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Encoding object-oriented democracy in Swedish museums: implementing method of the thing in exhibition-making

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ABSTRACT
As museums face conflicting demands on maintaining and caring for their collections, opening for visitor engagement, and being more inclusive in their practice, new approaches are needed to museum work. This article introduces a democratic and inclusive approach focusing on the relational properties of the artefact – the Method of the Thing (Tingenes Metode). We use interviews with different museum professionals in Sweden. The method allows knowledge to emerge from the convergence of different actors within and outside the museum who negotiate their expertise, (professional) roles and technical infrastructure of the museum by foregrounding the object rather than the curators’ story. We use the encoding/decoding model to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the method where centring the object allows for a process of democratisation and polyvocality to take shape, thus allowing divergent narratives to emerge.

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1. Introduction
The museum of the twenty-first century is operating against the backdrop of ongoing social concerns ranging from climate change to gender inequalities to racial tensions, and often exhibitions become the contact zones where those expressions are formulated. Traditionally museums have been spaces removed from public debates, avoiding contested and controversial issues. However, ‘hot topics’ are now finding their way into museological culture (Cameron 2010, 1). As museums embrace a more active role within the public discourse, they need tools and methods which will enable visitor dialogue and engagement while at the same time staying true to their core mission of collecting, studying and displaying cultural heritage objects.

Tingenes Metode or method of the thing (‘Tingens metod’ n.d.; Huseby and Treimo 2018; Treimo 2020; Treimo et al. 2023) draws on Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel’s work (2005) and aspires to be a dialogic method bridging visitor dialogue and museum’s focus on object. The method focuses on an object-oriented democracy – playing on the double meaning of the word ‘ting’, both the thing/object and an assembly, gathering
or even a parliament. Tingenes Metode, (hereafter T.M) approaches museum processes from the principles of inclusiveness, democracy and activism and can be seen as a museological method and a philosophical ethos that sees objects as possessing relational properties and epistemic value that can be traced and elaborated through dialogue. The method offers a museological approach that is centred neither on the curatorial decision framework nor on the audience perspective but rather on the narrative of the artefact.

This article investigates how the T.M is used to include diverse voices in exhibitions and collections and how the experimental approach takes shape. Interviews with museum professionals from three Swedish museums showcase their experiences and struggles as they attempt to move away from traditional ideas of curatorship towards a more equitable idea of ‘stewardship’, which views the archival material not as property but as a cultural asset co-owned by the institution and the community of origin (Wurl 2005, 72). We argue that applying T.M has the potential to bring in multiple voices and perspectives. However, the application of the method is not free from production struggles. What T.M means for a particular person and how it is enacted in any given context is framed by the properties of the things and infrastructure of the museum, the knowledge frameworks of the participants and their relationship to the museum and its messages.

We introduce T.M in its Scandinavian context, placing it in the larger framework of challenges contemporary museums face. The paper gives an overview of the nine interviews used for the empirical insights and discusses the results using the following structure. First, we look at how Swedish museums have implemented T.M and then how the properties of the technical infrastructure, knowledge frameworks and relations to the museum provide challenges and opportunities. We conclude that while the method has great potential, its openness and flexibility make the implementation challenging and heavily dependent on the particulars of each individual museum.

2. Method of the thing in the context of the museums today

Museums collaborating with external actors is nothing new (Davies 2010), and as such, the Method of the Thing is just one approach among many. The T.M is inspired by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel’s work with the exhibition ‘Making Things Public’, where they propose an object-oriented democratic approach where thing is both an object as well as a gathering of discussions (Latour and Weibel 2005). Borrowing a phrase from computer science and coding, they asked, ‘what would an object-oriented democracy look like?’ (Latour and Weibel 2005, 14). The method’s name comes from the old Scandinavian word ‘ting’, meaning both a thing and a democratic gathering, and the attempt then is to bring forward both meanings in the museum context. This starting point inspired a project developed in Norway 2015–2017 centred around questions such as: is it possible to combine openness and inclusion with the museum’s core collection management, research, and dissemination activities? Can the things in museums gather ideas and discussions from different perspectives? (Huseby and Treimo 2018).

