

Presence in the Museum

On metonymies, discontinuity and history without stories

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Abstract

In this paper, I will explore and extend the concept of presence as formulated by the Dutch philosopher of history, novelist and psychologist Eelco Runia, arguing that it provides a useful tool with which to unpick some of the non-representational aspects of exhibition making in historical museums. The paper proceeds from a desire to find theoretical tools with which to, in Kathleen Stewart's words, 'slow the quick jump to representational thinking and evaluative critique long enough to find ways of approaching the complex and uncertain objects that fascinate because they literally hit us or exert a pull on us' (Stewart 2007: 4). Specifically, I will use a philosophical analysis of presence to show how it might be employed in a museum context, through the conceptual pairings of presence and meaning, discontinuity and continuity, and metaphor and metonymy.

Key words: Presence, museology, non-representational, Eelco Runia

Introduction – feeling it in the bones

Medical Museion¹ has a large collection of pathological bones. In a small room in a tiny house in the back of the museum sit some 600 specimens, mounted on cardboard and wooden plinths, ranging from spines malformed by tuberculosis to skulls dissolved by syphilis and skeletons of anencephalic newborns, and so forth across the range of nineteenth and early twentieth century pathologies. The collection is not on display at the moment, but a group of researchers and curators at the museum are currently working to make it part of a new gallery of human remains which will open in late 2014. The process of writing grant applications for constructing the gallery has led to the somewhat awkward conclusion that it is difficult to translate into the customary application language one of the main motivations for wanting to exhibit the collection in the first place: its presence.

When deciding what collections a historical museum should put on display, arguments are usually based on their historical value, for example that they show important stages in the development of science. But this is not solely, or even primarily, the exhibition planning group's reason for wanting to exhibit the pathological bone specimens. One of the main strengths of the collection, the curatorial group feels, lies in what happens when you actually see it, and only secondarily in the stories (scientific, medical, cultural, etc.) it may elicit. This is not to say that the collection does not give rise to important stories. For example, it may reveal aspects of the development of anatomical knowledge and its relation to our understandings of disease specifically and the body more generally, it speaks of the changing patterns of the role of human remains in pathology and experimental medicine, as well as the forms and methods used to contain and transmit knowledge in medicine. But it is as if such potential stories run at a different voltage than the immediate impact on the observer of the objects themselves; they impart a whole range of affects and sensations, at once both extremely individual but also touching upon a common and shared sensitivity towards issues of life, death, illness and health. To put it metaphorically, the displayed bones seem to reverberate with the spectator's bones; our internal body image contorts in the attempt to match our form to the form in front of us. Our spine shivers with the sheer impossibility of imagining living the shape of the spine on the pedestal. We cannot help but use our own three-dimensional shape to enfold the three-dimensional

shape of the bones, and in that enfolding the specimens affect us. And this affecting germinates thought, feelings, emotions, sensations and other forms of life in the viewing subject.

This affective germination spurred by the presence of the specimen, however difficult to trace or pin down, is what motivates this paper. It proceeds from a desire to find theoretical tools with which to, in Kathleen Stewarts words, 'slow the quick jump to representational thinking and evaluative critique long enough to find ways of approaching the complex and uncertain objects that fascinate because they literally hit us or exert a pull on us' (Stewart 2007: 4). Specifically, I will build on earlier work (Bencard 2008; Söderqvist and Bencard 2008), and extend the concept of presence as formulated by the Dutch philosopher of history, novelist and psychologist Eelco Runia, arguing that it provides a useful entry point from which to study some of the non-representational aspects of putting things on display in historical museums. He develops the concept of presence as an engagement with what he sees as a basic passion: the need to figure out what role history and historicity plays in human life – issues that are crucial for historical museums as well.² Runia has published a number of essays on this topic, which he introduced in the seminal paper 'Presence' in the journal *History and Theory* (Runia 2006a). He has since published a number of papers that explore this concept from different angles (Runia 2006b; 2010a; 2010b).³

In this paper, I will use a philosophical analysis of presence to show how it might be employed in a museum context, through the conceptual pairings of presence and meaning, discontinuity and continuity, and metaphor and metonymy. Its aims are, in short, to supplement the museological theoretical toolbox with a set of concepts that allow for tinkering with the non-representational, that which escapes articulation, the inherent non-narrative qualities of history and historical representations. Also, Runia's philosophy of presence has interesting perspectives on how we engage with historical objects, and the paper thus participates in a topical debate on the non-representational qualities of, and how, these qualities interweave in the process of meaning-making in museums.

This paper, then, is related to the wider renewed desire within museology to engage with objects and their material effects as something other than social texts or cultural symbols suggested by such anthologies as *Museum Materialities* (Dudley 2010a); *Sensible Objects* (Edwards, Gosden & Phillips 2006), *The Thing about Museums* (Dudley *et al* 2011) and *Museum Objects* (Dudley 2012). The new (or new-ish, at least) interest in materiality is less interested in disentangling the strands of power and discourse woven into the museum, but attempts to use a material approach to say new things about the relationship between subject and world. There is an increasing interest in exploring the 'bony materiality' of things (Daston 2004: 18), starting with a 'bottom-up focus on objects' (Dudley 2012: xxviii) and the ways in which they cannot be reduced to a social text or to cultural symbols (Brown 2004), to name a select few of these approaches (a good overview can be found Dudley 2010b).

