

Presentasjoner av dr.avhandlinger

Multiplying Munch. New Digital Practices at the Munch Museum

Faculty of Humanities, University of Oslo
Public Defense: 25 January 2019

Joanna Iranowska

From custodians of the originals to makers of images

The contemporary museum is a world of image making — the influence of digital reproduction on the role of museums as cultural institutions has been profound. Between 2012 and 2015, I worked as a research assistant on the project *Edvard Munch's Writings*, and the omnipresence of copying and digitization in an art museum has fascinated me since then. Digital prints occasionally mimic original paintings; tiny images of artworks pop up on our mobile phones, computers and tablets. Museum stores are full of diverse reproductions, replicas, adaptations, interpretations, and creations based on actual art pieces.

The creation of new images has always been an important area of museums' activity — new technologies have been taken up and developed in museums since their inception. However, since the early 1990s, we have been witnessing an extreme proliferation of image making in museums. In their book *Museum Informatics: People, Information, and Technology in Museums* (2009), Katherine Burton Jones and Paul F. Marty observe that the adoption of digital computers and digital record keeping has

had a powerful effect on the methods of museum work. Museums adapt to their new role in the information society and evolve from being collectors and custodians of the originals toward being communicators and educators. That often requires the production of new images based on the collections. Although in principle, museums are still safekeeping, collecting, conserving, and exhibiting the originals, the proportions between these basic functions and making and disseminating new images evolves.

The series of articles in my thesis has been an attempt to reveal and explore some parts of the actor-networks in which copies and originals in an art museum are embedded. This was done by exploring a range of cases from the Munch Museum in Oslo. In the first article, I investigated copies of artworks, more specifically photocopies of paintings manufactured with UV printing techniques. The second article describes the transformation of one of Edvard Munch's private belongings, a bedspread, into a line of museum store merchandise. The last two articles analyze the *Edvard Munch's Writing* crowdsourcing project (www.emunch.no) and focus mostly on the practice of involving the online volunteers in the process of transcribing manuscripts.

Scope of the project

The overarching research questions of my project were as follows: First, what is the ontology of copies of museum objects manufactured with digital methods? Secondly, why and, especially, how are the

new images made and brought to life? Thirdly, how is the agency of human and non-human actors negotiated during the making of new images? And last, but not least, which are the crucial actors in these networks? The scope of this PhD project — researching digital imaging practices in art museums — is in tune with the “practice turn” in contemporary museology described by Sharon Macdonald. As Macdonald puts it, we are witnessing a new commitment to trying to bring together the insights from academic studies with the practical work of museum — to return to some of the “how-to” concerns of the “old museology.” The new wave of museum research merges the critical and theoretical perspectives of the new museology with the empirical study of practice.

The image production in the Munch Museum in Oslo is an interesting case to research, for three main reasons. First of all, the museum embraces diverse new technologies and experiments with various digitizing techniques such as UV printing of painting reproductions (e.g., collaboration with Canon), digitizing of archival material through crowdsourcing (the *Edvard Munch's Writings* project), an online catalogue raisonné of the artist's drawings, implementing mobile audio guides on visitors' mobiles, or production of multiple copies in the form of museum souvenirs distributed in the museum store, such as magnets, tote bags, pencils, scarves, or coffee cups. Secondly, it is a medium-sized institution, and thus it is possible to get a more comprehensive overview of its collection and ongoing practices. Last but not least, the institution is undergoing extensive organizational changes, and is therefore implementing many modern solutions and following international trends in the field of museums.

