

## Fault lines of participation: An ethnography translated into an exhibition on family and kinship

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### Abstract

Since the 'new museology' (Vergo 1989), curating exhibitions has become a contested task. Participatory methods in education and curating have been used and debated as one of the tools to bring museums and visitors into contact in a new way. On the basis of an exhibition on family and kinship, based on praxeologic approaches in curating as well as in displaying the content, this article discusses critically the limits of such methods: they show up not simply in the museum in the form of a changeable ideology, but rather implicitly in all actions that unfold with the concrete use of an exhibition. Against the assumption of improving exhibiting with participatory methods, we think the ideal of participation to be in the same way marked with fault lines as traditional 'politics of display' (MacDonald 1989).

**Key words:** Participation; curating, new museology; audience; kinship studies

### 1. Introduction

Since the 'new museology' (Vergo 1989), curating exhibitions in museums has become a contested task. The critique of museums as representing hegemonic knowledge as a central pillar of bourgeois domination led to the call to make them more inclusive, participative (Simon 2010) and interactive (Witcomb 2006). The 'community museum' has been one of the consequences of this orientation, and it depends on concrete practices, whether this results in an essentialist 'groupism' (Brubaker 1998) or in a processual and strategic invocation of 'community' (for example, Rassool 2006: 314). But it immediately became obvious that this aim cannot be praised as a neutral improvement of the museum and the curatorial task. A more critical perspective hints at the paradoxes of this 'educational turn in curating' (Rogoff 2008): on the one hand, it could imply a fundamental challenge to museums' and curators' sovereignty and, therefore, develop as an open, undetermined way of producing and circulating knowledge; on the other hand the participatory set-up is not neutral but intermingled with ideals of a self-educating subject, which show a class bias and already have a long history in education (Alheit 1999; Sternfeld 2010). Surely, not only the search for effective methods of educating and mediating (in schools, museums and the like), be it within hegemonic institutions or for more emancipative goals, but also the critical reflection of numerous efforts, projects and concepts also, already has a history in philosophy and pedagogy that goes back to antiquity and has intensified since the enlightenment (see Allen 2011 for a collection of classical texts as well as of contemporary and sceptical positions concerning the so-called educational turn).

Ross (2004) identified a shift of museum professionals from 'legislators' to 'interpreters' of cultural meaning, and he asserts that: 'This move involves a heightened awareness of diverse audiences and publics' (Ross 2004: 90). While Ross focused on museum professionals in the setting of local museums, this article explores visitors' actions in the specific exhibition *Familienmacher: Vom Festhalten, Verbinden und Loswerden (Family-Makers: Capturing, Connecting and Divesting)* (Vienna, 2011/2012).<sup>2</sup> We would like to introduce and consider the Viennese exhibition in four exemplary sections, with a focus on the possibilities and limits of a participatory approach. In order to contextualize the project, we will firstly locate it in the contemporary debate on participation in museums, as well as in the new kinship studies in

anthropology. Secondly, we will consider the process from fieldwork to exhibition and introduce the individual exhibition formats. We will look at how methods from design and art mediation were integrated and used in the conception phase of the project. Thirdly, we will identify the various fault lines that appeared during the course of the exhibition. To do so, we perceive the museum visitor as a performative actor and co-designer of the exhibition. We discuss the tensions that appear if traditional formats and modes of the modern museum are changed and blurred: between the practices of the visitors, the Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art and the curators.

## 2. Museum and participation

Praxeologic attempts are a central theoretical foundation of new kinship studies (Carsten 2000a and Franklin and McKinnon 2001; but see the earlier praxeologic approach of Bourdieu 1977). With this approach, kinship is no longer analysed as an outcome of given rules, norms or structures, but as a practice of the everyday as the very production of kinship. Additionally, the nature-culture division here is no longer a tool of analysis, but an object of investigation: How do people create or end the links and connections that appear as 'family' or 'kinship' concretely? Praxeologic attempts also play a central role in museum studies in the form of approaches which, on a micro level, investigate how and by whom museums are made and re-made constantly. Consequently, the analytical focus on practices (rather than norms, structures, rules, meanings) and (museum) participation are two perspectives which, as we think, can form trans-institutional connections. The new aim of making museums participative criticizes these institutions as constituting power and as situating the audience as passive recipients of hegemonic knowledge (Bennett 1995). According to Clifford (1997), museums function and should be analysed as a 'contact zone' that develops in an extensive and permanent confrontation with the people whose culture and history it collects and exhibits. While the modern museum followed the paradigm of educating the public (and, therefore, conflicts with the public have been perceived as disturbance), museums are now confronted with the aim of being inclusive, participatory and interactive. In our view, this aim cannot be reduced to a simple improvement and, therefore, be praised without critical consideration. We think that the aim of being participative should explicitly set up open-ended, permanent and mutual relations with the people represented. Obviously, the asymmetries of resources and social power cannot be disclosed deliberately in the relations between curators, mediators, and the audience. Participation, consequently, should not be understood as a paternalistic, generous offer 'to take part', but it should include a retrospective of what a respective project brought up. Finally, it should not be a matter of integrating criticism but of thinking about hegemonial representations and exclusions. Linked to these new paradigms, an 'educational turn in curating' (Rogoff 2008) has been observed, which is often interpreted as a sign of a profound change in the museum as an institution. The 'educational turn' is first characterized by a critique of the paradigm of education. This is expressed by the search for new terms that do not have the paternalistic connotations of giving knowledge to someone who does not have it. One of the alternative terms then is mediation. In the German academic field, for example, this is expressed by the fact that the pertinent studies and curricula offered by universities or by universities of applied arts no longer are described as 'pedagogy' (for example, 'pedagogy of culture'), but as mediation [*Vermittlung*]: 'mediation of culture'. In this perspective, mediation is accorded an emancipatory potential.

