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Sølvberget as a Modern Architectural Complex: An Anthropological Study of Material Objects and Their Implications for Social Life

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Abstract

The study of materiality is not new. Scholars have long explored things as meaningful symbols, metaphorical representations, or commodities within economic exchange. Yet, such discourses often neglect the recognition of the thing in and of itself. In this master's thesis, I advocate for centering the ontology of objects in anthropological inquiry. Drawing on seven months of fieldwork at Sølvberget Cultural Centre in Stavanger, I investigate how objects—through their design and materiality—shape the conditions for social life. As a nexus where humans, material entities, and non-human actors converge, Sølvberget serves as a gathering point for people, objects, and even pulsating animals, offering a window into the complex dynamics of more-than-human interactions. This thesis posits that material objects resist purely verbal description, demanding embodied interaction for their full apprehension. Through the method of 'participatory sensing'—as opposed to mere observation—I explore the inadequacy of separating humans from their environments and argue that objects, beyond offering insight into human behavior, merit independent analysis. Here, humans, birds, and objects co-constitute one another in a reciprocal and interdependent relationship. The aim is to dissolve rigid boundaries while respecting the distinctions that remain between them. Grounded in contemporary ontological debates, this thesis proposes a new perspective that moves beyond, without entirely forsaking, anthropocentric frameworks. It seeks to uncover the latent significance of everyday objects often dismissed as mundane. Rather than conceptualizing objects as static, enclosed, or fully constructed, this study emphasizes their fluidity, dynamism, and capacity to disrupt and surprise. Sensory engagement—through soundscapes, visual media, and textual analysis—is central to this exploration. Consequently, the thesis is situated within the realms of sensory and material anthropology, probing the porous yet distinctive interactions between humans, objects, and Sølvberget as a cultural and architectural entity.

Keywords: materiality, ontology, virtuality, sensory research, participation, perception, phenomenology