

# Who is ID8470?

## Tal Adler

### I. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

#### A Pause

Once upon a time, someone lived. Then she, or he, died.

I would like to pause already now, at the very beginning of the story, to pay respect to this person whose story of life and death – a mystery – accompanied me over the last few years.

In fact, the main goal of the project presented in this text – *Who is ID8470?* – was to offer a similar pause and to question the overlong practice of exhibiting the skull of a person whose identity is unknown. The skull was, and still is, frequently exhibited in order to tell a story irrelevant to this person's life and without any reference, or respect, to this person's *own* story. In this chapter, I will describe the circumstances that led me to engage with this person and the artistic research I developed as part of this engagement. I will reveal how spirit narratives helped me share this person's stories and ask whether the critical pause offered by this project served its purpose. By unwrapping the *Who is ID8470?* project in detail, I hope to exemplify Artistic Provenance Research (APR) – a concept I conceived and developed through this project.

While the story is paused, I would like to reflect on the way I write about this person who was already dead, perhaps for centuries, when we first met in 2019. At that time, when all I got to meet was this person's skull, there was no information available about their identity. The stories I discovered produced multiple possible identities across centuries, places, and sexes. From here on, I will use the singular *they* pronoun

and its forms to refer to this person and their stories. In addition to being a widely acceptable and used neutral pronoun, the singular *they* also serves to reflect the multiple, possible biographies that the *Who is ID8470?* project proposed.<sup>1</sup>

A bigger challenge, though, is writing about their skull. It might seem obvious to use *it* as the pronoun for the skull – and, indeed, all texts that were written about this skull have exclusively used *it* so far. Although this would be grammatically correct, in the context of this chapter it might be counterproductive. One of the main questions raised in this text (and in this project) is the question of objectification – the processes underlying the transformation of persons from subjects into objects. The skull at the centre of this project has been used as an object for display and study in such ways that the story of the person that this skull used to be – or even the fact that there once was a subject, an identity with stories and agency – has been entirely (and, I would argue, insensitively) ignored. By using the singular *they* in this text not only for the person but also for their skull, I wish to unsettle and sensitize the field in which this skull has been used and to refer to practices of re-humanization.<sup>2</sup> While I do not necessarily argue that human remains should be regarded as persons, I address different approaches to, and understandings of, human remains as well as the challenges they pose.

Finally, the story can now resume: Once upon a time, someone lived. Then, they died. Their skull is covered with drawn lines and numbers. Their name was...

But what was their name?

### A Few Names

A human skull lies inside a used cardboard box partially covered with stickers from DB Schenker Cargo and Freight Company – evidencing this box's dual role in mobilizing the skull across borders as well as providing storage at the anatomical collection of the Centre for

[1] In this project, I use 'possible biographies' to refer to the multiple narratives offered by various spirits of the same person whose skull is discussed and researched here. As I elaborate in the chapter 'We are ID8470' in this book, the possible biographies narrated in this project are all equally possible, legitimate, non-hierarchical, and true.

[2] I have used the concept of *re-humanization* previously in the context of collections of human remains in the project *Dead Images* (2009–19). Significantly, Ciraj Rassool and others use re-humanization in the context of decolonization and restitution or repatriation. I would like to refer again to these practices in the discussion on pronouns and to point to the mutual goal underlying various understandings of re-humanization – to address the objectification of human remains in collections and to create (re)humanizing narratives. See, for example, Ciraj Rassool, 'Re-storing the Skeletons of Empire: Return, Reburial and Rehumanisation in Southern Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 41, no. 2 (2015): 653–70.

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Sammlung am Centrum für Anatomie

### Schädel mit Beschriftungen nach Gall

Die Popularität der Gallischen Lehre führte dazu, dass phrenologisch bestimmte Schädel in großer Zahl hergeteilt, verkauft und gesammelt wurden; im Zuge der allgemeinen Phrenologie-Begierde gelangten wohl auch dieser und der von Gall Schüler Spurzheim bestimmte Schädel in die Sammlung des Anatomischen Instituts der Charité. Gall glaubte, dass sich bestimmte geistige und charakterliche Eigenschaften an entsprechenden Zonen auf der Oberfläche des Schädels - mehr oder weniger ausgeprägt - zu erkennen geben. Die Zonen sind als »Hirngänge« markiert und beschriftet. Die Eigenschaften, die Gall lokalisierte und »verifiziert« sind hauptsächlich »scharfsinnig«, »Tätigkeit«, »Witz«, »Erlehnungsfähigkeit«, »Gemeinnützigkeit« (des moralischen Sinns und das Rechtsbewusstseins umfasst). Auch negative Eigenschaften sind zu erkennen, so der »Würg- und Mordinstinkt« mit den Unterabteilungen »Barbarei, Blutrurst und Grausamkeit«. Ein eigenes Hirngang besitzt auch der »Fortpflanzungs- und Zeugungstrieb«, ihm benachbart ist der »Hang zur sinnlichen Liebe«.



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#### Detaillangaben

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|---------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Einstiegstyp  | Plastische Objekte                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| ID            | 8470                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Inventar-Nr.  | AN 8711, N.C. 381                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Dokumentation | Neben der Erforschung des Körpers war die Erkundung der geistigen und seelischen Wirkungskräfte eine nicht weniger große Herausforderung für Anatomen, welche die Selbsterkenntnis des Menschen auf eine wissenschaftliche Grundlage stellen wollten. Die von dem Arzt und Anatomen Franz Josef Gall um 1800 in Wien entwickelte Schädellehre (Phrenologie) geht zu Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts als großer Fortschritt und faszinierte nicht nur Mediziner, sondern auch gebildete, nach ihrem Selbstverständnis aufgeklärte Laien. Gall suchte das Unfassbare gleichsam dingfest zu machen, indem er die geistigen und seelischen Anlagen des Menschen im Gehirn lokalisierte und auf der Landschaft des Schädels die Orte verzeichnete, an denen sich, wie er glaubte, ihre »Verrichtungen« etablierten. So populär diese Lehre auch war - in Wien genoss das phrenologische Bestimmen von Schädeln zu einer Art Gesellschaftsspiel, an dem jeder ohne viel Vorkenntnisse teilhaben zu können glaubte - blieb sie nicht unumstritten und handelte sich das Vorwurf der Materialismus ein, der gegen die weiten Grundrätze der Religion und Morals verstoße. Diese damals fundamentale Kritik führte in Wien zum Verbot der Lehre. 1805 trat Gall eine längere Vortragsreise durch Deutschland an, und im August des gleichen Jahres hörte ihn Goethe an der Hallenser Universität. »Seine Lehre«, so Goethe in den Tag- und Jahresheften, »müßte gleich, so wie sie bekannt zu werden anfing, mir dem ersten Abblicke nach zuzagen«. Freilich schätzte Goethe, der damals vergleichende morphologische Studien betrieb, Galls anatomische Kenntnisse des Gehirns weit höher ein als die populären physiognomischen Spekulationen. Eine Einschätzung, die sich Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts bestätigte, als die Schädellehre - im Grunde ein Kind des 18. Jahrhunderts wie Lavaters Physiognomik - wissenschaftlich nicht mehr zu halten war. Als Hirnanatom kam Gall indessen zu richtigen und wegschenden Einsichten. Auf dem Feld der Hirnforschung war er ein Pionier seiner Zeit. |
| Sachtitel     | Schädel mit Beschriftungen nach der Lehre von Gall                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Datierung     | um 1800                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |

Screenshot of the skull's webpage on the Collection Portal of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

Anatomy at the Charité.<sup>3</sup> No one at the collection knows the name of the person this skull used to be. However, over the course of time, their skull has acquired a few names. 'ID 8470' is a relatively new name that was given around 2000, when the skull was inventoried into a digital database that later became the online Collection Portal of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (HU).<sup>4</sup> On this portal, a dedicated webpage for the skull bears a title that is sometimes used as a name, especially when the skull is exhibited: 'Skull with inscriptions according to Gall' ('Schädel mit Beschriftungen nach Gall').<sup>5</sup> A slightly longer version is provided further down on the same webpage: 'Skull with inscriptions according to Gall's teachings'. However, many exhibitions and texts in which this skull appeared simply used the name 'Gall skull' – making it perhaps an official nickname.

On this same webpage, two more names appear: AN 8711 and

N.C. 381. Each number-name corresponds to a different inventory system in which this skull was once registered. While ID 8470 is the newest identifying number, corresponding to the Collection Portal's database, AN 8711 and N.C. 381 refer to two nineteenth-century inventory books of the Berlin anatomical collection.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, both inventory

[3] The Charité – Berlin University of Medicine is one of Europe's largest university hospitals and is affiliated with both Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (HU) and Freie Universität Berlin. The Centre for Anatomy (Fächerverbund Anatomie) includes three anatomical institutes that share the anatomical collection; see [https://anatomie.charite.de/anatomische\\_sammlung](https://anatomie.charite.de/anatomische_sammlung).

[4] The Collection Portal showcases HU's various collections, with dedicated pages for a selection of some of their objects. It can be accessed at <https://www.sammlungen.hu-berlin.de>.

[5] Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations are mine. The skull's webpage on the Collection Portal can be found at <https://www.sammlungen.hu-berlin.de/objekte/sammlung-am-centrum-fuer-anatomie/8470>.

[6] For more information on the inventory books and their corresponding institutions, read Marion Hulverscheidt's chapter in this book.



Franz Joseph Gall. Lithograph by A. F. Kunike. Wellcome Collection (CC BY 4.0).

books have long gone missing, together with possible evidence about the origins of the skull and the consequences that brought them into the collection.

In addition to so-called object-names ('skull with inscriptions') and number-names ('ID 8470'), there are two person-names on this same webpage. The first is that of Franz Joseph Gall (1758–1828), the physician and anatomist who, in the beginning of the nineteenth century, created the theory that would later be known as phrenology. Gall claimed that mental and character traits reside in different 'organs' in the brain. The supposed strength of each trait in different individuals influences the size of its corresponding organ, which in turn is manifested on the skull as either lumps or grooves. Knowing how to feel and interpret those signs on our skulls can give us the ability to know how strong or weak different

personality traits are in different individuals. To demonstrate his theory, Gall and his followers often inscribed the various zones and traits on skulls they procured. These skulls were used in public lectures and were part of many phrenological collections around the world.<sup>7</sup> Despite often being named after Franz Joseph Gall, and although most of the text about the skull on the Collection Portal webpage is actually about Gall (his name appears more than ten times on this page), the skull for whom this webpage was created is not the skull of Franz Joseph Gall.<sup>8</sup>

The other person-name listed is Birgit Formann – the photographer who created the two photographs of the skull that appear on this webpage. In addition to the skull, Formann photographed other items and human remains from the anatomical collection at the Charité for the catalogue of the renowned exhibition of the HU *Theater der Natur und Kunst / Theatrum Naturae et Artis – Wunderkammern des Wissens* (Theatres of nature and art – curiosity cabinets of knowledge), which was held in the Martin-Gropius-Bau between 2000 and 2001.<sup>9</sup> This exhibition and the Collection Portal have a particular connection, and both influenced how the skull came to be known, exhibited, and stored.

