

Museum Temporalities: Time, History and the (Ethnographic) Museum

An international conference at the Research Center for Material Culture of the Tropenmuseum, Afrika Museum and Museum Volkenkunde

Thursday November 26 & Friday November 27, 2015

The Research Center for Material Culture in collaboration with the Institute for Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology is pleased to invite you to the conference *Museum Temporalities: Time, History and the Ethnographic Museum*, which will be held on November 26-27, at the RCMC, Museum Volkenkunde, Steenstreet 1, Leiden.

Museum Temporalities brings together scholars and curators to think critically about the often tense relationship between ethnographic curation and display and notions of time. We are interested to explore the multiple temporalities that operate within museum practices and help to structure them, especially in ethnographic museums, which have remained under-explored to date within much scholarly discourse.

Museums are by nature intricately bound up within multiple temporalities. Exhibitions are organized around the opposing poles of permanence (fixed or permanent exhibitions) or transience (temporary exhibitions) while, at least according to International Council of Museums (ICOM), for a museum to fulfil its ethical responsibilities it is “expected” to preserve things “in perpetuity”. Such ideas of eternity also dictate what kinds of objects are collected and what kinds are not; museums struggle with how to deal with time-limited, ephemeral objects. There is arguably a temporal dimension implicit in the notion of universal collections, which some museums claim to possess, conjuring up ideas of finitude, of completeness pertaining not only to covering all spaces but also all times.

Beyond the more practical temporal notions associated with preservation and exhibitions, this conference also seeks to explore the more conceptual implications of such temporal categories for questions of materiality and representation. How do they impact on ethnographic curation and display? Michel Foucault’s description of the museum as a “heterotopia of indefinitely accumulated time” that evidences the modern West’s “will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time” prompts more complex questions about the relationship between the museum and time. This perspective sees the museum as a co-existence of multiple temporalities, a co-presence of different times and different spaces. Foucault goes on to contrast the “immobile” museum with the more transient festival, which he sees as “flowing, transitory, precarious... and not oriented toward the eternal”.

While the notion of the museum as heterotopia has become accepted, the museum’s relationship to time goes beyond the distinction between flow and fixity, certainly in contemporary museum practice. In his seminal work *Time and the Other*, published some 30 years ago, Johannes Fabian provides another framework for thinking critically about the work that different conceptions of time do within practices of representation. This publication provided a reference point for many of the critiques of ethnographic displays as placing the cultures that they were purported to represent “out of time”.

It is these more complex entanglements that this conference hopes to explore, thinking critically about how conceptual temporal categories such as *pasts*, *presents* and *futures*, or questions of *the contemporary* are implicated within practices of museum representation. We invite speakers to explore questions including the following:

1. What are the specific histories of ethnographic displays and their afterlives? How might we think critically, for example, about earlier techniques of museum representation such as the *diorama*, and what role do these earlier forms play in the present? What forms of *enchantment* did these earlier technologies of representation allow? Mindful of the now well-established critique of these older forms of display, is there a role for them in the present?
2. How have history and memory been addressed or, conversely, neglected within ethnographic curation and display? What temporalities have dominated ethnographic curation and display practices? Have they allowed for a sufficient sense of historicity?
3. What is the relationship between materiality and concepts of permanence or transience (including concepts such as finitude and perpetuity or ephemerality)?
4. What is the relationship between ethnographic museums (curation and display) as heritage or archival institutions, and temporal concepts of past, present, or future? Beyond the more recent discussions of the future of the ethnographic museums, what is the museum's relationship to these chronological concepts?
5. Are ethnographic museums dominated by western temporalities? What other temporalities can we conceive of for ethnographic curation and display?

The conference will coincide with the delivery of the Gerbrands Lecture, which will be delivered this year by Prof. Barbara Kirshenblatt Gimblett.

Abstracts & Biographies

Day 1: Thursday 26 November 2015

Session 1: Museum Temporalities

Introduction: Time is not what it used to be: Museums and the Anthropology of Time

Peter Pels

Peter Pels (1958) is Professor in the Anthropology of Africa at the University of Leiden since 2003. He is a specialist in the study of religion and politics in situations of colonial contact, the history of anthropology, the anthropology of magic, and social science ethics. He supervises research on religion and cyberculture, the comparative study of images of the future, colonial photography and cinematic representation. He is currently finishing a book entitled 'The Spirit of Matter. Religion, Modernity and the Power of Objects', and supervises a research project financed by the Dutch National Research Foundation entitled "The Future is Elsewhere: Towards a Comparative History of the Futurities of the Digital "evolution" (2010-2014). Professor Pels was the editor of *Social Anthropology* between 2002 and 2007.

