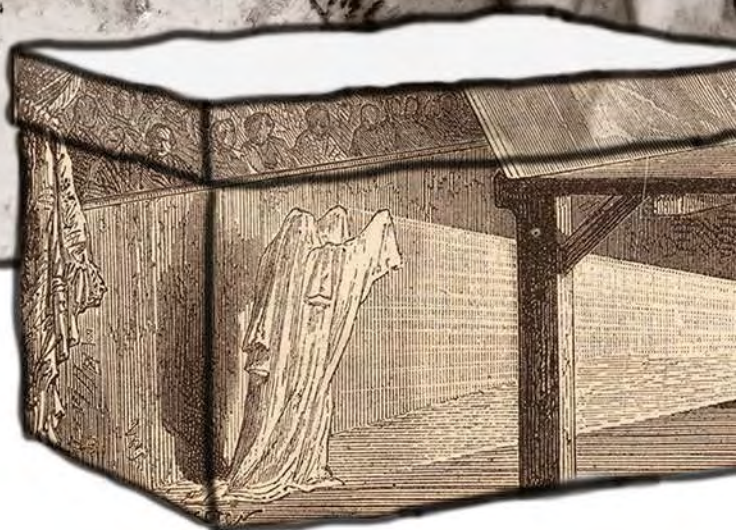


Artistic Provenance Research

Tal Adler
Sharon Macdonald
(eds.)



[transcript] Cultural Heritage Studies

Artistic Provenance Research

Tal Adler

Sharon Macdonald

(eds.)

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <https://dnb.dnb.de>



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons License BY 4.0. For the full license terms, please visit the URL <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>. Creative Commons license terms for re-use do not apply to any content (such as graphs, figures, photos, excerpts, etc.) not original to the Open Access publication and further permission may be required from the rights holder. The obligation to research and clear permission lies solely with the party re-using the material.

The publication of this work was supported by the Open Access Publication Fund of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

2025 © Tal Adler, Sharon Macdonald (eds.)

transcript Verlag | Hermannstraße 26 | D-33602 Bielefeld | live@transcript-verlag.de

Graphic design: Gila Kaplan, Avi Bohbot

Cover image: *Spectral projections*. © Tal Adler

Printing: Druckhaus Bechstein GmbH, Wetzlar

<https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839465530>

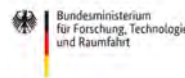
Print-ISBN: 978-3-8376-6553-6 | PDF-ISBN: 978-3-8394-6553-0

ISSN of series: 2752-1516 | eISSN of series: 2752-1524

Printed on permanent acid-free text paper.



Gefördert durch:



**Artistic
Provenance
Research
Tal Adler
Sharon Macdonald
(eds.)**

[transcript]

Content

- 7 **Preface**
- 11 **Introducing Artistic Provenance Research**
Sharon Macdonald and Tal Adler
- 32 **A Note on Terms**
- 35 **Who is ID8470?**
Tal Adler
- 73 **We Are ID8470**
Tal Adler
- 77 **The Performer**
- 82 **The Prisoner**
- 88 **The Architect**
- 96 **The Maid**
Tal Adler, Clara Dröll, Ricarda Rivoir, Laura Strott
- 105 **Intervening Potentials: Artistic Research on
Human Remains in University Collections**
Friedrich von Bose
- 123 **Searching for Fingerprints on ID 8470:
Provenance Research on a Gall Skull from
the Anatomical Collection of Berlin Charité**
Marion A. Hulverscheidt
- 139 **Filling Gaps in Provenance Research:
Between Plausibility and Experimentality**
Larissa Förster
- 153 **From Performing Provenance Research
to Community-Centred Engagement:
Flinn Works and the Ancestors in Boxes**
Konradin Kunze

- 175 **Unsettling Spirits: An Unfinished Conversation Towards Provenance and Artistic Work**
Duane Jethro and George Mahashe in conversation
- 189 **Provenance is Many Journeys – it's Plural, it's Complicated, it's Contingent**
Edmund de Waal in conversation with Tal Adler and Sharon Macdonald
- 203 **List of Exhibitions of the so-called Gall Skull**
- 205 **This book's authors**

Preface

Acknowledgements are a form of provenance: they record certain origins and influences. Sensitized by our own attention to provenance, we are acutely aware of the selective and often problematic nature of who and what is included and who and what is excluded, as well as the way that acknowledgements, like provenance, can act as markers of authenticity and quality. The cultural historian Jürgen Dinkel has analyzed how acknowledgements in academic texts have changed over time, the number and kinds of those thanked proliferating enormously since the 1990s.¹ This, he says, is bound up with an expanded academic system in which marking distinction becomes increasingly difficult. It is, perhaps, also part of a wider cultural development that we see in the heritage field, among other places, in which more and more kinds of heritage and histories are seen as significant and worthy of recording and preserving.

Although we are aware of how contemporary acknowledgement practice tends to spread a wide net – to include things like the coffee that helped keep us going or to delve far back into individual biographies, to find the seeds in early childhood that awoke interests that we only realized decades later – we choose here to resist and just mention those who specifically deserve thanks for their direct influence on this book. We do, however, apologize to anybody we may have inadvertently missed and hope that they can feel included in our general thanks to all

[1] Jürgen Dinkel 'Dank sagen. Geschichte einer akademischen Kulturtechnik', *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* 19 (2022): 537–39.

of those who directly or indirectly contributed to this work. This book has taken several years, and we have had so much assistance and learned so much from so many along the way.

The book began as part of work undertaken within a project called Making Differences: Transforming Museums and Heritage in the Twenty-First Century, which was funded primarily by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. This funding, together with further resources from Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (HU), the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, and the Natural History Museum, Berlin, also helped to establish the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage (CARMAH), at HU. In the years following that project and the founding of CARMAH, in 2015, the topic of provenance – linked with concerns of restitution and return, as well as the politics of collecting and display – was increasingly often part of public debate. Sometimes, provenance was seen as a solution, or at least part of a solution, to the challenges that museums were facing. At others, it was seen as part of the problem. We are grateful that we could conduct the work presented in this book in the context of CARMAH and the Institute for European Ethnology, in which it was located, and that we were able to profit from the insights of so many of our colleagues. Our work also benefited from CARMAH's wide network, which included researchers and professionals in Berlin and beyond. In particular, we wish to mention colleagues at the Humboldt Lab – the HU's exhibition space within the Humboldt Forum. Their cooperation was crucial for realizing the main instance of artistic provenance research presented in this book, as well as for helping us think through the issues raised. The Hermann von Helmholtz-Zentrum für Kulturtechnik, which manages the Humboldt Lab, has also been an enormous source of support.

We have had the opportunity to present our ongoing work to audiences of colleagues, students, and the wider public at a variety of events and locations, including the Akademie der bildenden Künste, Vienna; the University of Cape Town (curatorial programme); the University of the Arts, Berlin; the University of East Anglia ('Anthropological Perspectives on Global Challenges' conference); the German Lost Art Foundation; the University of Helsinki ('Voices and Practices in Research' conference); the Wereldmuseum Leiden ('Pressing Matters' conference); Musée du Quai Branly, Paris; the Museumsakademie Joanneum, Graz; the Open University of the Netherlands and Reinwardt Academy ('Taboo' conference), Amsterdam; the University of Oslo; the University of Oxford (School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography); and the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum ('Imperial Lives' conference), Cologne; as well as in various classes and talks at HU. The contributors to this

book were also, of course, vital to its realization and our thinking, and we thank them for their work and responsiveness.

Jakob Horstmann at transcript publishers deserves a big round of applause for being so enthusiastic about the book, as well as for his openness and flexibility. So, too, does Elisabeth Stern for invaluable input that went far beyond copy-editing. Working with Gila Kaplan and Avi Bohbot, the book's designers, has been an inspiring lesson in creativity and patience.

Funding by the publication fund of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin has made it possible for the book to be published open access. Special thanks to Jacqueline Sachse and Marc Lange from the open-access team of the university's library.

The book was completed while we were both working at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg, Centre for Advanced Study, *inherit. heritage in transformation*, located at HU and funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. This was an ideal location in which to finalize the book, not least for the opportunities to discuss it with colleagues and fellows but also for considering it in relation to the centre's major agenda of promoting artistic research.

There is a convention that acknowledgements conclude with thanks to partners. We are happy to follow this here and to heartily thank Mike Beaney and Anna Szöke, who have lived with this work over these years and contributed to it, advertently and inadvertently, from their own areas of relevant expertise.

Sharon Macdonald and Tal Adler
Berlin, January 2025

Introducing Artistic Provenance Research

Sharon Macdonald and Tal Adler

This book aims to introduce *artistic provenance research* into wider debate and practice. Artistic provenance research (APR) mobilizes artistic approaches and sensibilities to engage with questions concerning the histories and ownership of objects, including the very modes of investigating these. It can thus be seen as both a form of and a reflection on provenance research. Through its distinctive methods, APR opens up new angles and perspectives on provenance, and through its production of artworks, it can make creative, challenging, and dynamic interventions into public debate.

It is important, at the outset, to emphasize that by APR, we do not mean provenance research that is conducted about artworks. While APR might address the provenance of artworks, it can also be concerned with other kinds of objects, ideas, or topics connected with provenance (such as the very notion of ownership or the politics and dynamics of provenance research). Deeply grounded in research, APR produces artistic processes and artworks that promote and enable new forms of research and knowledge production, as well as reflection on – and potentially activating change in relation to – other forms of provenance research.

