its vicissitudes. Art exists in a kind of eternity of display, and though there is lots of “period” (late modern), there is no time. (O’Doherty 1986, 15)

There are several similarities between the exhibition principles of the white cube and the DigitaltMuseum mediation of *Sleeping Bag (Small)*, as well as their onsite presence in *Poor Art – Rich Legacy*. Online, the sculptures appear as frozen in and untouched by time as they do onsite. In both cases, they are also static, frozen in space. Onsite because the materiality of the works renders them immobile. Online because the still photographs of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* are precisely still, although the zoom function creates some semblance of movement. One might consider the frozen moment, the suspension of time and space that the plaster casts suggests, to be doubled in the photographic depictions of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)*. The photographs, just as the plaster sculptures, both suggest and reject affordances tied to the sleeping bag: shelter, sleep, warmth and so on. Simultaneously, the photographs suggest and reject affordances tied to the sculptures as such. The depictions hint at the three-dimensionality of the works and the possibility for visitors to examine them from various angles. The photographic depictions do not afford similar opportunities.

On a related note, both the *Poor Art – Rich Legacy* exhibit and the DigitaltMuseum interface constitute environments where downplaying human presence is crucial. This may seem like an odd claim, insofar as both environments are meant for human visitors. In *Poor Art – Rich Legacy*, human ways of life were even thematized, and *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag*

(*Small*) reference human bodies, worlds and identities. But both onsite and online, they are mediated in environments that are similar to the white cube in that they welcome “eyes and minds,” but not necessarily “space-occupying bodies” (O’Doherty 1986, 15). The unwelcomeness of human bodies in the white cube is reinforced in what O’Doherty labels one of the icons of visual culture: the installation shot (ibid. 15). The installation shot is a photographic image of one or more artworks installed in a museum or gallery. It depicts both the exhibited work(s) and parts of the gallery room, while excluding the presence visitors. In the installation shot, the human perceiver is eliminated: “You are there without being there”, as O’Doherty writes, adding that “the installation shot is a metaphor for the gallery space” (O’Doherty 1986, 15). The DigitaltMuseum photograph of *Sleeping Bag (Small)* is too tightly framed to be referred to as an installation shot, but it nevertheless maintains an installation shot feature: It strives to impress in the viewer an illusion of objectivity.⁵⁰ By transforming the white cube aesthetic into a pictorial composition, installations shots set out to make spectators believe, in the words of curator Melanie Bühler,

that no human has ever touched these perfectly retouched images. They show no stains, no blemishes, no bodies, just works, well lit against a backdrop of pristine white. As such, and by removing all the worldly, bodily, potentially dirty or otherwise imperfect traces of our daily lives, these images create the illusion of absolute objectiveness. (Bühler 2015, para. 3)

Through a white cube aesthetic, installation shots purport to represent “pure objects” (ibid. para. 4), void of human interference between the object and its photographic depiction. Although one might be aware of the staged aspects of installation shots, they are nonetheless accepted as documents. Viewers, as Bühler argues, may have internalized what the photographic image has historically represented, namely “objective truth” (ibid. para. 4).

The mediation of the sleeping bags in DigitaltMuseum is characterized by a presentation that exudes the appearance of neutrality. Both the gray frame (which encapsulates all DigitaltMuseum objects) and the dark background in the photographs isolate the sculptures, engulfing them in a “neutral” space. The artworks are left floating in what one might register as *nothing*, i.e. a thing not worth noticing. Effectively, the DigitaltMuseum visitor is left alone with the artwork. Similarly, the texts accompanying the photographs of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and

⁵⁰ Despite their illusory veil of objectivity, theorists have long argued that photographs of material cultural heritage are aesthetic objects in their own right. Such photographs hold value as historical documents and serve both archival and interpretative functions. Thus, they must be acknowledged as creative works rather than neutral representations (Cameron 2007, 70; Walsh 2007, 31).

Sleeping Bag (Small) are void of discernable human presence. The lists of catalog information contain no interpretation and no art historical positioning. The listings are factual and non-interpretative litanies of keywords and cataloging data that lack traces of human narration:

ARTIST: Hermansen, Siri
TITLE: Sleeping Bag (Small)
IDENTIFIER: NMK.2006.0016
CREATION DATE: 2005
MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES: Plaster, spray paint
DIMENSIONS: Ca. 40 x 100 cm
ACQUISITION: Purchased 2005

(DigitaltMuseum n.d. b, my translations).

If the white cube aesthetic is, as argued by O’Doherty (1986, 15), clean and artificial, these are certainly descriptors well suited for the mediation of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* on DigitaltMuseum.

Foregrounding the Photograph on the Screen

What is most prominent in the mediated encounter with the sleeping bags on DigitaltMuseum are not, I argue, the tensions embedded in the artworks as such. That is, the lack of human presence and the contrast between the unmalleable plaster and the textile material of actual sleeping bags, simultaneously suggesting and refusing certain affordances. Nor is it the general atmosphere of the image. What arguably stands out in the DigitaltMuseum interface environment are the photographs on the screen. This foregrounding may best be explained by comparing the DigitaltMuseum environment to that of *Poor Art – Rich Legacy*. In the *Nomads* room, what lay on the floor was two three-dimensional masses of plaster, cast into the figurative shapes of sleeping bags. The exhibition context emphasized their status as works of art, and consequently, visitors would encounter them as such. Thus, what participated in the aesthetic encounter were not only masses of plaster cast into particular shapes, but artworks that could potentially evoke a range of sensory experiences in human perceivers.

Aesthetic experience does not depend on the phenomenon encountered being classified, understood or experienced as art. Still, art museums are arguably places that especially welcome aesthetic sensibilities, reflection and meaning-making. They are places that emphasize spatially situated experience. As such they have the capacity to generate an embracing experience, to engulf the visitor in atmosphere (Bjerregaard 2015, 75). The affectiveness of the museum atmosphere is both the immediate, pre-cognitive, pre-emotional “shock” of entering the exhibition space, and, in the case of the *Nomads* room, the subsequent calm one might experience as the close-to-nature, low-tech exhibited materials take hold. The sense of being enveloped in such an atmosphere hinges on the spatially situated experience: On being able to

take in the indecipherable sense of presence (ibid. 77) of objects as they appear in time and space. Because this experience, in the words of Bjerregaard, is “what we sense when we enter a space” (ibid. 77), it is not circumventable. One cannot escape it or avoid it. The experience of atmosphere is an immediate consequence of the spatially situated encounter between a human perceiver and, for instance, a work of art. Still, atmosphere is fleeting. In both onsite and online environments, visitors will inevitably slip in and out experiencing atmosphere: Between being enveloped in the experience of a sense of presence that may be difficult to decipher, and being preoccupied with reflecting on, for instance, the meaning of a wall text. In the *Nomads* room, however, the exhibition context made up a curatorially staged environment that encouraged aesthetic experience. And with that, the affectiveness of atmosphere would find grounds to flourish, to linger. This invites the question: Is there something in the interface environment of DigitaltMuseum that encourages such a lingering?

In the object page of *Sleeping Bag (Small)*, what visitors encounter is the undeniable material presence of a screen, displaying a digital photographic image of an artefact. I have already argued that the photographic depiction of *Sleeping Bag (Small)* may effectively convey the presence, the atmosphere of the sculpture as such. Nonetheless, I would also argue that the lingering of the atmosphere surrounding the work is not particularly encouraged by its DigitaltMuseum mediation. And the reason is this: The atmosphere of the DigitaltMuseum interface, the “motivating rhythm” (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2016, 90) that emerges through it, is not what one might perceive as museal.

Admittedly, museum atmosphere is varied. The sense of it may differ from person to person, from one museum to another, from one gallery to next in the very same exhibit, or as visitors scroll down a digital museum webpage. But when I speak of a museal atmosphere – and more specifically, atmosphere in art museums – I do not refer to a specific atmospheric character, such as calm, tense, gloomy or playful. I refer to the general sense of being engulfed in an environment where aesthetic sensibilities are cultivated and nurtured, and aesthetic experience is encouraged. This is what the sociocultural environment that constitutes onsite museums tends to generate: An embracing experience, where individual objects are made part of the general sense of an environment (Bjerregaard 2015, 75) which invites aesthetic experience to linger.

Digital Museum or Digital Archive?

