

Exhibition Review Article

The Power of presence: the 'Cradle to Grave' installation at the British Museum

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Abstract

The Living and Dying gallery opened at the British Museum five years ago. Praised by critics, this award-winning exhibition is one of the most well attended exhibitions at the Museum. A visit to the gallery makes it apparent that it is the contemporary art installation, *Cradle to Grave*, that is particularly attractive to the visitors. The aim of this article is to explore why this installation is so effective. However, rather than evaluating visitor responses to the installation, this article analyses the fundamental premises that make it so successful. Using three different theories of 'proximity', 'presence' and 'flow of materials' I thereby attempt a deeper understanding of the installation's particular intensity. Thus, this article presents a type of exhibition analysis that tries to incorporate the 'meaning production' potential of an exhibition, i.e., what an exhibition tells, along with the exhibition's capability to produce 'presence' and 'material grounding', i.e., what it does.¹

Key words: *Cradle to Grave*, materiality, presence, proximity, exhibition analysis.

In 2003, the British Museum opened the Living and Dying gallery, which explores the various ways in which people deal with life's everyday challenges, achieve well being for themselves and their communities, and come to terms with death. In huge glass display cases materials from New Zealand, Ghana, the Solomon Islands, Mexico, and North America are on display. Objects range from ancient sculptures and masks to modern artefacts whose function is to avert illness, danger and trouble. Centrally located in the gallery is the specially commissioned art installation, *Cradle to Grave*, created by the artist group *Pharmacopoeia*.²

In 2004 the gallery won the Museums and Heritage Show 2004 Award for Excellence for best permanent exhibition and five years later it still attracts the public's attention. Most recently, The Guardian journalist Jonathan Jones, in his art-blog, praises the gallery but criticizes *Pharmacopoeia*'s installation for drawing all the attention: 'Eighty per cent of visitors give all their attention to the installation by *Pharmacopoeia* and ignore – or virtually ignore – the mysterious objects in the other cases' (Jones, July 24, 2009). To some extent this article concurs with Jones's point of view, namely that the installation is indeed, powerful. However, instead of criticizing the art work for its dominant impact, this article tries to excavate the means by which the installation achieves its impact with the public. By analyzing, at a more theoretical level, what is happening in the installation, it will be suggested that the installation's effectiveness can be seen in the encounter between what the installation tells and what it does. Or, put slightly differently, I argue that the installation works because it uses its materiality and presence to create an unusual encounter between normally distinctive categories, like time and space, mind and material, and meaning and presence. In investigating this aspect of the installation I am, of course, putting in question distinctions and dichotomies which are fundamental to western modes of thought (see e.g. Gumbrecht 2004: 21-49).

The challenge of the exhibition analysis

In the following pages the reasons for the effectiveness of the installation will be examined. However, this is not an easy task. As with other types of material culture studies, any exhibition

analysis is in danger of either over-emphasizing the social and cultural construction of the phenomenon, i.e., its concrete appearance and materiality have a tendency to disappear from the analysis, or conversely the phenomenon's material foundation and appearance is taken for granted as part of an agenda that does not adequately take account of the social and cultural framing of the situation. The fact that the exhibition per se is both a place where signification 'is constructed, maintained, and occasionally deconstructed', to quote Greenberg et al., but also operates through its tangible and physical appearance, renders a balanced analysis even more necessary. Perhaps this is the reason why, despite numerous studies of 'museum culture' in its broadest sense, there is still a call for a theoretical language and methodology in exhibition analyses (see, e.g., Greenberg et al. 1996: 2).

