Meaningful Losses

Deaccessioning as an Integral Part of Sustainable Heritage Work

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“If I ever get round to writing one, my ideal Collections Development Policy would consist of just 5 words:

‘Burn it. Burn it all.’

Maybe with an appendix that reads, ‘Or better still, sell it, if you can.’”

- Subhadra Das, in *Happily Never After* (2016)

Abstract

The central aim of this thesis is to uncover how deaccessioning can be used as a sustainable tool in heritage institutions as well as discuss the paradigmatic shift that lays the crucial foundation for the practice to be fully embraced. Research shows that while deaccessioning in recent years has been accepted as a necessity for managing the overwhelming growth of collections, the practice is handled with ambivalence: Removing objects from a museum collection is still taboo seen through the lens of traditional notions of what museums are supposed to be and do. A foundational shift in epistemological ideas about what collections represent and what role they are to play in society needs to take place. This shift has already begun to emerge but is not yet fully integrated into everyday heritage work in Western museums. Through the analysis of three highly different deaccessioning cases in Norwegian and Danish museums, this thesis seeks to demonstrate the complexities of the loss caused by deaccessions, and how these losses might generate meaning and knowledge. Each case is used as a window to critically explore themes that can contribute to a paradigmatic change in the heritage sector.

Key words: Deaccessioning, Disposal, Destruction, Collecting, Loss, Sustainability, Heritage, Preservation, Memory, Care, Repatriation, Decay.

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Contents

CHAPTER 1 | DISRUPTING NOAH'S ARK

"Agatha Christie's picnic basket – junk or artifact? You decide" is the title of The Guardian's article about an exhibition at University College London called *Disposal?* The 2009 exhibition displayed objects from the institution's collection that they found difficult to care for – things that they did not know how or why were collected, broken things, duplicates, and things never used. These objects were displayed, not only to bring up the problems of caring for objects in collections but also to invite visitors to actively partake in the decision of whether or not to keep them. Among the objects up for trial was "Agatha Christie's picnic basket", or more accurately, a basket that probably belonged to Agatha Christie's second husband's second wife (Kennedy 2009). While making the public aware of the pressing issue of overgrown collections and the need for pruning, this meta exhibition did not only display the issue of disposal but also that of collecting – like an insignificant picnic basket randomly entering a museum. The basket might work as a metaphor for the themes in this thesis: What lies behind the perceived value of a museum object, why should it be (or not be) part of a collection, and how can letting it go be part of caring for the past?

Museums are institutions of collecting and preservation. Their authority on managing, protecting, and mediating material heritage is rooted in this societal role (as well as in their long history as arenas of representations of a nation's identity). The rhetoric used regarding these responsibilities carries with it an assumption of loss: In the very moment buildings, objects, or landscapes are classified as cultural heritage[1], they also become exposed to the danger of disappearing. Their status as valuable witnesses of history emphasize their need for attention, protection, and conservation (DeSilvey 2017, 7). The work against the ephemeral, against neglect, decay, and loss, is a fundamental part of a museum's identity and purpose. However, in the past decade, voices within the interdisciplinary field of critical heritage

[1] Rodney Harrison's definition of *cultural heritage* covers the diversity and broadness of the term: "Heritage refers to a set of attitudes to, and relationships with, the past (…) These relationships are characterized by a reverence and attachment to select objects, places, and practices that are thought to connect with or exemplify the past in some way" (Harrison 2012, 14). This definition encompasses different forms of heritage; *tangible/intangible*, and *absent* heritage (the conservation of the absence of destroyed heritage). The term tangible is used to refer to the material aspect of heritage, and intangible contains all forms of cultural practices that are orally transmitted from the past and work as markers of cultural identity in the present (Alvizatou 2016, 15). An additional layer of heritage lies in the elitism (experts and powerful interest groups) behind the decisions of making something heritage (Smith 2006, 44). Therefore, there is always an obliquity in which pasts and cultural elements are valued as heritage.

studies have begun to challenge established notions of preservation: “It is time for a no-blame conversation about letting things change and even letting some things go”, says Tate Modern director Maria Balshaw (Desilvey 2017, 8).

In her book *Curated Decay. Heritage Beyond Saving,* geographer Caitlin DeSilvey asks if it is possible to deconstruct the intertwinement of cultural memory work and material standstill. In investigating heritage sites where decay has been allowed to progress, she asks what opportunities occur when change is embraced rather than opposed (DeSilvey 2017, 4). Heavily influenced by DeSilvey’s philosophy and research, I want to look at what happens when objects for different reasons are taken out of a museum’s collection. What opportunities for creative innovation in the understanding and dissemination of heritage can be found in these processes of change and loss within a museum? In this thesis, I will attempt to answer two main research questions. The second one is a variation of questions DeSilvey poses at the end of her book[2], which she leaves unanswered:

> How can deaccessioning be a sustainable tool for working with cultural heritage? What needs to change for museums to practice deaccessioning without the risk of damaging their duty as caretakers of the past?

In answering these rather overarching questions, I will draw on examples from three very different deaccessioning cases: a repatriation, a destruction, and a transformation. I will identify the arguments behind the decisions and analyze the processes of phasing out the objects from the museums. Through an empirical review of the three cases, I will form a basis for a theoretical discussion on how *loss might be meaningful in institutions of preservation*.

As I will show, the discrepancy between foundational ideas about museums as institutions of preservation and a new acceptance of deaccessioning is present in the cases. Both in the literature on the subject and in my own interviews, I found that museum professionals are in general agreement that deaccessioning *should* be part of collection management. Still, deaccessioning is not happening on a scale big enough for the management to be sustainable[3], and initiating a process of deaccessioning is experienced as

[2] On the last page in *Curated Decay*, DeSilvey lists these unanswered questions (among others): “How would heritage legislation and policy need to change to accommodate these approaches? (…) Could institutional heritage practice adopt forms of care that make no claims to material protection, or is the risk of loss (of both reputation and resources) too great?” (2017, 188).

[3] The most used definition of *sustainability* is: “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland 1987). By this definition, museums with continuous collection growth are compromising the needs of future generations, by passing them the responsibility of caring for an overgrown collection (Merriman 2008, 9). According to Merriman, sustainable

difficult on many levels. Even repatriation (which is by many perceived as a morally superior form of deaccessioning), is not a common practice in most museums. With the help of theoretical literature, I will argue that historically rooted ideas on collections and collective memory, still persist in contemporary museums, and make deaccessioning difficult to carry through. To change the practice of heritage management, fundamental ideas about keeping the past alive in the present need to be transformed.

A Deaccession History

Judicially, deaccessioning refers to the transfer of something from one owner to another. Within a museum context, the word is used as a broad umbrella term for everything from sales, deposits, repatriation, exchange, and donation, to disposal (Norheim 1997, 13). The small body of literature and research on the subject show that in practice, there exists a general opposition to removing objects from museum collections. The same goes for removing the heritage status from built structures or landscapes (only two sites have ever been removed from the World Heritage List) (Harrison 2013, 582). There has, however, been a shift in attitude from viewing deaccessioning as something to be avoided, to acknowledging its place in sustainable collection development. I will here present an overview of the historical background for this shift.

The Western European discipline of heritage conservation was formed in the mid-19th century. According to heritage researcher Ioannis Poulios, a central reason for its development was a growing cultural dissatisfaction with the present, caused by rapid industrial change and progression. This dissatisfaction led to a longing for an authentic, "purer" past (Poulios 2010, 171). Cultural historian Anne Eriksen describes the 19th-century museum as a safe haven for things threatened by modernization and neglect. The general perception was that museums needed to perform their acts of saving before it was too late – before private collectors, buyers, decay, or societal change could "get there first". In this way, the museum represented a contrast to a destructive world (Eriksen 2009, 146). It is these notions that create the frame for conservation ethics: that the "authentic" and "non-renewable" physical remnants of the past need to be preserved for future generations.

development does not mean that growth should not take place, but rather manage growth without doing significant damage to people and resources today and in the future. Sustainability, therefore, is not a goal but a path. Furthermore, there are several dimensions to sustainability: social, economic, and environmental. A sustainable museum will integrate all these overlapping dimensions (Merriman 2008, 10). According to Harrison, seeing sustainability in light of heritage pushes us to consider the capacities for different forms of heritage to endure, as well as if all forms of heritage can or should persist into the future (Harrison 2013, 590). I will discuss this point in chapter 4.

Conservation principles are therefore defined by a constructed discontinuity between (a fragile) past, (a destructive) present, and (a secured) future (Poulios 2010, 171).

Poulios shows that this discontinuity between past and present pervades international guidelines of heritage management. The Venice (1964) and Burra (1979) charters give conservation professionals the highest authority in managing cultural heritage while emphasizing the need to save the material past (Poulios 2010, 171). The 1999 Burra Charter advocates for the now dominant model of conservation, a *values-based approach*. Its core element is that the protection of a heritage site or object is determined through analyzing "the totality of values that society, consisting of various stakeholder groups (a stakeholder group is 'any group with a legitimate interest in the site') attributes to this object or site." (Poulios 2010, 172). The concept of stakeholder groups is central in this definition, as it places values ascribed by certain groups of people at the core of conservation. The purpose of conserving is to protect the values embedded in the *physical form* of the heritage site or object (Poulios 2010, 172). Poulious' suggestion for an alternative conservation model will be presented in Chapter 2, p.16.

The rhetoric of the *accumulation and conservation paradigm* is conveyed in international policy standards of cultural heritage management. For example, the World Heritage Convention of 1972 uses terms like danger, destruction, threats, decay, and deterioration – all to express a fear of losing remnants of the material past (Holtorf 2015, 407). As professor of history David Lowenthal and professor of heritage studies Rodney Harrison point out, we seem to value heritage the more it is at risk of being lost – it is the threat of it disappearing that generates our willingness to guard and save (Lowenthal 1996, 23. Harrison 2015, 26). This notion has clearly influenced how deaccessioning has been viewed historically. Up until 2007, there has been a "strong presumption against disposal" stated in the International Council of Museums' (ICOM) code of ethics. This supposition is, according to museologist Nick Merriman, rooted in the belief that the objects in museum collections are the material and objective form of collective memories (2008, 11).

The Norwegian discourse on deaccessioning is similar to the international one, as shown in Eva Marie Sund's master thesis on deaccessioning debates. Her discourse analysis shows that the theme was hardly present (with some exceptions) in museum political documents up until 2009 (Sund 2016, 64). The Norwegian museum reform (beginning around the year 2000) influenced a growing acceptance of deaccessioning in museums. The consolidations and economic security brought forth by the reform led to a professionalization

of museum work, and renewed plans for collections were made. The goals of the newly developed collection plans were to raise awareness about the contents of collections, why they were collected, and how they could be deployed in the future (Sund 2016, 65).

In the past decades, a shift has slowly begun to emerge: New discourse challenges the long-pervading accumulation and conservation paradigm (DeSilvey 2017, Harrison 2012/2013/2015, Poulios 2010, Hylland 2013, Holtorf 2015, Merriman 2008). According to Harrison, the dominant heritage practices of today are not sustainable from neither an economic, practical, or environmental perspective. If we have accepted that heritage does not hold universal value but are kept and preserved within a culturally defined framework, then we should also consider reevaluating previously defined heritage objects, buildings, or landscapes. The constant piling up of heritage can lead us to be overwhelmed, and in turn make heritage useless (Harrison 2013, 580). This notion is further emphasized by archeologists Cornelius Holtorf and Anders Högberg, who argues that our work to preserve everything can backfire: What exists in abundance might be seen as less valuable by future generations, which can lead to indifference to keep protecting what we now have saved (Holtorf & Högberg 2015, 514. Referenced in DeSilvey 2017, 178).

The emerging paradigm shift is also evident in my case studies, all being examples of how to deal with tensions between keeping and losing, showing us various ways of caring[4] for museum objects, like DeSilvey refers to in this quote: "If we are to explore alternatives to the preservation paradigm, we need to develop new modes of care that can help us to negotiate between the transitions between presence and absence" (2017, 179). According to museologist Simon Knell, higher awareness and competence on the topic of deaccessioning is something that museums need (Knell 2004, 28). Knell points out the importance of asking questions about whether the knowledge conveyed by an object can be replaced by other means (digitalization for example), or if the knowledge has any perceivable value at all. The

[4] The noun *care* can be defined as "attention that is given to someone or something so that they are looked after, protected, or dealt with the right way" (Cambridge Dictionary). The adjective *caring* can be defined as "feeling or showing concern for or kindness to others" (Merriam-Webster 2023). These definitions reveal that both feelings and actions of compassion are central to the concept. Caring for the past is, as previously mentioned, interconnected with material preservation. This notion lies at the heart of what needs to change for deaccessioning to be fully embraced. DeSilvey demonstrates that the human drive to care in this way is pervasive: "(…) in moments of threat, it is extremely difficult to step back and allow destruction to continue unchecked" (2017, 179). Throughout my thesis, I will emphasize, as DeSilvey puts it, that "the withholding of physical care does not have to mean withdrawal of a care-ful attitude towards the objects of the past that we engage with" (DeSilvey 2017, 179).

question he recommends asking when considering deaccessioning is: "What and how will this thing contribute to our ability to know?" (Knell 2004, 34).

Legal Frames – Museums' Right to Deaccession

Legal Practitioner Lars Norheim has written a judicial analysis accounting for Norwegian museums' rights to deaccession. The general law is that whoever acquires an object (through purchase, exchange, testation, gift-sale, or gift), gets full rights of ownership. They are therefore free to deaccession the object if they wish (Norheim 1997, 17). Museums are not general acquirers: Given their societal role and function, museums' freedom to dispose of objects should be somewhat limited, writes Norheim. However, in cases where deaccessioning is considered, their right to deaccession weighs heavier than the limitations (Norheim 1997, 18).

In Danish and Norwegian museums, the law is that deaccessioning should only happen with approval from the museum director and board (Norheim 1997, 48). Individual museums usually have their own guidelines and rules for deaccessioning, but the accepted norm is that museums are free to deaccession if there are no traceable conditions or decrees from the giver of the objects (Hylland 2013, 10). The judicial framework resonates in government-issued white papers: The 2020-2021 *Museumsmeldinga* clearly states that museums have a responsibility to make prioritizations in their collections. It criticizes the discrepancy between accessioning and deaccessioning (more objects have been taken into collections than out) and states that deaccessioning is an important part of collection management (Ministry of Culture 2021). These official guidelines, both legal and political, are explicitly referenced in one of my cases below, where they were employed to legitimize deaccessioning.