Time, temporality, and objects

Johannes Fabian

In this presentation I will begin with an attempt to understand the popularity of *Time and the Other* among curators and then offer some thoughts on temporality and working with objects. I conclude with some observations on current usage of "curator" and "curating."

Johannes Fabian is professor emeritus of cultural anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. He did research on religious movements, language, work, and popular culture in the Shaba/Katanga mining region of Zaire, now Congo (1966-7, 1972-4, 1985, 1986). In his theoretical and critical work, he addressed questions of epistemology and of the history of anthropology. His most recent publications include *Out of Our Minds. Reason and Madness in the Exploration of Central Africa* (2002), *Anthropology with an Attitude* (2001), *Memory against Culture. Arguments and Reminders* (2007), and *Ethnography as Commentary: Writing from the Virtual Archive* (2008).

The Crisis of Eternity: Canons and Contemporaneity

Cecilia Hurley

The mid-nineteenth century witnessed the development in some European museums of the 'masterpiece' room, whose proclaimed model was the Tribuna in the Florentine Offices. This sanctum sanctorum was intended as the highlight of any visit, the room in which the museum's greatest artistic treasures were assembled. Very quickly, it became apparent that these rooms, far from representing a stable, immobile canon of fixed artistic values, were forced to address the question of fluctuating artistic values, of national representations and of the role of modernity. Was the canon a fixed set of values, or did it – and should it – allow contemporary considerations to modulate it?

Cecilia Hurley studied classics at the University of Oxford before writing a thesis on responses to French revolutionary vandalism. More recently she has completed a study on masterpiece rooms in European fine arts museums during the nineteenth century. She has recently published *Monuments for the people : Aubin-Louis Millin's Antiquités nationales (1790-1798)* (Turnhout, 2013) (Gold medal

from the Académie des Inscriptions et des belles-Lettres) and (with Claire Barbillon) *Le catalogue dans tous ses états* (Paris, 2015). She is a researcher and lecture at the Ecole du Louvre, and head of special collections at the University of Neuchâtel.

Session 2: Racing Time: Historical Displays, Evolutionary Narratives and the Question of Origins

Rethinking Evolution in the Museum: Envisioning African Origins

Monique Scott

In this paper I will share my research conducted at the American Museum of Natural History, the Natural History Museum (London), the Horniman Museum and the National Museums of Kenya, *Envisioning African Origins*, where I found that the majority of museum visitors interpret human evolution exhibitions as linear, color-coded narratives of progress from bestial African prehistory to a civilized, European present (though black visitors often produced negotiated or resistant readings). I will address some of the sources of these teleological assumptions, which I suggest are products of culturally-encoded exhibition media and the cultural preconceptions that museum visitors bring with them to exhibitions, including those derived from the *racial folklore* circulating outside the museum that continues to stigmatize African people as evolutionary relics.

Monique Scott is the Director of Museum Studies at Bryn Mawr College. She is a museum anthropologist with particular expertise in how museum visitors make meaning of representations of Africa within natural history museums and how diverse visitors experience traditional ethnographic exhibitions as a whole. Prior to Bryn Mawr, Monique served as head of anthropological education at the American Museum of Natural History for almost ten years. In that role, she applied her doctoral and post-doctoral research in museum anthropology to her work in museum education.

Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going to? Some questions about framing time in museums.

Benoît de L'Estoile

The Paris Museum of Man has been reinaugurated mid-October after extensive works of renovation. Purporting to present “the natural and cultural history of Man”, it is organized around three questions: Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going to?

While such questions are couched in an evolutionist framework, they prompt us to ask how museums are framing time. What gives ethnographic museums their value is in part their role as conservatory of the past, or rather of various pasts. At the same time, they are also challenged to be “contemporary” and open up the future. How do they face tensions between past-oriented and future-oriented roles? How can museums deal both with the past as past (as “another country”), the past in the present (e.g. colonial legacies), and the past for the future?

Benoît de L'Estoile is Directeur de Recherche at the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS (Centre Maurice Halbwachs, CMH) and Professor of Anthropology at the Ecole normale supérieure, Paris. Doing fieldwork in rural Brazil, he has published among other *Empires, Nations and Natives: Anthropology and State-making* (ed. with L. Sigaud, F. Neiburg), Duke University Press, 2005, *Le goût des Autres: de l'Exposition coloniale aux Arts premiers* (Flammarion, 2007, 2010), and « Can French anthropology outlive its museums? Notes on a changing landscape », in S. Chevalier (ed.), 2015 *Anthropology at the Crossroads: the View from France*, Sean Kingston Publishing, Cambridge.