However, some notable exceptions in this regard are worth mentioning. Using concepts such as 'resonance' and 'wonder' (Greenblatt 1991), 'the visible' and 'the invisible' (Pomian 1994), 'realism' and 'representation' (Jordanova 1993) and 'aesthetic interaction' (Hein 2006), the exhibition's hybrid constitution, falling between the material and the discursive, has been caught and identified, methodologically and theoretically. The primary aim of this article, thus, is to contribute to this kind of methodological and theoretical development, i.e. to develop an exhibition language which includes the discursive aspects of an exhibition interpretation without excluding those qualities of an exhibition which are 'non-representational', i.e. are connected to the bodily and intellectual experiences related to the physical substances, the immediate surroundings and being in a space. To take all that into account, however, it is necessary to introduce other concepts and theories from related fields. This, it is hoped, will expand our ways of understanding and analyzing the exhibition as a cultural phenomenon in general and come closer to uncovering what it is, specifically, that is at stake in the installation *Cradle to Grave* and where in its effectiveness resides.



Fig.1. 28,000 pills in rows. *The Cradle to Grave* installation by *Pharmacopoeia* (Susie Freeman, Liz Lee & David Critchley) 2003. (Photo: © the Trustees of the British Museum).

The installation

The *Living and Dying* gallery displays how different cultures throughout the world seek to maintain health and well-being. A raven head from a totem pole, a thousand-year-old giant stone sculpture of a human figure from Easter Island and contemporary Mexican papier-mâché sculptures representing the four elements of the Biblical Apocalypse in skeletal form are seen among other ethnographic highlights and witnesses about peoples' approaches to averting illness, danger and trouble. Huge glass cases on the floor and along the walls exhibit a variety of exquisite historical and ethnographic objects. In the middle of the exhibition is the installation *Cradle to Grave*, from 2003 [fig. 1]. The installation consists of a long, low glass case, in which can be seen a life's supply of prescribed drugs sewn into two lengths of textile, rolled out as a fictional biographical life course of an average man and woman. Each length contains over 14,000 pills, tablets, lozenges and capsules, the estimated average number prescribed to every person in Britain during their lifetimes. On either side of the case, along the 13-metre-long pale grey

net of pill rows, are objects and photos from various males' and females' lives, that represent an ordinary man and woman's health and illness. Among the objects can be seen ultrasound

images, lost milk teeth, an asthma inhalator, condoms, an ash tray, a hearing aid, artificial teeth and an artificial hip joint. Photographs in colour and in black and white, taken from a variety of family albums from the 1930s to the present day, are arranged chronologically. There are well over 100 personal photographs which show typical and touching scenes of every day life. Each photo is accompanied with a hand-written caption written by the photographer, explaining the particular scenario of the picture [fig. 2].



Fig. 2. *The installation, photos displayed at the perimeters of the case, attracts the visitors' attention. (Photo: Camilla Mordhorst, 2008).*

Usually we perceive the course of life as an extension of time, but here life is an extension in space. The abstract ordering of the life course in time is replaced with a concrete physical length of a fabric in a room. The life course as a spatial extension is underscored by the abrupt stop of the woven pill tapestry of the man's life. In his seventy-sixth year, the fabric suddenly stops, leaving untied ends. A label says laconically: 'Unexpectedly dies from a stroke.' On the woman's side, the fabric is rolled at the end. We understand that she is still living at eighty-two years old, but for how long we can only guess from the size of the rolled fabric.

The proximity

It is a peculiar feeling to witness an overview of an entire life course, from entering the world to leaving it again, all in one glance. The many photos from various family albums depicting major events and intimate moments emphasise this feeling of grasping life in toto as we know it and recognise it. At the same time, the thousands of pills expose and recount every single day in a life. They remind the visitor of the repeated daily routines that usually never come to mind when looking at the course of a life, but which nevertheless fill the days. The pills create a kind of 'biographical proximity', which offers another view of the life course that we usually do not see.

