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VOICES FROM THE CONFERENCE 2 – Getting to the core

[Please find the collected voices from day one here.]

Day two of the conference "Museum Collections in Motion" offered an insight into curating practices from different places. Among others, Malick Ndiaye gave a talk on his work as curator for the Theodore Monod Mueseum of African Art in Dakar, Senegal in which he described the museum "as a community gathering place". Felix Sattler explained how he co-created an exhibition with four different groups/ artists at the Tieranatomische Theater (Theatre of Veterinary Anatomy) in Berlin. He showed how he tried to ensure a non-hierarchical curatorship, for example by a decentralization of the space.

The third panel of the day titled "Open Forum: On the Ethics and Politics of Return and New Forms of Cooperation" continued in a similar vein. Amber Aranui, Thomas Laely, Adebo Abiti Nelson, Julia Binter and Cynthia Schimming engaged the audience in a moving debate. This round turned out to be a somewhat "cathartic moment", as Nanette Snoep, the director of the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum and one the organizers of the conference, put it afterwards. Some very personal stories were shared that caused emotional responses. Wandile Kasibe from the University of Cape Town later referred to the afternoon of the second day as the "moment that history opened a window for all of us".

We had the chance to interview two of the panelists from this moving session, Amber Aranui and Cynthia Schimming.

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Participants of the Open Forum on day two: Julia Binter, Cynthia Schimming, Nelson Abiti, Thomas Laely (from left to right)

Cynthia Schimming is an internationally acclaimed fashion designer, researcher and clothing technologist based in Windhoek. As a part of the steering committee of the Museums Association of Namibia she is currently researching the historical collections from Namibia at the Ethnologische Museum Berlin.

How would you describe the panel you were part of today?

Cynthia Schimming: I was actually happy that I was part of that panel, because somehow we all talked about the same problems and the same topic. But from the perspective of an artist, sitting through a conference like this for three days and having to listen to all of these papers repeating themselves and hear about the discourses – it really becomes boring.

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I actually felt that in the end, I told the audience enough so there can maybe be a change or a shift. I would like a shift in the way academics talk so that a normal person on the street can understand what they're talking about.

And what do you think caused this shift?

Cynthia Schimming: After I was done speaking, there was this silence. I thought that I made a mistake, that I had done something wrong. But if you remember the stories I was telling and how the depot of the museum is bringing out emotions in me, I realized that it was actually a moment of silence because people started to realize something. Maybe they realized that they are talking about the museum as a building and objects, but that they had never actually touched those objects, that they were never in contact with those objects. They had never realized that those objects are talking back to you.

Can you repeat a bit of what you said during the panel?

Cynthia Schimming: I can't repeat anything, because it all came from emotions. I think I spoke much longer than I was supposed to. I was asked to explain how I got here and what was my mission, but when you start digging you open the Pandora box and everything changes.
I think I actually spoke about how these objects are haunting you: How bad it was of people to take objects, giving them the wrong names or even no names at all, giving them numbers, not telling us where they come from, who brought them and how they got them.
It is also bad that they got things wrong, some of the explanations of what purposes the objects were used for were wrong. We had these corsets, where they said they were for intercourse purposes. But it is not true. If you really go into the research on how these corsets were worn, they were worn during the day. When did intercourse take place while the women were working on the field?
I also spoke about objects with which children were involved, for example, this

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necklace that was taken from a boy. If we go back into the records to find out who brought this necklace to the museum, we find out that it was a person that went to Namibia in 1904: during the time of the genocide. So, this necklace is linked to the genocide.
Then there was this doll that really spoke to my soul. As a designer I could see that this doll was made by a child. Maybe a child that was sitting under a tree with her grandmother, who took pieces of the fabric of her grandmother's dress and started making her own. She made her own dress, she made her own doll. The legs were not even properly made, but the arms were there. If you look more closely you see that the doll is wearing a petticoat, that there is actually no dress. I remember as a child, being half Herero and half German, I asked my grandmother why women wore so many petticoats. That was after us being forced into Victorian dresses, being told that our skin is not good enough. Her answer was that women were scared of being raped.
Seeing this doll only wearing a petticoat, the dress not being there, I think about the women being raped. It is an emotional journey going through these objects, it's really not easy. You can't walk out of the depot at night and be happy. Yes, you can be happy that they have preserved some of the objects and students in Namibia will be able to see them. But if you look at the objects and how they came there, it brings anger and tears to a person.

Have you taken something away from this conference so far?

Cynthia Schimming: I have learned a lot and I have met a lot of people. One of the things that I have learned is that we are all humans. When I spoke, my aim was not to stir emotions. But it happened. Somehow, I have touched people and maybe they will do conferences in a different way now.

There is a lot that people can take away from you and from what you have told. Is there something that you can take away from them?

