A recontextualized telescope

- Connecting things, exhibitions, and research

By

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The past few decades have witnessed an intense museum reformation including their structures and priorities. In the process research has lost ground. The case we are to present here today is part of a research and development project that attempts to reintegrate and rethink the role of research in the museum.

Museums are different from other academic institutions that produce and disseminate knowledge about technology. The main difference might be that research at a museum often thinks with and talks through collected objects, not only texts, and expresses new knowledge through exhibitions. To be specific, and a bit programmatic: The advantage of the museum is that they have objects and space – and this should be the basis for developing a museum specific research.

In this presentation we will address the question on how museums can generate new knowledge and insights instead of just communicating established "facts". We will do so by introducing to you a practical and conceptual working method that integrates research in the exhibition making process. The clue is to work out from objects. In this presentation we will use an old telescope as our case.

By asking questions like "whom does the thing call upon" our aim is to make an assembly around the telescope that brings to the front new knowledge and unheard stories.

Let us start with introducing a conceptual approach to the museum where knowledge is shaped through interaction between humans and objects. What you see here is an ancient thing-place.

A thing place referred to a place and an assembly where people met to discuss, judge, and make decisions on societal issues. Things, and technology we can add, have always been contested and discussed. Things are dynamic, they evolve and change and take upon new meaning in interaction with humans through time. Therefore, things should not be let alone with the museum curators, there are many other actors that should be called upon, to make an assembly of different voices.

In 2014 we made an exhibition called THING – Technology and Democracy, and tested the idea of gathering people around things at the museum.


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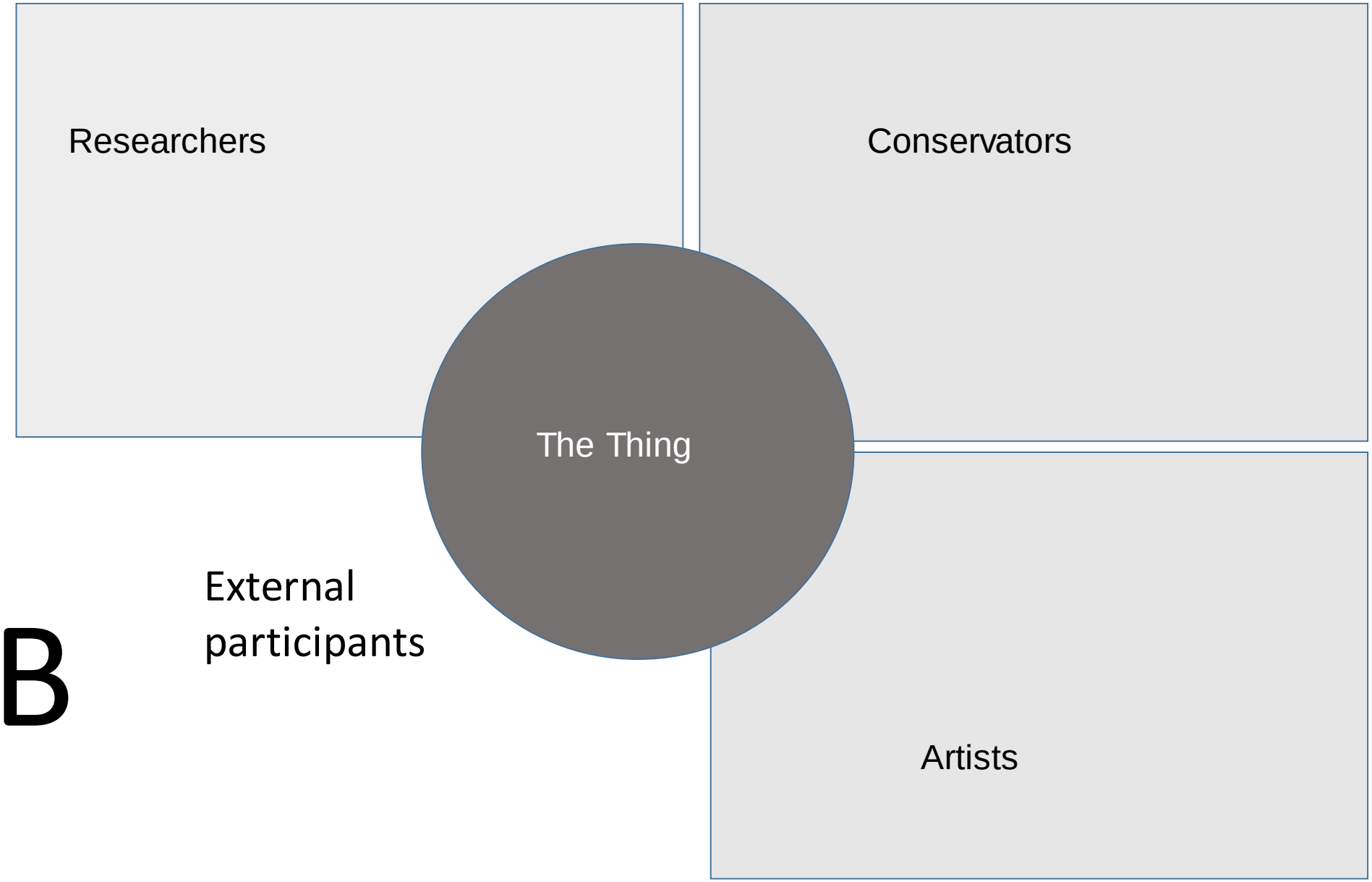
The heart of the exhibition was the “Thing”, a round table around which visitors were invited to assemble and discuss unsettled technological issues, such as the introduction of a robotic seal in health care or the increasing use of drones. The basic idea was to literally place contested technological objects in the “thing” and monitor discussions. The response and visitors engagement were beyond what we could have imagined, and this strengthened our focus on the unrealized potential of using objects to stage assemblies and to stir discussions and debate. But also as a means to generated new knowledge as a collaborative effort.