Session 3: Stockpiling Time: Materiality and the Forever Impulse

From dust to dust: the nuances of material impermanence

Renata Peters

Conservators are often perceived as professionals who want to make everything last forever. However, the discipline is based on an essential awareness of the mechanisms of transience. This paper will discuss expectations of longevity by exploring contemporary art and Indigenous collections. It will show how battles against impermanence vary according to the context, artist's intent, original uses, perceptions of ideal condition, market trends, national and international politics, and other tangible and intangible features.

Renata F. Peters is a Brazilian conservator who has worked in South and North America, Europe and Africa. She has been a lecturer in conservation at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London (UCL) since 2005. She is coordinator of the UCL MA Principles of Conservation, the UCL Conservation and Development Research Network, and of the ICOM-CC Objects from Indigenous and World Cultures Working Group.

Stockpiling the Past for an Unpredictable Future: Techniques of Preparedness in labs and museums.

Frédéric Keck

Andrew Lakoff and Stephen Collier have showed that at the end of the Cold War, techniques of risk management that aimed at preparing for a nuclear attack were transferred to all kinds of natural disasters. Neo-liberal societies prepare for a catastrophic future which they cannot predict. They imagine the effects of the catastrophe when they cannot calculate its probability. I will show how this new conception of temporality applies to collections of biological samples conserved in labs and ethnographic objects conserved in museums, taking my observations in the Pasteur Centre of the University of Hong Kong and the musée du quai Branly in Paris as cases. I will ask how materialities are imagined when the infrastructures in which they are conserved appear as vulnerable.

Frédéric Keck is a researcher at the Laboratory of Social Anthropology and Director of the Research Department of the Quai Branly Museum. After studying philosophy at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris and Anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley, he has been researching the history of anthropology and contemporary biopolitical questions. He published *Claude Lévi-Strauss, une introduction* (Pocket-La découverte, 2005), *Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, entre philosophie et anthropologie* (CNRS Editions, 2008) *Un monde grippé* (Flammarion, 2010). He has co-edited (with N. Vialles) *Des hommes malades des animaux*, L'Herne, 2012 and (with A. Lakoff) *Sentinel devices, Limn*, 2013.

5th Annual Gerbrands Lecture

Materializing History: Time and Telos at POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

POLIN Museum was built on the rubble of the destroyed Warsaw ghetto and prewar Jewish neighborhood of Warsaw. The core exhibition stages the thousand-year history of Polish Jews within a theater of history. It was created from scratch, without an historic building and without a collection. The starting point was the story, rather than a collection, and our top priority was to bring that story to life. Although objects were purchased and borrowed for the core exhibition, objects alone could not tell this thousand-year story. What we lack in material heritage we make up for in intangible heritage. This presentation will explore the role of intangible heritage in materializing the

history of Polish Jews, with special attention to time and telos – in particular, creating a narrative arc and a mode of narration in the historical present that would resist the teleology of the Holocaust.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is Chief Curator of the Core Exhibition at POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw. She is University Professor Emerita and Professor Emerita of Performance Studies at New York University. Her books include *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*; *Image before My Eyes: A Photographic History of Jewish Life in Poland, 1864–1939* (with Lucjan Dobroszycki); *They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland Before the Holocaust* (with Mayer Kirshenblatt), and *Anne Frank Unbound: Media, Imagination, Memory* (with Jeffrey Shandler). She received the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland from the President of Poland.

Day 2: Friday 27 November 2015

Session 4: Other times: Indigenous temporalities in museum theory and practice

Rethinking Museum Temporalities through Hawaiian Lenses: Curatorial Conversations, Material Languages, and Indigenous Skills

Philipp Schorch

So-called ethnographic exhibitions have often portrayed Indigenous people as distant in time and place, as 'over there' and 'back then'. Drawing on collaborative research at Bishop Museum, Hawai'i, this paper reveals that Hawaiians' own conception of the past, however, figure it as a dynamic ontological source which is continually recycled to ground the speaker in the present geared towards the future – a temporal ontological reality of a past-being-present-being-future. Bishop Museum emerges as a living resource, rather than a static record, which is actively used by Indigenous actors to self-theorize, -historicize and -interpret by conversing with ancestors and contemporaries via material languages such as weaving, and to (re)discover Indigenous skills in their own right, without necessarily aiming at Indigenizing Western practices, sciences and institutions. The paper argues for an analytical shift from the usual museological focus on exhibitionary productions and representations towards approaching curatorship as ongoing *conversations* which require various common *languages* and the translational power of traveling *skills*.