The research on which this introduction is based was conducted as part of Sharon Macdonald's Alexander von Humboldt Professorship, within the project Making Differences: Transforming Museums and Heritage in the Twenty-First Century. We thank those who were part of this project and who were part of related discussions over the years. We would also like to thank the following for their comments on this chapter: Michael Beaney, Larissa Förster, Gordon Fyfe, Gesa Grimme, Habiba Insaf, Yoonha Kim, Erica Lehrer, and Suzana Milevska. We are grateful to Lina-Luisa Sittig for sending us her BA dissertation about artistic research. Lynn Rother and Max Kross deserve special thanks for their helpful criticism. We are also very grateful to Elizabeth H. Stern for input that has gone far beyond copy-editing. Any remaining errors or misjudgements are, sadly, our own.

In this book, the core ideas of APR are presented, illustrated, and explored through selected cases. These are by no means the only instances of APR; various works by artists such as Sophie Calle, Maria Eichhorn, and Hans Haacke, among others, could have been included, even though this is not a designation these artists have used.¹ Here, however, we choose to look in depth at a set of recent examples, which are mainly presented by the artists and researchers themselves. This makes it possible for us not only to consider finished artworks and their motivations but also to examine the processes of their making, including the struggles involved. We selected these particular works because they take an interesting approach to provenance and they illustrate a diverse (though definitely not exhaustive) range of media, including drama, performance, installation, photography, and text. Furthermore, they highlight a variety of modes of conducting provenance research, including delving into archives, paying close attention to objects, collaborating with various groups and communities, engaging in autobiographical reflection, and trying to communicate with ghosts and spirits. At the same time, there are certain concerns that thread through many of the chapters, such as those of human remains and of colonial contexts.

In order to more fully illustrate and probe APR, we give one case especially detailed attention – a project called *Who is ID8470?* The project was conceived and created by artist and researcher Tal Adler, who coined the term *artistic provenance research* and who is one of the editors of this book.² This book itself can also be seen as part of the artistic research project *Who is ID 8470?* The project concerns the collection and exhibition of a human skull with markings according to the discredited science of phrenology, and it – and this book – examines in detail the forms in which the skull has been kept, categorized, mobilized,

[1] It is beyond the scope of this chapter and book to catalogue and discuss the works that might be considered to be engaging in APR. There are, however, good reasons to consider as APR works such as Sophie Calle's *What Do You See?* and *Last Seen*; Maria Eichhorn's *Restitutionspolitik* and *In den Zelten* ...; and Hans Haacke's *Manet-Projekt '74*. Other artists who are producing work that might be considered APR include Pansee Abou ElAtta, Nora Al-Badri, Martin Krenn, and the following, who are discussed as instances of APR by either art historian Christoph Zuschlag, in his *Einführung in die Provenienzforschung. Wie die Herkunft von Kulturgut entschlüsselt wird* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2022) or by Lina-Luisa Sittig in her bachelor's thesis ('Künstlerische Provenienzforschung – Mehrwert für die museale und kuratorische Praxis', Hochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft Berlin, 2023); Anna Artaker, Michael Asher, Marianna Christofides, Raphaël Denis, Vera Frenkel, Arno Gisinger, Emeka Ogbob, Michael Rakowitz, Christian Schnalke, and Christoph Westermeier. Zuschlag and Sittig also discuss Tal Adler's *Who is ID8470?*

[2] Tal Adler has used the term in various public presentations, including 'Künstlerische Provenienzforschung – Mehrwert für die museale und kuratorische Praxis' (presentation at the Deutsches Zentrum Kulturgutverluste, February 21, 2022); see <https://kulturgutverluste.de/node/775>. He has also used this term, together with Sharon Macdonald, in 'Artistic Provenance Research' (presentation, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford, April 29, 2022). Zuschlag, in *Einführung in die Provenienzforschung*, uses the term 'künstlerische Provenienzforschung' to refer to works by artists that deal with themes of 'the provenance of artworks, collections histories, the colonial past, NS-loot and restitution' (113; our translation). He gives as a prime example Tal Adler's *Who is ID8470?*

and displayed, as well as the challenges in intervening in these. These interventions included a video-sculpture installation in the Humboldt Lab in the Humboldt Forum in Berlin. Through several chapters, each examining different aspects of this project – written not only by Adler but also by various other actors involved in the project – we intend to provide a multidimensional exemplification of APR.

In this introduction, we begin with some comments on provenance – a topic that has been gathering momentum since World War II and that is currently the subject of increasing interest and discussion not only within academia and the art and museum worlds but also in wider political and public arenas. We then provide a more detailed explanation of APR, in which we also discuss related movements and terms, including critical fabulation and experimental, potential, and speculative history, as well as the cases of APR included in this book. The final section reflects on the wider potential for artistic-research approaches in relation to provenance research and beyond.

Provenance Research

The term *provenance* emerged in late eighteenth-century Europe, where it was closely bound up with the development of art markets, which shaped its subsequent use elsewhere.³ Referring to an artwork's history, provenance was important, especially for auction houses, for determining who had created an artwork, as well as its transfers of ownership, and thus its authenticity and financial value. While provenance relied on documents, provenance practice in such contexts was typically more affirmative than investigative, and it tended to rely on a fairly limited set of questions, approaches, and sources. Only in the twentieth century, and especially in the wake of trying to track down and restitute artworks that

[3] See, for example, Gail Feigenbaum, and Inge Reist, introduction to *Provenance: An Alternative History of Art*, ed. Gail Feigenbaum and Inge Reist (Los Angeles: Getty, 2012), 1–4, at 1. They note that the term first appeared in English in 1785, derived from the French *provenir*. In the same volume, the entangled early history with art markets is also discussed, especially in Sophie Raux 'From Mariette to Joullain: Provenance and Value in Eighteenth-Century French Auction Catalogs', 86–103, with insightful remarks also in Anne Higonnet 'Afterword: The Social Life of Provenance', 195–209. It is worth noting that the term *provenience* is also sometimes used, especially in archaeology, though this refers specifically to the location of an object's discovery and excavation; Rosemary A. Joyce, 'From Place to Place: Provenience, Provenance and Archaeology', in *Provenance: An Alternative History of Art*, ed. Gail Feigenbaum and Inge Reist (Los Angeles: Getty, 2012), 48–60. For further relevant discussion, see also Patty Gerstenblith, 'Provenances: Real, Fake and Questionable', *International Journal of Cultural Property* 26, no. 3 (2019): 285–304. It should also be noted that interest in questions of the origins and life histories of objects, which can, for example, be found in various disciplines, is not restricted to that which is described as *provenance*. See, for example, Victoria L. Lemieux, 'Provenance: Past, Present and Future in Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Perspective', in *Building Trust in Information: Perspectives on the Frontiers of Provenance*, ed. Victoria L. Lemieux (Cham: Springer, 2016); and Jane Milosch and Nick Pearce, eds., *Collecting and Provenance: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2019).

had been looted by the National Socialists, did scholars and the public call for more probing approaches, and questions of provenance were increasingly coupled with those of social justice. Even then, however, it was not until the 1990s that such efforts moved significantly beyond private initiatives, with, for example, the founding of the German Lost Art Foundation.⁴ Especially important in ushering in what can properly be called provenance *research*, were the Washington Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art, which were formulated at a conference in December 1998, after which, as art historian and provenance expert Lynn Rother puts it, a ‘mode of provenance research’ emerged that was ‘concerned with socially disquieting details’ and that ‘meticulously tracks institutions, people, objects, and money with a forensic level of detail’.⁵

Since then, such research has gathered considerable pace, especially within the last ten years. Cases – such as that of German art dealer heir Cornelius Gurlitt, whose collection of over one thousand artworks, many presumed to have come to him, via his father, as forcibly seized property of Jewish owners – have brought questions of provenance into a more public arena.⁶ As have films, such as *The Woman in Gold*, a semi-fictionalized account of a Jewish refugee’s legal challenge to the Austrian government to have a painting stolen from her family by the Nazis returned to her.⁷ Such popular accounts promote a narrative in which property that has been criminally appropriated – initially by the National Socialists – is restituted, once the proper facts are finally discovered and verified. Provenance research is, thus, cast in such public

[4] The Coordination Office of the Länder for the Return of Cultural Property, out of which the German Lost Art Foundation grew, was established in 1994. The situation varies significantly between countries, with most lacking such an organization.

[5] Lynn Rother ‘Uncanny Provenance: Art History and its Double’, *Texte zur Kunst* 128 (2022): 84–97, at 92. Other authors also comment on the relative recency of this development. In a review of the history of provenance research, Christian Fuhrmeister and Meike Hopp write, in 2019, that ‘provenance research is now – and significantly, only now – booming’. They attribute the shift to a range of factors, including funding, though they also conclude that the current state of affairs is far from adequate. Christian Fuhrmeister and Meike Hopp, ‘Rethinking Provenance Research’, *Getty Research Journal* 1.1 (2019): 213–31, at 216. Christian Zuschlag sees the late 1990s as marking a key paradigm shift – also involving wider public interest – in relation to questions of provenance while also pointing to its longer-term practice: Christian Zuschlag, ‘Provenienz-Geschichte und Perspektiven eines neuen Paradigmas in den Geistes- und Kulturwissenschaften’, in *Raubkunst und Restitution-Zwischen Kolonialzeit und Washington Principles*, ed. Matthias Weller, Nicolai B. Kemle, Thomas Dreier, and Karolina Kuprecht (Zurich: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2020), 22–36. The point is also made by Tilman von Stockhausen, ‘The Failure of Provenance Research in Germany’, in Feigenbaum and Reist, *Provenance*, 124–136.