The use of the concept 'proximity' in this context is inspired by John Gabriel Granö. In his classic work from 1929, the Finnish geographer argued that if we are to understand the landscape properly, we should not just rely on the abstract simplification of cartography. It is also necessary to identify the perceived landscape in its immediate incalculable presence, where it becomes materials and things, tactile experiences, sounds, smells, details and complexity, where the material life becomes as intimate and involved as it gets. The installation creates this kind of proximity by including every single one of the pills we must take in our lives, and the wide range of snapshots from all sorts of situations and families create a confusing variety of feelings, moods and impressions that depict actual incidents and intimate situations. The images are supplied with personal comments such as: 'John and Ruby, just a few hours old', 'Da, da. In the paddling pool with my sister', 'Dec. 99. Terry's beads trim by Rosie - probably 4 weeks from death from cancer at this point' or 'Ben + I dancing on Harlech Beach (or are we fighting?)'. The handwritten notes appear un-edited in their familiar form of address. They seem to express spontaneous and personal comments on the event by the owner of the photographs. The intimate universe is supported by the displayed objects that relate to the domain of privacy: medical certificates, condoms, a mammography, prostheses etc. We are very close to a firsthand experience of the life course, almost 'in it', just as Granö is in the middle of the landscape.

Instead of looking at life from the outside, distanced, as a linear process in time, the installation makes us 'enter' the life course, and perceive it as an extension in space. One of Granö's theoretical successors, geographer Torsten Hägerstrand, was in the habit of cycling around the countryside, so that he might come closer to the reality of space (Nilsson 2007: 27-8); similarly, the visitor to Cradle to Grave can walk along a life course, at a slow pace or rapidly, back and forth, observing one of life's minor and intimate routines. In that case, it seems that the body rather than the mind becomes the dominant self-reference of the experience, because life becomes an extension in space rather than in time. Life as a biographical chronology changes a life course from one stretched out between the past, present and future to a life that is about being in the world and being a part of it. By presenting the life course as a detailed 'landscape' of pills and tablets, the installation creates an opportunity to experience life as a complexity. This kind of proximity creates an experience of life when the senses rather than an abstract acknowledgment offer a path to recognition, as Granö argues. By presenting concrete phenomena for direct contemplation, the exhibition can provide, as few other media can, the close-up experience of a phenomenon in its complex three-dimensional sensory appearance. The installation uses this potential and emphasizes it with the fabrics of pills and tablets, unrolled as a chronology of physical concrete details that constitute the course of life.

Presence

For geographer Hägerstrand, the solution was to represent the landscape as a diorama, a close-up, frozen snapshot of the perceived landscape in its diversity and natural appearance (Nilsson 2007: 28). The installation Cradle to Grave, however, is anything but a realistic snapshot. It is an artificial staging of a lifetime. Nothing natural corresponds to it. The artefact is a spatial extension of time; it is an articulation in space. We used to think of space as subordinate to time, because space can be formed and transformed by time. But the installation seems to reverse this relationship; time surprisingly becomes a dimension of space. It is the long series of chemical drugs that maintain our well-being and life, and thus provide the very possibility of extracting meaning from life (reflected in the notes on the photographs). Where the images depict the life course as a story of events and memorable moments, the repeated consumption of pills points to the basic conditions of being a living being with a biological body, which needs to go on and on to keep us alive. The installation thereby juxtaposes and blurs the normally distinct categories of biology and culture/society, and somehow a banal realization is exposed: to experience pain in life can be both a matter of losing a beloved one or suffering from physical malfunctions. The need for medical treatments like Viagra, anti-depressants and sleeping-pills can both derive from physical, biological and bodily conditions and from cultural expectations, living conditions, and private feelings and experiences. The private experiences, however, are only private to the extent that it is possible to display a common pattern to our

consumption of prescribed medicine throughout our lives. It might be a biological fact that our bodies become increasingly fragile and prone to diseases in later life, but why this includes an increased intake of anti-depressants, sleeping-tablets and appetite suppressants probably has more to say about living in a modern Western culture than how the human body ages. However, when viewing the long fabric of pills and tablets, no distinction needs to be made: the installation does not offer explanations and causes, but simply exposes the presence of our composite medical consumption. It is the confrontation with this 'presence', i.e., the overwhelming abundance of the many drugs, the multiplicity of their forms and colours, through which some of the effectiveness of the installation seems to work.