[7] James Poskett, *Materials of the Mind: Phrenology, Race, and the Global History of Science, 1815–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 19–50.

[8] In fact, Gall's own skull is believed to be kept at the Musée de l'Homme under catalogue number 19216. See Douwe Draaisma, *Metaphors of Memory: A History of Ideas about the Mind*, trans. Paul Vincent (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 80.

[9] *Theater der Natur und Kunst. Theatrum Naturae et Artis. Wunderkammern des Wissens*, vol. *Katalog*, ed. Horst Bredekamp, Jochen Brüning, and Cornelia Weber (Berlin: Henschel, 2000), 203.

### Cabinets of Wonder and Knowledge

First created as a digital database in 1999, the Collection Portal of HU went online in 2007. It provides an overview of over eighty collections of the university, including historical ones that no longer exist or are no longer part of the university. When the digital database was created, its founders named it Kabinette des Wissens (cabinet of knowledge). Both the name of the database and the title of the exhibition that followed its creation (*Theater der Natur und Kunst / Theatrum Naturae et Artis – Wunderkammern des Wissens*) invoke the same historical phenomenon – the curiosity cabinet, *Wunderkammer*, *Kunstkammer*, or *Kunstkabinett*. These terms are often used interchangeably to describe the historical collections that emerged in the sixteenth century and that, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, were turned into museums or absorbed into university collections.<sup>10</sup> *Wunderkammern* displayed artworks, natural objects, and machines, side by side. The displayed objects were often chosen for their rarity, high quality (or superb workmanship in the case of human-made objects), and fascinating, curiosity-arousing qualities.<sup>11</sup> But why did these historical terms reappear in HU's collections' database and exhibition at the beginning of the new millennium? And how are the two connected?

During the process of German reunification in the early 1990s, HU went through its own intensive processes of evaluation and restructuring.<sup>12</sup> Governed by the Structure and Appointment Commissions, the university hired new academic staff, and its assets were explored and re-evaluated. One person so hired was Horst Bredekamp, who was appointed professor of art history in 1993.<sup>13</sup> Already interested in the *Kunstkammer*, on which he had published an award-winning article in 1982 and a book in 1993, he became involved in evaluating the university's scientific collections.<sup>14</sup> In the following years, pursuing his interest in the connections between the *Kunstkammer* and university collections, he developed plans, together with two university

[10] *Wunderkammer* and *Kunstkammer* are German words that are often also used in English interchangeably with *curiosity cabinet* and *wonder-room*. Although there are some differences between *Wunderkammer* and *Kunstkammer*, these are beyond the scope of this text and are not crucial for the understanding of my arguments.

[11] Eilean Hooper-Greenhill draws on a range of sources to argue that curiosity cabinets are not 'irrational', as often assumed, but had their own logic, designed especially to help read God's 'book of nature'. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1992), 78–104.

[12] For more on this process, see the description on HU's website, last modified May 18, 2016, [https://www.hu-berlin.de/en/about/history/huben\\_html#evaluation](https://www.hu-berlin.de/en/about/history/huben_html#evaluation).

[13] Prior to that, Bredekamp was a professor of art history at the Universität Hamburg, beginning in 1982.

[14] Horst Bredekamp, 'Antikensehnsucht und Maschinenglauben', in *Forschungen zur Villa Albani: antike Kunst und die Epoche der Aufklärung*, ed. Herbert Beck and Peter C. Bol (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1982), 507–59; Horst Bredekamp, *Antikensehnsucht und Maschinenglauben. Die Geschichte der Kunstkammer und die Zukunft der Kunstgeschichte* (Berlin: Klaus Wagenbach, 1993).



Three-volume publication of the *Theater der Natur und Kunst / Theatrum Naturae et Artis – Wunderkammern des Wissens* exhibition. © Tal Adler

colleagues – mathematician Jochen Brüning and historian Cornelia Weber, to create a database of HU's collections as a backbone for using them in teaching, exhibitions, and publications.<sup>15</sup> In 1999, Bredekamp, Brüning, and Weber launched the Cabinet of Knowledge database and co-curated the exhibition *Theatres of Nature and Art. Curiosity Cabinets of Knowledge* that opened the following year at the Martin-Gropius-Bau, one of the largest and most important exhibition venues in Berlin. The exhibition showcased over a thousand items from HU's various collections in nineteen rooms, organized by

the academic disciplines and departments from which they came, in big airy glass vitrines accompanied by short texts. The so-called Gall skull from the Charité was displayed in Room 14, a space dedicated to the anatomical collection, which also displayed many other human remains of various sizes and preparation techniques. One such display was of an upright-mounted 223-centimetre-tall skeleton of a 'Langer Kerl' (long fellow) – an eighteenth-century soldier from the Potsdam Giants regiment – mounted next to a mummified body 'from Peru'.<sup>16</sup> Although the Peruvian body was mummified and buried in a lying fetus position, they were mounted vertically at the bottom of the vitrine, as if squatting next to the tall skeleton – only to be dwarfed by barely reaching the Langer Kerl's knees. 'Anatomical atlases and plates complete the Ensemble' is written in the catalogue's text next to a photo of this installation.<sup>17</sup> Culturally insensitive and disrespectful, this display was perhaps more fitting and relevant to a sixteenth-century Wunderkammer than to a university exhibition that marked the beginning of the twenty-first century.

As the first major exhibition of the university that was aimed at the general public, *Theatres of Nature and Art* left its mark in more ways than commonly understood and for generations to come. Both the collections' database and the exhibition were two arms of the same endeavour, powered by Bredekamp's passionate engagement with the university's collections and their histories, some of them reaching back to the royal curiosity cabinet – the Brandenburg-Prussian Kunstkammer – that was

[15] Michael Willenbücher (IT administrator of the database at the Hermann von Helmholtz Centre for Cultural Techniques [ZfK]), personal correspondence with author, June 16, 2023; Michael Willenbücher and Thilo Habel (head of the Universität Greifswald collections [Kustodie], who worked alongside Bredekamp during the process of creating the database), unpublished correspondence, June 21, 2023.

[16] *Theater der Natur und Kunst. Theatrum Naturae et Artis. Wunderkammern des Wissens*, vol. *Dokumentation*, ed. Horst Bredekamp, Jochen Brüning, and Cornelia Weber (Berlin: Henschel, 2001), 62–67.

[17] *Theater der Natur und Kunst*, vol. *Dokumentation*, 64.

once housed in the Prussian Berlin palace. This famous imperial palace in the heart of Berlin was rebuilt in the years following the *Theatres of Nature and Art* exhibition and transformed into a high-profile, and controversial, exhibition venue called the Humboldt Forum.<sup>18</sup> Bredekamp's scholarly and curatorial engagements with the history of the royal Brandenburg-Prussian Kunstkammer proved instrumental in the processes behind the reconstruction of the palace and its transformation into the Humboldt Forum. Texts by Bredekamp and the then president of HU, in the *Dokumentation* volume of the *Theatres of Nature and Art* exhibition's three-volume publication, show how the exhibition's success was used to promote the 'return' of the old imperial collections (some of them were now the university's collections) to their 'place of origin'.<sup>19</sup> In his text, titled 'From the Berlin Palace to the Humboldt Universität – and Back?', Bredekamp lays the ground for the establishment of an exhibition space for HU's collections in the rebuilt palace.<sup>20</sup> With his vision of resurrecting the historical Kunstkammer in the heart of Berlin, Bredekamp, in 2015, became one of the three founding directors (Gründungsintendanz) of the expansive exhibition venue and museum complex inside the reconstructed Berlin Palace – the newly established Humboldt Forum.<sup>21</sup>

The *Theatres of Nature and Art* – the first exhibition we know of to have exhibited the so-called Gall skull from the Charité – seems to have influenced following generations of curators, who displayed this skull in more than ten subsequent exhibitions to date.<sup>22</sup> Although these exhibitions varied in scope, themes, and institutional and geographical contexts, the skull was always displayed in largely the same way – within the same context and with quite similar texts.<sup>23</sup> They (the skull) were

[18] For a thorough exploration of the processes behind the planning and erection of the Humboldt Forum, see Friedrich von Bose, *Das Humboldt Forum – Eine Ethnografie Seiner Planung* (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2016).

[19] *Theater der Natur und Kunst*, vol. *Dokumentation*, 7, 138. In his text, Bredekamp also asserts that the 'place of origin' of the ethnographic collections, which he calls 'Außereuropäische Abteilung' (the 'non-European' section of the Kunstkammer), is the Berlin Palace – boldly ignoring the previous places of origin from which the objects were taken, or looted, in the frameworks of imperialism and colonialism.

[20] Nineteen years later, an exhibition space for HU under the name the Humboldt Lab was being built inside the reconstructed palace, and the so-called Gall skull was again chosen to be displayed in its inaugural exhibition.

[21] 'Berliner Stadtschloss: Intellektuelles Richtfest am Humboldt-Forum', website of Bundesregierung, May 5, 2015, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv/alt-inhalte/intellektuelles-richtfest-am-humboldt-forum-468622>.

[22] Although it is possible that the skull was included in exhibitions prior to that, neither my research nor Marion Hulverscheidt's – based on archival research and collections' staff documentation and recollections since at least the early 1980s (described in Hulverscheidt's text in this book) – found any prior exhibitions. See list of exhibitions in this book.

[23] See, for example, *+ultra. gestaltung schafft wissen – Dokumentation der Ausstellung und ihrer partizipativen Vermittlungsformate*, ed. Frauke Stuhl, Horst Bredekamp, and Wolfgang Schäffner, (Münster: Waxmann, 2017), 38; Jochen Hennig and Udo Andraschke, eds., *Weltwissen – 300 Jahre Wissenschaften in Berlin* (Munich: Hirmer, 2010), 330.

always used as an exhibition prop to refer to the story of phrenology and Franz Joseph Gall, while not mentioning the person whose skull was on display, as well as ignoring the lack of provenance research around the skull and not proposing to undertake or support such research.

The popularity of the skull amongst exhibition curators had an impact not only on the way they (the skull) are featured in exhibitions but also on the way they are kept, between exhibitions, at the anatomical collection itself. In a 2016 burglary of the collection, a few items that were featured in the catalogue of *Theatres of Nature and Art* were stolen. To protect the skull in case of future burglaries, they were removed from the display cabinet at the large lecture room in which they were usually kept and placed inside a cardboard box, in a separate, more secure room.<sup>24</sup> The skull's popularity in exhibitions outside the collection meant that, from then on, they will only be featured in high-profile, public exhibitions and will not be displayed and studied as they originally were for many decades within the university.