Museum are in a unique position to tell other stories – through other ways of communicating history. The question is how should museums do this in practice – and how this can be turned into a method of research?

LAB

External participants



The question of how to integrate research in the museum in a way that contributes to and enhances museum practice and museum research was the main reason why the museum decided to set up a permanent laboratory in 2014. The LAB is a physical and conceptual experimental space aiming at developing research-based exhibitions in cooperation with external researchers, artists, as well as diverse stakeholders and audiences. (The long-run ambition is to renew the museum by suggesting a method for museum research that builds on its distinctiveness and incorporates its main mandates; collecting, researching, communicating through exhibitions.)

The driving force and our working hypothesis is the methodological rigor of the multi-disciplinary involvement and engagement with objects. And, that objects may serve as gathering points of enquiry.

The LAB, as you can se from this sketch, is set up with a particular layout. The physical space comprises of three zones to spatially and conceptually arrange the collaborative work of researchers, conservators, and artists – as well as external participants. In addition, there is a roundtable space for discussing ideas among the core participants, invited external collaborators, and audiences. We refer to this zone as the "Thing" to underline that the collaborative knowledge generation rests on connecting ideas, perspectives, and different kinds of knowledge.

To sum up: The main point is that we think of objects as relational things – as assemblies, and that the various disciplines in the museum as well as external actors that relates to the objects in question are invited to take part in the process.

Before we go further with how the work is carried out in the LAB, let us now introduce the object for this experiment.

Our case is this telescope.

We will give you a brief sketch of the history of the telescope from the time it was constructed and up until today.

This story can be told in different ways. There is not just one story, but rather multiple stories. Moreover, one of our basic assumptions is that the history of the instrument has not ended. We are adding new layers to this story.