(The metaphysics of) presence in philosophy

But before discussing the specifics of Runia's philosophy of presence and how it might be applied within museology, it is necessary to dwell a bit on the history of the concept of presence in philosophy, as it has something of a troubled past. Even if, as Frank Ankersmit writes, 'Presence' in a way is a new word in the theoretical reflection on the humanities that 'does not have a meaning that we can all be required to accept, if we wish to be admitted to the arena of theoretical debate', (Ankersmit 2006: 336) there is still a historical baggage in and around the word that requires some elaboration.

Fundamentally, the noun presence indicates that which is *prae* (before) *sens* (I am), i.e., that which is before me. In the history of philosophy, presence has been linked to issues of truth, whether the closeness, the being-there, provides a uniquely privileged position. Plato argues this in *Phaedrus*, positing the unmediated truth of speaking (because it implies presence) against the mediation of writing (where presence would be mediated or represented). Presence thus, for Plato, signals a unique closeness to reality and truth. In the context of philosophy of history, this form of presence would be related to a search for something originary, something somewhere close to 'what actually happened'. Talking about presence from this view, then, is akin to searching for a reality anchor outside language and representation, a stable centre or point of reference, from which truth can be fixed (see de Preester and Van de Vijver 2005).

This understanding of presence was problematized most famously first by Heidegger in *Being and Time* and then by Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology*. Heidegger problematized the contraction of time and presence and identified it as the central mistake of western metaphysics. In his vision, metaphysics from Plato to Nietzsche postulates a self-knowing and self-propelling autonomous agent, for whom nature exists only in so far as it is present, which means useful, which in turn leads to what he diagnosed as the particular blindness of the age of technology (see White 1996). Derrida took up this critique of the metaphysics of presence in the widely influential work *Of Grammatology*, arguing that western thought is based on the idea of a centre, an origin or a presence which fixates and guarantees meaning (Derrida 1998). Derrida destabilized this notion, arguing that there are no positions of unmediated access from which meaning can be stabilized and authenticated, only a plurality of representations. This severing is important, because it removes representations from a system of judgement in terms of its success or failure to reconstitute the 'presence' that is thought to be the original 'content' of the empirical form of the representation. This important subversion of presence as unmediated access had led the word itself to be something of an immediate red flag, signalling an implicit belief in Truth and Reality, capital T and R. Even talking about presence can, in light of this critique of the metaphysics of presence, seem like an attempt to drag in naive realist or empiricist notions of truth. As Peter Gratton wrote recently, presence still has a bit of a dubious ring to it, 'we are told of all the dangers of the metaphysics of presence, which we know just leads, for some reason, to hierarchies, colonialism, and why not, death camps'.⁴

These warnings aside, there have been recent attempts to engage with presence in a different way, notably the German philosopher and literary theoretician Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's book *The Production of Presence* (Gumbrecht 2004).⁵ Gumbrecht is explicitly interested in the relationship between meaning and presence (or the representational and the non-representational), interrogating what he describes as an oscillation between meaning-effects and presence-effects. His aim is to go against a tradition in philosophy and literary criticism in which everything that cannot be reduced to configurations of meaning are rejected. Gumbrecht wants to argue against both an everyday attitude and an academic perspective that gives a higher value to the meaning of phenomena than to their material presence. Gumbrecht compares this meaning culture, as he calls it, to presence cultures, in which humans figure themselves as bodies within a material cosmology. In such presence cultures meaning is not as much produced by interpretation as it is revealed in 'events of self-unconcealment of the world', as he writes, or in moments of revelation (Gumbrecht 2004: 81). In presence cultures, Gumbrecht argues, knowledge is thus not exclusively conceptual, prior to, or dependent on, interpretation.

Presence as being in touch with history

Runia, in fact, does not mention this philosophical tradition of engaging with a metaphysics of presence as a discussion of truth or closeness to reality in his work; he sidesteps these questions, perhaps in part to avoid a perceived quagmire around issues of what might constitute something as True. Rather, his understanding of presence is closer to Gumbrecht emphasis on the non-representational, non-interpretative knowledge that 'just happens' (Gumbrecht 2004: 81). Runia defines presence as

"being in touch" – either literally or figuratively – with people, things, events, and feelings that made you into the person you are. It is having a whisper of life breathed into what has become routine and clichéd – it is fully realizing things instead of just taking them for granted. (Runia 2006a: 5)

Presence is no more true or false than representation; rather it is a way in which history affects us. Runia's understanding of presence is aimed specifically at understanding how the past can be present in the present and how it makes itself felt by us.⁶ What makes Runia's theories of presence of particular value to the business of cultural and scientific historical museum making is that it emphasizes and wants to work out how history functions and can be present (or fail to be so) – 'How can the subliminal, mysterious, but uncommonly powerful *living-on*, the presence, of the past be envisaged?' as he writes (Runia 2006b: 305). This living-on of history is, in a

sense, a core component of what draws visitors to museums: a desire for remembrance, for commemoration, for closeness and authenticity, for being in touch with, moved by and in the presence of past reality.