[6] See Sabine Oelzer, ‘Nazi-Looted Art: A Chronology of the Gurlitt Case’, *Deutsche Welle*, February 28, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/nazi-looted-art-a-chronology-of-the-gurlitt-case/a-60896180>; Andreas Huyssen, Anson Rabinbach, and Avinoam Shalem, ‘Nazi-Looted Art and Its Legacies: An Introduction’, *New German Critique*, no. 130 (2017): 1–7; and Jonas Tinius, ‘Awkward Art and Difficult Heritage: Nazi Art Collectors and Postcolonial Archives’, in *An Anthropology of Contemporary Art: Practices, Markets, and Collectors*, ed. Thomas Fillitz (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 130–45.

[7] First shown in 2015, the film was directed by Simon Curtis and produced by BBC Films. The screenplay is by Alexi Kaye Campbell.

narratives as a heroic form of detective work, in which the truth carries the redemptory capacity to right past wrongs. Its etymological connections with the word *prove* highlight the onus on provenance research to provide categorical proof of ownership as the basis for its work of restorative justice.

Contributing to the growing interest in questions of provenance – and also mobilizing its restorative and redemptory promise – are debates about the theft and illegal trade of antiquities, as well as about colonial plunder and restitution. This has led to museums, especially those holding collections of antiquities or ethnographic objects, increasingly finding themselves at the centre of debates about their right to hold them.⁸ In Germany, indicators of new attention to colonial provenance include the German Lost Art Foundation's being granted funding for work on 'cultural goods from colonial contexts', in 2018, and in 2021, the establishment of a new national contact point for collected goods from colonial contexts.⁹ The emphasis has certainly not been restricted to Germany, however, with many former colonial powers being challenged about the objects that they hold in museums and increasing numbers of initiatives being developed to investigate the circumstances in which collections were acquired.¹⁰ In relation to colonial-context provenance, too, popular culture provides an index of wider awareness and sensibilities; for instance, the US film *Black Panther* (2018) includes scenes in which a member of the Wakanda people forcefully removes a Wakanda object

[8] On antiquities, see, for example, Sharon Waxman, *Loot: The Battle over the Stolen Treasures of the Ancient World* (New York: Times Books, 2008). On questions of colonial plunder and restitution, see footnote 10 below.

[9] A list of various developments can be found on the website of the German Ministry for Culture and Media: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/bundesregierung/bundeskanzleramt/staatsministerin-fuer-kultur-und-medien/sammlungsgut-aus-kolonialen-kontexten-1851438>. See also Jonathan Bach, 'Provenance-Centered Reckoning. A Memory Infrastructure for the Colonial Past?', in 'Germany's Changing Memoryscape. Postcolonial, Postmigrant and Postsocialist Dynamics', ed. Irene Hilden, Sharon Macdonald, and Andrei Zavadski, special issue, *Berliner Blätter* 89 (2024): 43–59.

[10] See, for example, Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics* (Paris: Ministère de la Culture, 2018); Katrin Sieg, *Decolonizing German and European History at the Museum* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021); Felicity Bodenstern, Damiana Otiou, and Eva-Maria Troelenberg, eds., *Contested Holdings: Museum Holdings in Political, Epistemic, and Artistic Processes of Return* (New York: Berghahn, 2022). There has also been an expansion of work on particular kinds of collections, including ethnological and those containing human remains. See, for example, Larissa Förster, Iris Edenheiser, Sarah Fründt, and Heike Hartmann, eds., *Provenienzforschung zu ethnografischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit. Positionen in der aktuellen Debatte* (Berlin: Arbeitsgruppe Museum der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie, 2018); Larissa Förster and Sarah Fründt, eds., in 'Human Remains in Museums and Collections', special issue, *Historisches Forum* 21 (2017): <https://doi.org/10.18452/19383>.

from a London museum.¹¹ While the word *provenance* is not used in all of these cases, questions about origins, ownership, and value – all of which are central to provenance research – are clearly involved.

This expansion of interest in provenance also reflects an expanded understanding of provenance that is no longer restricted to the function of providing credentials for the evaluation of artworks within art markets, though providing a worthy pedigree for an artwork or for other objects continues to be significant and influential.¹² Increasingly, however, provenance research is conducted within a moral framework of establishing rightful possession, with the question of whether the current owners really have the right to be regarded as such often being at the forefront. This means that provenance research is frequently tightly bound up with questions of restitution and return, and in relation to objects from colonial contexts, with the decolonization of museums and other collecting institutions.

Despite the importance of such work and the fact that it is publicly prominent, and despite increases in funding and in the quantity and range of provenance investigation being undertaken, this is all still inadequate to the task of providing information about even a small proportion of the objects in museums and other locations, and such efforts are also hindered by insufficient infrastructure and coordination.¹³ Nevertheless, advances are being made, and provenance scholarship, as well as some of its practice, has become more sophisticated, raising questions about the assumptions and tendencies of earlier provenance research, as shaped by their former contexts of use, and bringing novel approaches and sources to bear.¹⁴ APR can be seen as part of this expanded critical and reflexive provenance research.

[11] While the scenes of the theft of the object have been widely referenced (including in our own earlier draft of this introduction) as an example of attempted ‘restitution’, the film’s narrative is not so unequivocal, not least since the character involved is trying to acquire the object to extract its metal (‘vibranium’) content. Thanks to Max Koss for pointing this out. Another interesting example is ‘Escape from the British Museum’, a series about a jade teapot that wants to return to China, which in 2023 was highly popular on the Chinese version of TikTok. See, for example, Amy Hawkins ‘Viral Series About Chinese Teapot Escaping from the British Museum to Become Film’, *Guardian*, September 2023. And in 2024, Mati Diop’s *Dahomey*, which follows the return of objects from the Musée du quai Branly to the Kingdom of Benin, won the Golden Bear at the Berlinale.

[12] For further discussion, see Gail Feigenbaum and Inge Jackson Reist, eds., *Provenance: An Alternate History of Art* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2013). Another important area concerns Ancient World objects, some of which are from a colonial context. See Waxman, *Loot*.

[13] See Führmeister and Hopp, ‘Rethinking Provenance’.

[14] Feigenbaum and Reist’s *Provenance* is one example of such scholarship, as is Rother’s ‘Uncanny Provenance’, which contains a compelling list of questions about how we might do provenance differently, such as asking about the consequences of listing restitution claims in provenance records.

Expanding Provenance Research

One feature of many understandings of provenance – as anthropologist and researcher at the German Lost Art Foundation Larissa Förster points out in her chapter in this book – is that it is seen as involving a continuous ‘chain of owners and possessors’. Provenance research seeks to piece together this single and unbroken line. It does so through attention to documentation, especially legal, that can establish such ownership, with, in many cases (especially for colonial contexts), the idea of the object’s ‘origin’ or original owner being deemed particularly significant. As Förster observes, there is an assumption here of the ‘ultimate knowability of an object’s history’. Yet, in many cases, the documentation is lacking, and it is not possible to trace the links in the chain continuously back over time or even to establish a clear-cut origin. In some cases, too, the object itself may be missing – and instead the research may have to begin ‘from a void’, as actor, director and writer Konradin Kunze describes of the missing bodily remains of an ancestor in his chapter in this volume, and what he suggests thus requires a form of ‘reversed provenance research’.

Whether an object is present or not, giving precedence to legally acceptable forms of documentation may be limiting, not least in its likely exclusion of other types of relationships – including forms of custodianship or belonging – between people and objects other than formal legal ownership, as highlighted in the conversation in this volume between artist and anthropologist George Mahashe and religious and heritage studies scholar Duane Jethro. This includes forms of custodianship and other relationships between people and objects that are not restricted to those of particular individuals, as tends to be the case in much formal provenance research. Even where collective ‘owners’ – such as nations or communities – are posited, this is still based on a model of a single and singular entity, thus upholding a specific conceptualization of ‘possessive individuation’ that permeates Western heritage and identity discourse, and it gives especial weight to property relations.¹⁵ In effect, this is to operate a mutually exclusive model of ownership – that is, there can be only one rightful owner and only one line of inheritance – that is not necessarily applicable in all circumstances and that might rule out other possible significant modes of belonging or relating. Provenance is, thus, ‘a limiting exercise’, as Mahashe puts it. His preference is for an understanding of it as ‘meandering, following the leads, not consolidating them’.

[15] See, for example, Sharon Macdonald, *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today* (London: Routledge, 2013), especially chapter 1, for a discussion of this. The notion of possessive individuation is derived from C. B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

Conceiving of provenance in terms of single lines of legal ownership effaces other kinds of relationships and gives priority to claims based on durable forms of documentation that are in formats and languages legible to and deemed legitimate by those with the power to make decisions about them. In practice, this tends to mean that oral sources or non-verbal means of recording have little traction, although arguments are increasingly being made for accepting them, as in the case of wampum belts – in which beaded patterns are modes of recording and sealing agreements – of certain Native American peoples.¹⁶ Circumscribed in scope by the specific aim to identify original and continuous lines of ownership, provenance research may also be limited by certain assumptions – including, for example, those of the relationships between people and objects – and the methodologies involved in this. Wampum belts, for example, are considered by Native Americans to be social agents rather than inanimate objects.¹⁷

Partly in response to perceived limitations of the term *provenance*, academics and museum workers have proposed other terms for researching objects' histories. Principal among these is *object biography*.¹⁸ Not seeking to necessarily affirm value or question ownership, object biographies may include not just transfers of ownership but also multiple aspects of an object's past. Like other terms that have been suggested, such as *object itinerary* or *object career*, object biography still shares the potential limitation of suggesting a single historical thread, a unilinear trajectory from birth or other beginning point onwards.¹⁹ While appreciating the excellent work done under these and other labels, we prefer to use the term *provenance* despite and indeed because of its possible limitations. We use this term to more readily enable dialogue with existing provenance work, contributing further to its ongoing

[16] Margaret Bruchac, 'Broken Chains of Custody: Possessing, Dispossessing, and Repossessing Lost Wampum Belts', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 162, no. 1 (2018): 56–105. This article also discusses provenance research on wampum belts. There are also instances of legal proceedings being taken on behalf of non-human entities, with the latter being designated as legal persons. See, for example, Erin L. O'Donnell and Julia Talbot Jones, 'Creating Legal Rights for Rivers: Lessons from Australia, New Zealand and India', *Ecology and Society* 23, no. 1, (2018): <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-09854-230107>.

