



# Activating Stilled Lives

## The Aesthetics and Politics of Specimens on Display

### Conference

organised by Petra Lange-Berndt and Mechthild Fend

Thursday 17 May 2012, 14.30-19.00

Location: UCL, JZ Young Lecture Theatre, Anatomy Building, Gower Street

Friday 18 May 2012, 10.00-19.00

Location: UCL, Gustave Tuck Lecture Theatre, Wilkins Building

For further information see overleaf and

[http://www.ucl.ac.uk/art-history/events/culture\\_of\\_preservation](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/art-history/events/culture_of_preservation)



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council





# Activating Stilled Lives

## The Aesthetics and Politics of Specimens on Display

A conference of the AHRC Research Network "The Culture of Preservation" at the UCL History of Art Department

### Programme

Thursday, 17 May 2012

UCL, JZ Young Lecture Theatre, Anatomy Building, Gower Street

14.30 **Mechthild Fend & Petra Lange-Berndt**  
Exhibiting Preserves

**Session one: REASSEMBLING**

Chair: **Sam Alberti**

(Director of Museums and Archives,  
The Royal College of Surgeons of England)

15.00 **Hans-Jörg Rheinberger**  
Preparations Revisited

15.45 **Rose Marie San Juan**  
Bones in Transit: the Re-Animation of Human Bone in Early Modern Cabinets of Display

16.30 **John MacKenzie**  
The Natural World and Imperial Legitimation: Hunting, Trophies, Taxidermy and Museums

17.15 Tea break

17.45 **Robert Marbury**  
Personal Computers as the New Wunderkammer and the Rise of Rogue Taxidermy

18.30 Reception at the Grant Museum of Zoology, University College of London (Rockefeller Building, University College London, 21 University Street, London WC1E 6DE)

Friday, 18 May 2012

UCL, Gustave Tuck Lecture Theatre, Wilkins Building, South Wing, Gower Street (access via Gower Street / Main Quadrangle or Gordon Street)

**Session two: HANDLING**

Chair: **Mechthild Fend**

(Art Historian, London)

10.00 **Petra Lange-Berndt**  
Subsculpture: Assembling a Museum of Attractions

10.45 **Steve Baker**  
Dead, dead, dead, dead, dead

11.30 Tea break

12.00 **Angela Matussek**  
"Museumlives": Mould, Decay and the History of the Object

12.45 Lunch break

**Session three: DISPLAYING**

Chair: **Bergit Arends**

(Curator Contemporary Art,  
The Natural History Museum, London)

14.30 Panel discussion "Curating Specimens" with **Claude d'Anthénaise, Christine Borland, Lisa O'Sullivan, Johannes Vogel**

16.00 Tea break

16.30 **Anke te Heesen**  
Displaying the Infinite Amount

17.15 **Nélia Dias**  
The Fate of Human Remains from the Musée de l'Homme to the Musée du quai Branly

18.00 Final discussion

The event is open and free to all, but please register with [pandora.syperek.09@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:pandora.syperek.09@ucl.ac.uk)

### Abstracts

**Steve Baker** (Artist and Art Historian, Norfolk)

**Dead, dead, dead, dead, dead**

The dead animal bodies presented or represented in contemporary art are frequently regarded as more provocative than those displayed, for example, in museums of natural history – even though museum-based taxidermy is now sometimes considered an archaic embarrassment. There is something wilful, deliberate and specific about each use of a dead animal body by a contemporary artist, and this seems to be the case regardless of whether that artist is motivated by a concern for animal life or by quite different concerns that have little to do with animals as such. There is, it might be said, something "livelier" about art's animal bodies than about the animal bodies of other contemporary institutions, and it is this that sometimes makes them hard to handle and hard to take. The case of artists known (or thought) to have commissioned or otherwise brought about the death of the animals that figure in their art has understandably been the subject of particular criticism by animal advocates and others, but a perplexing aspect of that criticism has been its tendency to dull rather than to sharpen awareness of the individual animal lives lost. If art (even terrible or cruel art) can render the dead body intense, particular and lively, it seems paradoxical that criticism of that art should have the effect of deadening and anonymizing those very bodies. There is much to be untangled here. There are questions about what kind of work is going on in the making of art of this kind, about how and why it differs from other forms of institutional display of animal bodies, about what kind of critical writing could do this work justice, and about how the death of an individual creature can be attended to in this context without attracting accusations of humanism from those who rightly value a posthumanist perspective on contemporary culture.