In Runia's interpretation of presence it is tied to our unconscious biographies. It is life stored inside of us, to which we do not have any direct access and does not follow from a meaning-based appropriation of the world. Presence is ineluctably tied to appropriations and interactions with the world that are not directly related to the stories we tell about ourselves, if at all. It is tied to experiences in the individual's life absorbed on other levels than that of consciousness. Existentially, then, it points to a separation between what we are and what we can understand; Runia suggests that "being" is always and irremediably one ontological and evolutionary level ahead of "understanding". We are what we don't understand, we can understand what we are not' (Runia 2006a: 21). Being, understood as our unconscious and bodily existence in and appropriation of the world, is ahead of our conscious appropriation of the world. And it is not just ahead of, in the sense that understanding over time catches fully up with being, but rather encompasses modes of relating to and experiencing the world that is distinct from understanding.

As Runia says, 'you can only surprise yourself if you exist on different planes, and if the connection between these planes is less than open and transparent' (Runia 2006a: 8). This suggests that we live both in the present (the moment we find ourselves in) and in the past (which we carry with us and which surrounds us) simultaneously – both past and present is 'present' each in its own way. This simultaneous nature of past and present in us also means that there is no 'pure presence' or 'pure meaning'. Instead, they make up different parts of us which function together, even if the connection between them is less than apparent. In this sense, discontinuity and presence are not mere addendums to continuity and meaning, or merely undigested fuel for a representational machine. Rather, reality as it appears to us and as we navigate in it exists through the complex intertwining of these elements.⁷

Discontinuity and the plane of the present

The need for meaning as well as the need for presence may, in Runia's opinion, be said to be the existential parallel to one of the key problems in understanding history – that of continuity and discontinuity (Runia 2010b). Presence relates to discontinuity as meaning relates to continuity, and this duality is, as Runia writes,

a manifestation of the will to account for the fact that we are completely unchanged yet completely different from the person we used to be. It is a symptom of the determination to account for the fact that our past – though irremediably gone – may feel more real than the world we inhabit. (Runia 2006a: 6)

Runia works to create a way of talking about presence and discontinuity that does not merely explain it away by creating meaning out of it, but rather allows it to exist in the investigation of history as much as it does in our experience of history. He wants to, in his own words, create a perspective from which 'one may say sensible things about "discontinuity" without dissolving its disturbing essence in the medium needed to come to terms with it' (Runia 2010a: 4).

History as an academic discipline is, in a sense, the business of creating continuity in the form of stories – most academic history revolves around making sense (meaning) of the past, arguing back and forth about the causality of a given event. Similarly, part and parcel of the historical museum is, in one form or another, to make sense of history as a continuous, narrative process. The chronological historical, story-driven exhibition remains one of the dominant tropes in museum making. As Daniel Sherman writes, one of the founding fictions of the historical museum is that the fragments of history in an exhibition are historically significant in that they create a coherent representational universe (Sherman 1995: 50). Even if there has been much experimentation with this exhibition format in the past two decades, it remains a powerful ordering principle (see also Haan 2006: 190). As humans, we seem to be subject to a certain 'narrative gravity' (Runia 2010a: 5) which leads us, both as historians, exhibition makers and individual, to creatively and ruthlessly search for continuity between events.

But in the effort to disentangle the functioning of presence, Runia argues that we have to realize that presence is not brought about by stories (Runia 2006b: 310-11). Since narrativism became an important analytical approach in the early 1970s, it has been a powerful line of thinking, both in the humanities and elsewhere, that stories are what drive the world around. Communities as well as individuals have been seen as constructing their identity through the stories that they tell about themselves. But, Runia argues, the stories that we tell ourselves do not determine the totality of our actions, or even most of them (Runia 2010a: 4-7). Our conscious reflections on our lives, as well as a society's reflections on its own state of being, does not capture fully why we do what we do, because our relationship with the world is not fully (or even primarily) based in consciousness. As Runia writes,

floating through the here and now, this presence of the past also makes me *feel* things, *think* things, and *do* things that are at odds with who I think I am – and so forces me to rewrite my story about myself. (Runia 2006b: 315-16).

Runia, calls upon what is called 'post-decisional dissonance reduction' in psychology to characterize this succumbing to narrative gravity, even if, he argues, most decisions and events are not started by thinking about them, but by acting. He calls this 'the myth of thinking', invoking Musil's *The Man without Qualities*, noting that

in actual practice thinking, as a sustained effort to ascend from premises to conclusions, is extremely rare. What we call "thinking" often is a kind of pathos [...] most of the time, what we call "thinking" just "happens" to us, or, as Musil said, "it is life that does the thinking around us". (Runia 2010a: 7)

The deed is before the word, not the other way around.