Swedish museums were inspired by the approach, which, while not necessarily new, foregrounds simple and relatively clear ideas about the possibility of focusing on the democratic and gathering potential of the objects (‘Tingens metod’ n.d.). The Nordic countries are well known for their democratic aspirations (Amnå 2006). Focus on citizen engagement, accessibility and inclusion, are important themes in Nordic museum research (Drotner
However, the path towards a democratic and polyphonic museum space in the Nordic context is still long. Temi Odumosu reminds us through her work with Danish cultural institutions that there are real challenges when intervening in institutions, as attempting to critique stakeholders’ traditional practices exposes issues of access and institutional exclusivity (Odumosu 2019, 616). The Swedish project team sees T.M as a way to respond to the challenges of problematisation, representation and relevance of museum collections (Pousette 2018). The question ‘whom does the object call for?’ captures the ethos of the method (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt et al. 2023), as such an approach overrides the curatorial decision-making framework in favour of a perspective that calls for multiple narratives centred around the object. The multiple narratives approach in T.M starts with the cross-departmental collaborations in museums (Pousette 2018), and the success depends on the organisational culture (Harrison 2005; Jung 2016). The internal processes and resources shape collaborations (Davies 2010) but gathering around an item can level some of the hierarchies and focus on the diversity and heterogeneity of the perspectives.

Looking at things as assemblages, not atomised units, we can perceive objects as nodes of connections dependent on other things and people. Consequently, this relatedness can evoke emotions, disruptions, agreements and even disagreements, potentially leading the space for negotiations and dialogue within the museum context. Moreover, these connections can lead to collaborations outside the museum, where different people – experts and laypersons – are called by the thing to contribute with viewpoints and ideas. An example of this layered perspective on objects is the complex narrative surrounding a smartphone. As components are sourced from various countries, each element forms a rich tapestry of narratives highlighting the benefits of technological advancements for human connectivity on the one hand, but also raising thorny questions on the exploitation of precious minerals, child labour and fair-trade practices on the other hand (Sonnemaker 2021; Cho et al. 2019; Qiu, Gregg, and Crawford 2014).

We locate the T.M within a larger discussion in museum studies and practice, where museums are driven to seek new ways of engaging audiences to stay relevant in society (Janes and Sandell 2019; Hetland and Schrøder 2020; Golding and Modest 2013). The traditional museum, often seen as a place of enlightenment and education for the public (Bennett 1995), is giving way to museums as interdisciplinary meeting places, where recognition through the size and value of the collections is losing its imperative. The participatory turn (Hetland and Schrøder 2020; Runnel et al. 2013) in museums has meant that the visitor or audience has become the core focus of the museum activities (Samis and Michaelson 2017; Hooper-Greenhill 1994; Jones 2016). Critics argue that such focus on the visitor has marginalised the object and the collections. However, we claim that T.M allows the diverging interests to meet as it brings the different aspects of the museum work to a gathering around the object.

Inspired by Conn, we too look at museums as ‘places uniquely situated at the intersection of objects, ideas, and the public space’ (2010, 5–6), as we foreground the unique capacities of the museums to engage in dialogue where the things are at the centre. As Treimo (2020) demonstrates, assembling various actors to museum objects and space can produce new knowledge and bring together the three strands of museum work relating to collections, research and dissemination. However, as Jenny Kidd (2016) points out, museums seldom acknowledge and investigate the political, philosophical and ideological implications of production and message construction at the heart of
the museum work. T.M is a method for joint efforts to produce knowledge and encode museum exhibitions and collections together with diverse actors. As a method, it also invites reflections on these issues.