[17] Bruchac, 'Broken Chains of Custody'.

[18] Igor Kopytoff, 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as a Process', in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64–91. For further discussion of the notion of *object biographies*, see Janet Hoskins 'Agency, Biography and Objects', in *Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. Chris Tilley, Webb Keane, Susanne Küchler, Mike Rowlands, and Patricia Spyer (London: Sage, 2005), 74–84.

[19] See, for example, Rosemary A. Joyce, and Susan D. Gillespie, 'Making Things Out of Objects That Move', in *Things in Motion: Object Itineraries in Anthropological Practice*, ed. Rosemary A. Joyce (Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press, 2015), 3–19; Hilde Doering 'Dingkarrieren. Sammelstück, Lagerstück, Werkstück, Ausstellungsobjekt', in *Geschichtskultur in der zweiten Moderne*, ed. Rosmarie Beier (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2000), 263–78; and Samuel J. M. M. Alberti, 'Objects and the Museum', *ISIS* 96 (2005): 559–71.

diversification and increasing criticality. Furthermore, inherent in such terms as *object biographies*, *object itineraries*, and *object careers* (and their attendant methodologies) is a following of objects.²⁰ The following of objects may sometimes be involved in APR, but not necessarily. APR might, for example, involve following persons or be primarily concerned with questions of ownership, institutionalization, and value that are not necessarily about establishing biographies, itineraries, or careers.

APR, then, is concerned with questions of provenance – including those of objects, origins, ownership, markets, institutions, and value – but like the newer scholarly approaches to provenance, APR’s approach is primarily interrogative and critical. It engages with questions about the pasts and entanglements of objects and subjects but in ways that actively probe, rather than only seek to ascertain, answers to those questions. APR interrogates or provides alternatives to the established conventions, ambitions, and narratives within which certain objects might usually feature. Moreover, it regards aporias in the record not as problems to be necessarily solved by documentation – or else ignored as irresolvable absences – but as opportunities for artistic engagement and for bringing to life the ‘*something else* and the *what-might-be*’ (emphasis in the original), or indeed the *what-might-not-be*, that lie at the edge of the imaginable.²¹ This seems to be similar to what writer and potter Edmund de Waal, in the interview in this volume, refers to when he emphasizes the importance of ‘the pause’ for opening up ‘a moment of possibility’. How such possibility is grasped in APR, however, may be multiple.

Between the Speculative and the Factual

APR’s addressing of pauses or gaps may have a particular role in contexts in which there is a lack of conventional documentation – for instance, by imaginatively offering possible narratives or by highlighting the hiatuses themselves or the social processes that produced them. There are affinities here with other approaches within the humanities. As Larissa Förster discusses in this volume, at least since the 1980s, historians have been seeking to admit a wider range of sources, including non-documentary and marginal ones, and to engage in forms of speculation. Among the terms that she references are the *circumstantial paradigm*, the *art of*

[20] Other terms may avoid this, such as ‘historiography of collections’, as proposed by Larissa Förster in ‘Plea for a More Systematic, Comparative, International and Long-term Approach to Restitution, Provenance and Historiography of Collections’, *Museumskunde* 81, no. 1 (2016): 49–54. This, however, then circumscribes the focus to collections.

[21] Saidiya Hartman, ‘Intimate History, Radical Narrative’, *The Journal of African American History* (Winter 2021): 127–35, at 131.

intelligent conjecture, and *experimental histories*.²² To these we might also add *counterfactual histories* and *potential history*.²³ She and historian Holger Stoecker, propose what they term ‘tentative object biographies’, an approach she demonstrates in her contribution to this volume with reference to their search for the provenance of certain human remains in the zoology collections of Jena University.²⁴ Unable to find a definitive single story, Förster and Stoecker present three possible – but plausible (a term that she emphasizes) – trajectories by which these human remains had come to be in the collections.

Other developments within the humanities also aim to creatively address a lack of historical information and the restrictions of the forms that available documentation may involve. To the forefront in recent years has been the work of Saidiya Hartman. First proposed in her 2008 essay, ‘Venus in Two Acts’, ‘critical fabulation’ is the name she gives to a method by which she seeks to ‘represent the lives of the nameless and the forgotten, to reckon with loss, and to respect the limits of what cannot be known.’²⁵ Critical fabulation is not simply conjecturing about what might fill the lacunae; rather, and as her practice shows, it means to be deeply immersed in the available archive and to critically engage with it, highlighting its limitations, while at the same time drawing on available sources – including more marginal and fleeting ones – to imagine experiences that are otherwise unavailable. In her 2019 book, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, for example, she seeks to explore and present the experience of young Black women in the urban United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, highlighting their multiple subject positions and forms of agency, as well as the

[22] Förster draws here on Carlo Ginsburg, ‘Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method’, trans. Anna Davin, *History Workshop Journal* 9 (1980): 5–34; Sybille Krämer, ‘Was also ist eine Spur? Und worin besteht ihre epistemologische Rolle? Eine Bestandaufnahme’, in *Spur. Spurenlesen als Orientierungstechnik und Wissenskunst*, ed. Sybille Krämer, Werner Knogge, and Gernot Grube (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007), 11–33; and Klaus Neumann, ‘But Is It History?’, *Cultural Studies Review* 14, no. 1 (2008): 19–32.

[23] Martin Bunzl, ‘Counterfactual History: A User’s Guide’, *The American Historical Review* 109, no. 3 (2004): 845–58; Ariella Aisha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019). Martin Bunzl acknowledges that to some extent in all historical work on causation, ‘counterfactual claims come along for the ride, like it or not’ (846), but he argues that there has been a new level of explicit counterfactual work undertaken since the 1990s. For further discussion of this development and the philosophical issues raised, see also Elazar Weinryb, ‘Historiographic Counterfactuals’, in *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography*, ed. Aviezer Tucker (New York: Wiley, 2011), 109–19; and Geoffrey Hawthorn, *Plausible Worlds: Possibility and Understanding in History and the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[24] They have developed this at more length in Larissa Förster and Holger Stoecker, *Haut, Haar und Knochen. Koloniale Spuren in den naturkundlichen Sammlungen der Universität Jena*, vol. 9, *Laborberichte* (Weimar: Verlag und Datenbank für Geisteswissenschaften, 2016).

[25] Saidiya Hartman, ‘Venus in Two Acts’, *Small Axe* 26 (2008): 1–14, at 4.

violence of the structures and strictures within which they lived.²⁶ This entailed activating an immense amount of detail from close readings of the archive and reassembling it to craft her alternative narratives. In addition to the term ‘critical fabulation’, she describes her practice as ‘speculative history, close narration, and documentary poetics’²⁷ – each name bringing a word from the more imaginative realm together with one indicating proximity to the available record.

This coupling of the creative and speculative with in-depth awareness of the available archive or sources is characteristic of many APR works, too. It is, among other things, through the mutual enmeshing of these – of the ‘plausible and the experimental’, as Förster puts it – that APR is able to make novel and significant contributions to the existing work on provenance. Such coupling and enmeshing is evident in Förster’s own work as well as in many examples of APR, such as those discussed in this volume: the project *Who is ID8470?*; the performances concerning the provenance of ancestral remains from former German colonies, collaboratively written and here reflected on by Konradin Kunze; the photographic installation of George Mahashe; and the books of Edmund de Waal. In all of these examples, it is evident that considerable importance is given to the record; so, emphasizing that speculation and artistic work do not mean ignoring or dismissing the archival record. This was addressed by de Waal when we asked him about the degree of poetic license that he allows himself in his own ‘stories’ – to use a word he often employs in talking about the provenance narratives in his work. ‘Not much’ was his reply. He went on to insist upon the importance of ‘the discipline of research’. Forms of discipline, rigour, and immersion – extensive and intensive research – are characteristic of all the cases in this volume, as well as most other examples of APR that we discuss here, albeit with varying inflections and emphases. This deserves underlining, for, as philosopher Martin Bunzl emphasizes in his discussion of counterfactual history, what is at issue here is not simply brandishing ‘imagination, and unconstrained imagination at that’ but, rather, a thorough ‘grounding’, as a researcher, in wide-ranging knowledge, including knowledge of what is currently known or not.²⁸ For speculation and artistic engagement to be compelling and effective, they must be informed: not only their ‘plausibility’ but often their richness and critical traction as art works rests, at least in part, on this.

[26] Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019).

[27] Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 127.

[28] Bunzl, ‘Counterfactual History’, 845.

Research and Production Modalities

Like Hartman, Förster emphasizes the considerable amount of time and work that creative and speculative approaches to provenance may entail. In part, this is because the work does not restrict itself to the usual sources and categories; instead, it is attentive to, or needs to wait for, serendipity and minor leads that others might overlook, and assessing the significance of absences and silences. De Waal – whose books *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, *The White Road*, and *Letters to Camondo* each, in various ways, tell of years of careful research into the pasts of objects – explains in his interview here the importance to his work not only of ‘tracking down texts and materials in libraries and archives’ but also of attending to ‘hiddenness’.²⁹ What is *not* said or shown – absences and gaps – needs attention and can itself open up new avenues of investigation. In addition, de Waal stresses what he calls ‘somatic research’: ‘actually being present in the places where things happened’ and, thus, having also to ‘deal with the physical presence of something, and the places that it’s been’. Such physical presence and the embodied and affective dimensions of encounters with objects, locations, persons, atmospheres, and spirits can be crucial for shaping artistic provenance work, as is evident in the other chapters in this volume, too. Again, this can take place over considerable stretches of time and be implicated in the artist-researcher’s own personal experience and relationships. For de Waal, this involves tracing his family’s histories, delving back into his own memories, as well as encountering relatives and others through photographs, documents, places, and objects. His books are thus not so much the results from distinct projects as parts of a continuous life’s work – a work in which provenance is, as he puts it, ‘a necessary political, personal act’.

