

*Curating a Sense for the Past: Echo of the Urals Review<sup>1</sup>*

I have a tendency to be struck by that which is inconvenient, inconsistent, or worthy of mockery when entering museum spaces. My jaded associations with these institutions as bastions of truth colour my ability to see what was attempted and where, in my view, they may even have been successful. Very few museums or galleries have failed to drive my sardonic commentary on missteps, only made worse when visiting with a cadre of classmates, friends or family members. Not that I don't appreciate the *subjects* found within the museum, rather it is often their *presentation* at which I poke fun.

When I first visited the Estonian National Museum, I erroneously relegated it to the same fate. My first attempt at absorbing the Echo of the Urals exhibition was overshadowed by distracting conversations, while the modest selection of text that abutted each segment of the display was no match for the raucous prattle. My second visit, however, would be different. I would make a more well-rounded assessment of the exhibition, allowing myself the freedom to weave back and forth between segments – even if the arrows led me ever-forward along the winding tunnels – and put myself in the shoes of the exhibition designers and curators.

During my first trip through the exhibition, I didn't even care to look at the title. On my second trip however, the title reverberated through every corner of the exhibit space. As the self-opening doors seduce one across the threshold, birdsong and the gentle gurgle of a distant stream greet one's ears. Meandering through the exhibit I realised that, true to its name, it was always the *sounds* that led me deeper into the depths of the past; that only after the *soundscape* hit me did I let my eyes take in the wallpaper backdrops chosen for each group, sectioned off by language and landscape characteristics. In fact, only after wandering amidst the first couple of rooms did I re-comprehend the introductory blurbs along the front wall on how "words and things" relate, how the environment can shape a people.

There was a deliberate choice not just in how many mannequins were in each room, but what emotional atmosphere was being emphasised. Naturally, there is tension between the vast body of historical knowledge and the willingness of the visitor to engage with said body. Therefore, the themes chosen for each group grew brighter when walking through as a hopeful curator, optimistic about how to capture visitor attention. What I found most intriguing, which I hadn't noticed before, was how interactive the place truly was. It was as though the designers were taking inspiration from contemporary video games where you discover only through autonomous exploration that there are hidden jewels to be collected and secret rooms to fall into. Had I not gone back to one of the rooms, wanting to re-experience the difference in soundscape, I would never have discovered a tiny square hole in the wall that was *not* an accidental back-stage exposure, but rather a special experiential element, intentionally orchestrated, and, further, that I was the only one of the few other visitors there who actually went inside. It was magical. From that point on, I became interested in *every* nook and cranny; every potential touchable button or sensor on the floor. It made me listen and absorb that much more of the discoveries, having had to seek them out myself. Perhaps I had stumbled upon one or two in passing during my initial visit, but this was completely new. Museums are generally so visual that it was refreshing to let another sense, my hearing, lead the way as I took time to listen for my next step.

Everything inside is slower, seemingly following the same unwavering metronome. Too slow for my contemporary taste, causing many of the more interactive story-telling displays to lag detrimentally behind the initial activating input – and waning interest – of each of us visitors. However, the rhythm did carry a healthy association with our conceptualisation of how time must've moved in the past: more slowly. It bolstered the spatially experiential

metaphor of going back in time by going down the stairs and following the electric blue river. The deeper you went, the darker and more coloured the lighting became, only adding to the deep winter cocoon and deeper dangers that logging through a timewarp evokes.

Is this mystical quality, with the animated folk stories of shapeshifters and cruel plot twists, really fair to the subjects to whom it is attached? I was able to see what the museum was prioritising – and to whom they decided deserved credit –, but I wondered how they felt about the edits to history that they had sacrificed for their high-tech exhibit. Little did I realise, until making my way through the entire exhibition, how much one unobtrusive paragraph of text near the entrance would encapsulate the driving aspiration and scope of the curators.

Ethnofuturism, which originated in Estonia and draws upon the Finno-Ugric legacy, is a comprehensive cultural strategy. By weaving age-old traditions into modern and future cultural fields, it preserves the archaic patterns of cultural diversity. Ethnofuturism is a unique cultural orientation of Finno-Ugric peoples. It is a method of artistic creation, a code of thought, a way of life; it is a model of adaptation and way of shaping a modern culture.

This was one of several inconspicuous paragraphs scattered very economically throughout the exhibition. One could easily decide to engage with these texts or not, the main focus being on the costumed figures and the soundscapes. One way the text was more noticeable was in the Udmurt and Mari wedding day celebration, where frosted white words wrapped around the clear cylinders holding the mannequins. One had to physically walk a circle or more around each figure to decipher the text, possibly lyrics to folk songs, though it was hard to tell. Even in this way the words were merely a tool to provide the visitor a more embodied engagement. One felt physically dizzy, as if one had just danced with each figure, all while the celebratory soundscape helped fuel such feelings. Similarly, the ani-

mated stories were audible in the language from which that story derives, but no captions were provided, perhaps to better attune the ear to the oral languages. Only the credits offered a written synopsis, collaborator names, and minute details about the curation. Most information was fed directly into your auditory, tactile, or spatial mechanisms. It was the fusion of modern forms of data dumping – there was little attempt to hide their fancy lighting and special effects equipment – and an evocation of an emotional conveyance about *these* people living in *these* places.

Before beginning this journey across time and space, there is a silent selection of video loops titled Uralic Peoples Today. Once you come to the exit, and press the correct order of symbols spotted throughout the various scenes, you find yourself back beside that same collection of silent videos. After a ceaseless orchestra of Finno-Ugric life sounds, your mind generates its own inner soundtrack to the colourful, muted people on the screen. You may or may not have picked up bits and bobs of factual history about the people, but your body feels them, closer than they were before.

I used to be oblivious to the aspirations, priorities, and thematic motifs manufactured by museum curators. If something struck me as odd or out of place, I would have immediately chalked it up to awkward, out of touch museum stiffs or bureaucratic neglect. However, the Eesti Rahva Muuseum exhibition stirred me to really ask ‘what are they trying to tell me’ with this or that particular choice, rather than calling it an inane mistake and wandering off with it already half-forgotten. *This* time... I felt the full force of the Urals echo through my bones.

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<sup>1</sup> Echo of the Urals is the Estonian National Museum’s permanent exhibition, dedicated to Finno-Ugric indigenous peoples and their cultures.