The mediation theorist Carmen Mörsch (2012) distinguishes four forms of mediation: affirmative, reproductive, deconstructive and transformative attempts. Affirmative attempts transmit institutional knowledge head-on; reproductive ones rely on dialogical and interactive methods. The deconstructive perspective seeks to reflect the powerful logics of the museum as an institution. Finally, the transformative attempt tries to reveal the structural conditions of the museum and to change them towards an unbounding of 'the categorical or hierarchical differentiation between curatorial effort and gallery education' (Mörsch 2012: 11). Mörsch seeks to provide an analysis of the field without supplying a micro-examination of genuine projects (for an empirical overview on recent strategies to set up participation cf. Simon 2010). Her attempt is to develop an analytical and critical typology of participation. This implies the existence of

more or less clearly distinguishable strategies, drafts and methods that would be comparable. In sceptical reference to such a typological approach, our article suggests focusing on the micro-dimension of a specific exhibition in order to develop concepts of participation beyond a dichotomy of theory and practice.

However, such ideal types of participatory strategies can be a tool for the analysis of specific museums and exhibitions. But the analysis then demonstrates that transformative and affirmative drafts, for example, are not clearly separable but often appear intermingled. In short, the differentiation of affirmative, reproductive, deconstructive and transformative attempts to establish participation is analytical but not practical or empirical. Transformative exhibitions can also cause affirmative effects, just as an affirmative draft can develop transformative dynamics. The reason for this is the openness of participation: the curatorial concept alone does not determine how participative an exhibition will be, it is underdetermined; the visitors' practice, which always has undetermined elements, is crucial. The research project 'Display' (John, Schade and Richter 2008) is thus helpful, because it discusses exhibition displays not as individually directed items but as an interface between visitors and exhibits. A conceptual consequence in museum studies, therefore, has been to turn upside down the critique of the museum as a hegemonic institution: not stating given power 'effects', but conceptualizing and investigating 'museum frictions' as 'a social technology', as wide spread uses of 'museums and other display and collecting institutions [... as a] surprisingly protean organization' (Kratz and Karp 2006: 1f., and the contributions in Karp et al. 2006). This implies a renewed interest in visitor studies, which developed from a quantitative to a qualitative discipline (ibid.: 19; Roberts 1997). In addition we think that unbound displays, as we used them in the project considered here, again prompt new questions concerning given separations between curators / educators / visitors / research, a task that was long ago identified by Roberts (1997).

Moreover, we criticize a blind spot in typology-oriented concepts of participation. Participatory efforts do not take place in a neutral space: they are always located in a specific institution (institutional context) on the one hand and connected to a certain research topic (content context). Both context levels structure the participative creation of the exhibition. Because participative strategies and practices take place in museums, and thus are anchored institutionally, one can always find traces of the specific museum structure in them. To emphasize it again: participation can be analysed and set up ideal-typically, but these ideal types will not unfold directly in practice. This is because a museum is not a neutral but a contested space with a long history of power, usages and politics within it (Bennett 1995; Karp and Lavine 1997). The embedding of participative projects within the institutional structure from a praxeological perspective means, at the same time, the reproduction and/or transformation of the museum structure by participative practices. Consequently, both are mutually dependent. Thus, the Austrian Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art is a place with a specific structure (see section 5), within which the participative approach that we developed has to be located.

Besides the contextual dimensions of participation in museums, the second context level of our exhibition, the scientific discourse, encloses the paradigm of the new kinship studies. From a praxeological perspective, family is conceived of as specific forms of power relations, dependences and solidarities produced by structured everyday practices. As a central issue (already mentioned above), the new kinship studies abandoned the nature-nurture-dichotomy as an analytical tool but re-considered it as an object of investigation (Franklin and McKinnon 2001). They raise new topics of research, themes such as migration, transnationality or multilocality (for example, on Germany cf. Körber 2011; Schier and Proske 2010). The focus is on specific everyday practices of doing kinship. Family and kinship are analysed as mutable productions in the everyday that transcend traditional, bourgeois, heterosexual ideals, which shaped not only the actors but also analytical concepts (cf. Rapp and Ginsburg 2001, Weston 2001). Janet Carsten's term of 'cultures of relatedness' (Carsten 2000a) refers to this everyday production of family and kinship relations and, in the meantime, suggests a new terminology to avoid the loaded semantics of 'family' and 'kinship'. In a study of adults who were adopted as children and had searched for their 'biological' parents, Carsten shows how social and biological explanation modes for relationships interact with each other and how the social expectation of durability of a consanguine relationship broke with the experience of many adopted people (cf. Carsten 2000b). What is important for a relationship