But if presence cannot be captured in narrative – in the words we use to make continuity out of that which happens to us and the world around us – what tools can we then use to unpack its effects and placement in the world? How can one draw forth in narratives something inherently non-narrative? Presence, Runia argues, resides in the denotative regions of language rather than the connotative, that is, in the literal meaning rather than in the cultural meanings associated with a given phrase. Presence is thus found in exactly the opposite of the *storiness* of stories, that is, of the culturally meaningful and representationally rich content of stories. It resides in what a given story, text or collection of objects contains *in spite* of the intentions of its authors, what it does to present itself as a story: 'historical texts invite us to read faster than at a certain minimum speed – on pain of noticing the cracks and fissures if we go too slowly' (Runia 2006a, 25). This means that presence is not something buried deep in some mystical part of our stories, rather it simply coincides with our personal and cultural blind spots (Runia 2006b: 311-13). It is in plain view, it is our culture – if culture is taken to mean the set of things that we take so for granted that we do not (or cannot) talk about them; 'our private collection of public secrets', as Runia (2006b: 315) says. Runia argues that presence is not the result of stories, exactly because it lies outside of our conscious appropriation of the world.

In order to approach how continuity and discontinuity works, that is, how history is at once both present and absent, Runia argues that we must stop focusing on history as time (since the chronological passage of time leads to continuity), and instead approach the present. We should, he argues, 'focus not on the past but on the present, not on history as *what is irremediably gone*, but on history as *an ongoing process*' (Runia 2006a: 8). This view of the importance of the present sees it (that is, present day reality, the cross-section through time that at any given moment presents itself to consciousness) as a surface, underneath which lies different historical depths. Runia (2006a: 9) likens it to a city that is never uniformly remade, but consists of structures of various sizes, functions and ages. This metaphor is employed because it translates time into space, thereby working to undo some of the linearity implicit in our perception of time. This plane of the present with its city-like messiness is a jumble of things that are 'genetically, ontologically and existentially separate' and is at one and the same time 'a wonder of continuity and as well as an orgy of discontinuity' (Runia 2006a: 9). Museum collections and collecting echoes this notion of history as an on-going process, as deep pockets of history stored on the plane of the present, as well as the intertwining of the continuous and

the discontinuous. The work of compiling, cataloguing and displaying history is a translation, albeit a fraught one, of time into space. And in that translation lies both a search for meaning – how history ended up with precisely the world we know now – and a possible production of presence; the weirdness of history containing more than we have access to, to hidden depths. This is similar to Ewa Domanska's utilization of Greimas' term 'non-absent' in the historical study of things, by which she argues that, by focusing on the non-absent past (the past whose absent is manifest), 'we avoid the desire to presentify and represent the past, and instead turn to a past that that is somehow still present, that will not go away or, rather, that of which we cannot rid ourselves' (Domanska 2006: 346) This past, Domanska argues, is liminal and full of 'ghostly artifacts' that cannot be easily controlled by represented, and which 'undermine our sense of the familiar and threaten our sense of safety' (Domanska 2006: 347).

Metonymy and the crack in every thing

In order to describe how presence functions and how it is related to us and our interaction with the world, Runia uses the conceptual pair of metonymy and metaphor. Metaphor is, in essence, understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another – the rose for the lover and so on. Metonymy, on the other hand, is a literary figure in which the name of one thing is used in place of another that is suggested by or associated with it; in other words, a figure in which the name of an attribute or adjunct is substituted for that of the thing meant (for a discussion on the differences between metaphor and metonymy, see also Ricoeur 1981: 56-58). As Runia (2010a: 8) describes it:

Strictly speaking, a metonymy is a substitution of one word or phrase by another word or another phrase. The common example is "a fleet of 20 sails", but personally I prefer instances in which somebody is addressed with his diagnosis: "the ulcer in room 20 has a temperature", "the leg fracture has visitors", "the appendix is a bore". These examples highlight two features of metonymy. In the first place: they show that metonymy involves not a "horizontal" leap – like metaphor – but a "vertical" one – a leap, that is, from what I clumsily describe as one "level of being" to another.

What happens in a metonymy is a transposition of a word from one context (sails) to another context (fleet) where it stands 'just slightly "out of place"' (Runia 2006a: 15-16). In the displaced word or phrase, different contexts are both connected and juxtaposed; metonymy might be considered as an 'abnormal' or 'wilfully inappropriate' passageway between two different contexts. Metonymy is then, as Runia uses it, a way of bringing things together which do not fit neatly, and this action creates a crack through which, as he argues, presence can potentially arise. What is suggested by metonymy and discontinuity is that history is much more than our conscious reflection or narrativization of it, but rather an example of the fact that we exist on different levels that have different structuring logics simultaneously and that the relationship between them is opaque rather than open and transparent. The ability of metonymy to bring about presence is because it makes an opaque connection between different levels of being, and this ability is exactly what can bring about a feeling of being in contact with history on a presence rather than a representational level:

Metonymy thus has the curious property of making things present by not presenting them. If the capacity "to make things present by not presenting them" is combined with the first feature of metonymy, the ability to bring about the transposition of different levels of being, we arrive at the exciting conclusion that in metonymy a supra- or, if you like, an intra-textual level of being is actually present in the text ... This, I think, is the wonder of metonymy: whereas metaphor procures "transfer of meaning", metonymy brings about "transfer of presence". (Runia 2010a: 9)

