ESSAYS
Condensed speculations on museums and humanity
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I

Museums (and art institutions in a broader sense) have played a significant role in the formation of the nation-state ideological apparatus. They have been part of the disciplinary machinery constituted as a strategic tool of soft power aimed to develop citizenship – and further on – to rehearse democratic, populist, liberal, and/or corporativist values. Their “public” role was originally inscribed with a catch: to educate – or “enlighten” – the masses into principles, tastes, desires, and interests of the then growing bourgeoisie. The objects – either scientific, artistic, or archeological – on display were (and in majority of cases still are) conceptualized and framed according to modernist euro-americanist (i.e. western) precepts, which are tainted with colonial, imperialist, and nationalistic perspectives, and have been portrayed as the universal, normative standard.

II

Museums have had a significant role in shaping public understanding concerning different forms of knowledge – science, art, history, ethnography, archeology, and so on – presented through a westernized rational gaze that reinforced the universal humanist myth. During the 18th and 19th centuries research developed through an encyclopedic and taxonomic perspective, positioning an evolutionary hierarchy that was later on sustained and amplified by bureaucratic and academic methods manifested through the figures of “the expert” (i.e. curator) and the institution.

These modernist precepts and the resulting way of producing exhibitions (present still today) always need to be taken with more than a grain of salt; partly due to their presentation of a specific cosmovision, portrayed both as “hegemonic” and as “truth”; and partly due to the subjective set of circumstances through which governmental bodies and private persons tend to collect, archive, and interpret documents and objects which serve their interests to preserve. Even when they pretend to do so, these documents and objects can never present a complete or comprehensive representation of the world / a “culture” / art / the nation’s collective memory / a movement / an epoch / human-
ity; since any history portrayed through collected items is like “using whatever is left in my kitchen to make a pie”.

III

Since its inception, the modern museum has developed a tacit complicity with the eurocentric cultural, theoretical, and political dominance. The (western) canon of art, indoctrinated through the academies, have been portrayed as linear, progressive, uninterrupted: antiquity, classic, modern, contemporary. A single story that has been depicted as the history that begun and ends in Europe; byproduct of the genius of the white-hetero-male-able-body: the human reference par excellence! Everything and everyone else fell between the gaps... and ended differentiated, taxonomized, classified, and measured, in the ethnographic museums – or zoos, where what was understood as human, non-human and below-human was on debate. Thus museums were conceived not only as archives and displays for artificialia, as the grandiosity and singularity of humanity, but as displays of exclusions reducing complexity and diversity to a monolith. Ever since, the resulting construction of subalternity – a product of colonialist and capitalist practices – as a subject position, has had a prominent role in museums. Who exhibits and who is exhibited? Who has a name and who is nameless? Whose work is valued as art and under which canon? Whose narratives are valorized on the expenses of whose? Who is shown as a byproduct of violence and who is above that violence? These pressing questions, that are still urgent today, are also product of the systemic reproduction of violence displayed in the art institutions.

IV

It is not only what is exhibited what counts, but also how. Display has been a language and a tool of power even before it took a prominent – now ubiquitous – position in the museum constellation. Along with the modern episteme came specific formats of displaying. Objects were differentiated by themes, techniques, size, functionality, chronology, and progressions, which constituted their identities; a history of art with a eurocentric genesis and the notion of “schools” became the narrative; the “individual show” served to emphasize heroic / genius images; the exhibitions separated between living and dead as much as between place of origin. Dissatisfied with the hanging methods of the Paris Salon, which exhibited paintings hanged from floor-to-ceiling and on every available inch of space, the artists responded by seeking display methods where the works had their own space and could have a clear visibility (i.e. hanged mainly at “eye level”), and refused the Salon’s conservatism by hosting their own “independent / parallel” shows. Later on, narrative, emotional registers and pedagogical elements were employed as propagandistic tools serving for example to spread mod-
ern, fascist, war and post-war agendas – including new consumerism design shows presented as displays of life-style and domestic modernity, exported via travelling exhibitions.