The introduction of the concept of 'presence' in this context draws on the way literary theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht uses the term. In his book *Production of Presence - What Meaning Can not Convey*, Gumbrecht argues for a rethinking of how to examine cultural phenomena. Gumbrecht writes that there seems to be a nearly exclusive dedication to interpretation in the humanities, so we tend to forget another aspect of cultural phenomena that is just as important as the dimension of meaning. It is the dimension of presence, i.e., when a cultural phenomenon or event becomes tangible and has an impact on our senses and our bodies (Gumbrecht 2004). The preference for interpretation in the humanities, among other things, has been expressed in the positive value our language attaches to the dimension of 'depth'.

If we call an observation 'deep', we intend to praise it for having given a new, more complex, particularly adequate meaning to a phenomenon. Whatever we deem 'superficial', in contrast, has to lack all these qualities, because we imply that it does not succeed in going 'beyond' or 'under' the first impression produced by the phenomenon in question (we normally do not imagine that anything or anybody might desire to remain without depth). (Gumbrecht 2004: 21)

Within material culture studies and the museological field, this preference has been seen as an endeavour to reach 'behind' the objects, behind their immediate appearance and presence in order to analyze their meaning. Things seem only to be a point of departure for analyzing 'the real object' of interest, which is the broader context of the object, i.e., as a representation of former civilizations, of other cultures etc. (Mordhorst 1997, Olsen 1993). To explain the meaning of the object results in an almost exclusive focus on the interpretation of the object, i.e., its ability or lack thereof to represent (Mordhorst & Tøndborg 2005). In this endeavour, semiotics came to play a significant role because it offers concepts for understanding and interpreting objects as signs (Tilley 1990, Pearce 1994), while museologists are digging deeper into the dilemmas of representation and the relationships between things and texts (see, e.g., Olsen 1997). The focus on the interpretation of the object has been so exclusive that it seems to have been overlooked that objects, like so much else in the world, also are characterized by something other than their potential to create meaning, namely the simple fact that they are present and thereby affect us. Or, as Gumbrecht points out: We forgot that things have substance: That all material includes an irreducible presence of the physical world that affects our senses and thus is constituting of our experience of the world (Gumbrecht 2004: 28-30).

The reason the fabric displaying the tablets and pills is so difficult to analyze is probably because it presents a physical world of extensions, weights, substances, surfaces, colours, grades of hardness and softness, quantities etc. These matters are easily perceivable by the senses, but more difficult to describe in words. It is like the experience of 'the first lightning in a thunderstorm' or 'the aggressive sunlight that almost blinds you when, coming from Central Europe, you deplane at any California destination', to quote Gumbrecht (2004:103). These experiences are so difficult to describe and represent. The overwhelming number of pills and tablets, the beautiful, yet disturbing, variety of colours, shapes and substances of the many drugs, which do not necessarily illustrate anything, but nevertheless are an integrated part of the utterance of the installation. Can it be that the play between presence and meaning, between just being in the world, on the one hand, and attributing meaning to our life course, on the other hand, creates some of the peculiar intensity of the installation? What seems to happen is that the installation redirects our knowledge of the medicated life from an abstract acknowledgment

to a concrete one, where the materials, the chemical substances with which the tablets and pills are made, are essential and add a form of recognition different from what we had before. The 28,000 tablets and pills are not exhibited primarily as representations of particular types of medicine. Neither do they represent an individual life course. Part of the installation's strength lies in the overwhelming presence of the large amount of drugs, presented as materials, namely synthetic chemical substances in tablet form – and how intimate and physically large a part of our lives they already are or will become. It is an intellectual experience to realize the complete consumption of prescription drugs each of us must take to sustain our lives, but it is also a bodily experience to be confronted by the mountain of medicine. Artificial life is suddenly not just an abstract future scenario, but also a practical experience we all will face over time.