Notwithstanding DigitaltMuseum’s similarities to the white cube, one may perceive the atmosphere of the platform as less museal and more archival. Although a thorough comparison between the archive and DigitaltMuseum is beyond the scope of this chapter, I want to briefly account for what I refer to as archival atmosphere. With brevity, however, comes simplification.

The concept of the archive is contested and mutable (Eastwood 2017; Cunningham 2017), and digitization has contributed to expand it well beyond the classical archive, into spheres of art, philosophy and new media practices (Røssaak 2010, 11). Like museums, archives are complex and ever-changing, and my passing treatment of the concept of the archive only touches its surface. But similar to my understanding of museum atmosphere outlined above, articulating a general “sense of archive” may be possible by looking to what have traditionally been the pillars of the archive: storage, preservation, classification and access (ibid. 11).

Compared to the International Council of Museum’s (ICOM) definition of the museum, which centers on the functions of acquiring, conserving, researching, communicating and exhibiting tangible and intangible heritage (ICOM 2018), the classical archive does not have an exhibiting function. By “access”, there is only a promise of archive visitors being able to find the material that the archive houses. There is no promise of them being *shown* it, as is implied in the exhibiting function of the museum. While the accessibility function “may extend to research-based exhibitions of archive materials” (ibid. 12) as Eivind Røssaak notes, exhibiting and curating is not a primary task of the archive. As for art museums, one can arguably tie their general atmosphere, i.e. the sense of being situated in an environment that nurtures aesthetic experience, to their exhibiting function. Insofar as it is possible to speak of archival atmosphere, one may relate it to the accessibility function of the archive, and to the archive as a provider of organized, classified and searchable information. The archive may conjure a specific range of imagery: The sense of encountering something that is stringent, formulaic and well-organized.

Archival access and searchability necessarily involve the development of some sort of interface (ibid. 12). In the case of DigitaltMuseum, the digital user interface is an environment in which providing informational content – images and catalog information of a diverse range of museum objects – trumps nurturing the aesthetic experience of these objects. The platform emphasizes to a greater extent the material facts of the mediation: The screenic mode of encounter and the photographic medium through which the artwork is depicted. In this sense, the DigitaltMuseum atmosphere is more archival than museal.

When I use the term archival atmosphere to describe DigitaltMuseum, I also refer to the ways in which the archive serves as a “collective memory” working between individuals, institutions and cultural, political and economic phenomena (Ramsay 2017). DigitaltMuseum accommodates cultural political objectives of public access to cultural heritage as well as the needs of collection owners and platform users. Concerning the accommodation of the latter group, Gran et al. take note of the search-engine style home page of DigitaltMuseum, and suggest that platform users often access the site with specific search topics in mind, approaching

the web portal “more as a specialized search engine than as a curated museum display” (Gran et al. 2018, 69). Structured largely around the affordance of searchability, the DigitaltMuseum interface appears as an archival database of museum content. In an archive perspective, the museum object and its catalog information are equally important: One completes the other. This archival aspect characterizes DigitaltMuseum. Although the photographic mediation of *Sleeping Bag (Small)* dominates the top part of the object page, it disappears from sight when visitors scroll down the list of catalog information, which is given considerable space. Much of the information in the list is of little use or value to non-expert visitors. That is, visitors that are not professionally involved in the museum or cultural heritage sector. Examples are the UUID number (i.e. universally unique identifier, namely B793C043-CBF8-4CD4-932D-A6D2C3088650), the identifier or inventory number (namely NMK.2006.0016) and the DIMU code (presumably DigitaltMuseum code, namely 021046108653).

Conversely, the onsite mediating situation of *Poor Art – Rich Legacy* emphasized the presence of the exhibited objects. There, the object label was secondary to the artworks on display, which were curated in a manner which encouraged the aesthetic experience of the works and their spatial presence. As such, *Poor Art – Rich Legacy* also encouraged the experience of the exhibit-specific atmosphere, which in turn affected how the works would be encountered and perceived. Though I mention this to note certain differences between the onsite environment of *Poor Art – Rich Legacy* and DigitaltMuseum, it is not to say that online platforms cannot also encourage an aesthetically motivated sense of presence. This becomes apparent when comparing the DigitaltMuseum mediation of *Sleeping Bag (Small)* with its mediation in the collection section of the National Museum’s website.⁵¹

Comparing DigitaltMuseum to the National Museum’s Website

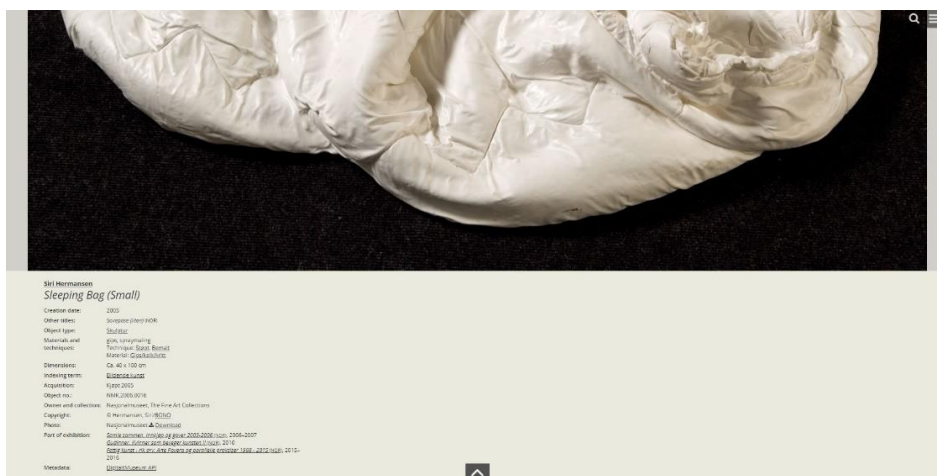
The photographs of *Sleeping Bag (Small)* are identical in DigitaltMuseum and the National Museum’s website, and both platforms publish information from the collection management system Primus. These mediations exemplify what Henry Jenkins refers to as “convergence culture”, where content “flows across multiple media channels” (Jenkins 2008, 254) and engenders multiple ways of access. It follows from this that the analysis of an image mediated

⁵¹ The Norwegian and English versions of the collection section are accessible via <http://samling.nasjonalmuseet.no/no/> and <http://samling.nasjonalmuseet.no/en/>, respectively.

through one platform would do well to acknowledge how the image is mediated in the context of other platforms (Rose 2016, 300).

The mediations of *Sleeping Bag (Small)* in DigitaltMuseum and the National Museum relies on the same “techno-cultural” (Gran et al. 2018, 61) conventions, with separate object pages for each object, mainly consisting of a photograph followed by a list of catalog information. However, there are also notable differences between the platforms. On the National Museum’s website, the photograph covers the entire screen. Visitors must scroll down the page to encounter any textual elements, save for the translucently typefaced words “Nasjonalmuseet Collection” in the upper left and a small row of icons in the upper right. The size of the photograph affords primacy to the artwork, rather than to the object-information-package that is offered by DigitaltMuseum. The National Museum also omits the catalog information that would be the most cryptic to non-expert visitors. The included information is set in a font so small that the text gains a secondary status, akin to that of the object label in *Poor Art – Rich Legacy*. While the photograph also dominates the interface of DigitaltMuseum, the search bar, textual elements and icons interfere in the aesthetic encounter, competing with *Sleeping Bag (Small)* for the attention of the visitors.

Another distinguishing feature is that the National Museum’s mediation of *Sleeping Bag (Small)* contains the hyperlinked titles of past exhibits featuring the sculpture, which lead to designated website entries for each exhibit. The entry for *Poor Art – Rich Legacy*, for instance, contains the exhibition poster, names of the curators and a map showing the location of the Museum of Contemporary Art. The entry also contains images of the artworks exhibited in *Poor Art – Rich Legacy*, accompanied by brief textual information, such as artwork titles and names of the artists. By linking to exhibits featuring *Sleeping Bag (Small)*, the National Museum further contextualizes the artwork, provides a connection to its sister work and re-mediate the artwork constellations of *Poor Art – Rich Legacy*. As such, the national museum’s mediation of *Sleeping Bag (Small)*, to a greater extent than DigitaltMuseum, retains a museal atmosphere.



