Morgue, Mausoleum – or Museum? How museum materiality works to transform human remains

Abstract: In this article, I present results from recent ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Scandinavian museums, focusing on visitors' attitudes towards the display of human remains. While the dead body can elicit fear, sorrow, or disgust in other contexts, participant observations show that most visitors seem indifferent to the presence of bodies in museums. Drawing on anthropologist Annemarie Mol's research on the “multiple” nature of the body, I attribute this indifference to the ability of the museum space to transform the remains from abject corpses into viable museum objects. In line with Media Studies scholar Katherine Goodnow, I see the museum as a genre recognizable to visitors; a genre in which human remains traditionally have a place as objects on display. Through ethnographic examples, I show how upholding this genre determines whether we see remains as belonging in a morgue or mausoleum – or in a museum.

Keywords: Human Remains, Museums, Visitor Experiences, Museology, Ethnology, Ethnography, Field Work

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Introduction

Afternoon at the museum. From where I sit in one of the exhibitions, I see people come and go. Young parents tugging toddlers along, big groups of teenage friends laughing and chatting incessantly, tourists transfixed by their guidebooks, affectionate couples, and retirees all stroll past my bench. Some of them seem curious. They peer closely at the display cases, take photos and carefully read all the signs. Others look bored and hurry by, hardly noticing the exhibitions around them. Most visitors end up somewhere in between. But none of them show any signs of anger, fear, disgust or shock—some of the emotions we might associate with death and its most potent, physical relic: the dead body. Yet the museum is filled with human bodily remains, with well-preserved skeletons on prominent display in several exhibitions. Would the visitors walking past my bench be just as calm if they faced these bodies in a morgue? Or in a mausoleum?

This article is based on my recent master’s thesis, Människan i montern: Om museipublikens inställning till mänskliga kvarlevor (Aspeborg, 2020), in which I used ethnographic field methods like participant observation and go-along interviews to investigate visitors’ attitudes toward the display of human remains in museums today. I spent hours in exhibition halls, looking for reactions and behaviours in connection to the human remains on display, almost exclusively finding casual indifference or acceptance. In this article, I take a closer look at this attitude of acceptance and ask how it is possible that something as culturally charged as the dead body can seem so unproblematic once it is put into a museum. I begin by presenting my field, giving ethnographic examples of visitors’ indifferent attitude before explaining why this behaviour is so noteworthy. Using classic anthropological concepts such as “matter out of place” and “rite of passage,” I explore the dead body as a cultural phenomenon, showing that across time and space, the dead body has almost always been accorded a special status.

Moving to the main argument of the article, I take inspiration from anthropologist Annemarie Mol’s The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medicine (2002), in which she describes how, in the field of medicine, the body can be both subject and object, depending on the people, places, objects and ideas surrounding it. I argue that something similar takes
place in the museum, where materiality such as display cases, signs, lighting and tour guides transform what would otherwise be seen as corpses into viable museum objects. Further, I show how such materiality can be understood as a genre that, when recognized by the visitor, helps neutralize the human remains. To highlight the importance of the museum genre in audiences’ perceptions of human remains, I end the article by presenting several ethnographic examples of what happens when the genre can no longer be upheld.

