

Conference

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

26 - 27 November 2015

Research Center for Material Culture, National Museum of World Cultures, Leiden

"One way to bring museum temporality into focus is to understand that objects, while their existence in our archives is understood, their presence or co-presence with us is not a given, but must be created or maintained" - Johannes Fabian

"We need to have creativity, openness to whatever comes, and heavy, robust justification for whatever we do" - Renata Peters

"The archaic is something that is constitutive to the present" - Philip Schorch

"Historians are frightened by time. They like to trap it in history" - Jenny Walklate

November 26, 2015

The recent merger of Amsterdam's Tropenmuseum, the Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde in Leiden, and the Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal into the National Museum of World Cultures, has opened a conversation about both the future of the ethnographic museum and the role it will play in the future. The conference was opened by Wayne Modest, head of the Research Center for Material Culture, who spoke about the center's role in critically reflecting on the museum's collections and engaging with questions about how to interact with and mobilize these collections in the present moment. Ethnographic museums have been criticized with presenting people as 'out of time', and this conference engaged with critical perspectives on how temporal categories such as *pasts*, *presents*, and *futures*, or questions of the *contemporary*, are implicated within practices of museum representation.

The first session, on the topic of museum temporalities, began with an introduction by **Peter Pels** (University of Leiden, Anthropology of Africa) on museums, the anthropology of time, and how primitive temporal classifications affect the museum. He spoke out against epochal thinking and the taxonomic urge that abolishes history, explored the potential power of the artifact to become animated and abolish time, and proposed a breaking up of linear history. The 'curious' and 'curiosity' was brought up and the question was put forth about how you can recover the 'curious' and 'curiosity' without positioning some people as curious and other people as not. The next speaker of the session, **Johannes Fabian** (University of Amsterdam), began by inquiring as to why he was invited to speak and whether it was merely to be exhibited as the author of 'Time and the Other'. He addressed issues about time and its relationship to the materiality of objects and ethnographic practice, the political significance and implication of curating, and noted that when we debate museum temporalities, we not only question practices of curating, but the museum as such. He ended with what he deems to be the new conceptual disease of the 'creepy plural' (temporalities, ontologies, knowledges, cultures) and asked whether putting concepts in the plural results in the annihilation of alternative concepts. The session ended with **Cecilia Hurley** (École du Louvre, University of Neuchâtel) who spoke about the relationship between the masterpiece and the canon, the changing meaning of the 'masterpiece', and the contemporaneity of masterpiece rooms. She closed with a quote about whether in the future "to survey the creation of the canon, will be just as important as watching its disintegration." In the Q&A following the first session, questions were raised about external parameters, such as tourists and the state, that also shape the collection of art and masterpieces, about whether we can create the awe-inspiring element in an object without fetishizing it and reproducing the violence of colonialization that is present there, and whether there is a difference in being excited by that which is different, versus

that which is 'alter'? Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett noted that the discussion points to how art can save these objects from ethnography; that these collections are maybe aiming to do for those objects what one cannot or will not do for the people from where they came.

The second session of the day engaged with race, historical displays, evolutionary narratives, and the question of origins. The first speaker was **Monique Scott** (Director of Museum Studies, Bryn Mawr College) whose research on the relationship between origins exhibitions and their audience was sparked by listening in on visitors at the American Museum of Natural History. In her research she looked at what happens when visitors encounter provocative origins exhibitions, how they interact with what is given to them, and the century old representation of aboriginal Africans as a unique species that acts as the bodily proof of the evolution, serving as the ignoble bottom rung. Her most significant finding is that the way visitors experience these exhibitions are profoundly and exceedingly diverse; shaped heavily by prior knowledge from pop culture, visual culture, and education, and with visitors of African descent simultaneously connected to and alienated from these origin stories. She concluded that museums need to put down more challenging and representative perspectives of our cultural heritage. The second speaker **Benoît de L'Estoile** (French National Center for Scientific Research, École normale supérieure) spoke about framing time within museums and how to deal with the tensions between the past oriented and the future oriented intentions of the museum and its collection. His talk, which used the Musée de l'Homme as its central example, questioned how ethnographic museums can confront the multiplicity of the forms of presence of past and colonial legacies and how the museum can present the contemporary. The Q&A period following the session raised some interesting questions for Monique about whether any of her interviewees rejected the essential proposition that they were looking at figures in museums that were somehow supposed to represent them and whether new findings in evolutionary science and history were making their way into museums and their evolutionary narratives.

