Tal Adler | Dead Images and TRACES

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The project I present here is concerned with two collections at the Natural History Museum in Vienna: a collection of human skulls and a photographic collection. Both belong to the department of anthropology.

One note before I begin: this presentation contains some images of the skulls in the collection. As some people might be offended by these images, especially as they might contain indigenous ancestral remains, I masked and blurred them, except of when they’re so small that no details are visible anymore. However, this isn’t only a technical notice as one of the main aspects of this project is not only the question of the display of human remains but also the display of photographic images of human remains.

This is a screen capture of TripAdvisor website page about the NHM Vienna. The photo masked was probably uploaded by a user, I will refer to it later on.

Before I talk about the project I will say a few words about the framework in which it is set, as it’s a sub project of the top-level project called TRACES:

‘TRACES: Transmitting Contentious Cultural Heritages with the Arts: From Intervention to Co-Production’ is a 3 year project funded by the EU under their H2020 program. We have 11 partner institutions across Europe. As the title suggests, we explore models for artistic and scientific collaborations that engage with difficult or contentious cultural heritage. TRACES is centred around five Creative Co-Productions or in short: CCPs. Our starting point is some inherent problems, or challenges, that we feel artistic residencies and interventions in heritage institutions usually face. One of the main ones is the very brief period of time given to the artists to explore the subject, immerse in the research about it, or engage with communities affected by it. The short time for research AND development is usually insufficient, especially when we deal with difficult or contentious heritage.

A CCP is an interdisciplinary team of artists, researchers, heritage agencies (museums, sites, phenomena) and **stakeholders** (citizens, organisations, policy makers, etc, who are affected by the heritages at question) who are working together over an extended period of time based on mutual, equal and non-hierarchical relations (unlike the the usual relations in hosted residencies where you have a guest and a host, commissioner and contractor, applicant and patron, etc). The team members share both the creative and research processes, and the main goal is to achieve significant and sustainable solutions for the problems they identify.

For TRACES, we set up five CCPs, in different places in Europe, addressing different types of contentious cultural heritages with very different social, political and historical contexts. The CCPs will produce participatory public interfaces embedded in research, reflection, experimentation negotiation and education.

Hovering above and around the CCPs are what we call work packages (EU terminology) which are a kind of research or meta questions, led by scholars from various fields (art theory, cultural and social anthropology, museum and heritage studies, education research, etc). There is a multichannel and multidirectional stream of knowledge between the CCPs and WPs to support and to theorise the work of the CCPs (for the benefit of others who engage with difficult heritage).

Dead Images is run by one of the CCPs in which I'm also a member:

Tal Adler, artist, Humboldt University of Berlin

Linda Fibiger, bioarchaeologist, University of Edinburgh

John Harries, social anthropologist, University of Edinburgh

Joan Smith, artist, College of Art – University of Edinburgh

Anna Szöke, art historian, Humboldt University of Berlin

Maria Teschler-Nicola, physical anthropologist, Natural History Museum Vienna

As you can see, this is a multidisciplinary team and the NHM itself is a member through Maria Teschler-Nicola who was until last year the head of the anthropology department and of the two collections we work on.

NHM Vienna was opened in late 19th century. Anthropologists played a crucial role in the founding of this museum and it is still the residence of the “Anthropological Association in Vienna”. The osteological collection of the anthropology dept. contains over 40,000 human skulls collected since early-mid 19th century from all over the world. Most of them are prehistoric and were acquired through archaeological excavations, but a few thousands were acquired under very problematic circumstances in the context of racial scientific theories and colonialism. Many of the skulls are organised on shelves in tall and long cabinets all over the department. The collection is labelled as a research collections and is not part of the museum official exhibition. However, museum visitors who take the night tour or the rooftop tour are guided through one of these cabinets that stretches over a long hallway. (this probably explains the photo in my first slide). In this glass-faced cabinet at the hallway, thousands of skulls are organized in open boxes on shelves according to their inventory numbers. Writing on the boxes as well as often on the skulls themselves refer to inventory numbers, place of origin, gender, ‘race’ and other identifying data. The rest of the skeletons, and other dozens of thousands of skulls that are not inventoried yet, are stored in boxes in various storage spaces of the museum.

Project timeline: In 2009, Margit Berner – researcher at the anthropology department – introduced me to the collection. It was the first time I saw anything like this and I was blown-away, amazed, shocked, impressed and confused – all at the same time.