The “white cube” has been the essential display format present in most museums and gallery spaces. It developed in the early 1920s introducing the white, undecorated, clean and discreet environment, where works are arranged emphasizing their formal qualities and are placed in a sufficiently spaced rhythm. This ideological concept space responded to the claims of the avant-garde towards abstraction from exteriority – a decontextualization of the works from the outside reality and any economic, political, or social context. The self-critical art installations developed as the artists directed their critique towards institutions and their corporate sponsorships at the end of 1960s; a time when museums refrained from a clear agency, and fluctuated towards presenting a position as “neutral aestheticized frameworks” for artists.

All of the above mentioned display methods were once innovative responses deployed by artists and curators. Now they are the norm, projecting easily digestible representations and simple language that promotes the illusion of visitor’s autonomy and autonomy of art. This switched the political agency from the institution to the artist. The majority of museums are perceived as apolitical receptacles that present a “good” entertainment for the (then hetero & cis, now fluid & trans) families. So while criticality has spurred, displays have stayed the same no matter what kind of art is on view. If the contents of the exhibition are able to be challenged or further developed it is mainly through sustaining an active public or parallel program – i.e. lectures, catalogue essays, discussions, etcetera – which is outsourced into the care of underpaid art workers and organic intellectuals that surround the art spaces, blurring the critical and political agency further away from the museum / art institutions. But, well, it is certain to say that there are always ideological changes behind the ways of doing museum work, and at the moment these institutions still maintain their image of “doing public good” through a polished educational gloss.

VI

Museums:
a) are archives of knowledge
b) preserve patrimony and cultural heritage against vandalism, oblivion, or decay
c) manifest concerns of the epochs
d) are sites of exclusion
e) mirror dominant ideologies
f) are neutral a(n)estheticized frameworks for artists
g) are none of the above
h) are all of the above
VI

It is exactly because museums have been sites of exclusion that they should be sites of contestation. Over time, artists and art workers – many with feminist, decolonial, and non-capitalistic practices – have taken this endeavor, but there is still much to be done. For this transformation to keep taking place it is crucial to attain a broader acknowledgement in the field that there is not only one way of being, understanding, and knowing. It is necessary to recognize, amplify and resonate the dignity present in the diversity of socialites, literacies, traces, cosmogonies, that are present in the vast cartographies of the world.

1. More on this topic can be found in the writings of Tony Benett, Carol Duncan, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, Mary Anne Staniszewski, Ruth B Phillips, Pablo LaFuente, Chika Okeke-Agulu, among others.
3. The Paris Salon began in 1667. The prominent years were from 1748, when the jury that awarded the artists was introduced, until 1890. The Salon promoted a conservative view of art, an example is the numerous rejections of the Impressionists from the Salon, who had to hold their own independent exhibitions.
4. The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations, also known as the Crystal Palace Exhibition, opened in London in 1851, and was the first in the series of World's fairs. Entartete Kunst (Degenerate Art Exhibition) organized by the Nazi Party in 1937, or Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista (Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution) opened by Benito Mussolini in 1932.
5. Some relevant examples are: The Family of Man devised at the Museum of Modern Art – MoMA; New York and the America's (referring to USA) national exhibition in Moscow in 1959, where Nixon and Khrushchev debated America's claim of capitalism vis-à-vis to Soviet Communism over the display of a lemon-yellow kitchen by General Electric.
In 2015, the European media issued regular news reports of people from neighbouring continents being washed up drowned on the beaches of Europe. The situation was described as a humanitarian crisis. This analysis proved correct, at the latest, when the EU countries jointly decided to stop people reaching EU territory.

What is this humanitarian crisis fundamentally about? A boundary line has been drawn between ourselves and others, a boundary line that empathy does not cross. We feel that caring about others takes something away from us. Borders that increase inequality do not eliminate problems, but create them. In this situation it is hard to envisage real change occurring other than through greater empathy.

Our future society, which will be marked by conflicts fuelled by global warming and inequality, will be a bleak place to live in for all of us if it is ruled by heartless competition for resources, such as safe areas, clean water and agricultural land.

After the second world war, people were shocked by wartime events and the human destruction that had occurred around the world. It was in this atmosphere that the UN adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration has subsequently been reinforced by international human-rights agreements.

Despite advances in human rights, rights are still being grossly violated. Even if, officially, every human being is supposed to be born free and to have equal value and rights, we are still far from human equality and fair treatment.

