

## **Conference Report by Angela Rosenberg**

### **'Art / Nature. Contemporary Art in Natural History Museums and Collections', Berlin, 26. / 27. June 2017**

Part of: 'Art/Nature. Artistic interventions at the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin', a model project in collaboration with the Federal Cultural Foundation

Natural history museums play a prominent role in our understanding of biodiversity, evolution, population genetics and ecology, environmental influences and climate change. Their historical collections allow baseline data to be compared with modern observations and foreseeable scenarios to be developed. For some time their activities have gone beyond collecting, investigating, storing and exhibiting information about and evidence of nature. As an institution of scientific education the natural history museum remains as essential as ever. However, the question does arise of how this institution can position itself in the 21st century. In what ways can its manifold exhibits, the results of its research and aspects of the history of science and culture be represented and scope be created for alternative perspectives and new material?

Artistic interventions and exhibition projects now take place in many museum collections worldwide with the aim of illuminating the collections – art objects, artefacts or objects of research – through new perspectives. There is evidently a need that artists can satisfy with their own unconventional methods of research to draw attention to the multi-layered potential of museum objects and displays. However, which artistic projects, media and topics are suited to the production of new perspectives and the narration of an “other” history? With 'PAN – Perspektiven auf Natur' (Perspectives on Nature) the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin has established a research department dedicated to the investigation of culture and cultural studies in order to open up a new understanding of “nature”. The international and interdisciplinary conference with prominent speakers 'Art / Nature. Contemporary Art in Natural History Museums and Collections' facilitated broad access and was held in addition to a series of cultural interventions in our own building. The Museum für Naturkunde Berlin and the Federal Cultural Foundation developed a model project for this using the forms visual art, sonic arts and literature that realised interventions with international curators and artists, placing the museum's scientific objects in a different light and re-categorizing spaces of knowledge about natural history. In the course of this the conference addressed numerous issues relating to practice, including how open or results-orientated such research may be and the responsibility the museum has to the artist, the collection and the public – and also lastly the question of whether there are any guidelines as how to find the correct partners and which forms and themes are particularly appropriate.

The basic idea for collaborating with artists is clear: it is long established for artists to accompany researchers, carry out studies of nature on expeditions and to develop artistic techniques such as taxidermy, model-building, drawing and photography in order to perfect the reproduction of nature

and to promote the understanding of broader connections. While this was initially concerned with the most realistic approach possible to natural phenomena, eras and exotic locations, the range of subjects and models of their explication soon became more complex and later, in the present, the institution itself would ultimately be brought into question. “There is nothing ‘natural’ about Natural History Museums,” remarked the artist Robert Smithson in 1968, imagining the Natural History Museum as an artificial and static place that manifested the divide between life and decay. In 1990 the artist Mark Dion suggested that public sections of museum collections ought to be frozen immediately in order to facilitate a radical comparison between the exhibited collection and items in storage.

In her keynote address ‘The Natural History Complex: On Artistic Research into Sticky Materialities’ Petra Lange-Berndt, of the Art History Department at Universität Hamburg, gave further examples of what a critical interaction with the collections, archives, materials or people that make up these collections can look like. How – aside from questions of presentation – can alternative approaches, comprehensive explanatory models and narratives be created to examine socially relevant themes such as evolution, ecology or colonialism? In taxidermy, the preparation of animals and art of preserving animal bodies for the purposes of study, teaching or decoration, what were previously living creatures are transformed into objects – as surrogates for reality. While the present day understanding of organisms is based on a dynamic, evolutionary ratio and permanent exchange, these objects offer a cultural historical perspective on an artistic handiwork that had considerable influence not least on fashion. A particular view of nature is presented by the delicate and at the same time radical bird specimens of the artist Annette Messager that present the violence inherent in taxidermy as a male domain. Tessa Farmer’s ‘Little Savages’ (2007), stuffed animals attacked by insects, also make clear how an occupation with taxidermy allows one to approach the themes of decay, death and evolution. Insects become metaphors for functioning networks, collective intelligence, decentralized and self-organized systems or collective consciousness in relation to human beings, as parasites and the supposed peak of creation.

