

Phallogical Museum*. Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson. Zurich: LIT Verlag, 2014. 192 pp.

Reviewed by John Bodinger de Uriarte

“The Icelandic Phallogical Museum was a dream come true at a time when it seemed important to imagine things rather than to know them” (19).

The *Phallogical Museum* offers a compelling analysis of the multiple intersections of the Icelandic neoliberal state and the country’s “cultural industries” during a time of dramatic economic and government changes. Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson explores the history of the Icelandic Phallogical Museum, connecting its scope and growth to changes in national cultural and economic policies. The book is ambitious—it presents not only a close history of a fairly unique institution, but also pays careful attention to the dynamics of the Icelandic state and the exercise of national identity projection through institutions of public representation. How does the state both encourage and influence national and sub-national narratives that work through public exhibitionary places? The role of neoliberal policies, understood as both a signature of changes in Iceland’s governing policies and its economic restructuring beginning in the mid-1990s, is traced in particular through changes in a number of key public institutions (The National Museum of Iceland, for example). Hafsteinsson makes a good case for the influence of these policies as an element in the redesign of the National Museum’s permanent exhibition halls in the late 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, shifting the overall national-identity narrative history to one of individual effort and entrepreneurial spirit. Hafsteinsson suggests that the Phallogical Museum’s argument is somewhat different and that this museum’s existence and growing public profile are partly dependent on the state’s deepening investments in museums and other public sites—as independent, privatized businesses rather than state-supported entities—to help grow tourism and tourist services as fundamental components to the Icelandic economy.

For a fairly small text the Phallogical Museum is wide-ranging in its attentions, casting a broad net to bring in a number of phallic and phallic-projected objects under its field of investigation. Indeed, there are moments when the book may be attempting to do too much in a limited space. But one of its numerous strengths is its focus on museums as sites for entrepreneurialism within a “new Iceland” of economic development and the expansion of the banking industry. As elsewhere, the business of museums in Iceland becomes increasingly tied to economic assessments, not just how a particular institution may contribute to larger narratives of identity or belonging, but how these narratives generate economic return in terms of admission fees or ancillary products—like those offered in gift shops. As Steven Dubin suggests in the book’s preface, the Museum serves as an illustration of “the neoliberal shift that privatized and globalized Icelandic cultural production...from the 1990s onward” (7–8).

For Hafsteinsson, the Phallogical Museum perpetuates, “ridicules and undermines...traditional notions of Icelandic culture, its people, and of the museum as a cultural institution” (9). The

* This editorially reviewed contribution was accepted for publication in *Museum Anthropology Review* on June 15, 2015. The work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Museum plays against the official national trinity of language, literature, and nature to create a playful space that also critiques mainstream museum exhibitionary practice and the idea of “the national.” The museum’s collection—natural history specimens of penises from Icelandic mammals—has become a site for increasing international tourist interest. Persuaded by neoliberal state policies linking participation in a market and result-oriented cultural industry to an expanding tourist economy, the museum’s founder, Sigurður Hjartarson, made his private collection public.

The text sets out to “investigate the social and cultural changes that seem to have paved the way for the Phallogical Museum to become the cultural force that it is today” (19). The development of neoliberal economics was rooted in post-independence (1944) Iceland; economic independence was realized as an expression of national (re)imagining, including government support for economic development. During this development, Hafsteinsson maintains that “the government perceived its role as one of establishing and controlling cultural institutions with national interests in mind” (20). The election of 1991 dismantled state sponsorship of industry, shifting emphasis to free market and privatization; a growing public discourse emphasized “individual initiative, responsibility, and freedom” (21). The forming and execution of public policy was seen as part of democratic process and the proper exercise of market forces. As Hafsteinsson notes: “Neoliberal ideology stressed entrepreneurship at all levels of cultural production, which undermined the State in managing and preserving cultural heritage” (22–23).