Philipp Schorch is Marie Curie Fellow (European Commission) at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, Germany, and Honorary Fellow at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation at Deakin University, Australia. Philipp is conducting a multi-sited, collaborative investigation of Indigenous curatorial practices across the Pacific. He is co-editor (with Eveline Dürr) of the volume *Transpacific Americas: Encounters and Engagements between the Americas and the South Pacific* (Routledge, 2016), and co-convened (with Conal McCarthy and Eveline Dürr) the international conference *Curatopia: Histories, Theories, Practices*.

Curating Indigenous Art in Mexico: possibilities and challenges

Genner Llanes-Ortiz

Curatorial work in/of Indigenous art in Mexico revolves around cultural temporalities that presumes the pre-Columbian, and/or traditionalist nature of these various forms of cultural expression. My current work consists in an interrogation of alternative forms to narrate Indigenous lives, histories and dreams, as expressed in the work of contemporary Indigenous artists, which has led me to envision new ways of curating Indigenous heritage and current production. In this presentation, I advance some definitions and strategies to be considered when dealing with Indigenous creativity, past and present, which challenge conventional museum temporalities. I draw from my current work as well as from my participation as a curatorial assistant in the international exhibition of Indigenous art in London, Ecocentrix, in 2013.

Genner Llanes-Ortiz is a Maya social researcher. He obtained his degree in Anthropology at the Autonomous University of Yucatan, Mexico. Later he conducted his postgraduate studies at the University of Sussex in the United Kingdom, where he was awarded the degree of DPhil in Anthropology in 2010. He later worked as a postdoctoral researcher at Royal Holloway University of London, where he participated in the international research project "Indigeneity in the Contemporary World", between 2011 and 2013. Since 2014, he works as a postdoctoral research associate at

Centre for Research and Higher Studies in Social Anthropology (CIESAS for the Spanish acronym) in Mexico City.

Session 5: Liquid Time: Carnival Temporality and the Question of Velocity

The Quintessence of Dust: Carnival Temporality and the Ethnographic Museum

Jenny Walklate

Carnival temporality is the temporality of dust: the excess of material existence in time, the continual transformation from thing to other. The time of carnival-as-event is unhinged from, but not exclusive of, the everyday. Whilst as event it is positioned at a particular point in the calendar, carnival-as-concept is able to permeate the everyday entirely. It does so through coevalness and multivalency - the intermingling of temporal layers in spaces and objects; through its acts of transformation and renewal; and through its perpetual incompleteness. The temporality of carnival is the temporality of the flesh - corrupted, grotesque, beautiful, always having been what it is no longer, and always already becoming something else.

Parallels can be drawn between this temporality, and that of ethnographic display and collecting, because of the complex relationship this particular discipline has to tense, coevalness, permanence, and the temporal qualities of material objects. By drawing on the characteristics of carnival, we can explore what makes ethnographic museology particular, and how we, as ethnographers and museum practitioners, might make changes and improvements in our thinking and practice.

Initially, this paper will explore the temporal qualities of carnival, following this with a short literature review of the carnivalesque in museological scholarship. Drawing these together, the final part of the paper will discuss the potential consequences of carnivalesque temporal thinking and practice for ethnographic museums, using artefacts and exhibitions from the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford to illustrate specific points. These items will include the Shrunken Heads and the Japanese Noh Mask collection. I will argue that by invoking carnival temporality in the analysis of specific objects and displays, it is possible to engage with questions of conservation, representation, and engagement in a way which is inclusive, politically minded, and renewing.

Jenny Walklate holds an MA in Museum Studies from the University of Leicester, and was the first recipient at the School of the AHRC-funded Block Grant Partnership to study for her PhD, which she completed in 2013. Her thesis was entitled *Timescapes: The Production of Temporality in Literature and Museums*, and this has been submitted for consideration to Routledge. She has co-edited two books, *The Thing About Museums* and *Narrating Objects, Collecting Stories*, and has published in a variety of peer reviewed journals. She was the Treasurer for the Museum Ethnographers Group (MEG) from 2012 - 2015, and has worked with them on two Arts Council England-funded projects, *Engaging Curators* and *Making outcomes accessible: reaching and revitalising the museum ethnography community*. She is also the newsletter editor for the International Committee for Museum Ethnography (ICME), and a managing editor for the international journal, *Museum and Society*.