Margit talked about the history of the collection, and I stared at one of the skulls, examining its features very closely. I then looked carefully at the skull next to it. I clearly saw how different and unique each one was. It might sound obvious to some, but until then I had a very generic concept of skulls in mind – a skull as a symbol. I’ve never seen a real skull so close before and here I was surrounded by thousands of them. I started thinking about the people they used to be, how each had a name, a life with passions, love stories, families, projects, problems. The dissonance between the sense of individuality and the way they were ordered there on the shelves and the gigantic scale of the collection was overwhelming.

This stayed with me for a long time and I decided to create an exhibition around a life-size image of this cabinet and a program to contextualize it through a broader public discussion.

2009-2011, I tried to get access and research permission to the collection, and although I met with the museum director I didn’t get an access.

2011 – together with colleagues I received funding from the Austrian Research Fund under their artistic research program (FWF, PEEK). We were based at the art academy in Vienna and worked on the politics of history and memory in Austria. I used my new official status and the arrival of a new director to the museum and I finally got access.

2012 – This is from the shooting of the life size image of the cabinet. I captured each of the cells of this 30 meter long cabinet with 120 high resolution photographs.

2013 – By the time this mosaic panorama was composed and ready it was the end of the grant, but luckily received new project funding from the same fund. Anna Szöke, an art historian, joined the project. Together we extended the research, deepened the relationship with Maria, the head of the anthropology department, and looked for partners and venues for the exhibition. We had interesting meetings with museums and institutions in the US and the UK, however finding a venue proved very difficult.

2015 – Our second project was coming to an end, we started conceptualising TRACES and the idea of the CCP, partially in order to support and continue the work on this project.

2016 – We formed our new CCP to continue and develop this project for TRACES. Linda Fibiger, John Harries, and Joan Smith from the university of Edinburgh Joined Anna, Maria and myself.

This is the panorama. It’s a life-size photograph composed of 120 individual photos of the cabinet.

Look at the doors in the photograph. The middle door was the entrance to the photographic laboratory of the department, founded by Josef Wastl, who was director of the department during NS: an early Nazi who concentrated on racial research, made an exhibition about Jews from a ‘scientific’ p.o.v in 1939, he acquired skulls of executed Jews and Poles from the medical institute in Posen in 1942. The format of this talk is too short to describe his very problematic career, however what I want to highlight is that he was also an avid photographer who used photography and film for his research and even made an exhibition at the NHM about the scientific value of photography.

The department’s huge photographic collection (consisting also of thousands of photographs of Wastl and other anthropologists of their ‘racial investigations’) is nowadays stored behind these doors!

With these two very difficult collections, one inside the other, and starting from the first inventory numbers (on the top left corner), this isn’t only a photograph of a skull cabinet. This panorama depicts the history and different methods of scientific racism and crime.

As a photographer and especially since I had to deal with this huge photograph, the field of photography itself and especially its entanglement with racist scientific theories became a main consideration for me bringing up ethical dilemmas: does my photograph reproduce the objectification of the dead? can I display it although I can’t have their permission? Does it hurt the feelings of those who still have ancestral remains in this collection?

In a way, our project and many of our group discussions in CCP4 turned their focus to the question of whether or not we should exhibit the panorama, and if yes, how.

Gradually, our project turns into an exhibition that questions itself…

However, with or without the panorama, the exhibition is developed with the concept of multiple perspectives:

1. Stakeholders perspectives: scientists who work with the skulls, people and communities who ask for their ancestral remains back, different religious, spiritual or cultural mortuary practices. We conduct interviews and invite them to contribute to the development of the exhibition.

2. Historical perspectives: mainly narratives of the skulls as well as the scientists who collected them and the narratives of those who ask for the return of the skulls.

3. Audiences perspectives: through activities and an education program in and around the exhibition.

4. Reflexive perspectives: the dilemma of the panorama and the ethical questions of display, photography, scientific research on humans and human remains.

In addition we are organizing a two-day international conference about some of the questions our exhibition raises, that will coincide with the opening of the exhibition next year in June, in Edinburgh.

These are two of my recent interviewees, France Rivet and Natasha Kanapé Fontaine, last month in Montreal. If the interviewees wish, I show them a small version of the. In the interview, some of the questions are about the panorama: would they have liked to see it in an exhibition? Do they think it should be exhibited? Do they think it should have been taken in the first place?

My time is up for this presentation. Here are some additional points we could discuss at the Q&A:

The different positions and interests in the team – how to negotiate and mediate? why am I in favour of exhibiting the panorama? How will we exhibit the panorama?

I end with an interesting thought – something we realised in one of our CCP’s workshop: “We will make a mistake, no matter what we do”