Working on Things (Berlin, 21–22 Nov 16)

Berlin, Nov 21–22, 2016
Deadline: Mar 18, 2016

Mareike Vennen

Working on Things: On the Social, Political, and Economic History of Collected Objects

Organized as part of the project “Dinosaurs in Berlin. Brachiosaurus brancai as an Icon of Politics, Science and Popular Culture”, funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, in cooperation with the base project “Mobile Objects” as part of the German Research Foundation’s cluster of excellence “Image Knowledge Gestaltung: An Interdisciplinary Laboratory”.

“Art is beautiful, but it’s a lot of work.” Karl Valentin’s aphorism can be applied to all kinds of collected objects, regardless of whether they belong to the fields of art history, natural history, ethnography, archaeology, or history. Various kinds of work have to be invested in objects before they become worthy of collection, before they can be researched, preserved, and exhibited. Work on the dinosaur skeleton of Brachiosaurus brancai in Berlin’s Museum für Naturkunde, for example, extended far beyond the decades of the fossil’s preparation in the Museum. This object’s history also includes the colonial forced labour on cotton plantations in German East Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century, that produced the packing material necessary for transporting the findings to Europe. Such figurations of work across time and space form the focus of the conference “Working on Things”.

The conference thus builds upon studies in the history of science and the sociology of knowledge that have shifted the attention from the contents of knowledge to its practices. Science as a practice has been considered in terms of the “fabrication” or creation of facts and its functioning as a major enterprise has come to the fore in recent studies. The conference will take the potential of this practical and material turn seriously yet at the same time proposes to expand it. By analysing the work that is invested in objects of knowledge, the very concepts of practice and of object can be opened into broader social, cultural, juridical, political, and economic dimensions. Practices as work are thus understood as technical, administrative, artisanal, artistic, classifying, or maintenance activities, which are strongly defined by economics and which in turn produce economies of their own. They are shaped by political and social contexts, cultural conventions, hierarchies, and regulations, and should therefore be questioned with regard to their function in creating values, and social in/equalities. The goal of the conference is to combine an object-focused history of knowledge with approaches in social and political history that move beyond classical narratives of social history or the history of collections and institutions.

The conference therefore intends to open a discussion about collected objects from the fields of natural history, art history, ethnography, archaeology, and history as focal points for often globally

distributed and historically specific work settings from the mid-nineteenth century onwards: which kinds of materials and immaterial labour had to be invested in order to acquire or produce a given object, in order to transport it, examine it, exhibit it, or valuate it? What existing knowledge, and which social, political, and legal conditions characterized this work? How was the work remunerated and categorized? What types of materials, tools or techniques were used? Who were the actors? What types of complications occured in object-related work settings?

The conference encourages examinations of work settings relating to collection items both within and beyond institutions in order to better understand their historical peculiarities. Furthermore, it aims at describing global and local interdependencies of very different kinds of work on objects.

Our leading questions are:

- Working on objects in a global context: what global policies are incorporated in the work on objects? How were/are global forms of work rendered visible or invisible?

- Working on objects and mobility: what type of labour has to be performed in order to transport the object and what infrastructures are required? What happens to collection items when the work-flow is interrupted? What kind of work can lead to the object becoming stabilized in a museum or library setting?

- Working on objects and the economy: which processes of valuation and value creation influence work on the object or are a result thereof? How has work on objects been evaluated and how have these evaluations changed? Who worked on the object and under which socio-economic conditions?

- Working on objects and institutions: how did work on the object develop within the collecting institutions? What types of work have been and are being carried out in order for objects to become a part of collections or exhibitions?

With this call for papers we would like to invite scholars from various disciplines: from the history and theory of science, art history, cultural studies, social and economic history, the history and theory of collections, as well as museology. We welcome contributions which explore historical or current object-related work settings from the mid-nineteenth century onwards and which discuss them from diachronic or systematic perspectives.

The conference language is English. A publication is planned.

Please send applications together with an abstract (max. 500 words) and a CV to pan@mfn-berlin.de no later than March 18th, 2016.

For further information please contact
Mareike Vennen (mareike.vennen@tu-berlin.de)
Ina Heumann (ina.heumann@mfn-berlin.de)

Reference:

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