Whereas the concept of presence tries to theoretically articulate such moments of intensity, the concept does not seem to include any notion of change and transformation. In his article *Presence Achieved in Language*, Gumbrecht explains the apparent non-processuality of the moments of presence in this way:

human existence, in a meaning-culture, unfolds and realizes itself in constant and ongoing attempts at transforming the world ("actions") that are based on the interpretation of things and the projection of human desires into the future. This drive toward change and transformation is absent from presence-cultures where humans just want to inscribe their behavior into what they consider to be structures and rules of a given cosmology. (Gumbrecht 2006a: 319)

The installation works as a phenomenon of 'presence-culture' rather than as a phenomenon of 'meaning-culture' insofar as the presence of the drugs is staged as a matter of fact, a condition (a cosmology) in which modern Western people are living. The pills are not represented as a step from one historical stage toward the next. They are just there as an inevitable part of our modern Western life.

That the installation, on the face of it, does not articulate change and transformation comes as no surprise in relation to the exhibition as a medium. The exhibition in general struggles to represent change. It can only display time as a transformative force insofar as the objects can be arranged according to their level of development and thereby represent a kind of evolution as a series of frozen pictures in time. The exact process from one point (artefact) to the next cannot be shown. One of the really interesting characteristics of the installation at the British Museum, however, is that on closer examination it seems, nevertheless, to manage to incorporate the life course as a process. To come closer to an understanding of how it does this, a third theory and a related concept need to be incorporated into the current analysis, namely archaeologist Tim Ingold's theory concerning the flow of materials.

The flow of materials

The chronology of the drugs in this case presents the life course as an extended moment in the world, but this physical extension also works in another way. By virtue of the arrangement of the drugs and the many photographs, i.e., in lines, the life course is represented as a transformation process, in which the distribution and quantity of the drugs play a crucial role. To understand more theoretically what is going on, i.e., how materiality, time and transformation processes interact in this exhibition experience, Tim Ingold's theory of materials (as presented in his article *Materials against Materiality*) offers an interesting approach. Ingold begins his article with a puzzle: why is it that the ever-growing literature on material culture seems to have hardly anything to say about materials (Ingold 2007: 1). Ingold believes that the paradox can be attributed to a continued polarization between the mental and the material. Regardless of intentions to include the material world in material culture studies, transformations and changing dynamics are normally attributed to the domain of the human being, while the material surroundings are presented 'as a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*, for the inscription of ideational forms' (Ingold 2007: 3). Thus, Ingold argues that these studies begin only after the materials have been made into a specific thing, e.g., have crystallized as a particular substance with a particular form with a specific meaning. Thereby the thing and its attributed meaning become the prime object of analysis rather than its material foundation.

Ingold suggests that instead of looking at the material versus the mental, we should look at the relationship between us and the outside world as a meeting between various surfaces; we are not only 'placed' in the world, but are also a part of it. 'Like all other creatures, human beings do not exist on the "other side" of materiality but swim in an ocean of materials' (Ingold 2007: 7). The removal of the polarization between us, on the one hand (the active mental), and the physical world around us, on the other hand (the passive material), permits new ways to understand the material, ways which assign the study of materials a more prominent place in the analysis. Ingold writes:

And as the environment unfolds, so the materials of which it is comprised do not exist - like the objects of the material world - but occur. Thus the properties of materials, regarded as constituents of an environment, cannot be identified as fixed, essential attributes of things, but are rather processual and relational. They are neither objectively nor subjectively imagined but practically experienced. (Ingold 2007: 14)

Thus, for Ingold, the way to get the materials back into material culture studies is to focus on the materials, investigating their flow in the world, where new materials emerge from old, transform, or perish. Instead of examining the materials after they are fixed in a particular form as a particular thing – like a silk scarf – another kind of perspective is offered if we contemplate the silk as a material in a process from mulberry leaf to the moth to the liquid secretions of the moth to the cocoon to fibres to textiles to commodity to consumption to use to waste to decaying material. The silk scarf according to this perspective is nothing but a temporary stability from the previous state to the next.