Figures 15a-b: Screenshots of the top and bottom halves of the object entry page for Sleeping Bag (Small) in the collection section of the website of the National Museum.



Figure 15c: The National Museum collection site entry for Poor Art – Rich Legacy, displaying an image of the exhibit's poster which covers the length of the screen.

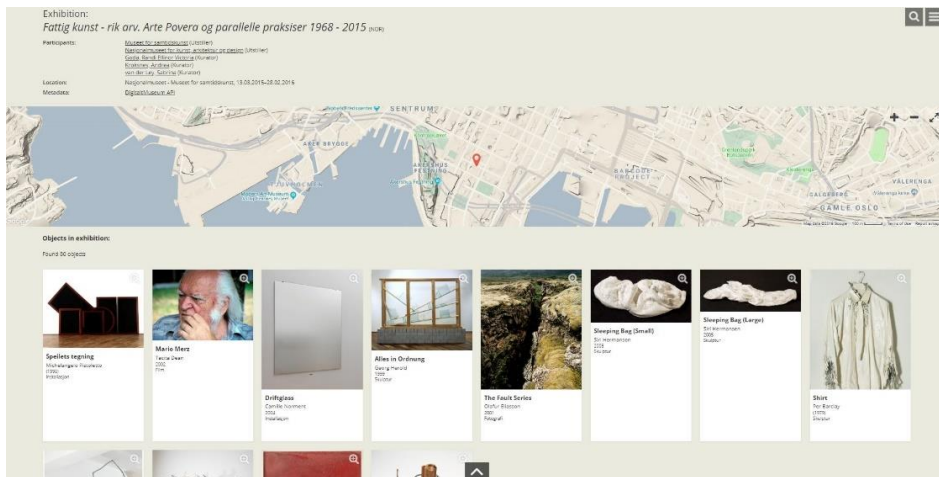


Figure 15d: In the Poor Art – Rich Legacy entry, visitors find hyperlinked images to the object entries of the exhibited works. Here, the sleeping bags are displayed side by side.

To grasp the distinguishing features of DigitaltMuseum, one cannot only address the parts that engender the emergence of the museum portal as a distinct whole, such as the photographic depiction of *Sleeping Bag (Small)* and the manner in which catalog data is presented. It is also conducive to consider a relevant lesson from DeLanda's assemblage theory, which pertains to how agency is distributed in complex structures. Namely, that "although a whole emerges from the interactions among its parts, once it comes into existence [the whole] can affect those parts" (DeLanda 2006, 34). In other words, DigitaltMuseum's emergence as a web museum portal and a "cultural-political infrastructure" (Gran et al. 2018, 63) has the agentic capacity to provide its parts – such as *Sleeping Bag (Small)* – with certain "constraints and resources" (DeLanda 2006, 34-35). Through such "macro-micro mechanisms" (ibid. 34), DigitaltMuseum affords specific participatory opportunities to the mediated artwork and the visitor. The platform affects what the artwork may do by contributing to how it "go[es] forth from itself" (Böhme 1993, 122). And through the affordances of the interface, DigitaltMuseum affects how visitors may engage with the mediated work.

The affordances offered by DigitaltMuseum are in congruence with the political and sociocultural distinctness of the platform. This distinctness largely hinges on its simultaneous objective to function as 1) a database of the digitized museum collections of Norwegian museums, and 2) to function as a public access web portal of these collections (Office of the Auditor General of Norway 2017). As these objectives conflate, they are expressed in a user interface environment that foregrounds the diverse content of the platform (e.g. in the home page collage) and its database/archive searchability (e.g. in the search engine style homepage and subsequent possibilities for navigation). The DigitaltMuseum environment predominately highlights the informational content of the site, mediating *Sleeping Bag (Small)* through a mode of display that affords access to the artwork, but also to a range of information that may be irrelevant to non-expert users. While access to the artwork does provide grounds for aesthetic experience, such experience is not particularly encouraged by the DigitaltMuseum platform. In comparison, the specificities of the National Museum's website retain the institutional identity of an art museum, through modes of mediation that emphasize the artworks *qua* art and that facilitates the aesthetic sensibilities of visitors.

4.4. Chapter Conclusion

Existing research on DigitaltMuseum by Gran et al. (2018) indicates that the platform contributes to diversity in the dissemination of cultural heritage. DigitaltMuseum supplements traditional bricks-and-mortar museums, expanding their contexts of use (i.e. at home, at the office, at the bus etc.), while also encouraging diversity of content (ibid.). From a participatory

perspective, does DigitaltMuseum also diversify the human and nonhuman participants involved in the aesthetic encounters enabled by the platform? And does it contribute to diversify their possibilities for and modes of participation?

I began this chapter by suggesting that what onsite and online visitors encounter, as they stand faced with *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)*, are literally different things. In the *Poor Art – Rich Legacy* and DigitaltMuseum modes of display, the same works of art are mediated, but the online presence of the sleeping bags radically diverges from that of the plaster casts. In DigitaltMuseum, the sculptures appear in the homogenized form of digitized cultural objects through screenic displays of captured images (ibid. 61). However, the most prominent difference between the onsite and online mediating situations analyzed here, is that in *Poor Art – Rich Legacy*, *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* participated as artworks. Their status as art was foregrounded, and visitors would encounter the plaster sculptures as such. In DigitaltMuseum, on the other hand, their inclusion in the database hinges not on their status as artworks but on their status as museum objects. Thus, they are virtually displayed as such.

The participatory consequences of this difference are perhaps best introduced through the notion of atmosphere, as it is the “motivating rhythm” (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2016, 90) that works to characterize each of the mediating situations I have discussed. Both onsite and online, the spatial experience of visitors is unstable as they move through gallery rooms (Madsen and Madsen 2016, 480) or navigate from one section of a website to another. Hence, atmosphere can be experienced as contrast. For example, when the atmosphere of the environment one enters contradicts one’s existing mood. Or if one experiences the affective movement that occurs when a change in atmosphere sets in. Atmosphere, then, can be suggestive: A force that pushes the visitor toward particular moods and movements (Böhme 1993, 121; Böhme 2000, 15).

In the *Nomads* room of *Poor Art – Rich Legacy*, the specificities of the mediating situation worked to guide the aesthetic sensibilities of visitors and the ways in which the exhibited objects filled the space. The atmosphere would likely nudge the meaning-making of visitors in specific directions, perhaps toward the premises of human habitation in nature or to questions concerning the human relations that the pairing of the plaster cast sleeping bags suggests. The atmosphere suggested the contemplative reflection of the themed exhibit. It, in combination with the spacious pathways afforded by the floor space left between the exhibited works, implicitly encouraged visitors to move slowly through the room: To take in the presence of each individual work of art as well as their constellation. Onsite, *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* were given grounds to affect each other, as they were placed side by side in a cohesive, curatorially staged environment. The thematically presented presence of exhibited

objects that in various ways resonated with each other made up an artistically founded mediating context.

In DigitaltMuseum, there is a change of agents participating in the mediating situation, as well as a shift in the distribution of agency. Onsite, agency is distributed among participants such as the architectural premises of the museum building, the museum institution and its curators, museum guards and visitors, the individual presence of each artwork as well as their spatial synthesis. In DigitaltMuseum, the architectural premises and curatorial influence is gone, and the agency of the sleeping bags and the museum institution are arguably somewhat weakened. In the case of sculptures, because their form and materiality are mediated from the limiting perspective of the photographic image. And from the object page of one of the sleeping bags, the presence of the other is a hidden affordance, as are the relations between the two works. Consequently, their potential affects are altered.

The agency of the museum institution is similarly weakened, because its power to structure the premises of the encounter become limited by the DigitaltMuseum platform. Through it, the mediation of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* is guided by the cultural political objectives of the web portal and the framework of its user interface. While the museum institution chooses (some of) the content in the catalog information list, as well as the media through which a given object should appear (e.g. through photograph or video), the DigitaltMuseum interface ultimately structures the premises of the aesthetic encounters which occur through the platform. The agency of the formulaically designed interface environment dominates and replaces the spatial premises of the museum building as well as the artistically motivated artwork constellation that characterized *Poor Art – Rich Legacy*.