Into the field

The presence of human remains in museums is in no way a new or unexplored topic. On the contrary, it might be one of the most talked about issues in the museum world at the moment. Certain cases even make headlines in the news, with one of the most recent Swedish examples being the 2019 deaccessioning and burial of human remains from the Gothenburg Museum of Natural History (Göteborgsposten, 2019). When I started my thesis work in 2016, most research on the topic focused either on the professional handling of the remains, for example proper storage and conservation, or on ethical matters such as repatriation and reburial. However, very little had been written about visitor reactions and opinions on the subject – something I wanted to help remedy with my master’s thesis, where I approached the topic from an ethnographic standpoint, using qualitative field methods to capture visitor experiences. I focused on field sites that would reflect the different types of human remains held by Scandinavian museums today, namely prehistoric and historic archaeological remains, ethnographic ones as well as anatomical and pathological specimens (Drenzel et al., 2015, p. 9). Therefore, I conducted fieldwork in five different museums within various disciplines: the Uppsala University museum Gustavianum, the Stockholm-based Swedish History Museum, the Museum of Ethnography and the Museum of Mediterranean and Near-Eastern Antiquities, as well as the Medical Museion in Copenhagen, Denmark. An additional participant observation was carried out when visiting the traveling anatomical exhibition Body Worlds during its stop in Malmö, Sweden, in the autumn of 2016.
While in the field, I conducted participant observations as well as three types of interviews. The first category of interviews included 1- to 20-minute interviews with anonymous visitors to the Swedish History Museum, whom I approached in the early stages of fieldwork as I tried recruiting informants. The majority of these informants were tourists who would not be able to participate in longer interviews at a later date, but who were willing to answer shorter questions on the spot. In total, my data included twenty-three such interviews. After this, I instead tried advertising for informants on social media, and ended up conducting ten 1-2 hour long go-along interviews with informants recruited in this way. During these interviews the informant and I would walk through a chosen museum, letting the displays themselves steer the conversations in the same way an interview guide would during a semi-structured interview. These informants have all been given pseudonyms in the finished thesis as well as in this article. Lastly, I conducted a semi-structured interview with staff from the Medical Museion regarding their experiences of visitor reactions (For a more detailed discussion on methodology, see Aspeborg, 2020).

Across my six field sites, the findings from my observations were the same — a casual acceptance of the dead bodies on display. From the exhibition Prehistories, at the Swedish History Museum, I note:

An older woman silently walks by, carefully reading the signs next to the woman from Barum [the 9,000-year-old skeleton of a woman found in southernmost Sweden]. A man dressed as a Buddhist monk follows. He seems to be taking photos of the woman from Barum. After him comes a man with an audio guide. He walks by very slowly, carefully studying all the displays, including the skeletons. Between these few visitors, the exhibition is empty. Most visitors who do walk by, do so quickly and don't seem to care about any of the displays — human remains or otherwise (Fieldnotes 2017-05-03).

In short, human remains do not seem “...to be of more or less interest to people than anything else” (Fieldnotes 2017-04-22). And it is not just prehistoric skeletons that are met with a shrug of the shoulders. At Copenhagen’s Medical Museion, where bones heavily marked by disease are displayed next to organs and foetuses preserved in glass jars, I am met by “...a constant flow of people” throughout the exhibitions. “They take their time looking at the remains, chatting casually. Some seem to be laughing or joking. They don’t seem bothered by the exhibition” (Fieldnotes 2017-07-18). Not even the controversial Body Worlds exhibition
provoke any obvious reactions from the visitors. When the exhibition first came to Sweden in 2012, visitors had to be at least twelve years old to enter, and the show was denounced in the press by representatives from the Swedish Medical Association (Langseth, 2012; Ekot, 2012). Four years later, when Body Worlds open in Malmö, the organizers seem to have dropped the age limit entirely. In the exhibition, the majority of visitors are families with children who seem to consider it a fun and educational Sunday outing. The exhibition space is alive with jokes and laughter (Fieldnotes 2016). As Hedley Swain points out in the UNESCO-published Human Remains and Museum Practice, the problem with drawing conclusions based on visitor behaviour or opinions is that such studies cannot account for those who might have made a conscious decision not to visit a certain museum based on their displays (2006, p. 99). Many museums, such as Medical Museion, also lay out their exhibition space so that no visitor can come across the more disturbing displays by accident. A member of staff explains:

The reason we have this introduction wall with the scale, that’s also to, in a very soft way, try to just tell people, before they enter the room: “Okay, now you’re going to see something, and it is real and there was a human being” (...) And most of the time people know if they don’t want to see it.

It can therefore be assumed that the people I have observed during my fieldwork knew what they would come to see and did not mind it, and that those who would find it upsetting refrained from visiting the exhibitions in the first place – explaining the accepting attitude. But would the visitors be just as calm if they came upon a corpse in another context? The place of the dead body in the cultural consciousness would suggest not.

The dead body – why does it matter?

