**BREAK! ON THE UNPLEASANT, THE MARGINAL, THE TABOO AND THE CONTROVERSIAL IN NORWEGIAN MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the programme entitled Break, which was launched within a grouping of Norwegian museums in 2003. Break emerged in the context of a more critical approach to museum practice and their ways of dealing with controversial pasts in the wake of the new museology. A central goal for Break has been to promote a shift from the presentation of conventionally treated narratives in order to focus on areas that are marginal, hidden, contested and regarded as unpleasant. The programme has aimed to strengthen museums as active social institutions that are able to engage successfully with current issues and to stimulate serious reflection among visitors. While the concern to avoid making waves or drawing negative publicity often hinders museums from tackling controversial issues, Break is distinctive in that the initiative came not from within the institutional setting of the museum but among certain authorities in Norway that served as its leading agents. In this short reflection on Break, I explore two key questions: How has Break encouraged new approaches to difficult and, in particular, marginalised histories; and what representations have ensued from it that may help to continue problematising museum collections in Norway and stimulating critical engagement.

**Keywords:** Break, Norway, museum collections, challenge, controversy, taboo, publicity

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**Biographical note**

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The scheme Break (‘Brudd’ in Norwegian) was launched in 2003. Break sought to challenge museums to ask critical questions and to treat taboo topics and difficult stories pertaining to Norwegian society. The programme was launched in 2003 by ABM-utvikling (the Norwegian counterpart to the United Kingdom’s Museums, Libraries and Archives Council – the MLA – which merged with the Arts Council Norway in 2011), with nine participating museums and one county administration (Holmesland et al., 2006, pp.6-17). Its central goal has been to promote a shift from the presentation of conventionally treated narratives toward areas that are marginal, hidden, contested and unpleasant. It has aimed to strengthen museums as active social institutions that engage with current issues and stimulate serious reflection among visitors. Norwegian museums are perhaps the least among public institutions to seek to make waves or draw negative publicity. Break sought to address that attitude by guiding the country’s museums along a path of exploration, broaching the stories they have felt were too difficult to tackle. It has come to represent a fundamental break therefore from approaches to exhibitions in which historical ‘fact’ is assumed rather than properly examined; as a break from that routine, it has intruded, sometimes rudely, on an erstwhile climate of self-evident museological ‘truth’. Whatever the case, Break initiated an important debate on the role of Norway’s museums and, in what follows, I offer a set of personal reflections on it from the perspective of a policy maker based (at the time of writing) within the museums division of Arts Council Norway.

What made Break so special?
Break was part of a deeper current of re-evaluating the role of museums and the exhibitionary complex in light of ‘difficult’ topics, and the need to signal new approaches to how museums should handle the invisible, unpleasant, marginal, and taboo. In 1996, Robert Macdonald asked the question ‘controversy...
– can museums handle it?’, responding with a firm ‘yes, if museums are to advance their missions as centres for learning’ (Cameron, 2003, p.1). In turn, the internationally significant research project Exhibitions as Contested Sites: The Role of Museums in Contemporary Society came to investigate the potential role of museums around contentious subjects, and to elaborate a relevant theoretical framework, in a lively debate that continued through several volumes of the Open Museum Journal published in the early 2000s (see especially volumes 2, 6 and 8).

What distinguished Break against this background was that it was not museums but government authorities that spearheaded the initiative. Its approach to museum practice emerged during the 1999 conference When Tradition is Standing in the Way (Når tradisjonene står i veien), which was followed by the Report to the Storting (Government white paper) Sources for Knowledge and Experiences, pointing out the need to take Norway beyond any tendency to self-interested promotion of its cultural heritage (St.meld, 1999-2000). In 2001, the official body for Norwegian Museums Development (NMU),1 followed up on the work it had begun in redefining the purpose of museums in step with broader social and political change in Norway. More recently, the white paper Cultural Policy Towards 2014 has encouraged museums to become more open and flexible, to consider more carefully the social values implicit in their programming (St.meld, 2002-2003). The governmental institution ABM-utvikling/MLA was given the responsibility to encourage museums to begin work on less conventionally explored issues and collections, in order to challenge working practices and find new conceptual frameworks with greater relevance to contemporary society.