That metonymy is better at bringing about presence is because metaphors inherently draw attention to their representational nature; they parades their richness around, as Runia (2006b: 313) writes, inviting interpretation. This is why, as we saw earlier, Runia locates presence in the

denotative rather than the connotative aspects of language. Just as denotative meanings seem to be blander or straightforward and connotative meaning seems rich and deep, metonymy and metaphor share a similar relationship. Metonymy hides its richness, suggesting that it has only one meaning that is apparent at the surface of the metonymy itself. But despite this apparent flatness, the metonymy is inherently not an even match – the part can never adequately represent the whole. This is why Runia locates presence in metonymies, because presence travels with it hidden from plain sight, like a 'stowaway' (Runia 2006b: 315). This is what makes presence both very real and close to us, but at the same time cannot be captured by representations. It can only be approached obliquely, because it is exactly that which is hidden from view. This is why metonymy carries with it our cultural baggage, our unspoken set of public secrets, the history which has made us what we are and which we can only approach obliquely.

Non-representational metonymies

Importantly within a museological context, metonymy is not necessarily a linguistic phenomenon, but can function with objects and images as well. And this is crucial for the relationship between history and objects and a museological engagement with presence and the non-representational. Runia writes of the ability of metonymies to imply and make present a different layer of reality than is present in the meaning of the words; ultimately preverbal reality is taken up in the world of words. The consequence is that the even if metonymy is a linguistic phenomenon it can provide a shortcut out of the linguistic predicament of representational thinking.

To exemplify this, Runia mentions the use of photographs in the work of German novelist W.G. Sebald. These images are not representations or illustrations of what is going on in the text or follow in any direct line from Sebald's narratives; for example, the novel *Vertigo* is riddled with photographs as well as train tickets, commercials, drawings, postcards and so on, all depicting things that are presented as illustrations, but their connection to what is going on in the narrative is unsettled. Rather, they function like non-verbal metonymies in a linguistic context, wilfully out-of-place. Sebald himself described them as kernels of reality surrounded by expanses of nothingness, and note that they have no meaning, except to point to the fact that 'we live on thin ice, that every moment we can fall through the ice' (Runia 2006a: 16). Sebald uses them in his books in ways that maximize their out-of-placeness. They have no captions or descriptions and they are not on separate pages but are inserted uncommented into the text. These photographs of *realia* serve a dual, contradictory function: they combine a 'vehement validation' of the reality of the narrative with 'an arguable pointlessness, meaninglessness' (Feiereisen & Pope 2007: 171). The images serve to break the surface of the narrative, suggesting its shortcomings by their undigested presence, a function Runia ascribe to their metonymic qualities. By their very presence, they point to the non-representational content that is carried in even the most self-conscious narrative. In this sense, they are employed in ways reminiscent of Barthes *punctum* (Barthes 2010) or how Stephen Greenblatt writes about anecdotes (Greenblatt 2000: 49-74). According to Greenblatt, the anecdote can work against the flow of larger, more coherent narratives. In the text, the meeting with the anecdote is like a change in the texture, the feel, of the text. It introduces an opening, a discontinuity in the text, which lets the reader sense some of that which lies outside the historical narrative – the historical abyss surrounding the text. The relative smoothness of the historical narrative, the way in which it presents a coherent, normalized story, is divulged when the anecdote stands out, like a knot in a piece of sanded down wood. This change of texture has the possibility of provoking in the reader the experience of a different reality, which the historian cannot easily represent or assimilate into the coherent significance.

Runia also uses monuments to explain how metonymy functions, defining monuments as '*Fremdkörper* (things that are out of place) that make past events present on the plane of the present, fistulae that connect and juxtapose those events to the here and now' (Runia 2006a: 17). Monuments are composed of both metaphorical connotation and metonymical denotation, and especially modern, more abstract, monuments are predominantly metonymical in that they rarely offer any sort of pictorial account of what happened at the event in question. Runia mentions Peter Eisenmann's Berlin Holocaust Memorial, noting that rather than accounting for the event, it presents an absence in the here and now. It presents a past event, rather than

representing it, and thus rather than transferring meaning, it transfers presence (of course, it can do both in varying degrees as they are not exclusive). It interacts not with our conscious relation with the event, but by imposing itself on our unconscious life. In a similar vein, James E. Young has analysed Daniel Liebeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin, which itself also bears the mark of a monument alongside its other functions, as an instance of Freud's *Unheimlich*, or uncanny, which has similar qualities to metonymically invoked presence. The uncanny is described as nothing new or alien, but rather something which is 'familiar and old' and already established in the mind, but alienated through repression. The uncanny is 'something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light', as Freud writes (Young 2000: 1). Young notes how the memorial brings about a sense of disquieting return in the form of a 'sudden revelation' of a previously buried past (Young 2000: 2). Following Runia's argument, one could argue that it succeeds in bringing this return about exactly because of its strong metonymic qualities. Young names that which returns a 'familiar alien', which echoes with Runia's ideas of presence as being hidden in plain sight, a stowaway in our beings. These ideas are also echoed in Dylan Trigg's recent book *Uncanny Phenomenology*, in which he argues that monuments do not affect us as much through what they represent but rather that they can bring us in touch with a collective past that is embodied in a fundamentally foreign way (Trigg 2012).