As ethnologist Lynn Åkesson describes it, to be in the presence of a dead body is to be in a culturally fraught situation (1997, p. 10). In folklore, horror media, and while crossing a cemetery at night, we fear the dead body, praying it will stay dead. At hospitals, in nursing homes, and at funerals, we care for and mourn it. After instances of crime, conflicts and natural disasters, we memorialize and honour the body, and when someone disrespects it, we react with anger. We talk about the importance of a dignified burial,
letting the dead rest in peace and not disturbing their final resting places. In some way or another the dead body matters to us (see e.g. Laqueur, 2015).

As the remains of what was once a living human being, just like us, the corpse inhabits a frightening, liminal position. It looks human, yet it is profoundly different. It bridges the gap between the realms of the living and the dead, the known and the unknown. In short, the dead body refuses to adhere to the strict categories through which we structure our lives, challenging our sense of control over our world. The corpse is what anthropologist Mary Douglas calls “matter out of place,” or in the words of French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, “abject” (Douglas, 1984; Kristeva, 1982). In Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (1984) Douglas explores what we call dirt or pollution, seeing it not as an objective distinction, but rather as what happens when something ends up in the wrong place. For example, while stored in a jar, honey is not unclean. However, if it gets on our hands or our clothes, it becomes dirt. Once on our hands, the honey makes them stick to the things we touch, thus upsetting the boundary between ourselves and the world around us (Frykman, 2012, pp. 104-6). Similarly, the abject describes that which is neither subject nor object but rather defies categories and therefore unsettles us. The abject includes our puke and faeces – that which has been part of us but which we now expel and reject. As such the corpse, once human like us but not anymore, is the utmost abject (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4).

The dead body carries with it one of the most disorganizing threats of all: that of death. Death is the total annihilation of the subject; the complete erasure of the boundary between the self and the rest of the world (Kristeva, 1982). In a wider perspective, death can unravel the social fabric of an affected group, making it a threat to hierarchies and social structures (Douglas 1984). In the hopes of holding back such chaos, we keep our distance. To make sure no one comes too close, we tell cautionary tales of the taint of death, be it meanspirited ghosts or the unsanitary microbes of decomposition. In order to pacify the dangerous corpse, we have to force it into a ritual structure through which it can be made sensible and through which it can help us uphold the social order instead of disrupting it. That is why humanity has developed such an impressive array of ways to deal with the dead body – from interment to cremation, embalming, sky burials and ritual cannibalism, to
mention a few (Hunter & Metcalf, 1991, p. 24). Archaeological evidence suggests that Homo sapiens, and our relatives the Neanderthals, have cared for our dead since around 100,000 years B.C., with the earliest ritual practices including grave offerings and sprinkling red ochre onto the dead (Sjöberg, 1994, p. 34). Such rituals, where the living say their last farewells and where the dead body is often physically separated from the community of the living through its being deposited into the designated burial place, have been defined as “rites of passage” by anthropologists. Through such a ritual, the individual is passed from one stage of life to the next. For example, a teen transitions to adulthood through participating in high school graduation and a young man from bachelor to family man through marriage. Thanks to its ritual structure, the rite of passage is meant to protect both the individual and their community during the transition, when the individual is in the liminal stage between categories (Hunter & Metcalf 1991, pp. 29-33).

Seen in this way, the function of the funeral is to safely oversee the transition of the departed from the community of the living to that of the dead. Halting this process leaves the dead in permanent limbo – no longer alive, but not quite put to rest. For example, older Swedish folklore tells us of the dangers of the liminal dead. The then common practice of viewing the dead in their home before the funeral was heavily regulated so as to protect the living: the eyes and mouth of the deceased were closed to prevent bad omens, and the mirrors in the house were covered with white sheets lest the spirit of the dead inhabit them. Those who had been denied a proper burial were thought to come back to haunt the living. Only once the body was buried in hallowed ground could it be considered harmless (see e.g. Lönnqvist, 2013; Skarin-Frykman, 1994). While such beliefs might not be very common in Sweden today, burial is still seen as natural and non-negotiable. Not only would the idea of holding onto a corpse and refusing burial be considered gross and immoral, it would also be illegal. Swedish law requires every corpse to be properly managed, either through interment or cremation, thus ensuring that the dead are symbolically passed over from this life to the next. Against this backdrop, the dead in our museums stand out. When the visitors I observed walk by display cases filled with human remains while being unfazed, they are accepting something that would not be tolerated in any other context. How is that possible?
Death as an event or as a state of being