### Critically Reading a Webpage

Although the skull is now kept inside a box in a locked room, they are not entirely invisible or inaccessible; their webpage on the Collection Portal functions as a more enduring display, accessible to anyone with internet access. Elements of this webpage highlight some of the difficulties that collections of human remains face and also generate. By analyzing them, I can present the broader context in which the project *Who is ID8470?* was developed and into which it continues to intervene.

Webpages on the Collection Portal are the visual representation (the front end) of database entries on the server (the back end). Texts, images, audio, or video files that we see on these webpages were first entered into pre-existing fields in the database, similar to filling in a digital form or managing information in a content management system (CMS) such as on a website on a WordPress platform. In the Collection Portal database, these pre-existing fields consist of all the different categories and types of information about collection objects that could possibly, but not necessarily, be displayed online. If data is entered into a specific field (for example, inventory number or producer), both the field's title and the data that was entered become visible on the webpage; if no data is entered into a specific field, its title (or category) will not be visible. When one critically reads this webpage, it is as important to see which

[24] Evelyn Heuckendorf (the Centre for Anatomy at the Charité), interview with author, October 31, 2019. Heuckendorf was the collection's specimen preparator.

fields were activated with data (and thus appear on the page) as it is to read the data that was entered.

### *Human Remains Human*

The category 'entry-type' (Eintragstyp) appears on all webpages for objects in the portal. In the back end, there are currently ten predefined terms that can be selected to be used in the entry-type category.<sup>25</sup> These terms define what kind of 'thing' is presented on the webpage – a taxonomy of collections' assets. On the skull's webpage, the entry-type 'physical object' ('Plastische Objekte' – which means a physical, three-dimensional, or sculptural object) was chosen by whoever created this webpage. Among the ten possible entry-types in the back end, one is 'person'.

I suppose that, for many people, it would seem a perfectly correct and unquestionable choice to register a skull under 'physical object' rather than 'person'. After all, many people probably think of their own bones as physical objects. I certainly do. But here is the problem: this skull is a body part of a deceased person. This skull is their remains. As such, they belong to a very specific and well-established category – human remains. Over recent decades, especially since the 1960s and within the fields of museums and institutional collections, this category has been at the centre of discussions, seminars, conferences, and a wealth of publications.<sup>26</sup> Books, manuals, guidelines, and lists of recommendations have been published about the handling of, and care for, human remains in collections. Although they might differ in approaches and specific recommendations, they all share the basic understanding that human remains in collections differ from non-human objects; careful ethical considerations are always mentioned in these publications, especially with regard to using human remains in displays and in publications.

Moreover, not everyone considers human remains as a special kind of physical object. There are communities, cultures, and religions that consider them as persons and that relate to the remains of their ancestors as the living ancestors themselves. In these contexts, other more acceptable terms such as *ancestors* or *old people* are used.<sup>27</sup> When Maori and

[25] Currently, the ten entry types are as follows: photograph, microscopic specimen, physical object, script, derivative object, person, collection, film, sound, and animal voice. See <https://www.sammlungen.hu-berlin.de/katalog/uebersicht>.

[26] On the evolution and usage of the term in the German context, see Larissa Förster, 'Talking and Going about Things Differently: On Changing Vocabularies and Practices in the Postcolonial Provenance and Restitution Debates', in *Doing Diversity in Museums and Heritage*, ed. Sharon Macdonald (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2022), 57–76.

[27] See Paul Turnbull, 'The Lives of the Indigenous Dead' (lecture, Morphomata International Center for Advanced Studies – Genesis, Dynamics and Mediality of Cultural Figurations, University of Cologne, Germany, 2015); available at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281068635\\_The\\_Lives\\_of\\_the\\_Indigenous\\_Dead](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281068635_The_Lives_of_the_Indigenous_Dead).

Moriorepresentatives who work on the repatriation of their *tūpuna* (ancestors) that are still kept in collections outside of Aotearoa/New Zealand visit them in these collections, they talk to them as someone would talk to their living relatives. In Jewish and Muslim traditions, the concept of the dignity of the dead generally forbids the exhumation, preparation, usage, and display of human remains.

In that sense, choosing the entry-type ‘person’ instead of ‘physical object’ for the skull’s webpage might have been more appropriate. Better still, the introduction of additional terms in the back end, such as *human remains* and *ancestors*, would correspond better to current ethical practices in museums and collections. It would enable easier identification of human remains in the portal – both for the benefit of research and for the possible implementation of filters for selective viewing.<sup>28</sup>

### *Reading Photography*

The photographic image of the skull on the skull’s webpage is composed of two separate photographs combined into one image file. On both, the skull is mounted on a rudimentary metal stand that seems like it was specifically constructed for the purpose of mounting human skulls. To describe its design, words like *utilitarian*, *crude Jugendstil*, *pathological*, and *German* come to mind. I have seen several of these stands at the anatomical collection at the Charité, holding other skulls. Black-painted cast-metal feet hold an upright, uncoated metal tube. The top part of the tube seems to enter the brain cavity through the foramen magnum – the hole at the base of the skull through which the spinal cord connects to the brain. The entire set-up looks like a Frankensteinian construction of a skull with a tiny mechanical body.

On the left photograph, the skull is turned to show their left-side profile; on the right, the skull is positioned to face the camera directly, although the mount is not facing the camera perfectly and the skull is tilted slightly to the right. Similar photographic set-ups can be seen in mugshots. I can recognize three light directions that look like an attempt to use different sources (artificial, available natural, and bounced light) to create an even exposure across the skull. However, this failed attempt resulted in a very unbalanced colour rendition, with patches of green,

[28] It is important to understand that the implementation of new guidelines and concepts in databases requires not only considerable efforts but a different approach in database programming and an institutional commitment to following through and supporting these processes. One of the planned outcomes of the *Who is ID8470?* project is a working group dedicated to rethinking and transforming the Collection Portal. Sharon Macdonald, director of the research centre (CARMAH), in which the *Who is ID8470?* project was based, became head of ZfK – in which the Collection Portal is hosted and managed – in 2021 and, together with Collection Portal staff and Tal Adler, will support this process.

yellow, and blue tints across the image. The tight and uneven cropping, the sloppy positioning of the mount and skull, the unbalanced colour with dominant greenish cast, and the mugshot composition somehow complement the crude pathological mount. When one clicks on the image, a larger version opens in the browser's window. However, there is no added value gained by enlarging the low resolution, 524-pixel-tall, heavily compressed image file; small or a little larger, it is a sad, uninspired image that transmits utility, disinterest, and carelessness.

There is, however, a different approach to photography of human remains. In 2018, I filmed a day-long discussion with Wolfgang Reichmann – the photographer at the anthropology department at the Natural History Museum in Vienna.<sup>29</sup> We talked about the difficult heritage of the photographic collection of his department – a legacy of using colonial and Nazi infrastructures in pursuit of racist science.<sup>30</sup> At the end of the day, I asked Reichmann about the ways in which he, as the person who inherited this legacy (professionally speaking, as the photographer of this department), deals with this position. Talking about making photographs of human remains at the museum, he said, 'I try to make the photographs in the best way possible, so that through the high quality, or through the diligent work, I am paying the highest respect to the objects in that I don't portray them with negligence or sloppiness'.<sup>31</sup>

In other words, Reichmann refers to quality and work processes as a deliberate ethical and political practice.

Reichmann's work is a counterexample to the skull's photographs in the Collection Portal; yet, the problematic images of the skull, in my opinion, are not principally the fault of the photographer. The responsibility lies first and foremost with the curators of the *Theatres of Nature and Art* exhibition and makers of the Cabinet



Wolfgang Reichmann and Tal Adler at the Natural History Museum Vienna, 2017. Film still from the *DARKROOM* video. © Tal Adler

[29] 'DARKROOM', posted May 27, 2019, by Artistic Provenance Research, YouTube, 21:05, <https://youtu.be/m6Axlznkc7o>.

[30] See Margit Berner, 'The Nazi Period Collections of Physical Anthropology in the Museum of Natural History, Vienna', in 'Col Tempo' – *The W. project*, catalogue of Péter Forgács's installation, curated by András Rényi in the Hungarian Pavilion of the 53rd International Art Exhibition in Venice, 2009 (Budapest: Műcsarnok, 2009), 34–53.

[31] 'DARKROOM', Artistic Provenance Research.

of Knowledge database. They commissioned and accepted this kind of photographic depiction of human remains – images that still linger in the Collection Portal.<sup>32</sup>

### *Contexts of Injustice*

Beyond the visual analysis, there is also the question of whether a photograph of human remains should be published at all, especially when the identity of the person is unknown. While there are different approaches to that question, it is important to think about the position of the person whose remains are displayed: Would they have agreed to have their remains photographed and published? Although it might be impossible to know (unless you ask the dead directly, as I have attempted to do in the *Who is ID8470?* project), more and more institutions choose not to publish images of human remains for whom no consent for publication can be given.<sup>33</sup> In fact, even the Collection Portal itself practices selective online publishing: out of the roughly forty-eight thousand items that have so far been added to the portal's database, more than half – including images of pathological specimens or voice recordings of prisoners of war – are not accessible online.<sup>34</sup> The reasons are given in a short explanatory text on the portal, which states that these are 'mainly cultural-ethical and licensing'.<sup>35</sup> Looking at the history of anatomical bodies in Europe, one can likely assume that this person was not asked for their consent to have their body not buried or exhumed, dissected, head separated from the body, defleshed, drawn on, and put on display, exhibition after

[32] While writing this chapter, I tried to think about an alternative portrait of the skull, one that could serve this publication, for example, maybe as a 'stand in', a replacement for direct photographic images of the skull. At that time, the skull was displayed in an exhibition at the Berlin Museum of Medical History (BMM). I asked the makers of the exhibition whether I could photograph the box in which the skull is usually kept and shipped, as a first step (visual research) in creating an alternative portrait, without showing the actual skull. My request was then discussed between BMM, the anatomical collection, and another esteemed colleague at a third institute. Eventually, my request was rejected on the grounds that the box is 'not presentable' and that my photographing of it might put the collection in an awkward situation. While this was not my intention, and I know that the skull is kept in the box to protect it from theft, it was interesting to observe that although the disrespectful photographs of the skull were still published online and the skull is still sometimes exhibited without acknowledgement and reference to the person whose skull this is, it is the prospect of having the box photographed that managed to create apprehension, reservations, discussions, and a decision to not allow this image to be created. The cover image of this chapter is an attempt to present an alternative 'portrait of a skull in a box' without access to the original box.

[33] Only in recent decades has it become common practice for anatomical institutions to ask body donors to specify which kinds of uses they allow their remains to be used for. Since most human remains in collections do not stem from consented body donations, more and more initiatives seek to limit or set stricter criteria for the publication of images of human remains. See, for example, the statement by editor of *Sapiens* digital magazine, Chip Colwell, 'Is It Ever OK to Publish Photographs of Human Remains?', *Sapiens*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.sapiens.org/culture/photographing-human-remains>.