Another type of monument, which according to Runia is particularly apt at transferring presence, is those that name the names of the dead, most famously Maya Lin's powerfully evocative Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The reason for why naming is particularly metonymically significant is, Runia says, because

names are the metonymies *par excellence*. By providing the names of the dead, absent lives are made present in the here and now. A name is a cenotaph for the person who once bore it, an abyss in which we may gaze into the fullness of a life that is no more. In the names of the dead, in short, we glimpse the numinosity of history. (Runia 2006b: 309-10)

Letting one's eyes travel across the endless list of lives opens up history to us, and takes possession of us. The lists of lives open us to life in ourselves. Maya Lin herself wrote of the process behind the memorial design that

The power of a name was very much with me at the time, partly because of the Memorial Rotunda at Yale. In Woolsey Hall, the walls are inscribed with the names of all the Yale alumni who have been killed in wars. I had never been able to resist touching the names cut into these marble walls, and no matter how busy or crowded the place is, a sense of quiet, a reverence, always surrounds those names. Throughout my freshman and sophomore years, the stonecutters were carving in by hand the names of those killed in the Vietnam War, and I think it left a lasting impression on me...the sense of the power of a name. (Lin 2000)

She suggests the existential relevance and presence effect of the names, stating that the memorial 'is not just a list of the dead. To find one name, chances are you will see the others close by, and you will see yourself reflected through them' (Lin 2000). This reflection is both literal and figurative; the metonymical qualities of the name (that is, as part for the whole life) are made physically visible by the carving of the name and the smooth surface of the monument reflecting the observer onto the name. The metonymical qualities come out as an interrelation between the physical manifestation of the name and the position of the observer in relation to it.

Presence in the museum

Runia's terminology seems to me to be well suited to capture some of the tension, if not the schizophrenia, of the historical museum. The past is represented, through presenting. The museum is a storehouse of discontinuity – objects are torn from their contexts, removed from the flows that bore them, but the museum works to create continuity, to connect us to the past. By their very natures, historical museums function as a repository of metonymies, of things out of context. The analytical tool kit that Runia offers – presence and meaning, metonymy and

metaphor, continuity and discontinuity, walking the plane of history – extends neatly to the museum. One might even argue that the museum provides an extremely potent locus for exactly these issues. In a sense, presence effects are part and parcel of the museum business. It might even be argued that it is a fundamental part of our *raison d'être* – if we cannot provide experiences that are qualitatively different from a textbook or from an online image, we are on shaky ground (Süderqvist, Mordhorst and Bencard 2009, Süderqvist and Arnold 2011). And almost anyone who has been to a museum, much less worked in one, will agree that the objects have the potential of gripping us in ways that we do not expect and make us see ourselves and our surroundings in new ways. As Barry Lord writes, the museum experience should be a transformative one, primarily of an affective nature rather than a cognitive one; museum experiences address 'our awareness of the world' (Lord 2001: 17) and not just specific facts or stories about this or that subject.

Following Runia's concepts, we can say that such an awareness also takes place through metonymically induced presence. And museums have an enormous wealth of potential sources of presence because what are objects in collections if not metonymies through and through? The axe for the army. The throne for royal power. The scalpel for the surgeon. The skull dissolved by syphilis for the dangerous sexual practice. The prosthetic limb for the patient. The microwell for the scientist. The skull of the ancephalic newborn for nineteenth century pathologies. The genechip for the hope of a cure. And so on and so forth in expanding circles. Much as the names on the Vietnam Memorials metonymically conjure the lives behind them, so do the objects we collect. These metonymical qualities account for what Kristen Wehner and Martha Sear calls

the slightly dislocating delight that comes from recognizing that an object was "there" at another time and another place and in another person's life and that it is now "here" in this time and this place and in our life. (Wehner & Sear 2010: 145)

This dislocation is also, if we follow Runia, a recognition of a fundamental dislocation in us, in the separation of our different layers of being and our actions in and appropriations of the world. The metonymical displacement of the objects brings about a non-representational awareness of history stored in us, which we rarely have access to. The objects in the museum potentially bring some of the non-representational aspects of our material interactions with the world present for us – they still rummage around below the surface of the ordered museum narrative. As Runia (2006a: 26) writes about the historical text:

Below the surface of the text—in words and phrases we take for granted when we speed along, in expressions we happily forgive the historian, in the concepts and categories the author keeps so masterfully in the air, in the proper and improper names that fill up with color, sense, and meaning—below, I repeat, the surface of the text—the things the metonymies stand for are still present. In absence, but present.

Objects can summon this absent presence in particularly effective ways. The rifle summons the soldier both because of our representational relationship with the rifle, but also because it is shaped to fit his (our) hands; the amputation saw summons both the surgeon and the patient – the handle on the saw blade is made for gripping and evokes a gripping response in us; the surgeon's cane with bite marks evokes the taste of leather, metal and pain – and so on. They invite us to invest ourselves in them, and thereby potentially engaging with history stored in us.