experienced as familiar is a common, shared history (cf. White 1994) and, not least, care – relationship as ‘caring and being cared for’ (Borneman 2001). New kinship studies define family and kinship as a performatively created and changeable way of life. As case studies demonstrate, material culture here has a crucial role: not as representing fixed meanings and cosmologies, but as objects which become productive by being used – collected, given, stored, viewed, circulated. In general, Miller (2008), therefore, argues for ‘connectivity’ as a potential of the material world, which became dominant today (and thus he puts into perspective the analysis of material objects as mere representatives of ‘meaning’). In his ethnography of about 100 households in a road in London, he avoids the re-contextualization of the things observed but demonstrates how their specific uses on the household-level creates world, space and time in late modernity, where grand, encompassing narratives and cosmologies no longer exist. In very detailed analyses, Bouquet (2001) and Marcoux (2001) investigated the production and circulation of pictures and objects to do kinship. Their results prove that the uses are not primarily an articulation of given meanings, but have to be considered as productive hybrid forms of materiality and sociality in themselves. Our two-fold focus on practices of doing kinship with objects and of using objects by an active audience in the museums is, thus, not an accidental combination. Another connection between doing kinship and processing things is in the history of museums, which quite often is a hybrid production of family and collections in the meantime. A family history of the modern museum in general, and museum collections specifically, still has to be written.<sup>3</sup> Such a collapsing of family history and museum history is also pertinent for the Austrian Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art, where the project presented here took place; the provenance of its collections being traceable as kinship routes of one of its founders, namely Michael Haberlandt, who acquired several of the exhibits via kinship connections. But in ethnographic museums especially, kinship not only shows up as the social lines by which objects are acquired, processed and collected, but also in epistemological perspective: In a two-fold analysis of ethnographic exhibitions and the study of kinship in anthropology, Bouquet (2000) reveals how the modern episteme of the modern nature-society-division fuelled the practices of anthropology in museums and at university as complementary ones, and how kinship is produced on both sides/sites – in the museum as ‘the material’, in academic work as ‘the social’. Finally, the visiting of a museum in itself is a means of doing family, especially in the context of national world orders. This is one of the reasons why learning specialists have focused on the museum visit as a practice of family – in fact, there are indications that most museum visits are family visits (Ellenbogen 2002). These indications at the intersection of doing a museum/an exhibition with doing family/kinship, call for a specification of audience studies that goes beyond the ‘groupism’ (Brubaker 1998) that is sometimes linked with educational efforts (for example, programmes for ‘children’, ‘women’, ‘the elderly’, etc.) on the one hand, and for an analytical focus on family as a collective, embedded practice (which again needs a critical consideration as being entangled with national orders) on the other.

Referring to both context levels described in this chapter, the *Familienmacher* exhibition avoided presenting family as already done, and it also avoided choosing pieces from the museum’s collection as representations of kinship. Instead, the exhibition pursued the aim of articulating the doing of family and kinship and the material and visual objects with which this is done. Thus, the exhibition concept created a space for action that allowed the visitors to intervene in the individual displays and to perform their doing kinship. *Familienmacher*, thus, developed a participative approach in connection with perspectives from the new kinship studies on a praxeological level, locating practices of doing kinship within an exhibition dispositive conceptualized and designed as a space of action and production.

The following section will explore how ethnographic research laid the basis for the participatory exhibition and how we initiated interactions with informants and visitors to develop the exhibition displays. We asked how displays can be designed that connect ethnographic insight into everyday kinship practices with participatory approaches and which recognize visitors as forming influential social actors.

### 3. A design process from fieldwork to exhibition

The following section seeks to explore the process from fieldwork to the exhibition *Familienmacher*:

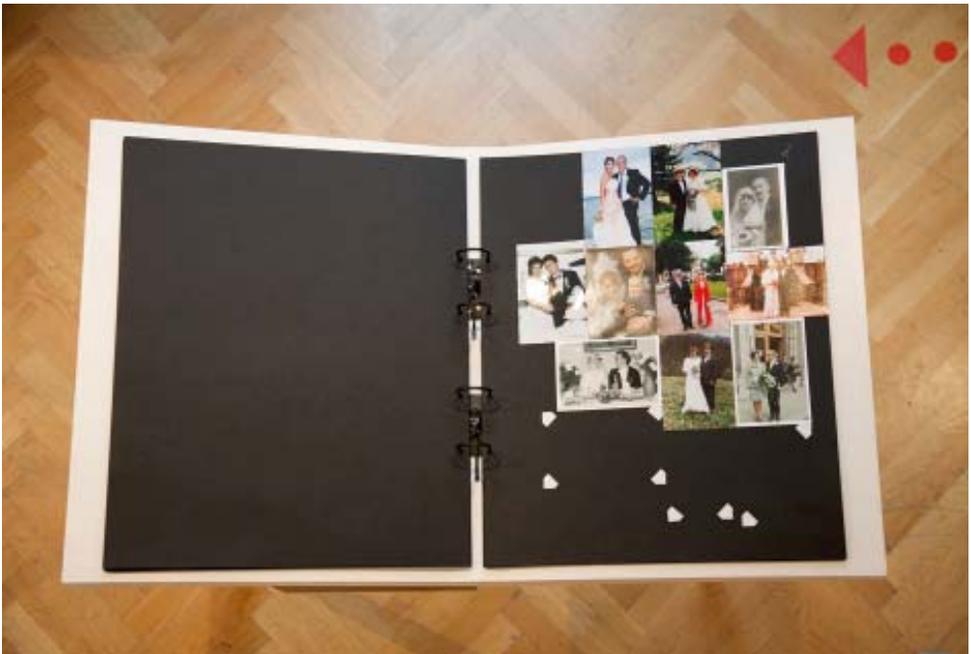
*Vom Festhalten, Verbinden und Loswerden.* The scientific team – composed of affiliates from anthropology, ethnology, art education and design – analysed practices of doing kinship with pictures and objects through the use and employment of ethnographic research methods in two adjacent Viennese districts – the 8th (Josefstadt) and the 16th (Ottakring). This section looks specifically at how methods from design and art mediation were integrated and used in this phase of the project, with the aim of translating research findings into tangible outputs such as exhibition displays and workshop formats.