Thinking of digital imaging and copies as networks

I believe that the role and importance of museum copies cannot be fully understood unless we grasp the ways in which they are produced. Focusing on objects, machines, and organizations makes material semiotics and actor-network theory (ANT) perspective suitable tools to study and explore “how” visual images in museums are made. As Tine Damsholt and Dorthe Gert Simonsen write in *Materialiseringer* (2009), the core of material semiotics is to study things in the process of their making—in other words, to investigate how they become entities in the world, rather than studying the way they exist in the world. While traditional semiotics studies how meaning is built, focusing on language signs and symbols as a significant part of communications, *material semiotics* considers the semiotic capacity of any entity in the world. For instance, a tote bag with Edvard Munch's bedspread pattern, which can be purchased in a museum store, can be understood as a material sign. Material semiotics analyzes relationships between physical entities in the world, and how things or entities relate to each other. In “Actor Network Theory and Material “Semiotics”” (2009), John Law posits that, regardless of their human or non-human nature, different elements define and shape one another. For instance, the tote bag with the bedspread pattern triggers a process of associations with the actual artwork while being its simplified version.

The exact variant of the material semiotics which I chose to use in my analysis is the actor-network theory, which originated from the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) in the 1980s. Its proponents, sociologists Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and John Law, chose to abandon what they called “standard sociology,” or “sociology of

the social,” since it focused exclusively on social relations, and therefore tended to ignore nature, technology, and the scientific part of human activity. Central to my considerations was *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (2007), in which Latour rethought “the social” and proposed a new approach — a “sociology of associations” which served as an alternative to traditional sociology with a broader focus. The sociology of associations drops the distinction between nature and culture and treats everything in the social and natural worlds as an effect of the webs of relations. The ANT’s rule of symmetry applies to different kinds of actors in the world on the ontological level. In my dissertation, when analyzing digital reproductions, I aimed to approach them with as much attentiveness as authentic museum objects usually receive from researchers, granting them the same type of agency that originals have.

Researching the images in the making

The overarching approach in this study was a qualitative one. I combined diverse types of ethnographical methods, including interviews, museum visits, technical walk-throughs of webpages, participant observations, and online surveys. In order to understand the complex reality of the 21st century museum, one needs to give up simplicities and apply complex methodology, as John Law says in *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* (2004). I believe that it is only through analyzing “thing-making” that the negotiations between human and non-human actors might be revealed.

The first article of my dissertation, “What is a ‘good’ copy of Edvard Munch’s painting? Painting reproductions on display,” published in *Culture Unbound* in 2017, discusses what constitutes a *good reproduction* of an artwork. The article analyzes three displays of digitally printed copies of Edvard Munch’s paintings in the



Visitors interacting with a tactile relief of Separation. Touch Munch exhibition, the Munch Museum, Oslo, 2015. Photo: Canon Norge AS.

Munch Museum and the National Gallery in Oslo between 2013 and 2015. I was especially interested in how the museum staff and professionals involved in the production of reproductions evaluate them. The research was based on a series of seven interviews with the museum curators, conservators, photographers, and carpenters. As a result, I distinguished five different registers of valuing reproductions: experiential, ethical, economic, mimetic and time.

As the analysis of three different exhibitions has shown, the museum copies have several values — a good reproduction is a heterogeneous set of phenomena, and a result of multiple negotiations and compromises. When explaining what makes a photoprint a good reproduction, the interview informants switched between different registers of value or referred to a few of them simultaneously. Conditions that make a copy *good* are fluid and dependent on the registers of value that are activated at the moment. Multiple registers of value tended to conflict with each other, and the tensions between them were resolved by negotiations and compromises (for example, by ordering a decent copy at a reasonable price or by collaboration in the form of corporate sponsorships). At other times, one value could overrule the other. I chose to study photoprints of paintings, but registers of value and the complex interplays between them are present regardless of the type of museum object reproduced. One of the most interesting findings in the exhibition context was that, although modern technology enables the creation of extremely advanced high-quality copies, it is not always the museums' intention to include the display copies resembling all the surface features of the original, since the ethical obligations of copies cannot be overlooked; in the case at hand, they were supposed to represent but not to forge.