Renovation, Moving Images, and the Question of Velocity

Mary Bouquet

The historical moments of ethnographic museum renewal, whether of architectural features such as entrances, or the languages of regional ('semi-permanent') or thematic (often temporary) gallery displays, afford insight onto the reconfiguration of social and material relations both within and across the institutional spectrum through time. The re-shuffled chronologies of the Rijksmuseum's art and history collections, from the mediaeval basement to the twentieth-century attics – with the re-

Cuyperated inner courtyards devoted to public reception in between; from the stillness of the insular Asian Pavilion to the non-stop media attention aided by an entire wing devoted to temporary exhibitions: all these exemplify refurbishment of format (2003-2013). The feeling of starting anew, re-shaping the legacies of history, is echoed by the use of film in the new twentieth-century attics of the Rijksmuseum - whether to evoke the post-World War II rebuilding of the Netherlands, or the sorrows of manhood - underlining such matters as sound, positioning in the gallery, taxonomy and hierarchy of the collections, and the (viewers') interaction with surrounding installations.

The contrast between the Rijksmuseum's parsimonious use of film in its twentieth-century attics (and temporary exhibitions), and the prolific use of film in the regional galleries of the National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden, and in temporary exhibitions such as *Geisha*, helps to illuminate ways that film has been, is, and might be used in ethnographic museums, and to what purpose, and with which (un)intended consequences. This preliminary paper considers how and what the notion of velocity (or velocities) might add to the discussion of ethnographic museum temporalities, with particular reference to the use of the moving image.

Mary Bouquet is Fellow of University College Utrecht, the Netherlands. She is author of *Museums: A Visual Anthropology*, and co-editor of the Berghahn Series *Museums and Collections*.

Session 6: Sensing Time: Museums, Memory and Historical Consciousness

"Does it almost feel like Nothing changed at all?" (Bastille): Museum Temporalities and Historical Consciousness

Susan Crane

The pop band Bastille captured the ambivalence and sublime thrill of feeling connected to the past, contemplating the devastation of Pompeii and shooting the video for their song "Pompeii" among the artifacts of the British Museum. It's not often that we see pop songs about historical consciousness (although other bands have similarly historically referential names), but it may be quintessential that in doing so, this song contemplates the meaning of "Nothing." I will consider a particular type of museum object, the photograph, and interrogate how its supposedly "timeless" representational qualities have been understood in museum display, and specifically how photographs relate to Nothing. How do photographic depictions of "the past" occur when the photograph is not even the primary object of display, but rather a background element of exhibit design? How have museums relied upon the apparent content of a photograph to convey historical context, even without providing captioned historical information? Whether photographs are deployed to convey a sense of historical reality, or the ephemerality of the past, or the timelessness of the depicted subjects, which aspects of the past have been lost in the translation from image-making to image-displaying? If a viewer is left with a sense that "nothing has changed," what implicit connections are being drawn between past and present via the photographic medium? And if the viewer perceives that "nothing is the way it was," how is the photograph also an instrument of distancing? I will suggest that *Nothing* is a flexible conceptual tool for understanding historical consciousness in the museum, and designating the varieties of museum temporalities.

Susan Crane is Associate Professor of Modern European History at the University of Arizona. She is the author of *Collecting and Historical Consciousness in Early 19th-Century Germany* and editor of *Museums and Memory*, and has published many articles on historical consciousness and the use of historical photographs. Her current work is "... and then Nothing Happened: A Short History of Nothing."

Biography of Relations and the Art of (Institutional) Forgetting in Museum

Riemer Knoop

Drawing on experience working with several museums in different parts of the world, and especially in China, Egypt, Russia and across Europe, this presentation will explore the general tendency in (ethnographic) museums to elide their institutional memories, presenting collections as timeless, one-dimensional and vacant “stuff” trapped in an eternal now. These collections are often unhinged from the complex pasts of which they were part, and from the value systems that brought them into the museums in the first place. In contrast to this tendency of institutional forgetting, I will present an example of what could be a more productive approach to addressing time/history in museum. Recently the Weltmuseum, Vienna, has proposed biographical approaches for the forthcoming renovation where they try to locate the former Hapsburg capital to world history through a series of biographical themes. Such an approach around the biography of relations, I will argue, provides an important opportunity for how (ethnographic) museum can deal with their often too orphaned collections.

Riemer Knoop is professor of Cultural heritage at the Reinwardt Academy, Amsterdam School of the Arts. He has a broad professional background in the areas of archaeology, built heritage preservation, museums and heritage, having held positions at the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities, the VU University, Amsterdam, and the University of Amsterdam.

He has recently held visiting professor positions at the Mahidol University Bangkok (Thailand) in cultural heritage and museum studies of the Research Institute of Languages and Cultures of Asia (RILCA), at the Zhejiang University in Hangzhou, and has taught participatory museum practices at the Polytechnic Museum, Moscow.