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Performative Interrelations of Children and Things – Ethnographic Research in the *Museum der Dinge*

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Abstract

This article focuses on performative learning processes of young children in museums. The research takes place in the Museum der Dinge in Berlin-Kreuzberg. This museum displays industrial products and design from the last 100 years. The artefacts were used in everyday life and were made for consumption. Outcomes of the research are reflected in the context of the German subject Sachunterricht, basic primary school lessons in natural and social science, which promotes a multi-perspective view on things, in which the performative learning approaches of children can be evaluated. First, this article will briefly introduce to the so called Vielperspektivität of the subject. Further on it describes fundamental considerations concerning performative contact zones in museums. Then qualitative study results on performative interrelation with things of elementary school children will be presented. Finally, in the context of the small study selected discipline-specific perspectives for an empirical foundation of performative learning processes of children will be pointed out.

As Krysztof Pomian (1988) is pointing out, on being placed in the museum, the objects in the exhibition were cut off from their original purpose. This also results from socio-historical changes in use-contexts. The items exhibited are disembedded from their meaning in material surroundings; they grow useless in relation to material artefacts and have lost their character of *affordance* described by Don Norman (1999). They fit no longer in everyday use contexts and represented object worlds.



Photo 1: Museum der Dinge, Photo of the Author

Also, visiting children find most of the things in the museum alienating. For example they still have an idea of the former use of record players in households but they can't combine it with their own everyday experiences. As the objects exhibited don't interact with things in their everyday lives they are considered strange, although they are usually not totally unknown. It is likely that children have an idea of their original intended use which provokes performative interactions (Wulf u. a. 2001) as previous observations in a Prussian ethnographic Museum and studies of Michael Parmentier (2001, 2008) prove. The actual ethnographic research focuses on children's performative interactions/play with so called *Lieblingsdinge*. Things visitors can select from the range of 20,000 objects in the museum. Outcomes of the research are reflected in the context of the German subject *Sachunterricht*, basic primary school lessons in natural and social science. *Sachunterricht* promotes a multi-perspective view on things, in which the performative learning approaches of children can be evaluated. First, this article will briefly introduce to the so called *Vielperspektivität* of the subject *Sachunterricht*, basic primary school lessons in social science. Further on the research site, the *Museum der Dinge* and present fundamental considerations concerning performative contact zones in museums will be described. Then qualitative study results on performative interrelation with things of elementary school children will be presented. Finally, in the context of the small study selected discipline-specific perspectives for an empirical foundation of performative learning processes of children will be pointed out.

1. *Vielperspektivität* and exemplary selection of contents in the subject *Sachunterricht*

Sachunterricht and its *Didactics* as a scientific discipline makes link between child, object and world. The things that can be discussed in and out of school, formal and informal learning environments are contents of the subject *Sachunterricht*. The subject addresses the question of how children acquire knowledge about things (Pech 2009).

Contents of the later subjects, such as geography, history, chemistry, physics, biology, politics, and social studies are also discussed in Sachunterricht.

The combination of different approaches of the later school subjects with educational science is thought to create the so called integrative character of Sachunterricht. What is meant is that the knowledge of the mentioned - and even further - subjects will be involved in issues on learning with things. In addition, everyday theories, subjective experiences and perceptions of children are considered as starting points for learning with objects. If we follow the so called *Kindheitsforschung* (Zinnecker 1995, Heinzl 2010) in Germany we consider children as actors in their learning processes. The investigation follows the question how experiences of children can be included in learning arrangements of basic primary education. The research focuses on how children make unfamiliar things matters of exploration. First, however, the museum as a place of informal learning is described.