3. Museums as ‘parliament for the thing’

Given the democratic principle behind T.M, we suggest that museums can be forums fostering debates and healthy disagreements. The thing (the museum object) gathers discussions. Each message (the exhibition, display or collection) undergoes a process of agreement and disagreement as voices are weighed … just as laws pass through a parliamentary debate before they are passed. Numerous scholars have argued that museums are communicative spaces (Hooper-Greenhill 1999; Drotner et al. 2018; Kidd 2016). Exhibitions, in particular, have been designed to convey ideas and communicate through the senses, whether visually (Kaplan and S 1999, 38) or emotionally (Smith 2020). As cultural blockbusters, museums strategically curate exhibitions that can potentially draw in large crowds to secure business sponsorships (Alexander 1999) or appeal to specific targeted audiences (Mägi and Lepik 2019). Museums send messages through exhibition mediums to viewers (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Runnel 2011). The communication model has allowed researchers to investigate the audience response to museum messages, for example understanding museum visitors as audiences (Jones 2016; Dicks 2000; Stylianou-Lambert 2010). However, the museum as the message producer has received less attention. As museums seldom construct messages in social and cultural isolation, and exhibitions are the inevitable result of teamwork, we need to investigate the encoding process of collaborative work to understand how multiple voices are incorporated. Here T.M becomes an example of a multi-vocal museum, and encoding museum messages also needs to be investigated in the context of other institutions and other museological methods.

In the classical model of exhibition making, the curator chooses the story, selects objects to complement the story, and decides how this is to be communicated to the audience, with labels and text panels functioning as contextual frameworks (Davies 2010). However, the participatory logic and the ‘rhizome’ nature of the associations from T.M challenges this top-down approach. The thing taking a central position in the story, instead of the message from the curators, can challenge existing dominant narratives. The classic encoding and decoding model by Stuart Hall (1973) offers a perspective for understanding the many ways in which social, economic and political contexts influence the production of the message as it travels through structures of power relations.

T.M gathers diverse voices at the production level, inviting people from both inside and outside of the museum to contribute to the object-oriented democratic debate. Following the idea of the encoding-decoding model (Figure 1), we see three layers of influences on the museum messages. We use the encoding model to demonstrate how T.M intervenes in each layer of encoding. The characteristics of the thing and the qualities of the museum space intervene with the technical infrastructure of encoding. Smaller or larger items, fitting within museum space or not, decaying items needing careful handling or being robust contemporary items – all can become different conversation starters and all shape the kinds of conversations – collections and exhibitions are possible.
Encoding a message in a museum is then influenced by the distinctive characteristics of the museum, such as institutional knowledge, professional ideologies, historical technical skills, assumptions about the audience, routine of production etc. T.M as a method has the potential to challenge some of these practices. Engaging new groups of people, shaking up traditional roles or placing the thing at the centre can disrupt curatorial storytelling and invite alternative storylines and networks of knowledge to emerge. The messages emerging from such multiple collaborations do not occur in a vacuum. Images, stories and overall agenda are borrowed from the wider socio-cultural and political structure and need to resonate with the outside world. Even in the traditional broadcasting model, the audience functions as both the source and the receiver of the message as their decoding frameworks influence the content reception (Hall 1973, 3). With T.M, museums can include the audiences in co-constructing the message allowing them to influence not only the invisible decoding process but inviting direct input and insights also at the encoding part of the work.

The model has been increasingly used for a broader understanding of social communication, and we have become aware that institutional code need not always follow the idea of single-voice hegemonic/dominant message (Ross 2011). Traditionally, the museum exhibition yields what Hall calls a ‘preferred reading’, which is often framed as hegemonic with regards to the dominant societal or field-specific narrative. However, the museums also have the power to challenge the dominant ideologies of the society around them and produce a counter-hegemonic narrative, challenging societal visions of idealised and unified stories. T.M can support museums in this process by highlighting alternative stories from the perspective of the museum object. An example of this was discussed during the interviews where the design museum, instead of focusing on the power and beauty of the design, used T.M to introduce the grim story of overconsumption and exploitative labour.