[34] Willenbücher, personal correspondence with author, June 16, 2023. At the time of our correspondence, out of the 48,516 items in the database, 32,801 were not accessible online.

[35] 'Objekte', Wissenschaftliche Sammlungen, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, last modified December 18, 2023, <https://www.sammlungen.hu-berlin.de/katalog>.

exhibition.<sup>36</sup> Why, then, were their skull's photographs published on the Collection Portal, while thousands of other files were excluded for cultural and ethical reasons? Why wasn't a body part of a person whose identity is not yet known considered culturally or ethically sensitive?

The main reason probably has to do with the fact that this skull is not associated with the contexts of German colonialism or National Socialism. According to the old inventory number written on the skull, they have probably been in the collection since at least the 1830s – decades before the German colonial empire was established (in the 1880s) and a century before the rise of National Socialism. In the German discourse on the ethics of human remains in collections, a specific term was developed: *Unrechtskontext* – the context of unlawfulness or injustice. In an analysis of the history of this term and its role in decolonial practices in Germany, Larissa Förster shows how the understanding of *Unrechtskontext* (and the need for special ethical considerations and handling of objects and human remains) is mostly applied to the eras of colonialism and National Socialism.<sup>37</sup> It seems that through the enormous (and certainly rightful and crucial) efforts to address the violence and injustices of these eras, other contexts of injustice have not yet had the chance to be addressed. The person whose skull is kept at the Charité most probably has also been a victim of injustice. Many of the bodies procured for anatomy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were those of unmarried mothers, people in poorhouses, executed prisoners, people who died by suicide, and those whose families could not afford burial. They were from the margins of society, subject to the consequences of low social and political status. Ending up as anatomical bodies was, for many of them, a terrifying fate. And it might also be that this skull originated in the context of colonialism, even if they entered the collection before the establishment of the German colonial empire. German scientists and collectors maintained networks of exchange with international scientists and collectors active in the other colonies, and many skulls for demonstrating phrenology were acquired through similar international networks.<sup>38</sup> Whatever the circumstances were, they are not yet known. Wouldn't this be an adequate reason to reconsider how, and in what contexts, images of this skull are published?

[36] See, for example, Tatjana Buklijas, 'Cultures of Death and Politics of Corpse Supply: Anatomy in Vienna, 1848–1914', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 82, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 570–607; and Marion Hulverscheidt's chapter in this book.

[37] Förster, 'Talking and Going About Things Differently'.

[38] See, for example, Anna Szöke, 'Collecting Networks – Human Remains at the Vienna Natural History', *Artefact*, no. 19 (2023): 71–96; and 'Sources on Blumenbach's Skull Collection' in the Johann Friedrich Blumenbach – Online project by the Göttingen Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Lower Saxony, accessed January 24, 2023, <https://blumenbach-online.de/Einzelseiten/QuellenSchaedelsammlung-englisch.php>; and James Poskett, *Materials of the Mind*, 3–8, 19–50.

### *The Kunstkammer Skull*

Regardless of the ethical discussions on sensitive collections and human remains, even if one wishes to consider a skull in an anatomical collection as ‘simply’ an osteological specimen, an object designated to function in the natural and medical sciences (and their educational) contexts, the architecture of the Cabinet of Knowledge database does not support such a reading. Perhaps because it was created by the impetus of an art historian and with a strong reference to the *Kunstkammer* (literally meaning ‘art chamber’), this database has a bias towards art and cultural contexts. The last categories on the skull’s webpage – ‘Sachtitel’, ‘Datierung’, ‘Hersteller’, and ‘Format’ (title, dating, producer/creator, and format) – demonstrate this clearly. Although these terms are fundamental for describing and categorizing cultural objects in collections, they are primarily useless for biological and osteological specimens. For example, what could possibly ‘create’ or ‘produce’ a human skull: The deceased’s parents? The disease, accident, or thing that caused their death? God(s)?<sup>39</sup> Or consider the ‘format’ category: it is not only useless in the context of biology, but the dimensions quoted under this term (26×13×20 cm – the skull’s overall outer dimension) have no significance from an osteological or bio-anthropological perspective; they are only relevant if one is interested in packaging and display sizes.<sup>40</sup>

Kept as a valuable artwork, measured for display, and ready to be shipped for the next exhibition, the packaged skull has functioned as a *Kunstkammer* (or *Wunderkammer*) object for more than two decades, since the *Theatres of Nature and Art* exhibition (2000–2001). It was the perpetual effect of that historical exhibition, not only on the fame of the skull but also on the field of scientific exhibitions in Berlin, that connected me with this skull for the first time, in 2019.

Twenty years after the opening of *Theatres of Nature and Art*, Bredekamp’s vision was realized, and an exhibition space for HU’s collections – the Humboldt Lab – was being built inside Berlin’s reconstructed palace. To prepare the Humboldt Lab for opening, the university commissioned historian Gorch Pieken to lead the curatorial team in its first exhibition. Already a seasoned curator, Pieken remembered well, and with admiration, the *Theatres of Nature and Art* exhibition, which

[39] Of course, this category can be used by the preparator of the specimen, but terms such *species* and *genus* and data such as biological sex, age, specific craniometric measurements, and even name would be much more likely to be used in databases for natural sciences and osteological collections.

[40] For more on what kinds of measurements would be relevant from anatomical, osteological, bio-anthropological perspectives, see ‘Measurements’, Forensic Anthro Guide, CoRA Docs (website and database), accessed October 20, 2023, <https://cora-docs.readthedocs.io/en/latest/forensics-anthro-guide/measurements>.



The Humboldt Lab inside the Humboldt Forum under construction, August 2020. © Tal Adler

he personally visited at the beginning of his curatorial career.<sup>41</sup> He also remembered the so-called Gall skull, which he later referred to as ‘a Wunderkammer item’ and ‘an icon of the collection’.<sup>42</sup> The importance of the Wunderkammer connotation was noticeable in Pieken’s vision for the Humboldt Lab’s first exhibition when, at its first public presentation, he said, ‘Everything we do is very reminiscent of the Wunderkammer’.<sup>43</sup> It was in this context – the preparations of the Humboldt Lab’s first exhibition and the skull’s perpetual role as a ‘Wunderkammer object’ – that the *Who is ID8470?* project was created.

[41] Gorch Pieken’s curatorial career started at the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin in 1995. From 2006, he led the creation of the central exhibition and reopening of the Military Historical Museum in Dresden and served as director of this museum from 2011 to 2017.

[42] The first quote is from a workshop on January 24, 2020, with the curators of the Humboldt Lab; the second is an excerpt of his interview for the *Who is ID8470?* video: ‘Who is ID8470?’, posted May 13, 2021, by Artistic Provenance Research, YouTube, 17 : 51, <https://youtu.be/QBu56hd8Cy0?si=tsZ2wyTvxjku2pBP>.

[43] ‘Alles was wir tun, erinnert sehr an die Wunderkammer’, Gorch Pieken, ‘HU im Humboldt Forum’ (live-streamed public presentation in the event series ‘Humboldt im Dialog’ at the Jacob-und-Wilhelm-Grimm-Zentrum, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, April 10, 2019). Pieken’s presentation of the exhibition was followed by discussion with the president of the university, Sabine Kunst. The video was removed from the university’s YouTube channel shortly after the event, but a copy of the video exists in the *Who is ID8470?* project’s offline storage.

## II. THE PROJECT *WHO IS ID8470?*

### Dead Images

In February 2019, I concluded a ten-year-long artistic-research engagement with two large collections – human skulls and photography – of the anthropology department at the Natural History Museum in Vienna. Both collections are deeply implicated in, and serve as significant examples of, the histories of scientific racism, colonialism, and National Socialism.<sup>44</sup> My engagement with these collections resulted in the *Dead Images* project, which, in its last three years, was developed further into an exhibition project together with a research and curatorial team.<sup>45</sup> The exhibition and activities around it highlighted multiple perspectives on the ethics, politics, and aesthetics of such contentious collections. In one of the videos – simply titled *PHOTOGRAPH* – that I created for the *Dead Images* exhibition, I invited several interviewees to look at a photograph I created in 2012.<sup>46</sup> It was a very detailed panorama of a



Israel Kaunatjike with a small print of the skull panorama, Berlin, 2017. Film still from the *PHOTOGRAPH* video. © Tal Adler

thirty-metre-long cabinet at the Natural History Museum, in which more than eight thousand skulls of the collection were displayed. I then asked my interviewees whether they thought the panorama should be printed at 'life size' scale (thirty metres long and four metres high) and displayed as part of the planned *Dead Images* exhibition. With diverse backgrounds and sometimes opposing stances and

[44] The photo collection contains thousands of anthropometric photographs that were taken in the scope of the museum's 'racial investigations'. Prisoners of war, colonized people, and victims of the Nazis were amongst the subjects of these investigations. Many of the skulls in the collection were collected under the same rationale and were used to promote racist ideas and political agendas.

[45] The team was assembled under the Europe-wide project TRACES, which was funded by the EU Horizon 2020. One of the TRACES partners was the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage (CARMAH), which was directed by Sharon Macdonald and founded in 2015 through her Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung professorship. For the duration of TRACES, art historian Anna Szöke and I were based at CARMAH, where we worked on *Dead Images* (as well as on TRACES's other research projects). For more information and texts about *Dead Images* and the other research conducted within TRACES, see Marion Hamm and Klaus Schönberger, eds., *Contentious Heritage and the Arts: A Critical Companion* (Klagenfurt: Wieser, 2021), especially 63–68; 95–128; 287–308; 473–94; 549–72. See also Tal Adler, Linda Fibiger, John Harries, Joan Smith, and Anna Szöke, 'Exposure: The Ethics of Making, Sharing and Displaying Photographs of Human Remains', *Human Remains and Violence* 4, no. 1 (2018): 3–24.

[46] 'PHOTOGRAPH', posted May 27, 2019, by Artistic Provenance Research, YouTube, 15 : 15, <https://youtu.be/kbu7gQhmWhU?si=DAOEMYmx362RUSHK>.

motivations, my interviewees projected some of my own dilemmas. These were curatorial as well as artistic, aesthetic, and political dilemmas regarding the creation and usage of difficult images that can trigger and hurt by transmitting the violence inherent in the objects or subjects they depict. In the case of the skulls in my panorama, these were traumatic histories of racism, persecution, and genocide. The question of showing or not showing was central to this work.

### Curatorial Discord

A few months after the closing of the *Dead Images* exhibition, I was invited to show the *PHOTOGRAPH* video and give advice on how to deal with curatorial dilemmas and ethics to the Humboldt Lab's new team of curators, who were themselves struggling with a professional disagreement. The four curators disagreed over the inclusion of the so-called Gall skull in their exhibition.