2. The *Museum der Dinge* as a research site

The *Museum der Dinge* is an open depot¹². The collection with about 20,000 objects represents industrial production the 20th century. The objects are shown in sample collections. There are numerous points of contact with other museums in Berlin. The collection provides historical, technical and sociological reconstructions of dealing with things in European industrial societies. The aim of the exhibition is to highlight this multi-perspective approach and to facilitate a dialogue with the complex meanings of things. Conceptual ideas are taken from Franz Hessel (2012, S. 23ff) and Walter Benjamin (1991), in their works on the physiognomy of things. Hessel and Benjamin stress that the things we watch *look back to us*, they create meanings. Benjamin provides basic considerations on this issue in the text *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man* (Benjamin 1992, S.47/48). One of his basic arguments in this essay is the concept of a language of things. Benjamin points out, that the language of things is silent, the medium is material community. Benjamin assumes that people can perceive the language of stones, pans and boxes.³ So in Benjamin's view, in addition to the language that is communicated by telephone, a language of the social use of the phone itself exists. This language can only be understood by people who have been socialized into familiar, particular object worlds.

The concept of the *Museum der Dinge* is deepened in the context of considerations of the American cultural anthropologist Mary Louise Pratt. Pratt (1992, 1993, 1995) outlines a performative concept of museum pedagogy. In this concept spontaneous interactions with museum objects are emphasized. She argues for a distance to everyday interpretations of things which can be reached by spontaneous interactions with objects in museums. In her point of view museums can provide possibilities of playful

¹ http://www.museumderdinge.de/stand_der_dinge/ [URL: 01.12.2012]

² http://www.museumderdinge.de/stand_der_dinge/ [URL: 01.12.2012]

³ This language is, as Christopher Bracken outlines, combined with social meanings: "A reading of thing-languages that ranges beyond the sphere of art shows that the *powers* in things are distributed through the *social*." (Bracken 1992, S. 344)

interactions in their exhibit rooms. Pratt criticizes ethnological museums in which a euro-centric bias and neo-feudal boundaries to the objects on display will be further maintained. She asks with James Clifford (2003) to create contact zones in exhibitions where interactive dimensions with the exhibited things are made possible. That means the attempt to get closer to the character, the things once held. As Marie Louise Pratt notes, through contact zones visitors get an insight into unknown object-worlds or meanings given to things in the past. Considering contact zones in museums elementary school pedagogy and its current didactic concepts are questioned. For example, the models of concentric circles or original encounters are fundamentally challenged. Instead, a performative concept of learning is favoured in a museum, as this leads students to define learning content in an interactive process. Performative forms of learning are understood as scenically, as social behavioral practices within the meaning of Judith Butler (1991), manifested for example in dealing with museum objects. They help to describe spontaneous activity of children in terms of physical-mimetic activities (Stauber 2006). Contact zones, as conceived by Pratt, arise performatively and can also be experienced by primary school children who visit a museum in the context of Sachunterricht. To enable contact zones with museum objects flexible use situative activities with groups of children are necessary. This gives children space to engage playfully with objects in the exhibition.

3. Ethnographic research in the *Museum der Dinge*

This small study examines the interaction of primary school pupils with exhibits in the *Museum der Dinge*. It considers in particular spontaneous moments of play and self-dramatization of children in interactions with the exhibited things. It aims to reconstruct the visible and observable practices on the interface between formal and informal learning. In order to approach these learning practices of children we work with participatory observation, ethnographic dense description and photo documentations. With the help of ethnographic methods in which the researchers reflect their adult learning culture interactions and practices of students during visits in the museums are investigated. The researchers are involved in the field through participatory observation. Observable contacts of children to exhibited things are extracted from the material and described densely. This article introduces in sequences from the material and presents first possible encodings. A more detailed, comparative analysis of the ethnographic descriptions and publication of the results are planned. In this article three thick ethnographic records were picked out of 20 examples because they show different forms of interaction between children and objects during the Museum visits. Many of the visits with elementary and preschool children reflect the call for recognition that comes from the exhibited, unusual things. On the basis of a museum visit on 11/03/2012 with the 5-year old Zaide⁴ this is illustrated in the context of a story told about a record player:

Zaide: "I do not know record players. I've only once heard a story. The fox has stolen the record player. Then he heard music at home. But they have taken away the record player from the fox. "

Ms. Rosenfeld: "That was the story?"

