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Museums as mausoleums, museums as mirrors.

(See slide 2) In Norway the literary museum landscape has multiplied and evolved during the last two decades. The traditional literary museums situated in writers' houses are now supplemented or challenged by new literary centers that present themselves as landmarks drawn by internationally renowned architects. The case studies in this presentation exemplify this expansion of author museums. Sigrid Undset's former home, Bjerkebak, represents the traditional writers' house, while the Knut Hamsun-center is a modern building drawn by the award-winning architect Stephen Holl.

I am participating in the interdisciplinary research project Transforming Author Museums (TRAUM), a cooperation between two academic institutions in Norway with ten participants from the fields of literary studies, history, marketing and tourism, language studies and museology. The project also has seven international collaborators and cooperates with three museums and one author.

I participate as a doctoral fellow and Museologist. My contribution to the project is focused on Author Museums in Norway and I wish to present to you a new addition to the literary landscape of writers' house museums, namely the literary centers that have become a part of the growing field of author museums in Norway.

In 2007 and 2009 respectively two literary museums dedicated to the Norwegian writers and Nobel Laureates Sigrid Undset (1882-1949) and Knut Hamsun (1859-1952) opened their doors to the public. Although being contemporaries, the two museums interpretation of time, and how different time regimes are part of their exhibitions, is done in quite different ways. In Undset's former house, the exhibition concept is a reconstruction of the Laureate's home in the 1930s, following a tradition of the historic house museums. The Hamsun center's exhibition concept is framed within modern architecture that points to an artistic interpretation of the exhibition within a building made as a landmark. The writers' house and the literary center are both author museums, dedicated to the author's life and literature and placed where the author once lived and worked as a writer. Although both museums make a connection between the authors' relation to the place, their exhibitions feature quite different approaches

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to the use of material objects (see slide 3). At Bjerkebak the museum holds a large collection of Undset's former belongings, while the Hamsun center have emphasized idea-based exhibition concepts with specifically designed installations.

These two different strategies are related to the academic and professional discussions that separates *traditionalists* and *renovators*. They can be seen in the light of a larger museum debate between those who defend traditional museum practices and those who argue that museums need to change. A discussion that distinguishes between the national, collection-based museums hailing back to the 19th century and the new information centers in landmark buildings that appeared about thirty years ago. For the traditionalist the *collection* is of great importance, and the collections are the basis for the exhibitions. They criticize the idea-based experimental museums for reducing their role to information centers, rather than being knowledge institutions, and thus undermining the museums' distinctiveness from other cultural institutions and the entertainment industry (Witcomb, 2003, p. 1). On the other hand, the renovators have criticized the national museums for representing an elitist museum culture, a place where objects come to die and where curatorial choices hides behind a veil of objectivity disguising as neutral containers of history. The two approaches are sometimes summarized as: museums as *mausoleums* or museums as mirrors of society (Bangstad, 2017; Dewdney, Dibosa, & Walsh, 2013; Witcomb, 2003).

This is of course a simplification, and most museums today seems to present a mixture of both approaches. But, the museums in my fieldwork can be placed within a more general museological debate that positions them in either a traditionalist and a renovator's view, with Bjerkebak representing the traditionalist and the Hamsun center representing the renovator. However, this understanding prevents a more complex interpretation of issues currently faced by author museums, and I pose the question: *do current developments mark as significant a departure from past practices as both their defenders and attackers seem to think?* (Witcomb, 2003, p. 2). And, *do the exhibitions I have studied fit into this view of the traditional museums as authoritarian, and the idea-based information centers as more democratic institutions with a polyphonic voice?*

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I explore these questions by engaging with actual museum practices from my fieldwork at two author museums, building my arguments on examples from these case studies. I will present an example from the exhibitions of both museums that have become a *topos* within the literary exhibitions, namely ‘The Writers Desk’.

Object-based exhibitions (show slide 4)

Objects on display in author museums are often related to authors’ belongings situated in a space where the author formerly lived. This is the case of Bjerkebak, where Undset lived from 1919 until she died in 1949 and that re-opened as a museum in 2007. In the rooms the writer’s former belongings are put on display arranged as lived-in interiors. In many ways these displays can be interpreted as an example of a conventional understanding of time and history that creates distance between the author on display and its audience. But, in this presentation I will also argue that these former belongings take up several temporalities in addition to the ones given to them by their curatorial framework, and these multiple times can also be a tool for exhibition practices. This view is inspired by actor-network-theory and Bruno Latour’s slogan to “follow the actors themselves” (Latour, 2005) and see where it takes you. In this case I followed the traces of Undset’s typewriter.

The Corona Standard typewriter—situated in Undset’s former office, placed at the desk and surrounded by books and other personal belongings—is stabilized and domesticized within the room in a specific temporal and spatial context. In this room, surrounded by her books and artworks, is where Undset wrote her historic novels. In that way it confirms the critique of the renovators, who claim that object-based exhibitions are static and not in contact with the world outside the museum walls. By being Sigrid Undset’s original belongings, however, the objects also contain other stories to be traced in relation to Undset as a writer. They will offer the museum more narratives that can connect the exhibition with the outside world.

