

Workshop Program
Museums-Contacts-Knowledges
June 6-8, 2024

conceived by Joachim Baur, Sharon Macdonald, and Philipp Schorch
& co-organized by Irene Hilden, Margareta von Oswald, and Andrei Zavadski

inherit. heritage in transformation, LMU Munich, and TU Dortmund University

The workshop is taking place at

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Charlottenstraße 42
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Museums-Contacts-Knowledges

Joachim Baur, Sharon Macdonald, and Philipp Schorch

Since James Clifford published his highly influential essay on ‘museums as contact zones’ (1997), its ideas have contributed to a sea-change in museum practice and innovation – particularly in ethnographic museums – across the Americas, Europe, the Pacific, and beyond. While his text has been critiqued from various perspectives, it remains useful and productive in many ways. Museums, despite, and even because of, their entanglements in colonial pasts and post/neo-colonial presents, are places that afford moments of contact, or contacts – between bodies, biographies, cosmologies, disciplines, histories, objects, philosophical positions, and political convictions – and may enable unexpected, revealing and even disruptive knowledge-making.

Against the backdrop of Clifford’s proposition, this workshop sets out to generate practice-based reflection on museological contact work and its potentials. It brings together participants who have variously worked with, against and beyond ‘contact zone’ ideas to assess and explore their continuing salience. Focusing especially on examples from Europe, the workshop will include attention to ethnographic collections and collecting institutions but will also seek to expand the remit to other kinds of museums – including those of art, history, medicine, and science and technology – and museum-related initiatives. In addition, it attends to a wider range of topics – such as restitution, new museum developments, and public engagement – and of multiple kinds of material things and entities, including non-human beings. In this way, the workshop will enable reflection on the nature of possible contacts, as well as on the kinds of knowledges and ways of knowing that might be encouraged in and by museums.

More specifically, the workshop aims, through specific cases, to examine: (1) the ways in which contact happens, that is, the moments and processes of contact work – within, against and beyond the notions of uneven reciprocity, ongoing relationship, shared control, honest disagreement and/or current struggles that Clifford variously mentions; and (2) the political and epistemic consequences of engagements that may be collaborative yet contested, negotiated yet asymmetrical. Presenters are asked to (1) draw on their own experience of museum contact work, including any tensions and ruptures, break downs and resurrections, as well as any generative and transformative capacities; and (2) reflect upon what emerged and has been learned from the experience, including what knowledge claims could be made and by whom, and based on what kind of contact work. Collectively, workshop participants will then address broader questions, for example: what happens when contact work is undertaken in different kinds of museums, such as those of art, ethnography, history, and science and technology? What are the agendas of contact work and who or what are implicated in which ways and to which ends? What epistemic contribution can museological contact work make, including to academic developments, such as the material and

ontological turns? Are there limitations in certain understandings or practices of 'contact,' and are there other notions or ways of engaging that might be employed instead?

In pursuing these questions and offering some answers, the workshop positions itself historically in the last quarter century of (re)thinking and (re)doing museological contact work through and potentially beyond contact perspectives. It attempts to explore contact (re)doing and (re)thinking across museum types and curatorial regimes, thus paving the way for the next quarter century, the yet unknown futures of museums-contacts-knowledges.

June 6

6-8pm

In the Contact Zones: Post/Neo Colonial Possibilities

Lecture and Q&A

James Clifford

University of California, Santa Cruz

8-9pm

Reception

June 7

9:30-10:30am

Introduction

Joachim Baur, Sharon Macdonald, Philipp Schorch

TU Dortmund University

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich

10:30-11am

Coffee break

11am-12pm

The Museum Is for the Amateur: Collapsology as a Method for the Museum as a Contact Zone

Peter Bjerregaard

Danish Museum for Science and Technology

12-1pm

Negotiating Belonging and Creating New Solidarities

Sabine Dahl Nielsen

University of Copenhagen

1-2:30pm

Lunch

2:30-3:30pm

Museums as Contact Zones: Circulation, Return, and Exchange of Objects in (Post)Soviet Museums

Maria Silina

University of Quebec in Montreal (UQAM)

3:30-4pm
Coffee break

4-5pm
Living the 'Contact Zone' Landscape in the 21st Century
Safua Akeli Amaama
Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

5-5:30pm
Discussion
Moderated by Philipp Schorch
Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich

6pm
Dinner at Kin Za
Address: Krausnickstraße 23, Berlin 10115

June 8

9:30-10:30am
Epistemologies of Listening. Collaborations, Reconnections, and Returns between Germany and Namibia
Julia Binter
University of Bonn

10:30-11am
Coffee Break

11am-12pm
From Contact to Resonance: Lessons from Ethnographic Collection Work
Margareta von Oswald
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

12-1pm
Concluding remarks
Joachim Baur and Sharon Macdonald
TU Dortmund University
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Abstracts