In sum, the mediation of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* in DigitaltMuseum contributes to diversify the agents in aesthetic encounters with these artworks and the ways in which the agents involved participate. However, this is a diversification that entails differences in modes of participation without necessarily comprising a broadening of participatory potential. On the contrary: The interface environment of DigitaltMuseum narrows the participatory potential of the artworks and the museum institution. This narrowing might stem from the split identity of the museum portal. On the one hand, DigitaltMuseum is an online exhibition space. On the other, it is an online archive. The exhibiting and archival roles of DigitaltMuseum entail differing functionalities, respectively an emphasis on and nurturing of aesthetic experience versus highlighting affordances of searchability and the informational content of the digitized museum objects. They also constitute different atmospheres and affordances which in turn invite differing audience behavior and affective potential. While the

mediations of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* in DigitaltMuseum do allow for the aesthetic engagement one would expect an exhibition space to accommodate, such as possibilities for affectivity, emotional response, contemplation and interpretation, this is not what the platform environment primarily encourages. The archival function of the platform, I argue, dominates.

DigitaltMuseum does contribute to what policymakers note are among the potential benefits of digitization. For example, a distribution of art and cultural heritage to a wider public (Norwegian Ministry of Culture 2018, 49-50), as well as increased diversity in cultural consumption brought on by new forms of expression and participation offered by digital media (Norwegian Ministry of Culture 2013, 14). However: As policymakers also express worry that digitization may, in the long term, lead to a marginalization of forms of cultural expression that demand time and concentration (ibid. 14), the DigitaltMuseum mediations of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* do little to lessen such concerns. While the onsite environment of *Poor Art – Rich Legacy* extends an invitation for visitors to dwell and linger, the search-driven interface environment of DigitaltMuseum offers no similar invite. Instead, the platform encourages perpetual movement and search through the museum collections it hosts.

Chapter 5

Concluding Discussion

On Digitization, Diversity and the Implications of Expanding the Notion of Participation

“[T]echnology in general and digitization in particular have aesthetic and political agency.”

Hylland and Stavrum 2018, 89.

5.0. Chapter Introduction: What the Case Studies Do and Do Not Illuminate

I began this thesis by problematizing a normative, anthropocentric distinction between participation and non-participation. Admittedly, a basic understanding of participation as a human activity, as something that designates degrees of visitor attendance and engagement, may be necessary for museums to fulfill their rationales and responsibilities. The established notion of participation may be helpful, for example, in articulating clearly defined, quantifiable participatory efforts and gauging their effects on visitors. It may also aid in answering the calls of new museology and cultural policy, as museums seek new ways to facilitate engagement, activate visitors, democratize the museum institution and delegate decision-making power. Still, I have argued in favor of expanding the notion of participation from solely pertaining to the actions of visitors to include the diverse, multidirectional flows of agency constituted by an entangled nexus of human and nonhuman participants. It has been my hope that a non-anthropocentric understanding of participation will make it possible to explore the transformative powers of the digital technologies and platforms frequently tasked with fulfilling participatory ideals. Moreover, that it may illuminate the participatory roles of artworks and the mediating situations through which one encounters them.

From the perspective of a critical museum visitor equipped with the analytical tools of the participation nexus, I have conducted media aesthetic case studies on two very differing works of art. Through my analyses, I have addressed some of the ways these artworks, as well as mediating onsite and online museum environments, technologies and museum visitors participate in – and thus shape – aesthetic encounters. In this chapter, I set out to account for

central findings and address how the case studies complement each other in answering the research question asked in the beginning of the thesis:

How, and to what extent, does digitization contribute to diversify relations between human and nonhuman participants, including their modes of participating, in onsite and online aesthetic encounters?

Additionally, I want to discuss what the case studies as well as the theoretical and methodological approach of this thesis do not illuminate. That is, what they lack, what they fall short of addressing and what form of knowledge they do not provide. Finally, I will discuss what the aesthetic-political consequences of an expanded notion of participation may be.

5.1. Case Study Discussion and Comparison

One of my aims as a critical museum visitor has been to examine how mediating situations enact social and material relations of power by structuring aesthetic encounters and the participatory relations in them. Relevant questions have been what specific onsite and online mediating situations may emphasize or exclude, and how the human and nonhuman participants that dominate the situation may influence the aesthetic encounter. Following such considerations, I now want to ask who or what benefits from the participatory relations that form in the cases I have discussed. Who are the ideal visitors implicated in them? Who would feel, as Lindauer puts it, “ideologically and culturally at home” (Lindauer 2006, 204) in the exhibition contexts? Which agents and forms of participation do the mediating situations cater to and which do they ignore?

From Ideal Visitors to Ideal Participation

An ideal visitor to the Astrup Fearnley Museum and *The World is Made of Stories* would be anyone attracted by what the museum performs: a cutting-edge art destination that also provides enjoyable experiences with regards to a range of amenities such as a bar, a beachfront view, a sculpture park and sightseeing possibilities. An ideal visitor to *The World is Made of Stories* would find such opportunities aesthetically and culturally appealing, and they might be drawn to the museum’s “Instagrammable” signature collection pieces, such as *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* and *“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)*. Unlike Astrup Fearnley, the Museum of Contemporary Art was not a “commercially positive” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2000) museum performing itself as an art destination. Its institutional enactment was conducted with all the more gravitas through the historically significant granite building and the museum’s status as part of the National Museum of Art, Architecture of Design. The institutional enactment was also

conducted through the exhibition context as such. The 25th anniversary exhibit *Poor Art – Rich Legacy* exhibit marked the museum’s longstanding presence in the Norwegian art sphere and museum landscape. Because the exhibit was themed, an ideal visitor to *Poor Art – Rich Legacy* would be someone with a specific interest in or curiosity about the Arte Povera Movement. It could also be someone with an interest in the museum’s history and the acquisitions that have been significant for it.

In both of my case studies, the digital platforms I have discussed constitute new mediating situations, which in turn imply new ideal visitors. In the case of the Astrup Fearnley Museum app, its mediation presupposes that whoever is using it is already visiting the museum. The ideal visitor to this online environment thus overlaps with the ideal visitor to the onsite environment. However, the app appeals specifically to an ideal visitor who is particularly interested in additional information on one or more of the works they encounter and is willing to seek out such information on their own. An ideal visitor may also be someone in need of auditory narration, someone who prefers having their museum experienced guided or someone who seeks a personalized experience. With content for both adult and young visitors, the app offers entryways into the aesthetic encounter that are more demographically tailored than *The World is Made of Stories*. Without the app, the onsite situation does little to cater specifically to young visitors, which is also the case with *Poor Art – Rich Legacy*.

Both onsite exhibits, however, as well as the Astrup Fearnley app and DigitaltMuseum, offer textual information (and for the app’s adult users, auditive information) in both Norwegian⁵² and English. Additionally, DigitaltMuseum offers information in Swedish. Ideal visitors to all the mediating environments I have discussed, then, understand Norwegian or English (or, in the case of DigitaltMuseum, Swedish). Moreover, with the exception of the Astrup Fearnley Museum app, ideal visitors to all the mediating situations are adults. Additionally, ideal visitors to the app and the web portal have some technical competency. While the app largely relies on scrolling and navigating hyperlinked entries – and might thus be easy to use for a wide demographic – the search-based interface of DigitaltMuseum contains relatively complex search parameters. An ideal DigitaltMuseum visitor would thus be someone with the language skills, maturity and knowledge to utilize the search possibilities and navigate the search results.

⁵² Only DigitaltMuseum includes both of the two written standards of Norwegian.

While both the onsite and online mediating situations mostly cater to adult visitors speaking specific languages, with varying levels of technical know-how, aesthetic encounters with the case study artworks do not hinge on the visitors being able to understand – or willing or wanting to engage in – the discourses that to varying degrees contextualize the works. The aesthetic experiences and affective processes these mediated works contribute to engender are not reducible to discourse. Beyond what is communicated by the host institutions, the mediating situations specifically welcome ideal visitors – and perhaps ideal modes of participation.

Encountering “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) in *The World is Made of Stories*, an ideal visitor could be someone comfortable with overtly visible forms of participation, such as helping themselves to pieces of candy, photographing the installation and sharing their encounter on social media. However, an ideal visitor could also be someone more at ease with traditionally “passive” forms of spectatorship, someone who is comfortable admiring the artwork from a distance, but who may feel stressed at the thought of reaching down to take a piece of candy. Rather than discriminating between such visitors, the onsite mediating situation – as well as “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) – make room for them both. “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) actively takes part in the subtle or overt process of transformation that occurs no matter how the visitors approach it. While the exhibition context is characterized by “passive” spectatorship, there is arguably no “ideal” manner in which an aesthetic encounter should unfold in *The World is Made of Stories*.