The research design was set to take place in parallel in both districts at public places of ‘doing kinship’ and opted for three ethnographic sites: firstly photo studios, secondly call shops and internet cafes, and thirdly a municipal retirement home. The fieldwork started by conducting interviews with the owners of the photo studios, call shops and with key informants within the organizations. Via snowballing and participant observation, the team were able to gain access to further informants such as clients of photo studios and call shops. In the case of the retirement home, access to inhabitants was gained through snowballing by a psychologist working within the organization. The team conducted 30 qualitative semi-structured interviews over an 18-month period. Parallel to fieldwork, the team set up a series of pilot workshops exploring the use of objects and pictures in families. The workshops fostered a number of discussions that were integrated in the exhibition concept. One was the centrality of one’s own family objects and the stories that are attached to them. This showed informants’ aspirations to provide space for personal objects and their connected narratives in the forthcoming exhibition. Another was the focal point of divestment in the everyday context of one’s own material culture (see Marcoux 2001; Ekerdt et al. 2004 in the context of divesting in older age) and a third was the tacit knowledge of what family photographs are supposed to look like.

The ethnographic data as well as findings from workshops were analysed and clustered. Within this process, major themes such as the visual narratives of photo albums, the conflictual role of family objects or the use of short text messages for family communication gained strength. The scientific team invited informants to co-design workshops aimed at refining these broad ideas for the exhibition. To make this process more tangible, we will describe one example in more detail. Ethnographic evidence showed that people have a strong tacit knowledge of the visual language of family pictures. In the Austrian context, the first day at school, for example, is photographed with the child at the centre, holding a large paper cornet filled with small presents and sweets. A similar photo composition could be seen whenever the researchers looked at the informants’ personal photo albums. This ethnographic finding was translated into the idea of gathering informants’ and future visitors’ images in one *super album*. This *super album* was imagined as holding various family photo categories, such as festive occasions or holiday photographs, but at the same time to provide space for family photos that are less public and clear, such as intimate pictures of pregnancy. Workshop members used design and methodology to develop a number of potential solutions for these images, which were then evaluated and used in the design process; for example, the final design of the *super album* includes a locked store of intimate photographs that is not accessible to visitors. Visitors could deposit their photos that other visitors should not see in the locked drawer. Visitors decided which family photographs were obviously placed in the *Festhalten* display and which ones should be hidden from the other visitors’ view. Thus, the photographs are transformed into objects of exclusive intimacy. The locked drawer, thus, articulated the division of a familial sphere made public and one hidden from visual desire.

The final design and structure of the exhibition *Familienmacher: Vom Festhalten, Verbinden und Loswerden* (*Family-Makers: Capturing, Connecting and Divesting*) consisted of three displays related to the three fieldwork topics and sites. As the research focus was on contemporary kinship practices – on the practices of making family – we were looking for suitable ways and forms not to represent, but to enable these processes in the exhibition. A logical consequence was not to exhibit the outcomes of the research by explaining what family is or how it is done today, but rather to invite the visitors to perform a part of their own family practices by making and contributing to the exhibition themselves. The exhibition did not offer ready-made content on the research issues. Instead, it offered an interactive space to which the visitors can bring their own family-makers: photos, unwanted objects and short text messages. The three displays not only allowed, but also called for and required visitors’ interaction and

intervention. The visitors could actively shape and reshape the contents of the displays, and through their participation they generated the subjects of the exhibition and in the meantime showed and performed how family today is done. Thus, the exhibition grew and developed through the participation of the visitors. As a logical consequence of these participatory formats in the exhibition, we decided to dispense with texts in the displays and instead created an instruction manual, which informed visitors about how to use the exhibition. The manual consisted of an instructional text and FAQs for each station and display as well as a collection of interview quotes that served to introduce each of the research topics and displays. The aim of conceptualizing the exhibition as participatory in a consistent manner also led us to a modification of the traditional coupling of exhibition and catalogue: since the opening did not open a completed exhibition but displays for visitors to use, no catalogue was published at this time. We developed the catalogue during the exhibition by using the visitors' actions and uses of it (Clarke et al. 2012). Additionally, we chose not to subordinate visitors' productions by using them as examples for definite comments by experts, but by demonstrating the spread of uses. In the following, we will describe the different exhibition displays.



*Photo 1 (Superalbum Wedding I) Display Capturing: Wedding photos in the superalbum, collected during fieldwork in Vienna, at the beginning of the exhibition in November 2011.*

#### **4.1 Capturing: photo studio and super album**

The first part of the exhibition, called 'Capturing' (*Festhalten*), focused on the photographic family practices. This station contained a temporary photo studio, where visitors could contribute family photos. The display relied on the implicit knowledge of the visual language of family pictures. As a trigger to evoke these implicit pictures, the exhibition provided cards with various names of places where photos are stored or presented. A collection of different places where family photos are stored (for example, 'on the piano', 'on the fridge', 'in the wallet', 'in an old suitcase' etc.) was an outcome of the photo workshop with our informants (see previous section), and of our interviews with them.