In 2001 the Museum Council of Iceland (Safnarád) was established as a legal entity, a gesture on the part of Parliament that confirmed the structural and cultural policy change. Another manifestation of the new policy is that the National Museum was closed for six years...A new exhibition was opened in 2004 with the rhetorical theme of the making of a nation. The theme itself emphasizes the transitional phase of Icelandic national culture as it highlights the concept of the nation and Icelandic society as a construction. [23]

Such changes were reflected across a number of entities, including the Ministry of Culture, Education, and Science, that were tasked with working on “results-based agreements with its cultural institutions with the aim of defining their roles and their fiscal responsibility” (24). The results-based model is a key component of neoliberal administration, with results being largely measured in terms of fiscal generation or viability. The collapse of museums as state-supported venues of cultural representation, regardless of visitor numbers, is now increasingly driven by the need to secure visitor numbers. Entertaining, fund-raising, and seeking private sponsors—and to do so in a market increasingly competitive, not only with other museums and cultural sites, but also other sites for entertainment and information about the nation—became more and more important institutional functions. Of course, this shift is not unique to Iceland and can be measured globally across the field of “cultural industries” over the course of at least the last twenty-five years (the literature on the gradual and relentless corporatization of public museums and cultural venues is extensive).

The Ministry produced a report on Cultural Tourism in 2001, advocating for a move away from Iceland’s literary (saga) heritage as an emphasis for the official national story:

the report stated that what had previously been categorized as lowbrow culture—and consequently had not been officially supported or institutionalized—should now be examined and possibly utilized for purposes like the tourism industry. What had been disregarded and therefore “unseen” should now be spotlighted. [25]

One of the more compelling elements of the *Phallogical Museum*'s analysis is its attention to the unseen, or the invisible-becoming-visible, as parameters of cultural heritage and representation shift in response to increasing pressure for tourism and the play of market forces. For Hafsteinsson, the Phallogical Museum gets a leg up because of its irreverence, and the shape of its collection and collections practices. But there is also an interesting recognition of the roles of the National Museum here, which are seen as important for conserving and exhibiting Icelandic historical artifacts and as a vehicle for the reexamination of Iceland's past.

This practice becomes mixed with new discourses of the neoliberal government, introducing “new linguistic and institutional metaphors that became keys to the ways in which societal changes were envisioned and imagined” (27). There is also discursive play at this time about the transformative properties of new markets and economies, to shift Iceland from “dead” to “alive”—the transformation of live fish to dead resources that are only given “life” through their transformation into a commodity is one example. Cultural institutions without results (profits and significant tourist audiences) were dead until they were liberated or transformed into market capital-generating industries.

Hafsteinsson argues that shifts in the global economy have created “shifts in the power structures that previously governed the curatorial world of museums,” thereby creating opportunities for collectors with “previously stigmatized interests” (29) to come forward with their collections. He cites the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles as one of these, along with the Beate Uhse Erotik-Museum in Berlin and the Sulabh Toilet Museum in New Delhi. While I am not familiar with the latter two institutions, I am not convinced that the Museum of Jurassic Technology works in a space of the “previously stigmatized.” Indeed, this section offers an opportunity to further discuss the ever-present and historical tension between the curatorial “high-brow” and “low-brow” worlds, including institutions such as Ripley's Believe It or Not or Barnum's American Museum, for example.

Building on this foundation, Hafsteinsson discusses the formation of the Phallogical Museum collection, found in both the material and the virtual, in the specimens dried and in jars, and in the photographs and promises that men send him concerning their penises (and their future donation to the collection).¹ For example, Elmo—the penis of future donator Tom Mitchell—blends the virtual, the collaborative, and the actual in a number of different directions. Not only is Mitchell interested in donating Elmo, Elmo has also been cast and used commercially as the model for dildos and vibrators. Virtual Elmo is in circulation, as are multiple material manifestations of Elmo, as is the promise of Elmo himself. Here the simulation of Elmo slowly grows to replace the materiality of Elmo as imagined. That some of the future elements of the collection are walking about, promised yet not delivered, raises the question: at what point do these penises enter the collection? And at what point can they be displayed or referred to? Thus, the Phallogical Museum can be understood as a participatory museum (Simon 2010), as a site for the co-production of exhibition content. The Museum serves as a locus of different desires

and different vernaculars—there are “collections objects” still in use before donation, the simulacra of these objects in other forms of circulation—that circulate around ideas of authenticity and how they are, in turn, connected to understandings of use as museum objects and components of other discourses and other lives.