However, when the museum app takes part in the encounter, its audio-guides introduce modes of participation for adults on one side and children and youth on the other. Adults are pushed toward cognitive modes of meaning-making and are encouraged to reflect on the ethical dilemmas of consumption and the questions of authority that may be raised by the work. In contrast, the app engages in a more direct manner the aesthetic sensibilities of young visitors, directing them to sense and explore the color, luster, sound and taste of the installation. For each group, the app works to emphasize and obfuscate certain aspects of the work, both directing visitors toward specific forms of participation and guiding the way in which “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) appear in and “go forth from” (Böhme 1993, 122) the museum environment.

Encountering *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* in *Poor Art – Rich Legacy*, an ideal visitor would be someone comfortable strolling through a gallery room largely inviting traditional “passive” spectatorship, happy to admire the constellation of works at their own pace. They would be willing to enter the encounter with an openness toward the material resonances enacted in and through the gallery environment and the exhibited works. They would enjoy approaching and aesthetically engaging with the plaster sculptures as part of these resonances, and they would gain something from reflecting upon the exhibited works as tied to

the art historical themes and currents presented in the wall text and in the exhibition catalogue. Arguably, one may understand the ideal form of participation in *Poor Art – Rich Legacy* as being quiet, contemplative engagement. Here, the aesthetic sensibilities of visitors were directed toward the material juxtaposition (plaster/fabric) and the environmental displacement (landscape/museum) that *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* embody. Visitors were invited to dwell, in reverence, in the aesthetic encounter. On DigitaltMuseum, however, no such invitation is made. Online, the sleeping bags participate more as museum objects than artworks, and visitors participate more by navigating the search-driven DigitaltMuseum interface than engaging aesthetically with the mediated sculptures as such.

Findings

As it is anchored in long established conventions of handheld visitor technologies, I have argued that the Astrup Fearnley Museum app does not contribute “techno-cultural” (Gran et al. 2016, 61) diversity or innovativeness to the museum landscape. Today, the Norwegian museum sector does not necessarily consider app technology, in and of itself, new or original. A statement made by the Head of Department of Museums of Arts Council Norway, Espen Hernes, illustrates this. “We want to fund innovative projects,” Hernes notes, “and that is not necessarily what an app is today. There have to be new ways of using the technology, which will inspire others than just the individual museum” (Hernes, quoted in Borgen 2016, para. 16, my translation).

In the case of the Astrup Fearnley Museum app and “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*), the diversifying contribution of the app lies precisely in how it may take part in and shape the encounter as such. The aesthetic value of the app, as I have argued, is tied to a dimension of “aesthetic-expression” (Gran et al. 2018, 61), because the digitized mediation diversifies the situation through which visitors may approach, experience, engage with and make sense of the artwork in the onsite encounter. There are differences and tensions between how “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) takes part in the visitor encounter with and without the added mediation of the app. And there are differences in how visitor demographics (adults and children/youth) and visitor types (initiated and uninitiated) may approach the installation with and without using the app. There are variances between how the work is presented, how the encounter is narrated, and what information is included in the gallery room constellation of works, in the object label, and in the two app audio guides. The app thus exemplifies how museums may utilize app technology to facilitate and experiment with diverse “entryways” for visitors into an aesthetic encounter with a given artwork, within the same exhibit.

The Astrup Fearnley app may add experiential layers to an aesthetic encounter with “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*), because using the app shapes how the artwork “works” in the museum environment. Additionally, the app demonstrates how digitized mediation and app technologies which utilize the personal devices of visitors may converge with and make use of the participatory possibilities of online participation culture and social media. For “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*), this entails an expansion – and a diversification – of the artistic device of the work, as visitors may capture, filter, share and re-mediate their encounters, dispersing the work in new formats and forms.

Like the Astrup Fearnley Museum app, DigitaltMuseum builds on established “techno-cultural” (Gran et al. 2016, 61) conventions. Still, the platform contributes to diversify the dissemination of art and cultural heritage, from the traditional context of the bricks-and-mortar museum to a range of private spheres and modes of access (ibid. 74), as existing research has noted. As I have argued, DigitaltMuseum also constitutes a diversity dimension of “aesthetic-expression” (ibid. 61), as the platform contributes to diversify the potential unfolding of the aesthetic encounter through its interface. Notably, the DigitaltMuseum interface is shaped by and designed to carry out cultural political objectives of publicly disseminating museum collections. In the case of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)*, the premises of the encounter are structured accordingly. The formulaic interface mediation dominates and replaces the exhibition design and the curated constellation of works that characterized *Poor Art – Rich Legacy*.

On one hand, DigitaltMuseum diversifies the mode of encounter by leaving visitors free to experience and reflect upon the artworks as part of a wider range of practices and phenomena, free from the guiding forces of curatorial staging and pregiven object constellations. On the other hand, I have argued that the museum portal may narrow the participatory possibilities of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)*, as well as the museum institution. The interface effectively separates the ties between each artwork, disrupts the “flow state” (Shinkle 2013) of the aesthetic encounter, mediates the individual sleeping bags through the limiting perspective offered by a single photograph, and forces the museum to contextualize the work largely within the framework of a formulaic list of catalog information. What I have argued to be the split identity of the museum portal (as an online archive and an online exhibition space) may lead to an emphasis on the informational content of the digitized museum objects rather than an emphasis on nurturing of aesthetic experience.

The Astrup Fearnley Museum app is a digital platform which the museum can use to customize its content for a variety of works, and the app mediation may be curated and tailored to specific exhibition contexts. What the app reveals can be hidden in the onsite situation, or vice versa.

Because the modes of being encouraged by the app unfolds in relation to an onsite context, one may imagine a multitude of ways in which the app may potentially shape the aesthetic encounter. DigitaltMuseum, on the other hand, works independently of onsite exhibit contexts. In the case of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping (Small)*, the DigitaltMuseum mediation also works independently of any curatorial museum educational contextualization. This is not to say, however, that the web portal does not afford the possibility for such contextualization. I will return to this point shortly.

Although the use of the Astrup Fearnley Museum app is situated in an onsite exhibit situation, the platform additionally works to move beyond the context of the exhibit by encouraging visitors to take part in online participation culture. Similarly, DigitaltMuseum contains social media sharing possibilities, but I have not devoted attention to this feature in this thesis. The reasons for this are simple: The web portal arguably does not inspire participation in social media re-mediation in any way comparable to the app, and social media sharing of DigitaltMuseum content removes the visitor from the mediating context of the museum platform. In DigitaltMuseum, visitors may click on one of the social media sharing shortcuts (for Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter and the now discontinued Google+) and share the DigitaltMuseum image of the museum object on their chosen social media feed. While the Instagram re-mediation of *“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)* which I discussed in chapter 3 also entails the introduction of new platforms and interfaces to the aesthetic encounter, there is a significant difference. In the case of *“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)*, the aesthetic encounter as such is shared. Rather than sharing a predetermined image, which is the case in DigitaltMuseum, visitors to the Astrup Fearnley Museum re-configure and re-mediate their own engagement with the artwork they encounter. Arguably, encountering a DigitaltMuseum photograph on a screen is less “Instagrammable”. Moreover, the localization of the app in the personal handheld devices of the visitors entails an encouragement of personal photographic practices and online participation culture that makes possibilities for social media sharing more entwined in the aesthetic encounter as such.

Both the Astrup Fearnley Museum app and DigitaltMuseum are motivated by the tenets of the participatory turn and new museology, and as such, they are built on ideals of widespread dissemination of museum objects and information. Taken together, the two case studies suggest key differences between the app, which is additionally motivated by artistic and curatorial concerns, and the web portal, which is additionally motivated by cultural political objectives of making cultural heritage publicly accessible. Moreover, the case studies suggest differences between the app, which is developed to suit the ideology and needs of a single museum, and the

web portal, which is developed to suit the varying needs of a diverse range of museum institutions, with equally diverse collections. Comparing the case studies on “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) and *Sleeping Bag (Big)/Sleeping (Small)* may suggest the importance of artistically motivated interfaces and curatorial input that allow room for the agency of the visitor, but also the artwork, the museum institution, museum curators and museum educators to influence the aesthetic encounter.