In the Contact Zones: Post/Neo Colonial Possibilities

James Clifford

University of California, Santa Cruz

Ethnographic and art collections amassed during several centuries of Western expansion are currently being contested and reimagined. Something we can call decolonization is being negotiated in these museums, but unevenly, with resistance, in messy exchanges. To account for this complexity, the lecture proposes a de-centered, contingent realism, an openness to multiple, contradictory histories. It discusses exhibitions, collaborations and restitutions in prominent institutions as well as in local communities and tribal centers. The approach questions one-size-fits-all concepts of repatriation, reciprocity, appropriation, and resistance. An ability to entertain discrepant possibilities is essential for understanding contemporary museums-in-transformation.

The Museum Is for the Amateur: Collapsology as a Method for the Museum as a Contact Zone

Peter Bjerregaard

Danish Museum for Science and Technology

This paper borrows its title from Theodor W. Adorno's well-known essay on Proust and Valéry. In that essay, Adorno traces two opposite approaches to the museum. While Valéry criticizes the museum for being artificial, placing works of art out of context, side by side with other works to which they never had any relation in their original location, Proust loves the museum for exactly the same. To Proust, the fact that the objects in the museum go beyond their original context and intention releases a creative potential. So, to Proust, the museum is not for the professional who knows about the "proper" context or categorization of each single object, but for the amateur who revels in the new life generated by bringing together objects and space that were never supposed to meet.

My approach to the museum as a contact zone will take its inspiration from Proust. While James Clifford's original article pointed towards relations between central museums and peripheral indigenous populations, my approach to the museum as a contact zone is not so much concerned with post-colonial relations, but rather with knowledge-making. In the original article, the contact zone is a question of unequal contacts not only between groups divided through colonial trajectories, but also between different knowledge systems. And indeed, as a public institution the contemporary museum seems to be required to handle a very wide approach to what knowledge is and where it is placed. If the cliché version of the early modern museum would portray the museum as an authoritative institution offering to its audience the correct categorizations of nature and culture, it is clear that the contemporary museum has to juggle not only audiences' expectations or the complex relationship to groups with special relations to the collections, but also a number of other stakeholders.

In order to explore what this means with regard to the operation of contemporary museums, I will take inspiration from another body of Clifford's work, namely his interest in French surrealism. In "The Predicament of Culture," Clifford traces the relation between French ethnography and surrealism in the 1920s. As I read it, this exploration offers two important points: 1) ethnography requires a break with established assumptions and cultural values, and 2) what the surrealists aimed at was a way for a free cultural expression. In other words, it seems as if this kind of expression relies on a constant oscillation between deconstruction and reconstruction.

In this paper, I will present two cases. First, I will argue that what I have earlier termed "collapsology" may work as a method for the museum to deconstruct disciplinary bounded ideas in order to create new worlds through collaborations across disciplines and across expert/layman divides. To make this point, I will draw on the processes we

worked through while re-installing the permanent displays at the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo from 2014–2019. Second, I will present our current ideas for the future Danish Museum of Science and Culture, which will open in the Svanemølle Powerplant in a few years. Our working concept for the new museum is based on a three-fold approach to the museum as a contact zone: the museum as a contact point to a subject matter (technology), the museum as a contact point to the (deep) past, and the museum as a broad, public contact zone for debate and collective speculation. Each of these three contact zones requires a collapse, a break with common sense in order for each of us to fathom what is technology, time, and the public. Doing that, we have to accept that we are all amateurs in being human and be happy with that!

Negotiating Belonging and Creating New Solidarities

Sabine Dahl Nielsen

University of Copenhagen

Within a European context, the rethinking of art institutional practices appears as an urgent matter of concern, not least because of the continent's colonial histories. The destructive consequences of colonial rule, including the looting of cultural assets and the displacement of people, have historically led to involuntary migratory movements and turned many art institutions into celebratory reminders of their colonial and capitalist legacies. Profound societal transformations are currently also taking place due to the cultural pluralization of European populations in the wake of decades of intensified migration and globalization. As a result of these former and ongoing forms of migration, European societies have become sites of social contact and conflict.

Due to these socio-political processes of transformation many art institutions are currently exploring how to historicize and politicize existing asymmetries of power relations, how to collaborate with socially diverse local communities, and how to create globally entangled sites of encounter. In my presentation, I will therefore focus on how art institutions shape and are shaped by the friction-filled struggles over issues of identity, community, and belonging that are currently being negotiated in today's migration-induced societies. More specifically, I will analyze and discuss how such contact work was played out within the framework of CAMP/Center for Art on Migration Politics (2015–2020): a contemporary art space uniquely based in the Trampoline House, a self-organized community center located in the highly diverse Northwest neighborhood of Copenhagen.