The idea of demanding rights for animals in a situation where concern for the lives of our fellow humans is being drowned can seem hopeless, or even grotesque.
Othering – permission to abuse

Inequality is maintained by a variety of othering practices, and above all by our way of thinking, which is still filled with divisions between ourselves and others, normal and different. Othering is a road to abuse. The othered is always secondary in relation to the first. Man is the norm, woman the exception, the other. White-skinned is normal, the rest are others.

The most unshakeable of all othernesses is the animal. The animal is that against which the human is defined. The human being is primarily that which the animal is not. The animal is always less, secondary, lower. Being human means not being an animal.

Efforts have long been made to dismantle various forms of othering. Slavery and apartheid have been abolished, and attempts made to counteract ethnic discrimination. Women have been granted rights that previously belonged only to men. There has been an increase in awareness of the treatment of people with disabilities and of the status of various minority groups, ranging from linguistic minorities to sexual minorities.

But change incites opposition. When things get really difficult, these distinctions are in full force: children are sent back to warzones because they are not one of us; air strikes blow up unnamed citizens of foreign countries, including civilians, because they were born within the wrong state borders.

The process of rectifying the status of oppressed groups of humans is still unfinished. People with disabilities, those with mental health problems, and representatives of sexual minorities are shut away in institutions, where even the most basic of human rights are not always applied. Women – who are not a minority, but simply an effectively othered group – are not included in political decision making on an equal footing with men. With the exception of Rwanda, there are fewer women than men in the parliaments of every nation. The world is run by men.

The strict dividing line between human and animal is frequently defended as safeguarding human rights. But how does the treatment of animals affect us in reality? The way we treat animals shows us a model of subjugation and othering. The treatment of animals shows that others can be mistreated, even if they are sentient, conscious, and in many ways intelligent. The status of animals constantly highlights the fact that, as long as you are sufficiently different, you do not need any guaranteed rights.

Animals are an example of otherness living alongside us, an example that makes abuse possible and legitimizes it. If our worldview were based on continua and on the connection between all living things, as science teaches us, there would be no such possibility of complete othering. If we admit that we are in some essential way the same, we would make it impossible to deny others the rights to everything that is essential for life.
What does it mean to be human?

An anthropocentric, hierarchical worldview still serves as a foundation both for the sciences and for Western everyday life. The idea of a clear qualitative difference between us and others lives on, as opposed to thinking of the relationship between humans and other animals as a true continuum. But we are not quite sure on what we would now base the higher status of the human over all other beings. And few would probably still dare to use religion as a justification.

One at a time, other animals have been found to have characteristics and abilities that were previously considered the sole possession of humans – and which have been used to justify the special status of humans: the capacity to feel pain, consciousness, tool use, self-awareness, linguistic social interaction, theory of mind, empathy for those other than one’s own genetic kin and conspecifics, the teaching of acquired skills to one’s own offspring and so on. Currently, there is speculation as to whether chimpanzees have some sort of conception of the supernatural, i.e. the raw materials for religious thinking.

Despite all the characteristics that we share with other animals, it is clear that the human being as a species is unique. But what if all the other species are unique, too?

The very word ‘animal’ has been described as one of the most heinous acts of violence against animals. It deprives countless different lifeforms and individuals of their uniqueness, and reduces them to simply being representatives of a lower, less-worthy category. They are always only animals. A human being is never only an animal. That is why many people think that a human being should not be called an animal at all.

The relationship between human and animal embodies the greatest possible contradiction. We know that we ourselves are animals, mammals, primates. This is an incontrovertible scientific fact. But no part of our society and customs operates in line with this idea. The human being is always defined as something other than an animal. Humans cannot be treated as animals. Animals are something that human beings can exploit. How could we ourselves be one of them?

Why can animals be treated like animals?

What if the other animals are not only animals? What if they are marvellous, complex, sentient, social and, in many of their abilities, better than humans – and partly the same as us? What would happen if we stopped comparing other species with human abilities? If we were occasionally to compare ourselves to others and asked: Do we attain the same standards?

What would happen if we gave up thinking that orangutans and crabs belonged in the same category: that they are both primarily animals, i.e. without rights and morally insignificant, and that they deserve
the same laws and the same treatment as each other? What if orang-utans should be thought of primarily as orangutans and crabs as crabs, and the way we treat either could not be summed up by saying they are “only animals”?