Cases and Limits

The scope of this thesis rests on examples from three cases that provide different and meaningful insights into the topic of deaccessioning. Case one is the Oslo Museum's deaccessioning of half of *the Aker collection* in 2020-2021. Destruction and disposal were central to the deaccessioning.

Case two is the biggest repatriation event in Norway, *Bååstede*. More than 1600 objects were returned from two Oslo-based museums: *Norsk Folkemuseum* (Norwegian Museum of Cultural History/The Open-Air Museum at Bygdøy) and *Kulturhistorisk Museum* (the Historical Museum), to six Sámi museums administrated by the Sámi Parliament. It was a long process taking place from 2014 to 2019 (Gaup 2021, 8).

Case three is not a traditional deaccessioning. *The Living Room*, a combination of a research project and an exhibition, explores the metabolism of objects. In the basement of the Medical Museion in Copenhagen, deaccessioned and unregistered objects are given new meaning by being involved in, and supporting different processes of life. Within a museum context, the objects are allowed to transform and decay.

In using three comprehensive and highly different cases in a relatively short thesis, it is necessary to fix the limits. Each case has the potential of illuminating various themes and perspectives and can be interpreted in the light of several relevant discourses. This is especially the case of Bååstede. Not only was the project extensive and connected to cultural and political processes, but the topic of repatriation constitutes its own sphere of post-colonial discourse (Wali, Collins 2023, 330). There are several aspects of repatriation and the return of Sámi cultural heritage that are not included due to the limits of the thesis. Ethical notions about possessing the material heritage of minorities, Norwegian colonial history, and ethnographic museum practices are a few examples of topics I will not discuss.[5]

The diversity of the cases has made braiding them together difficult. However, it is neither my goal to give each of them a full interpretation on their own, nor to make a comprehensive comparative analysis of them, but to use them as different paths to access a deeper understanding of the ambiguity of the deaccessioning practice. The data from the cases is employed to reflect on some overall and unifying claims about deaccessioning as a sustainable tool for working with cultural heritage.

Structure of the Thesis

In ending this chapter, I will present the methods I have used to explore the different cases. Chapter 2 accounts for my theoretical framework and why it is relevant to my research question. Chapter 3 contains an in-depth presentation of the three cases, and I will demonstrate how my methods and theory have come to use. Here, each case will be separately analyzed. Chapter 4 concentrates on what the cases tell us about deaccessioning as a sustainable tool and I will reflect on themes and arguments that can contribute to the full integration of deaccessioning in heritage work.

[5] Liisa-Rávná Finbog's dissertation *It Speaks to You: Making Kin of People, Duodji and Stories in Sámi Museums* (2020), goes in-depth on some of these topics from a Sámi perspective.

Case Investigation – Methodology

The three cases make up the backdrop for a broader discussion on deaccessioning, and understanding the particularities of the processes in each case is important. I have chosen methods of investigation that I deemed most relevant for understanding and utilizing the cases. Both the deaccessioning of the Aker collection and Bååstede were long processes containing meetings, reports, contracts, and dialogues. As both cases have produced documents accounting for these processes, document analysis was, in my opinion, the method most useful for uncovering information. For a visual project like *The Living Room*, exhibition analysis seemed appropriate. Since my main goal with this thesis is to reflect theoretically on deaccessioning, reflections from experienced curators in addition to relevant literature also make up an important source of reference.

Documents as case-making actors – an approach to document analysis

Documents play a small but integral role in two of my cases, the Aker collection and Bååstede. In analyzing documents, I have used STS researchers Kristin Asdal and Hilde Reinertsen's methodological framework for document analysis. In addition to approaching a document's textual dimension, their framework presents six other approaches. I have chosen one of these: to analyze the documents as actors that produce *cases.*

Asdal and Reinertsen list three terms that can be used in approaching the case dimension of a document: *case-making*, *modification work*, and *contextualization.* In summary, *Case-making* is about how the document frames and presents the case, how structure and content interplay, what information is prioritized and undermined, and what actors are included or not (Asdal & Reinertsen 2020, 109). An interesting methodological experience was that after I had conducted interviews, I was able to read the documents in a new light. Seeing the implications of prioritized themes and what actors are not included became much easier after hearing the critical views of my informants.

Modification work is about tracing how the documents change a case, for example by making reformulations or adding/omitting information. *Contextualizing* is about seeing the context that the document is written within, and how the document writes itself into a context (Asdal & Reinertsen 2020, 112-119). In my case analysis of both the Aker collection and Bååstede, I will show how documents of both cases connect their content to other cases, arguments, and events outside themselves.

Visual and Textual Observations – Exhibition Analysis

For my last case, *The Living Room*, my data collection relies heavily on exhibition analysis. I have used Stephanie Moser's methodological framework for researching how exhibitions create knowledge. The components she lists as key aspects are all about noticing the details and how they relate to other elements in the exhibition (Moser 2010, 22). I will limit myself to the aspects I feel are the most useful in an examination of *The Living Room*: Architecture and placement, display types, and text. All components communicate meaning about collecting, preservation, and disposal.

Architecture and setting can tell us something about the epistemological meaning of an exhibition, as the visitors' first impressions from entering a museum building affect how they perceive and interpret the exhibition (Moser 2010, 24). A significant aspect of my exhibition analysis is how the architecture relates to the placement of the exhibition. Since the most conspicuous displays of *The Living Room* are its photographs and audio-visual installations, I have also looked at how these display types relate to the objects in the exhibition.

Lastly, I wanted to include how the subject and message are communicated through text. Moser writes that thematic exhibitions often single out particular things and invite visitors to take an active part in interpreting what they see (2010, 27). This was certainly the case in *The Living Room*. The texts next to the displays played a vital role in how I perceived and understood the objects exhibited and the overall themes represented. I would also like to stress that I experienced The Living Room *with* the curator guiding and answering questions. The room is open to visitors only in the form of guided tours, no doubt affecting how both I and other visitors move through and interpret the room.

Interviews – The People Working the Cases

I have used interviews as a complementary method for a deeper understanding of each of the cases. All my interviews were done on an academic topic (deaccessioning), as well as on a specific case with the aim of getting professional perspectives to support my analysis. However, my informants have different backgrounds, and the answers I got reflected highly personal experiences and views. The informants have professional titles in their respective museums and I have therefore included full names and titles, as these provide legitimacy to the perspectives. For this, I received consent from both *NSD* (Norwegian Centre for Research Data) and all my informants.

According to cultural historian Ida Tolgensbakk, some elements are always lost when interpreting an interview in the transcription process (Tolgensbakk 2020, 126). I conducted two of my interviews in Norwegian and translated the answers into English, thereby increasing the risk of misinterpretation. To minimize the loss of meaning, I sent the citations I used to each of my informants to make sure they approved of my interpretations.

Conducting *semi-structural interviews* was my method of choice, as it establishes a general frame for the conversation while allowing for derailments and elaborations on a particular topic. I found that the informants often wanted to speak on matters that they were most interested in, and I wanted to encourage this by asking follow-up questions. Ethnologist Eva Fägerborg states that the interviewer should seek the interviewee's thoughts, experiences, and personal perspectives (Fägerborg 2011, 88). Derailments can therefore be meaningful. For example, when interviewing anthropologist Gro Birgit Ween for the case of the Bååstede I had not planned on asking questions about the physical condition of the objects returned. However, Ween was especially interested in the challenges surrounding the amount of toxic pesticides in the objects. Because the issue of pesticides proved to give nuances to the repatriation, the subject earned a place in my analysis of the case. I learned not to be fixated on what to talk about, as a more open approach gives new insights.

CHAPTER 2 | HERITAGE WORK REIMAGINED

Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I will present and actualize theoretical perspectives from different but overlapping fields within cultural studies: science of materiality, heritage studies, memory studies, and museology. The theories, however different, can be used to understand the complexity of deaccessioning and the discomfort surrounding the practice. From the broad field of materiality studies, I have chosen perspectives on what changes need to be made (and are already emerging) in our understanding and handling of cultural heritage. Strongly connected to theories of materialities, the introduction of a "living heritage approach", provides insight into how appropriate conservation is always situational. I have also included theory on the loss of heritage objects. Here, studies on collective memory and objects' capability to contain memories will be central references. Finally, I will introduce a theory on sustainable museum collecting, arguing that traditional ideas of collecting and the role of the museum, no longer is sustainable in contemporary museums.

Theories of Materialities – New Ways of Working with Cultural Heritage

Since the question of deaccessioning is connected to how we relate to and work with material objects, theories on materialities will function as a theoretical frame. A common basis of the extensive field of materiality studies is that cultural symbols, language, and materiality are perpetually dependent on each other. Furthermore, the material world is neither stable nor bounded but part of processes, practices, networks, and performativity (Damsholt & Simonsen 2009, 13). According to materiality researchers Tine Damsholt and Dorthe Gert Simonsen, an important aspect within the field is asking questions about what material things "make", and how things "are made" in specific times and spatial contexts. The verb "to make" emphasizes that praxis is part of the material. Praxis is not always centered around a thinking human but a result of the relations between objects and subjects (Damsholt & Simonsen 2009, 13). *Actor-network-theory* (ANT), first developed by the sociologists Bruno Latour and John Law, is a broad theoretical field on relational materialities. Its most important elements are the term *agency* and the concept of *non-human actors* (Damsholt & Simonsen 2009, 23).

The notion of a network implies that human and non-human actors influence each other in constant interactions and that certain elements in such networks have (and develop)

agency.[6] These networks of interplay are not organized, but chaotic and arbitrary, like a rhizome (Damsholt & Simonsen 2009, 24). One cannot know in advance who or what is going to be actors, Latour says, but this will show itself empirically. The actors should be seen as the "nodes" in the network where the effects are uncovered. Action and practice become a result of the different relations in the network – not of sovereign actors (Damsholt & Simonsen 2009, 25). In analyzing my cases, I identify the nodes and how they interact in the networks that develop throughout a deaccessioning process. In the following, I will introduce several perspectives within the framework of ANT.

Can an understanding of heritage, in the light of theories of materialities, be of help in moving beyond the accumulation and conservation paradigm? As the quote below suggests, caring for the past needs some new ways of thinking:

> *"When protection can no longer be sustained, we need new ways of making sense of the world and our relationship to it (...) We need new ways of valuing the material past that do not necessarily involve accumulation and preservation – ways that instead countenance the release of some of the things we care about into other systems of significance" (DeSilvey 2007,17).*

Can we, in the spirit of DeSilvey, invite a more experimental way of engaging with heritage, where deaccessioning can be seen as openings and not endings?

Interconnectivity and the "rights of objects"

In an article arguing for a dismantling of the dichotomy of natural/cultural heritage, Rodney Harrison presents a definition of heritage where the dissolution of the dichotomy is taken for granted: "a series of diplomatic properties that emerge in the dialogue of heterogeneous human and non-human actors who are engaged in keeping pasts alive in the present, which function toward assembling futures" (Harrison 2015, 28). The definition recognizes networks of relations that do not necessarily revolve around a thinking subject, *and* that heritage is as much about the present and the future as it is about the past.

Even if Harrison does not mention ANT directly, his definition of heritage is strongly influenced by the field (Harrison refers to Latour in his article) and is therefore presented here as an ANT perspective. According to Harrison, *heritage-making* is about taking responsibility

[6] An example of such networks can be illustrated in a study by John Law on Portuguese expansion and long-distance control during the 16th and 17th century. He shows how both human and non-human actors form a network that allows for sending information (documents, artifacts) and people from the center to the periphery and back. The network is constructed from a relationality between power, materiality, and practice, where for example a postmarking machine is ascribed authority and thereby becomes a passive actor contributing to executing power from afar (Law 1986, rendered in Brenna 2011, 24).

for the future. Even if it is constructed through decisions about which versions of the past are to be deemed valuable, it is not really about the past: Heritage is only constructed in the present in a state of looking ahead to the *future* (Harrison 2015, 35). This way of understanding heritage is helpful in analyzing specifically two of my cases: Bååstede (the future of Indigenous communities and relations with the majority), and the Aker collection (the future of new collections).

With the idea of social relations as a foundation, Harrison also argues for a sense of ethics that recognizes the right of both humans and non-humans to "pass from one state to another". This invites us to take into consideration the interconnectedness of the rights of living beings and objects and to see change as equally valuable as stasis (Harrison 2015, 32). According to DeSilvey, this ethical standpoint can release us from the drive to conserve, and instead, generate an appreciation of "specific and unique circumstances". It becomes the encounter between different actors that drives forth appropriate action for management, and in *some* circumstances leads us to accommodate for transformations[7] (DeSilvey 2017, 133). Deaccessioning within museums can in some cases be understood as such a transformation.

I will argue that the theoretical framework given by Harrison and DeSilvey – where the needs of all actors are acknowledged, not just the human need to conserve – will contribute to a broader understanding of deaccessioning. I think it will help us see that considerable value might be found in letting things go, whether it be into new networks via repatriation, into more suitable contexts via donating to other institutions, being re-defined as objects for use for cultural ceremonies or teaching, being destroyed to make room for new acquisitions, or becoming a part of experimentation to appreciate new narratives about the objects.

Life of objects – common cycles and biographies

> *"If we accept that our buildings have lives, then we also must accept that they, like us, have deaths" (DeSilvey 2017, 159).*

Archaeologist Michael Shanks writes about the common life cycles of things, buildings, and

[7] An example of such an encounter is the management of Duisburg Nord Lanschaftpark, a previous ironworks now landscape park in West Germany. The concept of *industrienatur* (the intertwinement of industrial culture and nature) is the framework that accommodates for a management that invites change: Ragwort and different species have been allowed to settle and grow, and the plants are seemingly recognized as individuals, with histories and rights. The ideas behind the management of the built structures, was that the site's "physical nature" should be allowed progress (DeSilvey 2017, 101-110). While there are many nuances to whether or not the management of the park is successful, this example shows how the rights of non-humans have been considered in heritage work.

humans. It is the materiality we have in common, he writes, which makes deterioration and death unavoidable. The acknowledgment of this similarity forms the basis of what Shanks calls "the symmetry of people and things" (Shanks 1998, 19-23). The conventional notion is the dualistic understanding of the human world as separate from the object world, just as society and history are contrasted to the environment and nature. According to Shanks, the reason for aversions against decay and disappearance is rooted in a perceived danger of the collapse of these dualisms (1998, 22). Shanks proposes an acceptance of the symmetry of humans and objects, all while pointing out that there is no such thing as "pure" human relations. We are constantly intertwined with non-humans, and we hold shared histories (Shanks 1998, 23).

