Presence and Atmosphere in Art museums

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Abstract. *Presence theory and atmosphere studies are the subject of a three-year research project between Faaborg Museum and University of Southern Denmark. In this paper, the project's two researchers will present the theoretical framework for analysing the museum as a specific place for presence and atmosphere. Counter-intuitive mapping and walk-along interviews are here used to study the museum as a space where museumgoers move in and out of presence and absence, solitude and social interaction, surface and depth, voids and intensity, or openness and hiddenness. Faaborg Museum is a Danish art museum and a hundred-year-old Gesamtkunstwerk, i.e. a museum where architecture, paintings, sculptures, design, and furniture are created as a total experience addressing the mind as well as the senses.*

Keywords: presence, art, atmosphere, phenomenology, multisensory, museums, meshwork, experiment

Part One

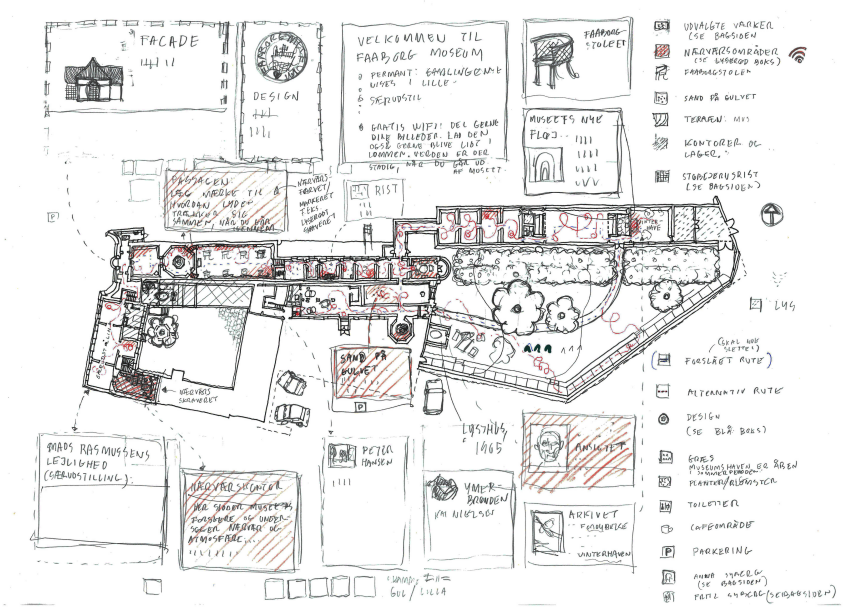
Presence has become a new object of study within architecture, literature, art, anthropology, and museology. Theorists have described presence as a state of being lost in focused intensity, an attitude towards history as an ongoing process, and as a newfound interest in the materiality of collections and the museum space. In the first part of the paper, the work on mapping a small historical museum in Denmark makes use of presence theory in order to rethink and rework the museum map in a(n) (futile) attempt to represent the embodied experience of museum space including time, movements, atmosphere, and presence effects. The article's museum map uses Tim Ingold's idea of the meshwork and its knots to illustrate certain zones of presence in the museum.

From the perspective of a museum researcher, 'presence' is an unapproachable concept. The experience of presence disappears into thin air as soon as we turn on our analytical apparatus. It escapes an analytical gaze. However, many people have an intuitive idea of what presence is. In *The Production of Presence*, German-American literary theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht describes presence as "[...] the state of being lost in focused intensity [...]" (2004:104). In order to analyse 'presence' beyond our aforementioned intuition, this paper will introduce a provisional *contra-intuitive method* – in this case mapping presence – in order to point to those qualities of the museum which are often overlooked. The cumbersome 'presence' is here considered to be a logical, predictable and static object of study. In this specific case, the contra-intuitive method will attempt to get a hold of

'presence' using one of the most uncreative and conventional parts of the museum institution: The museum map (Fig. 1).