Figure 1. Encoding/decoding model, Stuart Hall (1973).
We will continue introducing the T.M through the production part of Hall’s model by exploring the various actors involved in the production of a T.M-based exhibition to understand better how an object-oriented democracy can be applied.

4. Museum staff as encoders

Although different in their mission and size, many museums share similar organisational structures where the ultimate responsibility for exhibitions rests with the director, who is given the task of reviewing and approving exhibitions. These responsibilities include long-term exhibition plans, specific exhibition ideas and final exhibition designs. In principle, exhibition ideas can originate from many sources. While curators have creative freedom, the criteria for selecting exhibitions include the availability of resources, compliance with the mission statement, and actionability (regarding the availability of objects). The exhibition’s potential to draw an audience is also evaluated (Smithsonian Institution Office of Policy and Analysis 2002). Most museums have an internal exhibition committee which reviews exhibition ideas and forwards those they consider viable to the most senior staff or director. An essential consideration of the selection criteria is the influence that a current or potential museum stakeholder (such as board members, elected officials, or financial supporters) has on a proposed exhibition. This tie becomes even more evident in cases where the museum receives public funds. The potential response of government officials and corporate partners can exert a significant influence.

There are key roles involved in making an exhibition, some of which are identified by Janet A. Kamien (2001, 115). Although these are presented as distinctive tasks attributed to a single individual, it is important to note that within the structural management, sometimes these can be incorporated in a single role, especially in small museums with limited budgets, or other times fall within a team’s responsibility. In general, the roles are: (1) the client (this is usually a director or an upper-level administrator. They provide the overall landscape for exhibit efforts); (2) the content specialist, or curator (they are responsible for providing the content and assure the accuracy of the exhibition); (3) the designer (they provide the framework for the exhibit’s elements and the drawings that will allow the exhibit to be built and installed as designed); (4) the content interpreter or educator (they provide the material, ideas, and experiences which will make exhibit content most accessible to its target audiences). Each of these has a different relationship to the message of the museum and is more or less involved in the exhibition process. T.M can be used to broaden these roles and add new kinds of relationships from inside or outside the museum.

5. Method

The paper builds on nine interviews with museum staff: curators, heads of exhibition and collection units and educators from three Swedish museums. Gothenburg City Museum, Malmö Museums and the Technical Museum in Stockholm participate in the Swedish National Heritage Board project of implementing the method of the thing approach in their respective museums (‘Tingens metod’ n.d). The first author conducted the interviews in November-December 2020 using Zoom online conferencing technology. The questions focused on the experiences and challenges of implementing the method of the thing by
the interview participants. Video communication still allows access to verbal and nonver-
bal cues by providing an equally authentic experience to in-person interviews (Sullivan 2012). Compared to other asynchronous and synchronous interviews, it provides a
more personable interaction and greater spontaneity (Howlett 2021, 4).

Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the analysis focuses on the interpret-
ation and implementation of T.M by the participants. Answers detailing the respondent’s
role, daily operations, and perspective on T.M were tagged for the frameworks of knowl-
edge, while discussions relating to the production process and different hierarchies vis-à-
vis other actors were tagged for the relations of production. Finally, information regarding
the materiality of exhibitions and the various items needed were tagged for the technical
infrastructure.

While there are public documents about the people engaged in the project, we
choose to keep them anonymised in our interviews and refer to specific interviewees
through fictional names without disclosing their affiliations. We try to ensure anonymity
and protect the people whose opinions might not always agree with the dominant pos-
tion of the project. As this is an interview study, we lack the actual enactment perspec-
tive of how the T.M is implemented and rely on the narrated accounts. We have not
seen all the exhibitions our participants discussed, and while we have existing collabor-
ations with one of the participating museums and have participated in some T.M dis-
cussions, we approach this study from an outsider’s perspective.

