Reviews

EXHIBITIONS

Permanent exhibitions. Luomus, Natural History Museum of Helsinki, Finland

This spring, I had the opportunity to visit the Natural History Museum of Helsinki, Finland, also known as Luomus. The neo-baroque building was originally built as a gymnasium and dedicated to the late Russian Tsar Alexander II in 1913. After independence from Russia in 1917, it was finally taken over by the University of Helsinki that transformed it into a zoological museum in 1923. Today, the museum is still part of the university functioning as an independent research unit. As I will highlight in this review, the strong relations with the institution's researchers are indeed present in interesting ways throughout the exhibitions.

After a complete renovation, the museum re-opened in 2008 with new displays. When I visited Luomus in the spring 2018, there was no temporary exhibition, but five permanent exhibitions entitled: *Finnish Nature*, *World Nature*, *Story of the Bones*, *History of Life and Change in the Air*. I enjoyed all the shows, but I have chosen to focus on the latter two since they somehow stood out to me as museological feats highlighting a bunch of – for want of better words – old school museum virtues that I find very important to nurture.

But before taking the beautiful winding stairways up to the exhibitions, visitors arrive in an entry hall. Here guests are welcomed by a big stuffed African male elephant with raised head and ears out. Even though an elephant is a spectacular animal, I must admit that my heart sank a bit; I couldn't help wondering why I should

be welcomed by an African specie in a Finnish Natural History museum. To me, it pointed to stereotypical ideas about natural history where children of Europe know just as many animals of the African savannah as African children know about European kings and queens. To me the stuffed mammal tied into a particular well-rehearsed history of nature where individual (often male) giants are celebrated at the expense of the nature-culture entangled multispecies life that we also encounter, consume and live with on a daily basis. Even though the welcoming elephant did not arouse the kind of excitement and curiosity that I associate with, or wish for, at a natural history museum, I came to appreciate the other beautifully stuffed vibrant animals set in dramatic and well-composed dioramas that the museum is full of. Apparently, as one can read on the museum's homepage, the action-loaded dioramas testify to a conglomerate of many talented curators and artists, for instance the conservator Jussi Mäntynen (1886–1978), who mounted the stuffed animals in positions full of action and movement.

“ADJUST, MIGRATE OR PERISH”

I started my tour with the exhibition *Change in the Air* that presents Luomus' research on climate change, then and now – and in the future. I was curious to see how the museum had taken up the challenge of telling stories that could quickly make visitors feel quite uncomfortable, guilty and doomed. Some years ago, I myself had a discussion with a biologist working in a similar institution about how to exhibit climate change and the unpleasant stories layered in the human-induced warming up of the globe.

162 Afraid of scaring visitors away with bad news, the biologist argued that at their museum they preferred to show the wonders and beauty of the natural world and through that avenue try to make people care for our planet. I was not convinced and argued for the urgency of telling stories about the disturbing condition of the world, recently debated under the label of the Anthropocene; a catchy term suggested as a new geological epoch following the Holocene. Stories of the Anthropocene would have to grapple explicitly with the consequences of present day humans' ever increasing traces on the earth and mix traditional divides between nature and culture that can no longer be upheld. Such an ambition might seem too political for those museums who have long presented their exhibitions as pure science; as apolitical and neutral, only showing things the way they are or have been. But at Luomus, a team of researchers and curators have boldly entered the debate that is indeed (also) political and have qualified climate change in clever ways; for instance by letting questions emerge out of the research done instead of just presenting answers. As an example, the exhibition opens with a traditional poster stating "The climate is changing". This statement is further elaborated: "Human activity is causing the Earth's climate to change faster than ever before. The average temperature is increasing, glaciers are shrinking, and sea levels are rising. The world is changing – are we?"