It would seem there is something special about the dead in our museums; something that makes them less disturbing than the dead body in religion, medicine, lore and pop culture. As we casually study the ancient Egyptian mummies of Gustavianum, I ask my informant Stefan how he thinks we are affected by being in the presence of the dead in this way, and if it might even help us come to terms with our own mortality. But Stefan is unsure if the human remains that we see in museums really have that sort of power.

Let me put it like this, death is both an event and a state of being. And these [the remains on display] represent death as a state of being, while the kind of death we face in everyday life (...) that’s death as an event. (...) I don’t think they’re comparable categories.

According to Stefan, the kind of human remains you find at museums are something other than the death we experience throughout life, the kind that we handle through ritual. But how does a body go from representing death as an event, to death as a state of being? In *The Body Multiple*, anthropologist Annemarie Mol investigates this very kind of transformation during her fieldwork in a Dutch research hospital, “Hospital Z.” The focus of Mol’s research is atherosclerosis, and during her time in the hospital she tries to follow this disease in all its varying guises. She finds that there is not just one phenomenon called atherosclerosis, but many. Atherosclerosis is both the patient’s pain, the statistics in the epidemiologist’s report and the hardened plaque found on the inside of arteries. Neither of these versions of atherosclerosis is more or less true – they are all atherosclerosis, just “enacted,” as Mol calls it, in different ways, by different people, using different tools (Mol, 2002).

This is also true for the body. Mol describes how the pathologist at Hospital Z uses a white cloth to cover the faces of the bodies scheduled for autopsy. When the cloth, the dissection table, the pathologist and her tools come together, the body is enacted as the raw material of pathology, something that can be cut into and examined. However, in another part of the hospital, nurses cared for the same body as the remains of a deceased human being. Once the pathologist’s work is done, the cloth is removed, the body is washed, dressed and enacted as the body that is soon to be buried by its relatives (Mol, 2002: 125–6). By looking at what people do instead of what something is, Mol shows that the world is not static and fixed. It instead has infinite possible
guises, with each coming into being depending on when, where and which factors come together to enact it. Such factors could be people, places, objects and ideas. Thus, while the body is normally seen as fixed and singular, through the practices at Hospital Z – the doings of doctors, patients, tools and rooms, the body is shown to be manifold – “the body multiple,” as Mol puts it in the title.

If we apply this focus on practice to the museum instead of the hospital, we find that the human remains in our museums are also being enacted, not by medicine, but by the heritage sector. In the museum, the dead body comes together with display cases and informative signs, and with the scientific authority which lends importance to the displays. It also comes together with the visitors, who enact the displays by viewing them as such. In visiting the museum and studying the objects on display, the visitors are part of doing the museum and its objects. A visitor who would mourn the remains displayed at a museum would not be enacting them as displays, nor the museum as a pedagogical site whose objects are material sources of knowledge. Mourning instead is part of another enactment, that of what Stefan calls “death as an event.” The body involved in that doing is enacted by other places, objects, ideas, people and practices, such as chapels, shrouds, coffins and flowers. That body would probably be more difficult to face than the one representing “death as a state of being” which we are not only allowed, but even encouraged to look at.