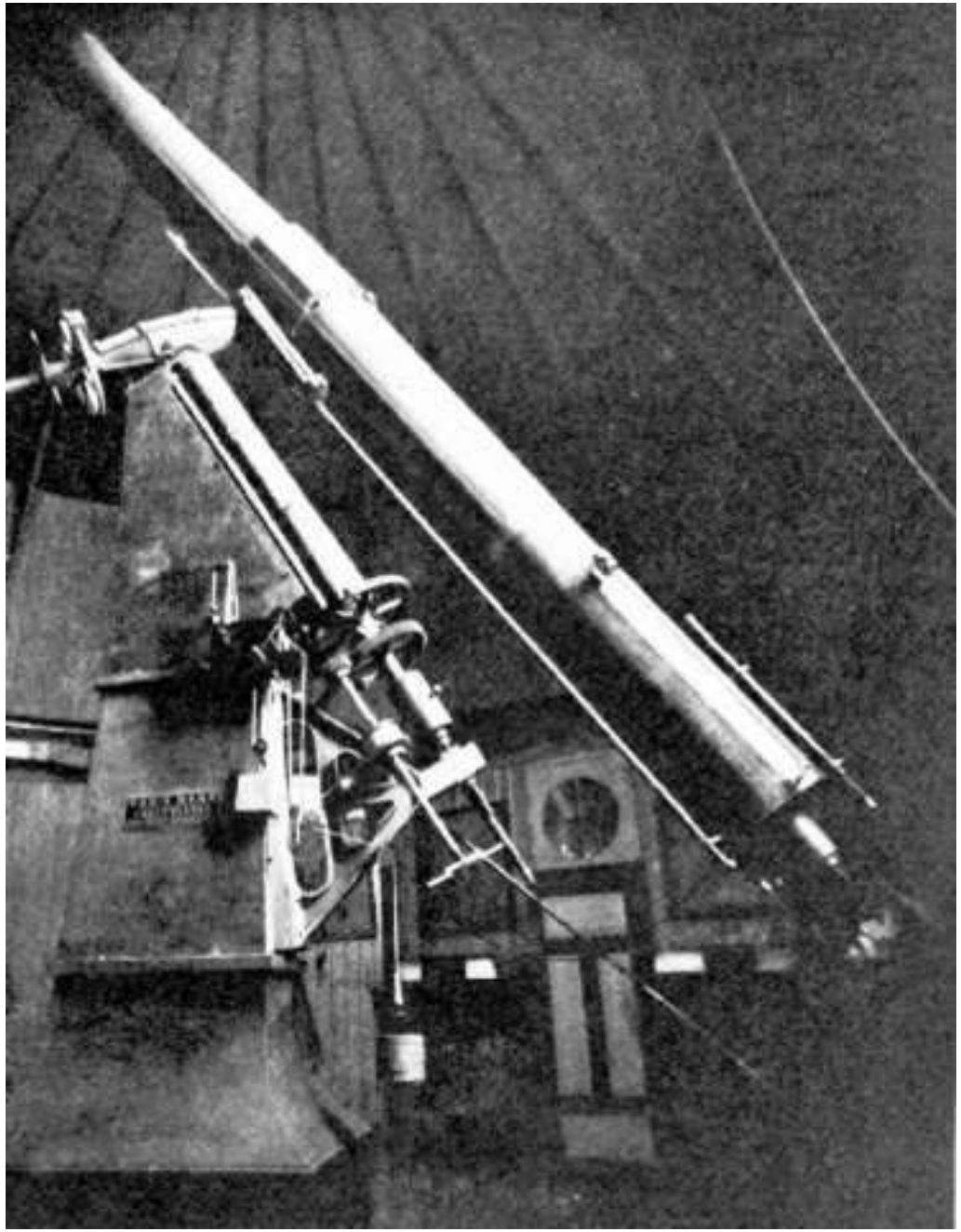
During the past 130 years the telescope has been contextualized, decontextualized and recontextualized // it has been put together, taken apart and moved around // is has been ascribed different meanings by different actors.