So, too, for Konradin Kunze, whose experience of learning that ‘hundreds of ancestors in boxes’ were stored in the cellar of the university where his father had worked – and which he had visited as a child – propelled his own political and personal artistic-research journey, realized in a range of dramatic performances. As with de Waal, physical journeys to locations – in various countries – from which objects and ancestors had come were a decisive part of his process. Some of these were highly affective, most notably being taken by a grandson of Mangi Meli – who had been hanged by German colonizers in Tanzania in 1900 – to the

[29] See Edmund de Waal, *The Hare with Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2010); Edmund de Waal, *The White Road: A Journey into an Obsession* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015); Edmund de Waal, *Letters to Camondo* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).

tree in the village where he had been murdered. Kunze's travels enabled him not only to meet people who were themselves seeking answers to provenance voids but also, in some cases, to develop collaborations that further shaped the artistic-research process and performances.

In the case of George Mahashe, his approach to provenance is rooted in his immersion in 'Xheloledu [. . .] the language, culture and religion of Balobedu from the north-eastern part of the Limpopo province of South Africa'.³⁰ In an enmeshing of the personal and political over many years, he critically interrogates the photographic archives of colonial anthropologists and develops his own distinctive artistic and research practice. Among other things, this involves drawing on the notion of *vadimu*, which is sometimes translated as 'ancestors' (a term also invoked by Adler and Kunze) but which, as he is keen to point out, has specific connotations in the South African context – including 'the capacity to make means, to secure a future for your children' – that are not necessarily captured by the term *ancestors* or others, such as *ghosts* and *spectres*. As he and Jethro suggest, this offers scope for expanding upon existing understandings of provenance.

Adler's decades-long engagement with what in much existing provenance research are referred to as 'human remains' was inspired in part by the disjuncture between the Jewish ideas that he was brought up with and what he encountered in museum storage and exhibition spaces.³¹ He has explored issues of visibility, presence, and absence over a series of artistic-research projects and practices, taking him to many museum collections and other storage spaces. As he describes in his chapters that follow in this volume, this brought him into contact with the narratives of a wide range of interlocutors, including spirits in the collections' storage – without which the artwork *Who is ID8470?* would have been impossible.

[30] Cited in Mahashe and Jethro, in this volume; originally from George Tebogo Mahashe, 'Walking Towards a Camera Obscura', *Critical African Studies* 12, no. 2 (2020): 218–36.

[31] See our note on terminological problems. For discussion of this term, 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: A Berlin Ethnography*, ed. Sharon Macdonald (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2023), 57–75.

Artistic Practice

As evident from the contents of this volume and from the examples below, our understanding of *art* is a broad one, to incorporate not just fine art but a wide range of creative practices, including film, performance, literature, hacking, and conceptual, relational, or dialogical practices, amongst others. Important here, however, is that we do not approach art as only a matter of taking a particular format or medium but, rather, as the mobilization of an artistic sensibility. That mobilization is not restricted to creating an art end product, but rather it is thoroughly part of the research or making process. What this means, as we see it, is a willingness to engage creatively and a heightened attention to modes of expression, form, and style, not only those that the artist themselves might use but also those suggested by whatever it is to which they direct their gaze – that is, attentiveness to ‘the aesthetics of research’, as Adler puts it in the interview with de Waal below. This is evident in all of the APR examples here, with the *Who is ID8470?* project manifesting it directly in its intervention into curatorial decisions regarding the display of human remains – as both Adler and anthropologist and curator Friedrich von Bose discuss in their chapters.

Significantly, all of the cases of APR in this volume involve consideration of questions of objectification and visibility, audibility, or sayability – including questions of what might or might not be shown. These are questions of the ‘ethics of research’, to quote de Waal, who expands Adler’s reference to the ‘aesthetics of research’. For those works dealing with parts or images of people now dead, such ethics are particularly fraught, since consent to display is unlikely to have been granted, and furthermore, there may be taboos or restrictions on showing or seeing them in various cultures. Moreover, acts of showing risk repeating and even reinforcing problematic historical modalities of representation. Whereas with *Who is ID8470?* Adler questions the planned display of a human skull, Kunze makes one central to his performance *Schädel X*. This is not, however, a real skull, which audiences only learn in the after-show discussion, and the question of objectification is raised in part by having the skull itself protest against how it is being treated. Giving voice to the skull (or, we might say, its possible former ‘inhabitant’) is thus a strategy shared by Adler and Kunze.

In Mahashe’s installation, *Dithugula tsa Malefokana*, photography is used as a medium, but there is a calculated attempt to disrupt its capacity to endure over time – and to thus act as a means of continuing visibility – by creating analogue photographs in such a manner that they quickly fade, obliterating the image taken. De Waal’s writing, too, is suffused with reflection on presence and absence and on what is possible

to say or show. These are major themes of his pottery and exhibition work, including the installation in the museum of the collector Moïse de Camondo, as he discusses in the interview here.

A further feature of the artistic mode in provenance work is its capacity to accept, incorporate, and even accentuate indeterminacy, ambiguity, and ambivalence. This is to value what Mahashe refers to as ‘meandering’ or de Waal’s appreciation of complexity and contingency: ‘You might feel that you want to nail things down . . . But that’s not truthful. You can’t hold things forever in one place; they don’t have one meaning’, the latter says. Such nuanced attention to indeterminacy, ambiguity, and ambivalence – as well as, more generally, to the figuring out modes of expression as part of the production process – is not necessarily exclusive to artists; it is shared, to some degree, by other disciplines, such as social and cultural anthropology and, to an even greater extent, by specific approaches such as critical fabulation and speculative history. But in artistic work, the openness to the non-settled and the crafted relationship with form and style are even more fundamental and far-reaching. Because of the greater degree of openness to possible modes of expression, the artistic is less bound to more conventional forms of articulation and presentation used in scholarly research in the academy or in applied contexts – although here we note that there are pockets of past and current academic practice in which a wider range of possible formats and styles, today often referred to as ‘multi-modal’, is employed.³² In tune with such searches for alternative and effective approaches, APR entails the honing of an artistic sensibility and practices in which forms and modes of expression are always at issue, deserving considered selection and forms of reflection.

Reflecting on Provenance

APR entails explicit or implicit reflection on provenance, provenance research, and/or related concepts and practices themselves. Not all of the chapters included in this book deal with *artistic* provenance research; some are included to illustrate related approaches. In Förster’s chapter, although she does not describe her work as ‘artistic’, her practice of ‘tentative object biographies’ is formulated through contemplating the expectations, practices, and restrictions of more conventional provenance research. In other chapters, however, such reflection is indeed made through art practice and performance.

[32] See, for example, Patricia Alvarez Astacio, Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan, and Arjun Shankar, ‘Multimodal Ambivalence: A Manifesto for Producing in S@!#t Times’, *American Anthropologist* 123, no. 2 (June 2021): 420–27

In Adler's *Who is ID8470?* project, provenance research – and especially the lack of such prior research – is a primary concern, and it is explicitly addressed in video interviews with various interlocutors whose own work or positions relate to provenance research as well as with others who reflect on it. As Adler discusses (in 'Who is ID8470?', in this volume), his experience of seeking funding for provenance research on the skull was part of the project and thus meticulously documented, including in this volume, which can itself be seen as a further dimension of the project. Part of *Who is ID8470?* was an exhibit at the Humboldt Lab – the exhibition space of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (HU) in the Humboldt Forum, a controversial public event and exhibition location that opened in 2021. Here, reflection on provenance is evident in the exhibit's attention to the historical practices that resulted in, or *might* have resulted in, this human skull – and others like it – being collected and exhibited. Through the project's mode of accessing existing records (as set out in detail by researcher of medical history Marion Hulverscheidt, in this volume), as well as alternative possible sources – especially the artist-researcher's communing with spirits (see 'We are ID8470' in this volume) – the artwork highlights the presuppositions and limitations of provenance research as it is usually conducted.

In dramatizing the attempt to find the provenance of a human skull from Namibia that had supposedly been inherited by a German school teacher, the plot of Kunze's fact-based fictional work was, he writes, 'shaped by many unexpected twists and turns, which serve as an – at times entertaining – example of the difficulties and limitations of provenance research and repatriations'. Kunze's chapter gives readers an insight into what is involved in trying to trace provenance, but it also makes an eloquent statement about the necessity of such work and the shortcomings of current institutional provision.

Shortcomings are also made evident in the chapter by Jethro and Mahashe, particularly when Mahashe, through his close attention to Khelobedu, highlights the inadequacies of Western notions and practices of provenance, especially, but not only, for non-Western contexts: 'In my context', he explains, 'we are not in the business of finding out who owns something but, rather, who does the responsibility for things fall to'. We need to reflect, he argues, on the very attempts to fix and pin down. This resonates, too, with de Waal's position, in which his books can be seen as sustained and subtle contemplations on provenance; as he puts it in the interview below, 'all my practice is about breaking that [the conventional, narrow, auction-house understanding of provenance] up and going: "You know what, you want complexity? Bring the word provenance in"'.

