

Small Forms and the Power of Collecting (Berlin, 14–15 Jun 24)

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin | Main Building, 2nd Floor | Room 2070 A | Unter den
Linden 6, 10117 Berlin, Jun 14–15, 2024

Registration deadline: Jun 13, 2024

Chiara Sartor, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

"List, Compile, Assemble: Small Forms and the Power of Collecting".

Interdisciplinary Workshop of the Research Training Group "The Literary and Epistemic History of
Small Forms"

Organization: Michael Kellerer, Claas Oberstadt & Chiara Sartor

[PROGRAM BELOW]

Collecting is, in many respects, an asymmetrical undertaking. Those who assemble, compile, curate or publish collections remove items from their original contexts, establish inclusion or exclusion criteria, and exercise interpretative power. Moreover, collections invite attention to the intricacies, disparities, and tensions within and between the small forms they contain, as well as between individual parts and the collection as a whole.

Unraveling the various asymmetries inherent in collecting requires shifting our focus from collections themselves to how collections come into being. This entails viewing collections as both purposeful and contingent results of scientific or cultural practice (cf. te Heesen & Spary 2001, 8). Those who collect data, documents or texts inscribe their own assumptions, prejudices and preferences into collections and thereby determine which perspectives are rendered legible and whose become illegible. Beyond the exercise of epistemic violence (Brunner 2020), collection practices can also give rise to physical violence (cf. Pollock 2023, 381). Such power imbalances are familiar features of archaeological and anthropological collections of material culture but shape other fields and types of collections as well. Literary anthologies, for instance, serve not only as potent tools of canonization and reader direction (cf. Price 2004) but as observed in the case of the textualization of oral literatures, can result from asymmetrical practices of collecting and recording as well (cf. Albers & Schmid 2023).

Drawing on the history of collecting (Pomian 1988, Findlen 1994, te Heesen 1997) and the history of paperwork (cf. Latour 1986, Gitelman 2014, Bittel/Leong/von Oertzen 2019), this interdisciplinary workshop specifically aims to enhance our understanding of the collecting processes involving written testimonies, inscriptions, and texts. With a focus on contexts such as artistic-literary primitivism or colonial encounters, the workshop proposes a comparative examination of the asymmetries associated with collecting via three main axes:

1. Actor-networks involved in the production of collections. Collecting practices not only assume a powerful role in the construction and dissemination of knowledge, as elucidated by Latour (1986), but also capitalize on existing power imbalances. The gathering of items from various corners of the globe in specific locations, such as museums, private collections or merchants' houses, hinges on varied resources, contacts, and techniques. Collections often originate within collector subcultures (cf. Stagl 1998, 50) and their success relies on factors such as institutional support, communication networks, and trade relations. This is evident, for instance, in the collecting of artworks and writings produced by psychiatric patients: the integration of such collectibles into the canon of "outsider art" necessitates the involvement of "insiders" like doctors or hospital staff, along with the accumulation of authenticating documents. In which social and material environments do collecting practices flourish? Which (small) forms and formats, paper technologies (Hess & Mendelsohn 2013), and infrastructures are involved in collecting?

2. Collecting's role in the management of life. From colonial administrations or psychiatric hospitals to HR departments, collections of data and information in reports, lists, and registers, support administrative apparatuses in the coding and recoding of life into problems of governance. Contrary to Max Weber's idea of the bureaucratic elimination of "love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements" (Weber 1946, 975), it is precisely documentation that organizes the "emotional economy" (Stoler 2009, 41) of power relations. How do affective tunings inscribe themselves into collections of data and information? How can we address the margins and omissions of commercial communication and paperwork that facilitated violent systems such as colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade? How can history – "written with and against the archive" (Hartman 2008, 12) – unfold based on such documents of trade and domination?

3. How collections emerge from asymmetrical media practices. Collecting is not an isolated phenomenon but exists in relation to practices such as extraction, arrangement, classification, fragmentation, anonymization, or recording. As can be seen, for example, from anthologies published by missionaries, these media practices enable the expression of power by making texts appear in new forms, in new contexts and with new meanings and attributions. How do the asymmetrical dynamics of these practices determine the de- and recontextualization of individual collection components? What can a media- and practice-centered approach to collecting contribute to debates around looted art, cultural appropriation, or philological provenance research (cf. Albers & Schmid 2023)?

REFERENCES

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PROGRAM

Friday, June 14

09:15–09:30 Welcoming address

Section I: Collecting Words

Moderation: Michael Kellerer

09:30–10:15 Anke te Heesen (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin): Collecting Life Histories

10:15–11:00 Andreas Schmid (Freie Universität Berlin): The Buffalo as Plastic Mass: Orature and Paper Power

11:00–11:15 Coffee break

Moderation: Franziska Teubert

11:15–12:00 Ruth Conrad (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin) & Claudia Jetter (EZW): Collecting Sermons – Religious Power Dynamics in the Long 19th Century

12:00–12:45 Michael Kellerer (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin): Towards an 'Exalted China': Following Richard Wilhelm's Text Collection Practices

12:45–14:00 Lunch break

Section II: Collecting and the Management of Life and Death

Moderation: Claas Oberstadt

14:00–14:45 Christine von Oertzen (MPIWG Berlin / Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin): The Power of

Protocol: Bureaucratic Routine as Epistemic Practice

14:45–15:30 Eva Seuntjens (Vrije Universiteit / International Institute of Social History Amsterdam): Divesting from Slavery: Reading Acts of Resistance in Late-Eighteenth Century Plantation Insurance Policies

15:30–15:45 Coffee break

Moderation: Morten Schneider

15:45–16:30 Claas Oberstadt (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin): Management's Imaginaries: On the Production of Risk in the Black Atlantic

16:30–17:15 Susan Zieger (University of California, Riverside): Collecting Flows: Warehouse Automation and the Future of Handling

19:00 Conference Dinner

Saturday, June 15

Section III: Material Culture: Collectors and their Networks

Moderation: Marie van Bömmel

09:30–10:15 Baptiste Brun (Université de Rennes): Collecting Art Brut. Jean Dubuffet's Network at a Crossroads (Art, Anthropology, Psychiatry, Folklore)

10:15–11:00 Chiara Sartor (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin): The Psychiatric Hospital as a Source of Poetic Renewal: Frédéric Baal, Michel Thévoz, and their Quest for "Extra-Cultural" Writings

11:00–11:15 Coffee break

Moderation: Chiara Sartor

11:15–12:00 Dwirahmi Suryandari (MPIWG Berlin): The Great Commission: Missionaries and Scientific Development in the 19th – 20th Century Dutch East Indies

12:00–12:45 Allison Morehead (Queen's University, Kingston): Doing Medical Humanities with Collections: Between Art and 'Non-Art'

12:45–13:15 Final discussion

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Reference:

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