The first room is poster-driven with texts and photos explaining the visible changes that are already now observed in the Finnish and north European landscapes. "Adjust, migrate or perish" is one heading pointing out that radical changes are taking place in concrete life worlds. Indeed, this is one way to qualify climate change by specifying and situating it – thus making tangible what is otherwise a hyperobject par excellence (cf. Morton 2013) and as such difficult

to exhibit. And again the visitor is grounded in field-based research: "The long term monitoring of data of the Finnish Museum of Natural history show that distribution of species has changed, and will continue to change, largely as a result of climate change." As an example, the visitor is told that southern birds are moving northwards and northern birds, not as adaptive, are receding due to warmer temperatures. Likewise, specific lichens, mosses and plants that have adjusted to the Finnish climate since the last Ice Age are now threatened. Such changes can trick cascades of other fatal unintended consequences, for instance by upsetting the vulnerable relations between pollinators and plants. The vital coordination needed between bees and plants are disturbed due to earlier blossoming tricked by warmer weather, leaving the flowers unpollinated and the bees without a destination. Accurate timing has evolved over a long period of time, and sudden changes in temperatures show the vulnerability of such living together. *Changes in the Air* displays what historian of science Donna Haraway argues, that collaboration and coordination across species are vital in order to survive (2016).

The dramatic changes in the landscape that we are guided to see and understand with the researchers, present in portraits or by name on the posters, are also linked to other earlier dramatic changes of the northern landscape. A beautiful diorama of mammoths takes up a full wall, and on the text accompanying the diorama one can read that the temperature has increased with 6 degrees since the height of the last Ice Age (20 million years ago). This information is followed by an alarming sentence suggesting that the temperature might increase with six degrees in Finland in only 100 years if we do not reduce present day greenhouse gas emissions. The numbers are dizzying in their mix of abyssal deep time and tangible presence.

Back home again, I read that a group of artists has tried to collect a new vocabulary emerging to describe our times and has suggested the word “shadowtime” to capture the experience of conflated or parallel time scales (Internet source 1); indeed the presence of the big mammoths whose life world is frozen in time gets overshadowed by this information. In the same room visitors are invited into a hunter-gatherers’ hut from the time of the mammoths made up of animal bones and skin. As such it is one of a few interactive installations in the museum. Here visitors can sit next to a bonfire and listen to throat song and ponder on the question “does the song tell about a great change?” The sudden appeal to the sensuous register and intuitive knowledge appeared awkward in a room where radical changes are presented as scientific facts. I wonder how to engage such a question in this context? For example, are we to learn from hunter-gatherers? Is it a voice from then or now?

Almost as a pause from the disturbing and indeed grand questions raised at this moment, one can move on to rooms with a number of spectacular and visually attractive dioramas, as mentioned above. The dioramas often freeze the moment right before a predator catches its prey. This air of suspense – is the attacked animal caught or not – made me pause and wonder about living, dying and surviving; maybe the dioramas are not that far removed from the explicit questions about climate change? Whether by intent or not, the potential brutality (or escape?) illustrated by the dioramas comments interestingly on the question of multispecies survival. This is an uncomfortable question that we might take a step further, and which is indirectly (this link is not made explicit) addressed in the final part of the exhibition where extinction (again) is a theme. Displayed here are 1:1 models of study plots that researchers use to determine the changing

vegetation. It is astonishing to see what thrives and what perishes in these plots over time and over vast areas of land. To map and understand these changes, we are told, is the focus of the research conducted by the museum scientists.

On a neighboring poster, the visitor is informed that “a third of terrestrial species will by 2050 be destined for extinction unless measures are taken to mitigate climate change.” On another poster with the subtitle “assisted migration”, a controversial method is presented to save species whose habitats have become uninhabitable over a short period of time, leaving the species no time to migrate or adapt. Under such circumstances, researchers move representatives of a plant or animal species to other places. This method, one can read, is discussed not only by biologists but also by philosophers who reflect on the ethical aspects of determining who should live and die and which areas should be chosen as refuges.

As the exhibition draws to an end, the political implications of climate change are foregrounded by pointing to and criticizing the growth regime built into the capitalistic-democratic societies that we have chosen as our form of governance. A cartoon slip with six images explaining the carbon cycle employs humor beginning 320 million years ago with huge trees sucking up CO₂ from the atmosphere, to the very same trees being burned intensely through our consumption of fossil fuel. The last image is an illustration of animals and humans united in demonstrating against a nineteenth century style capitalist caricature in white tie and tails, briefcase and black hat defending himself saying “uh, umm, we intend to commit to very strict emission regulations...” What is striking – and in my opinion welcome – is the way that the exhibition so clearly identifies the problem of climate change as located in the political and historical support for an unlimited capitalist

growth regime, a fact that is too often left as an (-other) elephant in the room.