Effects and Afterlives

By highlighting limitations and suggesting alternatives, APR opens up the capacity to change existing perspectives and practices. The very act of bringing the usually forgotten or marginalized into the frame of attention might be seen as a form of repair. In addition, APR artworks can help bring about change by promoting further provenance work or by suggesting alternatives to existing modes of conservation or display. Beyond this, however, APR works may actively seek to instigate specific actions – such as those leading towards restitution. Indeed, one significant feature of APR – whether avowedly activist or not – is that it can reach publics beyond the academy and thus bring the questions, perspectives, and concerns that it implicates to wider audiences.

It is not always possible, however, to directly attribute change to a specific work of APR, and many works and other developments operate in concert or cumulatively. Nevertheless, it is evident that APR works can play a major role in shifting sensibilities, which can then spark further action and transformation. In the interview with de Waal, for instance, he recounts that the Austrian government gave away a thousand free copies of *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, and the president ‘said that the book has helped change the kind of awareness in Austria of Jewish families [...] not just as victims’. Such a shift is hard to pin down but is of tremendous historical importance – not least, it seemed to have contributed to a change in the Austrian law to finally allow ‘Holocaust-era families to reclaim citizenship’.

APR has helped generate still further provenance research and/or activism, and in some cases, it has led also to repatriation and other concrete developments. Kunze’s work is exemplary here: his initial investigations and artistic works led to extensive further provenance research undertaken by himself and others, often in collaboration. Although he writes that his work did not directly lead to the repatriation of the skull featured in *Schädel X* to Namibia in 2018, it nevertheless was a contributing factor. After many years of sleuthing, in which Kunze was considerably involved and worked closely with descendants (who requested that DNA sampling be undertaken), certain ancestral remains have been found and positively identified as extremely likely to be of the Mangi family (though not Mangi Meli’s skull), and negotiations have begun for their repatriation to Tanzania. Similarly, the compelling arguments made by Förster and Stoecker for the plausibility of a particular tentative object biography led to human remains being repatriated from the Phyletic Museum in Jena to Namibia. Förster has also helped draw up guidelines on the conduct of provenance research and, in her work at the German Lost Art Foundation, has played a role in determining what that institution researches and how.

Who is ID8470? has prompted further provenance research – such as that of Hulverscheidt, presented in her chapter in this volume – and the project has also involved the public in the discussion on provenance research, artistic engagements with scientific collections, and the display of human remains, as Adler outlines in his chapter. The ways in which this APR did and did not contribute to changing collections and display practice is also discussed by him in detail; what his experience also arguably shows is the recalcitrance of existing practices. Von Bose points out how the interdisciplinary and artistic approach of *Who is ID8470?* has helped shape museum and collections discussions beyond the Humboldt Forum, especially about what to show and not show.³³ As with the work of Kunze and de Waal, Adler's *Who is ID8470?* aims to engage a wider public in the concerns around provenance, something which it was explicitly conceptualized to do as a work of APR.

What we hope to have made clear in this introduction and in the chapters that follow is that APR is not simply a method advocating open-ended fantasizing in cases where there is a lack of information; rather, it is deeply grounded in research and in attentive forms of investigation and practice, which are alert to affective, bodily, ethical, personal, political, and representational dimensions. APR is not necessarily an alternative to more conventional forms of provenance research, and, indeed, it can help support or initiate more of the latter. More than anything, it opens up new possibilities and offers alternatives. In the process, it frequently alerts us to the culturally bounded nature, amongst other limitations, of conventional provenance work. By doing so, APR helps to propose and propel ways of expanding beyond and improving upon existing provenance work.

The fact that APR produces artworks – of multiple kinds – is a vital dimension of its dynamic and constitutive capacity. These are not simply the end points or outputs of the processes that precede them; they are a further stage in the process, in which the effects and afterlives – what

[33] Earlier artistic research by Adler relating to collected human skulls has also had an impact on practice. The work *Dead Images*, focused on collections in the Museum of Natural History in Vienna, is acknowledged by that museum's curators as having shifted their practice, leading to more considered and considerate treatment of the subjects in their care. For more information about *Dead Images* and the EU-funded project TRACES: Transmitting Contentious Cultural Heritage with the Arts, in which it was embedded, see the following chapters, all in Marion Hamm and Klaus Schönberger, eds., *Contentious Heritage and the Arts: A Critical Companion* (Klagenfurt: Wieser Verlag, 2021): Tal Adler, Linda Fibiger, John Harries, Joan Smith, Anna Szöke, and Maria Teschler-Nicola, 'Dead Images: Facing the History, Ethics and Politics of European Skull Collections', 63–68; Sharon Macdonald, 'Contentious Collections, Contentious Heritage: Risks and Potentials of Opening Europe's Memory Banks', 95–128; Tal Adler, 'The Creative Co-production: An Experimental Model for Artistic Engagements with Contentious Cultural Heritage', 287–308; Tal Adler and John Harries, 'Reflexive Photography and the Transformation of Shock – an Interview', 473–94; and Anna Szöke, 'In Search of the Individual Story: Learning from Collections of Human Remains', 549–72.

happens through and with them, and as initiated or encouraged by them – of the works are also part of the APR's wider scope. Of course, all artistic works have a productive potential to make things happen, not least through their aesthetic and affective moving of individuals. But with APR, because of its direct engagement with questions of provenance (and the inherently ethical and political nature of these questions), the potential is even more salient and, thus, potentially more far-reaching and powerful.

This Volume

The first four chapters that follow this introduction present *Who is ID8470?* In the first of these ('Who is ID8470?'), Tal Adler sets out the background and context of the human skull – sometimes given the identification number 8470 – with markings according to Gall's phrenological ideas, which became the focal point for this APR project. Adler discusses previous showings of the skull in exhibitions and on websites, his own relevant earlier work (especially on a project called *Dead Images*), and how he came to propose and carry out APR. The chapter describes the decisions he made, the difficulties he faced, and what was ultimately produced. In the following chapter, called 'We are ID8470', Adler discusses the possible biographies of ID8470 and his mode of engaging with spirits as part of his research. The research for four possible biographies, each of which also features as a particular character in his video installation at the Humboldt Lab, is presented here. His research is then complemented by a chapter by Marion Hulverscheidt, in which she deploys her medical historical skills to investigate the provenance of the skull ID8470 further, in the process illuminating various sources and potentials but also the limits of what it seems possible to unearth. Curator at the Humboldt Lab, Friedrich von Bose, who first brought ID8470 to Adler's attention as he contemplated whether and how to show it, explains the concerns and processes involved from his perspective. An insightful theorist, ethnographer, and curator of exhibitions, von Bose also discusses the work of (co-)producing an exhibition, especially in the contested space of the Humboldt Forum, as well as wider considerations of the potentials of university collections.

The remaining four chapters expand into further dimensions of provenance while also delving into particular cases. Larissa Förster's chapter, 'Filling Gaps in Provenance Research: Between Plausibility and Experimentality', clearly explains the positions and assumptions involved in particular kinds of provenance research, as well as how these might be addressed by speculation and 'tentative histories'. Through

a summary of extensive provenance research that she (together with Stoecker) conducted on a piece of human scalp from an individual from Africa, she highlights the tensions between dealing with the information available and contemplating what might have been. The book that Förster and Stoecker produced follows academic conventions of rigorously investigating and referencing sources, but it is also experimental in its format by offering, in three main chapters, three different possible histories.

Like the previous chapters, Konradin Kunze's concerns human remains, one of the most problematic topics for provenance research, and is also, like Förster's, focused on African colonial contexts. His detailed account of how he came to be engaged in attempting to track down missing ancestors of Tanzanian people whom he met and of the plays that he produced, often collaboratively, shows the detailed research involved, as well as the ways in which the artworks produced could recursively prompt further investigation and wider public interest. The project is ongoing.

The following chapter also focuses on Africa, in this case South Africa. It takes the form of a dialogue between artist and anthropologist George Mahashe and religious studies scholar Duane Jethro; it foregrounds Mahashe's views on provenance and how he addresses it in his artistic work. A key part of his approach involves engaging with ideas and practices that are part of his Vhalovedu heritage. As he argues, provenance is important in contexts of restitution and repatriation claims, but this should also mean acknowledging the ideas and sensibilities involved in the particular cultural contexts. His artworks draw on these ideas while helping bring them to light.

The final chapter of this book is an interview by the editors with Edmund de Waal in which they discuss provenance in relation to his highly reflective and beautifully crafted books, as well as his pottery. This interview makes crystal clear just why provenance research is so important, in addition to how it is conducted, the kinds of probing questions that it asks, and how it can and should be (especially through artistic forms) released into – or, we might say, gifted to – the world.

By bringing these authors and chapters together, this book provides the first theorizing and in-depth discussion of APR. In addition to setting out theory, methodology, and case studies, the book functions as a manifesto for such work. We hope it will inspire others to undertake APR work. Beyond that, however, we also call for APR's greater institutionalization – its acceptance as a legitimate approach and its eligibility for institutional support. Already there are signs of this, though APR still tends to be supported mainly through temporary project

funding.³⁴ Without greater institutionalization, there is a risk that APR might be regarded as something of a specialist approach that is used only occasionally – or, perhaps, just in those cases when nobody knows what else to do or there are differences of opinion that cannot be resolved by other players (as was partly the case in the Humboldt Lab, as von Bose discusses here). Instead, APR should be more formally embedded within the kinds of institutional frameworks that can enable it to flourish. It should be accepted as part of the wider academic landscape, rather than viewed as an art practice that takes place only at distinct institutions (namely, art schools). And it should be eligible to receive support from both academic and cultural funding sources.³⁵

Although individual artist-researchers were involved and indeed at the centre of each of the cases discussed in this volume, they were often part of wider multi- or interdisciplinary collaborations and were thus attuned to (and often trained in) multiple disciplines. Because artistic research frequently requires and mobilizes diverse players, it can play an important role in the academy, helping generate multi-, inter-, and transdisciplinary engagements. APR – and artistic research more generally – is not, however, restricted to the academy. Many of the questions that it deals with are of considerable public interest. Taking forms such as installations, exhibitions, plays, and books, APR is able to reach and go beyond those spheres within which more conventional provenance research usually operates. This enables it not only to become a means of commenting on the ongoing debate about provenance but also to be fully part of it.