Ingold argues that his analytical approach shows us how a proper, material, culture studies should be conducted, as opposed to all those studies that claim to be about material culture but which do not include careful studies of the materials themselves. There is also a tendency, noted in the article, for the study of material flow to exclude or at least overrule the study of materiality, i.e., the objects' human significance. Ingold writes: 'Materials always and inevitably win out over materiality in the long term' (Ingold 2007: 10). Several of Ingold's archaeological colleagues have criticized him on these points. They claim that Ingold's attempts are in danger of bringing the field of archaeology back to where it started as a very traditional empirical discipline, avoiding any kind of broader social or cultural contextualization (see, e.g., Tilley 2007). Or, as his colleague Carl Knappett formulates his criticism: 'Ingold invites us to take the materials seriously and points out the danger that the study of material culture will be reduced to a study of social relationships, but the question is whether Ingold is not in danger of making exactly the opposite: to throw the social relations out of the study of materials' (Knappett 2007: 23).

Although, Ingold's methodology offers a very specific approach to material culture studies, and therefore evidently only seems relevant in some cases, his conclusions are worthwhile nonetheless. An interesting point about his way of looking at the material world as a matter of material flow is that it seems to cut across traditional dichotomies like nature and culture, passive and active, production and consumption, and not least, human beings and their environment, because it focuses on the flow of materials in their dynamic processes. And it is exactly this connecting perspective which makes his methodology interesting in relationship to what is going on at the Cradle to Grave installation.

In the glass case are two 13-metre-long textiles with rows of penicillin, antihistamines, painkillers, contraceptive pills, anti-depressants, Viagra, cholesterol-lowering drugs, sleeping tablets, regulating blood pressure medicine, medications for diabetes, and a host of other well-known drugs. On either side of the case, accompanying the length of the fabric, a tape measure indicates the number of years lived. It does not take many steps to reach the 50-year mark on the man's side of the case. In the last 10 years of his 75-year life, he consumed the same amount of drugs that he took for the first 66 years of his life. That the intake of medicine increases with age is hardly news, but the installation's chronology of drugs nevertheless invites reflection upon how closely our biological existence in the world is linked to industrial-chemical products. It evokes a strange bodily feeling to scan the quantity of synthetic chemicals that eventually will

become a part of my body, a part of me. It makes no sense to draw a clear line here between the mental and material, or between what we normally consider external objects (chemically synthesized pills) and inner personal bodily experiences. Ingold's observation that human beings do not exist outside the materiality, but in the midst of it, makes concrete sense here. Just as the cultivated mulberry leaves will, one day, become a part of a silk scarf, these synthetic extracts will become an increasingly important part of my living biological body. The installation demonstrates that to exist as a human being in late life requires the ingestion of enormous quantities of synthetic chemicals. The visitor is reminded of how much our existence as living beings depends on an exchange with our surroundings. The clear distinction between the human being and their surroundings becomes blurred and rather more a matter of chains of material that are in perpetual motion and change. A life course is a deeply existential experience, but at the same time it is also just a temporary (material) substance in a material world in process.

Between medicine, culture and art

An installation which focuses on the appearance of objects and their substantial qualities, as opposed to presenting them as realizations of an underlying culture, is something rarely seen at cultural history museums. On the other hand, this is a very common way to present objects in art museums. Thus, some of the specific features of the installation probably are associated with its indeterminate hybrid nature, suspended between the medical, the aesthetic and the cultural. The artist group themselves are aware of their work's hybridity between art, medicine and culture. Liz Lee, herself medically qualified as a general practitioner, has described their collective creative process. 'Three years into the collaboration, the boundary between artist and scientist has blurred [...] Each new idea is honed to see if it has a message worth developing, that the drugs required are accessible and that in the end an image can be produced which is strong enough to carry the message' (Lee on *Pharmacopoeia-art.net*). For analytical purposes, however, it can be interesting to separate the installation's medical, aesthetical and cultural aspects because it illuminates different ways in which the installation works by itself and in relation to the other exhibition elements in the gallery.