Finally, visitors meet a wall made up of 18 cubes each portraying a scientist who has contributed to the exhibition and her or his answer to the question “Can climate change be mitigated through personal choices?” Behind the portraits one can flip each of the cubes and read a short presentation of the individual and the answer he or she comes up with. The answers include statements to eat less meat, use public transport, avoid taking the airplane, consume less, wear an extra sweater instead of turning up the heat and the like. All of these are very concrete answers that can inspire visitors through their personal communicative style and feasibility. In times when individual scientists, artists, curators and directors are celebrated in museums and other research institutions, I find this final action-driven “diorama” full of portraits and doable down-to-earth suggestions a most welcome tribute to the collaborative work that exhibition-making and research imply. Hierarchies are broken down in the structuring of the cubes as the researchers appear in what seems to be a random order – be it professors, lecturers or PhD students. In a straightforward and elegant way the museum makes visible that the exhibition is not just made by an objective, neutral scientific voice curated by aesthetically skillful people. Instead the exhibit makes visible that there are persons behind who each have interests and perspectives and altogether contributing to make exactly this kind of story line to changes in the air – bravo!

CURATING THE SMALL AND BIG WONDERS OF THE WORLD

From this exhibition, I want to take you through *History of Life*. The introductory wall is structured around a geological time line

starting with the creation of the world and ending with the evolution of human beings. Scattered above and below the time line are some iconic illustrations from each geological period (eon, period and epoch) such as a cave painting, fossils of extinct birds, dinosaurs and plants. Structured in this strict chronological way, the exhibition appears rather traditional – and in many ways it is. But labeling it traditional does not mean bad or boring – far from it. Starting with the creation of the world and ending with the evolution of human beings the visitor is taken on an ambitious time travel. And what an interesting journey, I must admit. I was completely absorbed and overwhelmed by the stories and information constantly thrown at me as a rain of meteorites. As in the *Change in the Air*, the texts are key in the exhibition. But here the texts are accompanied by copies or original fossils and stones and not (just) illustrated with photographs. Dioramas also take up much space in the hall that is the culmination of the exhibition, and as in all the other exhibitions at Luomus, the dioramas are beautiful and stimulating to explore. The ambition of making a short history of the world is not unique to a museum. The grandiose topic itself is spectacular and, one might argue, thus difficult for any museum to trivialize. On the other hand, it is also challenging to make such a distant story relevant in order for it to speak to us today. However spectacular in nature, the question is how to create a good framing. As I see it, the task of any curators-cum-researchers embarking on such a project is to actively make this chronological deep time story appear, while also conflating it by pointing to its presence (or absence) and relevance for life today. What this exhibition does so excellently is to conflate and, indeed, curate stories of both recognition and alterity as vital elements in the history of life. In other words, curating

and choosing what stories should be included alongside a unilinear chronological timeline and how to tell them are simply very well done. Of course this might be a personal taste, but I really think that the museum succeeds in posing questions and coming up with answers – qualified by science – to the small and indeed big wonders of the world. Let me give you some examples.

In the Precambrian period taking up almost 90 per cent of the history of the globe, the curators for example ask the still enigmatic question of how lifeless matter turned into life. They point to the necessity of carbon for life and talk about cyanobacteria – today mostly feared and infecting our waters during hot summers, but once a key to further life. On the posters, the interdependencies of the organisms living on earth and the atmosphere and temperatures are explained. We learn that these conditions all influence one another and drive evolution in different directions – or rather in one messy direction. It is amazing that even tiny organisms – if numerous and long lasting – can change the composition of the atmosphere, making it suitable for new organisms. This interrelatedness is simply fascinating and teaches us important lessons about an entangled nature and co-habitation. Outside the Petri dish, no species ever acted alone.