I was introduced to their discord when the Humboldt Lab's deputy chief curator, Friedrich von Bose, approached me and Anna Szöke, an art historian and curator who was part of the *Dead Images* research and curatorial team, for advice.<sup>47</sup> In our meeting, von Bose shared with us his concerns after finding out that the skull was added by one of his colleagues to the Humboldt Lab's exhibition list. This list was an internal document in progress, which the curatorial team updated regularly as they were systematically reviewing all the university's collections and exhibition catalogues in search of objects, stories, and topics for their new exhibition. In discussions with his team, von Bose argued that given the growing consensus against displaying human remains in public exhibitions, they should avoid exhibiting the skull at the Humboldt Lab, especially since the circumstances under which the skull was added to the collection, and their identity, were still unknown and no provenance research was envisioned. Von Bose also noted that the Humboldt Lab would be visited by people from a variety of backgrounds, ages, cultures, and faiths, and that putting human remains on display might be triggering for some. The Humboldt Forum – the housing complex within which the Humboldt Lab is located – was already facing a great deal of criticism for being culturally insensitive and neocolonial, and thus it would be all the more important to avoid possibly insensitive displays.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, his arguments failed

[47] See Friedrich von Bose's chapter in this book for his account of our collaboration.

[48] For more on some of the critical discourse around the Humboldt Forum, see Friedrich von Bose, 'Strategische Reflexivität. Das Humboldt Forum und die postkoloniale Kritik', *Historische Anthropologie* 25, no. 3 (2017): 409–17; Mareike Heller, ed., *No Humboldt 21! – Dekoloniale Einwände gegen das Humboldt Forum* (Berlin: AfricAvenir International, 2017).



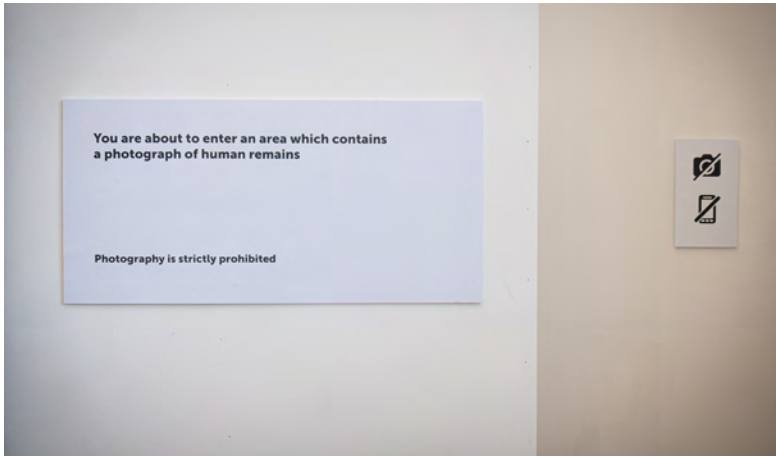
Demonstrators with a sign calling for a German apology for the genocide of the Herero and Nama (1904–1908) at a demonstration against the Humboldt Forum, organized by the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum, August 15, 2020. © Tal Adler

to convince everyone on the team, perhaps because they were assured by the skull's previous exhibition history that it would be fine to exhibit this skull in their planned exhibition. Instead of using his veto power – a last-resort curatorial tool – to remove the skull from the list, von Bose devised a more diplomatic solution. He invited three external advisors for a consultation meeting with his team: Holger Stöcker (a historian who specializes in provenance research on human remains and one of the researchers involved in the Charité Human Remains Project), Anna Szöke, and me.<sup>49</sup>

After the screening of the *PHOTOGRAPH* video, an intensive discussion ensued in which we (the three external advisors) backed von Bose's arguments and advised against including the skull in the exhibition. In response, one of the main counterarguments supporting the inclusion of the skull in the exhibition was that doing so would provide an opportunity to discuss the importance of anatomy and the role it played in the process of Enlightenment in Germany. In the text draft that was already prepared for the skull's vitrine, the curator who added the skull to their list wrote about Gall's lecture in Berlin in 1805, which a few women attended: 'Women were not allowed to study at that time... public lectures enabled them to participate in current scientific debates'. In our meeting, the curator said that removing the skull from the exhibition list would be akin to an act of censorship and constitute a patronizing position towards the audience. In a way, by not including the skull in this exhibition – in their view – the public would be denied their right to see the skull and read the accompanying text about phrenology, Gall, and the connection between anatomy, the Enlightenment, and women's access to education in Germany.<sup>50</sup> Although I thought that

[49] Holger Stoecker, Thomas Schnalke, and Andreas Winkelmann, 'Einleitung', in *Sammeln, Erforschen, Zurückgeben? Menschliche Gebeine aus der Kolonialzeit in akademischen und musealen Sammlungen*, ed. Holger Stoecker, Thomas Schnalke, and Andreas Winkelmann (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2013), 9–22.

[50] Throughout the project, I kept a 'field diary' with summaries of most of the meetings (some of which were also recorded with permission), discussions, and ideas connected to the project. In this text, I used this documentation to describe the discussions with the curators and other interlocutors.



Advisory sign at the entrance of a potentially triggering display at the *Dead Images* exhibition, Edinburgh, 2018. © Tal Adler

these topics could be told at the exhibition through a plethora of other objects and media, I was more occupied with the argument's conclusion.

Evoking censorship and patronization in a discussion about ethics and cultural sensitivity had a familiar ring to it. When working on the *Dead Images* project and during its exhibition, most people were appreciative of the ethical discussion we invited them to join. Many were shocked to learn about the histories of anthropological collections of skulls – and to hear that they still exist and are regularly used and displayed. At the same time, however, some people were triggered by our approach itself. For them, concentrating on the ethical questions of exhibition displays or alerting visitors – through warning signs, for example – that a controversial or possibly triggering display is ahead, was irritating. Around 5 to 10 percent of the feedback we received at the *Dead Images* exhibition included accusations of oversensitivity, censorship, being patronizing, or creating an unnecessary 'woke' discussion.<sup>[51]</sup> As one conservative and impatient journalist in the *Guardian* put it, 'hand wringing is not art'.<sup>[52]</sup>

Close to the end of our meeting with the Humboldt Lab's curators, when it seemed that everyone had exhausted their arguments and no new information or resolution would follow, I was asked by the chief curator, Gorch Pieken, what I would have done, as an artist, with their

[51] During the *Dead Images* exhibition in Edinburgh, we collected more than two hundred anonymous feedback cards in which visitors were asked about their perception of the exhibition.

[52] Jonathan Jones, 'Edinburgh Art Festival Review – a Plodding, Poor Relation of the Fringe', *Guardian*, July 27, 2018.

dilemma. I answered that, for me, their dilemma is a more interesting and relevant subject for their exhibition than the actual skull and that, if it had been up to me, I would have created a project that focused on their dilemma and the social, historical, and political contexts to which it related. Pieken then turned to his fellow curators and said, half-jokingly, that if they had done so, then it would be ‘the artist’s problem’ and not theirs anymore. It was a diplomatic way to relieve the tension that had accumulated during the discussions and to end the meeting with a laugh. But for me, it was also a gentle invitation to propose another solution to the dilemma – an artistic intervention that would also share the burden of, and take responsibility for, the decision of whether the skull would be exhibited.

### Proposing Artistic Research

Two weeks after that meeting, my three-year employment at HU and the project *Dead Images* came to an end. With them, an eight-year lucky streak of employment as an artist-researcher in academic institutions also ended. I was once again ‘just’ an artist, not affiliated with an institution and not employed – a freelancer. For a conceptual artist working on social, political, and institutional transformation, who is outside of the art-market matrix and dependant on public funding and institutional collaborations and affiliation, it was threatening. But I had a plan and a new meeting scheduled at the offices of the Humboldt Lab. On the last day of my work at the university, before locking the office and returning the keys, I prepared a short and simple pitch for a not-so-simple project at the Humboldt Lab. I wrote,

*In science, we sometimes need to remove the subject of research from its environment in order to study it. Materials such as minerals or tissue are removed and placed under a microscope. Bacteria colonies are grown in a Petri dish. We separate and isolate the subject of research not to hide or discard them, but rather to highlight and examine them. This type of removal for close and concentrated examination is what I propose to do with the skull of the unidentified person from the Charité. I want to remove them from the main exhibition grid and dedicate an artistic research and exhibition project entirely to them. In a close-by but separate space, I will reinstall the display case **without** the skull in it. In and around it, I will install an exhibition that will concentrate on the following questions: Why isn’t the skull exhibited? Who could this person have been? How is phrenology relevant nowadays? Using collaborative methods that I have developed in previous projects, I will create a series of*

*workshops engaging with these questions. In the now vacant display case, I will project a 'hologram' video of heads of our workshops' participants narrating possible biographies of the person whose skull is not displayed.*

The next morning, I presented this proposal to Pieken and von Bose.

In addition to removing the skull from the exhibition list and taking over the display case for a participatory project, I added a third element (or condition): this project will be established as a collaboration between the Humboldt Lab and CARMAH – the research centre at which my previous project was located – where I will be reemployed for the duration of this project.<sup>53</sup>

As challenging as it might have been for the chief curator to accept the first two conditions, Pieken only seemed to struggle with the third – about binding my artistic contribution with employment at a university research centre. Generally speaking, curators of museums and other cultural institutions are used to inviting artists to engage with their collections, displays, or heritage. The artists are usually commissioned to create a new work at and for the institution in what is commonly referred to as artistic residencies and interventions. In these frameworks, the independent (in other words, freelance, not fully employed) artists function as contractors; the agreement is drawn directly between them and the commissioning institution, and the time allocated to participate in the residency and/or to deliver their work (often referred to as an 'intervention') is relatively short (usually a few weeks to a few months).<sup>54</sup>

Framing my proposed project as longer-term research that is based at the university rather than as a straightforward artistic-intervention agreement between me and the Humboldt Lab probably seemed unnecessarily complicated at first. To argue for employment, von Bose stated that as a university's exhibition space dedicated to exhibiting science and research, the Humboldt Lab would benefit from CARMAH's expertise in questions of difficult exhibition and heritage and from their ongoing research on the Humboldt Forum itself. I added that my proposal required more time and funds than what they might have imagined; much more than 'only' producing a video for the display case, my proposed

[53] More specifically, I proposed that my project about the skull will be undertaken as part of CARMAH's core project – Making Differences: Transforming Museums and Heritage in the Twenty-First Century (funded by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation). For more on this project, see <https://www.carmah.berlin/making-differences-in-berlin> (accessed October 20, 2023).