Zaide: "No, oh, the fox did not know how to use the record player, how to deal with

⁴ In order to protect privacy names of the children have been modified in the article.

records and such. Perhaps he used CDs. But he definitely didn't use any records. "

Ms. Rosenfeld: "You know records?"

Zaide: "Of course I know records. My Dad even has a vinyl cloth for cleaning. But he never used it; at least I have not seen him using it. "

According to the parents Zaide repeated this story several times at home, and asked for a record player. In her living environment this object was no longer represented. But she had heard of it. She is trying out different meanings, because she knows from her father, that the object was used to listen to music. She is setting the unknown record player in relation to known equipment and brings it in comparison to accessories that are still used in the household. She knows CDs but no records, only the cleaning cloth for records of her father. During the museum visit she spent much time on the record player thinking about how to use it, or what activities may be associated with it. Like all children participating in the small study, researchers asked Zaide about her favorite things in the museum in a short narrative interview. Zaide's favorite thing is a polly-pocket, a little capsule, in which a foldable landscape, a miniature playground, is placed. In particular the playing area and foldable slide was of interest for her. The possibility to carry the landscape in a miniature format fascinated Zaide. She has been thinking about how to open and close the Polly Pocket without damaging the contents. In this she has shown a deep interest in technical questions.

The second excerpt from the data derived from a museum visit on 17/03/2012 with the 9-year-old Anna. Anna has a special interest in things from the new opened special exhibition *Istanbul alphabet*. The displayed things were unknown and strange to Anna, which made them interesting. In addition, children could touch individual objects of the special exhibition, so that Anna has been able to experiment with things. A retractable travel hairbrush has been her favorite object. She tried the use several times and thought about how much space it would consume in a handbag. Also the hopping plastic bunny of a street seller, that was connected with an air ball to bounce, was fascinating Anna. She spent much time on the coin sorting machine Money Matic. Only by playing did she realize what this thing was used for.



Photo2: Anna working with an object of *Istanbul alphabet*, Photo of the Author

Her play was largely silent. She filled several containers with loose change and then tried out variations – for example whether small coins in large insertion slots - are possible. "This thing is important to understand," says Anna. She was also surprised by the 80's computer boards. She expressed her surprise this way: "What does a computer look like from the inside? Not like this? My components are much smaller, since I've already seen it when it was broken." A relative of ours has turned off the power and then opened it. "Anna compares the museum objects with a specific situation in her everyday live. She deals with a contradictory, contrasting experience and applies the exhibits to the use of known things.

The third museum visit was on 29/03/2012 with 22 elementary school students of a 6th class from Berlin-Wedding. The museum visit with a group of children was a challenge. The appointment to visit the museum has been in a special opening time unattended by supervisory staff. The researchers arrived about 10 minutes before the appointment, the class with the teacher and a parent has been waiting in the 3rd Floor, a pupil picked them up at the street entrance. On the way to the 3 floor Paul showed a small toy figure, a part of his collection, and asked weather one can find similar figures in the exhibition. Paul said that he and his father collect these figures. Arrived in the museum a first brief tour was undertaken and then the pupils met for an opening circle. The pupils were given the work assignment to explore the exhibition in small groups to find favorite things. Reasons for this choice could be marked on small index cards.



Photo3: A class in the *Museum der Dinge*, Photo of the Author

The pupils were particularly interested in the contemporary design pieces - for example, attracted by a sweater on which a wolf's head was mounted. Thus formulated, for example, Kristian: "The sweater because it's bent." Or Fatima: "Because it looks crazy, it's apart. It's not like the normal stuff." Also other favorite pieces have been highlighted for their extraordinary design, which was not locatable in everyday use. Such as Mihrican: "The typewriter: We chose it because typewriters no longer exists." Also in

the following group discussion the argument has been mentioned that things cause attraction because pupils had to guess their original use. The mannequin Lulu has been the favorite thing of many pupils. Her eyes were painted very lively and the ruined torso gave room for speculation and slight shudder. In this context the following pupil dialogue:

Florian: "The doll is great. So alive. One can imagine that she's alive. "

Ergin: "Karstadt mannequins are not so great. She is looking at me. "Background noise.