It is extremely hard to justify the pain, distress and suffering caused to animals – at least with reference to anything other than the law of the strongest. If our right to exploit other animals is based solely on the idea that might is right, it is hard, almost impossible, to justify humankind’s unique status by saying that we are a special animal capable of ethics and morality.

The idea of the special nature of human beings and their society and culture has become a substitute for a religious worldview when we want to argue for the special status of human morality. But are a complex social system and the products of cultures actually fair justification for the boundaries of ethical treatment? Do we think that small children, people with severe disabilities, or others who do not participate in our systems or their creation, are morally less significant, worthy of less protection? We do not. At least on the level of principle, we consider caring for them at least as important as caring for others.

The belief that those who are different do not need the same as those who are like us has been too strong. Up until the 1980s, surgical operations were performed on babies without anaesthetic. It was thought that small children’s brains are so undeveloped that they are incapable of experiencing pain. People with disabilities have been made to suffer considerably from the treatment to which they have been subjected. Many of those who, for example, due to their inability to communicate, have been considered to exist on a mentally low level, are actually cognitively capable in many ways. In Finland, too, people with learning disabilities have been locked up, for example, in animal pens. They have been subjected to the numerous kinds of abuse that their subordinate status inspires. Numerous people with disabilities and mental health problems around the world still experience such treatment: living in cowsheds, cages, shackles.

We defend ourselves by saying we did not know that they are essentially the same as us. Perhaps we were incapable of acting differently. But greater knowledge has not been enough. Improving the treatment of all these human groups has required an active struggle, resistance, stubbornly demanding rights. We do not readily admit that the subjugated do not deserve their subordinate status.

Research on other animals’ social and cognitive abilities is constantly producing new information. Researchers think that animal-welfare legislation lags noticeably behind scientific knowledge. So, can we say that we do not know? It looks like, the more research we do, the more abilities we discover that animals possess. Should we make allowances for this in advance? Is it time to admit that our actions are wrong?
The image of the animal as a tool for subjugating humans

The animal has been a key tool in the othering of human beings. Ranking another human being closer to animals, as being animalistic, makes their exploitation easier to justify. During wartime, the enemy is often depicted as an animal. With the second world war, some US soldiers had the words “rodent exterminator” on their helmets. War iconography depicted the Japanese as rats, monkeys, and as animals generally – on top of their being defined as a different race, as “yellow”. Hence, soldiers called themselves rodent – or vermin – exterminators.

As European humans continued their journeys into new continents and met alien peoples, they were not at all sure of their human-ness. Even into the 20th century, both in the USA and Europe, human beings from other continents were put on display in exhibitions, and even in zoos. This may, however, have appeared to be a lesser evil in the aftermath of slavery.

The history of slavery is itself filled with animalization, and this is more than just a way of speaking. For example, Charles Patterson (*The Eternal Treblinka*, 2002) and Marjorie Spiegel (*The Dreaded Comparison*, 1989) have listed the common factors linking the treatment of animals and slaves, ranging from arguments for moral insignificance right up to concrete means of subjugation. Iron collars, shackles and branding have been used on both groups. According to Patterson, underlying the Jewish holocaust was the influence of methods developed by modern slaughterhouses in the USA. People with disabilities and mental health problems have frequently been put on display as being like animals, and instruments and procedures familiar from animal husbandry used in their treatment.

Not even the second sex, women, were considered equal members of society, nor always even as fully human. The iconography of the animalization of women is diverse and goes so far as to show women as dead animals, as meat, as objects for consumption. A woman is simply a chick, a cow or a piece of ass, a piece of meat. We use language as a means of subjugation and our language reflects our attitudes. In English ‘human’ and ‘man’ are used interchangeably.

Human beings have been viewed as a rational species, but women and those who are not white were long seen as irrational, or as less rational than (white) men. The difference between animals and humans has, likewise, been considered a lack of rationality. Women have often been portrayed as being closer to animals than to men. The acceptance of women in both politics and universities, in Finland, too, came very late. Women’s participation in these spheres of life was resisted, for instance, with appeals to their emotionalism and irrationality.