In his chapter in *The social life of things – commodities in a cultural perspective*, anthropologist Igor Kopytoff presents a theoretical framework for writing culturally informed biographies of objects. Through the process of classification, diverse things must be made cognitively alike for them to be put in the same category – and made unalike when selected for different categories (Kopytoff 1986, 70). The concept of categorization is relevant in understanding deaccessioning since the practice can be understood as a transfer from one category to another. Kopytoff's main focus is commodities, but all things must be culturally defined as being a specific type of thing. A thing might be a commodity at one time and priceless at another, and the same thing can be viewed as a commodity by one individual and not by another (Kopytoff 1986, 64). The changes in an object's categorization are relevant in all of my cases. For example, in Bååstede, many of the objects went through dramatic shifts in categorization, which in turn shifted the narrative surrounding them.

When writing the biography of an object, it is useful to ask similar questions to what one would ask when investigating a person's life. Kopytoff suggests asking where a specific thing comes from, who made it, what "career" it has had, and what is considered an optimal career for this type of thing. Asking questions relating to the duration of time is also important: What are the recognized time periods in the object's life, and what cultural symbols are connected to these times? Kopytoff then presents the question that I find the most relevant for investigating processes around deaccessioning, especially when it comes to disposal: "How does the thing's use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness?" (Kopytoff 1986, 66).

Kopytoff writes about the *social* lives of objects, but I would like to include DeSilvey's argument of not forgetting that objects also have *biological* and *chemical* lives.

These kinds of lives can according to her become more readable when they are being phased out of social spheres. Then, other histories and biographies can be appreciated (DeSilvey 2017, 30). Approaching and interpreting an object as a process and not as something stable, can open up possibilities to tackle the ambiguous elements of the object's material form, whether it is intact or starting to disappear (DeSilvey 2017, 30). I will mostly discuss the objects in my cases through a lens of culture; endowed with social meaning with cultural definitions and redefinitions, but I will also take into consideration the biological and chemical lives, as these will provide insight into valuable aspects of deaccessioning outside of traditional frames. Connecting the theory of Kopytoff with DeSilvey's perspectives opens up for conducting an ANT analysis, where natural and social processes, in practice, become intertwined. The uncertainties in the values and identities of the objects will be the focal points when including these perspectives in my analysis.

"A Living Heritage Approach" – When Preservation of Fabric is Not the Prioritized Form of Care

"We prefer a past that is fragile, a past that needs our attention", writes DeSilvey (2017, 178). The notion of care when it comes to cultural heritage is therefore deeply associated with protecting and preserving fabric. Philosopher Greg Kennedy establishes a division between two modes of care – care that forces its will on the objects and beings of the world, and care that makes relations with what is cared for (DeSilvey 2017, 179). It is this second mode of care that recognizes the role of communities and changes in relations, which is visible in the next theoretical perspective, "a living heritage approach".

In his article *Moving Beyond a Values-Based Approach to Heritage Conservation,* Poulios argues for a shift away from the traditional "values-based" approach to heritage management (see p. 4). According to him, it is not compatible with "living heritage", which he explains as "a heritage site that maintains its original function, as continually reflected in the process of its spatial definition and arrangement, in response to the changing circumstances in society at local, national and international level" (Poulios 2010, 171, 175). None of my case examples are about heritage sites, which is Poulios' concern, but I still find the living heritage approach useful to apply to types of deaccessioning in my cases.

Poulios lists the many weaknesses of the values-based approach; the most important being the fact that the managing authority of heritage mostly lies with conservation professionals. Poulios states that in theory, conservators are just one of the many stakeholder groups. In practice, however, they become the leading authority, overseeing other stakeholder

groups (Poulios 2010, 174). As a result of this imbalance in power, a values-based approach tends to focus on preserving the physical form of heritage objects and sites. While modern ideals are that both intangible and tangible aspects are to be considered equally, the case is that tangible elements are the ones prioritized as they are considered a "non-renewable resource" (Poulios 2010, 173).

When heritage is treated as a fixed resource that needs to be materially preserved in its authentic form for the future, a discontinuity between past and present is established. This gap between past and present maintained by conservation ethics opposes the perceived continuity inherent in living heritage sites (Poulios 2010, 174). Poulios presents a "living heritage approach" as an alternative model of heritage management. More concentrated on a community's relationship with a heritage site, the concepts of continuity and change are at the heart of this approach, breaching the gap between past, present, and future:

> *"In the context of continuity, the boundaries between past, present, and future are eliminated. Past, present, and future are unified into an ongoing present, and thus the present is seen as the continuation of the past into the future" (Poulios 2010, 180).*

The central aim of the living heritage approach is to conserve the relationship between the communities and the heritage sites they are associated with. Here, the material form prioritized in values-based conservation is given a lower priority. The materials are generally preserved, but the approach opens up the possibility of a variety of practices, and in some instances, the fabric can be treated as a "renewable source." Within this model, conservation will be more embracing towards change if it can support the relevance of the heritage site or object to the community (Poulios 2010, 180). Community involvement is as we see the core element of this approach.

Poulios presents three criteria that prioritize various groups' interests in a site, all within the context of continuity: 1) The function of the site. 2) The processes of management, definition, and arrangement of the site. 3) The presence of the core community in or near the site. It is the local community's relationship with the site that is given the highest priority, while other groups; conservationists and peripheral communities are given a secondary role (Poulios 2010, 180). The living heritage approach is composed by Poulios as a way to work with living heritage *sites*, however, he does state that the approach can be applied to other types of cultural heritage. The living heritage approach will be relevant when discussing Bååstede. The form of caring for the objects now returned has, as I will show, previously been

centered around fabric preservation, in a way that has had negative consequences for the source communities' management of the objects today.

A management model that emphasizes heritage as continuous processes and not as stable objects, can help stress valuable aspects of deaccessioning that may not have been considered when viewed within the values-based framework. A living heritage approach considers heritage, not as a non-renewable resource, but as something that continues to be renewed through the maintenance of social relations and practices that infuse the tangible heritage with meaning. From this perspective, the alterations or even disappearance of material form can be productive and meaningful: "Some things will remain, but others will be allowed to pass on, or over (DeSilvey 2017, 185). With this outlook, the living heritage approach will also be applicable to the Aker collection and *The Living Room*.

Losing Heritage – Objects, Memory, and Forgetting

Cornelius Holtorf presents in his paper *Averting loss aversion in cultural heritage*, a theory where he merges two theoretical perspectives: Daniel Kahneman's loss aversion theory and Tim Ingold's theory of people and structures as continuing processes. Holtorf argues that heritage is the perpetual manifestation of transformations over periods of time and not the victim of time. Even so-called vandalism and looting can, according to Holtorf, add to, and not just threaten, heritage. He asks if it is even possible for heritage to disappear at all (Holtorf 2015, 417). His argument lies within the notion that loss and destruction are central to the concept of cultural heritage. The losses felt in the 19th century, as pointed out in Chapter 1, p. 3, generated social and political attention to heritage (Holtorf 2015, 405). Holtorf uses the example of memory work in the aftermath of 9/11 to underline that the loss of heritage contributes to forming collective identities even more than the preservation of it (Holtorf 2015, 406).

Kahneman's theory of loss aversion is developed within behavioral economics. It shows a tendency in people's preferability to avoid losses rather than to obtain gains of the same value as the loss. Holtorf transfers Kahneman's theory from the field of economics to the field of cultural heritage and argues that within the Western heritage sector, there has been a strong preference to avoid loss over obtaining gains, even if those gains have the same societal value. The accumulation and conservation paradigm is, according to Holtorf, *a manifestation of loss aversion* (2015, 406). The continuance of the "status quo" within the field of cultural heritage management is believed to be superior to the loss or substitution of heritage. Holtorf asks if prioritizing the preservation of the existing material heritage over

acquiring new heritage is justified when considering the interests of both present and future generations. Objects' values are dependent on social and cultural contexts, making individual objects replaceable. Their values will therefore endure regardless of what happens to individual objects (Holtorf 2015, 408). Holtorf is mostly interested in the loss of heritage in the context of vandalism, but his take on loss aversion is highly applicable to processes of deaccessioning. Holtorf's theoretical approach to loss has given me a conceptual entry to understand the resistance that so often surrounds processes of deaccessioning.

Tim Ingold proposes a view of people and buildings not as complete entities, but as "crystallizations of persistent processes that continue to carry on, while occasionally leaving behind ephemeral cast-offs into the archaeological record" (Holtorf 2015, 410). The quote means that the lives of humans and objects do not start or end but are punctuated by the changes in the processes they undergo and create. According to Ingold, humans are not just born: They are conceived genetically and mentally constructed before they come into the physical world. Also, their influence on both people and the environment continues after they are gone. This notion is, according to Ingold, the same for buildings. Holtorf transfers Ingold's perspective to the heritage field: "Heritage actively creates the flow of time through the pastness heritage objects possess" (Holtorf 2015, 410). Heritage not only represents the past but constantly creates it.

Holtorf writes that the theoretical perspectives of Kahneman and Ingold, together with other recent arguments, represent the beginning of a developing paradigm shift within the field of heritage management (Holtorf 2015, 411). The paradigm shift refers to, as I understand it, a new interest in loss as a phenomenon, the choices that lie behind definitions of heritage, and how non-humans and humans are interrelated in what constitutes cultural heritage. Holtorf also points to new developments in heritage management where perspectives like Ingold's seem to make way, like the English heritage project *Change and Creation* which set out to publicly recognize that all heritage exists only in the present. Projects like this show less fear of material loss and a willingness to appreciate destructive changes (Holtorf 2015, 412). *The Living Room* and the deaccessioning of the Aker collection are also examples of such developments.

Historian of architecture Adrian Forty writes in the book *The Art of Forgetting* that in the West, material objects have come to represent collective memories – their disintegration and decay mean forgetting and thereby losing part of collective identity. But this logic is too simple, he says. The perception that objects and memory go hand in hand is not always true

(Forty 1999, 2). Referring to memory researcher Paul Connerton, Forty writes that material objects hold much less weight in processes of remembering than cultural practices like rituals and standardized social behavior (1999, 2). Three reasons are listed for doubting that objects can take on the mental form of memory:

1. The concept of *ephemeral monuments* that are found in several non-western societies. In these contexts, the destruction or abandonment of the monuments *serves* collective memory rather than hurting it.
2. The concept of *repressed memory.* Sigmund Freud's research on mental processes shows that memories can be repressed but not disappear, unlike objects which are in a constant decaying process.
3. The difficulties in how we remember *historical atrocities.* In cases like the Holocaust, typical memorial practices fail to convey the true reality of the events. In many ways, pure material representations lessen the horror of the atrocities (Forty 1999, 4-6).

Holtorf continues to develop the theory of Forty, stating that the loss of physical heritage does not necessarily mean the loss of memory and that the loss can benefit society in the same way the physical form did. The values the objects contain are not necessarily lost, writes Holtorf (2015, 409). This perspective supports the argument for increasing the use of deaccessioning in museums. When part of the reasoning behind the piling up and for-ever-keeping heritage objects is refuted, a doorway to changing practice opens.[8]

The argument of loss can also be turned around – something can lose its value as heritage without being lost. If an object of heritage (artifact, landscape, building, practice) is deliberately and intentionally discarded and therefore not fulfilling a role in society, only then has it lost its status as heritage. This *does not* involve having to erase the heritage object physically (Holtorf 2015, 417). This is, in my view, the case in many museums that hold big and disorderly collections where knowledge, condition, and value slowly disintegrate. The Aker collection and the objects used in The Living Room were such collections – neglected and forgotten. While still being part of a museum made *the idea of them* valuable, in practice they were not. The processes set in motion around them through the two forms of

[8] The theory that the loss of physical heritage might benefit society is interesting in light of recent statue debates. Arguments opposing statue removal often express the fear of erasing history. Considering Forty's perspectives: the narratives that occur surrounding the lost statue both keep the collective memory about what the statue represented but also provide a new critical view that on its own develops collective memory.

deaccessioning gave the objects new meanings. This is a point I will elaborate on in Chapter 4, p. 48-49.

Making Disposal Manageable – Sustainable Museum Collecting

Having focused on theoretical approaches that concern underlying ideas about object-human relations, heritage, and memory, I will now shift my gaze to a more practice-oriented theory that seeks to find solutions to the unsustainable collection management we see in museums today. In 2008, Nick Merriman published a study on how little disposal was taking place in British museums. The results of his findings showed that museums over the course of 15 years were continuing to collect at a high speed while not using disposal as a management tool. Merriman's main argument is that museums have the capacity to expand their collections "as long as a path towards sustainability is followed" (Merriman 2008, 11). In following this path, disposal is necessary, but to provide disposal with the role it needs, we need an intellectual framework to justify it (Merriman 2008, 11).

The size of museum collections will inevitably reach a limit if museums continue to include more objects than they exclude if the ideal of a well-preserved, well-documented, and researchable collection is to be kept (Hylland 2013, 5). Merriman claims that deaccessioning is usually undertaken based on "practical necessity" (space restrictions and costs) only – not because it is viewed as a sustainable tool in collection development. What is needed is a revision of ideas that lie at the root of collecting and asking if they still serve us (Merriman 2008, 11). While almost all museum workers accept the need for both disposal and continual collecting, most of them do not want to start disposals before they have full knowledge of their collections through documentation work (Merriman 2008, 11). Thus, the problem with disposal is not that its necessity is not recognized, but the lack of knowledge surrounding it.

As stated above, the traditional notion has been that museum collections contain the material forms of memory and thus provide an "objective" record of the past, rooted in the identities of communities. Revising the history of these ideas together with theories of memory, challenge their place in the contemporary museum (Merriman 2008, 9). According to Merriman, the anxieties surrounding disposal are caused by several intertwined ideas:

1. That collections are the material form of collective memory.
2. That knowledge derives from classificatory holdings.
3. The role the museum plays in a capitalistic society as a "sacred set-aside".
4. That collections are kept for future generations (Merriman 2008, 12).

Some of these notions, according to Merriman, contrast the ideals of the contemporary museum – where knowledge is understood not as something unified, but as multifocal: Depending upon historical and political contexts as well as class, gender, ethnicity, etc. There is today an acceptance of the multiple perspectives of what meanings objects or displays hold, as well as a greater emphasis on the value of intangible heritage. It is when considering these changes in notions about the contemporary museum and its societal role, that the presumption against disposal does not fit (Merriman 2008, 13).