As a medical history display, the installation relates to the body-related objects that often are on display in medical museums. In these museums, medical history is presented through its artefacts, not just because of their confrontational three-dimensional existence, but also because of their ability to grasp the living-body experience, often in quite disconcerting ways (Arnold 2004: 161-2). Amputation saws, blood letting cups, scalpels, diseased body parts in jars – there is an unmistakable atmosphere of 'blood and guts' in medical museums, which creates a basic attraction of the majority of medical artefacts. The installation at the British Museum is not 'dripping with blood' as some of the old, brutal medical objects and instruments tend to be. But what it shares with other medical displays is the ability to intervene in the body and relate to an inner physical experience of the body. The installation makes it possible to sense a basic condition of living, by not distancing itself from the subject, not reducing the amount of pills to an abstract number. The installation thereby lets the visitor walk in the 'landscape' of a life course in a *Gränöian* sense.

As a contemporary work of art, the installation addresses another tradition: the use of aesthetics and materials as an integrated part of its content. It is not difficult to find works of art where the interconnections between the artificial, the medical and the body physicality come to life through the materials themselves and the processing of them. In art work such as 'Chemical Life Support', from 2004, English artist Marc Quinn has worked on this meeting in terms of biochemical bodies of patients with chronic life-threatening diseases. In a series of sculptures, he worked with casts made from polymer wax that was mixed with the drug that kept each patient alive. 'Innocence' is a sculpture of Quinn's infant son Lucas, who suffers from a milk allergy; thus the wax was mixed with the chemically produced milk-free substitute that has been used to sustain him. For the figure of Carl Whittaker, who survived a kidney transplant, the wax mould contains the drug cocktail that keeps his body from rejecting its own organs (for a more detailed description of the art work, see Renton 2005). The installation makes us remember that a life course is not just an extension in time, but an extension in space too. It makes us remember

what Gumbrecht draws to our attention and theoretical reflection, namely that the museum object is not just characterized and recognized by its appearance, but that things have a substance which affects our senses in ways that are constitutive of our very experience of the world (Gumbrecht 2004: 28-30).

Whereas many works of art thus play with the material and substantial qualities of the artwork, this kind of play between content, form and substance rarely is emphasized or on stage at cultural history and ethnographic museums. In this sense, they are in line with natural science museums, which very seldom exhibit objects for their unique appearance or aesthetic qualities, but rather for their ability to represent a general rule or broader context. Or as the museologist Hilde Hein writes:

[The difference between] a work of art and an instrument of science is that the former draws attention to itself as the locus of aesthetic experience, but the latter, even if it is beautiful, directs attention away from itself to a process or phenomenon. (Hein 1990: 36)

Cradle to Grave is a work of art by Susie Freeman, a textile artist, David Critchley, a video artist, and Dr. Liz Lee, a general practitioner. Together they call themselves *Pharmacopoeia*. By definition we are, therefore, talking about a work of art. But it can also be argued that the glass cases display ethnographic/cultural objects, represented in a very aesthetic way. The fact of bringing forth the others' cultural properties and aesthetic qualities as a counter strategy to the traditional ethnographic museums' stereotyping of foreign cultures is far from new (see, e.g., Gell 1998), but in this case, paradoxically, the situation is reversed in two respects. First, *Cradle to Grave* presents the life of 'ourselves', not the life of 'others' (Pearce 2002a, 2002b). Second, this is not an ethnographic object that has been displayed as art, but conversely, this is a work of art that describes an ethnographic/cultural setting. The installation shows how Western Europeans use drugs to ensure a good life without pain and disease. The installation is displayed in the middle of a large exhibition room filled with ethnographic objects that show how different cultures address this very issue. Around the installation are classic glass cases filled with ethnographic images and objects. No matter how spectacular and rare these artefacts are, like the head of a totem from North America, the huge stone sculpture from the Easter Islands, the painted panels from the Nicobar Islands, the Diablada dance mask from the Bolivian Andes or the papier-mâché skeletons from Mexico, they appear 'reassuring' and familiar, as representations of the cultures of 'others'. This is underlined by their arrangement in the tall glass cases along the walls and on the floors. The objects are categorized according to geographical location and explanatory text panels describe the cultural rites the objects represent. Whether it is the hybrid position of *Cradle to Grave*, situated between works of art and contemporary historical objects, that makes it unique in its display of substantial qualities, is an interesting question. None of the other artefacts in the exhibition highlights the intimate relationship between material and meaning, or are displayed so that the substances, gravity, extent or volumes of the objects stress their cultural meaning. Why are the painted skeletons from Mexico made from light and perishable papier-mâché, so they must be remade again and again, while the old moai sculpture is made of a material that makes it steadfast and everlasting in the landscape of Easter Island? Thus, what Ingold claimed was a peculiar paradox in many new studies of materiality seems also to apply to this exhibition: the material expression of the world's cultures might be the point of departure for the exhibition's theme and content, but the materials themselves do not seem to play a particularly important role in the displays that surround the thousands of tablets and pills in the middle of the room.