[54] For more about the challenges of artistic interventions, see Tal Adler, 'The Creative Co-production. An Experimental Model for Artistic Engagements with Contentious Cultural Heritage', in *Contentious Heritage and the Arts*, 287–308.

project comprised historical research, workshops with various communities on possible biographies, and developing an education programme. Employment at CARMAH would at least relieve the Humboldt Lab from paying for the time I would invest in this collaboration. My proposal was then accepted, and, in addition, we decided to write a joint application requesting additional funding from an external foundation to help cover production costs.<sup>55</sup>

### Writing a Project

After the incorporation of *Who is ID8470?* into CARMAH's Making Differences project, I started preparing a more detailed proposal that would serve as the backbone of our joint funding request. One of the many challenges of working on this kind of hybrid project – artistic and scientific – is applying for funding. There are few significant funding options for artistic research. The fact that this project was in collaboration with an institution inside the heavily funded – and contested – Humboldt Forum, made it even more complicated. Since my project plans were quite ambitious (in other words, expensive), Pieken suggested that we apply to the German Federal Cultural Foundation (Kulturstiftung des Bundes – KSB), which provides large funding schemes.

Writing a project proposal for a funding application is often one of the most significant phases in the development of my projects – and not only because these projects need funding. It is a creative endeavour in which all the project's elements are imagined, researched, understood, and systematically constructed – all theoretically and on paper. During this process, the project should be transformed from an instinctive idea and a few probing talks into a well-argued, enticing concept with a logical and accurate plan to carry it out. The main elements of the project that I included in the application and describe below were the video sculpture; a series of collaborative workshops and an education programme; an international network of collaborations; and a commissioned scientific provenance research on the skull.

[55] Joint-funding application writing is becoming common practice in collaborative artistic-research projects; von Bose and I already discussed this strategy prior to that meeting.

### *Pepper's Ghost*

The video sculpture is the installation I proposed to replace the skull with. In the project proposal, I wrote that the video

*narrates 12 different, alternative, or possible biographies of the skull and who they were. 12 individuals, ghost-like talking-heads floating in the display case, tell us who they were and how their skull ended up in the collection of the Charité, inventoried as ID 8470. Intermittently, brief views from within the collection and excerpts of interviews with curators, collection staff, exhibition visitors, researchers, activists, artists and others, intervene with and complement the biographies. A multiperspectivity of positions and fragmented pieces of life (and death) [...] This installation offers a chance to highlight what is usually hidden, deemphasized or neglected. It draws attention to the processes in*

*which a person is transformed into an object of science; used as a tool for teachings and training [...] But it is not only the story of this person. They stand for the many thousands of those who are not at the centre of attention; those who remain, often without names, inside collection storages, on shelves, classrooms, or laboratories, around the world.*<sup>56</sup>

As it was now clear to me that I was going to be working with spirits or ghost narratives, I suggested that the display case would use



Spectres on the stage. Woodcut by Cosson-Smeeton, 1871, after A. Jahandier. New York Public Library (public domain).

*the age-old illusion technique of Pepper's Ghost, corresponding with its long tradition in art and entertainment culture of referring to the dead and invoking a sense of resurrection. The video image of the talking-heads is reflected from a glass set at an angle inside the display case. An illusion of a three-dimensional, yet semi-transparent head [...] appears in the display case. The 12 biographies are edited interwoven, in a non-linear way, challenging hierarchies, chronologies, and the limitations of archival documentation at the Charité collection.*<sup>57</sup>

[56] Tal Adler, 'Project Proposal Draft', July 25, 2019; saved on the project's offline drives.

[57] Adler, 'Project Proposal Draft'.

### *Collaborative Workshops*

The next element of the project described in the proposal was a set of research-and-production workshops, in which the spirit narratives are collaboratively created and filmed with the workshop participants. I defined the groups I wanted to collaborate with as individuals, organizations, and institutions that are either involved with, have an interest in, or are affected by the project's topics and outcomes. Among these, I proposed 'museums- and collections staff, provenance researchers, art theoreticians, body donors, prisoners, decolonization activists, intervention artists, physical anthropologists, art and museum educators, archaeologists, historians of science, ethics professionals, policy makers, legislators, and anyone with a skull inside their head'.<sup>58</sup> In hindsight, and after learning more about the history of anatomy in Germany, I should have also included unmarried mothers, the poor, the unhoused, people in mental institutions, and people without social and familial anchoring.

In my first project pitch to Pieken and von Bose, I suggested that the video sculpture be installed 'in a close-by but separate space'. At that time, when the Humboldt Forum was still a construction site and the Humboldt Lab existed mainly in architectural sketches, the curators planned to use a large room at the back of the main exhibition space as a multipurpose space. Separated from the main exhibition hall and available for small, guided groups, this multipurpose room was meant to be a place for exhibition experiments and educational activities. I felt it would be a more appropriate place for the *Who is ID8470?* project than the main exhibition space. The room signalled the removal of the skull from the exhibition and provided a quieter and more intimate place to work on sensitive topics with dedicated groups. Although the curators ultimately decided to locate the video sculpture in the main exhibition hall, I did not give up on using this space somehow. In the application, I proposed to locate most of the educational activities and some of the production workshops in this room. I also proposed to build a second installation here – a video production unit and an archive of the project's materials: This installation would first be used during the pre-exhibition phase of the project for the research-and-production workshops. After the exhibition's opening, this installation would then serve the education programme, enabling users not only to research the project's materials but also to feed into it new contributions, including perhaps new spirit narratives.

### *Scientific Provenance Research*

[58] Adler, 'Project Proposal Draft'.

In addition to working on spirit narratives and possible biographies, I wrote that the project should promote scientific provenance research to try to find out the identity of the person this skull used to be – not to counter the stories that we would try to receive from the spirits and not to set hierarchies of research, but as an additional, equally legitimate way of researching. The Charité collection, HU, and the other institutions that have exhibited the skull in the past have never undertaken scientific provenance research on the skull. Offering to promote this research as part of the *Who is ID8470?* project was not only a critical statement about these uninterested institutions; it was also a statement about the validity and non-competitiveness of the different research methods – that of scientific provenance and that of reaching out to the spirits for possible biographies. It was at that moment that the idea of *artistic provenance research* started to germinate.

### *Institutional Partners*

In addition to the Charité and the Humboldt Lab, von Bose and I brought together a network of international institutions that would contribute to the development of the project through hosting workshops, providing consultation, and offering additional exhibition opportunities for the outcomes of the project. The proposal now included commitments to collaborate from the Dutch Research Centre for Material Culture (including the research institute of the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden, Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal, and the Wereldmuseum in Rotterdam); the International Council of Museum's Committee for University Museums and Collections (ICOM-UMAC); the Penn Museum at the University of Pennsylvania; the Rollett museum in Baden bei Wien; the Lentos Museum in Linz; and the Berlin Museum of Medical History (BMM).<sup>59</sup>

### **Downscaling a Project**

The *Who is ID8470?* project proposal was submitted at the end of July 2019, and in November we learned that the KSB had rejected our application. With less than a year until the planned opening of the Humboldt Lab (originally slated for Autumn 2020), we did not have enough time to start a new funding application with another institution. Going back to the original proposal, I now had to radically downscale the project

[59] This network was enabled through the support of Wayne Modest (Dutch Research Centre for Material Culture), Marta Lourenço (ICOM-UMAC), Stephanie Mach (Penn Museum), Ulrike Scholda (Rollett museum), Karin Schneider (Lentos Museum), and Thomas Schnalke (BMM).

by cancelling over 80 percent of it to fit within the production budget already pledged by the Humboldt Lab. I had to give up on the workshops, the research-and-production installation in the multipurpose room, the development of a comprehensive education programme, all the international partner engagements, and a more professional way of producing the video. However, the most significant (and painful) change was giving up on the collaborative process of producing spirit narratives. Without the engagement of communities of interest and possible descendants, the task of getting the dead to tell me their stories seemed daunting.

Thus, in the next few months I concentrated on things that seemed more accessible than the dead: designing the Pepper's ghost installation; coordinating the only two workshops I kept from the original proposal<sup>60</sup>; researching and contacting (living) interview partners; and learning more about the history of anatomy in Berlin, Gall and phrenology, Wunderkammern in German scientific exhibitions, the thriving subculture of ghost hunting, and the differences between spirits, ghosts, spectres, and apparitions.

### Processing Conflict

With the threat of an approaching pandemic at the beginning of 2020, I held an intensive workshop with the four curators of the Humboldt Lab in which we delved into their conflict around the display of the skull and how they felt about my intervention. The workshop was not only important for me as a way of getting the information I needed to introduce the dilemma and portray their positions in the video, but it was also part of the intervention – to create accepting, non-judgemental, and respectful dynamics in which the conflict could be laid out and examined, and in which the different opinions could be acknowledged. Perhaps it could also help them to come to terms – both individually and as a team – with the discord, my intervention, and the transfer of curatorial resolution.

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic to Germany and the consequent period of lockdowns and social distancing not only prevented me from carrying out actual production of the video, which relied mainly on interview partners and shooting in institutions that were now closed; it also put in motion a series of reschedulings of the opening of the Humboldt Lab, postponing its opening by months at a time. This extended 'break' also gave me the chance to reflect longer on the positions of the Humboldt Lab's curators and on which other voices might

[60] One was a workshop with the Humboldt Lab curators about their conflict and the other about artistic engagements for the staff of German universities' collections.

be necessary to tell a story of contradictions: an eagerness to exhibit this popular skull versus the disinterest in their human story; an obsolete and often ridiculed scientific theory that nevertheless perpetually reappears in scientific exhibitions; an ambition to create new knowledge with cutting edge display and yet a regurgitation of old narratives and exhibition trends; institutional understanding of the importance of provenance research alongside the evasion of responsibility to carry it out.

### Researching Provenance Research

As lockdowns and social-distancing restrictions loosened, I completed shooting the interviews and collection visits for the *Who is ID8470?* video. One of the central questions in the video is that of provenance research: Why hasn't there been any research into the origin of the skull? What would it take to launch such research? Who is responsible for or might be interested in that? As with most edited work, the resulting video is a distillation of hours of material, and naturally many interesting statements could not be included in the final seventeen-minute-long video. Below, I share some of these statements (as well as some that do appear in the video) to explain the challenges this project faced as it set out to bring into focus the identity of the person behind the skull.

I interviewed Thomas Schnalke in the anatomical collection at the Charité, just a few minutes' walk from the BMM, where he has been director since 2000. In this position, Schnalke has been involved in many public discussions and research initiatives around the topic of exhibiting human remains. In his interview, he acknowledged the importance of conducting provenance research on human remains that are on display and said that the responsibility to undertake this research rests with the institution that holds them.<sup>61</sup> He added that if other institutions want to exhibit the remains, they should find out whether an inquiry into their origins has been conducted. In case such inquiry has not been made or not enough information has been found, the exhibiting institutions should consider taking on provenance research themselves. Unfortunately, this was never the case regarding this skull; neither the Charité, nor HU, nor any of the other institutions that exhibited the skull has done so.