6. The process for the method of the thing

The fundamental idea behind T.M is that museums are using things (museum objects)
to create an inviting space for dialogue and connections: the process of exhibition
making or displays of artefact is done so through engagement. Museums start with
stories, constructing a storyboard and sourcing objects to suit those stories, a
process often led by mainly the curators. But let’s turn the process around by asking,
‘whom does the object call for’. Collecting the stories can be guided not only by cura-
tors but also by educators, designers, carpenters, experts or lay people outside the
museums. In the short guide to the method (Ta till …., n.d) six steps are outlined:
1. Begin with collections and take the starting point to documenting or exhibiting
project from an object or a collection; 2. Take the object out of the storage or out
of the exhibition and start by inviting museum colleagues to identify relationships
for further investigations. 3. Who is summoned by the object? Consider which external
actors to include in the discussions. 4. Define a joint goal. T.M does not need to lead to
an exhibition; the object can also be at a centre of a discussion or inclusion activity or a
start of a collection process. 5. Investigate with an open mind, but keep in mind the
realistic frameworks of the project. 6. Document along the way, as the process can
give important input for further activities. In this process, the thing at the centre of
the discussions holds a diversity of relationships, and the inside and outside actors
can help to decode the knowledge.

In one project involving a nuclear plant, T.M is applied as a dialogue-building exer-
cise between the museum and the community about the role of nuclear energy in
society. In this exercise, the nuclear plant is the incipit from which different ideas are
formulated.
I talk about this nuclear plant as a thing, and then I gather people in groups around a table, and I use pictures and photography. So, I will set up a theme, for example, talk about energy or something connected to the environment. Another group may talk about it through a worker’s perspective, you know, and then I give them different pictures to get their mindset going and then I just say talk about it, discuss what is important about the nuclear plants in the perspective of energy for example. And when you’ve talked about that, try to find out what symbolises that, as in which artefact or story or whatever, and write that down and afterwards describe it to me. And they come up with these different ideas of what is important, you know. So I use the nuclear plant as the thing. (Anya, head of documentation and collections)

Instead of recruiting experts or being experts who tell us what we have to collect, the community contributes to the narrative surrounding the object. This applies not only to what can be considered historical artefacts but also to contemporary objects. One curator brings the example of a coffee mug and how we can trace its relationships by investigating the clay used, thus leading us to an ambitious ethnographic exploration of stories of individuals and communities. In this case, the clay serves as an entry point in critically analysing issues of power and oppression at a global-political level.

T.M is flexible. There are no concrete guidelines for how things are supposed to be done or detailed instructions for focusing on an object. In the flexibility and potential of endless results lies both opportunities and challenges. The format supports museums to explore different ways of communicating their messages.

If you are at the design museum, you start with a design object, and so if you don’t give it any other relations, you don’t develop interesting questions around it. So Tingens Metod is about letting all their other relations sort of flow in. Invite a lot of people so stories come through, and then you can (do so many things) [...] that can be a podcast, an exhibition, it can be a blog post, it can be a book. It could be anything but you choose which stories you want to go work with. So it’s not that rigid at all. It gives you a kind of tool to invite all those different stories which I find extremely useful. (Carina, curator)

This flexibility can be challenging. In recalling how the method was applied to one particular exhibition project, an educator notes the frustration in making sense of the different ideas and inputs from the group.

We had this workshop almost a year ago, and we gathered a lot of people and the first thing they had to do was to put a small coloured mark on what artefacts they thought were the most exciting or made them think the most. We then took some of the artefacts out, and we grouped the people, and they got these instructions to think about different things. What is it made of? Who made it? Why did someone make it? How did it end up in the museum etc? And that discussion was nice and with a lot of ideas, but then when we finished it, it was a bit like, OK, so what do we do next? Are we going to make an exhibition out of these? What will be the theme of that? Should that be connected to the pieces that we have picked out, or should it be a completely new exhibition with new artefacts? Maybe photography and maybe someone should perform, play music and dance. Whatever, I don’t … I don’t know. (Hanna, educator)