The article “Copying as Museum Branding. Souvenirs with Edvard Munch’s Bedsread Pattern,” published in *Museums as Cultures of Copies* (eds. Brita Brenna, Hans Dam Christensen and Olav Hamran 2019), demonstrates that the choice of motifs reproduced on museum merchandise resulted in a rebranding of the Munch Museum and its artist. Branding of an art museum is highly dependent on copying, transforming the mimetic structures, reframing and re-contextualising the original pieces from its collection. The question was how and why certain motifs are chosen to serve as a museum’s icon and to build its visual identity. The bedsread-related merchandise was developed for the first time in connection with the *Jasper Johns + Edvard Munch* exhibition in 2016. Interestingly, the Munch Museum went from promoting itself exclusively with iconic works from Edvard Munch’s most famous symbolic period to promoting itself with an abstract geometrical pattern. A reproduced motif is not something given, but rather brought to life by the museum staff. It was created and co-authored by human and non-human actors: employees from the marketing department, the consulting company, the curators, the photographer, and the designers, along with cameras, computers, software, and printers. As a result, the motif mediated on the souvenirs is not simply Edvard Munch’s piece any more. Moreover, it turns out to be fluid and constantly unfinished, since it will be reworked and multiplied in the future on new merchandise.

The Munch Museum in Oslo is carrying out a broadly-based research project which aims to unlock access to the literary works, notes, diaries, and letters of the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch (www.emunch.no). The last two articles discuss some aspects of producing an electronic scholarly edition of letters. Taking into consideration the huge

workload (over 5,800 letters), and the newest trends in museum informatics and digital humanities, the museum decided to ask the public for assistance with the transcription process. Volunteers were invited to proofread and encode OCR-scanned transcriptions of letters through a digital Wikimedia platform. By crowdsourcing, the museum hoped to speed up the transcription process and minimize expenses. The article “Museum Crowdsourcing—Detecting the Limits: eMunch.no and the Digitisation of Letters Addressed to Edvard Munch” investigates the crowdsourcing project as a trail of associations between heterogeneous elements by following the crucial actors who participated in the making of the scholarly edition, specifically: eMunch.no, the letters, the editors, the wiki workplace, and the volunteers.

The article “Greater Good, Empowerment and Democratization? Affordances of the Crowdsourcing Transcription Projects” compares and contrasts four different projects dealing with transcriptions of similar types of archival material established on two different platforms (Zooniverse and MediaWiki). Drawing on Gibson’s notion of affordances, I investigated how the different interfaces allow users to interact with the digital networked objects mediated on a computer screen. I relied on the notion of networked object coined by Fiona Cameron and Sarah Mengler in “Activating the Networked Object for a Complex World (2011). Analysis of four cases reveals that recruiting of new volunteers and sustaining interest turned out to be more difficult and time-consuming than expected. The investigation has shown that the biggest challenge was to evenly mobilize all the actors in the actor-network. As Latour has observed, innovative technologies are weak, fragile, and hypersensitive to variations in their environment.

In my PhD project, I was preoccupied with banishing the classical distinction between copies versus originals. I applied a broader perspective, perceiving the museum as a complex network of associations in which images — copies and originals — are embedded. As a part of the museum’s social-technical landscape, copies are adaptable, flexible, and responsive rather than firm. The images are intertwined in complex assemblages of human and non-human actors such as curators, conservators, photographers, computers, printers, and wires, to name a few. I perceived museum copies as capable actors characterized by their mobility — they are incorporated in assemblages of human and non-human actors and circulate between different levels of museum work. Museum copies are being constantly processed and updated, multiplied and moved around, both in a physical space and in a virtual space. Therefore, museums can be seen as ever-growing networks of actors organized around the collections and their multiplications.

Om «Et av de viktigste arbeider ved et museum». En studie av dokumentasjonspraksisenes gjøren av museumsgjenstander

Det humanistiske fakultet, Universitetet i Oslo

Disputas: 11. januar 2019.04.23

Janne Werner Olsrud

Hva er en museumsgjenstand? En museumsgjenstand har ikke alltid vært på museum. Den kan har vært til stede i noens liv, og har i noen tilfeller selv levd et liv. En museumsgjenstand er ikke født, vokst, tilvirket eller masseprodusert som en museumsgjenstand, men transformeres eller