Trapped. Museum experiments with relationality, empathetic imagination and perspective

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Abstract: This article presents a reflection on a particular category of objects often found in ethnographic museum collections: traps. It asks what might be particular to this kind of object, and what these particularities might teach us about making exhibitions, whether specifically about traps or not. I argue that traps can teach us about particular ways of engaging with objects that mobilise what I call “empathetic imagination”. In the conclusion, I reflect on how exhibitions can use artefacts in ways reminiscent of traps to facilitate such engagement.

Keywords: traps, exhibitions, relational objects, human-animal relations, imagination, empathy

Imagine encountering this artefact (on the right of Fig. 1) in a museum: an object that looks a bit like a large bird house, or a small dog house, woven from fibre and wood. It has a single round opening, a pointed roof, and a stone attached to the side. Looking carefully, one can catch a glimpse of the interior, and of the wooden sticks that extend as fingers around the single round opening. Just by looking at the objects, one might guess that this is a trap of some sort. The label confirms this guess (it’s a fish-trap from Kiribati). Once this recognition, one’s mind will probably next make sense of how the artefact can successfully catch fish. Figuring this out will imply playing out in one’s mind’s eye an imaginary fish swimming towards the artefact resting on the sea or river floor. Perhaps the current is pushing the fish towards this opening, but the opening is also inviting, it looks like a safe place to hide from predators (it does look like a house, with its pointed roof). The fish decides to swim in, and finds that its dark interiors do indeed fulfil the promise of safety from larger animals. But now the fish wants to get back out. How does it get out? It turns around in circles, trying to find that way out, it can even see light shining in from the opening, but obstacles – those wooden sticks – are in the way.

How can such an apparently simple object have the power to work the imagination in such a way, create (silent) narratives and drama
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Food harvesting, they are technical instruments for obtaining the basics of life? Indeed, the exhibition did not mention this, only hinted at it in the display of fish or bird traps from the museum’s ethnographic collection. I can correct this omission here: traps are used by people around the world as a technology to obtain food necessary to their survival. But traps are so much more than this, they can bring us to consider the human mind, the way humans relate to other beings (including other humans), and the consequences of our actions.

The exhibition forgot about the first point (traps are tools to obtain food), but attempted to address the second (traps tell stories about the human condition) in a way that could be interesting to audiences who, living in northern Europe, no longer need to know the skills of food harvesting, they are technical instruments for obtaining the basics of life? Indeed, the exhibition did not mention this, only hinted at it in the display of fish or bird traps from the museum’s ethnographic collection. I can correct this omission here: traps are used by people around the world as a technology to obtain food necessary to their survival. But traps are so much more than this, they can bring us to consider the human mind, the way humans relate to other beings (including other humans), and the consequences of our actions.

This short drama that plays out (in the trap? or in the mind?) is witness to the potential power of traps as artefacts, even if encountered behind glass in a museum. Their power is not only to provoke the imagination, but possibly also engage us emotionally and ethically. Admittedly, relatively few museum visitors encountering this trap would feel sadness for the imaginary fish struggling to get out – but what if the trap had been labelled “puppy trap”?

When our exhibition entitled “Trapped” opened at the Cultural History Museum of the University of Oslo (2017), an anthropologist approached me to criticise the display: why had we not stated anywhere the obvious, that traps are used by people around the world for

Fig. 1. On the right, a fish trap from Kiribati, as displayed in the exhibition Trapped, Cultural History Museum, University of Oslo. Museum number UEM49315. On the left, a still from a video presentation showing indigenous Taiwanese knowledge holder Cemelesai Takivalit demonstrating the making and use of a fish trap. Photo: Ellen C. Holte © Kulturhistorisk museum, UiO.
the trapper or hunter to obtain food. Whether the exhibition did so successfully is beyond the scope of this article. Rather, I want here to think about what an exhibition about traps can bring to address broader questions that we face as researchers or curators. What is an artefact? And how do we exhibit artefacts in order to leave open their power to provoke questions, reactions, emotions and imagination?

I will suggest in this article that traps are particular kinds of artefacts that can be enlightening in the study of such questions. To do this, the article addresses the following, narrower, set of questions: what kind of things are traps? How do we do justice to what traps are when we display them in an exhibition? What kind of thing is an exhibition about traps? I start by suggesting that traps are particular artefacts because they engage our imagination in a specific way. I turn to a reflection on the potential of an exhibition on traps, and what we actually decided to create at the Cultural History Museum, specifically, how an exhibition can allow and enhance imagined engagement to provoke reflection and bring audiences to take ethical stances. One approach is to play with the perspectives audiences take in the exhibition, an approach that is also inspired by the traps, and by the tenuous perspectives of trapper and animal mediated by the trap.