Thus agreeing on the goal and considering the realistic possibilities of executing the discussions becomes a crucial element in the process. In its more radical form, T.M can give ownership of the ‘issue’ to others outside the museum, even if it is not clear if there is always a clear Other or if the Other realises that they now have the ownership. One of the interviewees draws parallels with Deleuze and Guattari’s non-hierarchical rhizomes,
meaning that T.M is not supposed to prioritise any ideas; instead, it is about bringing a variety of different perspectives, following the principles of connections and heterogeneity. For others, the rhizome is unfeasible and undesirable. For them, the curation of the multitude of voices still needs to be at the core of the process. In the T.M perspective, the curator’s knowledge of the object is not erased, but it is instead enriched with other stories, as the various relations of the objects are given space to be explored. The practical goal-setting and clear time-frames help keep the focus and support from getting lost in the exploration.

7. Challenges and opportunities when applying T.M within the technical infrastructure of the museum?

In T.M an artefact holds meaning through the museological lens of becoming a ‘story’ situated within the museum’s visual and aural discourse. Things in the T.M can be constrained by the technical infrastructure – it can be too big to be brought into the museum, like in the case of the nuclear plant. Alternatively, the thing can be too fragile to be handled by a larger group of people, constraining the possible tactile explorations of the objects.

In the context of the method of the thing, the technical infrastructure starts with the artefact(s), their presentability within the museum context, how much or how little space they will take up, and if there are special conditions to be considered. When producing exhibitions, the technical infrastructures relating to budgets, logistics, and object availability can be seen as crucial components in framing the work. Overall, the exhibition furniture, glass cases, wall panels, stanchions, together with the technical tools such as projectors, sound and lighting become the ‘material substratum’ (Hall 1973, 2). They constitute the museological mise-en-scène as they represent important items that frame and elevate the visual storytelling of an exhibition.

Not every narrative strand of the object can be captured and framed within the museological walls. One such example emerged during a T.M workshop at a nuclear plant that is in the process of being dismantled. Through the workshop it transpired that sound was a characteristic of the plant that workers wanted to preserve for posterity. The kind of answers that maybe we would not have thought of and one thing that the people talked very much about is the sound of the nuclear plant. Because people that have been working there have a lot of sounds, a lot of signals that are so special to a nuclear plant that you can’t find anywhere else. So they say they wish that we keep the sound. Somehow it can be all different kinds of sounds. So that’s something. Maybe we shouldn’t have thought about an exhibition in the future. The sound from a nuclear plant might be quite interesting because we can’t recreate that. (Anya, head of documentation and collections)

T.M offers museum professionals a different variety of source materials. At the same time, museum workers are mindful of the fact that not every story can be fully explored. Staff must ascertain which narrative strand is worth pursuing by assessing it against budget, time and space constraints, as well as the directives set by those at the managerial level.

T.M as a process requires many forms of investments: firstly, the identification of a physical space within the museum where gatherings can take place (Treimo 2020). Secondly, staff needs to be skilled in building relationships with community members as well as working across departments. Thirdly, museum workers must be savvy in their selections of stories.
It’s still curated (the process). It’s not a free process that goes like this. No! you have to curate it. You have to choose which stories to tell from them. (Carina, curator)

The democratic principle of the method could be nullified as the museum exercises its vetoing power on which story to curate. However, it is also important to note that the opportunities presented by T.M are in the iterative process of the model itself. In the logic of T.M an exhibition or a display is never intended as the final result of a curatorial project. Instead, curation can be viewed as a process of re-editing and re-adjustment (Taher et al. 2022). This understanding can ultimately foster real dialogue and connections.

8. How the method of the thing challenges existing knowledge frameworks

T.M can create a cacophony of voices, which contradicts the aim of clear didactic messages of pedagogical programmes. For instance, when museums produce for schools, they do so to ensure that students gain access to cultural education programmes and learn practically and interactively. At the same time, museums retain didactic expertise and authority on those subjects. Conversely, the construction of meaning becomes the result of a museological production in which objects are selected, arranged and viewed through a ‘museological prism’ to yield a code that ultimately holds a high cultural narrative.