The Museum’s curator and founder Sigurður Hjartarson suggests the museum is “best described as a cultural history museum, a natural history museum and a science centre” (38). Hafsteinsson connects this intersection of culture and nature to a history of changing sexual eras in Iceland, stating that Iceland experienced a sexual awakening in the 1990s, coupled with a new permissiveness in the regulation of obscenity and sex. This can be read as one affirmation of neoliberalism, one of individualism, agency, and national identity as realized through the unregulated self. This book allows us to engage questions relating to the effect of neoliberal and market-driven policies on the management, growth, and exhibitionary content of cultural institutions. The site of “the national” in Icelandic history has been one of contestation for quite some time. In part, projections of Icelandic identity are connected to Icelandic manuscripts that were returned by the Danes in 1971. The manuscripts are an important element Icelandic cultural and national continuity.²

The ownership and control over collections, like the manuscripts, is recognized as an affirmation of national sovereignty and identity. The National Museum of Iceland (founded in 1863) is a key site for the assertion of Icelandic national ideals against Danish colonial rule. But the Phallogical Museum also navigates a terrain between an assertion of a national, natural history—its collection of almost three hundred penises and penile parts are of Icelandic land and sea mammals—and one of folkloric objects also understood as particularly Icelandic:

in the Folklore section, one can find specimens of an adult Nicor or Kelpie (*Equus fabulosus Aquaticus Islandicus*), a Christmas lad (*Homo natalicus Islandicus*), and the penis of an elf (*huldumaður*), merman, Njardvik-Growler, elfin billy-goat, elfin ram, rustic elf, the neogrophic cat, catafox (a mixture of cat and fox), shadow hound (a mixture of dog and fox), enriching beach mouse, beach walker, seahowler (an Icelandic sea monster), ghost, changeling, beach murmurer, whirler (Icelandic witches’s familiar) and seabull. [69]

In many ways, this is brilliant. It actively blurs the lines between the “shadow members” of folkloric creatures and the shadow members of others (those that have donated their members in promise while continuing to use them in their daily lives). To further trouble this distinction between “the real” and “the unreal,” “each artistic artifact in the collection is assigned a fictitious name in Latin” (73), a nod to Linnean taxonomy and authoritative labeling and cataloguing as sites for critical engagement. Penises are exhibited in glass containers filled with formaldehyde, at once toying with and validating the authenticity of museum practice(s).

In this active space—between affirming and unsettling traditional forms of museum practice—Hafsteinsson’s analysis sometimes folds back on itself. Various, the Phallogical Museum is understood as a site for humor, a site for the exercise of neoliberal market forces, a site that questions museum practices by poking fun at display conceits and terminologies and, in other moments, as a site that establishes the seriousness of its project, “turning this unexplored field of investigation into a respectable, systematic subject” (79).

But the Phallogical Museum also presents an opportunity to think about “the disappeared” and the present as museum objects. For example, Hjartarson is actively seeking “phalluses (penises) from some mammalian species that used to be found in or around Iceland” (80). Here the collection is a site for claiming and affirming heritage and identity: if the disappeared can be located, they can extend the Museum’s reach, not only the reach of the collection but the reach of the museum’s claim to collections logic (mammal phalluses from Iceland). Interestingly, this can be seen with the incorporation of human phalluses as well as sex toys either cast directly from human phalluses or made in the shape of human phalluses. The Phallogical Museum offers a way for all of these artifacts to appear under one roof, which depends on the museum’s understanding of the collection’s reach and scope.

One example of this active play: the Icelandic handball team won the silver medal in the 2008 Olympics and 40 thousand celebrants turned out on the streets in Reykjavík to welcome them home. Hjartarson asked his daughter to make an exhibition object in their honor. Titled *The Silverteam*, the work “consists of fifteen clay-sculpted penises, spray painted in silver, and closed in a wooden box with a glass front” (84). It is important that these are *not* casts of the team’s members, but that they exist in a tenuous space, their interpretation largely supplied and answered by their viewers’ own desire to see “the authentic” (and is this not the way that most museums and their objects function?). As exhibit objects, their meaning must always be supplied by an interaction of master narrative and visitor desire to make their own sense out of what they see.