The exhibition project “Trapped” discussed in this article was part of the Tinges Metode project (Huseby & Treimo 2018), which involved exhibition experiments in several museums in Oslo. The different exhibition projects aimed in various ways to work closely with objects and collections, and include a diversity of social actors in museum work. Projects were not necessarily finalised, but rather thought of as experiments, as curators were interested in processes of creating exhibitions rather than the end results per se. Through the various exhibition projects, we explored research questions about artefacts, and devised methods to create research environments within museums and engage various audiences in exhibition creation. At the Cultural History Museum, the Trapped exhibition was installed in the “Red Zone”, the experimental exhibition space that enables curators to work with less conventional display and narrative techniques, as arenas for conducting research. The exhibition included items from the personal collection of mouse traps of Gunnar H Gundersen, Professor at the Department of Product Design at the Oslo Metropolitan University, and a digital installation by the Oslo-based design studio Void.

TRAPS AND THE IMAGINATION

Traps mediate a relation between a trapper and prey. The trapper must use imagination in setting the trap, imagine the movements of the animal across a given landscape, imagine the habits, desires, fears of the animal. In Taiwan, among the indigenous Paiwan people where I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork, trappers told me about an apparently counter-intuitive move: they might place a trap not in the middle of a path well-trodden by animals such as deer, but by the side of the path. This is because they are anticipating the reactions of the animal: the deer is likely to detect the odour of the human trapper who walked along the path, and to take a cautious detour in the thick vegetation by the side of the path. The trapper is using experience, trial-and-error, and knowledge passed on from hunter to hunter, in using this trick. But experience must be complemented by imagination, the trapper must put themselves in another's
shoes (hooves?) based on the specifics of the terrain, and the type of animal they want to trap, to second-guess their reactions. Paiwan hunters would actually comment on the level of intelligence, or stupidity, of species: from the extremely smart and always suspicious muntjac deer, to the not-so-smart mountain goat that is always looking up to find tree leaves to chew and not watching its step. One might object that the trap is about the opposite of empathy, it is about tricking an animal, concealing deadly intentions. This might be the case ultimately, yet (as for instance, Willerslev (2004) has argued), hunters need to be empathetic simply to get close to the animals they hunt. Here I am not talking about empathy as “good feelings towards other creatures”, but “seeing the world from another creature’s point of view” (De Castro 1998). Arguably one cannot hunt or trap without the latter (and for some, including many indigenous people, the former).

Even when shown in the safe environment of a museum, behind glass that imposes a distance between artefact and audience, traps seem to have similar capacities to work the imagination. Other types of artefacts might well activate the imagination: looking at a piece of antique clothing for instance, one might imagine oneself actually wearing it, moving about in it, the feel of the cloth against the skin, perhaps be transported back to a bygone era. Touching clothing, whether actually or in one’s imagination, can evoke emotions that bring us closer to people of the past (Dudley 2012). Or, looking at depictions of crafts in a museum can involve our “hand-in-the-brain” (Gowlland 2016), one might imagine reaching out to objects, to tools, imagine what creating something with these tools might actually feel like. I would argue that traps engage the imagination in a different way: traps call for an imagined narrative, an act, a drama, to be played out in order to understand what they are and how they work. In order to figure out the mechanism of a trap, such as the fish-trap pictured above, one needs to put oneself in another’s shoes (gills?), imagine the movements of a fish, evaluate its intellect, perhaps (with a bit of anthropomorphising) its goals and aspirations, emotions, or realisations of impeding doom or absurdity of life. In short, the trap brings one to express empathy (of either kind, or both – good feelings, or another’s perspective).

Despite using artefacts from ethnographic collections, the story that our exhibition in Oslo attempted to tell was not about the trap as a tool or technology. It was about traps as a way of relating to other beings. Traps stand in the way of two beings, each with different goals and aspirations. A trap then is not just a thing (sometimes it is not even a clearly defined object, as I will discuss below), rather it is an arena where a particular drama unfolds – who will succeed, who will outwit the other? This idea, the trap as dramatic arena, was essentially what the exhibition wanted to explore.