Reflecting on the intimate connection between the mission of the art space and the purpose of the community center, and focusing attention on two selected exhibitions, my presentation will revolve around a series of guiding questions, namely: how did CAMP deal with the fact that society has been and continues to be shaped by migration, i.e., the coming, residing, and going of people with diverse backgrounds? How did it work with the fact of plurality in ways that created fundamental structural changes and institutional transformations? How did CAMP respond to the histories and presence of structural marginalization and discrimination? And how did the small-scale institution seek to create occasions for developing ongoing contacts and support intersectional alliances of solidarity that cut across sedimented lines of fracture?

Museums as Contact Zones: Circulation, Return, and Exchange of Objects in (Post)Soviet Museums

Maria Silina

University of Quebec in Montreal

My research approach builds upon the ideas of James Clifford, particularly his concept of “contact zones.” I want to develop on how this concept intersects with the museum’s and stakeholders’ uses of objects as agents in international diplomacy within highly ritualized and regulated public exchanges, restitutions, and repatriations. The paper will employ case studies from Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Caucasus to explore how museums have been designed to embrace, facilitate, and regulate communication regarding objects exchanged through cultural diplomacy practices throughout the long 20th century. I will provide an overview of the museum environment established in the Soviet Union and then analyze the reciprocal shaping of museum spaces and the circulation of objects as elements of international exchange.

Beginning from 1918 and over the next several decades, Soviet Russia assumed supervision and orchestrated a large-scale, decade-long dissemination of nationalized objects through its socialist museum network. Objects from non-Russian cultures, often categorized as ethnographic, had been displayed in the capital to promote the country’s diversity. Conversely, artworks from Russian academies of art and studios, i.e., the high arts, were dispatched to non-Russian republics to ensure the presence of universal Russian-centered public displays nationwide. The process and language used to facilitate this circulation of objects presupposed the existence of a homogeneous space within the unified nation, leading to the portrayal of these operations as natural and expert-led by central powers. Once regarded as purely domestic affairs, since 1991, these transfers have been considered matters within the domain of international relations. This shift in perspective from domestic to international level helps to reveal often hidden ways in which contacts are institutionalized in museum spaces in the process of negotiating about objects.

To look closer at these shifts and their potential for future relationships in the war-torn region, I will analyze how different types of objects (objects from ethnographic collections, European paintings) are reframed as products of various epistemological systems, such as gifts, items of justice, symbols of reciprocity, etc., in the process of negotiations and ceremonies of return. As countries in the region engage in negotiations, it becomes clear how museum contexts differ regionally and, consequently, how each side describes and imagines the restitution process. As I show, these differences also imply various modes of re-institutionalization and the meaning of institutions across the globe. This dynamic relationship between the object and re-institutionalization can reveal significant critical potential for understanding the conditions, settings, and language used in such contact zones during restitution processes and (re)writing art and cultural history.

Living the 'Contact Zone' Landscape in the 21st century

Safua Akeli Amaama

Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

Indigenous knowledge systems continue to shape and contest various knowledge systems, and the dynamic of that non-linear convergence is a constant way of being. In many ways, within a museum context, the activation of tangible and intangible taonga/measina/cultural objects complicate those shifting contact spaces. As a museum professional of Pacific heritage, ongoing connections, tensions and ruptures are part of working within a museum context in the 21st century. Moving through the internal and external contact moments offer up many questions for critical consideration. These include a moving center and, in the case of Te Papa Museum, involve activations of collections in the Global North with connections to the Global South through collaborative discussions utilizing language and archives. In as much as the contact zone discussion was laid before us almost 30 years ago, as indigenous public servants we are grappling with community spaces, agency, futures, and place. Arguably, the contact space goes beyond borders with shifting parameters. Working within an increasingly pressurized environment, the role of museums is an evolving conversation, largely sitting outside of the museum building. This cross-disciplinary workshop provides opportunities to explore the living landscapes of the contact zones between oceans, lands and skies alongside and within the changing museum environment.

Epistemologies of Listening. Collaborations, Reconnections, and Returns between Germany and Namibia

Julia Binter

University of Bonn

How do recent returns of cultural belongings from Germany to Namibia transgress and reconfigure the museum as a contact zone? What methodological skills are necessary to develop more equitable and sustainable ways of restitution? My contribution discusses these questions by looking at the collaborative research, curatorial and restitution project *Confronting Colonial Pasts, Envisioning Creative Futures* on the collections from Namibia at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, and proposes listening, next to translation, as a key method for engaging in decolonial museum work. The project started in 2018 as a partnership between the Ethnological Museum in Berlin and the Museums Association of Namibia. Since then, it has grown into a multi-sited, transdisciplinary and, at times, unruly endeavor challenging the epistemological underpinnings of restitution.

