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Third Hall. Museums Reviews and Interviews



Objects + Things = Stuff

A Visitor's Guide to Berlin's *Museum der Dinge*¹

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ABSTRACT

Museology has shifted its focus in some places of the world: artefacts and historical objects are being repatriated, returned as permanent loans, institutions are questioning the ownership of indigenous objects, selections are made by kids, and texts are being written by visitors.

The following case study discusses the reprioritization of a dynamic imagination around a museum's purpose in a jejune way, from the perspective of an independent cultural worker, trained in visual communication and schooled in visual ethnography. The text, a non-linear narrative of the visitor's experience, is interspersed with excerpts from a recorded conversation between two visitors of the Werkbundarchiv—*Museum der Dinge*, Berlin.

The Museum of Things does more than try to find a place for the *Werkbund* "stuff," it opens up a continuous material dialogue that includes different perspectives on the history of design in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Founded in Munich, in 1907, the *Deutscher Werkbund* or the German Association of Craftsmen was an organisation of artists, artisans and architects that strove to ensure good design and craftsmanship in times of mass-production of goods and architecture. The *Made in Germany* label is commonly associated with durable products and viable design precisely due to the work of the *Deutscher Werkbund*, which made efforts to create those associations linked today with German architecture or industrial, commercial, and household German products. A visit to this museum can last forever due to the extra satirical layer, combining ethnographic methods with personal narratives. This text is a sample of a specific visitor experience in an unusual educational institution that, using almost exclusively analogue methods, reaches remarkable levels of interactivity.

KEYWORDS

Museum, visual anthropology, objects, things, Berlin, interactive, testimony, *Deutscher Werkbund*, *Museum der Dinge*.

1) Excerpts from a conversation with David Heim. Edits by Gwen Mitchell.

"That's the whole meaning of life, trying to find a place for your stuff."

—George Carlin, comedian (2007)

Museums are no longer merely hosts for stuff that belonged to long-deceased owners or creators incapable to edit the labels attached to their things; or hosts for "objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying" (Adorno 1967: 175). Some museums refuse this role. Contemporary museums that display "the stuff of the present" are indirectly preparing people for the future,

using accurate and legitimate descriptions and categories the public is acquainted with. Ideally, such museums function as research platforms that tell participatory narratives of the land the objects come from; these institutions use experiences as learning processes and seem to strive for an inclusive language that conveys information in various ways so as to stir the curiosity of extremely diverse publics. Museology has shifted its focus in some places of the world: artefacts and historical objects are being repatriated, returned as permanent loans, institutions are questioning the ownership of indigenous objects, selections are made by kids, and texts are being written by



visitors. In Germany, to the surprise of wide audiences, big institutions still fail to engage inclusively with the past, while small independent ones are trying to make up for the general lack of empathy. Still, we live in a time when almost “anything can be a museum” (Dillenburg 2011: 8) and a visit to the museum can have you experience “everything imaginable” (Jordanova 1989: 22-40).

The following case study discusses the reprioritization of a dynamic imagination around a museum’s purpose in a jejune way, from the perspective of an independent cultural worker, trained in visual communication and schooled in visual ethnography. And the name of that museum is the Werkbundarchiv—*Museum der Dinge*, in Berlin. The Museum of Things does more than try to find a place for the Werkbund “stuff,” it opens a continuous material dialogue that includes different perspectives on the history of design in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

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“Kitsch, you learned a new German word.”

There’s more to design than Bauhaus. Founded in Munich, in 1907, Deutscher Werkbund or the German Association of Craftsmen was the organisation of artists, artisans and architects that strove to ensure good design and craftsmanship in times of mass-production of goods and architecture. The *Made in Germany* label is commonly associated with durable products and viable design precisely due to the work of the Deutscher Werkbund, which made efforts to create those organizations associated today with German architecture or industrial, commercial, and household German products. The group’s concern was to satisfy the needs of modern society, and it was realized through a rejection of historicism and the practice of giving more credit to

ordinary aesthetics. The Werkbund did not reject mass-production, unlike the British Arts and Crafts, but integrated technology to conform with the changes in society. Basically, they were the unofficial “police” of sustainability and functionality for both architecture and everyday objects.

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“This obviously did not work because the work demanded for fast, cheap production”

At present, the *Museum der Dinge* in Berlin’s Kreuzberg hosts both the things the Deutscher Werkbund thought of as appropriate and the things they would never approve of. Visitors trudge up a dark staircase, surrounded by the thick walls of the building previously used as a workshop, until they reach a sign that reads “*Museum der Dinge*.” Just outside the entrance to the museum shop, there is a vending machine that sells a selection of random objects packaged in a transparent bag for four euros.

It’s dark outside. The bars and small restaurants are buzzing. Berlin as usual. A soft light over a white desk marks a dustless depository—the five hundred square-meter open storage space full of things, full of stuff. The official description points to the storing method as *grouped into sample-collections* (Museum der Dinge 2018). But a visitor could simply call it fascinatingly odd.