**Nélia Dias** (Anthropologist, Lisbon, ISCTE/IUL – CRIA)

**The Fate of Human Remains from the Musée de l'Homme to the Musée du quai Branly**

What does the display of human bodies indicate about Western cultures of preservation? How and why have human bodies been recontextualised in museums, initially as natural specimens, and subsequently as human remains? This paper will focus on the destiny of the preserved specimen collections in the Musée de l'Homme (1937) and the Musée du quai Branly (2006). It first examines the role played by the display of human bodies at the Musée de l'Homme, where they were supposed to evoke an abstract totality, a specific type. Aimed at combining physical anthropology, ethnology, and prehistoric archaeology, the Musée de l'Homme sought to emphasise the rejection of racial hierarchies as well as to highlight the unity of humankind and the equal value of all peoples. Second, this presentation will explore how the separation of the biological from the cultural at the Musée du quai Branly implies the end of an encompassing conception of anthropology and the establishment of an autonomous cultural sphere defined mostly in aesthetic terms. Conceived with the main purpose of displaying cultural diversity, the Musée du quai Branly stresses that it is the equality of artistic creations that paves the way for the equivalence of peoples and cultures. But this goal is not easily attained. Let us take for example the display of human skulls in the Oceania department. Labelled as "anthropomorphized sculpture", "over-modelled skull", "ancestor skull", these bodily fragments are exhibited in showcases dedicated to ritual life. Although the skulls are categorized as 'human remains' in the museum's online catalogue, they are displayed in an aesthetic mode, as if they were art objects. Such a migration from 'nature's specimens' to art objects attests of the shifting boundaries between the notions of art and science. This mobility, aestheticization and decontextualisation of human body parts, which characterizes current exhibitions and refurbished museums in France beyond Quai Branly, will be examined in the third and last part of my presentation.

**Anke te Heesen** (Historian of Science, Berlin)

**Displaying the Infinite Amount**

My paper will deal with recent displaying techniques of museums and exhibitions: the exposition of the infinite amount of objects that could be gathered and shown at a glance, thus giving the infinite a form or structure. Since the 1990s two phenomena handled the 'infinite': the Kunst- und Wunderkammer on the one hand and the display-storages („Schaudepot"). Both were dealing with special ways of displaying a large amount of objects in a given or defined space. Their techniques were multifaceted: Gigantic shelves along a wall, filled with all different kinds of objects, enormous cupboards with specimens, rows of similar objects in the middle of the room, tableaux of objects in a flat showcase in a minimalist presentation. The idea behind it was to frame what otherwise seems to be not properly graspable; to facilitate a space, where the visitor could freely associate and bring in his or her own thoughts and ideas. These presentation techniques seemed to be a good idea because they made sense of collections hidden away in the cellars of museums and of objects never seen before. This process will be discussed considering the example of the Museum für Naturkunde in Berlin and its recently opened wet collections room (2010). What exactly is on display here? What are the aesthetic, artistic and historical origins of this idea? The paper will locate the wet collections within the context of other versions of that kind of display and raise the question of how the infinite amount can be displayed?