Our workshops demonstrated that this brief naming of a photo's place is enough to trigger a clearly defined picture. Thus, the visitors were asked to take a photo that fitted the place



*Photo 2 (Superalbum Wedding II) Wedding photos in the superalbum (part of the display Capturing), supplemented by visitors, February 2012.*

they had chosen. The family photos taken in the studio were developed and placed in the *super album*.

The super album consisted of a main part – similar to a typical family album – where family photographs were visually categorized according to their different motifs and topics (for example, first school day, festive family gatherings, wedding, holidays etc.). The super album also contained several drawers with photos, which would not usually be kept in a family album, such as the intimate photos, snapshots or duplicates. Photos taken by visitors were stored in a particular drawer. Visitors were invited to integrate pictures from the different drawers into the super album and, thus, to contribute to and experience the labour-intensive and time-consuming doing kinship work with family photography.

#### **4.2 Connecting: text-message station**

This part of the exhibition addressed the topic of mediated communication practices within families and focused especially on the practice of text messaging. This display showed how new media technologies construct closeness in distance. The questions focused on in this station, for example, were: How much of your family is on your mobile phone? What kinds of content are communicated through text messages? Is the content frequently intimate or rather banal? Who do you text frequently? What happens when private messages addressed to a particular person are displayed publicly?

The main display here was an LED ticker showing family text messages. Visitors were requested to forward their last family text messages to a mobile phone number and their message was shown on the ticker within a few days. The text messages were also collected and printed out. Visitors were asked to perform a reading theatre using the printed text-messages and, thus, construct fictive family dialogues.



**Photo 3 (Connecting front view)** The display Connecting offers a telephone number and invites visitors to send their family text messages to the LED ticker on the wall.

#### 4.3 Divesting: exchange shelves

This display was concerned with the difficulty of letting go of things we are somehow emotionally, personally, historically connected to through family and kin, but which at the same time we want to get rid of. Visitors could bring unwanted family objects; they could document the objects' stories and their wish for the objects' new homes. Other visitors could take an object, making notes on their reasons for doing so and mentioning the new home or purpose of the object. Both the donors and the takers had to fill in a form with questions about the object, its familial history, as well as the person's wishes for the future of the object. This form was designed as an allusion to inventory forms museums usually use to document the objects that are included in their collections. Thus, the exhibition made tangible not only the use of objects in doing kinship, but intermingled with this the use of objects in doing a museum – i.e. its usually hidden part, the work with the stored objects. [Photos 5 and 6]

Exchange shelves made the complexity of the dealing with everyday objects in families tangible by giving the family object a temporal home as exhibits in a museum. This station revealed the social relations made by these objects and, at the same time, pointed out the transformation of objects into



**Photo 4 (Connecting detail)** Display Connecting: LED ticker with the loop of visitors family text messages sent to the exhibition.



*Photo 5 (Exchange shelves front view) Exchange shelves with desk to fill in inventory forms for the family objects brought by visitors to the display *Divesting*.*

emotionally loaded family artefacts through social relationships and, thus, hinted at processes of letting things go. This format ironically also related to the museum as society's last place for material culture, by signifying that family and kinship are also defined social spaces to secure and to circulate objects on the one hand, and that family and kin on the other hand are made by the use and circulation of objects.

All three exhibition displays generated ethnographic data on family and kinship as it is produced through materiality. By the end of the exhibition, 'Capturing' had engendered a super-family album as well as a range of paper objects used as stage props for family photos, 'Connecting' had produced family text messages in a diversity of languages, senders as well as recipients. 'Divesting' had generated more than 200 filled in forms with specific information on unwanted family objects, as well as pieces that did not find a new owner and are now part of the museum collection. A genuine reflection of the ethnographic research data produced by the three exhibition displays will have to be the focus of a forthcoming paper. The site of the museum creates a particular public setting without the permanent scrutiny of researchers; it needs a thorough contextualisation on the possibilities of using participatory museum displays as a research tool in this way.<sup>4</sup>

##### **5. Fault lines in the participatory concept of the *Familienmacher* exhibition**

Following a participatory approach, the exhibition not only asked questions of doing family, but also of doing exhibitions. How do visitors appropriate the design and what insights can we draw from this for our curatorial thinking of participation in the museum? What are some of the fault lines of the concept and how might they correspond with museological discourse?

We will analyse responses to the 'call for action' within the display of the *exchange shelf* (*Divesting* display) to understand its triggers. We call 'fault lines' a sample inherent in contradictions within the participatory approach itself. 'Fault lines' in this perspective are part of the participatory experiment in a specific museum: on the one hand, the Austrian Museum