Bjerkebak is also part of a virtual museum, a common database of Norwegian and Swedish museums and collections called *DigitaltMuseum*¹, (see slide 5) where you can look up all the exhibited objects. The virtual museum work as a supplement to the actual museum and provides interesting information about Undset’s former belongings. Looking further into the

¹ <https://digitaltmuseum.no/011022396089/skrivemaskin> 01.08.2018.

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history of the typewriter I learned that it is portable, and that Undset bought it when she lived in exile in New York during the Second World War.

In 1940 Undset had to flee from Norway because of her opposition to Nazi Germany. The occupiers confiscated her typewriter before she fled, but she managed to buy a new one after she arrived in America. This Corona Standard portable typewriter followed Undset on her travels through America, where she mostly worked as an information soldier enlisted by Eleanor Roosevelt. During this period she held speeches and wrote articles about the resistance movement in Norway while residing on the American east coast (Slapgard, 2007).

Being Undset's former belonging, this typewriter also contains other stories than the one that is stabilized within the interior of her former office. The typewriter also embodies a story about Undset's flight to the US, her political and ideological statements and refers to another bibliography than her historical novels. It tells the story of her political work and her role as a women-of-the-world and makes connections between Undset and the world outside of Bjerkebak.

This example shows the strength and possibilities of the stories a writers' house and his or her personal belongings can convey. By following the object biographies, new stories can be conveyed and made use of at the museums. The durability of objects and their ability to outlive persons make them interesting objects for contemplating temporalities, and they can become focal points for discussing how exhibition makers struggles with time and personality as fixed communication tools in the exhibition display.

Idea-based exhibitions (show slide 6)

On the second floor of the Hamsun center there is an old school desk made of wood. It occupies a central place in the exhibition presenting Hamsun's childhood. At the Hamsun center the mystique of authenticity has disappeared, and the installation becomes a pastiche of the writers' desk. By positioning it clearly outside its domestic context it reveals that it is staged. The installation is part of a post-modern conceptual framework that exposes its own staging and invites more voices into the narrative. Behind the desk there is a board with a picture of the landscape at Hamarøy and a quote from Hamsun: (show slide 7)

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Many of my poems are composed while lying on my back in the forest. I try to get far away from people and from everything to do with modern life, I return to the days of my childhood, when I tended the beasts in the fields at home. That was when my feeling for nature was awakened -

On the opposite board there is a video screen where professors and other scholars who have done research on Hamsun are interviewed. The display techniques highlight the way in which objects have lost their central position. More voices participate in the narrative; the author himself is included by the quote (although in a revised form because of the modernized language), and the professors at the video screen let more voices into the narrative than the museum's own. The hierarchy between the original objects and the other parts of the exhibition is flattened, making the text and the board illustration just as important as the actual desk.

Although the desk is an original belonging from Hamsun's childhood, this information is not made part of the exhibition. Its meaning is produced through the text and the illustration on the board, the mock-ups and audio-visual media, which makes them just as important for the installation's meaning. The renovator—who advocates the dethronement of museum objects—sees this change as a democratization of the museum institution that reflects the external world the museums now find themselves part of, and as a break from the museum as repository and mausoleum.

If we are to take the quote above seriously it actually distances the author from the main object in the installation. According to the quote it was not behind the desk but out in the nature, in the forest, that Hamsun started composing poems. The quote and the interview with the professors contextualize Hamsun as a writer-of-the world and makes the nature outside the museum part of its experience. The display obtains authority by the professor's statements. But, when looking up the quote on the board I find the rest of the letter in an edition of Hamsun's articles (Hamsun & Bull, 1968, p. 96). By reading the rest of the letter, and the parts that are not included in the exhibition I find that after the hyphen Hamsun reveals his doubt and writes "That was when my feeling for nature was awakened - if I ever had any" (see slide 9). Leaving out the rest of the sentence after the hyphen give a different meaning to the quote than if the museum had included it. Although the exhibition makes room for several voices and tries to create an open dialogue with its audience by a polyphonic

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strategy, it is also authoritative in its attempt to make a strong connection between Hamsun and Hamarøy, his literary awakening and the imagined childhood paradise.

Conclusion

One of the reasons why I find these two museum cases so interesting, is because they represent a change in the exhibitions of authors and their literature in a Norwegian context. But although it can be framed as a break, these two cases show that in the Norwegian literary landscape of author museums they live side by side, as they opened just two years apart. I see this debate as a topic that has to be continuously reflected on, where both museum staff and university research can affect the debate. In this paper I hope to have shown how both types of museums face the same type of critique and challenges. I also hope to have made some points about what the museum potentially loses, when it moves away from collection-based exhibitions onto idea-based concepts. It loses the potential of framing the rich, historical objects in new settings and exhibitions. This potential is not fully taken advantage of by Bjerkebæk but offers future possibilities for the museum's efforts to be in constant touch with our own time, and the changing group of visitors that museums have to respond to.

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Witcomb, A. (2003). *Re-imagining the museum : beyond the mausoleum*. London: Routledge.