The museum as a genre

In the last chapter of Human Remains and Museum Practice (2006), Katherine Goodnow considers conditions and strategies for the successful display of human remains in museums. She brings up the concept of genre, pointing out that when a media consumer knows what to expect from a piece of media based on previous experience with the genre, it gives them a sense of safety. They can be assured that any potential threat will eventually turn out to be harmless, since that is what previous exposure to the conventions of the genre tells them. According to Goodnow, many of us may have encountered dead bodies in a religious or medical context before, when saying goodbye to loved ones, and trust these institutions to handle the dead properly. Therefore, Goodnow argues, museums can take advantage
of our familiarity with these contexts in their display of human remains. If the audience knows that the dead body is made harmless in religious or medical settings, intentionally borrowing from these “genres” might make for a more positive experience for the museum visitor (Goodnow, 2006, p. 128). Further, Goodnow describes the kind of materiality that facilitates visitors’ meetings with human remains in museums. She primarily focuses on the creation of barriers – physical and metaphorical – through the use of glass cases, railing, and conscious lighting. Goodnow argues that such barriers serve to uphold the distance between ourselves and the remains, thus protecting us from the dangerous, liminal dead and their disrupting potential – much in the same way as the ritual of the funeral would (Goodnow, 2006, p. 127). However, I would like to argue that the display case and railing does not just uphold boundaries. Together with materiality such as signs and spotlights, they also serve to enact the museum as a genre of its own – a coherent phenomenon recognizable to the visitors.

This genre is enacted not just by barriers, signs and lighting. The information desk in the reception area with its maps and leaflets helps enact the museum genre too, as do the visitors, tour guides and guards patrolling the exhibition space, and the imposing museum building signalling scientific authority. When these components are done together, we get the museum – a “shrine” where the unique and noteworthy is collected and preserved for posterity. But also, a pedagogical or perhaps even moral institution where artifacts are presented to the public as part of set narratives (see e.g. Marstine, 2006). Done together with the components of the museum genre, the otherwise disruptive, liminal dead body is inserted into a framework where it can once again make sense. The body in the display case is no longer read as the abject reminder of our own mortality but can instead be understood as an artifact and source of knowledge. Thus, the dead body in the museum ceases to be a threat to us and we can calmly study it, looking for the information we have been told that it holds. My material would suggest that visitors have enough

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2 Such a definition of the museum, while still influential, is increasingly being challenged and might fit certain museums better than others. The modern art museum, for example, uses plain, white walls and neutral lighting to remove context and overarching narratives, striving to be a “white cube” (Giebelhausen, 2006, p. 55). The specific museum genre described in the article thus applies to a certain type of museum – the (cultural) history museum.
experience seeing human remains in this setting for the museum in itself to work as a reassuring genre. Borrowing from other genres such as religion or medicine to reassure the visitor is thus unnecessary and might even have the opposite effect if overdone, something I explore in detail further down.

An example of someone who is intimately familiar with and has learned to “read” the museum genre is my informant Erika. She describes herself as being into “the humanities all the way” and grew up in a family of academics with frequent visits to museums.

I've been dragged through so, so many museums. And gone by myself too. So, in a way, I'm also used to the way human remains are presented in museums. I'm a lot better at handling seeing human remains in this way than I would be in some other contexts. If you've visited a lot of museums, especially a bunch of historical museums, of different kinds, which often display remains in some way or another, then you don't care as much.

Erika emphasizes that seeing human remains in a museum is an entirely different experience from seeing them in other contexts. She attributes this to how the remains are “presented in museums,” thus implicitly referring to many of the ingredients that make up the museum genre such as the display case, lighting and the informative signs. Further, Erika points out that the way she views human remains in museums is something she has learned through visiting “a lot of museums” (especially historical ones). As Tony Bennett points out in “Civic Seeing: Museums and the Organization of Vision,” the modern museum developed together with a certain visual competence—a recognition that museum objects are done differently than their counterparts outside of the museum (2011). Enacted as a museum object, the dead body is no longer “matter out of place.” Instead, by virtue of being an artifact it naturally belongs at the museum. Indeed, spontaneous, shorter interviews with visitors to the Swedish History Museum show that many of them have never even thought about the presence of human remains in museums. “I haven’t really thought about human remains until you came up to me” says a younger, American man, while a German woman thanks me for opening her eyes to the issue: “I’ve never thought about it before, so thank you.” Such answers show how much the enactment of the bodies as museum objects rather than corpses affects our attitudes towards them. I argue that it is this specific enactment of the
remains in our museums, made possible only by the many components of the museum genre, that allows the visitors I have seen in my observations to approach the remains with such calm.

