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Using digital technology as a mode of experimental display

Thoughts on an exhibition on stave church portals

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Abstract: *This article reflects on the digital exhibitionary approaches that were explored as part of the exhibition* Looking Through Portals *held at the Cultural History Museum in Oslo in 2018. The exhibition experimented with new ways of displaying, representing and experiencing stave church portals. I discuss two of the exhibition's installations that used digital technologies – a video display and a 3D print. These point to how powers of suggestion in museum displays can bring visitors to experience heritage in new ways.*

Keywords: Stave church portals, display, digital installations, heritage, suggestion, experience.

This article reflects on the digital exhibition approaches explored as part of an experimental exhibition on stave church portals I curated at the Cultural History Museum in Oslo.[1] Norwegian stave churches and their portals began to be made roughly around 1100 A.D., forming part of an elaborate institutional programme for Christianised Norway. In their original medieval setting, the portals functioned as entrance/exit ways, as markers for the dividing line between the secular and the spiritual, the material and immaterial world. Heavily decorated with elaborate carvings, the portals have been transferred to and displayed in museums since the nineteenth century, a period in which monumental objects were sought after as Norway aimed at establishing their own national heritage collections. Their "museumification" transformed them into iconic Norwegian national heritage emblems. However, throughout their lives as exhibition objects, curators have not done justice to the display potential of portals. Often they have assumed a position close to and/or against the wall as stationary aestheticised ornaments. Such a display cuts off the original function of the stave church portals as an entrance/exit way. I propose that one should aim to take up the challenge and determine ways to engage with their display potential as a museum object and offer a challenge to the modern viewer regarding how their ambiguous identity and agency as individual ("art"/"archaeological") objects and as thresholds between different worlds can be experienced. In the exhibition, I explored ways to allow viewers to experience

stave church portals in new ways, to engage with them as "living" cultural heritage through the potential of digital display and digitalisation. In this article, I discuss two digital installations that were part of the experimental exhibition *Looking Through Portals* that I curated at the Museum for Cultural History in Oslo in spring 2018.[2] The original intention of the exhibition was to use an original portal from the museum's medieval displays. The costs of moving a fragile item up two flights of stairs proved to be prohibitive. This led us to explore display approaches that evoked portals in their absence. The two digital display elements discussed here – a video display and a 3D print – point to ways in which viewers can experience the portals visually, physically, and imaginatively. Theoretically, these point to the powers of suggestion of exhibitions, and how they can enable visitors to experience heritage in new ways. Before discussing the exhibition, I briefly discuss the theoretical notion of "suggestion" and the implications for exhibition curation.

The notion of suggestion

The actual experience of crossing the threshold of stave church portals can be a potent act. The act of looking through the portal, I want to suggest, can be at least as potent as the actual physical movement through and across it. Evocation and suggestion may be considered key elements connected to the concept and experience of "gazing". Here, I briefly touch upon these themes by examining Gothic choir screens discussed by art historian Jaqueline Jung (2000) that are not too dissimilar to stave church portals. This discussion provides a way of thinking theoretically about the power of suggestion in an exhibition and informed my experimental exhibition of church portals.

In her article, Jung questioned mainstream academic ideas about the function and aesthetics of choir screens in Gothic churches, namely hindering the church goers' visual access to the sacred ritual space of the choir, only accessible to the clerics (2000:622). Instead, Jung postulated that these intricately sculpted screens first had a pertinent integral liturgical function: "the screens as architectural structures […] are fundamentally complex things fraught with paradox, markers of a highly charged site of transition and passage" (2000:624). They were meant to visually engage the perceiver and teach them through empathy and identification. Their purpose was the opposite of excluding lay people from the sacred space of the choir, for they spurred the perceiver on through suggestion and concealment. Church goers were invited, perhaps lured to peer into the choir through the frame of the open doors of the screen. By concealing them from the public's gaze, the screen enhanced and mystified the liturgical practices going on behind it. Jung further stipulated that the screen, broadly speaking, can be seen "as a sacred site for rites of passage" (2000:630). Starting from a distance at the outer threshold, one would experience intensification as one moved closer and was led into and through the doorway (2000:632). The sculpted imagery – functioning as devotional instruments (meditatively and mnemonically) – of the choir screens blurred reality, and one's imagination triggered by the sculptures merged with the living moving body. The notions of suggestion and concealment, as suggested by Jung, thus contrive towards the perspective of evocation; they evoke a response that involves a feeling or need of exploration, of curiosity, and of wonder. These insights have much potential to inform exhibition making, in particular one about stave church portals,

which in the past acted as thresholds between the secular and sacred. Ideally, an exhibition on portals can trigger in viewers the same emotions of curiosity and wonder as those described by Jung. In the next section, I turn to a museum example of the use of suggestion in an exhibition and how digital technologies can play an interesting role in this function.

Digital installation as powerful suggestion

The archaeological and ethnographic museum in Moesgaard near Aarhus, Denmark, is a newly renovated museum that opened its doors to the public in 2014. Its innovative and technologically rich exhibition scenography is basically orientated towards a collaboration between the spatial material setting, the setup of lighting, high-tech audio/visual equipment, and the display of objects, which creates a multi-sensorial, multi-aesthetic experience in which visual sensations are as important as auditory, tactile, and bodily ones, and imagined participation. In other words, the display installations and material infrastructure can be used as a source of inspiration for integrating objects and digital technologies to create physical, visual, and imaginative experiences. In one room, for instance, visitors can experience a full-fledged battle of the Viking age that affords spectators unique visceral and aural embodied experiences. The space of the room is entirely engrossed between two huge screens on either side; they are so large that one can only perceive one screen at a time. In between the screens runs a pathway from one end of the room to the other that is equipped to quake under one's feet – a feature which, however, often tends to break down.

