

ART and HUMAN REMAINS: a roundtable discussion of the ethics of artistic work with historic collections of human remains

Discussants: June Jones (Institute of Clinical Science, The University of Birmingham), Sharon Macdonald (Institut für Europäische Ethnologie, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin) and Tal Adler (Institut für Europäische Ethnologie, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin), chaired by John Harries (Social Anthropology, The University of Edinburgh)

TRACES* (transmitting contentious cultural heritage with the arts) is an exploration of the role of the arts in interrogating, bringing to light, and inviting a multi-layered and critical engagement with, the material legacy of difficult and contentious histories. Such an undertaking requires a critical reflection on arts practice and as a form of ethical engagement (see: <http://www.traces.polimi.it/>).

Our particular concern is with collections of human remains deposited in the museums, Universities and other public institutions in Europe. These are now usually (although not invariably) held away from the public gaze, access being reserved for those who are deemed to possess a legitimate interest. The questions which those attending this roundtable will be asked to consider is:

1. What is the role of the arts in facilitating a public engagement with historic collections of human remains and, in particular an engagement with the difficult histories of violence and appropriation that is disclosed in these collections?
2. In engaging with this material, in what ways does artistic practice risk being implicated within, and reproducing, the histories of violence that it is seeking to critique, and how do we mitigate this risk?
3. What ethical considerations should direct and inform the artistic engagement with historic collections of human remains?
4. What should be the role of source communities in these processes of artistic engagement and public awareness?

17:00 – 18:30 Reception in the ECA board room.

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Attending = Angela McClanahan-Simmons (University of Edinburgh), Gordon Brennan (University of Edinburgh), Francesca Lanz (Politecnico di Milano), Jacopo Leveratto (Politecnico di Milano), Tal Adler (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin), Anna Szöeke (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin), Maria Teschler-Nicola (Vienna Natural History Museum), John Harries (University of Edinburgh), Linda Fibiger (University of Edinburgh), Joan Smith (University of Edinburgh), June Jones (University of Birmingham), Suzana Milevska (Politecnico di Milano), Sharon Macdonald (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin), Alex Gapud (Social Anthropology), Kim Wilson (ECA), Melanie Ratliff (ECA), Rachel Craig (Archaeology), Cristina Clopot (Heriot-Watt University), Neil Lebetter (Edinburgh Collections).