The past twenty years saw an explosion of exhibitions fathoming the relations between art and science as well as numerous refurbishments of natural history or former colonial museums. Many of these displays and gallery transformations mobilised specimens, be it taxidermied animals or preserved human body parts. Objects were put into new contexts opening up their meanings, others disappeared in storage or travelled back to the countries where they were once collected. The conference will address the challenges institutions face when dealing with formerly living entities and consider the aesthetics and politics of their display. The idea is to discuss the use of specimens in temporary exhibitions, museums or university collections and the role curators, art and artists have been playing in the transformation of these spaces. We would also like to consider how preserved specimens have changed through the altering contexts in which they have been displayed: One could name the initial transformation of organisms into objects, the more recent redefinition of pathological specimens as human remains, or the dramatic rearrangements that took place when natural history, anthropology or anatomy collections (many originating from the nineteenth century) were updated.

Beyond that, the question of preservation shall be considered in a more expanded sense, as this subject area offers a unique opportunity to reflect more broadly on issues of conservation and their ethics and to raise a variety of questions such as: How and why do various cultures preserve elements of what is considered as nature? How does this relate to environmental notions of conservation and extinction? Should flawed specimens be disposed of? Can museums as a whole be considered cultural preserves? And last but not least: Do we really need to embalm everything?

**Petra Lange-Berndt** (Art Historian, London)

**Subsculpture: Assembling a Museum of Attractions**

Since the early twentieth century artists have been commenting critically on public displays of Museums of Natural History and narrations of colonial conquest, naturalised gender constructions or the favouring of photogenic species. Focusing on the work of Mark Dion and Mike Kelley, this paper will discuss the importance of these strategies for contemporary curatorial practices. While large institutions predominantly try to stage themselves as controlled environments that preserve objects as such as ideologies, an ambivalent group of things, taxidermied animals, seems to be suited to disrupt these impulses. Therefore, I would like to stress the possibility of assembling differently and look to the side: By considering grottoes, side shows, fun fairs, curiosity shops and the amateur I would like to ask if it is possible to turn displays about nature, the earth and biodiversity into continued projects, altered daily: How can things be activated? What happens if we let go of a distancing reception, got immersed and took things into our own hands? How exactly could one reclaim different histories that challenge dominant norms?

**John MacKenzie** (Professor Emeritus of Imperial History, Lancaster)

**The Natural World and Imperial Legitimation: Hunting, Trophies, Taxidermy and Museums**

Among the many fantasies of empire in the nineteenth century was the notion that imperialism offered the opportunity for the embracing of the globe through comprehensive taxonomies. One of the routes to such an outcome was hunting. Hunting performed a number of different functions for imperial officials, settlers, and upper-class travellers. It offered 'sport', the prerogative of the ruling classes from ancient through medieval times. It provided an emblematic dominance of the environment on a global scale, notably in key areas of North America, Africa, and Asia. The British in India considered that in taking over the trappings of the elaborate hunt, they were appropriately substituting themselves for the Mughals who preceded them. In Africa, they established their command over striking faunal resources, illustrating their technological power to indigenous Africans. Such hunting also had significant economic functions, notably in Africa and in North America. But in the course of the nineteenth century, it was further legitimised through its alleged scientific functions. Hunters now claimed that they were indeed indulging in forms of taxonomic survey, that as well as feeding private passions and a desire for collection and interior decoration in homes, clubs, hotels and official buildings, they were also contributing to science by handing over 'trophies' to museums. But of course museums had a much wider remit and they began to combine such donations with field work pursuing small as well as large creatures, with marine surveys, with entomological collecting and much else. The argument of this paper will be that in the early days of museum collecting, certainly up to the First World War, such concerns were all connected with the imperial ethos. There will be some consideration of the extent to which these motivations changed in the course of the twentieth century.