Challenging the notions of objectivity, permanence, and collective memory indicates that museums must give *the purpose* of having collections more attention. When notions of objectivity and permanence are not actively challenged, we cannot properly tackle the issues of managing growing collections, Merriman argues (Merriman 2008, 14). Merriman suggests freeing museum workers from their predecessors – then they can see collections as dynamic resources where reworkings can be done to better suit todays and future needs. For this to happen we need to assess collections according to their value/significance for the present and future, instead of treating everything as holding equal value. Merriman writes that we must be aware of the different ways of assessing value and thus develop means for evaluation: Each museum should define its "critical cultural capital" that should be kept and passed on. There are museums that are already doing this, like the Glasgow and Glenbow Museums (Merriman 2008, 15), and as I will show, Oslo Museum.[9] Merriman's argument is very much in line with what Knell writes about deaccessioning: It should be seen in the light of what role the objects play in the museum (Knell 2004, 28).

Merriman does not mean that we can get rid of everything we do not like, but rather that managers and curators must acquire the confidence to assess and ascribe value to the collection in their care. This is how we allow for sustainable collection management, writes Merriman (2008, 17). There are possible hindrances to this form of collection management, the biggest being the incomplete knowledge of what is held in collections. Greater digitalization efforts are already starting to ease this issue. Also, in the UK, the development of "Subject Specialist Networks" (a website for advice on collections), makes it easier to share information (Merriman 2008, 18).

Cultural historian Marius Hylland asserts that deaccessioning is often treated as an ethical dilemma (the practice is included in ICOM's ethical guidelines). Why is this when

[9] Museums that have been assessing the value of their collections and making decisions about what should and should not be passed on to the future, illustrate that there are significant exceptions to the accumulation and conservation paradigm.

other institutions have clean-ups without discussions about ethics, he asks. Deaccessioning *is* a context and institution-dependent practice, but it is often not treated as such (Hylland 2013, 9). Only if deaccessioning harms collective memory and important knowledge does it need to become ethical (studies referenced above show that in many cases, it does not). According to Hylland, objects' journeys into collections are usually *random*, and unlike archives, object collections are not good at retaining information (particularly if the documentation and caretaking have been poorly executed). It is therefore difficult, he writes, to sustain the belief that the collections fulfill a role of complete and objective building blocks for common identity and history (Hylland 2013, 9).

Hylland argues that while deaccessioning is a question of sustainability, it is also a question of what perspectives should dominate in museum work. If we allow the growth of collections that are not adequately communicated or researched, without continuous reflections on what should be included or excluded in the collections, there is a possibility that the museum's legitimacy and basis of existence can be diminished (Hylland 2013, 6). Deaccessioning (especially disposals and sales) stirs the "material knowledge fundament" that makes out the central legitimacy for museums as societal institutions. But the link between museums and the material is not as unbreakable as it once was, Hylland writes. Museum work today is heavily influenced by digitalization and the transmission of intangible heritage (Hylland 2013, 6).

If a revision is done of what kind of knowledge institutions museums are and should be, as well as the museum's role as institutions of identity, then the ethics of deaccessioning are challenged (Hylland 2013, 10). Hyland's main argument, similar to Merriman's, is that in order to theoretically legitimize deaccessioning, the object-based, material epistemology that museums still operate with needs to be placed in a critical light (Hylland 2013, 20).

CHAPTER 3 | OPPORTUNITY IN LOSS

Three Cases

This chapter is dedicated to the three cases that lay the foundation for theoretical reflections on deaccessioning. I will present and analyze each case separately, weaving in methodological tools and theory. The contents of each case could cover a whole thesis on their own, thus I limit myself to general descriptions and exploration of themes that I deem most useful in answering the research question. For case one, the Aker Collection, I will address several problems related to deaccessioning: prior documentation, openness, reputation, and the need to make prioritizations when working with collections. For case two, Bååstede, the typical repatriation topics of post-colonial discourse and morality will have their place, but my analysis will center on two themes: how phasing the objects out of the Oslo-based museums created a new type of knowledge, and how the ideal and rhetoric of repatriation overshadow the practical issues for the ones on the receiving end. For case three, *The Living Room*, I will present a limited exhibition analysis and reflect on how the kind of experimentation the project contains can be a meaningful alternative to disposal.

Case One: Destruction – The Deaccessioning of the *Aker Collection*

Fritz Holland, the architect who founded the City Museum of Oslo, was an enthusiastic collector. On a mission to establish a museum for the municipality of *Aker* (now part of Oslo), he went to auctions and traveled to farms around Oslo to collect objects. Just two weeks before the German invasion in 1940, he was able to put together the museum's first exhibition on *Nordre Skøyen Hovedgård,* a banquet hall in the southwest of Oslo (OM Report 2021, 5). When the premises were confiscated by the Nazis, Holland had to move the collection consisting of big artifacts (carts, wagons, tables, farm equipment etc.). The *Aker collection* has since then been stored in different locations (museums, farms, and barns) administrated by the heritage manager of Oslo. In storage, the collection has been exposed to multiple accidents (fire, collapsed roof, theft, etc.) In 1979 the whole of the collection was placed in a barn in Oslo where it stood for over 15 years. The ownership of the Aker collection was transferred to the City Museum in 1981, but the collection was not moved again until 2005 (OM Report 2021, 6).

In 2006, the City Museum was consolidated with Intercultural Museum and the Theatre Museum. Within the new *Oslo Museum*[10], these museums have their own foundation. Before the consolidation took place, the City Museum wanted order in their collections, and a revision was done of the Aker collection before it was moved, now to two barns at Nesodden (the farms *Hasle* and *Gjøfjell*) (OM Report 2021, 6). The processes of collecting, storing, documenting, and moving the Aker collection, are an important backdrop to the deaccessioning of part of the collection in 2020-2021. The main sources for this case are the official but unfinished document of the deaccessioning, and an interview with the collection manager at Oslo Museum, Kristin Gaukstad, who oversaw the whole process and wrote the report.

There were many problems with the Aker collection. The report on the 2020-2021 deaccessioning states that the barns that stored the collection were not suitable for cold storage, and that the museum did not have an adequate overview of the objects in the collection. Information on provenience and context is described as flawed and incomplete (OM Report 2021, 2). In my interview with Gaukstad, she strongly expressed her dissatisfaction with the situation:

> *"In my opinion, it is unprofessional to not know what you are managing and why. Museums should have a clearly defined responsibility of knowing what is in their collections, why they are taking care of them, and what resources are being used" (Gaukstad 24.01.23. My translation).*

Since 2013, Oslo Museum has been in dialogue with the City Museum and its board of ownership about the Aker collection. Between 2017 and 2019, several inspections of the collection and its premises were carried out. In the report, it is made clear that all parties were united in the decision that something needed to be done. This notion is also emphasized by Gaukstad: "We paid hundreds of thousands (NOK) each year to keep something that was just standing there, rotting away. The board gave us free reins to prioritize in the collection" (Gaukstad 24.01.23. My translation).

Beginning in the fall of 2020 and ending in 2021, around half of the Aker collection was deaccessioned. While my analysis will mostly emphasize destruction and disposal, this was only one out of three methods of deaccessioning used. Gaukstad explained that they deaccessioned part of the collection into objects for use in the museum (couches and carpets).

[10] The Labor Museum also became part of Oslo Museum in 2013 (Oslo Museum).

They also deaccessioned objects in the form of transfer to other heritage institutions and to one private person (farm equipment to farmer Carl Fredrik Heltzen) (Gaukstad 24.01.23).

Every single one of the objects was revised, photographed, documented, and considered for keeping – or discarding. Over 800 objects were revised, and 501 objects were taken out of the collection. The report does not mention how many of these were destroyed or deaccessioned in other ways. The removed objects are still to be found in the museum's database, now with the word *discontinued* next to their identification number (OM Report 2021, 3).

No provenience = good riddance?

Aker, comprised of rural areas around Oslo, used to be its own municipality until it was merged with the capital in 1948. It was a rural area, but due to its proximity to the city, agriculture was market-oriented (Bergkvist, Hovdhaugen 2018, 10). According to the deaccessioning report, there is not much left of the previous farming culture, but many of the farmhouses are still preserved (OM Report 2021, 4). The Aker collection mainly comprised of furniture and farm equipment, but not everything came from farms in Aker. The poor documentation done by Holland and later managers, as well as damages (caused by accidents and the many moves), have left Oslo Museum with little knowledge about where many of the objects come from (OM Report 2021, 6). "The context was not as important to Holland as it is to us now", says Gaukstad (24.01.23. My translation). The lack of knowledge about the objects is a key reason for the deaccessioning.

In reading the report, one can sense a pervasive frustration with the collection's lack of context. The document betrays an indirect critique of the City Museum's previous management of the collection when presenting the moving project in 2005. In these paragraphs, it is mentioned that while some broken objects were indeed deaccessioned in the moving process, the City Museum still moved many hundreds of objects without provenience into the barns (OM Report 2021, 6). The report also states, in an accusatory tone, that the City Museum logged information and pictures in different and unconnected Word documents, not transferring anything to the museum's digital database (Primus). Many of the objects were not given a placement code: "It has therefore been hard – if not impossible – to find out specifically what and how many objects were placed in the two barns" (OM Report 2021, 7. My translation).

In analyzing how a document shapes and frames a case, Asdal and Reinertsen (2020, 107) suggest asking questions about the document's time dimension: How is the case

presented in the document related to past events and perceptions? As I have shown, the deaccessioning report strongly builds its case on the previous management of the Aker collection: moving, damages, and most importantly, poor documentation. The revision and deaccessioning are presented as a "clean up" of past work and as something that is needed and has been needed for a long time: "They (the City Museum) have for a long time been aware of the Aker-collections fate and condition" (OM Report 2021, 7. My translation).

Figure 1. Evaluation of duplicates: Kristin M. Gaukstad/Oslo Museum. (2020)

In evaluating the objects in 2020-2021, Oslo Museum used a traffic-light model and a value scale from zero to three. Red marking: deaccessioning/destruction, yellow: find out more, green: to keep. The report names the physical state of the object and its provenience as the directing elements for evaluation. An excerpt from an Excel sheet in the report shows that most of the objects have "no" under the category of provenience. If it exists, it is only written as a vague location of where the object probably came from, with no comprehensive context. The majority of the objects are marked as being in "ok" condition, most of them "ok" with a question mark (OM Report 2021, 3). Still, the Excel excerpt in the report shows that all the objects logged as being in ok condition, have the value markings of 0-1, meaning that they will be deaccessioned for use, transferred to another institution, or destroyed. This indicates

that context/provenience was the leading criterion in deciding how "keepable" the object is. The meaning of context is also strongly emphasized by Gaukstad:

> *"The object itself was the most important aspect back then (at the time of being collected). Now it is provenience and authenticity. Maybe the pendant swings back again, but so be it. Then we will have thrown all the bad stuff away. Provenience is important. Maybe I will be scolded for throwing away something that might have been significant in some way or to someone, something that might have belonged to this and this. But if the information is not well enough registered, and only exists in the head of some old retiree, then it is not good enough" (Gaukstad 24.01.23. My translation).*

The significance of context and registration is interesting in light of the present-future perspective in Harrison's take on the making of heritage: It is about constructions in the present and taking responsibility for the future (Harrison 2015, 35). If heritage is something that emerges from working to keep the past alive for the future, then the role of documentation is central: How well can the past be kept alive for future generations without knowledge about the object's context? In the light of this deaccessioning case, it becomes clear that poor documentation and consequently lack of context obscures past objects' value as heritage. In making decisions about the value of collections based on how well they carry the past into the present, Oslo Museum made investments for the future. Gaukstad points out the importance of making space for new collections:

> *"I am most afraid that our time will not be represented in the museum because we do not have the resources to take care of it. Many museums have seized collecting and that is horrible. ICOM tells us that we should be active collectors, but numerous museums say no to objects of recent times because they do not have an overview of their collections or enough space to keep collecting. Where is your generation or mine? When museums first were established, they collected a lot from the present time, but now we do not do that anymore. The obliquity that exists today worries me" (Gaukstad 24.01.23. My translation).*

In hearing Gaukstad's perspective on collecting, one can ask if the aspect of the present and future is being lost in many museums' heritage work.

Destruction and disposal – full candor, or not?

While context probably was the most important aspect for the overall deaccessioning of the Aker collection, it seems that the condition of the object was the main reason for destruction and disposal (though this is not mentioned in the report): "What we chose to destroy was mostly damaged and moldy things, unstable objects", says Gaukstad (24.01.23. My translation). Objects were thrown into a container going to a waste plant, and they used a

crane to destroy bigger artifacts, lifting them up, and letting them crash into the container. The feeling of crossing a boundary was expressed in my interview with Gaukstad: “It was scary when we first started to destroy, but after a while, it became quite fun” (24.01.23. My translation).

Figure 2. Piano thrown into a container: Kristin M. Gaukstad/Oslo Museum. (2020).

What seemed most important in this way of deaccessioning, was not destroying the object, but destroying the museum number attached to each object. “If the number was engraved on the object, we would carve it out so that the object no longer is recognized as a museum object”, says Gaukstad (24.01.23. My translation). I asked her why this is the case, but her answer was not clear: “I think it has something to do with the reputation of the museum. When we destroy it, it is not a museum object anymore, it is just wood or iron” (Gaukstad 24.01.23. My translation). The report could not provide answers as it does not give an account of how the deaccessioning and destructions were carried out in practice.

SPECTRUM[11] clearly communicates the importance of candor in deaccessioning processes in its statement: “Communicate the process proactively to interested parties and to the public” (Spectrum 5.0. My translation). This aspect also seems important to Gaukstad: “We document everything we are doing, step by step. Everything needs to be transparent, as it

[11] SPECTRUM is a British standard on collection management, containing clear guidelines for deaccessions. Norwegian museums have just begun to incorporate the standard in their collection plans (Helgestad 16.01.23).

can lead to people who want to give gifts to the museum thinking that we just throw away the things they give" (Gaukstad 24.01.23. My translation). I sense a contradiction in the idea of openness. If candor is integral to the process of deaccessioning, why remove the evidence of the object once belonging to a museum? Is it so essential for the museum's reputation that not even a plank with a museum number should be found?