We have divided this story into three periods – based on where the telescope has been located at different times:

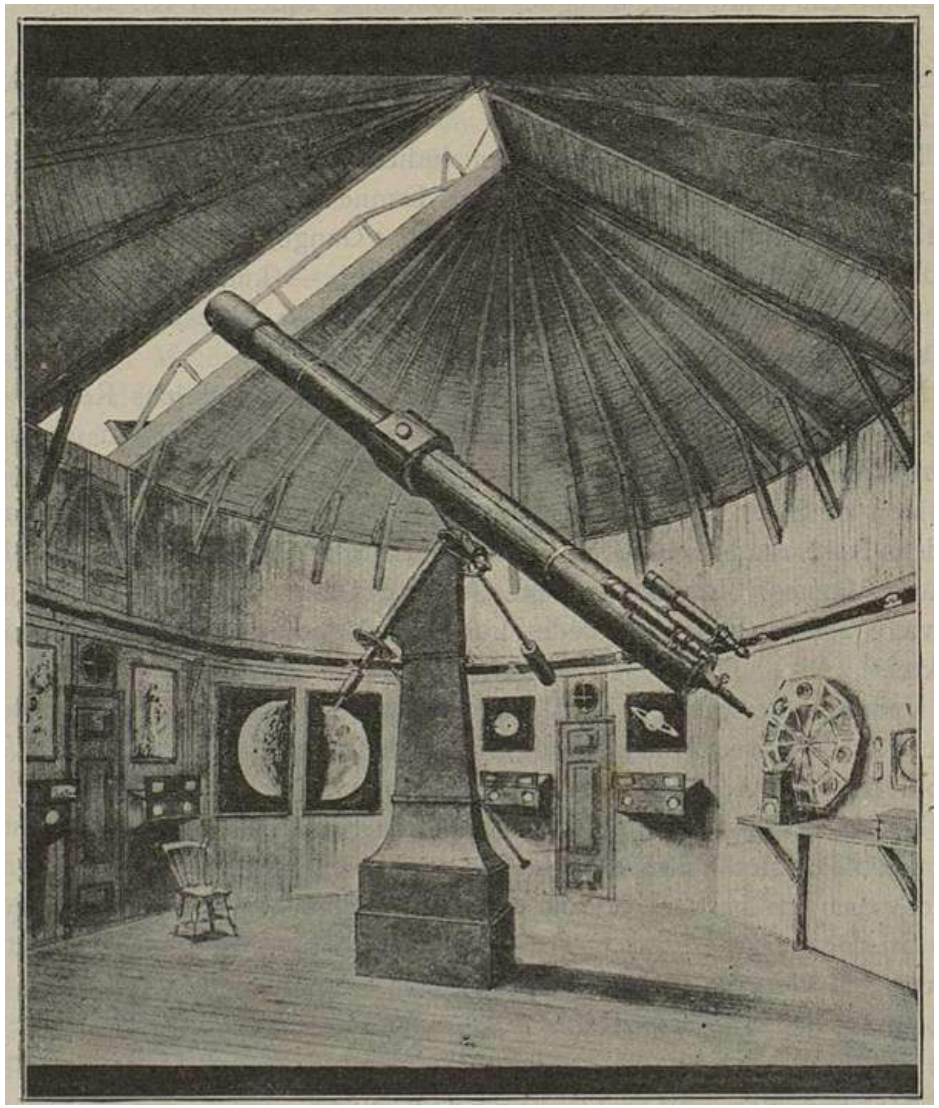
1886 – 1917: The Telescope in the Observatory

1917 – 1953: The Telescope in a Limbo

1953 – 2016: The Telescope in the Museum



1886 – 1917: The Telescope in the Observatory



Christian H. G. Olsen

The telescope was made by the Norwegian instrument maker Christian Olsen. It was introduced to the public in 1886, when Olsen opened Europe's first public observatory in the Royal Park in Oslo. The telescope was the largest in Scandinavia: 7.5 metres long with lenses 370 mm in diameter, providing 11-1200x magnification.

The observatory and the telescope instantly became a major public attraction. Olsen showed visitors moon craters, cyclones on Jupiter and the rings of Saturn. The observatory was a place for entertainment. For Olsen, however, there was also an important religious dimension. The telescope served to prove the existence of God.