**Robert Marbury** (Artist / Minnesota Association of Rogue Taxidermy, Baltimore)

**Personal Computers as the New Wunderkammer and the Rise of Rogue Taxidermy**

Because of the ease at which information is available, our personal computers have become collections of individualized obsessions rivaling the cabinets of curiosities from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Hard drives become a true microcosm of the individual's interests. They are memory theatres in the true sense. Collections of mp3, cat images, obscure posters and pornography all bid for hard drive space and a place in the digital museum. The main drawback to this type of collection is that it is not physical: it is conceptual. This felt disconnect encourages the modern internet user to explore physical experience, be it knitting, brewing, local farming, bee-keeping or taxidermy. The irony is that the same modern technology that removes us from the physical also catalogues and disbursts instruction on heritage craft more adeptly than ever in human history. This presentation will address how our digital collections define us and specifically, how this trend has made taxidermy accessible to urban, suburban and exurban artists. The challenges of taxidermy as an alternative craft, including one's personal relationship with death; animals and food; as well as the reality of local and international laws, make it the perfect example of how we make our internet real.

**Angela Matussek** (Art Historian, Marburg / Maastricht)

**"Museumlives": Mould, Decay and the History of the Object**

Preserved specimens on the one hand and works of art made with organic materials on the other seem to share the same set of problems regarding their preservation, above all the dilemma between material decay versus the museums' task of conservation as well as questions of authenticity and originality. Taking as a point of departure artist Dieter Roth's Hamburg-based "Schimmelmuseum" (mould museum) and some of his so called "Originale", this contribution tries to explore the different ways of keeping Roth's works "alive", from photo- and film-documentations to remakes and exhibition copies. What are the advantages and disadvantages of these very different approaches? In examining exemplary objects, I am going to ask what precisely it is that artists, museum curators, gallery owners and collectors are trying to conserve in each case. To what extent do their different conservation strategies reflect their interpretations of these objects as well as their own position in the art world?

**Hans-Jörg Rheinberger** (Historian of Science, Berlin)

**Preparations Revisited**

Since my essay on preparations as images of themselves (Kunsthistorisches Jahrbuch für Bildwissenschaft 1 (2009), 9-19), a number of years have lapsed. In the present paper, I would like to spin the thread a bit further. My emphasis will, however, not be on exhibitions, but rather on "preparing" in knowledge production. Perhaps I will also touch on a particular preparation procedure that became crucial for the life sciences of the twentieth century: cryo-preparation.

**Rose Marie San Juan** (Art Historian, London)

**Bones in Transit: The Re-Animation of Human Bone in Early Modern Cabinets of Display**

An indispensable testament of martyrdom, the bones of missionaries returned to Europe from distant places to prove the extent of the reach of Christianity. By the seventeenth century, the Jesuits were shipping numerous crates with bodily remains from Asia and the Americas, and confronted the problem of where and how to install such remains, especially since their status between human remains and sacred relics remained unresolved for decades. Both related to place of death and placeless due to their increasing proliferation and anonymity, many bodily parts, especially bones, were relocated within anatomical cabinets of display, and thus came into visibility in relation to new forms of anatomical and ethnographic knowledge. I will consider how this exchange between different conceptions of bodily remains held implications to the early modern cabinet's focus on the transformative body in its fraught transitions between life and death.

**Claude d'Anthénaise** (Director, Musée de la chasse et de la nature, Paris), **Bergit Arends** (Museum of Natural History, London), **Christine Borland** (Artist, Glasgow), **Lisa O'Sullivan** (Director, Center for the History of Medicine, New York Academy of Medicine), and **Johannes Vogel** (Director, Museum für Naturkunde, Berlin)

**Curating Specimens**

The panel will address issues around the possession, conservation and exhibition of animal or human remains especially with regards to the colonial heritage of public institutions. Taking the examples of the Musée de la chasse et de la nature (Museum of Hunting and Nature) in Paris, and the Museum für Naturkunde (Natural History Museum) in Berlin it will put some outstanding propositions for museum refurbishments up for discussion, and will particularly consider the involvement of art and artists in the transformation of these institutions. It will also debate the handling of preserved human body parts in public collections or displays from issues around the repatriation of human remains to artistic interventions in university or museum collections.



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council

