

## Tal Adler – First Encounter with the Skull Collection at the NHM Vienna – 2009

In 2009 I visited the anthropology department at the Natural History Museum in Vienna with Karin Schneider who organised a private guided tour for me by Margit Berner, a staff researcher at the anthropology department. I was always interested in natural history museums and scientific and educational biological collections, how they look like, organised, arranged, displayed, and disseminated. I was mainly thinking about seeing the zoological collections, I'm not sure I was expecting human remains. Margit took us directly to the department's collection of human skulls. The department has a collection of over 40,000 skulls, collected from all over the world, starting from mid 19th century.

Upon seeing the dozens of thousands of skulls organized neatly on shelves behind glass doors, I was blown-away, amazed, in awe, shocked, impressed and confused, all at the same time.

As Margit started telling us about the history of the collection, I slowly came nearer to the glass doors, I started looking very closely at one of the skulls, examining its features, the shape of the eyes' sockets, cheek bones, jaws. I then looked at the neighboring skull at the same way and compared the two. I engaged in a kind of a concentrated stare while losing connection with Margit's explanations. I tried to understand what I was thinking and feeling. I've never seen a real skull so close before (coming from a place with predominantly Jewish and Muslim religious cultures, you don't really find body parts exhibited), and here I was surrounded by thousands of them. Until then, my visual concept of a skull was a generic one, probably created by the popularity of skulls as symbols: skulls on tattoos, skulls as symbols for poison, skulls as pirate flags, skulls on jewellery. Generic skulls.

As I looked closely at the real skulls in front of me, I clearly saw how different and unique each one was, I started to think about the people they used to be, how each had a name, a life with passions, love stories, families, projects, problems – just like me. Confronting this realisation of the individuals behind the bones with the (almost-obscene) gigantic scale of the collection was overwhelming. I felt I was standing in front of a silent city full of individuals without a life's-story, organised like empty books on endless shelves (it almost sounds like a scene from a science fiction or horror movie).

I slowly got back to Margit's talk and heard about the activities and research of the anthropology department during National Socialism and about the skulls of holocaust victims and prisoners of war that were part of that collection until 1991 and 2000. Other disturbing feelings were then added to the already crowded spectrum of feelings that I was trying to accommodate.

I kept thinking about the skulls for a long time after the visit. The only way I could think of engaging with my feelings and the story of the collection was with art. That's how the project was born.