In the mid-1890s the observatory in the Royal Park was closed down. In 1912, it was relocated to the outskirts of Oslo. However, it didn't attract as many visitors as before, and it was demounted in 1917. The telescope as an object became separated from the observatory as a context.

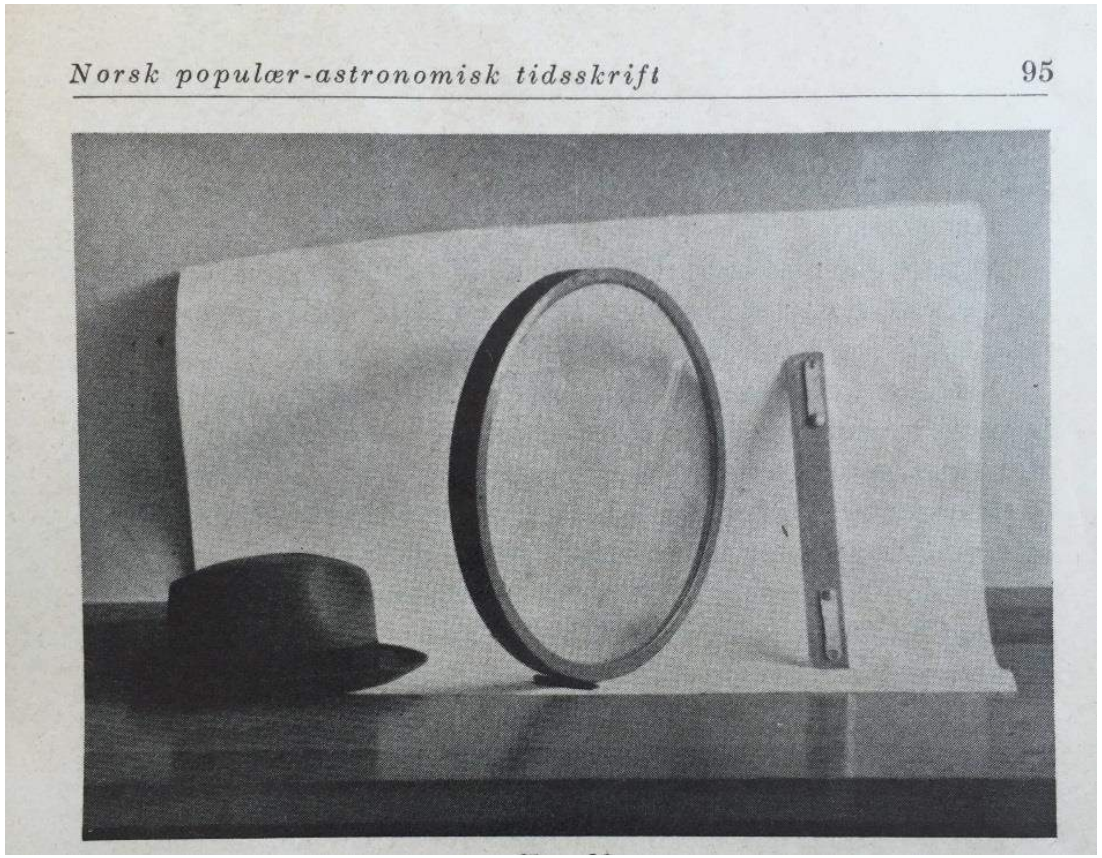
The observatory in the Royal Park in Oslo (1886)

The new observatory (1912)

Christian Olsen died in 1921. The telescope was then taken apart and stored in different places. Discussions about the fate of the telescope involved several groups of actors: Olsen's family, local authorities, different ministries, the University of Oslo, and the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology.