The battle scenes are illustrated in a well-designed animated video – a ten-minute-long panorama filled with special visual and audio effects. The projected animated video starts once the viewer is situated in the space between these two screens, a space that the visitor must envisage as being situated in an imaginary landscape between the two encroaching war parties (one coloured in blue, the other in red). As the war parties approach each other, the perceiver is immersed in a riveting aural, visual, and imaginative encounter. In particular, the reverberating loud sounds of war screams and weapon clatter make for a gritty experience. Apart from these sound bites, the actual battle scene is visually abstracted and absent, further stimulating the visitor's imagination. The entire experience of the installation is therefore more than mere digital visual imagery. Instead, because of the animated nature of the video and the abstract suggestion offered by this digital technology, it performs as an intricate component of the imaginary world of the perceiving visitor. The interplay between the physical scenographic reconstructions and digital displays can be powerfully evocative, echoing the past and blurring the imagination and physical reality, something that explicit text labels and panels cannot do.

In the next section, I turn to my own exhibition and how this insight from theory and from museum practice have informed my approach to exhibiting portals in the absence of an original artefact.

Digital approaches to exhibiting stave church portals

The centrepiece of the exhibition on portals consisted of a wooden construction unit installed at the centre of the gallery space. This echoed the shape and contours of a Christian church, although not a stave church specifically. It was an experimental design of

Fig. 1. Panoramic viewing device. This was part of an experimental architecture (designed by Lars D. Holen) constructed in the middle of the "Red Zone" exhibition room. Photo Jason Falkenburg.

an amalgam of features; together they made an infusion of church, museum, and laboratory. It was a serious but playful experiential machine apparatus that deployed particular design techniques that had the purpose of asking the viewer to really "work" with the presented objects on display. Dispensed outside and inside the unit were various modules that formed part and parcel of the construction – an immersive staged environment in and of itself. These modules came in the form of detailed optical examinations, optical illusions, visual fragmented imagery, scaled down models of stave churches, copies and replicas of stave church portals and portal-like structures, visual effects using digital technologies, and visual effects in relation to distance and proximity. Two installations relying on digital technologies presented inside the construction unit stood out in the way that they asked the viewer to engage with the display and the presented material, helping shape the audience's encounters with such heritage and bridging the gap between the physical (material) and digital (immaterial) form.

The first was a digital viewing device that was positioned inside the inner wall of the construction unit. This device (Fig. 1 & 2) had the shape of a funnel that presented the viewer with a small digital screen at the end of it. The position and shape of the device played a central role in integrating the viewer's experience and the digital technology. It was placed in such a way that it asked the viewer to hunch over and place his or her head directly against and partially into the viewing device. The different features of the box – it's placement, it's interior painted black, the funnel shape, and the fact that it brought the visitor to take a hunched

Fig. 2. Example of a video image as seen through the viewing device. Photo Jason Falkenburg.

position – were intended to fully immerse the viewer in the content of the screen. The screen, which only measured 10 by 15 cm, played a video of a selection of stave church portal images that were digitally manipulated and edited to appear to float out of each other. The video started off by leading the viewer to look at and along the rich carvings of a stave church portal and then visually swooping through several "floating" portals, suggesting the experience of physically walking through the portals.

At the end of the construction unit, the viewer was presented with another interactive device that brought the viewer to experience the portals in a different way. A large wooden box in the shape of a chapel vault was presented in such a way that the viewer was invited to engage both visually and physically with the display and the object shown inside. Upon approaching the installation, the darkness from the tunnel formed by the construction unit accentuated the soft yellow light glowing through the holes of its doors. The visitor was meant to open the doors where one would have been met with a burst of golden light. In a similar way to a reliquary holder, the box presented a very special item, a 3D print of a digital scan of a gypsum copy of the Urnes stave church portal produced by Riksantikvaren (the Norwegian directorate for cultural heritage) in 2008 (Fig. 3). Reminiscent in style of the cabinets of curiosity of the Renaissance where one was allowed to handle objects, the viewer was allowed to touch the digitally printed copy and have the unique opportunity to feel the intricate carvings with their fingertips. This is something that, for obvious reasons, visitors cannot do with the original museum artefacts, and even if only a fragment of a portal was

Fig. 3. Scaled down 3D print of a gypsum copy of the Urnes Portal displayed in a reliquary-like box that formed part of the experimental architecture. Photo Jason Falkenburg

made available to touch, visitors could imagine what it might be like to be in the presence of the original portal and reach out to touch it.

Conclusion

Both these briefly described installations stand testimony to how digital technology can help bring the viewer to experience heritage objects in new ways, even in the absence of an authentic artefact. The two devices did this in different ways, using different possibilities of the digital form. In the first, digital images and video provided an immersive experience and, through the power of suggestion, allowed visitors to use their imagination to explore the portals. In the second, digital scans actually offered an alternative physical encounter with the portals, making material the digital images seen elsewhere in the exhibition, and allowing touch that would otherwise not be permitted in a museum. Intriguingly, the 3D artefact was a printed copy of a digital copy of a physical gypsum copy of the original artefact; yet, despite this distance from the original portal and despite the very different material it is made of, this object offered a new way of experiencing an iconic heritage artefact. Taken together, these two examples point to the potential of digital exhibition techniques for creating immersive museum experiences that can bring heritage to life.

Notes

1. The exhibition was part of my Ph.D. project "Looking through portals: an investigation into the iconic stave church portals as display object in Norwegian museum settings"
2. The core team of the exhibition was made up of Peter Bjerregaard (Exhibitions Advisor at the Cultural History Museum), architect Lars D. Holen, and myself

References

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