But this is not just about borrowing authenticating exhibition practices to unsettle museums’ “validating voice.” Hafsteinsson clearly ties this to shifts in public national Icelandic discourse, and what he identifies as a “neoliberal enterprise culture [that wields] people and culture as a resource to create a national brand with the aid of artists and artistic works that practice institutional critique” (85). The Phallogical Museum is a tourist site and one repeatedly featured in the foreign press “as a sign of Iceland’s all-around strangeness,” (87) an element of its national “brand.” It is recognized for its role in the production of the exotic (for a collection that is actually fairly mundane). But the institution does provide crossovers between the exotic and the imagined erotic or obscene. While some visitors may wonder if they are being poked fun at, one of the underlying questions has to be about a critical tongue-in-cheek depiction of the cataloguing and museological practices of mainstream institutions. No matter how much the collection may seem odd or titillating, it is still a legitimate collection. While Hjartarson may be asking why dominant museums are boring and humorless, he recognizes that humor—and its practice of unsettling—is at least one of the museum’s goals. Here “only in Iceland” works as branding and an imagined national member(ship).

Hafsteinsson perhaps tries to fit too many things into his “portrayal report” on Iceland as an exotic frontier state, on understandings of the phallus, on the failure of Icelandic neoliberal economics and politics, and on controversies between titillation and fact-based exhibition practices. It arrests the text’s ability to make an extended, and perhaps more complicated, central argument. The tension between “private” (as in “private parts” and “private “property”) and “public” (in discourses, institutions, and ideologies) works well through the text, and a critique of cultural industries and “the national” as commodity branding is more than useful.

There are a few moments where it is unclear if Hafsteinsson is affirming the pedagogical value of the Museum's practices or reading it as free-range joking. But careful consideration of "low" and "high" culture is worked through the comparative discussions of the corporate roles of the Icelandic rhyme and the Icelandic saga, for example, which broadens the book's contributions. There is ongoing play, throughout, between a national vernacular and a more elevated story of the nation. As Hafsteinsson rightly notes, however, this tension is resolved differently in the face of neoliberal governance:

governments began to demand that museums become more accountable to the democratic society and communities they purported to serve. This was especially prevalent in neoliberal states that were advocating (and continue to advocate) for free market competition in and between cultural institutions. [141]

Connecting neoliberalism to a shift in the measures-results-marketing value of cultural industries is one of the book's larger insights. Thinking about the Phallogical Museum as both a "counter museum" and a museum fueled in part by humor, and making claims to either the traditional presence of that humor or its contemporary use to "unsettle" also makes sense. One of the book's most interesting contributions may be found in "Elves' Reality:" "elves remain a consistent presence within Icelandic culture and society, and they reveal Iceland's tug of war between what is taken as real and fiction, concrete and abstract, material and mental, science and superstition" (149). Indeed, Icelandic governmental agencies like the Icelandic Road Administration recognize the presence of elves and mediums' claims to their presence as factors in public works planning. Additionally, a number of artifacts held by the National Museum of Iceland make the "hidden world" elves manifest. In 2011, the Akureyri Museum in North-Iceland had an exhibition devoted to elves and hidden people. The idea that elves and the invisible co-habitat the land runs through a number of different venues. It is tied to Icelandic imagination about place, and to ideas about identity and history and understandings of national belonging. "These stories and representations of the unseen world of elves with mortal humans in Iceland suggest a transparent world that seems just as real for Icelanders as material objects" (156). "Transparency" is also a key concept for neoliberal politics: transparency and accountability, market measures and results rendered visible, even if made possible through "the invisible hand."

Interestingly, the Folklore section of the Phallogical Museum "includes the penis of an elf or a hidden man which, according to Hjartarson, 'only sensitive women' can see" (158). Here the "visible invisible" serves as an affirmation of difference (only some can see it) and one of shared experience—all visitors see the exhibit, in some sense. Hafsteinsson notes: "Invisibility/transparency can mean that visitors discover the representational system of museums—as visitors are always looking through something at something" (161). As he states later,

the hidden man's penis suggests to its viewers notions of incompleteness, hesitation, contradiction, unconscious slip, and awkward silence, which are an inevitable part of any knowledge production but is usually in the unreported background of the process...and suggests that museums can be more flexible and malleable in their practices. [162–163]