An Additional Look at DigitaltMuseum

In the introduction to this thesis, I noted that the case study artworks I have chosen would not be the only possible or relevant objects of study for this project. A pertinent question, then, is if the findings outlined above would have differed, had I analyzed other works. This question is especially relevant in the case of DigitaltMuseum, because I have argued that the platform – in its mediation of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* – limits the participatory possibilities of the artworks and the museum institution. However, there are possibilities in the DigitaltMuseum interface that are not illuminated in its mediation of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)*. For example, the platform lets institutions upload several images for each object entry, upload other media content than still photographs, add longer paragraphs of contextualizing text and curate “exhibits” consisting of several object entries. To illustrate this, and to problematize the findings of the *Sleeping Bag (Big)/Sleeping Bag (Small)* case study, I want to briefly describe the DigitaltMuseum mediation of the light installation *Traveling SUN* (2012-2016) by Christine Istad and Lisa Pacini.

Traveling SUN (2012-2016) is a circular installation of LED lights, aluminum discs and a PVC canvas, measuring 300 centimeters in diameter and 20 centimeters in depth. On its object page, the collection owner Public Art Norway (KORO) has uploaded five photographs of the installation mounted on the façade of the National Library of Norway’s division in Mo i Rana, which is located in Northern Norway. The images depict *Traveling SUN* from different angles, at different times of the day, as it glows in purple, orange, yellow and pink. The page contains catalog information, but also paragraphs of text accounting for the artistic project and the themes associated with the installation. The text reads, in part:

Between 2012 and 2016, a shining sun journeyed on a trailer bed in northern latitudes. From Oslo-Tromsø-Kirkenes-Bergen-London-Rjukan-Oslo-Reykjavik-Mo i Rana, a total of 12,755 kilometers. Now, the sun has a permanent place to stay.

The idea behind the artwork is to bring the sun to places with little or no sunlight. In polar nights, the installation brightens its environments in warm-toned colors. “Traveling SUN” thematizes the importance of the sun for human beings, emotionally, physically and mythologically. Driving around with “Traveling SUN” as it shines from a trailer bed in the dark has been an important part of the project. (DigitaltMuseum n.d. c, my translation).

On the object page, additional contextualization comes in the form of a link to the exhibit *Traveling SUN* is part of. A DigitaltMuseum “exhibit” is a way for the collection owner to group object entries together in curated collections. *Traveling SUN* is part of an exhibit which centers on the National Library of Norway in Mo i Rana’s digitizing facility and automated warehouse. The exhibit page contains a longer text describing the art project as tied to the National Library and a link back to the object page of *Traveling SUN*. The exhibit page also links to the object page of a 9 minute 15 seconds long video depicting the installation’s journey from the south to the north of Norway and snippets of the artists speaking about the work.

Without going into further detail on this artwork, it should be apparent that its DigitaltMuseum mediation differs greatly from that of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)*. The agency of the interface offers very different premises for an aesthetic encounter with *Traveling SUN*, for instance with regards to media formats and forms, artistic curation, textual contextualization and the “state of flow” (Shinkle 2013) that is engendered by linking relevant images and object entries. These mediations differ not only because the artworks differ from each other in terms of artistic context, materiality and the relational processes they may engender. They also differ because the display and presentation of the light installation draws on possibilities of customization that are not utilized in the mediation of the plaster sculptures.

What the case study of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* does not illuminate, then, is the range of potential for curation and customization in the DigitaltMuseum interface. However, my above description of the object page of *Traveling SUN* may suggest that the DigitaltMuseum mediation of the sleeping bags only makes use of the most basic features of the platform interface. Here, I can only speculate as to the reason. Perhaps the National Museum prefers to focus on exhibiting their digitized collection through their own website rather than the “one-size-may-not-quite-fit-all” formulaic interface environment of a museum portal designed to display the collections of highly diverse institutions. Or perhaps to curate and tailor the content of each DigitaltMuseum object page in accordance with the demands of each individual artwork in their digitized collection is simply too resource demanding.

To grasp more fully the participatory potential of the DigitaltMuseum interface, it would have been interesting to compare the mediation of more than one – or rather, more than a pair – of artworks mediated through the platform. This, however, would have made for a much longer thesis. Questions regarding unexplored perspectives should nonetheless be asked, which brings me to the framework of the participation nexus. In what follows, I want to address the problems and potentials the approach entails and what I could have done differently.

5.2. Strengths and Weaknesses of the Nexus Landscape – and Alternative Routes

As I have argued for an expanded understanding of participation which considers both human and nonhuman participants, I have taken an approach toward this aim which involves a particular theoretical and methodological stance and carries with it certain limitations and weaknesses, as well as specific strengths. In what follows, I discuss some such problems and potentials, while reflecting on what have been the primary challenges of applying the participation nexus to the case studies, and what I could have done differently. Additionally, I touch upon what my analytical approach may contribute to new materialist thought.

The Composite Character of the Nexus Framework

The first challenge I want to address concerns the compositeness of the participation nexus framework. To support the aim of considering the participation of both humans and nonhumans in aesthetic encounters, I have found the notions of agency, affordance, atmosphere and affect to be particularly relevant. Consisting of four distinct, but arguably interrelated notions, there is a composite character to the conceptual structuring and analytical approach of the nexus. Each concept offers an opening into a specific dimension of the aesthetic encounter, which in turn is better understood through the remaining concepts. The compositeness of the nexus is thus generative, as new understandings potentially emerge through the combined analytical use of the notions of agency, affordance, atmosphere and affect.

A strength of the nexus which follows from its generative compositeness is that it offers a dynamic openness toward the case study artworks and mediating situations: Toward the ways in which they unfold in co-constitutive encounters with museum visitors. However, a notable challenge in this regard has been how to analytically approach the always-present, always-changing, always-multidirectional exchanges between the agencies of the museum visitor, the exhibited artworks, and the mediating technologies and environments as they are expressed through affordances, atmospheres and affects. The methodological perspective of a critical museum visitor, as proposed by Lindauer, offers suggestions of what to take note of in an exhibition context, such as exhibition design, object labels and how museum objects are presented and installed. It does not, however, offer a formulaic “recipe” for analysis. Similarly, the media aesthetic approach suggests an attentiveness toward the role of media and mediation, and the concepts of agency, affordance, atmosphere and affect further contribute to steer the critical visitor perspective toward certain aspects of the aesthetic encounter. How these aspects are addressed and structured in a case study analysis, however, is not given.

The analytic openness of the nexus approach has facilitated two somewhat differing case studies. In them, each of the nexus concepts have contributed in varying ways – and with varying presence – to the analyses. The case studies may thus appear somewhat asymmetrical. From a critical perspective, one may take such asymmetry to designate a lack of methodological and analytical stringency. However – a stringent, highly symmetrical structuring of the case studies would be counterproductive. First, because the case study objects (the artworks and the onsite and online mediating situations discussed) entailed different modes of being. When encountering “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) in *The World is Made of Stories*, both with and without the use of the Astrup Fearnley Museum app, one was always situated in the onsite environment. In the case of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)*, on the other hand, the mediating situations of the *Poor Art – Rich Legacy* exhibit and DigitaltMuseum did not (necessarily) overlap in a comparable manner. Here, the onsite and online mediating situations made up two more distinct spheres of encounter. Structuring the analysis in ways that accommodate such differences has therefore been necessary.

The second reason a stringent, symmetrical structuring of the case studies would be counterproductive is because the nexus framework presupposes that its generative, productive potential emerges from the flows between the concepts in it. For instance, one cannot structure the analysis to first address how agency is distributed in the mediating situation, then move on to the affordances of the aesthetic encounter before discussing atmosphere – and so on. In the nexus context, it makes little sense to discuss in isolation the affordances and action possibilities that are engendered when entities meet. One must also address the agency of these entities, how they work to affect each other and how the atmosphere of their situation affects the actions, suggestions, encouragements, interrogations (and so on) they may make in their encounter.