Florian: "She is broken and damaged. It scares me, since parts of the body and the arms are missing, somehow violently broken."

Ergin: "Yes, I find that too creepy." Coughs.

Teacher: "These are the reasons why you selected it as your favorite thing?"

Florian: "Yes, because you do not know whether it still lives."

Ergin: "I like it when it the creeps. Whenever I look at it, I feel that way. "

Ergin and Florian emphasize the amazing attitudes of their favorite things. Especially things that cause emotional reactions. These emotional responses are associated with body-related, sensory experiences.⁵ Things that still can be combined with their use contexts, but are not easy to categorize, attract the children of the small sample. Their favorite things are not completely alien, but at the same time they irritate and are indescribable in usual linear combinations of things.

4) Perspectives for learning processes of children with things

The children in the sample perform an exemplary selection of things in the museum. This does not follow an educational significance or social relevance, but, as Florian and Ergin show, is based on a character of subjective call. Known or unknown things come into focus when they encourage children to try them out or to connect them to their surroundings. Many children of the sample have also created their own thing collections which they like to complete with suitable pieces. As Ludwig Duncker and Corinna Kremling already stress children's collections have an enormous learning potential. Basic primary science and social studies can connect to the existing collections of children. A lot of children are collectors, they collect all sorts of things; for example lucky charms. Things on the one hand emerge emotions whilst being used by children, on the other hand something happens with the things, they obtain or alter their function, are classified in different thing relationships. This means in the context of Sachunterricht to focus less term exercises rather than individual meanings of things in learning situations. Pupils can select things with individual meanings for learning processes and they are involved in creating meaning in class. As the small sample shows children dispose of experience horizons that allow them to act simultaneously and differentiated with the selected things which can be connected to their socialization and appear in the

⁵ Similar results were brought up by a study about an ethnographic museum with the Prussian collections of Northern American Indians. vgl. Wagner, B. (2010): *Kontaktzonen im Museum – Kinder in der Ausstellung „Indianer Nordamerikas“*. In Paragrana. Bd.19. H.2. S.192-203.

context of thing related learning. Children have different strategies: they treat things in stories (Zaide); they try use contexts (Anna), and set them in relation to body experiences (Florian and Ergin). These forms of automatic aesthetic learning are shaped by individual impulses and take place informally. The children of the small samples are very interested in unusual things, they try spontaneously to produce meanings and perform experiments with objects (Anna). Historical learning is possible through this productive uncertainty, leading to identify combinations of use and strengthening empathy for the living conditions in historically grown object worlds.

Arnd Nohl sketches a pedagogy of things and emphasizes the spontaneous physical and verbal interaction with objects. He pleads for testing situations and a distance to simple name exercises. Basic primary social studies, understood as interactions of children with things, open space for approaches of children. Performative concepts are helping to pick up experience horizons and self-activity of children in processes of material based learning (Scholz, Rauterberg 2004). Children approach to unknown objects, try to involve them spontaneously to produce body-related contacts and to convey meanings (Kerll, Wagner 2009). In performative play asymmetries and meaning contexts are negotiated. Children experiment with the objects, movement, spatial situations, noise, lighting conditions, and playmates. They don't play only known sequences, but act according to the situations in invented action concepts. Performative body images are produced and connected to situational rooms, exhibition objects and match partners. The objects are connected with new meanings that may differ from current explanation and categorization schemes.

The research results in the field of museum education show that children automatically select things with which they deal intensively. The resulting performative moments of the game can be dealt with in class. They set the tone for a child-related formulation of the central action orientation in Sachunterricht. Action orientation will not necessarily be scheduled by adults in the classroom. The focus on forms of appropriation of children point out that children offer diverse performative productions. These performative forms of appropriation reflect learning activities and action impulses that do not need to be teacher centered. The research results remind teachers to recognize presentations of children and spontaneous forms of informal confrontation with things.

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