Museum map

Museum maps are – from the perspective of museum studies – one of the museum's most interesting objects of study. Most museums have a site map depicting the museum from high above. Colours and hatchings show specific curatorial or (art-) historical divisions of materials, periods and cultures. The ordering of colours and codes gives museumgoers a first-hand impression of the hierarchy of the collection. These maps, like any other map, are never innocent and value-free representations of places. They discard, categorise, and organise. They reveal as much as they hide.

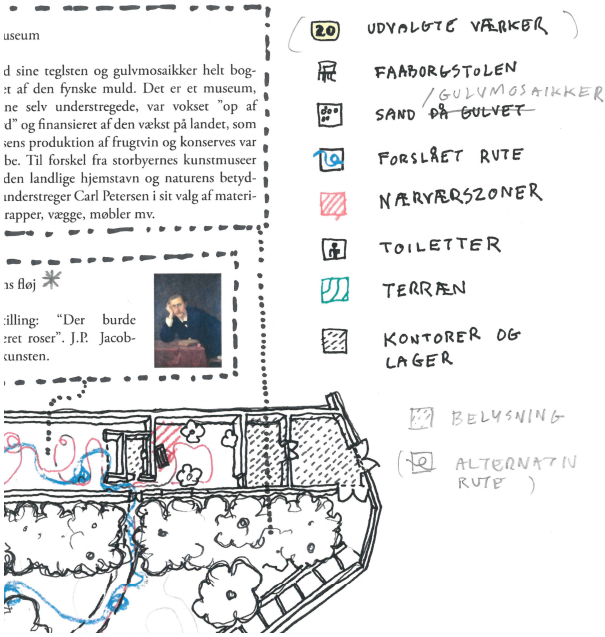


Figur 1 First draft of the map

Borrowing from atmosphere studies, the current presence mapping attempts to combine Gernot Böhme's two planes of reality. The German philosopher Gernot Böhme describes *atmo-sphere* by distinguishing between *Realität* and *Wirklichkeit*. The former consists of objective and tangible things such as walls, colours, and other facts. The latter, the Wirklichkeit, is by contrast determined by our movement through specific spaces. It is, according to Böhme, what we *do*, not what the space *is* (Böhme 2003, Bjerregaard 2014:4). Most museum maps depict empirical and perpetual facts. A map of a museum's Wirklichkeit, however, shows the sensory effects of museum space and museum collections when people move through the building including sensory impulses, smaller surprises and perhaps even certain zones of potential presence. The map of presence is obviously a futile attempt to bring both planes of reality into one site because of the unstable nature of the

experience of space. Nevertheless, the failed map allows us to consider the museum as a site for reason as well as embodied knowledge.

A map of potential presence zones must necessarily involve movement because embodied experiences of atmosphere and presence are situated in a body moving through space. British anthropologist Tim Ingold's notion of the meshwork might serve as a means of studying the museum as a particular place for walking, thinking, and talking. Ingold distinguishes between two types of motion, *along* and *across* (Ingold, 2007: 84-102, Ingold 2011). When walking in nature as well as in the museum we walk along a path and a terrain. We walk along works of art, museum objects, and the museum space. The stroll is essential to every museum walk.



Figur 2 Second draft of the map (detail)

This movement along the terrain differs from the thoroughfare where travellers have an endpoint and a distance to traverse. On thoroughfare we go with a predefined meaning and purpose. We are transported towards a destination. The presence map should show a museum where museumgoers are not going across floors in straight lines from a to b. Instead, they should move along crooked and curved lines including knots and folds where things accumulate and movements intensify. Museum-goers move both in transitive ways, for example across floors in larger and brighter galleries, and in intransitive ways into folds and corners like looser and tighter knots on a thread (Ingold 2011:83).