The telescope was ascribed new meanings. Olsen was portrayed as a genius. The telescope was seen as a symbol of scientific achievements, but was no longer considered to have any value as a scientific instrument or as a tool for public enlightenment. It became a symbol of past times. This quote from Svein Rosseland, professor in astrophysics at the University of Oslo, is illustrating:

1917 – 1953: The Telescope in a Limbo



One of lenses displayed at the University of Oslo, 1930s

"It is an impressing instrument – but it is not made for use today, and there are no prospects of it being used scientifically or for popular demonstrations of the starry heaven. However, it has a quite interesting history. … It appears to me that the telescope now belongs in the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology, as a memory of a great project in past times."

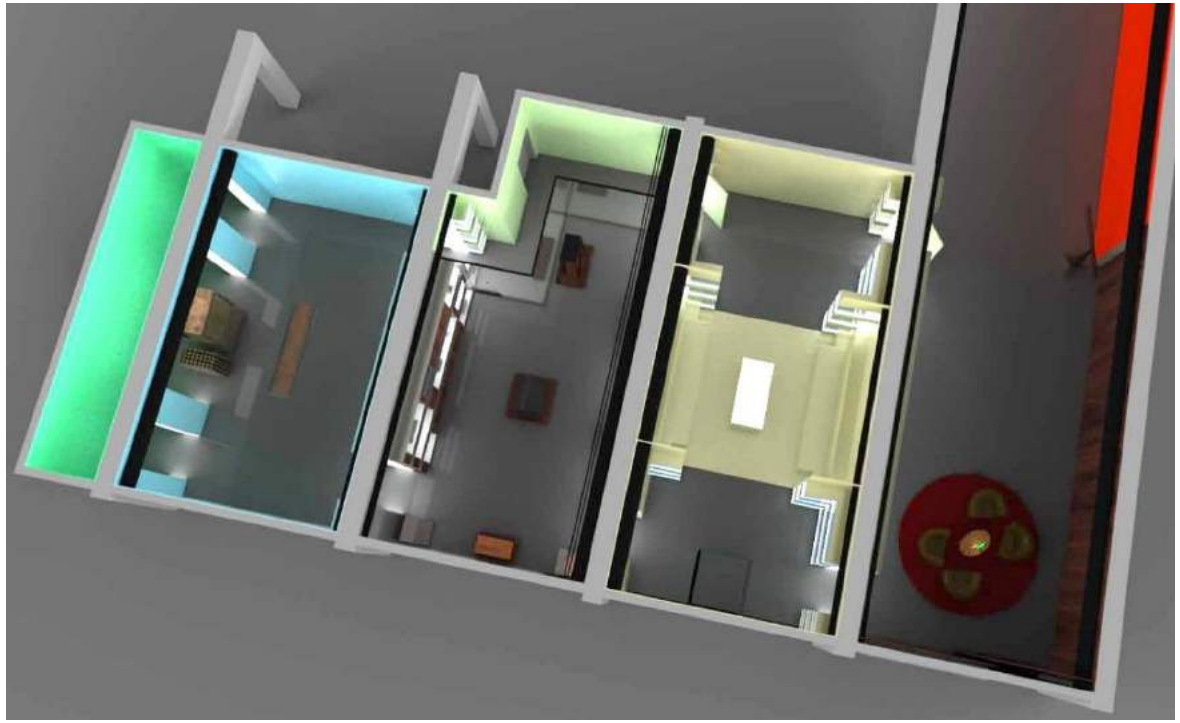
Professor Svein Rosseland, 1946

1953 – 2016: The Telescope in the Museum

The Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology. New museum buildings opened in 1959 and 1986.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the telescope was gradually acquired by the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology. From 1953 the whole telescope was stored in the museum. The museum had plans for putting the telescope on display, as a milestone in the Norwegian history of science and technology. It was intended to be one of the icons of the museum. However, new museum buildings opened in 1959 and 1986 – without the telescope being included. As years went by, the pieces of the telescope lost their former sheen, the painting disintegrated, and parts even disappeared. Stored away in the museum, the telescope became a fragmented object.