The institutions are concerned with precisely this shift of perspective and the question of the relationship between humanity and nature. One example of a functioning experimental arrangement featuring an existing collection in conjunction with contemporary art was presented by Claude d’Anthenaise with an insight into the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature in Paris. Transcending a white cube the private hunting museum transformed itself from a dusty, old-fashioned place into a refreshing setting. In the manner of a treasure hunt the embedded works by contemporary artists permitted an encounter with the artefacts exhibited and prompted questions regarding the relationship humans have with nature.

Located in Brumadinho, Brazil, INHOTIM – a hybrid of a contemporary art museum and botanical garden – lies outside the structures of urban museums. Yara Castanheira presented this model whose focus lies in building up a private collection in combination with a mission to educate the public. The projects unite cultural, social and economic aspects and are directed at people in the

surrounding communities with the aim of stimulating a conscious and enduring relationship with nature.

Responsible behaviour also occupies a central role in BIOTOPIA, the natural history museum run by Michael John Gorman at Schloss Nymphenburg in Munich that is dedicated to bringing together art, biology and speculative design. This does not foreground artefacts but rather the question of how our relationship with other living creatures can be conceived and shaped. The museum becomes an interactive place of learning, public laboratory and interdisciplinary space and bridges the gaps between nature, culture, art and design.

In addition to these, artist-in-residence programmes permit art and science to interact with each other on a working level over a longer term. How varied the projects may be was shown by Barbara Stauffer with reference to the Artist Research Fellowship Programs at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington. Heterogeneity is one of their key criteria in selecting the artists. Through an application process twelve projects per year are realised out of which subsequent co-operations and financing opportunities can arise with a range of partners and sponsors from the scientific sector.

The range of projects presented showed how differently artists develop their visual, associative or poetic language, themes and aesthetics and introduce these into museum or scientific operations. Janet Laurence's 'The Alchemical Afterlife' is concerned with aspects of instability and transience as well as natural processes of transformation while D'Arcy Wilson reflects the change of nature as a reflection of the history of colonial settlement in Canada and explores concepts of wilderness, landscape and the destructive potential of human beings. Humans and animals in relation to nature and museums also occupy a central role in the project 'How to Not Be a Stuffed Animal' by anthropologist Susanne Schmitt and choreographer Laurie Young. Starting with taxidermic objects, their audiowalks invite audience participation. That humans have become the most significant factor influencing biological, geological and atmospheric processes on earth is investigated by Anna-Sophie Springer and Etienne Turpin in their project about the necroaesthetic of the anthropocene. How scientific and artistic methods of research and evaluation can be combined was shown by Tal Adler with his interdisciplinary research project CARMAH, TRACES/Horizon 2020 at the Humboldt-Universität Berlin. His starting point for open questions about property, cultural inheritance and a sensitive treatment of human remains was represented by 40,000 skulls to be found in the collection of the Natural History Museum Vienna. Neil MacGregor of the Humboldt Forum Berlin used an historical example to allude to the traditional link between scientific and artistic reception: the painter Frederic Edwin Church followed in Alexander von Humboldt's footsteps, creating representations of landscapes that became models for national parks and had a significant influence on the concept of landscape. Last but not least Bergit Arends of Royal Holloway, University of London / Science Museum, London, used the example of Daniel Boyd's 'Up in Smoke Tour' at the Natural History Museum in London to show that contemporary art provides a suitable vehicle to combine the critique of an institution with social and political engagement.