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“You recognized a lot of things, and you are young.”

Mastering the German language allows for a certain kind of engagement with the spoken comments of the visitors, which can enrich and add context to the collection of this unusual educational institution. A huge key, a phone with a dial, a striped

teapot, an icon, and a bucket, an old kettle are pointed at and identified as items that the visitor has previously owned. Mediated by the objects as *social actors*, without which this social action would not be possible (Gosden and Marshall 1999: 173), a museum experience with a mnemonic dimension ensues. Max and Moritz salt and pepper shakers by Wilhelm Wagenfeld, the designer who worked for Rosenthal and Braun, advertisements for Thonet Chairs, Florena and Nivea cream boxes, they are all available for examination by a more specialized eye.

Similar to music recognition, where people happily sing along and feel satisfaction when they know what they hear (Margulis 2014), recognition of vernacular objects in a public institution might deliver the key to an accessible, modest, yet complex educational space, in which you are familiar with the objects exhibited, but suddenly you regress to infancy by not being able to use them.

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“I don’t understand: Jugendstil, do they like it or not?”

The tale of beauty, of tolerated design includes the disappearance of Jugendstil ornaments from household objects. Moving too fast on a first visit, one can get disrupted by the swastikas present here in various forms. The Werkbund activity was diverse and divided. Suspended during the First World War, it resumed in Stuttgart in 1927 with the famous housing estate built for exhibition headed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, which dwelled on the standardisation of both design and material for the sake of efficiency in architecture. And these were not the only milestones in the history of the Werkbund; most noteworthy, there was the dissolution of the organization by Nazi rule, and its return after the Second World War (“Deutscher Werkbund” 2015).

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“So they listed all the products they thought were terrible.”

The *Museum der Dinge* holds a mysticism that can be read in the various methods of categorising contemporary objects designed to provide a highly entertaining, yet institutionalized learning experience. A visit to this museum could last forever due to the extra satirical layer, combining ethnographic methods with personal narratives.

There are two main categories of objects: the ones in charge of narrating the importance and activity of the Werkbund (arranged longitudinally) and an outstanding variety of twentieth and twenty-first century objects designed for domestic use (arranged transversely). Famous objects are displayed next to replicas, handcrafted objects next to mass-produced copies, famous objects next to infamous ones; copies of copies, DIY objects, wartime products and creations, unidentifiable, generic objects, signifiers of objects, symbols of objects, precious materials or plastic replicating them, brands and copycats of brands, such is the stuff that the museum’s collection is made of. The visit is likely to be a long one because the archive, established in the 1970s, consists of approximately 35,000 documents and 40,000 objects. (Museum der Dinge 2018)

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“But the giraffe is not a beauty product.”

One can only speculate about the archiving method, as for the interpretation, that is up to the visitor. A new vocabulary of arrangement seems to emerge from the way objects talk to each other in a language whose words you know, while you are free to choose how to interpret them. This gives you the feeling that you are visiting a



refined version of a flea market makes you wonder about the definition of value, about the difference between stuff and things.

Listening to bits and pieces of the Werkbund voices—interviews, public talks, spoken texts—available at the listen stations, you start interpreting objects based on the quality of their materials, their aesthetics, the importance of the person who made them, and the generally strict standards under which they were supposed to be produced in order to become permanent objects. If there is any difference between the two, apart from the lexical one, this should be the line that separates objects from things.

What the visitor seems to look at is shape, function and material. These are addressed by the book—at one point, “object of the month” in the *Museum der Dinge*—*Publication Lessons on Objects* by Elizabeth Mayo. Her book was inspired by the practice of the Swiss education reformist Johann Pestalozzi (1746—1827) who thought that experience and direct interaction with objects beyond their names should serve as basis for children’s education. For the one hundred object descriptions that can be found in this book, Mayo used everyday items exclusively: things are talked about using comparisons, they are talked about as setting boundaries, from rough to refined, from texture to weight, lessons on objects from observations to deliberations, created to enhance and train the intuition of children. In thirty years, twenty editions of the book were published (Museum der Dinge 2018) and circulated.

The Werkbund itself developed educational programs, boxes with teaching materials for kids, for a while in the 1950s and 1960s. Everyday products were presented to children as being the “good” things. Such an initiative, as illustrated by the perfect miniature dinner table, for example, was not only supportive of good design but of the good family. It should be noted that in the *Museum der Dinge* the word “good” is always used between quotation marks.

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“These are arranged by shape, because they are all cute.”

Interactions beyond interactivity: spotted. In an interview for a German TV channel, the curator of the *Museum der Dinge*, Renate Flagmeier (2014) explains that, by appointment, people can bring objects to the museum to have them historically and critically assessed. By appointment only the museum provides an expert examination of things and they can tell you who and when made the object and how much it is worth; every third Saturday visitors are invited to design their own objects using various methods and techniques; on the first Monday of the month, the museum hosts a *jour fixe* for discussions with the staff, the public, and other guests (Museum der Dinge 2018).