The topic of materiality and the forever impulse was dealt with in the third session. **Renata Peters** (University College London) spoke about the nuances of material impermanence and argued that there should be a relationship between the processes of conservation of indigenous collections and contemporary art. Deterioration or decay are processes used by many contemporary artists as part of their work (Anselm Kiefer and Joseph Beuys) and it is also a process inherent to some indigenous collections (the twin deities Ahayu:da), where older images are often 'retired' by being placed in a special shrine and returned to dust. There is a complex relationship between keeping something in perpetuity, and the ritual death of the object. Peters concluded that in the processes of preservation we need to have creativity, openness to whatever comes, and heavy, robust justification for whatever we do. The second speaker **Frédéric Keck** (Musée du quai Branly, Laboratory of Social Anthropology) talked about techniques of preparedness in labs and museums. He researched Avian Flu in Hong Kong before working for the museum and was quick to point out the relationship between birds and conservation, with the Netherlands having both the highest density of poultry farms and museums. Keck outlined various techniques of preparedness that museums could use which included sentinel devices, simulations, and stockpiling. The Q&A period brought out comments about how risk management, which is derived from other elements of society, is a big part of museum culture, and that objects have to be protected due to their monetary worth in the context of some museums, and their ritualistic or historical value in the context of others.

The first day of the conference closed with the 5th annual Gerbrands lecture by **Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett** (New York University) titled "Materializing History: Time and Telos at POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews." As the Chief Curator of the Core Exhibition at the POLIN museum, Barbara used her work at the museum to reflect on whether the history of Polish Jews can be saved from ethnography, whether history can be purged of memory, and the role of intangible heritage in what makes process matter. The POLIN museum was a *gesamtkunstwerk* from its birth,

since it was a museum that was built on ruins and created from the inside out. The broader goal of the museum and the exhibition was to resist the teleological narrative of the Holocaust, which was accomplished by narrating in the 'historical present', using the first person, and situating the event within the 1000 year history of the Polish Jews. The museum functions more as a theatre of history than a preservation of history, with the story unfolding as the visitor moves through the space. As there were so few artifacts remaining from the Polish Jews, material elements were created from stories and process-based histories, including a wooden synagogue which exemplified the recovery of materiality through knowledge. The exhibition raised questions of how you do something in the absence of objects and material culture. Barbara's passionate and enthralling talk was followed by a stimulating question and answer period where questions were raised about the memory of life versus the memory of death, whether the definition of 'what is Poland' was shifting, the conceptual design of an institution where life is the driving force, and the differences and similarities between the POLIN Museum and the Jewish Museum in Berlin. Johannes Fabian brought up the three point distinction of history, memory, and remembering; that remembering cannot be controlled, but memory can be domesticated. In response, Barbara concluded that she wants to get away from memory culture and focus on remembering.

November 27, 2015

A session on Indigenous temporalities in museum theory and practice started the second day of the conference. The first speaker **Philipp Schorch** (Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Deakin University) spoke about his field work in Hawaii at the Bishop Museum, and how this has shaped his view of museum temporalities and ethnographic practices. In Hawaiian and other Polynesian cultures, art objects and artifacts are seen as material manifestations of their ancestors, or the ancestors themselves, and this definition shapes the curatorial practices at the museum. The original meaning of 'curate' (*curare*, to care for something) is used and the focus is not on material objects or finished products, but the processes by which they are produced. Philip noted that the Hawaiian curators engaged in practices that self-theorize, self-historicize, and self-interpret; they recognize their history, their past, and their relationship with it, rather than framing it within Western curatorial and conservation practices. The second speaker of the session, **Genner Llanes-Ortiz** (CIESAS, Mexico City), discussed the challenges and possibilities of curating Indigenous art in Mexico, especially as this kind of curatorial practice revolves around cultural temporalities that presume the pre-Columbian and traditionalist nature of these various forms of cultural expression. He shared that time and representations of indigenous art are often defined by archeological time, imagined as tradition, geographically attached, and created by anonymous-Indigenous artisans. He spoke about contemporary art made by indigenous artists that challenges the present/presence of Indigenous agencies and de-territorializes/de-temporalizes Indigenous creativity. During the Q & A period, it was pointed out that both speakers were investigating the ability to collapse notions of time and timelessness through the catalyzation of objects and contemporary Indigenous art practices. A question was raised about what defines Indigenous curatorial practices as Indigenous, who gives the quality of the Indigenous?