Merriman's reasoning for museums' anxiety surrounding disposal (see p. 20), can help to explain the ambiguity around the ideal of openness we see in the case of the Aker collection. The new ideal of openness in deaccessioning processes adds to the already present tension between traditional and recent ideas about the role of a museum's collection. I would argue that old notions about the museum (as a sacred set-aside preserving physical representations of collective memory for future generations) create the framework in which museums to some degree conceal their disposals. The 2009 exhibition *Disposal?* (see p.1) represent a contrast to the hiding of some aspects of the disposals of the Aker collection.

The issue of reputation becomes clearer when we look at the museal practice of *selling* objects from collections (this is most common in art museums). In describing museums in financial crisis, attorney Jorja Ackers Cirigliana says: "Museums are being forced to choose between making huge cutbacks – even permanent closure – and deaccessioning portions of collections at the risk of lawsuits and condemnation" (Cirigliana 2011, 365). A popular example of this is the Northampton Borough Council's decision to sell an object from Northampton Museum's collection – a 4000-year-old Egyptian statue of the scribe Sekhemka, sold on auction for 15, 8 million pounds. As a result, the museum lost public funding, and The English Arts Council (the agency that accredit British museums) removed its status as a museum institution with the effect of five years (Baily 2015).

Destroying and selling objects are in contradiction with the (traditional) ethos of a museum: It questions their moral standing as caretakers of the past without capitalistic interests. In the case of the Aker collection, the feeling of doing something "wrong" in the eye of the public was evident both in the lack of focus on the issue in the deaccessioning report and in the data from the interview: "I have fought with other museums about deaccessioning. It is obvious that it is a risk of bad reputation, but I am sure that most museums think that it is cool that we dared to do it" (Gaukstad 24.01.23. My translation).

Choices – to have or not to have

In her discourse analysis of changes surrounding deaccessions in Norwegian museum-political documents, Sund uncovers when and how deaccessioning entered white papers and

public accounts. The word *prioritization* first occurred in the 2009 government report on museums (*Museumsmeldinga*), the first to bring up deaccessioning as part of a bigger task to prioritize in collections. By also connecting the practice to resources, the report signalized the emergence of a time in collection management where difficult choices needed to be made (Sund 2016, 66). Sund shows how the word prioritization became more frequently used in arguments in favor of deaccessioning and how it started to reflect a new understanding of collections management (Sund 2016, 56). The emphasis on prioritization and choices is prevalent both in my interview with Gaukstad and in the 2021 deaccessioning report.

That prioritization has become an established concept in the guidelines from the government is something that the deaccessioning report refers to when legitimizing the deaccessioning of the Aker Collection. The report states that in the last years, the government has issued all museums the responsibility to make prioritizations in their collections (OM Report 2021, 9). The Australian method *Significance 2.0* became a central tool for Oslo Museum when deciding that deaccessioning was to be the fate for most of the Aker collection. *Significance* works as a guide to assess the value and meaning of collections. It presents steps for evaluating a collection that involves assessing history, provenience, condition, and relevance for the museum and its aims (Russel, Winkworth 2009, 10).

Oslo Museum has done what Merriman suggests that all museums should do: Freeing museum workers from their predecessors and letting them ascribe value to the objects in their care.[12] The lack of context and the objects' low-grade physical condition placed the Aker collection at the bottom of their list of prioritizations:

> *"(…) both condition and documentation do not reach the level we have set as a limit for managing our objects. Consequently, the Museum has initiated a bigger prioritization project with the aim of professional management of the collection. Deaccessioning and destruction/disposal will naturally be included in this management" (OM Report 2021, 10. My translation).*

As we see, making pragmatic choices on the basis of evaluation and prioritization was central to the deaccessioning of the Aker collection.

By making prioritizations in the Aker collection, Gaukstad and Oslo Museum put the question of why we hold collections at the forefront. The part of the collection that did not contribute to fulfilling the aim of 'holding a collection' was destroyed or transferred.

[12] Oslo Museum has established the art and photo collection as being of the highest historical value and is, therefore, top prioritized. Furthermore, objects that are well documented in regard to history and provenience, are also prioritized (OM Report 2021, 9).

Emphasis was put on the values and aims of the museum's collections, instead of clinging to traditional notions of permanence and object-based collective memory.

Case Two: Repatriation – Post-Colonial Deaccessioning of Sámi Heritage

> *"Even though we deaccession, we can still tell stories" (Ween 20.02.23. My translation).*

In 2010, an extensive project to return cultural heritage to Sámi institutions in Norway was set in motion. The project, fittingly named Bååstede, the Sámi word for *return*, was officially launched in 2014. It came to an end in 2019, with the repatriation of over 1600 objects from two Norwegian museums, *Norsk Folkemuseum* (the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History) and *Kulturhistorisk museum* (the Historical Museum) to six Sámi museums governed by the Sámi parliament. The project was initiated by Norsk Folkemuseum which put together a working group with their own representative, and representatives from the Sámi Museum Association (*samisk museumslag*) and the Sámi parliament (Gaup 2021, 8). The group issued the report *Bååstede – Tilbakeføring av samisk kulturarv* (hereby Bååstede Report 2012), which is a central source for my analysis of the case.

Interviews with the representative of Kulturhistorisk museum, anthropologist Gro Birgit Ween, and the representative of the Sámi Museum Association, museum director and conservator Anne May Olli, will be used actively throughout my analysis. Bååstede was a long and comprehensive project, hence there are many aspects I will not address, like the practical execution of the project, how it was organized, or the history of the objects. My presentation of the project will be incomplete, as I have chosen to present elements of the process that are specifically relevant to my research questions only and which were highlighted in the interviews I conducted.

The objects repatriated through the Bååstede project were part of *the Sámi collection,* which at the time of the project, consisted of around 4500 objects (Bååstede Report 2012, 31). Before delving into the case, I want to provide some historical background of this collection, as it was detached from its original context and redefined by people outside of the culture it was taken from: Sámi cultural heritage was collected in a colonial context and displayed in ethnographic exhibitions in Oslo (Gaup 2021, 8). The Sámi collection was originally part of the ethnographic section in Kulturhistorisk museum, and it was not until 1951 that the museum transferred a considerable part of the collection to Norsk Folkemuseum. The idea was to incorporate Sámi culture in a national frame (Bååstede Report 2012, 30). In spite of

this change regarding Sámi culture as part of the cultural history of Norway, it took decades before the question of repatriation was raised.

Since the 1980s and in the light of international law and the state's obligations toward its indigenous population, dialogues about returning objects to Sámi institutions became more frequent. These dialogues can also be seen as part of a broad and international decolonial discourse.[13] Still, the first comprehensive repatriation of displaced Sámi heritage was the signing of the Bååstede Agreement in 2012. The agreement was between the Sámi Parliament, Norsk Folkemuseum, and Kulturhistorisk museum.

Figure 3. Objects from the Sámi collection at Norsk Folkemuseum before distribution: Gro Ween.

Bååstede became a project of negotiation – about which objects to return, under what conditions, and about resources (space and economy). Every single object of the collection was thoroughly revised, and all provenience was mapped out (Ween 20.02.23). A defined precondition behind the negotiations was that the two Oslo-based museums had to repatriate the most valuable objects in the Sámi collection:

[13] An example of one of the earlier repatriations was the return of a Sieidi-stone (a Sámi sacrificial stone) from Norsk Folkemuseum back to nature on the mountain Gargovarri in Kautokeino in 1997 (Bååstede Report 2012, 35).

> *"We knew we had to give away all of the drums, everything religious and the things relating to rituals. We had to give away what was most spectacular. I did not believe in making wishes or demands about what we wanted to keep." (Ween 20.02.23. My translation).*

The quote shows that objects related to lived and ritualized culture were understood as the most valuable. The parties had also agreed that only around half of the collection was to be returned, with the other half left in Oslo. Ween explained that besides there being Sámi people in Oslo, the idea was that the capital-based museums required parts of the collection to teach and convey to the majority population. Many of the repatriated objects still remain in the capital, in storage at Norsk Folkemuseum (Ween 20.02.23).

Post-colonial context and symbolic values – Deaccessioning in the form of repatriation

In the 2012 Bååstede report, the project is described as an extensive step towards realizing internationally defined principles for indigenous heritage, and an expression of Norway's responsibility to its indigenous population. This context of 'making up for history' is evident in the report (Bååstede Report 2012, 2). As pointed out in Chapter 1, p. 8, it can be useful to look at the context a document writes itself into (Asdal & Reinertsen 2020, 119). When establishing the foundation for the project, the 2012 Bååstede report states: "It is clear that this is a theme (repatriation of Sámi cultural heritage) that also needs to be seen in relation to the international development of indigenous people's position, decolonization in different parts of the world, the effects of human rights, etc. (…)" (Bååstede Report 2012, 8. My translation). It is obvious that the understanding of this form of deaccessioning is part of a discourse – and one that is very different from the discourse surrounding museum disposals.

In addition to connecting the project to international cultural processes, the report also relates the project to different Norwegian developments that have led to the realization of Bååstede (Bååstede Report 2012, 8). Both the national and international references show how the document builds its case on other projects, arguments, and cultural processes outside of the case itself, giving the deaccessioning processes a specific moral dimension. When deaccessioning comes in the form of repatriation, it has a clear symbolic feature: Repatriation within a museum context is primarily about returning material heritage or human remains, but Finbog points out that the practice is about much more than that. By referencing indigenous researchers, she writes that the return of indigenous heritage operates in a sphere of *healing*,

in the sense that repatriations deal with symbolic values, practices, and religious beliefs (Finbog 2020, 126).

Some negotiations that took place during the Bååstede project highlight how repatriation goes beyond the returning of material. This becomes clear in one of the disputes during the Bååstede project: Both Norsk Folkemuseum and *Guovdageainnu gilisillju*, a Sámi museum in Kautokeino, wanted to include a small assortment of artifacts in their collections: A series of miniatures from the 19th century, made by Lars Jacobsen Hætta, a reindeer herder and activist from Kautokeino. He made the miniatures while imprisoned in Oslo for his part in the 1852 Sámi uprising against the Norwegian colonization of their land (Johansen 2021, 57).

Guovdageainnu gilisillju's argument for full ownership of the miniatures was that the objects had symbolic and emotional value. The artifacts being held in the local museum were seen as important for the community's history, colonial remembrance, and significance for the descendants of Hætta (Johansen 2021, 61). Norsk Folkemuseum, on their side, argued that the objects were made in Oslo and suggested dividing the collection of miniatures between the two museums. Eventually, they accepted Kautokeino's emotional connection to the miniatures (Johansen 2021, 62). Emotions and morality clearly legitimate the processes of repatriation in this case. The narrative accompanying the deaccessioning is of great importance as there were shifts in which histories were emphasized in the decision to repatriate. Both parties used historical narratives to back their arguments, but one was deemed morally superior and emotionally charged.

A different aspect of the importance of ownership was highlighted by Anne May Olli, who states:

> *"Ownership matters. With it, we get to have a voice in what kind of research is prioritized, which objects are being tested and for what purposes. We can now say yes or no and make the decisions about the collection. This is important because the Sámi people are often left out when it comes to research. For example, our museums are not approved research institutions" (Olli 25.04.23. My translation).*

Her quote shows how having the power to make decisions about own cultural heritage can make Sámi perspectives in museum research more prevalent.

"It represents continuity rather than rupture" – How deaccessioning can spur the creation of knowledge

In analyzing how repatriation can bring value to the museum that loses the objects, I would like to reframe Knell's question ("what and how will this thing contribute to our ability to know?" (Knell 2004, 34)) to: How can the *release* of this thing contribute to our ability to know? In my interview with Ween, it is clear that she sees the loss of the artifacts as a gain in knowledge:

> *"The project was not just about negotiations. We learned so much about all of the things; the objects' travels, whom they belonged to, the craftsmanship, the use of fabric, the use of animals, and so on. It was an adventure! I felt that there was empowerment in telling histories together, to creating knowledge together. Some of us knew of the craft, some about provenience, and the families to which the objects belonged. There is empowerment in creating a bigger universe around each object. That the objects leave our collection does not necessarily mean loss. Because of the production of knowledge that happens in the leaving process, and the relations made because of it, then it represents continuity rather than rupture" (Ween 20.02.23. My translation).*

Hearing Ween describe this process of creating narratives and knowledge production, makes me think about what Holtorf writes about heritage: That heritage does not only represent the past but continuously creates it (Holtorf 2015, 410). Because of the intense process of phasing objects out of one's care and into another's, the participants were able to create and establish histories about the objects. For Norsk Folkemuseum and Kulturhistorisk Museum, new challenges in how to convey these stories presented themselves.

The two Oslo-based museums now have to imagine new ways of creating exhibitions about the Sámi population, Sámi material heritage, and sharing the knowledge production that took place during the negotiation meetings. Ween has many thoughts about this challenge, and like Gaukstad, she also emphasizes the objects' context:

> *"Everything around the object is just as important as the object itself. It would be amazing if we could make the repatriation visible through a new Arctic exhibition. We have to think new: what relationship are we in Oslo going to have with Sámi culture, and how are we going to exhibit it? We can borrow things and we will make copies. In a way, I think copies are cooler for our purpose" (Ween 20.02.23).*

The quote shows how a deaccessioning process can release interest in the returned objects as part of the museum's storytelling. Losing the objects does not necessarily mean that the history they represent is lost. The absence of the objects might tell its own story, for example

in an exhibition on relations between the majority and the Sámi culture (like getting the audience to reflect upon why certain objects are returned, etc.) It is also interesting that Ween mentions copying as a strategy. Calls for museums to act as 'copying machines' have become prevalent, with the arguments that reproductions give the opportunity to enhance teaching, creativity, and new thinking, as well as the ability to reach worldwide audiences.[14] According to Hylland, digital technology has changed heritage institutions and accessibility has in some ways replaced authenticity as the core value of objects in museum collections (Brenna, Christensen & Hamran 2019, 3-4).

"The ones who return the objects are also getting rid of problems" – Toxic pesticides and the darker side of repatriation

Almost every single one of the objects returned in the Bååstede project is made out of organic material previously conserved using now outdated methods – toxic pesticides (Olli 25.04.23). Chemicals like DDT were used to "freeze" objects – originally destined for rapid demise – in time. This aspect of the collection's history and the consequences of that history showed up in both my interviews: "The things were made permanent with poison" (Ween 20.02.23. My translation). I wish to reflect on how the toxic objects affect the Sámi museums in terms of resources, museal practice, and revitalization of culture, as well as how this issue reflects an imbalance in economic funding and an abnegation of responsibility by the Oslo-based museums. The difficulties of keeping and working with pesticides are one of the central reasons why the objects are not physically returned.