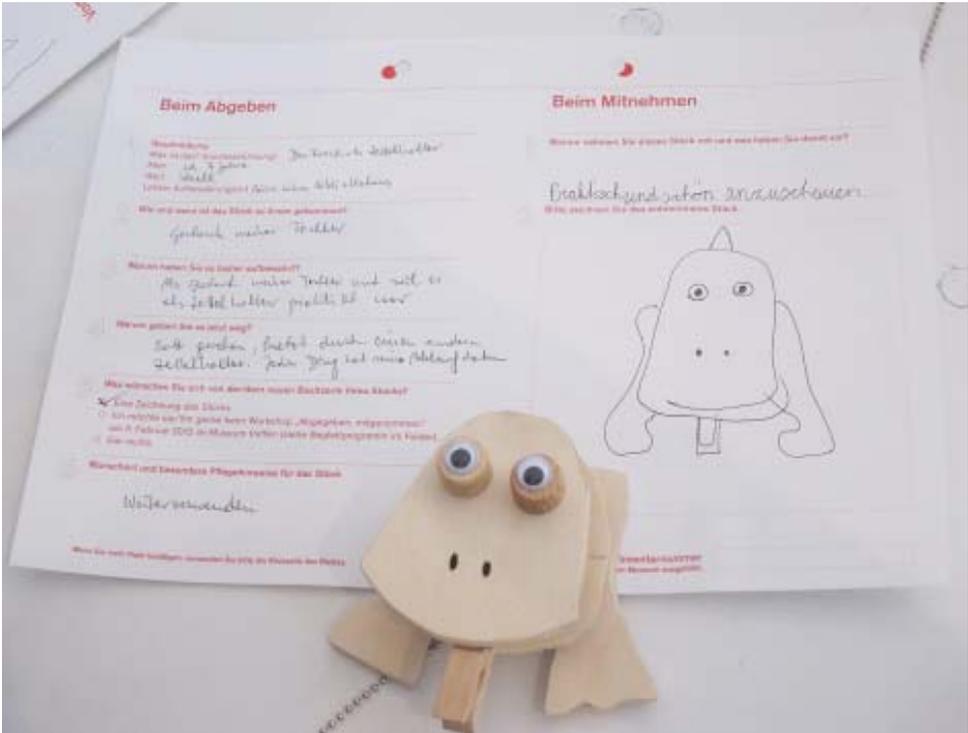


Photo 6 (Exchange shelves inventory form) Inventory form with a delivered object classified as “present of my daughter” by the visitor who brought it to the display Divesting.

for Folk Life and Folk Art is identified with traditional documentary approaches to vernacular rural and craft culture, on the other hand it invites innovative and experimental projects (for example, the project ‘museum\_inside\_out’, where in 2007/2008 the whole work of the museum, from secretary to curatorial work up to the director’s desk, was transferred to the exhibition halls and so became an exhibit for nearly six months (cf. Beitzl 2008 and Divjak 2012 on this project). We want to stress this twofold structure of this specific museum because, in most cases, experimental museological efforts are not situated in more traditional museums. The tension that arises in this situation is instructive (for example, the effort to turn the museum inside out in the visitor rooms was halted prematurely because, as one critic remarked (Divjak 2012), although the staff welcomed it, ‘the immaterial manifestations’ of such an experiment had not been foreseen by the director, who on the other hand had to take account of the more traditional expectations of visitors).

A striking difference between the Austrian Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art and the *Familienmacher* exhibition concerns dealing with objects. Firstly, the collection strategy of the museum, according to the settlements of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), stipulates that objects acquired should not leave the museum again. In contrast, *Familienmacher* serves as a platform to bring objects into the museum and to remove them again. Thus, this circulation of objects inside and outside the museum runs counter to its strategy of collecting objects by keeping them forever. Secondly, related to this, is the different status that the museum and *Familienmacher* ascribe to objects. Because the museum does not release the objects, they are raised to something extraordinary. By staging and representing, the museum bestows an aura on the objects in its collection. The object displayed in the museum acts as a demonstrable example of the knowledge of the whole institution. The museum delegates the object to its own collection, and the museum’s collection is represented in the exhibit. Exhibiting

the object means giving it an aura. The visitor is invited to the visual consumption of the exhibited object, but not to a haptic or practical experience. *Familienmacher* broke the barrier of this aura, and thus the objects circulated and the museum functioned as a temporary place of their residence.

Thirdly, in the *Familienmacher* exhibition visitors took on different roles by collecting, intervening or co-designing. The displays permitted visitors' actions and interventions, which showed that objects can be seen as a materiality-in-use by social practices.

Not surprisingly, misunderstandings articulated the fault lines of participation very clearly. We will report some of them. One of the fundamental evidences was the general feedback we received from the colleagues working in the museum as curators vis-à-vis our group, who came from the outside as a temporary team: 'We would call it not an exhibition but an exhibition project.' This short sentence states very clearly that an exhibition is thought of as being something fixed and unchanging; a processual concept such as ours, thus, cannot be an exhibition but more precisely an exhibition project. Immediately after the opening of the exhibition, a box of cocktail glasses appeared in the *exchange shelf*. A visitor wanted to have the glasses and immediately took the box. As it was quite heavy, he asked the cashier at the entrance to look after it during his visit. Suddenly the staff at the cash desk became worried that this might be a mistake and that the curators and the head of the museum did not mean the idea of taking away an object literally. So, they consulted the museum's education and visitor's service department, who were also no longer sure whether or not it was permitted to remove a box of cocktail glasses or any other objects from a shelf in the exhibition. Consequently they decided to call us, the external curators, to obtain permission for an action that had been discussed in length and which had already been agreed months previously. Precisely this action – that visitors could take something that was part of the display – is taboo in a museum. The concerns reported here show the stability of this element of the museological dispositive; a curatorial decision to change it is not enough. During the exhibition, visitors and museum staff frequently raised the question of whether the invitation was 'real' or if it was 'only a game', a metaphor, an idea.

