*Transmitting Contentious Cultural Heritages with the Arts: From Intervention to Co-production*

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**ABSTRACT: Lives of death masks**

For various reasons, death masks seem like a thing of the past. When in 2011 the City museum of Ljubljana prepared an exhibition of busts, Domestic Research Society, a Ljubljana-based contemporary art collective, applied for the tender of said museum, they were rejected on account of not fitting in the exhibition’s concept. While that may have been so, Society’s members nonetheless noticed a more general reluctance on the museum’s part to even consider the very idea of exhibiting death masks. Surprised and perplexed, Society’s members saved their idea to work with masks for another opportunity.

Then, in 2015, an opportunity presented itself, where they could, on the one hand, address such institutional restraints and, on the other hand, look into, and work with, objects of these disinclinations. Challenged to think about contentious heritage, they remembered the 2011 occurrence; were the masks contentious and if so, why and for whom? At first it indeed seemed that death masks are a thing of the past, since new masks appeared to be scarcely made, their social importance minute, as few death masks remain accessible to the public and additional masks are removed from museum and gallery collections. Were they, when they brought up the masks, inadvertently pushing for something “improper,” something that should for some reason like the majority of death masks stay out of sight and out of mind?

Their research, as was often the case with Domestic Research Society’s projects even before engaging with death masks, took a rather ethnographic turn. Inquiry led Society’s members, individually and collectively, as well as – quite often – with collaborating historians and art historians, into museum and gallery depos, memorial collections, death masks sculptor’s workshop, his client’s home, academia and local Red Cross’ store facilities. Right as Society’s research took somewhat of an ethnographic turn, an ethnographer turned up. As the artists followed the masks, the ethnographer followed the artists. Their investigation was marked by several serendipitous proposals and discoveries, which showed that first impressions were somewhat misleading, as well as by the realisation that, as findings propagated, public interest appeared, various perspectives formed, something had to be done – including with the nagging question about contentiousness of the death masks.

In this paper, I, the above-mentioned ethnographer, will trace what was done and how. I will critically examine Domestic Research Society’s procedures, which I observed and participated in, and by means of which Society’s members turned death masks from – to use the members’ own terminology – “appearances” and “triggers” to, firstly, “items,” then “products,” and, lastly, to “sightings.”