This argument is worth making, and worth making even more forcefully. The display of what *might* not be visible questions the authenticity of seeing as a practice and seeing as a *confirmation* of knowledge. A museum that questions the visible *knowing* by gesturing toward the unseen or the unseeable puts us on somewhat familiar ground. This sounds very much like the Museum of Jurassic Technology's project (see Weschler 1996, for example). But Hjrtarson's project cannot be all about having an extended locker room joke, or about playing at the surface of humor. Part of what makes the Museum of Jurassic Technology's project so successful is that it is not overtly kidding about anything; it constantly pushes at the viewer to examine and reexamine their suppositions for museum visiting and exhibition viewing. Visitors often feel what they take for firm ground slip away from beneath them. In this, the Museum of Jurassic Technology functions as a kind of meta-museum, a museum of museum practice and visitor knowledge formation. The work that the Phallogological Museum does around the hidden man's penis tends in this direction. The premise for believing or disbelieving in the penis is partly based on believing or disbelieving the entire premise of the museum: that a variety of penises are on display for pedagogical purposes, that the hitherto (mostly) unseen—perhaps a useful definition of “private part”—is now fully seen and in focus. The hidden man's penis bumps against this. While the premise maybe somewhat fanciful, the role of hidden men is an element of the national character, and not something to be fully dismissed out of hand. This observation extends to talk about the invisible national of Iceland itself, the claiming of the sagas as a global treasure, the repatriation of the sagas from elsewhere, from a place rendered invisible by distance.⁴ Not to mention the invisible hand of the marketplace and how such logic completely failed the Icelandic national economy.

The *Phallogological Museum* is often excellent and thought provoking. One of its main points of critique and analysis is to examine the effects of Icelandic neoliberal policies on the *doing* of cultural industry(ies) and the imagination of the national character. It is important to consider the connection between the neoliberal state and the advent or unprecedented new growth in independent museums (like the Phallogological Museum) looking for free market share with the blessing of the state's absence of support. Increasingly, more traditional national history museums' main narratives get appropriated, in concert, to be re-read and re-told as histories of entrepreneurship, ever-seeking the lessening of state controls. Some of the book's small detours—the androcentricity of museums and other mainstream discourses of representation, feminist critiques of dominant cultural forms, or the folkloric recurrence of penises in Icelandic literature, for example—are not given enough room for carefully nuanced and considered critique. That said, the closing discussion of the role of the visible, and the questioning of the primacy of sight, is fully compelling and useful. *The Phallogological Museum* calls for an active unsettling of the categories of museums, exhibition, and meaning-making. Transcending the boring (Hjrtarson's assessment of dominant or traditional museums), it lays a claim for specialized access (the visibility/invisibility of the hidden man's penis, for example) and calls for active imagination and active uncertainty.

Notes

1. Pall Arasonar was the first Icelandic human to actually have his penis willed to the Museum (Mitchell is from the United States). Hjrtarson, wishing to visualize the donation beyond the

signed document for its imminent gift, “‘materialized’ it by displaying an empty [glass] urine container for males” (95) with the accompanying label: “Mr. Arasonar’s Future Resting Place” (96).

2. Their return is an affirmation of cultural sovereignty through repatriation; they were added to the UNESCO Memory of the World Register in 2009—(here understanding “nation” as something that can exist without, or prior to, a nation-state).

3. Hafsteinsson references an article that appeared in *The San Jose Mercury News* as one example; other articles have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Smithsonian.com*, the *Tucson Weekly*, and the Huffington Post. “The Final Member,” a documentary about the first human penis to appear in the museum, was released in spring 2014.

4. Denmark as a real place, the archives as a place rendered partly invisible by difficulties of access, in part due to the functioning of archives themselves (they grant access while, at the same time, they deny access by making it special[ized]).

References Cited

Weschler, Lawrence

1996 Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder: Pronged Ants, Horned Humans, Mice on Toast, and Other Marvels of Jurassic Technology. Westminster, MD: Vintage Books.

John Bodinger de Uriarte is an Associate Professor of Anthropology and Chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Susquehanna University. His research in part focuses on the formation of cultural self-definition and self-representation in the public sphere. He is the author of Casino and Museum: Representing Mashantucket Pequot Identity (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.14434/mar.v9i1-2.13471>