The idea of an exhibition on traps has two origins, a theoretical one, anthropologist Alfred Gell’s (1996) discussion about traps as works of art, and an empirical one, my discussions with indigenous Taiwanese hunters. To understand the ideas explored in the exhibition, I want to turn now to the ideas of Gell, and more broadly, to the notion of “relational objects”.

Gell’s article on traps is a seminal article in the anthropology of art. The article holds the kernel of Gell’s ideas about the agency of artworks that he would fully develop a couple of years later in his book *Art and Agency* (1998). The exhibition I curated was in part an homage to Gell, responding to Gell’s suggestion that we should consider traps as artworks of sorts. In the article, Gell takes as point of departure
an exhibition of African art in New York. He reacts to the comments of an art critic, Danto, who was at pains to make a distinction between objects he considered mere “artefacts”, and artworks – the latter being those objects that are imbued with special mythical or religious meanings. This leads Gell to question this artificial divide between merely functional objects and those that have special meanings. Why can’t an artefact be both? Traps are the iconic artefacts that Gell uses to prove his point. A trap might be a method of food gathering, a tool, a technology. But this does not mean that trappers are not intrigued by the deeper questions such artefacts raise: a trap can also be an object of philosophical contemplation. Gell goes on to discuss traps and their many meanings, with reference to ethnographic material from around the world. He points to the kinds of existential questions that traps might inspire, because they exemplify drama, trickery, deceit, or fate. Gell ends his discussion by asking, why would we not then promote these artefacts to the status of works of art? They might not be “art” in the sense of “beautiful objects”, but resemble the artworks of contemporary artists that strive to provoke a response in the viewer, or bring them to ponder deeper questions. In Art and Agency, Gell reflects more extensively on the power of art to mediate social relations, and for things to become agentive in the absence of their maker. Traps as artefacts can be said to derive agency from the trapper, they become “secondary agents”, acting in the absence of a human. Gell extends the example of the hunting trap to war-zone landmines, which are essentially human traps, loaded with the deadly agency of the soldiers who scatter them in the fields.

When we abstract what a trap is, then, we are left with a relationship between two creatures with the same but mutually-exclusive aim: living a prosperous life. We might have the archetypical image of a mouse trap as visual representation of a trap, though traps come in all shapes and sizes. What they all share is the same characteristic of relating two beings with diametrically opposed interests. We even recognise as traps things that are not artefacts but schemes: an ambush is a trap, as are pyramid schemes, debt slavery, or email scams. The outcome of the drama that unfolds around the trap is not known – will the trap break the neck of the inquisitive animal, or will the animal escape, triumphant, having grabbed the bait but outwitted the mechanism? As Wishart (2018) tells us, these scenarios might actually obsessively be playing out in the minds and even the dreams of trappers.

In what follows, I discuss the exhibition I set up on traps at the Cultural History Museum, the solutions we found to talk about traps, and some of the issues that the exhibition raised. This will lead to a reflection on what one can learn about exhibition making from traps.

**Designing an exhibition on traps**

One of the important messages the exhibition wanted to convey was that traps need not be “objects”. During my fieldwork in Taiwan as an anthropologist, one informant took time to explain to me the many ways of catching fish, crabs, shrimp and other creatures in the rivers of the mountains. One of these methods stood out, one that did not involve special equipment, except the net bag that any Paiwan person will have with them as they venture into the mountains. This consisted in amassing flat stones in a shallow part of the river. The stones are arranged scale-like, which creates pockets of water under them. This construction is left there for several months, during which time fish, crayfish, and crabs will have elected these
pockets of water as their home, finding safety from predators. The trap maker then returns with a large net bag, places it downstream from the stack of stones, and removes them one by one, disturbing the creatures who swim downstream, and into the net.

A trap need not be a device, nor be clearly defined. It is a procedure, what French anthropologists would call a "chainé opératoire" (Lemonnier 1976), one that is led by the intention of trapping. One key perspective we put forward in the exhibition was that a trap is in essence a modification of the environment in which creatures roam, resulting in the capture of an animal. The intention was for visitors to think about traps not as discreet objects, but ideas or principles: a trap is not a technical object, it is an assemblage of things put in place that all contribute to the act of trapping. A trap then includes features of the environment, the ground on which a device is placed, the leaves and branches that conceal strings and cages, the trapper’s knowledge of the animal’s behaviour, habits and desires, and even the animal’s inquisitiveness. All of these are necessary for a trap to be effective.