"We do not want something given back to us just to keep it in a box. That is not the purpose of repatriation", says Olli (25.04.23. My translation) when I ask her about the consequences of using toxic pesticides in conservation. As director of the *RiddoDuottarMuseat*, a representative for the Sámi Museum Association in the Bååstede project, *and* a conservator, her perspective on this issue is unique and insightful. While she wants the displaced heritage of her culture returned, she wants it done properly (and that has not been the case in the Bååstede project):

[14] An example of how repatriation can be made visible through exhibition is illustrated in a recent repatriation event. In June 2023, the Chrysler Museum of Art returned a Bakor Monolith to Nigeria. The monument was most likely acquired through sale or theft during the Biafran civil war. On behalf of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, The Factum Foundation made an exact copy which will be used in the Chrysler Museum's new permanent exhibition about looting and repatriation (Béliard & Fornaciari 2023).

> *"We do not have enough recourses to manage the toxic objects. When the ownership is transferred to us, the bill for research and attempts at cleansing the objects go to us. The ones who return the objects are also getting rid of problems. Dealing with toxic objects is difficult and costly" (Olli 25.04.23. My translation).*

An interesting aspect of the Bååstede case is that the primary workgroup for the project (that Olli was part of), had the issue of pesticides clear on the agenda: The 2012 report not only states that the conservation history of the collection needs to be investigated as a step in the return process but also calls for Norsk Folkemuseum to take tests to uncover what toxins exist in the objects (textiles and fur especially) *and* to cleanse the objects for these toxins before they are returned (Bååstede Report 2012, 31). However, this aspect of the project fell away in the negotiations that followed the report. This shift is shown in the later agreements in which the topic is non-existent. In the official agreement document in 2012, it is written that the Sámi parliament is expected to take responsibility for all extraordinary expenses (Bååstede Agreement 2012, 165). This change in how the case is presented in the documents is something I did not see until after my interview with Olli.[15]

In addition to pointing out the health risk of conserving and working with the objects (cancer, Alzheimer, etc.), Olli was especially concerned with the role repatriated objects play in the revitalization of cultural practice, especially *Duodji* (traditional Sámi craftmanship):

> *"How are we going to study the objects? We need to accommodate for the duodji's, and as it is now, they cannot revitalize the techniques the objects are made by and hold the tradition alive. They are unable to do this if they cannot study the material. In order to revitalize the craftmanship one has to sit with their "nose up in" the object to study the textiles. That is how we take back lost knowledge" (Olli 25.04.23. My translation).*

This quote shows how values inherent to repatriation – the regaining of culture, knowledge, and identity – have (to some degree) been lost due to previous heritage work. I will return to this theme in chapter 4, p. 49.

[15] In 2015, the Sámi parliament issued a document where they listed different criteria that need to be in place in order for the Sámi museums to realize the management of their material cultural heritage. The need for adequate storage capacity, adequate resources for museal practice, and economic funding from the state for the return process are the first three points (2015 Sámi Parliament Bååstede Decision). These criteria have not been fulfilled. An important reason for this is that the Sámi museums do not receive economic support like Norwegian museums do (Ween 2021, 127). With the Bååstede project, Olli had hoped that the repatriation would force the state to see the necessity for upgrades. That did not happen. Now, it is 2023 and they have not made much progress (Olli 25.04.23).

Figure 4. Testing for pesticides: Gro Ween.

Repatriation is often talked about in the context of confronting the colonial history of museums and what possessing own heritage means for communities who are getting back what was lost. The nuances that Olli is providing often get lost in these discussions. The "greatness" of repatriations overshadows practical problems, as shown in this quote:

> *"The bigger institutions only want to make visible the good part of repatriation, but there are actual consequences to the practice. The issue of pesticides did not get its own place in the book about the project, the small mentions are written by someone who does not have a professional knowledge of the topic. I was not invited to hold a lecture at the conference either. I think this is because the other parties did not want critical voices" (Olli 25.04.23).*

Another aspect of repatriation is the ethnocentricity of the giver. In the Bååstede agreement, there is included a demand that the objects in the Sámi collection should not be returned to worse storage conditions (Ween 2021, 127). This notion is shared by the Sámi museums, and according to both Ween and Olli, they do not want the objects back until their resources and storage facilities can accommodate this requirement[16] (Ween 20.02.23 & Olli

[16] Representatives from Norsk Folkemuseum traveled to the Sámi museums to give technical conservation guidance. According to Olli, being told how the objects were supposed to be taken care of felt like an intervention (Olli 25.04.23).

25.04.23). It is ironic that the repatriation has happened on paper, as part of a discourse, but physical repatriation has not happened because necessary recourses do not come with the repatriation deal.

While most of the repatriated objects have not been moved physically, the stories around them have changed. New values and shifts in narratives are also an important part of repatriation and Bååstede has been a huge step in fulfilling the obligations Norwegian museums have towards the source communities whose heritage they hold. However, as Ween points out, the case is far from finished: "Whether the return in hindsight will be considered more of a symbolic gesture, or whether its decolonizing potential will be realized, is still not clear" (Ween 2021, 128).

Case Three: Transformation – Deaccessioning Exhibited

In the cold and dusty basement of Copenhagen's Medical Museion, we find *The Living Room*; a curated space where peculiar objects, installations, and constellations make up an aesthetic composition of different life-supporting processes: Water-damaged pictures, photography of decomposition and corrosion, fungus-covered statuettes, audios of mushrooms growing, a worm dome, and several assemblages of touchable objects. All these elements create a multi-sensory experience, unusual in the context of a museum. *The Living Room* is an innovative and in part provocative project led by philosopher Martin Grünfeld and a team of artists and researchers. Their aim is to explore what happens if the museum attempts to host life instead of working against it –inviting in what conservators usually are desperate to keep out (mold, fungi, insects, etc.) The life-hosting taking place in *The Living Room* is done with the help of deaccessioned and unregistered objects that the curators found in the museum's basement – neglected and forgotten.

Grünfeld explains *The Living Room* as an experimenting project, uncovering the different life stages of objects – or rather, the metabolic encounter between objects and organisms. He uses the term metabolic in an attempt to change how we talk about the life of objects and collections in a museum. Metabolism points to "the exchange of matter": (…) "the interface between inside and outside, the space of conversion of one to another, of matter to energy, of substrate to waste, of synthesis and break down (…)" (Landecker 2013, 193). The process of metabolism is a criterion for living, which makes it suitable for analyzing objects: Materiality is always changing, in constant relation with the environments surrounding it, human handling, and microbes (Grünfeld 2022, 275). Grünfeld is, in spirit

with DeSilvey, interested in what happens if a museum extends its notion of *care* beyond the prevailing accumulation and conservation paradigm.

Architecture and space – a basement experience

Moser suggests asking questions about how the architectonic and spatial elements relate to an exhibition and how they affect its integrity (Moser 2010, 24). Built in 1787 in a neoclassical style, the museum originally housed the Academy of Surgery (Medicinsk Museion). Typical neoclassical carvings, pillars, Roman numerals framing the entrance, and a Latin phrase for the Royal Academy at the top of the building – are all part of supporting the authoritative and knowledge-centered aspects of the museum. This feeling of historical grandness created by the architectonic elements persists as one goes inside the museum to the reception. By the time I arrived, I had been informed that *The Living Room* is segregated from the rest of the exhibitions and is closed off from visitors outside of guided tours led by Grünfeld. Across the courtyard, Grünfeld unlocks a small door with *The Living Room* painted on the brick walls on its side. We have to bend low so as not to hit our heads at the door frame. As one could feel already before entering the basement, the architectonic placement has given the exhibition an aura of rebellion – something on the margins, in opposition to the hegemony.

The basement creates the perfect space for the type of experimentation that is going on in *The Living Room.* In my interview with Grünfeld after the tour, I asked if it could be possible to have the project more accessible. Grünfeld explains that *The Living Room* could not have been developed in the main museum building because of safety issues: "It is a hazard to introduce fungal growth and mycelium in a museum space", he says (Grünfeld 27.01.23). In addition to this reasoning behind the location, I interpret the placement as a visualization of the hidden side of deaccessioning. It shows that this kind of caring for cultural heritage still exists on the *fringes* (to borrow the term Grünfeld uses of the objects on display), not yet fully embraced by museums.

Grunfeld does not call *The Living Room* an exhibition. By not classifying it as such, he wants to loosen the project from the expectations one might have when entering an exhibition. "*The Living Room* follows a different logic; it is neither finished nor stable", he says (Grünfeld 27.01.23). Nevertheless, in entering the space it certainly feels like an exhibition. A text excerpt on a deconstructed door lying on the floor right at the entrance reads like an introductory text: "The museum is a caring host for objects, but is hostile towards living organisms. Mould and insects must be kept away at all costs. What happens if the museum

attempt to welcome life?" The text is, similar to the objects on display, deteriorated and faded.

"Aesthetically pleasing yet harmful landscapes" – introducing the objects

Seven square photographs are mounted on the barred wall facing the entrance, all portraying beautiful and various color schemes and textures. Grünfeld explains that the photographs are microscopic closeups of the different forms of decay and deterioration that are taking place on the objects displayed in the glass box below the photographs, containing framed paper pictures and what looks like an old metal reel stock. The title of the display is AR(T)CHIVES: DECAYSCAPES. Followed by a text that invites visitors to reflect on what is worth preserving and why.

Figure 5. Ar(t)chives: Decayscapes: Peter Stanners. (2023).

The contrast between the visually striking photography of mold and rust, against the carefully exhibited objects in the traditional display case creates a feeling of dissonance. The photographs make me appreciate and admire the processes of decay, and at the same time, I worry about the state of the objects exhibited below. The use of display cases for already damaged objects reminds me of the ideology behind conservation – freezing the process of decay, freezing change. An insect monitor placed on top of the display case makes me reflect on how nature is constantly kept at bay inside a museum. Grünfeld explains how *The Living Room* puts conservation to use in an experimental way:

"Conservators know so much about material processes, so I think it is interesting to use their knowledge for something different, like in this project where the objects are dissolving. The conservator in the museum felt freedom working with these objects that were supposed to be thrown out anyway. She found value in doing something more than throwing the objects away" (Grünfeld 27.01.23).

Figure 6. Worm Dome: Peter Stanners. (2023).

The *Worm Dome*: an installation of a stuffed and murky museum desiccator inside a display box in the middle of the room. The text plate reads: "Plastic eater, future food source, model organism. The wax worm has amazing potential. In our glass container, worms live among discarded paper, metal and wood, and feast on lab plastic waste". Sound design made by artist Eduardo Abrantes is also integrated into this installation. Grünfeld plays the unsettling yet intriguing sound of what is presented as a sound translation of the worms' movements of eating and emitting food. However, there is one twist to the narrative: The worms do no longer exist.

Grünfeld explains that what started out as an ambitious and exciting project where the worms would be eating plastic and transforming it into ethanol, ended with them dying. The curators tried a second time, now with an environment better accommodated for the worms. These worms died as well, and instead; clusters of mites have shown up in the corners of the installation, living off of the new mold that has begun to grow. However, Grünfeld is not dissatisfied with the situation, quite the opposite. He wants *The Living Room* to be about

looking at ecological processes, without necessarily turning them into art: “The worm dome is doing it now by itself. It is its own development. In a way, it is lucky for us that this happened, even though we initially wanted something different” (Grünfeld 27.01.23). Here, human intention failed, and the material reality transformed into something else.

The creation and development of the worm dome is, at its core, an ANT experiment. The different actors and the effects of agency were uncovered empirically and gradually. The present situation – dead worms, mold, and mites – is a result of the relations of the actors, not only the thinking subjects. In spirit with Harrison’s ethical argument to include the rights of non-humans in heritage work, Grünfeld has accommodated new actors (mold and mites) to influence and determine the outcome of the micro-ecosystem.

Slow Show, an installation designed by artist Maria Brænder, is a box mounted on the barred wall to the right side of the entrance. The box is a peculiar sight, filled with what seems like random objects; medical tools and paper, with pink oyster mushrooms thriving among them:

> *“Brightly coloured oyster mushrooms and fringe objects intertwined in a micro-scale performance cycle of life and decay. The mushrooms perform their metabolic wizardry next to an uncontrollable growth of black mould. In the lengthy act of the show, the decaying fungal divas chant; Where did we begin and the objects end?”*

This is an example of how exhibition text can expand the message of a display and encourage specific interpretations in audiences. The text accompanying this display reimagines the seemingly static installation as a living performance act – where the slow processes of growing mushrooms and mold on objects create a dynamic interplay. Influenced by the phrase: “uncontrollable growth”, I saw the installation as an allegory of what Harrison calls the “crisis of accumulation of heterogenous and conflicting pasts in the present”. He refers to how our time’s heritage work is characterized by piling up of heritage and “material excess” (Harrison 2013, 583): The box representing a museum storage room, cramped with objects stacked on top of each other, seemingly randomly thrown into it. The mold growing among the objects symbolizes the growing disintegration of knowledge about what exists in museum collections.

One aspect of exhibition analysis is looking at whether a display type is characteristic of the collection that is being exhibited (Moser 2010, 28). At first glance, one would probably say no, as it is the processes the objects are caught up in and not their history or characteristics that are on display. After consideration, I would say that the discarded collection of medical objects is a perfect fit for the life-hosting *The Living Room* contains. Objects of a profession related to the cycles and conditions of the human body provide another level of depth to the display of metabolic processes. It is from this perspective that a box of sterilized hydrophilic cotton, a model of teeth, posters of what looks like human organs – and mushrooms and mold – creates a display that sets meaning already inherent in the objects, in motion.

Figure 7. Slow Show: Peter Stanners. (2023).

Sensorial elements – sound, touch, and co-creation

> *"Sound made it possible to explore another sensibility, as it has the ability to communicate phenomena that are not clearly distinguished, like metabolism. I like to think about decomposition not as something disappearing but turning into something else. The objects are not just becoming mold and rot, but also becoming food and sound" (Grünfeld 27.01.23).*

From this quote, it is clear that Grünfeld has used sound and listening as elements to further widen the category of metabolism and how we can perceive it – to make it tangible and

experiential, something to be felt by the audience.[17] The sounds – of both the worms and the fungi – also illustrates that something is happening right now, as the digestion of objects are a slow process that cannot easily be seen. The sound transforms an otherwise drawn-out development to one that is immediately felt.