Among the result were a lively internal debate among custodians of museum, library and archival collections and the focus of the 2003 Oslo conference The Power of Collections (Kildenes makt). The central questions that have emerged are about the use and visibility of public collections for furthering social progress and democracy; the consequences of institutional silence, consensus, concealment/suppression, and ‘forgetfulness’ for political, cultural and historical understandings of modern subjectivity; how to ensure the representation of excluded and marginalised groups; and how to re-examine the relationships between institutional authority and historical truth. In particular, museums and other cultural institutions have been challenged to reflect on how they treat issues of human rights, especially those concerning minority groups, and to explore the question of what aspects of the past museums should try to preserve and present.

Overall, Break sought new ways of thinking and working in Norwegian museums, and unsurprisingly it generated significant resistance. Various complaints were levelled about the use of time and resources, and anxieties about falling short of public expectations, with concerns focused on audience reception – ‘what will local people say?’ – and institutional purpose – ‘this isn’t what museums are for’ – as well as anxiety about losing credibility, summed up by a reactionary complaint about the initiative’s apparent overabundance of ‘political correctness’. If there was every reason here not to become involved with Break, nevertheless a significant number of museums volunteered. Mainly cultural history museums, with the exception of some special collections and a museum of natural history, their chosen themes related to war and conflict, the infringement of personal rights by institutions, and the rights of marginalised groups and minority ethnicities. The projects focused principally on two areas. Where they dealt with difficult, concealed and controversial narratives, participating institutions explored the ethics and impact of Norwegian museums, in a process of confronting unacceptable institutional bias. This was coupled with a problematising of exhibition content, and the goal of stimulating criticism and reflection, which took the form of interpretative strategies that focus on asking questions without stipulating easy answers, and promoting thereby the need to broach topical issues from unusual angles. On the whole, the Break initiative combined an informative presentation of difficult stories with a self-critical mode.

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1 The Norwegian counterpart and predecessor to the United Kingdom’s Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA; established in 2003 and dissolved in 2011).
of interpretation. Museum visitors have been enticed and challenged by displays that encourage reflection not only on their content but a wider consideration of how museums should approach histories that remain contested.

This activity emerged through a lively forum of meetings where participants discussed both major exhibitions/works of documentation and more modest displays. Building such a supportive network of peers has been of particular value as a means to cope with the sometimes negative, even aggressive reactions that several of the museums experienced from visitors and which led to some of the projects undergoing revisions by their organisers. The circumstances and outcomes of these may be grasped through a brief comparison, as in the remaining part of this paper, of three of the institutional sites that offered their individual response to Break.

The Vidkun Quisling exhibition at Telemark Museum (May 2007)
The exhibition that met with the most negative media coverage was the Vidkun Quisling exhibition at the Telemark Museum. Quisling came to be seen as a traitor after taking power in Norway in May 1940 and has remained one of the most controversial characters in Norwegian history. He was executed in October 1945 and his actions during the Second World War caused widespread speculation and debate in the years that followed. Since Quisling was born and spent his childhood and youth in different parts of Telemark, the main aim of the exhibition was to inform young people (aged 14-20) about him, establishing a space for reflection on their own assumptions, in such a way as to allow them to explore genocide and abuses of human rights in the world today.

In order to do so, the museum needed to display a more nuanced image of Quisling than the standard demonisation usually given. The exhibition had been long in preparation, with the idea originally discussed as early as 1999. Around that time the museum faced several internal obstacles, including a sense that it lacked staff expertise on the topic; it was also experiencing organisational pressures, such as mergers with other museums. More serious was that certain members of the board strongly opposed the plans. But it was the discussions and interest among the local community and in the media that brought the plans forward. In 2004, the museum established a pre-project working group with highly qualified members, including respected historians, philosophers and psychiatrists (Walle, 2012, p.84). Plans for the exhibition drew sustained interest before it was finally realised in 2007.

The exhibition plan was loudly discussed in local and national media before the opening. The local newspaper conducted a poll in 2005, which showed that 57 % of the local residents supported the exhibition. People below 30 years of age (73 %) were found to be especially supportive, while 41 % of people...
older than 60 were also favourable to the idea (Mohr, 2006, pp. 62–65). Nonetheless, an abiding criticism was that a man like Quisling should not be honoured with an exhibition in a museum; it became clear that many people looked to the museum as a site for demonstrating national pride. It was suggested that while Quisling could be legitimately documented in print, interest in his life would be better left alone by museums. Some politicians also feared the exhibition could have a negative effect on the reputation of Telemark.