An artefact from the Santal people of India (Fig. 2) was chosen to bring visitors to think about this. It consisted in a bundle of strings and sticks which would have been used to pocket water as their home, finding safety from predators. The trap maker then returns with a large net bag, places it downstream from the stack of stones, and removes them one by one, disturbing the creatures who swim downstream, and into the net.

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ensnare birds. Given conservation issues and the fragility of the object, we could not disentangle the strings to find out more about how the trap worked, and even if that had been possible, we had no information as to how the trap was to be used. This rendered the object opaque, it was difficult for the curators (and likely, museum audiences) to picture in the mind’s eye how the entangled object was to be set up. This led to a reflection on what is missing from ethnographic collections, and in the exhibition was evoked with the text label that accompanied the object “What is missing from the collection? A tangle of strings and sticks will not catch a bird. Is something missing? What about the soil in which these elements will be set, the dead leaves that will conceal the strings? And what about the habits of the animals, or the knowledge and skills of the trapper – can these ever be collected by a museum?” Alfred Gell tells us that traps might be objects that invite contemplation and reflection, yet clearly some of the artefacts that were brought out of storage at the museum were opaque in meaning – they refused to “talk”, or let themselves be triggers of our imagination. Using the distinction formulated by, among others, Tim Ingold (2013), these artefacts were “objects” that one came up against and not “things” we could engage with (see also Hodder 2012).

Looking through artefacts in the museum’s collections, I realised that the traps that were collected are specific kinds of traps: they are transportable objects, usually meant to catch small animals. Larger traps would be impractical to transport or place in the storage of a museum. An example is the trap I learnt about in Taiwan, mentioned above: an assemblage of rocks placed strategically in a river to attract fish, shrimp and crabs. Clearly, this is not an artefact in the museum sense of the word, and it is not easily transported to a museum. Even if the rocks are placed in a museum’s storage, or displayed in a gallery, carefully reconstituted in the shape of the original, they are meaningless because crucial elements of the trap are missing – notably, the river itself. The trap is part of the landscape, or what Tim Ingold (2000, 194–200) calls the taskscape of human activity on the land.

I have suggested above that traps encountered in a museum exhibition can trigger empathetic imagination. Another glass case in the exhibition was labelled “Me, you, it”, and invited visitors to reflect on human-animal relations, using traps to imagine such relations. One object that I found particularly powerful in illustrating this power of the trap to trigger one’s imagination was a rat trap from the Santal people. The device consists in a spear that shoots forward when the trap is triggered, pushed by the force of a weight. Perhaps more than other artefacts, looking at this trap and the tip of the spear, it was easy for me to imagine what would happen to a rat tempted by the bait. Through text and display, the glass case invited audiences to think about what trap design tells us about animals – for instance, the inquisitiveness of mice – and about ourselves, for instance our willingness to take responsibility for the life of an animal.

Moving on along the gallery, visitors to the exhibition encountered a digital installation (Fig. 3), which consisted in a virtual environment, projected onto the floor of the gallery, in which different “species” of digital creatures were seen roaming. The creatures escaped when a visitor approached. Simple physical objects made of wood could be placed in the midst of the creatures. These objects had different effects: they could feed, trap, or harm the creatures. The idea with this installation was to give power to audiences to
intervene and control an ecosystem of digital creatures, and to foster creativity in arranging the physical objects.

The digital installation was conceived and set up by Void, a computational design studio based in Oslo, working at the intersection between design, architecture, art and technology; they build experimental solutions that range from sophisticated interface design to interactive installations. Among other themes, Void are interested in the design concept of what they call “passive interaction”, in which design and architecture elements respond to the presence, movement and actions of people, notably using a range of digital sensors and software algorithms. The idea here is that installations can engage the spectator in a collaboration through the mediation of technology. So, by using sensor-based technology, audiences can engage in a play with an installation, activating it and being activated by it. The word “passive” might be misleading, since it does not imply that audiences are passive, but is meant to contrast with other technologies that might be employed in an exhibition, notably touch screens, where audiences need to walk up to and initiate the technological “conversation”. In contrast, sensor-based design elements are triggered by the movements or actions of unwitting audiences, who they have to adapt their actions in order to engage and respond to this initial trigger. In that sense, they very much resemble traps.
Our aim with the digital installation was to explore how we may translate the idea of a trap into a particular form of audience interaction. In a significant way, Void’s installation was not just digital: audiences were presented with a number of physical wooden objects that they could pick up and move around. The connection between the ethnographic objects and the abstract shapes of the installation was not explicit, yet it was hoped that audiences would bring their reflection and observations of the ethnographic objects with them as they encountered the digital display. There was no “correct” way to interact with the digital display; in that sense it was not a game but, as the designers suggested, a “sandbox”. The abstract wooden objects substituted for the ethnographic objects but let audiences imagine their function, and combine them in creative ways. The shapes of the objects indicated their function – “deadly” triangle, “nurturing” square, and “enclosure” disk. Audiences could then combine these objects to achieve certain aims, for instance, the combination of a “deadly” triangle and “nurturing” square created a deadly trap, whereas the combination of a “nurturing” square and “enclosure” circle created the possibility of “domesticating” some of the creatures without harming them: they moved around in a digital circle of light that contained them, and were fed digital pellets emanating from the square object.