The interactive style of *The Living Room* further removes the project from the typical expectations one might have of an exhibition. The visitors are allowed to touch everything and to physically alter the displays. A box on the floor by the entrance is filled with fringe objects and papers you can attach to them, like labels used when cataloging objects into a collection. The label attached to a strange metal object lying on the floor names the item: "bouncy water-drop sprinkler", and the description of use: "to amuse children while they wait for the doctor". This interactive display can be seen as a commentary on collecting and documentation. Like with the case of the Aker collection, much of the reasoning behind using these objects for *The Living Room*, was that they were unregistered and lacking provenience. The display allowed for one last documenting process in which creative imagination gave value to strange and unknown objects.

The Living Room as a doorway to explore deaccessioning

The Living Room is not a typical deaccessioning case. Grünfeld himself wants the project to inspire museums to experiment with different alternatives to disposal:

> *"If a museum is going to deaccession, this kind of experimenting would be a meaningful alternative. Not turning the objects into waste and adding to a landfill but doing something more with them. It would be the last they are used, but at least they would be appreciated one last time. The Living Room is a project that turns deaccessioning into something else. We are not just throwing stuff out but reusing and recycling. However, alternatives do not need to be as transgressive as this, it could be as simple as letting people touch objects in museums" (Grünfeld 27.01.23).*

The life growth and decay on and around "dead" objects, expand the category of deaccessioning. Grünfeld believes that the life cycle of objects that exists on the fringes in museums (objects suitable for deaccessioning), needs to be reimagined: there lies opportunity in envisioning and "reworking" the end of an object's life beyond the rigid dichotomy of accessioning/deaccessioning (Grünfeld 2021). This form of deaccessioning transforms the object from being one type of thing to becoming something else.

[17] Link to audio files from *The Living Room*: https://soundcloud.com/user-840271062/living-room-at-work-1?in=user-840271062/sets/living-room-1

Grünfeld clearly states that *The Living Room* does not present a substitute for conservation practices but rather an opportunity among others. He wishes for practices that are not always centered around the artifact itself and the human-central stories: "we can also look at what else is growing in, on and around the objects and bring forth the ecological side of collections" (Grünfeld 27.01.23). This is a point that will be elaborated on in Chapter 4, p. 55-56.

"While it is tempting to accession the displays after the project is finished, that would go against the project – but so is throwing them away. We need to find other ways of releasing them", says Grünfeld (27.01.23). How they are going to end the project is not clear at the time of our interview, and Grünfeld is entertaining several ideas: Putting the objects outside in big jars of water and dissolving them? Can displays become street art and maybe someone will steal them? Some things can be placed in nature to disintegrate. Maybe the worm dome can be excavated and be turned into data points? (Grunfeld 27.01.23).[18]

An exhibition like *The Living Room* challenges established notions on preservation, and in successfully doing so, contributes to a conversation about the fear of losing reputation. The processes that are on display goes against the very foundation on which a museum stand on, still, the positive reactions of visitors are eminent (Grünfeld 27.01.23). The project spur new ideas about how museums can feel secure in phasing objects out of their collection by employing public communication and participation. In this way, *The Living Room* presents one of many examples of how full candor can be a remedy to loss of reputation.

[18] Several months after I conducted my interview with Grünfeld, *The Living Room* was taken down and an excavation of the *Worm Dome* was done in collaboration with archaeologist Tim Flohr Sørensen. The mold that was found inside the installation, *A. Glaucus*, will continue its life in the Technical University of Denmark's collection of molds. A short film (*Weird Excavation*) was made about the process. The objects from the *Ar(t)chives*-display box were re-accessioned into the museum's collection (Grünfeld 2023).

CHAPTER 4 | BRAIDING CASES

Deaccessioning Discussed

According to Harrison (2013, 582), we need to start revising past heritage decisions, as the constant growth of heritage is distracting us from creating cultural memory today. My three cases are examples of such revisions. While Bååstede and the deaccessioning of the Aker collection are explicitly about revision – repatriation (revising who the heritage belongs to) and disposal (revising the heritage's ability to relate to a meaningful past) – *The Living Room* is a more abstract revision in the form of meta-reflections on the paradigmatic "need to save". In this chapter, I will continue with, and sharpen, reflections on my research questions: how deaccessioning can be used as a tool to achieve sustainable heritage work, and what needs to change for museums to fully embrace the practice. I will focus on three main perspectives: relations between collections and sustainability, public trust, and how to care for the past.

Collections and Growth – Sustainable Heritage Work

According to Merriman, traditional museums have the role of a "sacred set-aside" within a capitalistic society, and their collections have become categorically separated from the workings of the commercial market (Merriman 2008, 12). The anti-commercial status of material heritage can be compared with anthropologist Anette B. Weiner's use of the term *inalienable objects*: things imbued with the identities of those who own them. Because of their function as symbolic containers of genealogy and history, their intrinsic value places them "above the exchangeability of one thing for another". They will therefore be guarded against anything that can force their loss (Weiner 1992, 6 & 33). In the case of museums, who have the task of guarding a nations or community's material heritage, the objects entering their care become "inalienable" the moment they get defined as heritage. However, it is not sustainable to define all heritage as equally valuable and equally inalienable. While museum collections might be seen as a counterpart to the capitalistic market, the unchecked growth of collections sure fits capitalistic ideals of growth.

A point that might destabilize the perceived inalienability of museum objects is the simple fact that many of the objects have entered museum collections in arbitrary ways, often as a result of a mass rescue of ways of life that were seen as in danger of disappearing, or because the objects interested the individual collectors at the time (Morgan & Macdonald 2018, 57. Hylland 2013, 9). An effect of this obsessive saving and consequential growth is

that curators feel restricted from collecting items from more recent times, which is a societal task for museums (as was stressed by Gaukstad). While deaccessioning in accordance with thoughtful collecting is an accepted solution to these issues (Morgan & Macdonald 2018, 60), it is crucial that the practice becomes more than "just a solution" to the practical problems of vast collections. Deaccessioning should (similar to what Merriman and Hylland argues) belong to a museum philosophy and be part of a self-reflexive practice of re-evaluation of why we hold collections and what role they should have in both museums and society.

The argument to embrace deaccessioning also mirrors environmental arguments for sustainable "de-growth" in the socio-economic sphere. In their article, cultural historian Jennie Morgan and archeologist Sharon Macdonald reflect on how strategies for de-growing a society can be employed in collection management. They use what Serge Latouche has named the eight R's: re-evaluate, reconceptualize, restructure, redistribute, re-localize, reduce, re-use, and recycle (Morgan & Macdonald 2018, 60). In the context of deaccessioning, I suggest adding another R: *re-profanation*. While removing the sacred is not useful in all cases of deaccessioning (repatriation), in cases of disposal and deaccessioning into contexts of use, taking off the "sacralized heritage glasses" can be an idea.

On the topic of *re-evaluation*, Morgan and Macdonald, like DeSilvey, question the strive for material stasis in collection management. They introduce the possibility of consciously defining an object's lifespan when implementing new items in collections. Deciding how long an object should be used, kept, and cared for, can be defined either through assessment of the fabric (if the material is durable or organic), or by assessing that value and meaning is limited to time and context (Morgan & Macdonald 2018, 61). These strategies, paired with Harrison's call to revise past decisions about heritage, introduce us to the possibility of re-defining the lifetime of already existing collections – establishing life cycles that in some instances can end in deaccessioning. This argument is in line with what Kopytoff says about writing the biography of an object: Noticing that an object might reach the end of its "usefulness" (Kopytoff 1986, 66). The Aker collection and the unregistered basement collection used in *The Living Room* were both collections on the fringes and "forgotten about" – passive heritage unconsciously carried into the present. The destruction (the Aker collection) and the transformation (*The Living Room*) put an end to an unconscious "keeping" of things.

The Sàmi collection, contrary to the other two collections, consisted of objects past and presently defined as worthy for future keeping (an active collection). Like Ween said (p.

33), the Oslo-based museums had to give away what was most valuable. In the case of repatriation, the decision to be made is not necessarily based on a re-evaluation of the length of an object's lifespan, but on a decision to *shift* its lifespan. Employing Poulious' theory of "living heritage approach" (see p. 16), Bååstede can be analyzed more broadly in relation to repatriation as a way of deaccessioning. According to Poulious' approach, it is the continuity of the heritage-community relationship and not necessarily the physical form of heritage, that should have priority in conservation practices. Giving priority to the source community's connection to the objects, increases, as I see it, the relevance of repatriating ethnographic collections.

As mentioned in chapter 3, p.31, Bååstede was a lengthy process. While far from being the only reason, demands to uphold western standards of conservation contributed to complicate and elongate the return process. A living heritage approach could relieve the strict adherence to conservation of fabric, thereby making repatriations more effective and on the source community's terms. The return of *toxic objects* complicated the Bååstede repatriation and created a paradox: While the objects in many ways were returned to ensure the continuing relationship between source communities and their heritage, this idealistic notion has somewhat failed in practice as the pesticides makes it difficult for the communities to engage with the heritage. Here, traditional practices of conservation had consequences for the possibility of reaching the goal of repatriation, namely returning an object with the purpose of re-establishing its relationship with a living community.

When discussing deaccessioning in the form of repatriation, I think it useful to repeat one of Merriman's four points for why there exist anxieties surrounding disposal: That knowledge stems from "classificatory holdings" (Merriman 2008, 12). This notion of knowledge is also relevant in the case of repatriations, as it is rooted in colonial ideology. Ethnographic collections revealed the perception that knowledge of the world was based on holding systematically organized material (Merriman 2008, 12). This makes me ask if the persistence of traditional ideas of knowledge in museums might be *one* of the reasons repatriation is not a more common deaccessioning method (especially in light of repatriation being recognized as an important tool in the processes of decolonizing museums)? As I have shown in Chapter 3 p, 35, knowledge is the one thing *not* being lost in the deaccessioning of part of the Sámi collection. The entire collection was reviewed and documented by a team of professionals from both the Norwegian museums and source communities, stimulating the production of new knowledge. Ideas of knowledge being dependent on autonomous

classificatory holdings have shifted towards emphasizing how knowledge is part of historical and social contexts – class, background, gender, and many other contributing dynamics (Merriman 2008, 9-13). A shift that nicely corresponds with how the objects returned in Bååstede were given new meaning.

This aspect of knowledge is not exclusive to repatriations, as a general pruning of unessential objects or duplicates can "release the potential of collections". This is an argument Morgan and Macdonald present in relation to another one of Latouche's R's, *reduce*. The idea is that the very act of reducing collections *requires* knowledge production, emphasizing that deaccessioning is as much about what we keep as what we are getting rid of (Morgan & Macdonald 2018. 62). Deaccessions done in line with international guidelines takes the form of a comprehensive process of examining, re-evaluating, and getting to know the objects in the collections. The deaccessioning of the Aker collection is an example of not just responsibly reducing the collection, but also of creating a more intentional collection. By examining the objects' significance to the museum, their physical condition, and provenience, Oslo Museum created a renewed, organized, and contextualized Aker collection.

Memory and disposal – different dimensions of sustainability

Sustainable heritage management is, according to Harrison, about confronting and taking responsibility for the different forms of pasts that are in our care, and actively manage and prune these pasts in the present (Harrison 2013, 590). Relying on this statement, deaccessioning becomes integral to sustainable collection management: To ensure that some pasts continue into the future, but without letting them replicate, pile up, and become an unattended heap of stuff for future generations to manage.

"(…) as a result of the increasingly broad definition of heritage, and the exponential growth of listed objects, places and practices of heritage in the contemporary world, we risk being overwhelmed by memory, and in the process making all heritages ineffective and useless" (Harrison 2013, 580). This quote illustrates a paradox I find challenging. Harrison argues that we need to consciously forget in order to remember, and therefore we must prune the pile of heritage. If we store too much information, we become unable to sort through it and decide what is important to keep. In the same way individuals discard memories to remember others, we need to do it collectively as it is part of creating collective memories (Harrison 2013, 587). Relating these arguments to deaccessioning becomes difficult, as *some*

theory of memory demonstrates that objects in themselves cannot take on the mental shape of memory (Forty 1999, 4).[19]

If object preservation does not equate to remembering, is deaccessioning really about forgetting the pasts they are attached to? Does the pruning of heritage contribute to the collective need to forget, as Harrison implies? I do not hold answers to these questions, but here is my reflection: Collecting and conservation are about remembering, but it is also about forgetting – remembering some aspects of the object and its history and hiding/forgetting some (Forty 1999, 2. Caple 2000, 17). Maybe deaccessioning holds the same truth? While some deaccessions increase memory by revitalizing the relevance of the objects (like "Agatha Christie's picnic basket"), some deaccessions help us to forget. This duality is illustrative in my cases: Both Bååstede and *The Living Room* increased interest in the objects, shifted their narratives, and made them relevant in new ways. Phasing them out of the museums, however different, did not entail forgetting them. The disposal of part of the Aker collection was different. The decision to destroy and dispose of part of a disorderly, unattended to, and in some way already forgotten collection, brought its role in history to an end. Unlike like *The Living Room*, in which the thematization of the death of objects made people remember them, the disposed objects of the Aker collection passed on in silence.

Another sustainability issue related to deaccessioning, is disposals and the impact they have on the environment. Traditional conservation that adheres to strict indoor climate classes contributes to negative effects on the environment. Heat regulations, air-conditioning, and ventilation use massive energy consumption and release CO2 emissions (Garthe 2023, 108). The argument to reduce museum collections is therefore sustainable also within the environmental aspects of the term. However, when discussing the sustainability of deaccessioning in the form of disposal, I also have to consider the process of turning museum objects into waste and potentially adding to landfills for future generations to handle. In cases where it is environmentally damaging to dispose of something (materials that do not easily degrade or release toxins), disposal is not a sustainable choice, and other means of phasing objects out of a collection need to be explored.

Morgan and Macdonald employ three more of Latouche's R's, *Redistributing, re-using, and recycling,* to suggest repurposing museum objects (for example by being turned into art or raw material to use in different contexts). This could make destruction more

[19] While objects are not the material form of memory, there are neuroscientific studies that provide nuances to the claim that "objects are the enemy of memory", as Forty states (1999, 7). Studies on *object recognition memory* show that objects can, in some instances, trigger memory (Winters, Saksida, Bussey 2008, 1056).

accepted (Morgan & Macdonald 2018, 61). By destroying most of the objects, Oslo Museum turned artifacts from the Aker collection into raw materials. However, This was done with the intention of hiding the objects "museal identity" and not to (for example) give it away as firewood or other kinds of re-usable material. Did Oslo Museum lack the sense of curiosity surrounding re-use and recycle that *The Living Room* thematized?