In this paper, I will reflect on the power dynamics as well as the methodological needs and epistemological implications of shifting collaborative configurations – from research with the collections in Berlin to the reconnection of artists, community researchers and scholars with the cultural belongings in Namibia after their return. While all museum sites, the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, the National Museum of Namibia, and the National Art Gallery of Namibia needed to create safe spaces to enable the often painful reconnection with cultural belongings from colonial contexts, the agency and role of individual research partners changed. Yet, there were key methodologies such as listening and translating that had to be adapted and attuned to the shifting contexts and needs of new and different collaboration partners (curators, conservators, community researchers, artists, scholars, to name but a few). In particular, I will reflect on my own shifting positionalities throughout the project, from provenance researcher and project coordinator to project lead and academic “listener.” This included accepting the importance of silences, gaps, and the untranslatability of knowledge.

I will also consider how such a Namibian-German project, in the context of recent debates on provenance research and restitution in Europe and Africa, might compare to and differ from the ways in which indigenous people have reclaimed their heritage in North America and the Pacific, so aptly described by James Clifford in *Routes* (1997) and *Returns* (2013).

The belongings’ mobilization transgressed national borders, regimes of care, and epistemological and ontological understandings, reconnecting people and places in unforeseen ways. From the belongings’ organic material that links them to OvaHerero, Nama, ǀNūkhoen, San, and many more ecologies suppressed and destroyed by missionization, territorial expropriation, colonial wars and genocide to the ways in which contemporary artists reimagine reconnections between cultural belongings,

bodies, and land: the museums as much as the cultural belongings themselves became starting points for cultural, social and ecological reconnections which necessitated ventures beyond the museum walls. Yet, the museums remained, reconfigured, powerfully-charged sites of epistemological gathering.

In April 2024, the exhibition *Artistic Research and Communal Knowledge* opened at the National Art Gallery of Namibia. It presented the returned cultural belongings for the first time to a wider public and embedded them in Namibian knowledge systems, thereby transgressing disciplinary boundaries and concepts (such as art vs. craft) and starting conversations across urban-rural and generational divides. It was a first step towards plurifying the formation of knowledge with and through returned cultural belongings and opened avenues for reclaiming how to relate to the past, staking a claim in the present and envisioning decolonial, creative futures in Namibia's postcolony.

From Contact to Resonance: Lessons from Ethnographic Fieldwork

Margareta von Oswald

inherit. heritage in transformation, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

In an era where the sensation of crisis appears perpetual, museums are redefining their roles and missions at their core, as reflected in the revision of the museum definition by ICOM. This redefinition is reshaping the tasks and responsibilities of museums, emphasizing inclusivity, community engagement, ethics, and ultimately, the pursuit of more democratic museums. This shift builds upon decades of museum practices within what was previously termed “ethnographic collections.” Many advocates for this new definition draw from their experiences gained in these specific spaces and institutional histories, grappling with the legacies of colonialism. Despite, or perhaps because of, the longstanding perception of ethnographic museums as exemplifying the worst museum practices, staff within those museums have attempted to, and often set examples for, designing innovative museum practices. These practices go beyond curatorial work and include basic principles of knowledge production and dissemination within museums: modes of working together; access and inventory, provenance, ordering and classificatory tasks; research; ownership, sharing and return. Related to the different ontologies to which the collections pertain links, working with “ethnographic” collections has questioned the basic missions of and epistemology in museums more generally speaking.

In my presentation, I will discuss what I have learnt from working in and with ethnographic museums. I will show how I was able to put this knowledge to action as part of an exhibition in a contemporary art museum, the Gropius Bau, in Berlin (2021–2023). The notion of contact zone can be extended beyond colonial relations, thus questioning distances that are “more social than geographic” (Clifford 1997, 204). *Mindscales* was an international cultural program that aimed to support a transformation in how we understand, address, and talk about mental health. In Berlin, *Mindscales* worked through different projects and with different partners, but culminated in the Resonance Room. A section of the exhibition *YOYI! Care, Repair, Heal* held at the Gropius Bau (September 2022 to January 2023), the Resonance Room collected and shared local knowledge and experiences of mental health in Berlin. The different projects questioned the understanding of and approach to mental health in the city: how do individual health and society interact? How does history affect the present? Which forms of welfare and care, solidarity and community, are created and practiced in urban society?

In my presentation, I will highlight three key lessons: community collaboration with the Gropius Bau's neighborhood, redefining notions of representation and expertise, and the role of science diplomacy. The talk proposes an example of how museums can respond to global challenges – in this case, health challenges – and how they can make themselves “useful” (Lynch 2021). Specifying James Clifford's reflections on “contact zones,” I will explore the concept of “resonance” as a framework for

understanding the dynamic interplay between the museum's outsides and insides, and will discuss how curatorial practice can build bridges when understood and practiced as participatory and collaborative research.