Dutch historian Eelco Runia describes presence as a spatial experience of history. Presence theory is an approach with "[...] focus not on the past but on the gift, not on history *as what is irremediably gone*, but on history as an ongoing process" (Runia 2006:8). Similar to Ingold's interest towards ongoing lines of life and movement

(Ingold 2007, 2011), Runia describes the experience of presence as a study of history as continuous. Time becomes a spatial matter that stretches out and bundles up in knots. Museumgoers experience the past as something that is not over, but continues into the present.
These knots of time are illustrated as knots on the presence map (Fig. 2-3). The map traces a route through the museum, but not a truer or particularly good route. Moreover, the sketched map is a permanent condition, which should stress the temporal nature of the map itself – unlike modern maps that seem to have been drawn from a neutral vantage point (Ingold 2007:84-103, Latour et al. 2010). The presence map charts uncertainties and errors alongside certainties and facts. Once the museum map is freed from portraying a fixed and timeless place, there are room for other information such as sand on the floor, presence, light, colours, and places outside the public sphere.

Criticism

Atmosphere studies and aesthetics of presence are not necessarily in a binary opposition to new media or modern day network culture. On the contrary, digital technologies, at least according to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, may turn out to be useful in an attempt to awaken a new desire for presence (2004: xv). Although presence studies should contribute to a newfound critical reflection towards the number and use of touch screens, apps, and bring-your-own-devices, the atmosphere studies and presence theory should avoid a categorization as one end of a dichotomy in contrast to digital culture, participatory designs, superficiality of social media, etcetera. When that happens, the theory becomes dependant of and defined by its binary contrast. It becomes its binary in reverse.
Paradoxically, this critical potential of presence theory can itself be criticized for institutional appropriation. Critical researchers should consider whether presence theory is yet another attempt to colonize and control every part of our cultural and social sphere – in this case our experience of being lost in the presence of art, stories, or spaces. Presence theory is principally critical of the ongoing utilization of our lives, but as German-Russian philosopher Boris Groys points out in "Logik der Sammlung" from 1997, the museum institution – especially institutions of art – has historically been highly effective in the work on collecting and assimilating every attempt to break with tradition (Groys 1997). It should, I will argue, remain an unsolvable paradox that the presence theory has become an object of study within academia. The combination of *presence* and *theory* is odd and in itself is a small disturbance. Counter-intuitive methods and smaller disturbances might allow us to rethink our methods for analysing and using spaces for art and cultural heritage. Without critique, concepts such as presence and atmosphere will remain positive, but vague terms for something we like and long for. That would prevent a much-needed reflection upon the past and the present.

Part Two

Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa argues that atmosphere is an interchange between the material and qualities of the specific place and our intangible sphere of expectation and imagination. He suggests that experimental atmosphere should be understood as the overall perceptual and emotive experience of a space, setting or

social situation. Atmosphere is then a mental thing, an experiential knowledge that somehow is stretched out between the object and the subject (Pallasmaa 2012: 20).



Figur 3. Faaborg Museum.

In this part of the paper, thoughts on how to get information from participants during case study interviews will be presented. These case studies were conducted in order to test the assumption that Faaborg Museum is a space for atmosphere (and presence) and a place where different senses are at play at the same time (the Gesamtkunstwerk). How do visitors describe and experience the sensorial perceptions they experience? The case study interviews with focus on the senses and multisensory perception were made with reference to the walk-along research conducted by ethnographer Sarah Pink and the anthropologists Jo Lee and Tim

Ingold, though with different interests and aspects (Pink 2015:184; Lee and Ingold 2006). The method offers an opportunity to interact with the space in a different way, through sharing the intimacy of the walk and experiencing together. It gives way for an embodied way of knowing that goes beyond what is being said verbally. Sharing or creating a walking rhythm with other people can lead to a very particular closeness and bond between the people involved as Lee and Ingold points out (Lee & Ingold 2006:67).

Especially Pink and her use of a sense-orientated methodology, which focuses on the multisensoriality of experience, perception, knowing, and practice, has given a way to explore Faaborg Museum with the participants. She argues that interviews can be seen as social, sensorial and affective encounters and insists upon the concept of the research encounter, which refers to the shared moment through which the researcher learns and knows about other people's experiences and how these moments produce multisensorial and emplaced learning and knowing.

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