**When the spell is broken**

It follows from this that the dead body can only be understood as a museum object as long as the museum genre is upheld. If the remains were to be moved from the exhibition halls to the cloakrooms, bathrooms or cafeterias, they would instantly revert to being “matter out of place.” While part of the museum building, these areas have their own distinct practical uses, made up of elements completely different from the ones that make up the museum as a genre. So, when enacted together with cutlery, paninis, and coffee instead of informative signs, tour guides and display cases, the dead body once again becomes incomprehensible and threatening. Therefore, designing an exhibition space that can be successfully read as a museum according to the conventions of the genre is important. Conversely, breaking the unspoken rules of the genre could foster suspicion in a visitor who got more than they bargained for. One example of this is the 1998 exhibition *London Bodies*, where the Museum of London tried to counteract audience discomfort regarding the human remains on display by creating a sterile, hospital-like exhibition space. The idea was that this design would tie into visitor familiarity with seeing the dead body in a healthcare context. However, the design choice strayed too far from the museum genre and instead of reducing uneasiness, it led some visitors to think of Frankenstein-esque medical experiments and to question the museum’s interest in the remains on the whole (Goodnow, 2006, p. 128). Chances are, such critique could have been avoided had the museum more closely followed the established museum genre.

Another example of what might happen if you break with the conventions of the genre comes from my interview with informant Emelie at the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm. Together, we visit the exhibition *Prehistories*, which presents prehistorical finds from all over Sweden. In *Prehistories*, the mood is set by atmospheric lighting and a looping audio track.
The overall lighting is dim, while coloured spotlights move slowly across the floor like a mysterious fog. There’s a heavy use of natural materials, possibly to give a sense of the environment in which these people lived. (...) The goal seems to be to bring the thousands of years old remains back to life. Who were these people? Were they like us? (Field notes 2017-04-25)

But one of the rooms in the exhibition has a different, minimalist design. The walls are painted a muted blue, the lighting is white and static and flooring and display cases are made from spotless linoleum and stainless steel. As Emilie enters the room, her attitude toward the exhibition and the remains on display change. “There’s a totally different feel in here. It’s a lot more clinical, and it also makes these feel a bit more like corpses, in a way…” she says, referring to the prehistoric skeletons in the room. The design of the room, which stands out in comparison to the rest of the exhibitions in the museum, clashes with Emilie’s idea of the museum genre. The materials, colours, and lighting used in the room work together to enact the remains as something other than museum exhibits. The clean, barren surfaces remind Emilie of clinical environments such as pathology labs and mortuaries. “I’m associating it with-, what’s it called, like autopsy rooms or morgues” she says. The remains, in turn, come off “(...) more like corpses.” The sudden shift in atmosphere makes Emilie pause and think about the exhibition and the remains in it. “The fact that it’s stripped down makes it… somewhat emotional, too (...) Cause you’re so used to everything being laid out and stylized.” Being used to it, Emilie usually does not reflect over the presence of human remains in museums. But when the museum chooses to display the remains in a different way, she is made aware that she is actually looking at a corpse and this awareness makes for a heightened, emotional experience.³

While Emilie describes her experience as “emotional”, she is not troubled by it in the same way as a middle-aged American woman I meet in another part of the Swedish History Museum. She tells me that she and her friend got very upset during a visit to the Vasa Museum earlier that week. There, they had seen the remains of some crewmembers displayed in oblong, coffin-like display cases. “They were laid out in coffin form which, in my tradition, ³ This room has more in common with the “white cube” than with the genre of the history museum and shows how human remains aren’t part of the practices that do the art museum in the same way as they are part of the history museum. The conscious lack of narrative in the “white cube” offers the visitor no alternative way to enact the dead body, making it stand out as a corpse.
we display a body in a coffin and that’s our way of saying goodbye (…) So it, the thought of, makes it really violent when you see ‘Oh, they really are dead.’” In this case, the women felt that the design of the display cases was so similar to that of a funereal casket that their immersion in the museum genre was broken. The display cases enacted the remains not as exhibits, but as deceased people, which prompted the women to take offense at their public display. Instead, the women felt that the remains should be laid to rest in peace.

