What do Contentious Objects Want? (Florence, 21-22 Oct 16)

Florence, Italy, Oct 21–22, 2016
Deadline: May 1, 2016
www.khi.fi.it/4826975/

Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut, Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut

What do Contentious Objects Want? Political, Epistemic and Artistic Cultures of Return

International Conference to be held at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz

Works of modern art, archaeological or ethnographic artefacts and human remains generally occupy separate realms in the museum world. Yet, the growing discourse surrounding claims on certain objects made to museums by former owners or communities of origin unite them in one very specific category. Their status appears unsettled as they are caught between conflicting desires and points of view. By bringing together scholars and practitioners dealing with case studies related to different types of museums and collections, this conference aims to facilitate a transdisciplinary engagement with the issue of returns (a term that encompasses here both restitution and repatriation questions).

One of the aims of this conference will be to ask how we might think about and historicize "contentious objects" as a category in its own right. Might it be considered alongside categories such as idols, icons, fetishes, totems, foundling objects and others discussed by J. T. Mitchell (2006)? What are the social, political and aesthetic dynamics that make objects contentious? How do property negotiations induce profound changes in the value and symbolic meaning of objects and their capacity to impact on post-conflict relationships? How does this process of remaking the museum challenge imperial and colonial constructions of knowledge?

In her foundational study, Jeannette Greenfield (1989) privileged the term "return" over repatriation or restitution, writing that it "may also refer in a wider sense to restoration, reinstatement, and even rejuvenation and reunification". The physical return of objects appears as one aspect of a large set of practices. These revolve around an effective or projected movement that places museum collections in an essentially social and relational perspective, reshaping their rather exclusive relationship with the institution and tying them back to former contexts (Bouquet 2012; 152). "Returns" potentially unsettle not only the object's perceived permanence of place but also the ontological and epistemological interpretations produced by the museum. Practices related to returns can be seen as new ways of asking "what do objects want?" As well as encompassing diplomatic and legal actions, they may also take the form of critical artistic expressions and museum displays that explicitly seek to draw attention to appropriation processes.

We welcome papers that look at the trajectories of specific objects or collections, analysing their agency as contested things. By focusing on the objects themselves, we hope to shift attention away from entrenched, often inherently ideological positions (Merryman, 2006). Focus will be placed on how "Returns" are in fact changing museum ethics and knowledge systems; calling on new actors and forms of curation and "curature" (Hamilton, Skotnes 2014), producing objects with more hybrid or heterogeneous identities that question traditional ontological categories.

Taken in parallel, case studies from different fields and periods will hopefully allow us to approach some important questions: How can we understand historic cases of returns, from Ancient Mesopotamia to Post-Napoleonic France, in relation to the contemporary culture of redress? Can they be related to the evolution of the "guilt of nations" defined by Elazar Barkan (2000) as a post World War II phenomenon? Have the growing number of negotiations around human remains impacted on how we perceive the issue of ownership for other types of objects, i.e. can artworks also be perceived as unique bodies? What do negotiations around Nazi looted art have in common with the legal and ethical questions related to objects appropriated in colonial contexts?

Applications in English consisting of an abstract of 300 words and a short C.V. should be submitted by the 1st of May, 2016 to:
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Notice of application results will be given by the 1st of June, 2016.
Contributions to travel and accommodation expenses may be available for participants.

The conference is part of the activities taking place within the framework of the Max Planck Research Group "Objects in the Contact Zone – The Cross-Cultural Lives of Things" (http://www.khi.fi.it/4826975/)
It is organized in partnership with the project "Museums and Controversial Collections. Politics and Policies of Heritage-Making in Post-colonial and Post-socialist Contexts", New Europe College, Bucharest.

Convenors:
Eva-Maria Troelenberg, Kunsthistorisches Institut Florenz, director of the Max Planck Research Group "Objects in the Contact Zone – The Cross-Cultural Lives of Things"
Felicity Bodenstein, Postdoctoral fellow, Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut
Damiana Otoiu, Lecturer in Political Anthropology at the University of Bucharest, director of the project "Museums and Controversial Collections. Politics and Policies of Heritage-Making in Post--colonial and Post-socialist Contexts", New Europe College, Bucharest.

Keynote:
Bénédicte Savoy, Professor of Art History, Technische Universität, Berlin.

Quoted References:
Barkan Elazar, The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices, New York :

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Greenfield Jeanette, The Return of Cultural Treasures, Cambridge, New York : Cambridge University Press, 1989.
Hamilton Carolyn and Skotnes Pipa (ed.), Uncertain Curature. In and Out the Archive, Johannesburg, Cape Town : Jacana, 2014.
Merryman John Henry (ed.), Imperialism, Art and Restitution, Cambridge, New York : Cambridge University Press, 2006.
Mitchell W. J., What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images, Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Reference:
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