Audiences reacted in varied ways, in part according to their age: younger children would run amok around the display chasing the “creatures” that would by design escape the presence of humans. Older children took pleasure in figuring the display out as a puzzle, probably inspired by their experience with video games. I saw adults with serious looks on their faces moving the objects around to discover how they worked, and a colleague reported that several audience members refused an explanation of how the installation worked in order to figure things out for themselves. Many were unsure whether they were supposed to enter the digital display space; there was indeed a bit of an ambiguity as to whether the display was to be seen from afar (as “normal” museum artefacts) or a space one was allowed to enter. In my mind, the success of the installation was to be measured by the variety of ways of engaging with it, rather than audiences “correctly” engaging with it or learning a lesson from it. The digital installation, as opposed to the museum artefacts, made this playful exploration possible.

Despite being “fake” animals and traps, the display invited another kind of imagined interaction. The digital blobs and geometric objects became meaningful only when they were imagined as animals and traps, and this allowed for interaction with the display. One of the critiques of the display I heard from a colleague is that it diluted the ideas presented in the first part of the gallery: digital blobs and geometric objects could not represent the richness of interactions between animal and trapper, the skills of the trapper, and the complexity of a real landscape. Notably, empathy for the creatures was lost. This was a fair critique. I do feel however that the digital installation offered something that the ethnographic artefacts could not, and that it was worth experimenting with digital options. The display provided another way of imagining traps, it brought movement to the exhibition, and potentially offered visitors the chance to take a renewed look at the ethnographic objects on display.

The interest in approaching the design studio Void was motivated by two main considerations. Firstly, we were interested in creating a museum environment that was not
passive, in order to restore to some degree the agency of the traps in the museum collections. Secondly, the digital sensors Void use in their work can be considered as sorts of modern traps. The collaboration with Void thus opened up a reflection on traps as technology beyond the specific context of trapping animals. This was explored in the final part of the exhibition, conceived as a kind of trap. On the backside of the digital installation, audiences found a computer image projection that revealed how the digital installation actually worked. The projection included a view of the sensors that tracked the movements of visitors and made it possible for the digital creatures to escape when in proximity of people. It also included statistics on how many of the digital creatures had died in the traps placed by visitors. In this section, audiences were confronted with another perspective on traps: after taking the active role as trapper in the digital installation, they found out that their movements had been monitored all along by sensors. I reflect further on this part of the exhibition in the next section.

The exhibition as trap

What kind of relationships are being established between a trap displayed behind glass, and audiences? Are these in any way similar to those between hunter and prey mediated by the same traps? And, how do we transform an exhibition on traps into an exhibition as trap? From the discussion of the exhibition above, I want to suggest that what we can learn from traps are: 1) a particular mode of engagement within exhibitions involving empathetic imagination, 2) how exhibitions can play with perspectives and points of view to deepen this empathetic imagination and provoke self-awareness.

Let me return to my comments about the relationships that are mediated by the trap, whether trapper/prey or audience/imagined creatures. I mentioned above a distinction between the definition of an “object” and a “thing” (Ingold 2013, Hodder 2012): objects are self-contained, finalised artefacts, and as such they offer no possibility for human interaction. We come up against objects, they resist us. Traps do not work as objects but as things, they are in a state of becoming, they emerge from certain relationships and as the assemblage of materials (see also Treimo 2018). A collection of rocks by the river becomes a trap once fish find their home there and trappers collect them in their net bags. If things are emergent according to the relationships they become part of, the same can be said of people. It is not controversial to think of people’s subjectivities as emergent from relations with significant social others, from our daily interactions with other humans. But subjectivities are also emergent from interactions with the world of things that surround us, which mediate social relations and relations of power (Warnier 2001).