[34] Examples of this include the projects *Pressing Matter: Ownership, Value and the Question of Colonial Heritage in Museums* (funded by the Dutch National Science Agenda) and *REPATRIATES: Artistic Research in Museums and Communities in the Process of Repatriation from Europe* (funded by the European Research Council). Both projects allow artists to develop artistic research in topics that relate to provenance such as the ownership, handling, exhibiting, or repatriation of objects and collections of colonial contexts.

[35] In Germany, these two streams of funding tend to be separate, and there is a risk that APR work may be viewed as not quite fitting – and therefore not funded – either.

A Note on Terms

Provenance research typically centres tracing the history of particular objects. Those objects may be parts of people, and those parts may be regarded as people or otherwise animate by some. This poses questions about how such so-called objects should be referred to. Using the term *object* might not just be inaccurate; it might also risk, as von Bose writes in his chapter in this volume, ‘conceal[ing] the process of having been *made* into an object [...] [and of] having been de-subjectified’ (see also the discussions by Adler and Hulverscheidt). For this reason – in order to try to avoid continuing and even reinforcing objectification and depersonalization – Adler tries to avoid the pronoun *it* (preferring the singular *they*) for the human skull with which he works. Ideally, perhaps, the name of the person whose skull it was would be used, but this is precisely what is missing from the record. Moreover, some might consider using a person’s name in relation to a non-living body part to be not so much an addition of personhood to the body part as a diminution of personhood. Clearly, these are complicated matters in which, we argue, it is important to consider the specific cultural ontologies likely to be involved.

Human remains has become the most widely used term to refer to body parts of people no longer living, with terms such as *human skull* to refer to specific parts.¹ As with the term *object*, however, these might be regarded as failing to sufficiently recognize that these were parts of particular persons – by referring to them in terms of general categories and in the language of scientific discourse. For Maori and Moriori, for instance, and for those in Kunze’s chapter here, these are ancestors, and thus this is the term that Kunze uses.

Because of the complexity of the issues and their context-dependency, this volume does not seek to standardize any particular terms or uses; instead, each author uses the terms they feel most appropriate to the circumstances of their work.

[1] For further discussion of this term, 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: A Berlin Ethnography*, ed. Sharon Macdonald (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2023), 57–75.



Alternative portrait of a skull in a box, 2025. © Tal Adler

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.¹

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.² 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.

Teil-Katalog der wissenschaftlichen Sammlungen


HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN

Suche | Methode | Systematik | Nutzungsgeschichte

> Sammlung am Centrum für Anatomie

Schädel mit Beschriftungen nach Gall

Die Popularität der Gallischen Lehre führte dazu, dass phrenologisch bestimmte Schädel in großer Zahl hergestellt, verkauft und gesammelt wurden; im Zuge der allgemeinen Phrenologie-Begisterung gelangten wohl auch dieser und der von Gall's 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 »zertifizierte«, sind hauptsächlich »Scharfsinn«, »Tätigkeit«, »Erziehungsfähigkeit«, »Gemeinnützigkeit« (für den moralischen Sinn und das Rechtsbewusstsein umfasst). Auch negative Eigenschaften sind zu erkennen, so der »Würg- und Mordtrieb« mit den Unterbetreibungen »Barbarei, Blutrurst und Grausamkeit«. Ein eigenes Hirnorgan besitzt auch der »Fortpflanzungs- und Zeugungstrieb«, ihm benachbart ist der »Hang zur sinnlichen Liebe«.



© Charité, Centrum für Anatomie, Bagni Fernand, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Detailangaben

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 Anatonen Franz Josef Gall um 1800 in Wien entwickelte Schädellehre (Phrenologie) galt zu Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts als großer Fortschritt und faszinierte nicht nur Mediziner, sondern auch gebildete, nach ihrem Selbstverständnis aufgeklärte Laien. Gall suchte das Urfasische 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« erfüllten. So populär diese Lehre auch war - in Wien gedieh das phrenologische Restimmen von Schädeln zu einer Art Gesellschaftsspiel, an dem jeder ohne »viel Vorkenntnisse teilhaben zu können glaubte« - blieb sie nicht unumstritten und handelte sich den Vorwurf des Materialismus ein, der gegen die »reinen Grundtöne der Religion und Morals« verstoße. Diese damals fundamentale Kritik führte in Wien zum Verbot der Lehre. 1805 trat Gall eine längere Vortragsreihe 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, »mußte gleich, so wie sie bekannt zu werden anfing, mir dem ersten Anblicke nach zuzagen«. Freilich schätzte Goethe, der damals vergleichende morphologische Studien betrieb, Gall's 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 Hirnanatomom kam Gall indessen zu richtigen und wegsenswerten 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.³ 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).⁴ 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').⁵ 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.⁶ 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.

[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.⁷ 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.⁸

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 2001.⁹ 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.¹⁰ *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.¹¹ 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.¹² 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 1993.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.

[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.¹⁵ 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’.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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 *Kunstammer* – 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.¹⁸ 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'.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ With his vision of resurrecting the historical Kunstkammer in the heart of Berlin, Bredekamp, in 2015, became one of the three founding directors (Gründungsintendant) of the expansive exhibition venue and museum complex inside the reconstructed Berlin Palace – the newly established Humboldt Forum.²¹

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.²² 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.²³ 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.²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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.

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.²⁸

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.²⁹ 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.³⁰ 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'.³¹

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.³²

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.³³ 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.³⁴ The reasons are given in a short explanatory text on the portal, which states that these are ‘mainly cultural-ethical and licensing’.³⁵ 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.³⁶ 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.³⁷ 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.³⁸ 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)?³⁹ 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.⁴⁰

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.⁴¹ He also remembered the so-called Gall skull, which he later referred to as ‘a Wunderkammer item’ and ‘an icon of the collection’.⁴² 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’.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ 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 2012.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸ 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).



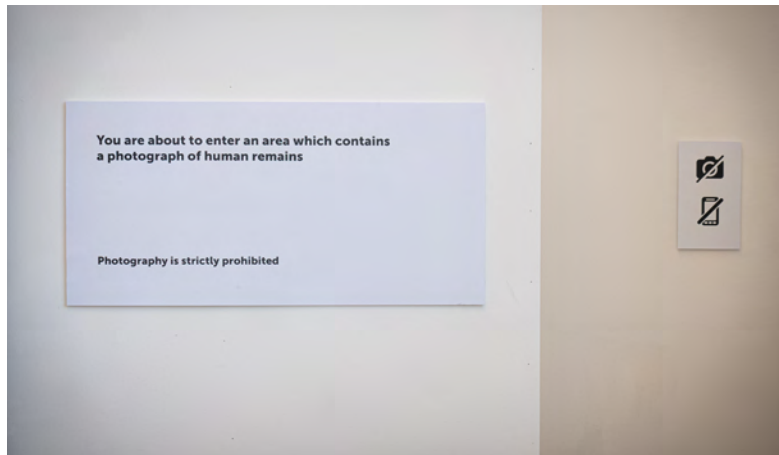
Demonstrators with a sign calling for a German apology for the genocide of the Herero and Nama (1904–1908) at a demonstration against the Humboldt Forum, organized by the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum, August 15, 2020. © Tal Adler

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.⁴⁹

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.⁵⁰ 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.^[51] As one conservative and impatient journalist in the *Guardian* put it, ‘hand wringing is not art’.^[52]

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.⁵³

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).⁵⁴

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.⁵⁵

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.⁵⁶

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.⁵⁷

[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'.⁵⁸ 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).⁵⁹

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 proposal⁶⁰; 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.⁶¹ 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 2013.⁶² 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.⁶³ 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'.⁶⁴ 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).⁶⁵ 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/contexts/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.⁶⁶

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.⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸

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

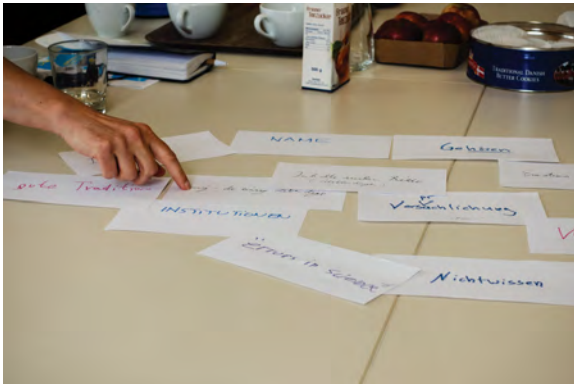
suspended from the ceiling on pantograph arms, one next to another, creating a crowded, colourful, somewhat confounding installation at the centre of the main exhibition space of the Humboldt Lab. The long and tall wall in front of the hanging display cases was covered by the kinetic *Wall of Research* – 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.⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹ 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.⁷²

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 Burggrabe (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-auseinandersetzung-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 issuing 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: 451.52i (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.⁷³ 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.⁷⁴

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

We Are ID8470

Tal Adler

Future work will have to focus on the investigation of further biographies so that numbers can be turned back into people.