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Cynthia Schimming: I have learned from the colleagues of the other African countries that there are so many things we have in common. When I was talking about the toy that we use, which is made out of a button, the man from Uganda, who was sitting next to me said that they are also using this as a toy. South Africans use it as a toy as well. But I learned that in New Zealand, they use it as a healing object. This is how we learn from each other and from our different cultures.

Many participants perceived this panel and your talk as a turning point of the conference. How did you perceive this?

Cynthia Schimming: This deeply emotional layer it there and nobody thought it was there. Besides all the hugs and kisses I received after my speech, some of the previous speakers actually went up to me and admitted that they feel like they need to go home and change their papers, rethinking how to approach these problems. Somehow, they learned from this process. And I salute Wandile Kasibe, who stood up at the end and talked like Nelson Mandela to the nation, about how we are doing things and how wrong we started off this whole conference.I came to Berlin to look for other things in the depot: To look for patterns to bring back into my world, which is design. But I went into the depot and realized that there is more than just design to these objects and my whole perspective changed. In fact, I'm still supposed to look for the designs and I have only ten days left. But working in the depot changed everything, the objects messed up my mind completely and I must restart. And as I said to Julia Binter last night, I hope that this little doll will start working with me at night. It was really a learning curve and I'm glad that I came. I'm sure that people learned from my perspective. Maybe in the future they will bring more artists into the discourse.

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Amber Aranui is a repartriation researcher at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington.

How would you describe the Panel you were on?

Amber Aranui: I felt it was a mixture of people and experiences, I really enjoyed it. Particularly, listening to African perspectives was interesting for me because we don't hear much of that in New Zealand.

I felt a little bit like I was the odd one out. But I still think talking about cooperation and working together, that connects us. Although I come from a different context it does show that we really are starting to work together.

It is important for us to think about how we are working together. We have to ask whether collaborations are meaningful for both parties. Of course it is meaningful for the museum because they gain information and knowledge. But are those relationships we want to establish also meaningful for the people connected to the objects? It is important to make sure that new forms of collaboration are equally beneficial to both parties. That is something I am passionate about: ensuring that this happens. In the past, when people have worked with specific descendant groups some of those collaborations haven't been balanced. It was more about what anthropologists and museums can get from those people rather than what the exchange is.

What are your expectations & hopes for the conference? Why did you come here?

Amber Aranui: I enjoy coming to conferences in Germany because I feel that the conversations are quite open. People are quite direct about how they feel about things, I really appreciate that. It is not always the case in New Zealand or even in the UK. People don't necessarily tell you exactly how they feel, there is a lot of stepping around the issues for fear of upsetting people. I think you need to be open and honest. If there is criticism, just take it!

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What I take away from this is an impression of what is happening between the European countries and the countries they have colonized in the past. In New Zealand that is all part and parcel, formerly colonizers and colonized are in the same place. Somewhat here they are separate. I like seeing that the conversations are about how those separate places can work better together. I also like that there is fierce debate at this conference. For me that is encouraging.

It is important for us in New Zealand to know what is happening in the world, to venture out and see what the rest of the museum world is doing. It is easy for us to settle down in a 'glass case' because we are so isolated as a country.

Coming here is also a way in which I can contribute some of my experiences to people here in Germany. Maybe that will help the museums? I actually feel like I get more out of it than you get out of me being here... I get a lot out of being here and listening, understanding the dynamics and politics that are going on with particular institutions. I like to just sit and observe and try to figure out what is going on.

Where is the debate at back in New Zealand? Do you notice any differences to the debate here?

Amber Aranui: What really stood out here was that there is a big debate about decolonizing the museum. That is also a big point of discussion in New Zealand but some of us who are in the museum sector are a bit bored with it. Everyone wants to talk about it, decolonizing. But what does that actually mean?

What I have taken away from this conference is the question of *who* needs to be decolonized? Is it us, the indigenous people who need to decolonize themselves and take over these spaces in the museum? Now that I have been here and listened to people I ask myself whether it is the museum and those people who did the colonizing who need to decolonize themselves. I never thought about it that way before I came here. What Servaj said about ethnographizing us is a perfect way to

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decolonize. Don't look at people or objects as ethnographic specimen. I am interested to talk about that with my colleagues when I get home.

The panel you were on marked a turning point in the conference. How did you perceive this?

I think we represented the practical side of things. How to do it, rather than just to theorize how it could be done. I think our three talks showed that it is already happening. Perhaps we should have started with that panel. It would have made sense because that is what the conference is about: to see how things are changing, how collections are changing and how the relationships with the collections are changing.

To be honest, I expected there to be more conversations like that. I was surprised about the amount of talk about thinking about doing things. You know, it is not a bad thing, we have to figure it out. But we need to just do it. From what I have seen here, there is the willingness to do it. So what is stopping us?