

Activating Stilled Lives: The Aesthetics and Politics of Specimens on Display

Department of History of Art, University College of London, May 17–18, 2012

Registration deadline: May 15, 2012

Petra Lange-Berndt

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17.-18. May 2012

The past twenty years saw an explosion of exhibitions fathoming the relations between art and science as well as numerous refurbishments of natural history or former colonial museums. Many of these displays and gallery transformations mobilised specimens, be it taxidermied animals or preserved human body parts. Objects were put into new contexts opening up their meanings, others disappeared in storage or travelled back to the countries where they were once collected. The conference will address the challenges institutions face when dealing with formerly living entities and consider the aesthetics and politics of their display. The idea is to discuss the use of specimens in temporary exhibitions, museums or university collections and the role curators, art and artists have been playing in the transformation of these spaces. We would also like to consider how preserved specimens have changed through the altering contexts in which they have been displayed: One could name the initial transformation of organisms into objects, the more recent re-definition of pathological specimens as human remains, or the dramatic rearrangements that took place when natural history, anthropology or anatomy collections (many dating from the nineteenth century) were updated – coinciding with a shift in audiences, from specialists to a broader public. Historical displays were often significantly altered, or even destroyed and replaced by „techy“ but at times also by sentimental, „post-modern“ installations still awaiting a critical assessment.

Beyond that, the question of preservation shall be considered in a more expanded sense, as this subject area offers a unique opportunity to reflect more broadly on issues of conservation and their ethics and to raise a variety of questions such as: How and why do various cultures preserve elements of what is considered as nature? How does this relate to environmental notions of conservation and extinction? Should flawed specimens be disposed of? Can museums as a whole be considered cultural preserves? Should we preserve the preserves? And last but not least: Do we really need to embalm everything?

Thursday, 17 May 2012

UCL, JZ Young Lecture Theatre, Anatomy Building, Gower Street

2.30 Mechthild Fend & Petra Lange-Berndt: Exhibiting Preserves

Session one: REASSEMBLING

Chair: Sam Alberti (Director of Museums and Archives, The Royal College of Surgeons of England)

3.00 Hans-Jörg Rheinberger (Historian of Science, Berlin): Preparations Revisited

3.45 Rose Marie San Juan (Art Historian, London): Bones in Transit: the Re-Animation of Human Bone in Early Modern Cabinets of Display

4.30 John MacKenzie (Professor Emeritus of Imperial History, Lancaster): The Natural World and Imperial Legitimation: Hunting, Trophies, Taxidermy and Museums

5.15 Tea break

5.45 Robert Marbury (Artist / Minnesota Association of Rogue Taxidermy, Baltimore): Personal Computers as the New Wunderkammer and the Rise of Rogue Taxidermy

6.30 Reception at the Grant Museum of Zoology, University College of London (Rockefeller Building, University College London, 21 University Street, London WC1E 6DE)

Friday, 18 May 2012

UCL, Gustave Tuck Lecture Theatre, Wilkins Building, South Wing, Gower Street (access via Gower Street / Main Quadrangle or Gordon Street)

Session two: HANDLING

Chair: Mechthild Fend (Art Historian, London)

10.00 Petra Lange-Berndt (Art Historian, London): Subsculpture: Assembling a Museum of Attractions

10.45 Steve Baker (Artist and Art Historian, Norfolk): "Dead, dead, dead, dead, dead"

11.30 Tea break

12.00 Angela Matyssek (Art Historian, Marburg / Maastricht): "Museumlives": Mould, Decay and the History of the Object

12.45 Lunch break

Session three: DISPLAYING

Chair: Bergit Arends (Curator Contemporary Art, The Natural History Museum, London)

14.30 Panel discussion on "Curating Specimens" with Claude d'Anthenaïse (Director, Musée de la chasse et de la nature, Paris), Christine Borland (Artist, Glasgow), Lisa O'Sullivan (Director, Center for the History of Medicine, New York Academy of Medicine), Johannes Vogel (Director, Museum für Naturkunde, Berlin)

16.00 Tea break

16.30 Anke te Heesen (Historian of Science, Berlin): Displaying the Infinite Amount

17.15 Nélia Dias (Anthropologist, Lisbon): The Fate of Human Remains from the Musée de l'homme to the Musée du quai Branly

18.00 Final discussion

The conference is organised by Petra Lange-Berndt and Mechthild Fend.

The event is open and free for all, but please register with Pandora Syperrek, pandora.syperek.09@ucl.ac.uk

Reference:

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