The terms of debate on the run up to the Quisling exhibition suggested strong assumptions about the role of museums as venues for glorification of the past – patriotic or otherwise – which steer clear of difficult themes. After the opening of the exhibition, most critics became silent, and the exhibition got quite positive comments in the media. It was not experienced as controversial as had been feared and the expected reactions did not materialise. The item causing the strongest reactions from general public turned out to be the display of the rocking horse that Quisling had played with as a child. How could this horrible man have been the owner of such a beautiful toy?

**Bad boys? Falstad ‘rescued’ by Bergen**

Falstad is a Memorial and Human Rights Centre in Levanger, central Norway, 80 kilometres North of the city of Trondheim. The Falstad Building was erected in 1921 as a special school for delinquent boys. In 1941, the building was turned into a prison camp by the Germans. SS-Strafgefangenenlager Falstad was the second largest prison camp in Norway, with about 5,000 people from 13 nations imprisoned there in the period 1941-45, and it often served as a station en route to concentration camps in Germany. After the liberation of Norway, Falstad prison camp became a forced labour camp, and more than 3,000 members of the Norwegian Nazi Party served their sentences there. The camp was closed down in 1949. Later on, the building again became a special school – returning full circle to its original use (Jørstad, 2006, pp.52–56).

In 2003, the Falstad Centre chose to develop an exhibition about the building's history as a school, but the plan led to a heated public debate in the newspapers and protests in the autumn of that year, especially from war veterans, showed up the depth of emotion surrounding a physical reminder of war. The main argument against the plan was that Falstad should focus solely on the period of its use as a prison camp, and that a presentation of its time as a school period would diminish the seriousness of its associations with Nazism. Some protestors even spoke of whitewashing the history of fascism. Ultimately, Falstad abandoned its plans for an exhibition of its function as a school. The project manager went on leave to write his doctoral thesis on the conflict (Seim, 2009). Falstad and Bergen School Museum later established a collaborative

![Entrance gate to the prison camp at Falstad.](image-url)
agreement and by joining forces, the Bad Boys exhibition was realised through an extremely productive relationship between the two institutions.

The media storm resulting from the Falstad project is the most distinct in Break but reactions to this and the Quisling exhibition examples make some crucial issues evident: Can the opinions of a limited group of people be allowed to influence the scope of museum interpretations and documentation? What of a democratic process of deciding which stories to tell? Who has ownership over the means to make voices of the past be heard?

Among the conventions that Break challenged were those about museum displays as capable of offering ‘neutral’ positions, while promoting the aesthetic contemplation of high-quality artefacts. Several international studies underscore that the public prefer museums to seek neutrality in the interpretation of knowledge. Consider, for instance, the shock caused by the decision to display the Enola Gay at the Smithsonian Museum in the mid-1990s, as part of a presentation on the history of the aircraft’s role in dropping the atomic bomb (see Gieryn, 1998, pp.197-228, Zolberg, 1996, pp.69-82). There was the case of a media frenzy surrounding the National Museum of Australia’s treatment of histories of Australian Aborigines. Dawn Casey, director of the National Museum, commented that ‘perhaps the most useful effect of the storm was to throw Australia’s current culture wars into sharp relief’ (2003, p.1).²

Interestingly, Break showed that it was impossible to predict which topics would cause storms of comment and discussion. Some of the topics the museums expected to be controversial caused no waves at all, while topics they predicted to be uncontroverial resulted in heated debates. The huge debate that followed the exhibition of the boys’ detention centre at Falstad was far from expected, while the one that highlighted the same site’s use as a prison camp seemed to pass unnoticed.

**Gay animals**

Break triggered no greater mixture of success and notoriety than the exhibition Against Nature, the first ever dedicated to the subject of homosexuality in animals. Opening in autumn 2006 at the Natural History Museum of the University of Oslo, it focused

2 Several museum directors chose or were forced to leave their positions in the aftermath of controversial exhibitions. It is a topic that runs through several of the earlier mentioned volumes of the Open Museum Journal (Casey, 2003; Ellison, 2003).
on a selection from more than 1,500 animal species. While a Pentecost pastor suggested the curators of the exhibition should ‘burn in hell’, others claimed that it helped people to see homosexuality as less man-made (Robech Lillebø, 2006), or that it was like a ‘fresh breath of controversy’.

In the introduction to the exhibition the public could read:

Sadly, most museums have no traditions for airing difficult, unspoken, and possibly controversial questions. Homosexuality is certainly such a question. We feel confident that a greater understanding of how extensive and common this behaviour is among animals will help to de-mystify homosexuality among people. At least, we hoped to reject the all too well-known argument that homosexual behaviour is a ‘crime against nature’.3

If measured by the degree of media attention, and from the interest and responses of visitors, then this exhibition is the Break initiative’s greatest success. The museum adapted Against Nature into a travelling exhibition that also reached audiences abroad (Søli et al., 2006, pp.56–61). It was moving to read in the museum’s guestbook those comments from young people who wrote about it having helped them to accept their sexuality.