A similar experience is described by my informant Jenny. While generally positive towards the display of human remains, she recalls a visit to the British Museum where the behaviour of her fellow visitors in regard to the museum’s mummies annoyed her. “I remember when I was in that big hall with all those mummies, and the thing is, people were talking and pointing and—and I just, ‘My God, we’re in a burial chamber! Show some respect!’ I remember I got so annoyed!” Jenny proceeds to tell me how she wished the rest of the visitors would have calmed down and lowered their voices, “(…) sort of like when you’re in church.” However, when I ask her if she thinks the two of us, who are standing in front of a display case at the Museum of Ethnography, filled with ritual objects made from human bones, should be acting any differently, she says that is a different question. “Let’s say there had been a mummy in this room, with these other things. Then I wouldn’t have had that feeling. Then it’s part of a different context.” There could be several factors going into Jenny’s reasoning. For example, the appearance of human remains often play a role in how we perceive them. Remains which are more easily identifiable as human, such as complete bodies, mummified or wet specimens, are often harder to enact as something other than corpses (see e.g. Aspeborg 2020). An ancient Egyptian mummy would thus appear more like a dead body than the fragmented remains at the Museum of Ethnography would. However, judging from Jenny’s assertion that she would not mind seeing a mummy displayed in “a different context”, such as the Museum of Ethnography, it would seem that her issues stem mainly from the exhibition rather than from the remains themselves. She goes on to explain:

It’s just that they had chosen to put only them [the mummies] in a room (…) It was four-, eight mummies that laid in one room. Those were the only things in the room. Nothing else, it was entirely empty.
otherwise (…) since there were so many, then it’s somehow a burial chamber to me.

The way Jenny sees it, it was the decision to put all the mummies in the same room, without any other museum objects, that created the issue. As she points out when I ask her about the remains at the Museum of Ethnography, displaying a mummy in a room together with “other things” would be different. In such a context, the mummy would be enacted as one amongst many museum objects. But without being enacted by much besides themselves, Jenny is unable to read the mummies of the British Museum as anything other than dead bodies – the sheer number of dead bodies together making every single one of them harder to enact in any other way. Being in the presence of the dead, Jenny no longer reacts according to the cultural cues of the museum goer, but rather as someone entering a sacred site, or as she puts it “(…) sort of like when you’re in church.”

Conclusion

The ethnographic examples presented in this article are a testament to the immense power of materiality over how we experience the world. They show that we exist through and with the objects, places, people, and ideas around us. For an institution such as the museum, that tell stories and convey knowledge through physical artifacts, such an insight is key to creating appealing, engaging and informative exhibitions. In this article I have focused on the impact of museum materiality on one type of object in particular: the dead body. Almost universally fraught with emotion and meaning, the dead body defies our ordered worldview – it is matter out of place. However, when entered into the museum context, the dead body seems to lose its power and is casually accepted by the visitors. In the museum the remains transform from “death as an event” – the disruptive reminders of our fragility and mortality – into “death as a state of being,” thanks to the surrounding materiality. It is when the dead body is enacted together with the objects, places, people, and ideas that make up the museum as we know it, or the museum genre, that it can be read as a display. When enacted as a museum object, the dead body is brought into a framework in which it can once again make sense. Through this, it loses the threatening and disruptive qualities that otherwise make it so potent, meaning it can be
approached safely. Only when the museum genre fails, the dead body once again becomes a dangerous presence that needs to be handled within the bounds of ritual, respect and mourning. Through using human remains as an example in this article, the power of museum materiality is brought to light. Talking about certain materiality as a cohesive genre further enables us to explore what elements go into such a genre, how we apply it as well as when and why that application fails. Ultimately, this knowledge might help in creating better exhibitions – preventing the museum from turning into a morgue or a mausoleum.

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INTERVIEWS
“Emelie” 2018-01-17
“Erika” 2018-01-23
“Jenny” 2018-01-24
“Stefan” 2018-01-20
American Woman 2017-09-27
American Man 2017-09-27
German Woman 2017-09-27
Museum Staff 2017-10-24

OBSERVATIONS
Body Worlds Autumn 2016
The Swedish History Museum 2017-04-22
The Swedish History Museum 2017-05-03
Medical Museion 2017-07-18

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