In 2011, the museum opened a new permanent exhibition on the history of science. This time the lenses – the most symbolic components of the telescope – were included, but in a way that differed distinctively from earlier visions.



“Instrument: Stories of Science”
Permanent exhibition at The Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology, opened in 2011

In this exhibition, the lenses were placed within new historical, social and cultural contexts. They told new stories. The lenses demonstrated the materiality of science and -- in particular -- the work and role of instrument makers. They were not presented as a monument of Christian Olsen or as an evidence of great scientific achievements. We might say that this reflected changes in the perspectives on the history of technology – away from the story of individual geniuses, and toward a focus on scientific practices.

Through time the telescope has taken upon various meanings through a continuous flow of activities. Some have to do with function and use, some have to do with materiality of the telescope, others have to do with ownership and politics, and some even have to do with existential and religious questions relating to what it means to see.

Two years ago the museum re-approached the telescope in all its pieces and brought it into The LAB. When we began this LAB project, our aim was to start with the thing and turn it into an assembly to hear new stories about it and to discuss the future for this object. We wanted to detect and activate historical and contemporary relations to the telescope by recontextualizing it in the museum.

We started the whole process with a three days intensive workshop.

The basic setup for the first workshop on the telescope was:
2 researchers/curators – to look into the archives and history of the telescope
2 conservators – to explore the condition of the telescope and future possibilities
1 artist and an exhibition builder – to explore the telescope from an artistic view point

To follow our method. The very first thing we did was to collect the telescope parts, that is, those we could find, from the museum storage.


Optimum 8
Haulotte

The pieces were displayed in the conservator zone in the LAB, as a starting point for our collaborative process.

We now started simultaneously to work along three paths. The **conservators** on the materiality and conservation of the telescope. They also invited an expert on the instrument to take part in the process, and adressed question about mounting, missing parts, and future possibilities.

The **curators/researchers** worked on the archive, spread it out in the LAB, to get an overview and to share it with the other collaborators, as well as visitors.

The **artist** worked on the conceptualization of the telescope, through artistic means and concepts, by reconstructing a lost work by Robert Smithson, from 1965.