Andreas Winkelmann – physician, professor of anatomy, and renowned researcher of the history of anatomy in Germany – worked at the Centre for Anatomy at the Charité from 2001 to 2015 and, together with Thomas Schnalke, led the impressive provenance survey Charité

[61] Thomas Schnalke, interview with author at the Charité collection of anatomy, November 30, 2020. Translation by Martin Bleisteiner. Transcriptions and video materials are on the project's offline drives.

Human Remains Project from 2010 to 2013.<sup>62</sup> Within this project, Winkelmann's own research concentrated on the 'race skull collection' (Rassenschädelsammlung) – more than eight hundred skulls that were kept in the anatomical collection at the Charité, just like the so-called Gall skull.<sup>63</sup> In our interview, Winkelmann's recollection of the skull resurfaced the Wunderkammer connotations: 'I know this skull [...] as a specialty, a curiosity, so to speak [...] I actually remember it more as a curiosity, because I know that Gall's skull theory also had something very curious [in the sense of odd] from today's point of view'. When I asked him the same question posed to Schnalke – Who should carry out provenance research on the skull? – Winkelmann put the finger on the important connection between provenance research, political and institutional interest, and funding: 'Who would finance such provenance research? [...] There must always be an interest. The interest is either [...] a personal relationship with someone who is deceased, or [...] some kind of cultural or group relationship with that person. But I don't know which group that this man, maybe a woman [...] belonged to would be interested in learning more about this person'.<sup>64</sup> As one of the leading experts on provenance research on human remains in Germany, Winkelmann critically points out the fact that human remains that are not associated with the usually acknowledged contexts of injustice in Germany (colonialism and National Socialism) do not yet garner sufficient civil, institutional, or political interest to set in motion resource-dependent provenance research.

The question of resource allocation was indeed crucial, since provenance research can take months or even years to complete and can thus be expensive. During the project, I tried to approach some of the institutions that were likely to have the interest and the capacity to finance provenance research on the skull. One of these institutions was the newly established Department for Cultural Goods and Collections from Colonial Contexts at the German Lost Art Foundation (Deutsches Zentrum Kulturgutverluste – DZK).<sup>65</sup> Larissa Förster, a former colleague at CARMAH, has headed this department since its founding, in 2019,

[62] See Stoecker, Schnalke, and Winkelmann, *Sammeln, Erforschen, Zurückgeben?*.

[63] Andreas Winkelmann, 'Die Anatomische Sammlung der Berliner Universität und ihre anthropologischen Bestände', in *Sammeln, Erforschen, Zurückgeben?*, 69–83. The so-called Gall skull was not part of the 'race skull collection' and was therefore not included in that provenance survey.

[64] Andreas Winkelmann, interview with author at the Brandenburg Medical School Theodor Fontane, Neuruppin, Germany, September 15, 2020. Translation by Harriet Merrow. Transcriptions and video materials are on the project's offline drives.

[65] See 'Colonial Contexts: Basics and Overview', website for German Lost Art Foundation, accessed October 20, 2023, <https://kulturgutverluste.de/en/context/colonial-contexts>.

and was my first interviewee for the *Who is ID8470?* video. Several months prior to our interview, I sent Förster's department at the DZK a request to finance provenance research on the skull. In her interview, she explained that my request was rejected because there was no indication that the skull was acquired in the context of colonialism – a prerequisite to receive funding by her department.<sup>66</sup>

Following Thomas Schnalke's statement about the collections' duty to research human remains in its custody, I approached one of the directors at the Centre for Anatomy at the Charité (where the collection is located) and asked them to support – or to be part of a joint effort, together with CARMAH – research into the provenance of the skull. This request was rejected as well.<sup>67</sup> The KSB had already rejected funding for the project, which included scientific provenance research, in 2019. My next logical target was HU's president, considering that the skull was included in the university's last three historical exhibitions and was (for a while) also considered for its new exhibition at the Humboldt Lab. However, as I was about to send the request, the Humboldt Lab's curators revealed to me that they had recently asked the president's office for additional funding and, unknown to me, referred to the elevated costs for *Who is ID8470?* project as one of the reasons for their request. I was, therefore, asked not to approach the president's office with requests connected to more funding for the *Who is ID8470?* project.

Following the failure of these attempts to secure funding for scientific provenance research, we managed to fund it (together with my salary and some other production costs) through the Alexander von Humboldt Making Differences project, since the pandemic had reduced other planned outgoings. At the end of 2021, we commissioned Marion Hulverscheidt – physician and historian of science – to employ scientific provenance research methods to research the skull at the Charité.<sup>68</sup>

In terms of artistic practice, that the scientific provenance research was funded within the framework of the artistic-research project was important. It meant that *Who is ID8470?* did not stop at the presentation of spirit narratives (or possible biographies) and the reflection of the challenges and politics of provenance research in the video installation at the Humboldt Lab. The project also did not limit itself to lobbying for parallel scientific provenance research and to encouraging relevant institutions to assume responsibility for such research. When those institutions failed to

[66] The official rejection of this funding request was received by email on December 9, 2019.

[67] The official rejection of this funding request was received by email on January 14, 2021.

[68] See Marion Hulverscheidt's text in this book for more on her research methods and findings.

do so, the artistic-research project took on the entire spectrum of scientific provenance research – commissioning, funding, managing, and hosting it at CARMAH as an integral part of the project. It was through reflection on the meaning of these processes, for the fields of both artistic research and provenance, that the term *artistic provenance research* was coined.

### Inside the Humboldt Lab

In July 2021, after many months of delays, the Humboldt Lab in the Humboldt Forum opened its doors to the public with its inaugural exhibition – *After Nature*. The *Who is ID8470?* installation – a Pepper's ghost housing the two-channel video – was suspended from the ceiling of the exhibition space on an industrial-looking, motorized pantograph arm. In an installation that was consciously (as Gorch Pieken stated in the presentation of the exhibition's concept at the university in 2019) 'very reminiscent of the Wunderkammer', it was placed amongst dozens of other display cases of various shapes and sizes that were filled with diverse items and media relating to the university's collections and research. The thirty-eight display cases hung in a similar manner,



The *Who is ID8470?* installation among other display cases and in front of the *Wall of Research* at the *After Nature* exhibition in the Humboldt Lab, 2022. © Tal Adler

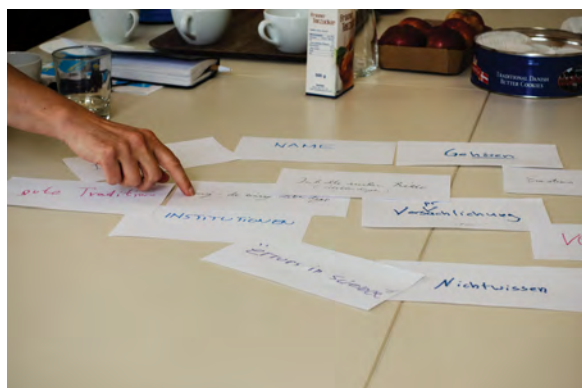
suspended from the ceiling on pantograph arms, one next to another, creating a crowded, colourful, somewhat confounding installation at the centre of the main exhibition space of the Humboldt Lab. The long and tall wall in front of the hanging display cases was covered by the kinetic *Wall of Research* – an immense video projection on motorized panels sliding up and down, running on a loop, and pushing light, colour, movement, and sound onto the hanging showcases.<sup>69</sup> It was quite

[69] This description of the main 'grid' of hanging showcases and the kinetic *Wall of Research* reflects my own subjective experience in the space, as well as the experience of others with whom I visited the exhibition. It is not meant dismissively or judgementally but rather as an attempt to convey my experience of the installation; there are other experiences and opinions. The *Wall of Research* won the Grandprix for 'Communication in Space/Event' by the Art Director's Club Germany (ADC) in 2022. In a video on the ADC website, one can see how the large and bright kinetic *Wall of Research* can overpower the display of the dimly lit hanging showcases and potentially distract viewers looking at them. Indeed, several observations I made in the exhibition, as well as in talks with visitors, confirmed this was a shared experience. The video can be found at <https://www.adc.de/2022/05/20/die-gewinnerinnen-adc-wettbewerb-2022>.

the opposite of the original idea I had in mind two years earlier – to install the video sculpture in a quiet, intimate space separate from the main exhibition and dedicate it for workshops and discussions on sensitive topics with guided groups. Nevertheless, and despite the overstimulating environment, the *Who is ID8470?* installation at the Humboldt Lab did manage to attract visitors who put on the headphones attached to the display case and delved into the possible biographies narrated by the skull's spirits and the discussions with the living interviewees around the now-not-on-display skull.

### Beyond Random Visitors

By the time the Humboldt Lab finally opened, the four curators that created this exhibition had left the university, and a new, smaller team under the supervision of Daniel Tyradellis – chair of the Humboldt Forum Endowed Professorship for the Theory and Practice of Interdisciplinary



Workshop on the educational affordances of the *Who is ID8470?* Video, August 2021. © Tal Adler

Curating – was entrusted with the space and the exhibition.<sup>70</sup> Together with Johanna Stapelfeldt (responsible for curatorial questions) and Hartmut Burggrabe (responsible for education), we started discussing the ways in which the *Who is ID8470?* installation could be used, beyond the incidental engagement of random visitors. In the months following the opening, we managed to revive some of the workshops that were sketched in the original proposal from 2019.

In the first, a ‘meta workshop’, we invited two experts for museum education, Karin Schneider (head of education at the Lentos Art Museum and Nordico Stadt Museum in Linz) and Wolfgang Schmutz (lecturer, consultant, and curator of Holocaust and memorial-site education), to help us develop an experimental model for possible workshops around the *Who is ID8470?* video installation. In the next workshop, with a group of university students, we tested the experimental model we developed in the ‘meta workshop’. These

[70] As Friedrich von Bose writes in a footnote at the end of his text in this book, the curatorial team mainly left because of the university’s human-resource strategy that, according to von Bose, did not allow for longer-term personnel planning.

two workshops revealed that even visitors who watch only two to three minutes of the video at random points within its seventeen-minute duration could grasp the key topics of the work and understand that it is about the ethics of human remains on display and that the questions of identity, provenance, and conflict are central in this work. With this realization, those visitors who were interested in these questions could quickly decide whether they wanted to continue watching the entire video (which is relatively long for a time-based work embedded in one of many display cases at a scientific exhibition).

For the next workshop, titled ‘Artistic Engagements with Scientific Collections’, which was developed in collaboration with the Coordination Centre for Scientific University Collections in Germany and the Veterinary Anatomy Theater (Tieranatomisches Theater), we invited university collections’ staff from all over Germany.<sup>71</sup> Through presentations of artistic practices in and with scientific collections and through several group discussions over two days in Berlin, the workshop participants discussed what artistic research in the context of university collections might mean, especially from the perspectives of their staff and their interfaces with the broad public.