This powerful element of the modern museum, although interested in and creative with new ways towards visitors, but seeking to keep absolute control of its objects, is also apparent in another case. To discuss the subject of divesting as a museological issue, the team also attempted to organize a workshop with a panel of curators from various Austrian museums to discuss the exchange shelf. A condition for taking part was for them to bring an object from their museum's collection to put it on the exchange shelf and to leave it there in the same way as the visitors left their objects. Here we received telling responses: on the one hand, all curators deplored the fact that their storerooms were crowded, and all mentioned specific objects they would get rid of if they were allowed to. And all underlined that new strategies to deal with the material past are urgently necessary – not least because storage space is limited, but also to consider critically the modern conception of collecting as producing eternal archives. But on the other hand, all the curators refused to bring an object and to carry out divesting concretely. They explained this with reference to the ICOM code of ethics for museums. Thus, the intended workshop could not take place. Unlike the visitors, the curators would only be willing to participate in the exchange shelf 'as a game', 'as an idea', but not materially. This shows that the often mentioned 'expectation of the visitor' also can be understood as a projection of the elements that deeply structure the modern museum: in the case of the exchange shelf, visitors were far more ready to do an exhibition in a new way than museum professionals were.

The *exchange shelf* addresses viewing patterns in the museum and challenges them at the very moment visitors accept the invitation to 'take' and 'bring'. A museum such as the Austrian Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art, with its focus on the everyday, is a place of objects, but objects that have been removed from their ordinary use in a private place where commodities or artefacts usually circulate. Removed from daily use, their afterlife in the museum emphasizes various 'productions of meaning' in a communication process with viewers. For the philosopher Krzysztof Pomian (1993), museum objects are 'semiophors', carriers of meaning that enable communication between the 'visible' (the object) and the 'invisible' (stories, ideas, concepts of a past life). Following the semiological concept, Stephen Greenblatt (1991) understands museum exhibits as 'social objects' that are connected with

personal stories, histories, and societies. Like the viewer, a museum object has a certain background and its own life-story. Hence, it provokes a resonance in the viewer, who associates it with stories from a different social context. Greenblatt distinguishes between 'resonance' and 'wonder' as two modes of attraction that museum objects can evoke. 'Resonance' triggers the complex, dynamic forces from which the object has emerged. By 'wonder' Greenblatt means the 'power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his/her own tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness to evoke an exalted attention' (Greenblatt 1991: 42). Both qualities have a history, are culturally specific and forced by curatorial decisions such as lighting concepts or the context in which an object appears. Hence a certain aura is created around a previously simple 'thing' that 'evokes the dream of possession' (ibid). Usually it is the museum-shop that fulfils this dream, because the museum – unlike the gallery – is a one-way path for things. But in our case the display creates a new communication and circulation of stories, objects and people inside and outside the museum. In the swap shelves the objects are only taking a rest, waiting for the possibility of being adopted. But, at the same time, these shelves can be understood as a traditional display that shows the leftovers of recent material culture as well as an invitation to transform the story that is being told. Indeed, the display changed its appearance quite often; people really did use the *exchange shelves* to bring and take things. In the four months of the exhibition, more than 100 objects passed through these shelves. Nevertheless, during a curator's guided tour we were asked by a visitor participating in the tour if it was *really* permitted to take an object that was so large that the donor had placed it slightly outside the official frame of the shelf. It seems as if people would have liked to use the invitation of the *exchange shelves* but felt insecure at the same time, as if they expected the curator's (or the institution's) 'NO' at any moment.

A second fault line is the extensive potential of expectations both on the part of the curators and the museum visitors. Because the exhibition concept was open and participative, it was also open to various projections. The supposed 'ideal' content of the exchange shelf could be discussed as one of these projection fields. While at some point the shelves were filled with silver cutlery, classic family heirlooms or grandma's hand-knitted socks – in short, objects instilled with an aura of family narratives – at another, visitors left a used theatre ticket, a coffee-shop pack of sugar and a supermarket receipt – objects that have the potential to express everyday life. The anthropologist Miller explored shopping for ordinary goods in his ethnography on North London and analysed the objectification of love, devotion and sacrifice via the practice of everyday provisions (Miller 1998). Miller asserts that the mundane reveals and manifests family obligations, aspirations and relationships. In line with Miller's argument, the supermarket receipt left on our exchange shelf would be a manifestation of kinship provisioning and, therefore, an object clearly anchored in family life and the everyday. An heirloom and supermarket receipt would be equally pertinent. In terms of articulating information about family practices, of 'doing family', the receipt would very probably be of overriding importance. The separation of the exchange shelves' goods into simple categories is, therefore, not possible and only points to the highly dynamic process of participation, where at second sight the most critical input may turn out to be an enormously significant contribution. But in the concept of the museum's curatorial staff, as well as among visitors, criteria such as the 'beautiful', 'interesting' or 'successful' use of the exchange shelves were associated with family objects such as heirlooms and those with a certain material or crafted value. We think this irritation not only to be an effect of dynamics of 'distinction' (Bourdieu 1984), which lead to a hierarchy of the extraordinary over the ordinary object. This fault line, moreover, articulates the expectation that a museum in its exhibitions works with vivid presentiveness. Apparently, the shift from representational to relational modes in exhibiting clashes with this issue. The disappointment with the banality of some objects shows some limits of the – indispensable – critique of the representational museum and calls for a reconsidering of presentiveness as the very quality of the representational mode and possible losses that are taken into account by reducing the presentiveness of the representational mode to power.