These metonymical qualities open for discussions with other examples of recent materially oriented museological literature. Runia's work in presence supplements the more very materially and sensorially grounded object engagements of works such as Dudley (2012) and Edwards, Gosden and Phillips (2006) by focusing on the culturally non-representational. In a sense, Runia's work does something akin to what Dudley describes as 'keeping open the space that lies *between* artefacts being either carriers of information or objects of detached contemplation' (Dudley 2012: 12) where the thing does not dissolve into meanings. Runia's philosophy of presence is a sustained attempt to argue that we, also, should pay attention to this space in ourselves in order to make sure that our analysis of what we do and why we do

it does not similarly dissolve into meaning – we inhabit and are inhabited by this culturally non-representational, although the degree to which we do is at best opaque to us.

This is the dual blindness that matches Runia to museology: we are often blind to objects just as we are blind to ourselves. Objects belong so obviously in our ‘common knowledge’, our free-floating shareware, that they often become invisible to us, reducible to mere obviousness. Making exhibitions, then, should strive to not just be an exercise in representations (or critique of representations), but also an effort to evoke what philosopher Jane Bennett has called ‘the vitality of things’ or ‘thing-power’: ‘the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle’ (Bennett 2010: 6). As Sandra Dudley writes, ‘museums and visitors alike grow so focused on the story *overlying* the physical thing, they may inadvertently close off other, perhaps equally significant potentials *in* things’ (Dudley 2012: 10). This potential in things to evoke, effect and transform or disturb our notions of human agency is a theme that runs through the materially inclined museology as well as object-oriented philosophical works such as those by Bennett and Joyce (2010), Morton (2013) and Bryant (2011). Runia’s work similarly engages with what he calls ‘Dissimulation of agency’ (Runia 2010a: 3) in his analysis of how participants in historical events do things that surprise themselves, as analysed earlier in the paper. Similarly, Daniel Miller speaks of ‘the humility of things’, noting that

objects are important not because they are evident and physically constrain or enable, but precisely because we do not “see” them. The less we are aware of them, the more powerfully they can determine our expectations by setting the scene and ensuring normative behaviour, without being open to challenge. They determine what takes place to the extent that we are unconscious of their ability to do so. (Miller 2005: 7)

Runia’s philosophy of presence brings out this elusiveness of objects and agency by focusing on the complex relationship between what we can articulate versus what we have absorbed of the world around us. By weirding agency and undoing an account of human action based on continuity and meaning, Runia’s work is related to the opening of museological discourse with a greater sensitivity towards objects and the experiential space.

While producing meaning in museums is vital, so is keeping clearly in our sights the ability of objects to engage us in the non-representational aspects of our lives. This invisibility of objects twined with the invisibility of agency is a potent state of affairs for museum makers; it means that thinking about presence as well as meaning when designing exhibitions can bring something almost unarticulatable of how we relate to ourselves into view. Presence is important because it ties in with an important layer of existential concerns, and because it is necessary to make sense of meaning. They cannot be separated, and attempting to understand one without the other means losing sight of their intertwined natures. Presence is a powerful thing, and one of the reasons we visit museums (and work in them). Working actively with decontextualization and allowing for a space between narrative and object, presence effects can drift through the gaps. As the examples of images in Sebald’s books or the analysis of presence qualities of monuments show, presence is not so non-representational that it cannot be worked with at all or given space in museological discourse, it just requires effort and specific tools with which to do so. Ultimately, presence is part and parcel of the museum business, whether we like it or not – so we would do well to develop tools that allow us to acknowledge its effects upon us and upon the visitors.

Conclusion – back to the bones

Runia’s use of metonymy, both linguistic and non-linguistic, to explain how presence can come about is a useful tool with which to unpack the sensations mentioned in the opening of this paper, the curatorial team’s response to the pathological bone collection at the Medical Museum. The remnants of life stored in the bones gain their presence effect from their ability to invoke this abyss of history, and to make the past present in the here and now. In fact, one might even argue that the entire business of museum making rests on an unspoken commitment to metonymically induced presence, hidden under the guise of representationalist metaphors. When arguing

which objects should enter a collection, museum workers most often refer to their representational value – this object is a metaphor for this period in time or it represents this or that important development in science – but we are as often drawn to objects that give us presence effects, like the pathological bones. Museums can, potentially at least, provide possible lacuna in the present from which history can merge into the present; in fact, as Runia argues, we (also) come to museums exactly because of the lure of presence. As Charles Saumarez Smith writes, the original impulse of a museum is not so much to say something about how people understand and experience the world but rather to witness ‘the cargo of the past on consignment into the future’ (Smith 2006: 550). This witnessing of objects as opposed to an interpretation or representing of them is a way not just of creating ‘yet another nuance of meaning, of “just a little more sense”’ (Gumbrecht 2004: 105) but also of being in touch with history. As much as we want museums to give us meaning to the historical process, we also want them to touch the dimly felt sense of history in us. Bringing selected aspects of the past in to the present can make our own invisible history visible in unexpected ways – but this also means that curators have to attune themselves to these possible presence effects, and be willing to analyse and defend them.