Consistently utilizing the generative flows between the nexus concepts has been challenging. And it has not always been attained, although I want to stress that speaking of affordance, atmosphere and affect always and already implies agentic flows between human and nonhuman participants. Similarly, speaking of affect implies the potentiality engendered by the affordances and atmosphere in the aesthetic encounter – and so on. Each of the concepts connects in some way to the other concepts in the nexus. Still, when addressing certain aspects of the mediating situations I have discussed, some of the nexus concepts may have appeared somewhat more prominent than others. In the case of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*), I devoted, for instance, considerable attention to how the affectiveness and affordances of the work emerged with and without the use of the Astrup Fearnley Museum app. And in the case of *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)*, I emphasized, to some extent, the atmosphere of the onsite and online mediating situations and the agency of the DigitaltMuseum interface.

The reasons for this are straightforward: For *“Untitled” (Blue Placebo)*, one can understand the affordance of the candy (i.e. consumption) and the affectiveness and affectedness of the work as such (i.e. processes of transformation) to be pivotal for the work’s artistic device and its materialization in space. The affectiveness and affordances of the work are also aspects that are overtly impacted through use of the app’s audio guide. Similarly, the atmospheres surrounding *Sleeping Bag (Big)* and *Sleeping Bag (Small)* onsite and online are so distinct, and the agency of the DigitalMuseum interface so diverging from that of the onsite environment, that they are worthy of analytical attention. The particularities of the case study objects, then, contribute to determine what is weighted in the analysis. This is one of the strengths of the participation nexus framework: Its openness toward the virtual unfolding of the aesthetic encounter makes room for the agency of the artworks and the mediating situation to guide the analysis.

On the other hand, one can reasonably consider assessments regarding prominent aspects of the mediating situation to be – at least in part – results of the researcher’s interpretations. As such, a critique of the nexus framework and the critical museum visitor perspective may be that the weight given to specific aspects of the studied phenomena is too researcher-dependent. As accounted for in chapter 2, however, making “agential cuts” (Barad 2007) in the case study objects is both necessary and unavoidable. My theoretical perspective emphasizes that the researcher participates in the analysis of the phenomenon, but also in the phenomenon as such: At the moment of encounter, the researcher is already implicated in it. The participation nexus’s openness toward the situated agency of the researcher (shaped by a specific theoretical and methodological stance) as well as the agency of the case study objects, thus fulfill a new materialist responsibility. That is, to emphasize the generative and transformative powers of artworks and technologies, and the necessary – but not entirely unproblematic – involvement of the researcher when encountering and articulating these forces.

Alternative Nexus Notions?

The notions of agency, affordance, atmosphere and affect have contributed to the articulation of human/nonhuman participation in the case studies. In a project which has aimed to consider the ways in which humans and nonhumans transform, shape and contribute to engender aesthetic encounters, a new materialist, postphenomenologically influenced concept of agency as distributed in human perceivers, artworks, mediating technologies and environments has been particularly relevant. As such, the concept of agency has been the principal tenet in the participation nexus. The notions of affordance, atmosphere and affect each contribute to illuminate some of the ways in which distributed agency is expressed in aesthetic encounters. To this end, each notion has worked toward articulating the participatory possibilities that arise

when visitors and artworks are considered as situated in and existing through specific mediating technologies and environments. As noted in chapter 2, however, affordance, atmosphere and affect are not the only possible or relevant analytical concepts for explicating the agentic capacities that shape aesthetic encounters. To highlight this, I want to briefly touch upon two other relevant concepts: multistability and serendipity. Each of them might have pushed this thesis in different directions, as they contribute in differing ways to highlight how human and nonhuman agency come into play in aesthetic encounters.

Multistability is a key concept in postphenomenology. First coined by Don Ihde (1990), it refers to the diverse purposes (i.e. stabilities) a given technology may have in different contexts and for different agents. “A technological object, whatever else it is, becomes what it ‘is’ through its uses” (Ihde 1990, 70), as Ihde puts it. Multistability emphasizes what has been a central premise in this thesis: Technologies do not possess a stable essence or a singular purpose, meaning or use. As such, the concept of multistability runs counter to the idea that a designer may design such aspects “into a technology” (Ihde 2008, 51). This is the “designer fallacy” and implies a degree of material neutrality over which the autonomous designer exerts control (ibid. 51). But while a pencil, for instance, may be used for writing, it can also be used in ways that its designer did not intend: To scratch one’s back or to remove gunk from the sole of a shoe.

The notion of multistability clearly resonates with the Gibsonian notion of affordance (see Aagaard 2018), as it concerns the ways in which technologies may afford or suggest particular uses to particular agents. However, the specific analytical consideration of multistability may have contributed to guide the analysis more directly toward relational unfoldings that are beyond the intended use of a given technology. In the case of the Astrup Fearnley Museum app, for instance, its intended purpose is to be an educational tool for onsite visitors. But as I have argued, the app also works to legitimize the use of personal devices in the museum environment, thus contributing to an atmosphere in which visitors are comfortable taking photographs and sharing their experience in social media. Weighted analytical attention toward multistabilities may have aided in uncovering other such surprise discoveries. Still, I have preferred the notion of affordance, first because it works to articulate the specific action possibilities that are engendered as agents meet in a given environment, and second because it carries with it the general idea of multistability.

The example of the Astrup Fearnley Museum app brings me to the second concept I want to address, that of serendipity. Serendipity designates a heterogeneous, multifaceted phenomenon (Yaquib 2018). Generally, however, when one recognizes surprise discoveries, connections, events, or developments as being relevant, valuable or productive in research, one think of them

as being serendipitous.⁵³ In this thesis, emphasizing the serendipitous from an analytical perspective may have contributed to further highlight and explain how disparate or opposing agentic forces come together to produce new and unexpected affects. Arguably, however, a new materialist perspective already entails an attentiveness toward the ways in which agency emerges through dynamic, on-going and ever-changing entanglements, sometimes eliciting surprising or anomalous developments (Frost 2011, 78). As such, one of the strengths of new materialism is that it encourages the analytical attitude and sagacity that, following Morley and de Rond (2010) as well as Fine and Deegan (1996), prepare the researcher to notice and discern serendipitous events.

The Participation Nexus's Contribution to New Materialist Thought

When analyzing artwork encounters, the new materialist openness toward the generative entanglements of human and nonhuman agentic forces contributes to shift analytical attention beyond the representational functions of the artwork. As noted in chapter 2, the new materialist perspective foregrounds the creative forces of art: What the artwork may do, more than what it represents. As such, new materialism is antithetical to the cultural turn and to postmodernist writing on art that largely concerned itself with meaning, signification and discursive formations. Proponents of new materialism may thus think of it as the antidote to what Barbara Bolt labels “the colonization of the arts by cultural theory”, through which the materiality of art “has disappeared into the textual, the linguistic and the discursive” (Bolt 2012, 4). The new materialist project seeks to reclaim the mattering of matter from the discursive realm, to avoid it being bound to and limited by the humanism and anthropocentrism which underpin social constructivism. But through well-meaning attempts to emphasize the vibrant generativity of matter, might new materialist risk losing sight of the human participant, of the role of sensed experience and the meanings attributed to the processes of mattering that they explore? Could the new materialist insistence on how matter is responsible “for the emergence of art” (Bolt 2012, 6), just as much as the human perceiver, lead to an overemphasis on the nonhuman agents which traditionally have been deemed “passive” participants?

Throughout the thesis, the new materialist perspective has been somewhat challenging to maintain. When discussing works of art, possible interpretations of what they may “represent”

⁵³ For thorough accounts of the uses of the notion of serendipity in research, see Fine and Deegan (1996), Morley and de Rond (2010) and Yaqub (2018).

or “mean” have proved difficult to circumvent. Such interpretations have, for instance, concerned the sizes of the plaster cast sleeping bags relative to each other and what the cellophane wrapped candies of “*Untitled*” (*Blue Placebo*) may embody. These considerations, however, have been relevant. The analyses in this thesis thus demonstrate and support what some new materialists emphasize: When one acknowledges the agency of nonhumans, configurations emerge in which the material and the discursive become entangled (see e.g. Bolt 2012, 3; Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012b, 50).⁵⁴ The participation nexus contributes to examine such entanglements. Each of the nexus notions explicate (some of) the ways in which distributed agency is at work in aesthetic encounters, by conceptually merging processes of mattering and processes of meaning.