The definition of humanness is, thus, problematic from the point of view of humans, too. If a human being is an animal that goes about upright on two legs, and has highly-developed fine-motor skills and a...
spoken language, what are those who are born human but who do not walk, who do not have good fine-motor skills or a spoken language? Are they inhuman, or less human?

Not everyone who we know to be and recognize as human meets the criteria for humanity that we ourselves set. And what if humanity is about something other than meeting these criteria? And on what grounds do we define those others who lie outside the criteria for humanity as also being excluded from all rights?

Towards respect

At present, our attitudes to animals accentuate difference and lead to inequality: one has everything, the others nothing. An alternative to this is recognizing sameness, and that includes recognizing it in the alien, the other. Since in nature there is only a continuum, no clear-cut boundaries, there is within us very little that is identical, but a great deal of sameness.

The ability to suffer is not unique – a capacity granted solely to humans. Our right to cause suffering to others is based – unless we enter into the realm of religious explanations – solely on the law of the strongest. Via strict categories and boundary demarcations, we construct a system and way of life in which part of natural empathy towards other sentient beings has to be killed off. If we want to create a society that takes the suffering of other beings seriously, an extension of empathy is the only option.

If we set limits on permission to use violence against other living beings, we do more than just reduce the suffering of the beings in question. There is plentiful research evidence that the various forms of violence directed at humans and other animals are interlinked. The idea of a connection between cruelty to animals and to humans was also central to the early animal-protection movement.

According to the ideas of the founder of Finland’s first animal-welfare association, the Maj Föreningen (later Helsinki Humane Society), fairytale teller Sakari Topelius, mistreatment of animals and violence towards them makes us prone to violence and indifference to humans. According to Topelius, young children feel the pain of others in themselves. If this ability is blunted, for example, by violent treatment of animals, this is reflected in the child’s attitude to other humans. For Topelius, a violence-free attitude to humans cannot flourish if we treat animals with cruelty.

Rather than exposing a section of humankind to violence, dismantling the boundary between humans and other animals could raise the threshold to the use of violence towards any kind of other.
And what if we are a humane species right down to our roots?

If we admit that the positive characteristics that we cherish as being our finest qualities are also partly shared with other animals, a very positive prospect opens up: we can let go of the fear that what is precious and important to us, soft and human, is easily lost, a veneer of civilization that can be scraped off. On the contrary, the roots of our abilities, emotions and morality go very deep. The roots of good humanity stretch far back into our animalistic history. Caring is deep in our nature.

One of our time’s leading primatologists, Frans De Waal, thinks that empathy, ethics and morals are equally fundamental features of our nature as violence and selfishness are. Care and concern are not a veneer conferred by culture, but go as deep as violent impulses do. But that which our society fosters and develops grows stronger within us.

The minds of human beings are mirrors of other living beings. We feel each other’s actions and emotions in ourselves. Many other animals are also capable of this. Our brains contain mirror neurons, which react both when we make, and when we see others make, movements. But the forms in which the acts and feelings of other living beings are communicated to us are a lot more than that. We living and acting beings somehow have to be able to read the actions of other living beings. In evolutionary terms it has even been essential to be able to interpret them correctly.

Not everyone is equally intensely capable of feeling the feelings of other living beings. The ability to feel that another is the same as oneself varies. Just as empathy can be deadened, it can also be nurtured. We can concentrate on constructing others as aliens, as others essentially different from what we ourselves are. Or we can concentrate on recognizing sameness, connecting features. Recognizing sameness in another is the road to empathy.

For instance, in post-apartheid South Africa humane education has gained a strong foothold. It has been understood that the traces of oppression, violence and othering will not disappear by themselves, but human beings can be brought up from childhood to be good: to feel empathy with others. In this teaching, empathy with animals has an important place. The more powerful a position of dominance we have in relation to another living being, the more challenging it is to refrain from subjugating that other.

I believe that the ability to feel empathy constitutes the foundation for our morality. Morality is based on empathy. Reasoning and factual information help us re-examine our morals and refine our
moral rules, but the foundation is always an emotion: caring about the happiness, pain and sorrow of others. A ballast of norms, beliefs, habits and traditions has accumulated on top of our emotions, but underlying the rules of behaviour that protect others is an identification with other human beings. Empathy causes us to ask: even if I survive, what will happen to those who are right beside me?

Translated by Mike Garner.
