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

Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, Palazzo Grifoni Budini Gattai, Via dei Servi 51, 50122 Florence, Italy, Oct 21–22, 2016

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

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 speakers dealing with case studies related to different types of museums and collections, in Europe, Africa, Australia and Canada this conference aims to facilitate a transdisciplinary engagement with the issue of returns (a term that encompasses here both restitution and repatriation questions). 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, in relation to the contemporary culture of redress? 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?

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.

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
Kunsthistorisches Institut Florenz, Postdoctoral fellow

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

PROGRAM

Friday 21st of October

9:30
Eva Maria Troelenberg, Damiana Otoiu & Felicity Bodenstein
Introduction

Biographies and objects
Chair: Costanza Caraffa

10:00
Fabrizio Federici (Rome)
Baroque restitutions: the donations and re-uses of Francesco Gualdi

10:30
Ewa Manikowska (Warsaw)
Entangled Identities. The Recovery of Eastern European Photographic Collections

11:00
Coffee Break

11:30
Ulrike Saß (Hamburg)
Saving lives with artworks. Do objects really want their stories to be told?

12:30-14:00
Lunch Break

The subject of return: between objects and bodies
Chair: Annie Coombes

14:00
Noémie Étienne (Bern)
Life-Casts, Relics, and Human Remains. The Return of Museum Tools

14:30
Christopher Sommer (Wellington)
Of Phrenology, reconciliation and veneration – An object biography of the life cast of Ma□ori chief Tangatahara

15:00
Clarissa Förster (Cologne)
The Long Way Home. On the Biography of returned objects/subjects

15:30
Coffee Break

16:00
Cressida Fforde, Major Sumner (Canberra)
The Dead or Artefacts: contention in the definition, retention and return of Ngarrindjeri Old People

16:30
Damiana Otoiu (Bucharest)
"Can biological history be determined?" South African Museums in the "New" Era of Genomics

Keynote

17:30
Bénédicte Savoy (Berlin)
Le droit des objets

Saturday 22nd of October

Return and afterlives of objects
Chair: Anna Seiderer

10:00
Christoph Frank (Mendrisio)
Genocide, Capitalization and Amnesia: An eighteenth-century French sculpture and its unexpected return to life

10:30
Jenny Graham (Plymouth)
The Van Eycks' Ghent Altarpiece and the Second World War: Restitution and Restoration as Cultural Patrimony

11:00

Eugenia Kisin (New York)
Resources and Returns: Totem Pole Afterlives in the Anthropocene

11:30
Coffee Break

12:00
Ruth E. Iskin (Jerusalem)
The Other Nefertiti: Symbolic Restitution in Contemporary Art

12:30-14:00
Lunch Break

14:00
Lucas Lixinski (Sydney)
Colonial and Post-Colonial Discourses in the Restitution of the Axum Stele (Ethiopia)

Objects in Intermediate "States"
Chair: Christian Fuhrmeister

14:30
Elena Franchi (Vicence)
Contentious and Missing Objects: the Landau-Finaly Collection in Florence and the EGELI Archives

15:00
Andrzej Jakubowski (Warsaw)
Failed States, de facto Regimes and the Return of Cultural Objects: the Role of Safe Havens

15:30
Coffee Break

16:00
Erin Thompson (New York)
Return to the Scene of the Crime: What Does the Future Hold for Looted Antiquities from Syria and Iraq?

Keynote

16:30
Laurajane Smith (Canberra)
Objects, agency and power: the pragmatic politics of heritage

Concluding discussion

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VENUE
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Reference:
CONF: What do Contentious Objects Want? (Florence, 21-22 Oct 16). In: ArtHist.net, Sep 21, 2016 (accessed Nov 6, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/13755>.