The second session of the day featured two distinct, but interconnected talks on carnival temporality and the question of velocity within the ethnographic museum. The first speaker, **Jenny Walklate** (Museum and Society, ICME), engaged with museum temporality through the framework of the carnival, or the carnivalesque. The notion of 'carnival' was used in a broader sense, as an unbuttoning, as a world turned inside out. She quotes Borges that "each moment, carnivalesque or otherwise, is unique and unrepeated and always slipping out of the contemporary." If all presents,

pasts, and futures are constantly changing, then who can grasp them? She concludes that a carnivalesque museum would be highly corporeal, have redistributed authority where objects are seen as multiplicitous, and be ambivalent and responsive. Carnival temporality returns to dust: that which is now what it is no longer and is now already becoming something else. **Mary Bouquet** (University College Utrecht), spoke about the ways in which film, has been, is, and might be used in ethnographic museums. The digital revolution marks a crucial watershed in the history of museums which is vital to the discussion of material temporalities: that of the process of speeding up. This speeding up also impacts design processes and she used the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden as an example, where the design brief refers to 'timelessness' as a style and where the museum's efforts were to tell an infinite number of stories under one roof. She explored whether the use of moving image has changed, how screens are used to create velocity in the museum, and how the staff use moving images to act on the spectator and actualize spaces. Velocity was literally built into the design as presentations can be altered every year, the walls can change, and new exhibitions can be created to deal with current issues. The scale of the walls and their projections create the atmospherics of a diorama that can be entered. During the Q&A period, Wayne noted that the moment of the carnival stops particular relations so that the colonizer and the colonized can be whoever they want themselves to be. The question was raised as to whether the carnivalesque museum is an oxymoron, due to the rigid structure of the museum, and that maybe what we need to do is turn the museum inside out.

The final panel of the day was on memory and historical consciousness. The first speaker, **Susan Crane** (University of Arizona), a historian of historical consciousness, shared her current work on museums and 'nothing'. Her talk was illustrated by the song Pompeii by the band Bastille, where, as they stand in the British Museum, they talk about how nothing has changed at all. Museums are faced with the complicated task of how to be in the present while dealing with representing history. She noted that perhaps the answer is to have a museum of a museum, to encapsulate the historical moment of presentation, rather than removing historically saturated objects and erasing certain elements of history. She noted that 'nothing' is worth pondering because of its static nature, everything changes, but nothing remains the same. The final speaker of the conference was **Riemer Knoop** (Reinwardt Academy) who shared an understanding of history as non-linear, with time periods intersecting, accumulating, and stacking on top of one another. To counter paradigmatic thinking, he proposed that there is a need to engage in a conversation with your pieces, including the physical 'facts' about the piece, the primary context of its purpose and production, the secondary context of its first museological use, and the intention of the present dialogue with the object. The final session ended with an engaging question and answer period, where Wayne noted that curators operate in the difficult space between the moment in the past where museum items were presented and the space in the present where those items are contested.

This two day conference engaged with museums temporalities through a myriad of lenses and raised important and difficult questions about how museums represent within the framework of contestation, and how they deal with the space between identity and the violent histories of colonialization. The museum is a part of the process of understanding the world through objects but how do you engage with ethnographic objects that are contaminated with the history of violence? Within the scope of the museum, critical reflexivity is important, but it also has its limitations, and a balance needs to be found between 'naval-gazing' and 'doing'. This conference, as it tackled difficult, often arresting, questions, also engaged t in a process of re-enchantment, putting forth new practices of ethnography, new forms of representation, and new engagements with the unfolding temporalities of the present moment. As Philipp Schorch aptly said, "modernity itself has been internally multiple and radically cross-cultural

throughout, and if the past was different then before, then the present is irrevocably changed; the future then, is forever up for grabs.”

Report by Margarita Osipian