Anita Hermannstädter of the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin presented some further noteworthy examples of recently realised artistic interventions at the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin. A K Dolven's staged prose poem in the historic hall of birds told a story of migration, deracination and insecurity in superimposed layers of time, space and reality. Fernando Bryce's 'Paradoxurus adustus' examines ordering and classification systems used in researching natural history as a possible way of interpreting the world and making it one's own, while Klara Hobza's 'Animaloculomat' offers the public playful and entertaining access to the different mechanisms of perception of humans and animals. Faced with these different projects Cord Riechelmann argued against the interdisciplinary approach and actively for the inclusion of subjective and less statistically verifiable practices such as poetry. His literary projects at the Natural History Museum in Berlin, such as the writer Monika Rinck's 'Lost Property' in the museum's mineral room facilitate an open investigation of questions about an object's value and the relations between subject and object.

Thomas Schnalke from the Berlin Museum of Medical History at the Charité used its art programme as an example of how artistic interventions react to open questions and lacunae in permanent exhibitions, thereby introducing a second narrative or counter-narrative. Ulrike Stottrop, a geologist at the Ruhr Museum Essen who co-operated with the artist Tony Clark, referenced the project 'Painting on the Rocks: Interventions in Terra Cognita' to demonstrate what an interdisciplinary, poetic collaboration in the form of an alternative cabinet of curiosities may look like.

The breadth of content available as potential topics is matched by the range of media that can be used. The realization of artistic interventions in the form of long-term museum presentations is often limited by technical resources, conservation measures or also ideologically differing approaches. New media and technical innovations in running museums are certainly able to provide new stimuli in establishing links to the present day. Small interventions and ephemeral media such as sound art are also able to create opportunities without causing substantial interference to existing presentations. Gaby Hartel, curator of the Art/Nature project for audio arts used the examples of the story of a fictional expedition by the artist duo Serotonin and A K Dolven's project 'sound outside. outside the window' in the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin's collection rooms to show how the open and less specific form of sound-based works that are not bound to particular objects is suited to telling stories, awakening memories or producing feelings that – as it were – breathe new life into the exhibits.

How to deal with the usually extensive unseen part of the collection that remains in storage is one of the challenges for all museums. For example, how can the photo and film archives of scientific collections be made accessible? On this point Frank Steinheimer of the Natural Science Collections at the Martin-Luther-Universität, Halle-Wittenberg, presented a project by the artist Pim Zwier whose atmospheric film underscored with gentle music examines historical glass photo plates from the collection relating to the theme of eugenics. The subsequent controversy revolved around the question of whether attention must be drawn to problematic historical contexts – such as research into eugenics under National Socialism – and also indirectly about whether artistic interventions always have to be critical. And ultimately how can different projects be evaluated and compared? To what extent can this form of knowledge production be measured? Ariane Berthoin Antal of the WZB Berlin Social Science Center undertook an international research

project analysing the diversity of methods for artistic interventions and the opening of such “intermediate spaces”. This considered the motivation and potential of artistic language as well as experimental, subjective perspectives that go beyond established normative boundaries.

A successful symbiosis of art and science may take many forms. In an ideal case visitors are stimulated to look at the existing collection with new eyes. New fields of discourse are created by conceptual or aesthetically sensitive spaces, by elaborating forgotten details, new narratives and perspectives or disconcerting questions that touch on sore points. In any event subjective and institutionally-critical components help to produce a more complex picture of the function of the museum, its history and the relationship of human beings with nature. Inspiration can be derived from those artistic positions that facilitate open engagement with themes that are fraught with social and political relevance and also from poetic concepts that ask philosophical questions, follow their own parameters and thus create new scope for thinking and experiences. Empathy, humour and interactivity can be equally important in involving the public in ways that go beyond amazement.

It was evident at the conference that institutional interests and artistic motivations do not always have to coincide – the difference between working methods is often too great. Artist-in-residence programmes and artistic interventions are not accepted immediately by all participants as co-operative opportunities: here too it is necessary to find a common language and broker collaborations that make sense. A willingness to work together with external curators as contributors of ideas and facilitators and with artists who will explore an area of scientific endeavour not only creates possible new perspectives in terms of form and content but also new financial models by collaborating with cultural institutions or sponsors. Of course the choice of artistic project is critical and not every concept can find answers to every question. Ultimately a delicate balance has to be found between artistic freedom and the host institution's right to have a say in the process.