LAB

Marius Engh

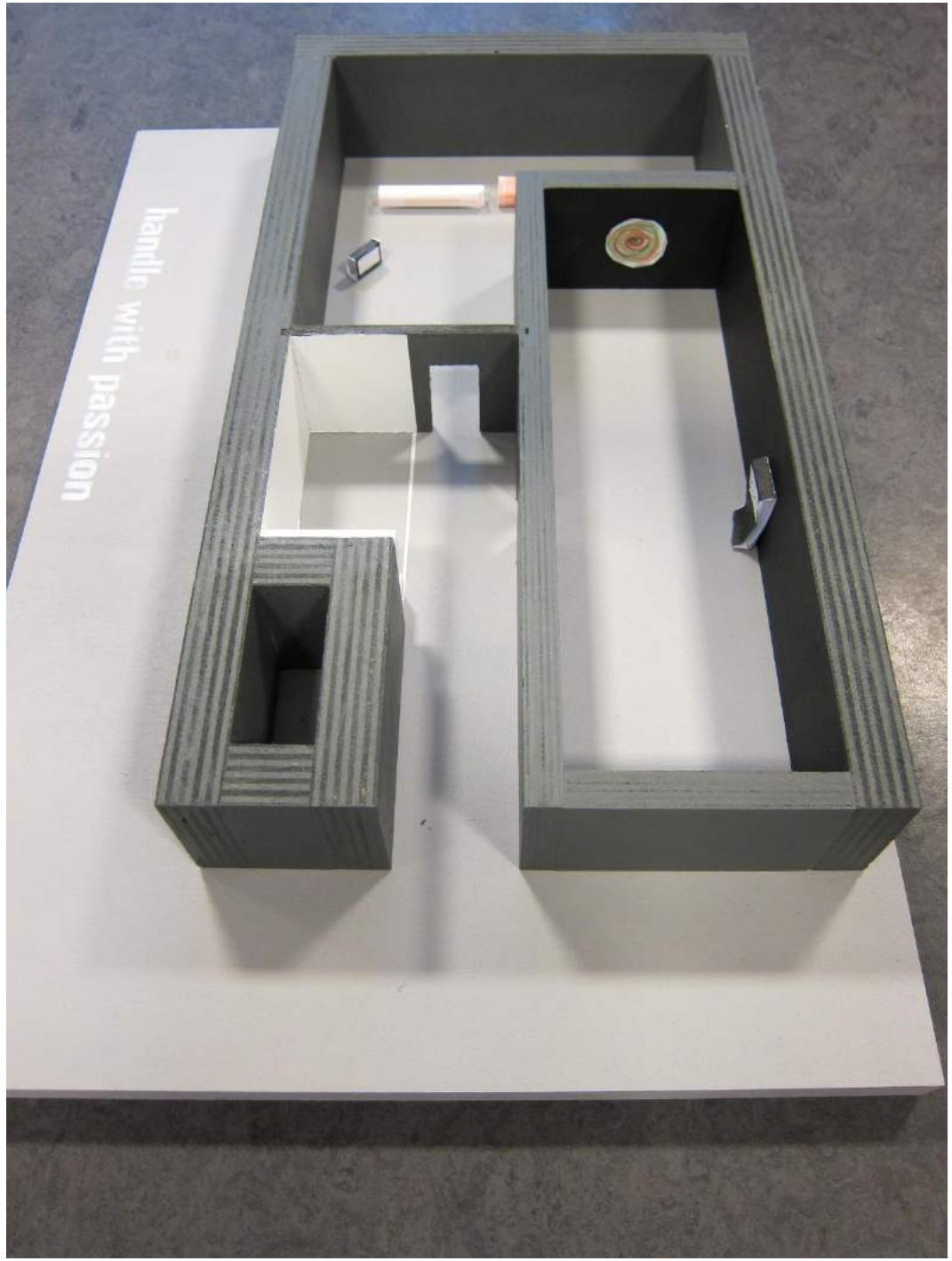
Enantiomorphic Chambers, Robert Smithson (1965) Reconstructed

What the artist brought into the process was another way of conceptualizing the telescope, as a means to create a point of view, as is also what contemporary art does, and also museums.

This became a concept for an exhibition idea: an exhibition on what it is to see, and to bring the telescope and the observatory back together on a conceptual level by means of conceptual art. This idea was funded by the Norwegian Art Council and will now soon be realized.

The exhibition will be developed in the LAB, with the same setup of conservators, curators and artists, and in collaboration with external actors – and will be the first concrete outcome of our effort to make an assembly around the telescope.

FOLKEOBSERVATORIET
OUTDOOR AREA
SCULPTURE GARDEN



The exhibition will be located at two places. The observatory will exhibit contemporary art works. The museum exhibition will include the parts of the telescope, mixed with contemporary art works, and a laboratory for conservation, as well as archive material.

As you can tell, this is not a final story about the telescope. It is a potential for several stories to be told, by the museum, by the artists, by audiences, and not at least by invited actors. We will invite actors that we have identified through the process of research, conservation and artistic intervention, and engage these actors in discussions about the telescope, its past and its future.

In addition to the exhibition, there are other outcomes of this collaborative work with the telescope.

At this stage, we are planning for :

1 published paper on the conservation of the telescope, by the museum conservators and an external academic.

1 published paper on the biography and museology related to the telescope, by the two of us.

1 book/catalogue on the exhibition projects in cooperation with the artist in the project.

Conclusion:

By focusing in on the *thing* itself and inquiring the relations a *thing* engages in with external actors, objects and places, we may discover how new knowledge and stories take shape. What we may achieve is that stories encompassing people and perspectives which are not part of a presently "known" identity of a *thing* emerge into the foreground.

We think that this practice and a close focus on relations as demonstrated here, may contribute to the history of technology by opening up for multiple stories related to the dynamic and evolving relationship of technology and humans.

Thank you!

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