Curiosity and eagerness to read more are also awoken in me when daily phenomena such as the evolution of seeds, branches, roots or trees are explained. Why do trees have branches? Or leaves for that matter? The world was not made with a broad leaf forest from the beginning. What happened with the introduction of two sexes, how did that change the landscape and vice versa? All these both basic and dizzying questions are posed on simple posters with modest illustrations or objects. No gimmicks,

no magic, only extremely good questions and answers.

Interestingly, extinction is a theme dealt with in both exhibitions I describe here. But whereas reasons for the mass extinctions facing us today and in the near future are (recognized and) pointed out in *Change in the Air*, the causes for the (mass) extinctions of the past remain unaccounted for. Most famously is the mysterious extinction of the dinosaurs 65 million of years ago, but why did the Trilobites (a marine arthropod) populating the earth for as long as 300 million years go extinct? The reason for their disappearance as lively creatures 252 million years ago is still a mystery to researchers. Different epochs have their mysteries and explanations around which research is centered. At Luomus this continuum is beautifully performed and not just mentioned as a catchy cliché. As a consequence, by treating extinctions as a theme, the two exhibitions come to comment on each other by pointing out the tremendously damaging effects humans have caused in a scandalous few years. Indeed, it is quite an accomplishment to sow such reflections.

DISPLAYING NATURAL HISTORY OF TODAY

Visiting Luomus, I was reassured that museums are well suited for telling important and interesting stories. Not by inviting an artist or star curator into the museum as seems to be so trendy these days, and not by spending a whole lot of money on high tech games, interactive elements, Virtual Reality, surround sound, or other spectacular sensual stimulations (not that such techniques disqualify an exhibit from being good; I simply mean that there are other great techniques). In this museum there was almost nothing to touch, no games to play, no

166 artists staring. What was done so convincingly and consistently was selecting, framing and telling – in other words *curating*. As such, Luomus is a triumph for non-extinct need for good and interesting stories of the universe, told through a variety of texts, photos, illustrations, dioramas and objects and other such classic facilities and tools that have long been used in museums – but also heavily criticized for their distance and lack of user involvement. And perhaps even more importantly, the exhibitions discussed here manage to present their displays as the outcomes of long and fruitful collaborative work – with contributors in all guises. Implicitly, this seems to me appropriate for a natural history museum in times of change.

I will end this review with a challenge. Before writing it, I did a little research about Luomus on the internet. On Wikipedia a surprising story about a spider infestation was reported. According to the article, a venomous Chilean recluse spider entered the museum in the early 1960s. Nobody really knows how, but two theories are presented: Either it came as a blind passenger in a fruit shipment from Argentina; or it arrived in wood chips used in a live rodent enclosure from South America. In 2016, a BBC reporter elaborated that the spider – especially the females – can stay alive without food and water for many months and that they reproduce effectively. In its native environment, the spider lives under rocks and inside holes, and thus thrives in great numbers in the cracks, drawers, boxes etc. of the museum – also after the total renovation. Fortunately, the eight-legged creature is very shy and vanishes if disturbed – until now only one person has been (non-fatally) bitten (Internet source 2). To me, the South American spider could be seen as more than a problematic internal issue at the museum. Might it materialize

the potential of telling stories of our times? The changes in the air that we experience now do not only lead to extinction of several species. Whereas some species have three options, adapt, migrate or perish, other species migrate, adapt and proliferate. And they do so via human infrastructures, global trade and other activities, but not under human control. Living in times of change, we might say, we also need to learn about these kinds of feral species – although they might scare us away. My challenge, then, is this: How can natural-cultural history museums curate a sense that creatures of the Anthropocene are not just sweating polar bears at risk or charismatic African elephants that find their habitat encroached upon, but also much more unseen and hard-lived beings that survive – for better or worse – in the cracks of human interventions?¹ In my view, we need institutions, researchers, museum visitors and others to be bold enough to face such challenges head-on – as, indeed, the Luomus helps us towards.

NOTES

1. One effort to explore the unstable terrain of such feral species is the forthcoming internet publication called *Feral Atlas*, edited by anthropologist Anna Tsing, Jennifer Deger, Alder Keleman Saxena and Elaine Gan. The publication, in many ways akin to an exhibition, features short entries from all over the globe about multispecies relations run amok in one way or another. See <http://anthropocene.au.dk/feral-atlas/>

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