If, however, you interpret the display of the other cultures, no matter how unique, rare and aesthetic beautifully they are, as an impressive frame for *Pharmacopoeia's* installation, then the perspective will change. Then it makes sense to exhibit the classic ethnographic icons as a visual referent to 'the others'. The impressive ethnographic items in the exhibition are almost stereotypical as icons of foreign cultures, which could give rise to such an interpretation. Totem poles, moai sculptures, wooden panels from the Nicobar Islands and Pre-Columbian gold works are almost the epitome of the idea of 'primitive' cultures' finest treasures. Such an interpretation would lead us to think of the entire exhibition as one large contemporary art

installation with Pharmacopia's art work as a prominent centrepiece. And in that sense Jonathan Jones might have a point in posting his blog criticism that instead of illuminating world art, there is a danger that Pharmacopeia's installation blinds us. His point is, however, that the installation's communicative effectiveness relies on the fact that we respond to the familiar and therefore we do not have 'to image our way into the remote codes of meaning that other kinds of art contains'. This article has argued that the installation's effectiveness to reach the audience is far more complex. It is not just that the installation stages a habit we (Britons and other cultural fellows) are very familiar with, but also and foremost the way in which the installation incorporates elements of presence in its overall expression.

The power of presence

In his latest work, *In Praise of Athletic Beauty*, Gumbrecht summarizes his definition of presence as the following: 'presence emphasises space much more than time (the Latin word *prae-esse* literally means "to be in front of"). Something present is something within reach, something that we can touch, and of which we have immediate sensual perceptions. Presence in this sense does not exclude time, but it always binds time to a particular place' (Gumbrecht 2006b: 61). I think that one of the main reasons why the installation works so effectively can be explained by its capability of producing presence-effects. When entering the gallery, the installation is 'in front of' us. The physical confrontation with the overwhelming presence of the pills and the tablets draws attention to how concrete and physically the drugs are part of our lives. Although this embodied experience is, in some sense timeless insofar as it displays a present situation without paying any attention to what has gone before or what is to come, the installation points very strongly to our individually limited time as living beings in the world and to how strongly our lives are intertwined with our surroundings. The installation creates an awareness of our contemporary everyday existence, where we live, and of lives that are lived in tandem with pharmaceuticals. It creates an overwhelming effect by the inclusive contraction of a lifetime and the complete consumption of the enormous amount of prescribed drugs.

What is distinctive about the exhibition as a medium is that it includes our own living bodies in the experience. Nothing happens before we enter the room and approach and combine the objects and artworks on display. The installation uses this presence of the viewer's body to make it the dominant self-reference of the experience. Other exhibitions or – for that matter – other cultural phenomena like sports, for example, might entertain and engage us, because we can imagine or feel certain lives for which we do not have the talent, the time or the possibility to live (Gumbrecht 2006b: 256). The unique thing about the *Cradle to Grave* installation is that it lets us 'imagine' and 'feel' how it is to be 'us', thereby realizing vital aspects about the lives we are living.

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Notes

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² A detailed representation of the art work can be found on-line, www.cradletograve.org.

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