The presence effect that started this paper – that of being present in the collection of pathological bones – remains a difficult one to measure or transmit, other than vague wordy attempts to express the impression the specimen makes upon us (or rather me, the author, in this case – there is an issue of basic untranslatability and singularity in confronting the collection that encourages doing away with the notion of a distant, critical third person observer). Arguments based on such presence effects are often personal and nonspecific, perhaps even unscientific if one wants to claim such standards, and reliant upon the reader’s willingness (or unwillingness) to accept the basic premise that these objects, in fact, do have an often profound impact on those who see them. But as Runia’s work suggests, we would do well to work with these effects, and not bury them under cleaner and more acceptable forms of argumentation. If one accepts the validity of this conceptualization of presence we have to work out ways of thinking with it and through it in order to grasp its resonance and potential existential importance. Even if it is difficult to articulate something that almost by definition transcends assimilation into traditional historical and scientific discourse, that should not take away from the necessity of developing analytical tools that will sensitize us to these qualities, so that they can play as important a part of museological discourse as they often do in our actual engagement with the objects in collections. We, as museum visitors, often seek out exactly these qualities. We want to be touched by history, moved by a sense of being present in front of the floating wreckage carried on the waves of history to our feet, like Benjamin’s angel of history, and having it reverberate with the history stored in us.

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Notes

- ¹ Medical Museion is a combined museum and research unit at the Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences, University of Copenhagen. Read more about our activities at www.museion.ku.dk.
- ² This focus on existential relevance of history stems in part from Runia’s original training in psychology and history; he worked for a number of years as a psychologist at the Faculty of Medicine of the Erasmus University Rotterdam.
- ³ Runia’s work is also studied in an anthology edited by Ranjan Ghosh and Ethan Kleinberg entitled *Presence: Philosophy, History, and Cultural Theory for the Twenty-First Century*, published in October 2013 by Cornell University Press. The anthology engages with presence as ‘a post-linguistic or post-discursive theory that challenges current understandings of ‘meaning’ and ‘interpretation.’

- ⁴ The quote can be found at <http://philosophyinatimeoferror.wordpress.com/2013/02/23/on-the-metaphysics-of-presence/>. Presence, as suggested by Gratton, also lies somewhat uncomfortably in our cultural heritage for historical reason: Fascism as a political ideology specifically utilized a language and practice of presence (see Peters 2006). Peters cautions that anyone interested in using presence as a paradigm for understanding our relationship with history should be careful to insist on a proper dialogue with history. He writes of the fascist use/abuse of presence: 'They were only interested in the past insofar as it would give presence to their present point of view. When presenting the past they cared more about presence than about meaning, more about rhetorical effect than about meticulous interpretation, and more about the arousal of emotions than about critical historical judgment. The practice of Fascist presence-culture was not a dialogue with the past, but a monologue in the present' (Peters 2006: 373-374). Presence, then, is related to emotional manipulation.
- ⁵ Another example of an engagement with presence from within a phenomenological tradition is Jean Luc Nancy's work, particularly *The Birth to Presence* (Nancy 1993). To Nancy, the question of presence is a concern with the forgetting of being and what he calls philosophy (as opposed to metaphysics), that philosophy turns away from its original interrogative nature and closes in on itself, leaving only itself as the source of questioning. Also the work of Dutch philosopher of history Frank Ankersmit, particularly his book *Sublime Historical Experience* (Ankersmit 2005) is relevant to this renewed interest in questions of presence and historical experience (see Froeyman 2012 for a discussion of the relationship between Runia and Ankersmit).
- ⁶ Runia's understanding of presence is hardly a neat one in any sense of the word. It is ephemeral and its lack of concreteness underscores the difficulty of putting into exact words what presence is or might be, and also, the tightrope that the theoretician walks when wrestling with the non-representational (see Thrift 2008:1-27) – explain in too much detail and the 'feeling' goes away; explain in too little and everything stops making sense. Even if one might agree on the importance of this feeling, its specific content is not the easiest thing to describe analytically. Accepting Runia's account of presence requires something of a leap of faith, as it means accepting the validity of this passion du reel – something not everyone will be inclined to do.
- ⁷ Nigel Thrift writes of his non-representational theory that 'the most effective approach values the pre-cognitive as something more than an addendum to the cognitive' (Thrift 2008: 6). This focus on layers of being in Runia relates to some forms of contemporary affect theory as well. For example, Kathleen Stewart's concept of ordinary affects is one similar in its focus on experience that lie outside meaning and stories. Stewart writes that ordinary affects 'do not work through "meanings" per se, but rather in the way they pick up density and texture as they move through bodies, dreams, dramas, and social worldlings of all kinds. Their significance lies in the intensities they build and in what thoughts and feelings they make possible. The question they beg is not what they might mean in an order of representations, or whether they are good or bad in an overarching scheme of things, but where they might go and in what potential modes of knowing, relating and attending to things are already somehow present in them in a state of potentiality and resonance' (Stewart 2007: 3). Affect theory as it has been taken up in cultural geography similarly attempts to work through how being can be said to exist on several levels at once (see McCormack 2003, Anderson 2006, Thrift 2007).

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