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# The Art Museum as Space of Hope:

Affective, Useful, and Collaborative  
Action in Times of Uncertainty

## The Art Museum as Space of Hope: Affective, Useful, and Collaborative Action in Times of Uncertainty

How can museums find openings in times of uncertainty and be(come) spaces of hope? Within our current political and planetary circumstances – with the darkest, everyday news about wars and climate emergency, and with inequality, polarization and fascism on the rise – insisting on hope in museums may seem naïve and out of touch with the world. However, this is exactly what we do in this symposium, where we want to explore how museums can enable conditions of hope and action today.

A premise of the symposium is that (with Solnit 2016, Kleist and Jansen 2016, Gross 2021) uncertainty is integral to the meaning of hope. Uncertainty of the future contains a potentiality, a space for hope. Focusing on hope is not buying into a naive optimistic everything-will-get-better narrative. But not knowing what will happen can open for a willingness to act and a hope that one's actions matter.

In the last couple of decades, many museums have tried to strengthen and diversify people's engagement in the museum as well as the museum's engagement in society. The strategies include, for instance, being more inclusive or polyphonic, more just or democratic, more agonistic or activist, more community-oriented or caring, more decolonial or sustainable.

But where do art museums stand and go now? What experiments, practices and theories of change emerge if we focus on hope? What happens, for instance, if we rather than focusing on people's deficits, e.g. by identifying them as non-users or victims of inequalities or other illnesses, suspend damage (Tuck 2009), remember hope (Rigney 2018) and focus on the transformations, big or small, that unfold when people collaborate, practice hope and make their actions matter? At the symposium, we will explore three interrelated aspects of this: a) how material and affective encounters can enable hope and agency, b) how museums can be useful arenas for public engagement while navigating between the demands of societal betterment and the attraction economy, and c) how museums can open for new forms of interaction and collaboration with other socio-cultural fields and actors.

The symposium is organised by CraftWorks (2021-25), a collaborative research and action project by Trapholt Museum and Aarhus University (**CraftWorks » Trapholt**). Through two large-

scale collaborative art projects, CraftWorks investigates the creative, institutional and social potentials of new forms of craft-based participation at the art museum. At the symposium, we will present the artistic and academic results of CraftWorks and, based on this, unfold what kind of future action we now will hope and work for. In line with this, we invite all participants at the symposium to do something similar, presenting where they stand and will go from here.

In short, the question we ask is: What are the most important hopes and potentials for the next 5-10 years, and what possible projects (research and/or action-based) would you (propose to) initiate? In more detail, we ask all participants to reflect on one or more of the aspects below.

Our first focus is on **the material and affective dimensions of practicing hope and collaborative action at the art museum**. We know that belief in one's own ability to influence the world is often overshadowed by feelings of isolation, powerlessness, frustration, or fatigue. In this context, we suggest that creating a space of hope and possibility at the museum may depend on a practice of renegotiating – or becoming more attentive to – the affective economies (Ahmed 2004) that govern the potential for action. Building on the focus on the body's capabilities, material agency and the (im) material transmission between humans and nonhuman entities – central to the affective and material turn – we ask: what might a more materially grounded and affective museum practice look like? How can feelings that impede the capacity to act, get 'unstuck'? And how can museums facilitate affective and material encounters (Massumi 2002, Bennett 2009) that foster agency and action?

Second, we explore **how art museums can be useful arenas where public engagement and hope flourish while balancing a dual trajectory in the evolving relationship between museums and the public**. On the one hand, museums are increasingly operating within attraction economies, striving to captivate wide audiences and remain economically viable. On the other hand, they are committed to fostering relevance and contributing meaningfully to societal betterment. In this pursuit, museums have sought to broaden participation within the museum space and deepen public engagement in societal issues. However, there are many pitfalls in attempts to foster genuine collaborative relationships with citizens that are ethical, democratic, participatory, and reciprocal, allowing for genuine exchange and debate (Lynch 2021). This raises a critical question: (How) can art museums, within the neoliberal attraction economy, catalyse hope for and engagement in better futures?

Finally, we focus on **museums' transversal openness to other socio-cultural fields and actors, e.g. to the hopes and actions that unfold within political and social activism.** Here, we are interested in collaboration with external partners and in the uses of art, and art museums (Hudson 2020) for cross-sectoral and cross-discursive entanglements. What kinds of hope and action emerge when we relate and establish collaborations between the field of art and other fields? What pragmatic, diagnostic or prefigurative potentials (Kester 2024) do we see in these collaborations? How can art museums make new forms of collaborative action flourish, within and beyond the museum, thereby enhancing their relevance in and impact on times of uncertainty?

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