The diversity of people operating in the museum space code the exhibition according to their frameworks of knowledge. The multitude of voices, diversity of perspectives and conflict tolerance can be seen as part of the frameworks of knowledge for some institutions but not necessarily for others. If T.M is used to question ‘the soul and heart of the collections’, the method can be perceived as more threatening.

See what’s happening now in England a lot with the Black Lives Matter and all the brutish museum and all these questions, which is really very dangerous, and that is because there is talk about the relations of these objects and then (they) say this object has another relation that you never mention. And you only mention this story, and you just try to wipe out that story, but that story is very much alive, and it’s part of this object’s story, and that story has to be told. And Tingenes Metode is really a way of trying to tell those stories. The stories that the museum doesn’t really want to hear. (Carina, curator).

T.M, at its core, calls for the expansion and inclusion of different voices in the museum, thus challenging the dominant preferred view of the museum, view on the collection, and interpretation of the object.

At the same time, the method can also be used to follow the mainstream understanding of ‘hot topics’, as is shown by the inclusion of #metoo in the exhibition context. Here, the museum staff followed the current trend and included stories of abuse in their ‘Sailor memories’ exhibition. At the core, T.M supports the museums’ aim to stay connected with society, current concerns, and issues. So, T.M can be used as an approach to make knowledge production circular, to gain knowledge by tapping into current topics that meet the interests of their audiences, just as producers draw stories from socio-political systems (Hall 1973, 3).

Within the participatory framework, the method challenges tokenistic practices which often result in ‘democratisation of culture’ (Ashley 2014), rather than genuine surrender of power entailed in ‘cultural democracy’ (Lynch and Alberti 2010). While our interview
participants agreed to the hypothetical risk of T.M bringing in too diverging voices, articulating the need for the museum to have the ‘final say’, they kept that from being a real issue. The participants engaged in discussing objects, layering stories and perspectives will hardly strive to dismantle the museum as a social institution. The museum maintains its authoritative knowledge position by being open, flexible, and inclusive, and the hegemonic position is never static; rather, it is historically contingent, socially conditioned, and dependent on the dialogues. Regular use of T.M can be part of the institutional frameworks of knowledge through which the museum messages are constructed.

In their daily endeavours museums operate as hegemonic creators of historical narrative through the scripts written by curators. However, the participatory turn (Hetland and Schröder 2020; Simon 2010; Runnel and Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2014) compelled museums to take a less authoritative approach. While many museum professionals agree that democratic and co-creating engagements can expand the process of meaning-making, many professionals find it challenging to completely relinquish power to audiences (Tatsi 2013). The more radical version of the T.M entails a complete surrender of curatorial power in favour of object-oriented inquiry questioning and challenging power structures. The lite version sees the focus shifting from the object to a curatorial-led operation where tensions can be quelled, and potential disruptions corralled. As such, there appears to be no strict parameter to determine what a failed T.M result might look like, but rather failure is seen as an unwillingness to carry out the jointly agreed objective.

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Well, as long as we don’t fail during the process. I wouldn’t see it as a failure, even if it is the lousiest exhibition and everyone thinks it is the lousiest exhibition. That is still a good outcome. If we fail to use the method in the right way, that is a failure. Then it is just, sorry to say that, then it is just bullshit! Then you see a method, but you are doing something else. (Jane, museum director)

9. How the method of the thing challenges the relations of the production

Like any other larger media producer, the museum has a hierarchy that corresponds to how the ideas get spread and implemented within the institution. T.M as an approach gets implemented differently, depending on the role of the person. Overall, the T.M is situated in the societal democratisation processes, where the owners of the museum (be it state or municipality) feel the pressure of doing things differently, being more inclusive and democratic.