Further, we noticed that objects placed on a shelf seemed to attract similar kinds of object. For example, soon after one recently used opera ticket was put on a shelf with the explanation 'I've got many used tickets, my husband collects them and I don't need them', two other old tickets were put on the shelf by other visitors. It seems the first ticket acted as an

entrance ticket for other objects found in visitors' pockets when they encountered the *exchange shelves* display. The used tickets attracted other objects that looked as if they have been put on the shelf in passing with only one intention, namely to react to the participatory requirement and become an active co-curator of the exhibition. This first, apparently accidentally placed (non-)object, brought about a change in the character of the artefacts appearing on the shelves afterwards, and thus it generated a change in the aura of the display as a whole. Some objects put on the shelves seemed to lack the implicitly called for kinship-nexus or they simply lacked the necessary aesthetics needed to fulfil the curators' hidden expectations. Nevertheless, most of the objects placed on the shelves – even those considered inappropriate – found a new owner. The reason for that might have been that, in the end, it is the museum's display that constructs the 'aura' which endows each object located in the museum and turns it from an everyday (sometimes 'useless' or 'meaningless') object into an exhibit and, therefore, into a charismatic artefact. This new aura facilitates and stimulates a re-vitalization of the object and its re-integration into everyday life. Some things reintegrated in private surroundings, however, are part of private exhibitions and display-like settings and become part of an existing private collection of similar artefacts.

Even though the project is familiar with material culture studies and its discussions on how mundane everyday objects also construct or processualize the social, the curators were disappointed about the latter content, evoking a sense of a new hierarchy of objects and a dichotomy of good or bad participation. It seems that, in fact, the curators with a very critical view of classical display and viewing modes have secret desires for the participatory public and, therefore, develop new forms of patterns within their curatorial practices. The new 'good' museum visitor would possess an implicit knowledge of what kinds of things are being asked for. The *exchange shelves* in *Familienmacher* ultimately rely on an implicit knowledge of the visitor that the shelf 'needs' objects with in-depth family bonds and active participation. This new imperative, thus, builds on visitors' understanding and active cherishing of a participatory display even without text or art educators' explanations. According to Bourdieu's analysis and critique of self-management principles of progressive education (cf. Bourdieu 1974), an open museum display addresses people who are already very familiar with an active appropriation of knowledge and might disadvantage visitors from a social background with less access to institutionalized education. Or in other words: a devoted open participatory concept also assumes invisible preconditions of the visitors.

## 6. Conclusion

In our project we questioned how research, the everyday practices of doing kinship and exhibiting in museums, can be linked in a new way. We assert that these links can be revealed by focusing on practices of these three fields at a micro level. The subject of participation itself only becomes tangible via a praxeological approach. We, thus, translated the ethnographic research on kinship into a participatory exhibition. We thereby locate our project within the theoretical debate on the possibilities and limits of the participatory museum. Our practical experience bore out the evidence that participation is a field riddled with fault lines that only appear from the analysis of concrete uses by visitors. We then assert that the fault lines cannot only be observed in visitors' uses but also in curators' judgements. It is easy to praise and to welcome participation in general, but to be actually confronted with 'unusual encounters and discourses' and with 'the unplannable' (Sternfeld 2010) reveals the hidden ideals of 'good' versus 'bad' participation that also go along with critical projects. The fault lines of the participatory approach occur in the web between visitors' interactions, curatorial suggestions and the institutional logic of the museum – whereas the misunderstandings related to the exhibits-to-take-away prove that the logic of the museum is not limited to its walls or representatives but is also inside the visitor's heads.

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## Notes

- 1 We would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for this journal for their valuable hints on the first version of this text.
- 2 The exhibition (12 November 2011 – 25 March 2012) was shown in the Österreichisches Museum für Volkskunde (The Austrian Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art) in Vienna. 'Family-makers' refers to pictures and object/material culture and not to people. The exhibition was the main outcome of the research project 'Doing kinship with pictures and objects: a laboratory for private and public practices of art'. Funding: WWTF (Wiener Wissenschafts, Forschungs-und Technologiefonds) in the programme 'Art(s)&Sciences' (call 2008), funding provided by the City of Vienna. The project started in September 2009 and ended in March 2012. The scientific team were Kathrina Dankl (designer, design anthropologist), Andrea Hubin (art historian, educator), Ana Ionescu and Lukasz Nieradzki (European ethnologists), Tena Mimica (anthropologist), Karin Schneider (art educator, curator, artist), Elisabeth Timm (anthropologist, project manager). Exhibition design: Kathrina Dankl. Graphics and catalogue: Johannes Lang, Wolfram Wiedner. Project partners were: the Austrian Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art (Margot Schindler, curatorial and educational team: Matthias Beitl, Herbert Justnik, Claudia Peschel-Wacha, Katharina Richter-Kovarik), University of Applied Arts, Vienna, Dept. for Theory and History of Design (Alison Clarke), University of Vienna, Institute of European Ethnology (Bernhard Fuchs).
- 3 For the analysis of two collections located in the Bromley Museum and the British Museum in this respect cf. Owen (1999).
- 4 Our first survey of the material produced and circulated in the 'Divesting' display proves that three ways of using it have been practised: One (this was the prevalent use) takes the user's manual for the exhibition literally, which is pertinent, for example for heirlooms brought and documented with a personal family history of the donor on the one and with a personal family history of the new owner on the other side of the inventory form (for example, a metallized baby shoe). Another way of using the display is the arbitrary use, which means that objects are circulated and documented through the display but without any reference to 'family'. And a third one, which is represented by only one case, is an oppositional use, in our case this was the placing of an object of remembrance and a photograph of the father of an Austrian boy without Austrian citizenship who has been expelled, with the explicit instruction not to circulate these pieces but to keep them as a document of the scandal of destroying a family by national law – in this form of use it can be described as a sort of 'counternarrative', which the new museology made its programme.

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