When we imagine what happens to imaginary creatures becoming trapped, we enter such relations, and to a perhaps minimal but still significant degree, we are shaped as subjects in these encounters. Traps bring us to take some ethical position. We might immediately think these are cruel devices and reject their use, or conversely that they are necessary to get rid of pests and harvest food. Seeing traps, engaging our empathetic imagination, might reinforce either of these positions, or create more subtle ones. In engaging our empathetic imagination, traps in a glass case engage us as subjects. They engage our ethical selves, who we think we are, how we relate to other creatures and fellow humans. The exhibition on traps was designed...
to allow this ethical engagement to happen (in whatever form), and perhaps amplify it.

In the “Trapped” exhibition, traps inspired us to explore certain approaches to create the possibility of this ethical engagement. As part of the display of ethnographic objects, text panels asked visitors a number of open questions that were inspired by the artefacts. One of the text panels for instance asked about responsibilities. An item from Gunnar H Gundersen’s collection of mouse traps is a type of industrially produced trap that seals itself hermetically when a mouse is caught. The text asked, what happens when an individual’s responsibility for killing a mouse is delegated to a commercial product? Some of these open questions might have been frustrating, but it was important to keep them open; the questions gently prodded audiences to effectively take an ethical stance.

In the digital installation, audiences were first put in the position of a trapper, and later got a behind-the-scenes view of the installation in the form of images provided by the sensors tracking visitors. In this part of the exhibition, the visitor is potentially given a moment of self-realisation, an understanding that they had been tracked by sensors in the other part of the gallery, and that their actions – trapping and killing digital creatures – were being monitored with a death count. The visitor-trapper was being trapped all along. Anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro tells us (1998) that hunters in the Amazon forest need to be careful that their perspective does not reverse in mid-hunt: that the prey does not turn around and decide to hunt the hunter-turned-prey (as for instance peccaries are known to do in Amazonia, and wild pigs in Taiwan). In the exhibition, visitors were put in a position where they might become aware of having been observed, of having been lured forward through the gallery into a trap. Perspectives can be reversed.

In including the “computer’s perspective” in the display, our idea was also to hint at the ubiquity of traps in our modern lives. The sensor technology was surveilling visitors in the gallery, just as technology (cctv, phones, search engines) surveils and track their movements, habits, tastes and desires on a daily basis. There were no text panels explaining this, we did not want to force these ideas onto audiences but make them available to observant visitors.

As audiences moved through the exhibition space, they were in effect invited to take a series of roles, a series of perspectives. This aspect of the exhibition, the possibility of a shift in perspective and self-reflexivity, could have been explored more fully. This is one of the lessons of the trap as topic for an exhibition, that a perspective is always tenuous. Audiences might feel in control of their own visit, but the curator can craft the exhibition to provoke self-awareness and ethical positioning.

In practical terms, this poses an interesting question in terms of design, relating to the issue of interactivity in the museum. The designers at Void studios are interested in what they call “passive interaction”. This they contrast to “active interaction”, in which audiences might be invited to interact with technology, for instance pressing a button or touching a touchscreen. The implication is not that audiences are passive, but that they do not need to take the initiative in triggering the interactive part of the exhibition’s design. In passive interaction, designers are not giving the initial choice to visitors, and their movements and actions will trigger some sensor that will then modify the environment of the gallery spaces (lights, sounds, or moving objects); visitors will then respond to this modified environment by changing their movements.
or actions. Passive interaction design ideas provide an opportunity for curators to destabilise the sense of control visitors might have. But technology cannot do all the work. In the exhibition on traps, the digital display needed the ethnographic objects to work, visitors needed to be engaged with actual trap artefacts, and needed to be engaged imaginatively with creatures encountering the artefacts.

**Conclusion**

The trap is less an artefact as a principle, and this makes it a particular kind of model for an exhibition. There are some intriguing parallels between the work of the trapper and the work of the museum curator. The exhibition Trapped attempted to draw out some of these parallels. To be successful, the trapper needs to lead without forcing, to entice, seduce. Trapping is a work of architecture, putting in place certain barriers whilst creating opportunities for free movement in other directions. The creatures (fish, birds, museum audiences) have the choice, to comply or to be distrustful of the path that opens up in front of them.