We are asking people to give us the story to help with the story because the way society is today with a lot of discussions as to how to do things together. How are we going to be more democratic? How are we letting all voices to be heard, and how are we going to make people interested in what are we doing so they could help us to develop it? (Lena, curator).

As such, T.M is seen as one of several approaches by museums to find ways of incorporating a multitude of perspectives. The museum management – directors, and head of collections or exhibitions see T.M as a mindset or ideology of inclusion and democracy. Following Jent Kamien’s (2001) idea that upper management or external stakeholders like the Swedish Art Council can be seen as ‘clients’ to the production, these clients dictate the ideological position. However, as we can observe from the interviews, the implementation of the method is not always so straightforward. The lack of specific instructions for listening to the people and implementing the multitude of voices within the exhibition or collection practices...
makes T.M very open. The relationship to the exhibition as production has thus more possibilities to frame the museum staff’s attitudes. As outlined by the curators in the sample, their practices within the exhibition are strongly guided by the management’s expectations. The frames from the management can manifest in the technical infrastructure – what kind of space there is, what is the budget and time plan. The frames are also ideological, following themes, purposes and aims set by the museum or its stakeholders.

Different sets of the power-negotiations stem from the relations of production – designers will frown upon curators’ design ideas, or outsiders brought in with T.M will attempt to dictate their perspectives on collection policies or exhibition practices. Even discussing collaborations within the T.M frameworks, the museum staff has the power to dismiss audience contributions as ‘not interesting’ and do so with the best of possible intentions. They see themselves as knowing the audiences, mediating their wishes through their professional expertise, and as such, being able to judge whether the multiplicity of voices adds to the discourses of the museum or if it can be dismissed. In the implementation phase of the T.M the choice of stories or which connections to prioritise lies in the museum’s hands. The T.M is implemented through the technical infrastructures, frameworks of knowledge, and relationships of production, and a decision to prioritise or de-prioritise particular connections can be based on any of these production layers.

T.M is used in museums to summon a democratic gathering whereby participants can bring their expertise to the table in a non-hierarchical manner. However, such flat hierarchies are not always possible, especially within big institutional settings where job titles, roles and visions are well-cemented within the structure. Referring to Hall (1973, 13), we can see that messages are produced through a complex structure of dominance because institutional and social power relations imprint them at each stage. In striving to create an object-oriented democracy through the T.M, asymmetric relationships of power still need to be accounted for when producing an exhibition.

10. Conclusions

T.M is a mindset and a method that allows museums to centre their democratic and inclusive approaches around collecting and exhibiting as the core practices. The method is open and flexible, which has both benefits and drawbacks, as the implementation of each object-oriented democratic gathering needs to be made to work in each particular context. T.M focuses on the museum object or collection and invites museums to reorient their traditional curator-centred approach in favour of multi-vocal knowledge creation. At the production stage the technical infrastructure represents the **museological mise-en-scène**, with the physical space, artefacts, props, text panels, and overall museum furniture and tools functioning as the medium via which the message is delivered. To convey meaning the museum object is codified through the visual grammar of the technical infrastructure. The frameworks of knowledge constitute the ideological leanings and frames of reference of the participants. Finally, the relations of production represent the social realities of exhibition-making as they are underpinned by dynamic power structures.

T.M invites collaborative knowledge creation from the convergence and dialogue of different roles and practices as multiple actors negotiate their autonomy by foregrounding the interest of the object to unlock the different narratives. The strength of the
method lies in its ability to elevate the epistemic value of the object, which stands to challenge the traditional model where the curator oversaw the process of narrative construction. Its weakness is in the messy process and potentially ambiguous goals, wherein much power is retained with the museums’ implementation. The top-down approach, hierarchies of power, job titles, visions, and financial resources can severely limit the potential of the method. While object-oriented democracy has the potential to challenge single curatorial narratives, the choice in showcasing layered narratives is still in the hands of the museum professional.

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