Apart from these workshops, the project was presented publicly more than fifteen times. Amongst those presentations was an invitation by the Humboldt Lab to give a guided tour at the *After Nature* exhibition, focusing on those displays that might be referred to as problematic, difficult, or sensitive. In another presentation, in the beginning of 2022, the concept of Artistic Provenance Research was presented to the public for the first time at the colloquium of the German Lost Art Foundation – an organization dedicated to provenance research in the contexts of the Holocaust and colonialism.<sup>72</sup>

### Engaged Provenance

In the summer of 2023, the Berlin Museum of Medical History (BMM) opened the exhibition *The Brain in Art and Science* – an adapted version of a larger exhibition created by the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn,

[71] The workshop was developed with Felix Sattler (Tieranatomisches Theater), Sarah Elena Link and Oliver Zauzig (Coordination Centre for Scientific University Collections), Friedrich von Bose, and Johanna Stapelfeldt and Hartmut Burggrave (Humboldt Lab), and assisted by Sarah Felix and Alina Januscheck. Artistic research and intervention practices were presented by Susanne Schmidt, Uli Westphal, and me. For more on the workshop, see <https://wissenschaftliche-sammlungen.de/de/termine/workshop-kuenstlerische-auseinandersetzen-mit-wissenschaftlichen-sammlungen> (accessed October 20, 2023).

[72] The video of the online presentation and discussion is available at ‘Künstlerische Provenienzforschung an einem “Gallschen Schädel” | Kolloquium Provenienzforschung’, posted March 24, 2022, by Kulturgutverluste/ German Lost Art Foundation, YouTube, 1 : 02 : 26, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFN2ljRzryU>.

in 2022. Both versions of this exhibition showcased new neurological research alongside many artworks concerned with the brain and the mind. Probably more than all previous exhibitions that displayed the so-called Gall skull in the last two decades, this exhibition offered a more relevant context, and the BMM itself a more suitable location, to discuss phrenology. I was nevertheless surprised to discover the skull displayed in this exhibition – not so much *because* they were exhibited there but mainly because of *how* this was done. A short text about Gall and phrenology was mounted below the vitrine in which the skull was placed, facing the visitors. Similar in content to texts from the previous exhibitions in which the skull was displayed, this text, too, did not mention the person whose skull is exhibited nor the question of their identity. This time, however, omitting these questions and the provenance research that was already carried out under the *Who is ID8470?* project – both the artistic research I conducted with the spirits and the scientific one by Marion Hulverscheidt – was puzzling. After four years of collaboration on the *Who is ID8470?* project with the BMM and the anatomical collection at the Charité that lent the skull for this exhibition, they were not only aware of its outcomes but were contributing and supporting partners.

I struggled to determine whether I should regard this as a failure of the *Who is ID8470?* project, not making a strong enough case for reconsidering the way this skull could be displayed and contextualized. Reaching out to the BMM and discussing their perspective provided an opportunity to think again about the core goals of the project, as well as its achievements.

The BMM's position was that their exhibition was mainly centred around two aspects of the brain – its shape (morphology) and its function (physiology). In this context, the exhibition highlighted the historical research regarding the brain's different cell types, the mapping of the brain according to that, and the understanding of the localization of different functions of the brain. Gall's theory is, of course, very interesting in this context, since it was the first to introduce the idea of localization in the brain. The BMM chose to demonstrate phrenology with this skull, especially since the curators were by then quite certain (partially thanks to the *Who is ID8470?* project's urging the revalidation of the skull's inventory number by Winkelmann and Hulverscheidt) that the skull is not connected to the *Unrechtskontext* of colonialism and National Socialism. Because they perceived the *Who is ID8470?* project to be primarily concerned with the curatorial disagreement at the Humboldt Lab and with a critical position regarding the display of the skull inside the controversial Humboldt Forum, they did not consider it relevant to

their exhibition and did not see any contradiction between the display of the skull at the BMM and the *Who is ID8470?* installation at the Humboldt Lab. They concluded that the fact that there were now two exhibitions in Berlin presenting different approaches to the display of the skull should be seen as a success, providing more platforms for discussion regarding the display of human remains.

While accepting this rationale, I wondered whether the *Who is ID8470?* project should only be perceived in the context of the curatorial disagreement at the Humboldt Lab. For me, the project offered more than a decision not to display the skull at the *After Nature* exhibition. It was also about identifying stagnant curatorial practices (that probably stem from Bredekamp's scholarly engagements with the Wunderkammer, decades ago) that continue unchallenged to this day. It was about questioning the display of human remains that were turned into an object that bears the markings of an erroneous and often ridiculed theory – not only signalling a mockery of Gall and his theory but also perpetuating the objectification, and potential humiliation, of a person transformed into a 'Wunderkammer object' through these markings. It was about finding new ways to deal with burdening legacies and new ways to think about provenance.

Through my discussion with the BMM, it became clear to me that the core difference between our approaches had to do with the way we understood and engaged with provenance research. For the BMM, knowing that provenance research of the skull had been attempted and that the inventory number on the skull suggests a disconnect from the problematic contexts of colonialism and National Socialism was sufficient. The BMM utilized provenance in the *background*, not unlike insuring an insurance policy. Internal knowledge of the supposed provenance was enough to assure the safety (in the sense of less likelihood for controversy) of the display and secure the inclusion of the skull in the exhibition. Just as museums do not display insurance policies alongside the objects they exhibit, the BMM probably did not see a reason to mention provenance in the text that accompanied the skull.

In my opinion, however, it is necessary to bring the question of provenance to the *foreground*. Putting *provenance* itself on display can highlight the most important aspect of the skull: that they are human remains. Not just an exhibition prop, and much more than a tool of phrenology, education, research, or amusement – this was once a human being. Regardless of whether or not we know how they ended up in the collection and regardless of which context of injustice or misfortune they came from, referring to the question of their identity serves to acknowledge their past as a person. It was precisely for this reason that



A phrenologist comparing his own head with a phrenological bust. Oil painting by Albert W. Holden. Wellcome Collection, reference: 45152i (public domain).

I was surprised to see how the skull was displayed at the BMM, since it lacked this important element – acknowledging the person on display.

Exhibitions are important. More than telling stories and enabling experience, they communicate subtle, implicit notions, not only through what they display but also through what they omit. I know that institutions like the BMM and the anatomical collection at the Charité care for and respect human remains in their custody. I think, however, that this respect should also be visible to the visitors of such exhibitions, not only by the thoughtful way the display is prepared but also by thoughtful information reflecting this respect. Mentioning the identity of the person, the provenance research that was carried out, and the deliberations regarding their display can help in signalling a respectful engagement.

Art can play a role in this communication, too. Quite unconventional for scientific exhibitions in Germany, the exhibition at the BMM presented art and science with a variety of artworks on display. Next to the skull, an artwork was mounted: a reproduction of a painting by Albert William Holden from the beginning of the twentieth century that mockingly depicts Gall palpating his head with one hand while the other palpates a porcelain model of a head with phrenological markings.<sup>73</sup> Although this artwork might demonstrate how Gall's theory was perceived by a later generation, one might also think about the ways in which this artwork relates to the skull that is installed next to it. The *Who is ID8470?* video

[73] The label next to the painting at the exhibition reads 'A Phrenologist Comparing his own Head with a Phrenological Bust'. In his satirical work, the London painter Albert William Holden (1848–1932) takes aim at the practice of craniology developed by Franz Josef Gall at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Albert William Holden, *The Phrenologist, Visibly Relieved, Checks to See How the Bumps on His Head Compare to Those of the Perfect Phrenological Bust*, ca. 1900, oil on canvas, reproduction, Wellcome Collection, London.

– which also refers to Gall and to how phrenology was perceived – could have added an additional layer of acknowledging the person whose skull is on display and subtly communicating respect. Might the choice of installing the Holden painting next to the skull reflect not only a different understanding of the capacity of provenance but also a different appreciation of art – employing its illustrative and entertaining capacities alone, while not perceiving the capacity of artistic provenance research to propose a more multilayered, intellectual, and sensitive engagement?

Thinking about these different ways to engage with provenance and with art in scientific contexts has been productive, urging me to identify and formulate those types of engagement and also prompting me to describe some of the ways in which the *Who is ID8470?* project encouraged others to grapple with questions of provenance and display. The original invitation I received – to intervene in the curatorial conflict at the Humboldt Lab and offer a solution for the display of the skull – was successful (at least in that exhibition), and the *Who is ID8470?* installation is still exhibited at the Humboldt Lab, two and half years after its opening (as of the time of writing this text). With over two hundred thousand visitors so far, the *Who is ID8470?* installation is still engaging with visitors, inviting reflection, and proposing (self-)critique. The *Who is ID8470?* video is available online (on YouTube), since the opening of *After Nature*, and has already been viewed a thousand times on this platform alone. In addition, the public presentations in which the *Who is ID8470?* project was presented – in conferences, university seminars, colloquia, and other cultural events; both in person and online; in and beyond Europe – have engaged with broader audiences and enabled additional platforms for debate and reflection. A process of re-evaluation and change in the way human remains are categorized, digitized, and presented in the Collection Portal is currently being set in motion. Finally, the concept of Artistic Provenance Research was conceived and developed through the *Who is ID8470?* project. This book – already in demand before its publication by researchers, practitioners, and educators in the fields of provenance and museology – is one of the outcomes of the project and is expected to continue the work of challenging research and exhibition conventions, deepening discussions, and supporting processes of institutional and political transformation.

In a complex project such as this one, achievements and success are thankfully shared. Without an invitation and an openness to experimentation and critique, this project would not have happened, and I am thankful to Friedrich von Bose for trusting me enough to invite me to intervene and to the curatorial team headed by Gorch Pieken, who have accepted the project and contributed to it. Embedding the project

in CARMAH was crucial in providing the infrastructure needed for in-depth research in an inspiring, intellectually stimulating, and critical environment, and I am thankful to Sharon Macdonald for believing in the potential of artistic practice within an academic environment.<sup>74</sup>

### **For the Living**

Once upon a time, someone lived. Then, they died. I still don't know who this person was, and I wonder what they would have thought about their skull being kept at the collection and displayed in exhibitions. I dedicate the project and this text not only to this person but to all the others whose remains are kept and displayed and who might have wished something else for their remains.

In the end, however, this project is not for the dead; it is for and about the living. I sometimes wonder whether there is some correlation between the way we relate to human remains, especially of those to whom we are not related, and the respect we show our fellow living humans. I wonder whether we can learn from this something about the way we care, or not care, about others – whether living or dead – and I hope that by developing more awareness of this question, we can also develop our ability to care more.

[74] A complete list of acknowledgements is provided at the end of the *Who is ID8470?* video. In addition to that, I would also like to thank the people who spent time reading through various versions of this text and provided invaluable and critical suggestions: Sharon Macdonald, Friedrich von Bose, Larissa Förster, Michael Willenbücher, Andreas Winkelmann, and Thomas Schnalke.



*Spectral Projections*, drawing on 'Alternative portrait of a skull in a box', 2025. © Tal Adler