Affordance designates the relational action possibilities that arise as (human and/or nonhuman) agents meet. However, it also conceptualizes the ways in which human agents perceive, understand and act upon affordances in situation-specific atmospheres and sociocultural contexts. Atmosphere, in turn, pertains to how humans and nonhumans “go forth” (Böhme 1993, 122) from themselves in space, as part of multidirectional flows of agency and affect. Additionally, it concerns how objects, as part of spatial constellations, are sensed and made sense of in human perceivers. Lastly, affect concerns processes of transformation emerging from the dynamic and shifting potential of the mediating situation with its entanglement of objects, technologies and human bodies. But affect also concerns the feelings one experiences when affective intensity takes hold of the sensing body. And it concerns emotion, understood as expressions of sensed and sociolinguistically recognized affective intensity.

With the notions of agency, affordance, atmosphere and affect, the participation nexus constitutes a framework for analysis that makes room for considering the entanglements of matter and meaning. It works toward an understanding of aesthetic participation that does not begin or end with the actions or interpretations of the human visitor. Nor does it begin or end with the materiality of the artwork or what it represents, or with the processes of mattering that are engendered by museum environments and technologies. Instead, the participation nexus works toward an understanding of how visitors and artworks, as well as onsite and online mediating environments all – necessarily and fundamentally – participate in aesthetic

⁵⁴ See also the anthology *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a “New Materialism” through the arts* (Barrett and Bolt 2012), which works toward re-thinking the relationship between materiality and signification.

encounters. Participation, in the sense I refer to it, entails more than merely being present in the aesthetic encounter. It involves an active contribution to the encounter as such: A generativity through which human and nonhuman participants contribute to shape the mediating situation that allows the aesthetic encounter to emerge.

5.3. Concluding Remarks: Aesthetic-Political Implications of Expanding the Notion of Participation

What I suggest here is an expansion of what counts as activity. Moreover, I suggest a broadened view on which entities are recognized with the agency to be active parts of the aesthetic encounter. Relevant to this is a question I asked in the introduction to this thesis, which so far has been left unanswered. What may be the aesthetic-political consequence of expanding the notion of participation? What is the consequence of going beyond the anthropocentrically inclined understanding that characterizes the contemporary participation paradigm with its focus on overt visitor activity? For cultural political discourse on digitization in particular, what is the consequence of considering the active participation of artworks and the digital interfaces through which they are mediated?

I want to approach these questions by first addressing what sort of knowledge has been gained by the perspective in this thesis. The new materialist, postphenomenologically influenced theoretical framework I have engaged, as well as the methodological, media aesthetic approach from the critical museum visitor perspective, all encourage and facilitate critical perspectives on the power relations engendered by and through museum materialities. One may consider the specific focus on mediation in this thesis, however, to be postphenomenologically inclined. It is thus notable that critical voices argue that postphenomenology may seem “apolitical” (Scharff 2006, 131), that it tends to treat mediation as a personal, rather than social affair: That it is too concerned with how subjects and objects shape each other, rather than how societies and objects shape each other (Kaplan 2009, 236). What, then, may come out of a project which has largely concerned itself with aesthetic encounters on a personal level, with the mediated one-to-one encounter between a work of art and a museum visitor? Has my project been so focused on the mediations of digital technologies that it cannot direct critical attention toward the political systems in which these mediations occur?

The answer, I argue, is negative. As feminist phenomenologists argue, making people reflect on everyday experiences and encounters is, in and of itself, a political project (Ferguson 2009). Doing so contributes to challenge the status quo and problematize the existing foundations on which experiences and encounters rest (Oksala 2014). Micro-scale analyses which focus on specific mediating situations and technologies – and here I follow Jesper Aagaard (2017, 530) –

may be helpful in contesting specific practices by way of raising critical awareness. As such, the postphenomenological influence is certainly political in that it, as Aagaard puts it, “paves the way for phenomenologically informed interventions” (ibid. 530). The aesthetic-political interventions which an expanded notion of participation calls for concern the agency attributed, by cultural policy, to works of art and the digital technologies through which they are mediated.

Aesthetic and politics, as Ole Marius Hylland and Erling Bjurström (2018, 1) argue, meet when cultural policy attributes art with the agency to fulfill certain functions or represent certain kinds of values. That is, “when art is promoted for the sake of something and not for art’s sake” (ibid. 1). In cultural policy, art is considered what Hylland and Bjurström label “a building block and a *Bildung* block” – part of a foundation that supports cultural citizenship and democracy, as well as cultivation, education and formation (ibid. 1). As such, museums are democratizing institutions, and, as I have touched upon throughout this thesis, digital technologies are largely considered as the democratizing tools through which art and cultural heritage are made available to broader publics. The important matter here is that artworks in museum collections maintain not only aesthetical, but political agency. They maintain their agency both through the material processes of becoming and transformation they contribute to engender, and through their roles as museum objects and “*Bildung* blocks” (cf. ibid. 1).

The agency of digitization, however, is equally important. Digitization not only maintains the political agency to make art accessible and visible. It also maintains aesthetical agency, as digital mediating technologies actively participate in – i.e. take part in, influence, shape and transform – aesthetic encounters, the experience of visitors and the affordances, atmospheres and affects of the mediated artwork. An expanded notion of participation serves to highlight how digital technologies are agentic participants in aesthetic encounters. Moreover, an expanded understanding of participatory processes encourages new ways of thinking about the democratization of art and culture and about processes of democratization as such. This is because moving beyond an anthropocentric notion of aesthetic participation also entails expanding the anthropocentrically inclined idea of the museum as a democratizing institution.

In the late twentieth century, the museum started its move away from being an authoritative, collection-based and building-centered purveyor of truth with an aim to civilize, discipline and educate the public (Bennett 1995; Barrett 2011; McCall and Gray 2014). Today, the democratic museum more readily aims for power to be distributed among the museum institution and demographically diverse visitors. According to prevailing ideals of new museology, visitors should be granted the power to take part in or somehow influence collections, exhibits and decision-making processes, as the democratic museum moves away from being monovocal and

strives, instead, for polyphony. As Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Runnel put it, the democratic museum does not speak “in a single voice to the masses”, but “makes space for other speakers” (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Runnel 2014b, 15). What may be problematic, from the perspective maintained in this thesis, is that such notions of democracy still privilege certain agents, certain acts and certain modes of being. What is privileged are human agents, and in online spaces in particular, their acts of “speaking up” (cf. Crawford 2009, 526) are deemed the most relevant. The social, the discursive and the communicative aspects of participation are emphasized, more so than the material processes of transformation and becoming that are foregrounded in an expanded notion of participation. While one may think of these aspects as being entwined, one may also ask whether the museum’s move from being collection-based to visitor-centered has shifted the attention too far beyond the objects and materialities at the heart of museum practice.

In a participation perspective, the art museum as a democratizing institution maintains a responsibility to distribute power to its visitors and to give them room to speak of, respond to, interact with and influence the exhibits and artworks they encounter. To this end, the predominant notion of participation-as-visitor-activity plays a pivotal role. However, the art museum also bears a responsibility to not limit the agency of the artworks in its collections, but to make room for the artworks to *work* in and influence the aesthetic encounters they become part of. In order to highlight the complexities of these responsibilities and the challenges they entail, an expanded notion of participation is necessary.

The challenges for the art museum to balance its responsibilities toward its visitors and the artworks it houses particularly surface with digitization, as digital mediating technologies – which necessarily negotiate between a range of stakeholders – intervene in and influence the visitor-artwork encounter. Today, policymakers note the importance of using digital technologies in ways that add new qualities to art, rather than take away from it (Norwegian Ministry of Culture 2018, 50). To this point, an expanded notion of participation emphasizes that the mediation of digitized art may both add to – and take away from – the possibilities visitors and artworks have for participating in aesthetic encounters. It follows from this that if art museums are to fulfill their roles as democratizing institutions, merely providing digital access to museum objects may not be enough. Perhaps more so than “techno-cultural” (Gran et al. 2018, 61) complexity and innovation in digital interfaces and devices, the case studies in this thesis suggest that digitized art demands a diversity of “aesthetic-expression” (ibid. 61) in the forms and content through which it is mediated. That is, forms of mediation diverse enough to

consider and facilitate both human and nonhuman participation and attend to the agency of both museum visitors and museum objects.

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