The objects used in *The Living Room* were at the end of their life cycles and given a rebirth by being repurposed into both art and life hosts. In my view, the whole process of *The Living Room* (its making, displays, and ending) actualized what DeSilvey says about how the biological and chemical lives of objects are easier to appreciate and understand when they are phased out of their usual contexts (DeSilvey 2017, 30). The deteriorated objects used in the *Ar(t)chives*-display were found in the museum's collection through archival work. Before the opportunity to use them in *The Living Room* emerged, the museum's plan was to "save" the objects from the decaying processes (Grünfeld 27.01.23). A project like *The Living Room* was able to transform the narrative around decay: "The urge to save constrain the scope of what you could do with objects. Without it, we could think about when it would make sense to do something entirely different with them" (Grünfeld 27.01.23). By tackling ambiguous dichotomies of life/disappearance, conservation/letting be, *The Living Room* created new stories and biographies in which different aspects of life became intertwined and appreciated.

Collections and the future – critical reflections on deaccessioning

In the deaccessioning processes of the Aker collection, Oslo Museum sometimes chose to keep one or two objects as a representative of many similar objects (see Figure 1). In a conversation with archeologist Birger Ekornåsvåg Helgestad, he pointed out an interesting argument against pruning a collection of many similar objects: It can be important to ask questions about why duplicates were collected and how they work together. The manifold of things can sometimes be the very aspect that museums want to convey. Identical objects (like national clothes) could be used in comparative studies to discover developments in craft and use over time (Helgestad 16.01.23). In relation to the deaccessioning of duplicates I suggest employing another *reframing* of Knell's question: How can duplicates contribute to our ability to know? We also have to ask if it is necessary to keep the duplicates physically, or if digital documentation and photographs are sufficient.

Not knowing what the future generation will value is part of another critical perspective on deaccessioning: There is a real risk of getting rid of something that could become important in a future we cannot predict (Morgan & Macdonald 2018, 61). I would

argue that this is a risk worth taking, as the future consequences of *not* re-working and de-growing museum collections can be much more damaging. There should, however, exist a high awareness of the risk of losing heritage the future generations might value. By being attentive to the possible consequences of deaccessioning, heritage workers can take measures to alleviate the risks, such as using standard guidelines for assessment (like Significance 2.0 and SPECTRUM). Digital inter-museum deaccessioning platforms where museums can transfer objects between themselves, can be a tool to ensure that objects are properly evaluated through different lenses. Objects that hold little value in one museum get to be assessed by other museums that might find them meaningful. The desire to introduce such platforms in Norway has been expressed in museum meetings (Helgestad 16.01.23). Platforms that allow objects to be deaccessioned into more suitable contexts can contribute to lessening the risk of getting rid of something that might be of importance.

A last critical remark in this otherwise positive discussion of deaccessioning is how some museums might be without the privilege to engage with deaccessioning, in spite of practical issues with collection growth. Last year I was an intern at the Jewish Museum in Oslo, a museum with a mandate of representing a small minority group with a history of genocide and massive material loss. Finding value in deaccessioning becomes much more difficult, as the Jewish minority's fragile material heritage rests on this small museum's shoulders. What Weiner writes about inalienable possessions corresponds with the material heritage of the Norwegian Jewish minority: "What makes a possession inalienable is its exclusive and cumulative identity with a particular series of owners through time." (Weiner 1992, 30). The objects contained in the Jewish Museum are inalienable in the way that they "carry in them the community", a community that was almost wiped out together with their material culture. In general, collection work in small minority-centered museums demands (because of the minority's history), a different form of cautiousness, as the museums' collections do not have resonance in other spheres of society.

Reputation, Trust, and the Public – Making Deaccessioning Visible

How deaccessions might be looked upon by the public can control whether or not a museum will lose reputation and in turn its funding (Baily 2015). The ways in which a museum communicates the reasons behind deaccessions are therefore crucial. In my view, the lack of openly communicating the relation between collections and the necessity of de-growth, prevents the public from understanding the museums responsibility to make prioritizations. Repatriation stands out as it is openly communicated and does not face the same criticism as

other forms of deaccessioning. Decolonial efforts in society lays the basis for the public embrace of repatriation, and being associated with high morality, repatriation becomes the stark contrast to sales. Repatriation also differs in how museums themselves portray the practice. Disposals and sales are often talked about in an apologetic and explanatory tone, while statements about repatriation are imbued with praise and self-boasting.[20]

As mentioned above, collections are often built on the basis of gifts, excessive saving, and the interests of museum workers of different times (Hylland 2013, 17). This fact is not communicated by most museums and gives the impression of museums as storehouses of knowledgeable collections of an important past (Noah's ark). *The Living Room* and the exhibition *Disposal?* are exceptions, as they both conveyed the "randomness" of museum objects and that they all do not have equal value. If these concepts were openly communicated by more museums, maybe deaccessioning would be less of a sensitive topic in relation to the fear of losing reputation?

A prevalent notion is that museums manage cultural heritage on behalf of the public, meaning that the public hold a symbolic ownership of collections (Steel 2013). Within this context there exists a potential tension between trust in the choices of museum workers and listening to public opinion. Gaukstad believes that museums should be allowed to make difficult choices without facing backlash: "We need to put our trust in museum professionals", she says (Gaukstad 24.01.23. My translation). But this trust might be easier to gain if museums include their audiences in the reasoning behind deaccessioning, especially when it comes to disposal and letting things decay? In my opinion, if the public are the true owners of collections, then museums should not just communicate about disposals, but also consider public giveaways (like how Oslo Museum gave farm equipment from the Aker collection to a local farmer). The MuseumDepotShop, a Dutch digital platform which enables museums to deaccession objects to individuals is another example of this (Museumdepotshop).

Morgan and Macdonald use the term *relocalize* (another of Latouche's R's), to present an argument for museums to establish deaccessioning-links not just between each other, but also to charities and academic institutions. Their research suggests that when things are deaccessioned in light of social sustainability, the practice can more accepted. Scottish Transport and Industrial Collections Knowledge Network deaccessioned sewing machines to

[20] My interview with Olli betrays that this type of rhetoric sometimes obscures aspects of repatriation that does not fit the idealistic narrative of a post-colonial museum.

crafts-communities in Sierra Leone and Tanzania. Museum of London gave several sewing machines, books, and tools from their "social and working history collections", to both a charity cause and universities where the objects were used in teaching craftmanship (Morgan & Macdonald 2018, 62). Blackwater Draw Museum made teaching trunks out of deaccessioned archeological material sent to be used in practical teaching in archeology studies (Domeichel & Waggle 2020, 421). I believe that an emphasis on these forms of cooperative deaccessions will strengthen the ties between museums and communities.[21]

Caring – How to Engage with the Past?

Throughout this thesis, I have shown that choosing decay, destruction, or loss is not necessarily equivalent to apathy, neglect, or carelessness. On the contrary, letting things be can (in some cases) betray more neglect than letting them go. All of my cases have conveyed elements in line with DeSilvey's argument, that caring for the past is about more than material preservation: It is about mindful management, re-evaluation, and conscious loss. According to archaeologist Sven Ouzman, museums' societal goal to be engaging, memory-centered institutions, is hindered by their determination to register and conserve objects (Ouzman 2006, 269).

I believe projects like *The Living Room* can contribute to embracing the tensions surrounding objects' life cycle, as it showed appreciation for not only decay but other organisms. Rejected collections like the objects found in the basement of the Medical Museion, contained discarded things not yet thrown away. Their identities as museum-objects persisted at the same time as they were perceived as waste – making them dangerous to the "order of things" (Douglas 1966, 160). DeSilvey writes about facing such ambiguous objects when visiting an abandoned and infested homestead: "I could understand the mess as the residue of a system of human memory storage or as an impressive display of animal adaption to available resources. It was difficult to hold both of these interpretations at once" (DeSilvey 2017, 27). She continues arguing for the possibilities that lie in acknowledging different categories at the same time: Decay will then show itself as generating new knowledge and not

[21] Writing about the public and deaccessioning made me again think about statue debates. Monument removal is part of a social movement that challenges past times prioritizations about heritage and becomes an adjustment of that same heritage. Can we describe these processes of removal as a *public deaccessioning and revision* of past heritage decisions?

just erasure. This we can only see if we resist establishing the identity of an object (DeSilvey 2017, 28).

When the ideology of the accumulation and conservation paradigm insist that the true meaning of an object will best be sustained by the preservation of fabric, finding other forms of meaning becomes difficult. This is where projects like *The Living Room* challenge and disrupt. By addressing ambiguous aspects of material heritage in the form of an exhibition, the objects in *The Living Room* are allowed to be seen as both artifacts and ecofacts – their biological and chemical biographies highlighted in a socio-cultural context – *the museum*. The project thus demonstrated that museums (in spite of being built on ideas of preservation) have the potential to be interesting spaces for these kinds of transgressions.

"In the future, no object should ever enter a museum collection on the assumption that it will be there forever", writes Subhadra Das, the museologist who curated *Disposal?* (Das 2016). According to Das, while there are several good and practical arguments for deaccessioning, none of them alleviate the sense that we are doing something wrong. For this, we need a *moral* argument in favor of deaccessioning, especially disposals. When we avoid disposing of objects with the excuses that they might be valuable someday, or that donors will stop trusting museums, etc., we hide *our own agency*, writes Das:

> *"We try and make it look like we don't exist, like we don't play an active role in what goes on display, how it's interpreted or conserved. We wipe ourselves out of the picture because "Look, it's OK, it's all good — it's not like we got rid of something; we still have all the stuff!" What I want to tell you is that it's not all about the stuff – it never has been" (Das 11.02.2016).*

In line with Das, I argue that by acknowledging that heritage workers are part of collections and are creating and conveying the stories with and about them, we can ease the reluctance to deaccessioning. Like Das says, it is morally right to make collection management a visible part of the collections.

Although my three cases differ with regard to the visibility of deaccessioning as well as in regard to finding support in an established moral for doing it, they all tell a story of the creation of heritage. In three very different ways, the cases illustrate how deaccessioning can be about caring for the past – making space for new interpretation and documentation, giving new contexts to the past, revising the past, symbolically make amends for the past, and attempting to restore a community's present relationship with the past.

Endings – Concluding Remarks

In this thesis, I have explored various themes related to three ways of deaccessioning: destruction and disposal, repatriation, and experimentation with object transformation. Seen together the three cases make up an empirical background that sheds light on a tension between traditional ideas and practices, and the emerging paradigm shift coined by an interest in loss as something meaningful. However different, the cases exemplify what Harrison states: That not only are the values of heritage ascribed (not inherent), but the values heritage-decisions are based on are also ascribed – therefore they should be flexible and change with time (Harrison 2013, 586). Through different ways of revising past heritage-decisions, the deaccessions in all the cases treat loss as openings and not endings. The results of the deaccessions range from freeing up resources and creating better knowledge of the things kept in collections, to shifting narratives around museum objects and allowing for community engagement, to pushing the boundary of deaccessioning by re-using objects for experimentation.

The deaccessions operate on a level of ambivalence in all of the forms I have described. The destruction and disposal of the Aker collection betray a lack of openness due to the fear of losing reputation. Bååstede illustrates a repatriation practice complicated by traditional practices of conservation, as well as a rhetorical undermining of the practical issues of returning toxic objects to underfunded Sámi museums. The Living Room exemplifies how an expanded form of deaccessioning – exhibiting decay and loss – also has difficulties with letting things go: Some of the deteriorated objects were once again integrated into the museum's collection, against Grünfeld's vision and the idea of the project.

Through case analysis and discussion, I have shown how some forms of deaccessioning can be used as tools in sustainable heritage management, and how the deaccessions in my cases both challenge and adhere to, the accumulation and conservation paradigm. The appreciation for loss as part of a sustainable way of caring for the past has shown itself in multiple ways – knowledge being a central theme in all of them:

The deaccessioning of the Aker collection shows that conscious loss and destruction can be part of a heritage work that actively takes responsibility for the pasts in a museum's care, ensuring the continuance of a more knowledgeable and sustainably reduced collection. By overcoming the pressure for permanence in museums and revising collections, we can let go of the things that do not fulfill the core role of heritage: To keep the past alive, in the present, for the future.

The Bååstede repatriation shows that returning material heritage to its source community can also be valuable for the museum that experiences the loss. Through negotiations and re-assessments, the objects can be made relevant in new ways. The making of new knowledge in the deaccessioning process demonstrates that heritage can be actively created through loss.

The Living Room shows that experimentation with the boundary of deaccessioning can spur appreciation for new aspects of museum objects. The creation of new insight can be made through letting "dead" objects be part of processes of decay, sound, and touch (like how the display of metabolism can make us experience the identity of an object in different ways). In turning deaccessioned objects into life-hosts, a new form of heritage work is established: one where other-than-human actors are invited to partake – and one where even so-called heritage eaters can be heritage makers.

By using highly different cases, the diversity of deaccessioning practices has been illuminated. This diversity illustrates that there is no unified theory on deaccessioning that works on all collections. If anything, the differences in my cases show that deaccessions always are relative and characterized by different relations – therefore they must be treated as such. However, in spite of their complexities, my cases are similar in being small-scale processes taking place within a national frame, and the question of how deaccessions are done in big museums with international relations would open up for interesting comparisons. The question of deaccessioning as part of sustainable heritage work will in such cases involve studying how transnational networks operate (for example sales of artworks and international repatriations). What does deaccessioning look like in big international museums and how do different legal frames influence the processes?

The example that opened my thesis, "Agatha Christie´s picnic basket", ended up being kept as part of the university's collection: The institution had become strangely fond of it (Kennedy 2009). This reveals that taking action to reduce collections is not only about assessing value but *finding new value*. The peculiarity of the object became a new story of heritage that the museum mindfully chose to keep and carry into the future – showing once more that processes of deaccessioning is not just about what we lose, but what we decide to keep.

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List of illustrations

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Stanners, Peter. "The Living Room." Photography. 23.05.2023. Received directly from proprietor of photographs. (Figure 3-4).

Ween, Gro. "Bååstede." Photography. Received directly from proprietor of photographs. (Figure 5-7).