Trappers never have full control over their prey, nor do curators have full control over audiences. My colleagues and I could observe this in the gallery or gain feedback from audiences: we were pleased when engaged visitors refused an explanation of the digital display in order to figure things out for themselves. Other visitors were hesitant to engage with the video display, apparently feeling that the space was not meant to be entered. We designed the display to invite curiosity, introspective problem-solving and ethical stance-taking, but the exhibition literally broke down when a class of over-enthusiastic school-children damaged most of the wooden objects that were part of the digital display. A museology inspired by traps anticipates the reactions of visitors, but necessarily always fails sometimes.

I have tried to make my case that traps are a particular kind of artefact, and when exhibited can elicit particular kinds of experiences, in particular by engaging the imagination of audiences in a particular way: they have the potential to evoke a narrative or drama. Traps afford imagined relationships, they afford the audience to briefly, and in their mind’s eye, encounter a creature, interrogate that creature, empathise. Traps are traps only once they have trapped, whether a real or imagined creature, they are emergent in the encounters between trapper and trapped. In these encounters, subjects are also emergent; whether trapper or museum visitor, traps shape our empathy and ethics.

What other artefacts might engage similarly this empathetic imagination and imagined drama? Alfred Gell (1998) writes about the icons of Hindu gods that endow blessings through the eyes of the god that is depicted in the painting. The icon appears to be looking at the devotee, mirroring the action of the devotee looking at the icon – effectively, it is looking back at the devotee because it is placed within a context of social relations in which two agents are exchanging glances (Gell 1998:116–121). For Gell, this effect is “instantaneous”, a cognitive trick that makes the devotee believe in the capacity of the icon to gaze back. I would rather see this encounter with the icon as one that is engaged, extended in time, and actively pursued. It is not just a realisation that the god is gazing back, but social interaction that emerges in the presence of an icon. This sustained, emergent engagement makes of the icon a “thing”, not an “object”, something one engages with rather than comes up against.
But empathetic imagination need not be connected to categories of objects – traps or icons. Sometimes, out of many artefacts, one stands out in a particular way. I have the still strong memory of encountering an artefact in a museum over twenty years ago that created a drama in my mind’s eye. The Musee Rath in Geneva proposed in the 1990s an exhibition on shields from the collections of the Barbier-Mueller Museum. The Barbier-Mueller are known for their aesthetically pleasing collection of masterpieces of world art. The exhibition displayed beautiful examples of shields from around the world, but the one I remember did not affect me for its beauty. A shield from the Philippines was “decorated” with the hair locks of the victims of the shield owner. The uncanny presence of hair and the implication of its presence on the shield placed me, the museum visitor, in a particularly uncomfortable place, facing an imagined warrior standing behind the shield. In this case, out of many artefacts, one called out to me to precipitate a shift in perspective, from museum visitor to enemy on the battle field.

Different artefacts will call out to different visitors in different ways; “objects” that become “things” once people engage with them. This points to the significance of museum collections, where variety is key (Thomas 2016). The other lesson to be learnt might be quite simply, but essentially, that in exhibition spaces, curators need to let artefacts breathe, give them space in case they decide to speak out to audiences. Labels and text panels are often important and necessary in an exhibition, but can over-interpret, and erect barriers between artefact and audience, transforming potential “things” into “objects” and preventing the full potential for engagement and emergent subjectivity. A trap might be labelled a food harvesting device. But give it a bit of freedom and it can become a new perspective onto the world.

Acknowledgements
My warmest thanks to Peter Bjerregaard, Tone Cecilie Simensen Karlgård, Hedvig Poppe, and Inge Bjørgen at the Cultural History Museum for their support and insights in the realisation of the exhibition; to Mikkel Lehne, Anders Nærø Tangen, Per Kristian Stoveland, Bjørn Gunnar Staal, and Joakim Hoen at Void for their dedication in creating and setting up the digital installation; and to Prof. Gunnar H Gundersen for his generosity in sharing his knowledge and ideas, and letting us use items from his collection. I am also grateful to the team members of the Tingenes Metode project, for thought-provoking discussions around the exhibition project, and to Henrik Treimo and Ageliki Lefkaditou for their editorial work and comments on a previous version of this article.

Notes
1. https://void.as

References
Trapped. Museum experiments with relationality, empathetic imagination and perspective


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