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“That’s a chair, now that’s a chair.”

Let’s imagine for a second that the *Museum der Dinge* belongs to only one person. As the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern says, the objects that a person uses are that person’s agency that continues to have effects independently from the person’s body (qtd in Gosden and Marshall 1999: 173). Things can be like people. And if we imagine that Germany over the last two hundred years is that person, then the *Museum der Dinge* is to some extent Germany.

Inhabiting a space is strongly connected with the interactions with objects; and new everyday objects are built to be disposed of as soon as possible, so new ones can replace them.

Each visit to the *Museum der Dinge* is like visiting an old friend’s place: the furniture is pretty much the same, only arranged differently. Ready to be discovered, this is a place where things seem to have a secret life of their own. The objects are igniting



a controversial history of convenience fetishism: Wärmflasche, kettles, ventilators. As we know, convenience has become the norm and “has the ability to make other options unthinkable” (Wu 2018).

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“There is always a subcategory to every category.”

The temporary exhibitions are spicing up the place in an unusual, delightful manner. FOTO | ALBUM Private and Anonymous Photography from the Collection of Werkbundarchiv—*Museum der Dinge* was a show on display until the end of February 2018, containing photographs from snapshots, to vernacular photography, to object-images arranged by subject, and delving into the role of photography in an attempt to read the plurality of pasts. With categories such as cars, symmetry, flowers, kisses, etc., the exhibit forms a long tapestry of everyday life occupying half of the last room. The captions are a support for the method, allowing the visitor to reflect on the avalanche of vernacular images in the absence of social media. In their almost metaphysical materiality, these kinds of images are now overwhelmingly available on social media platforms, easily blurred by hashtags, stored on servers all over the planet.

Throughout the duration of this show, the museum organized workshops with children, teenagers and families, in collaboration with another institution—in this case Jugend im Museum e.V. (Youth in the Museum), which collaborates with museums and mediates cultural education with fun and games. And this brings us to another important point of this article: the social function of the museum is emphasized through experiments, its constantly changing approaches and collaborations with other institutions in Berlin as it displays without discrimination

the good, the bad and the innocent of twenty-first century design.

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“Everything here is instagrammable.”

“We are not super modern” was the one-sentence answer to my request for an audio guide. Opposing conventional forms of display, interactives (electronic communication) are not, however, the only way to interactivity (Witcomb 2006). And interactivity is not the only component of progress.

The *Museum der Dinge* is nothing like, for instance, The Exploratorium with its inquiry-based learning—through questioning and not simply presenting facts—that changed museum strategies all over the world, or the hyper-instagrammed and always sold-out Museum of Ice Cream, incidentally both located in San Francisco. Indeed, today’s museums “appeal to entertainment as much as education and owe as much to the theme park as the modernist canon” (Prior 2006: 531). Not modern in that sense, the *Museum der Dinge* remains unbearably progressive, accessible, thoughtful, knowledgeable and interactive, without the screens, the 3D models, the holograms, and other wireless objects. The institution’s autonomy becomes apparent in the way it challenges the rigours of what the Werkbund deemed beautiful. The *Museum der Dinge* does not raise the question of beauty, instead it presents both the rulers and the plebs who interact and are equally represented in an apparently abstract set-up.

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“These are colonial objects.”

The “aura” of these objects is complicated. The curator and the staff advise people not to donate to the museum the things that they



no longer need, but to reconsider a possible connection with the collection. Given as a gift, the thing carries the qualities of both the giver and the receiver, Marcel Mauss famously argued. The gesture is eventually solidifying a relationship (Appadurai 2006). In the case of an appropriate donation, if the object will never be displayed, it might not acquire the quality of the receiver and thus there will be no relationship to solidify.

Most objects in the *Museum der Dinge*, even though not art for sale, are objects that lack singularity—to use Appadurai’s term (2006). A question for the universal visitor: can we look at these objects without imagining there are many others that look just the same? A moment of silence in the warmth of an orange wooden floor: These objects are ambassadors of the world of things, arrested to perform for people that are looking for vernacular testimonies of the past.

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“Babies and religion”

The non-German-speaking cultural worker, who started out equipped with visual recognition as her main tool, is neither an ideal nor an average visitor. Yet she has a “critical museum visitor” (Lindauer 2006). Engagement with commodities on the simple maps of memory was supported by an unexpected display arrangement, which triggered mundane shivers.

To speculate, the Werkbund is indirectly looking into ways to underline the difference between objects and things. But the *Museum der Dinge* is making these objects communicate just the way they communicate outside of the museum world, in the world people unavoidably inhabit and have to deal with in their everyday lives. All together being stuff.

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