### Conclusion

The outcomes of Break were evaluated in 2010 through independent consultation, focusing on several key questions, namely: Has the Break scheme had a more general influence on its participating institutions, beyond piecemeal exhibitions and projects? Are its central aims embedded in the institutional landscape; has the contribution made by Break been sustainable? The results showed up the significant barriers that stand in the way to deeper and more lasting change in museum programming and management. Institutional custom and practice, generation gaps in staffing and existing workload pressures were all outlined, in addition to a more worrying sense of a lack of attention to the diverse publics that museums might serve.

Certainly, museums found it a challenge to meet the ambitions of Break. The museums that participated seriously in the initiative were those motivated by the need to position themselves with relevance to contemporary society. Where there were successful responses, they came through concrete projects such as the focus on minority groups at the Glomdalsmuseet, with its documentation, exhibition and educational programmes dedicated to the Roma people (Lahn, 2006). For other participating institutions, it has been the impetus to strike up new discussions that has emboldened the desire to re-engage the past. Governmental support has been crucial for many organisations, and the five remaining museums in the project still feel they need it. The Vest-Agder-museet has allowed curator Kathrin Pabst to undertake a Ph.D. based on her experiences from several of the Break-inspired projects. Her research focuses on the ethical dilemmas associated with using personal stories in exhibition projects, in which she analyses seven Norwegian exhibitions alongside others staged abroad (Pabst, 2011, pp.28-52).

The exhibition Sanatorium Kids at Norsk Teknisk Museum (National Medical Museum/Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology) is another success story and one which made a difference for a group of people who otherwise may not have had a public voice. The project began as an exercise in documenting the history of the sanatorium building at Grefsen in Oslo but, in so doing, museum staff found controversial stories and from them produced a small exhibition that shed light on the fate of abused children, which received huge public interest. This led to a public enquiry and compensation for victims. While curators in this case showed little fear of entering untrammelled territory, the Break concept still struggles to be taken up more readily by the majority of Norwegian organisations. This has meant that the initiative is pushed to the margins, and even those museums that did feel able to participate have struggled.

In sum, only two museums (Nordsjøfartsmuseet – Museum Vest and Lepramuseet – Bergen City Museum) joined Break throughout, while others participated in just some stage of it. Although most new Break projects are limited in size, they are planned thoroughly before being launched. An important lesson is that a small number of sceptics were allowed to have too great an

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3 It has been long established that homosexuality is widespread in the animal world. In the summer of 2012, the Natural History Museum in London released information on the research notes of Dr. George Levick from the famous 1910-13 British Antarctic Expedition led by Robert Scott. Studying the penguins at Cape Adare he included a description of ‘hooligan’ behavior among the birds, which he considered to be instances of sexual coercion. The observations were included in Greek to disguise and limit the general access to the knowledge of these obviously quite controversial findings. Levick’s sense of shock is palpable in his comment that: ‘There seems to be no crime too low for these penguins’. For more information on Scott’s observations, see http://www.nhm.ac.uk/about-us/news/2012/june/penguin-sex-habits-study-recovered-at-museum110510.html.
Figure 1.4.7: The Latjo Drom exhibition at Glomdalsmuseet. Photo: Emir Curt, Anno Museum – Glomdalsmuseet.

Figure 1.4.8: «My Body – My Truth» is one of the exhibitions discussed by Kathrin Pabst (2011). Photo: Arve Lindvig, Vest-Agder-museet.
influence on the initial raft of projects. In terms of the themes of displays, it seems that World War II stories are still the most sensitive. From the more recent projects focusing on forgotten stories, the experience is that storytelling per se is not nearly as difficult as the application of a genuinely critical approach to history.

A question posed by Per Rekdal is pertinent here: Why does it appear easier to write about the controversial in a book – or to make a film – than to stage an exhibition? (Rekdal, 2006). Addressing this question, and asking why Norwegian museums are not more engaged with the country’s difficult pasts (or indeed with what was once the ‘new’ museology), would take this topic onto even more challenging ground.

**Bibliography**


13 St.meld (1999-2000) Kjelder til kunnskap og oppleving, St.meld no.22.