–Sabine Hildebrandt, ‘The Women on Stieve’s List’¹

Meeting Spirits

From the first time I was introduced to the story of the so-called Gall skull in 2019, even before I visited them at the anatomical collection of the Charité, many of their spirits – those human stories, past lives somehow related to the bare cranial bones – were already with me.²

During the ten years prior to that, I was immersed in the field of human remains that linger in collections all around the world. My first direct encounter with such a collection (in Vienna, in 2009) was extreme: I came face-to-face with a collection of bones of more than forty thousand people, whose histories were often tragic and violent; I stood shocked in front of a thirty-metre-long cabinet that displayed a few thousand of

[1] Sabine Hildebrandt, ‘The Women on Stieve’s List: Victims of National Socialism Whose Bodies Were Used for Anatomical Research’, *Clinical Anatomy* 26, no. 3 (2013): 3. Hildebrandt refers to a quote by Timothy Snyder: ‘It is for us scholars, to seek these numbers and put them into perspective. It is for us humanists to turn the numbers back into people’. Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 408.

[2] This chapter discusses my work with spirit narratives, which was one element of the project *Who is ID8470?*. For a better understanding of the project and its broader context, see my chapter ‘Who is ID8470?’ in this volume. On using the singular pronoun *they* to write about the so-called Gall skull from the anatomical collection of the Charité, see ‘Who is ID8470?’ in this volume.

these skulls, only a fraction of the entire collection.³ The impact of the encounter prompted me to engage with the collection, research it, try to comprehend it. In the process, I learned about the histories and motivations – especially those that rose within the contexts of European science between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries – that led to the rampant collecting of skulls and other human remains.⁴ I gradually encountered more collections around the world, some of which I have visited and in which I have spoken to, held interviews with, or conducted research with their staff. Directly and indirectly, I was exposed to stories from dozens of collections, altogether containing hundreds of thousands of human remains. Through the histories of early anatomy and medical research, phrenology, racial theories, anthropology, archaeology, world expeditions, exhibitions, colonialism, world wars, the Holocaust and other genocides, criminology, forensics, and genetic research – the ways in which human remains were obtained, as well as the historical periods and social, political and geographical contexts, varied greatly. So diverse and numerous were the spirit narratives I came across through my encounters with their remains in the collections, through reading and talking about them, through finding them in historical photographs, or through watching films about their lives. So many lives.

But in 2019, in contrast to my previous encounters in and with collections of human remains, I was introduced to *just* one skull. Until then, one of my main motivations, as well as challenges, was to highlight the individual story – hidden, erased by the way human remains were amassed and kept as objects. However, when I was finally introduced to a single skull, to an individual, so many stories – so many spirits – emerged. The spirit narratives appeared gradually, in the process of writing them down. They surfaced mostly when I drifted between states of deep contemplation and unintentional daydreaming, likely summoned in the spaces between implicit memories, associative thinking, instinct, imagination,

[3] For more information on the *Dead Images* project and the skulls at the Natural History Museum Vienna, see Tal Adler, Linda Fibiger, John Harries, Joan Smith, Anna Szöke, and Maria Teschler-Nicola, 'Dead Images: Facing the History, Ethics and Politics of European Skull Collections', in *Contentious Heritage and the Arts: A Critical Companion*, ed. Marion Ham and Klaus Schönberger (Klagenfurt: Wieser, 2021), 63–68; 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.

[4] See for example Wulf D. Hund, ed., *Entfremdete Körper. Rassismus als Leichenschändung* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009); Margit Berner, Anette Hoffmann, and Britta Lange, *Sensible Sammlungen. Aus dem anthropologischen Depot* (Hamburg: PHILO Fine Arts, 2011); Holger Stoecker, Thomas Schnalke, and Andreas Winkelmann, eds., *Sammeln, Erforschen, Zurückgeben? Menschliche Gebeine aus der Kolonialzeit in akademischen und musealen Sammlungen* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2013); Frances Larson, *Severed: A History of Heads Lost and Heads Found* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2014); Samuel J. Redman, *Bone Rooms. From Scientific Racism to Human Prehistory in Museums* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Ann Fabian, *The Skull Collectors: Race, Science, and America's Unburied Dead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).



Skull mounts at the anatomical collection of the Centre for Anatomy at the Charité, Berlin, 2020. Film still from the *Who is ID8470?* video. © Tal Adler

and a metaphysical connection that is hard to capture in words. Unlike scenes in ghost or haunting movies, where apparitions or voices manifest in direct relation to specific physical objects and places, the narratives I received required no ghost-hunting tools, mystical rituals, or proximity to human remains. Instead, they surfaced organically, in a state of reflection hovering between reverie and intention.⁵

Why did multiple spirits appear around a single skull? Because

the identity of this person was unknown? Because no one seemed to be interested in this person's identity until then? Perhaps, also, because this skull was not alone in this collection: next to them, mounted behind vitrine doors, hundreds of human remains are still kept and displayed – the remains of other people with different stories. Maybe they, too, wanted to tell their stories. Maybe, after decades and sometimes centuries in the same collection, spirits – stories – get mixed up, confused, fused.

Possible Biographies

The multiple stories that emerged around the skull from the anatomical collection of the Charité spanned centuries, places, and sexes. As voices reached out to me from beyond life, from beyond my mortal understanding of reality, I, as the medium capturing their stories, felt obliged to accept them all equally. To me, the different biographies narrated by the multiple spirits did not contradict one another; they did not compete for reasonableness or call for a hierarchy of plausibility (as a more conventional approach to provenance might stipulate).⁶ Having researched many similar collections and histories and having learned about so many similar narratives, I knew that the stories that emerged around the skull at the Charité were all possible. By listening to their stories, and later echoing them through the *Who is ID8470?* video, I wanted to acknowledge and assert their truthfulness.

[5] I am grateful to my late aunt Hannah, who was a medium for spirits and, though she passed before I was born, may have helped me connect to the spirits of the skull from the Charité. This work is dedicated to her.

[6] See the introduction to this volume for a discussion of different approaches to narratives and speculation within artistic and scientific provenance research. See also Larissa Förster's chapter in this volume for her definition of 'tentative object biographies'.

Of the many spirits I encountered while working on the *Who is ID8470?* project, only a few eventually appear in the seventeen-minute video, one of the outcomes of this project.⁷ In this video, four of the spirits narrate fragments of their stories, while the others make fewer, yet poignant statements. At the end of the video, they all recite a poem together, or a sort of manifesto. The brevity of the spirits' appearances, their laconic statements, and their apparent struggle with remembering their names produced enigmatic accounts, which entailed fundamental questions: Who were they? When and where did they live? How did they die? And why did their skull end up in the anatomical collection of the Charité? Trying to answer these questions, I researched every hint left in their short testimonies. Although I managed to reveal many of the contexts around their stories and the possible circumstances of their lives and deaths, in most cases I did not find their personal identities.

Laying out the results of my research in this chapter without being able to name the spirits presented me with a challenge. For a project whose main goal was to 'turn numbers back into people', describing these spirits' moving stories without giving them a name might seem contradictory. At the same time, however, it was precisely this acute absence (and the painful way that the spirits seem to struggle without a name in the video) that resonated with the essential question in the project's title – Who is this person? By making this uncomfortable contradiction visible, the nameless spirits embody the main concern of this project: the objectification that is inherent in collections of human remains.⁸

Unlike in the video, where the spirits speak directly to us in the first person, this text requires referring to each spirit in the third person. To create a more individual reference than simply 'the spirit', I used the information I found about them in my research and named them here as *the performer*, *the prisoner*, *the maid*, and *the architect*, leaving open the inner contradiction between the desire to re-humanize them and the decision to highlight their missing names.

[7] The main reason for not including all the spirit narratives in the video was limitations on its length. I selected only a few stories, on the basis of their relevance to visitors to the Humboldt Lab and their ability to exemplify the range and variety of anatomical body acquisition. See the video here: 'Who is ID8470?', posted March 1, 2024, by Artistic Provenance Research, YouTube, 17 : 51, <https://youtu.be/QBu56hd8Cy0?si=tsZ2wyTvXjku2pBP>.

[8] This is especially apparent in anatomical collections in which the removal of the name and identities of the person dissected is part of the practice's core traditions. See the discussion of this topic with Thomas Schnalke and Andreas Winkelmann in the 'Who is ID8470?' video, at 1 : 33–2 : 13.



*The performer's spirit, played by Deborah Cohen. Film still from the *Who is ID8470?* video.*
© Tal Adler

The Performer

Coming here was my biggest mistake. I didn't know I would never go back home.

*They put us in the exhibition *Cairo in Berlin*. We were hundreds of people, but only twenty were actually from Egypt. People paid to look at us, to look at our clothes, to hear our songs.*

Before leaving for our next show in Paris, I got very ill. They took me to their hospital. They measured me and photographed me from every angle.

After I died, they opened me up and looked inside.

They still keep my head there.

In her disturbing account, this spirit – *the performer* – refers to an exhibition she calls *Cairo in Berlin*. I found many historical records referring to an exhibition called *Cairo*, which was set up as one of the main attractions of the famous Industrial Exhibition of Berlin (der Berliner Gewerbe-Ausstellung) that took place in Treptower Park between May and October 1896.⁹ Designed and constructed as a much bigger event

[9] *Offizieller Haupt-Katalog der Berliner Gewerbe-Ausstellung 1896* (Berlin: Rudolf Mosse, 1896); Karl Krug, *Offizieller Führer Durch Die Special-Abteilung Kairo Der Berliner Gewerbe-Ausstellung 1896* (Berlin: Kleinen Journals, 1896). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.



Aerial view of the exhibition grounds in Treptower Park. Illustration from the *Offizieller Haupt-Katalog der Berliner Gewerbe-Ausstellung 1896*. Zentral- und Landesbibliothek Berlin (public domain).

than a national trade fair, the Industrial Exhibition of Berlin 1896 was inspired by – and arguably in competition with – the grand world’s fairs of the time, such as the 1889 Paris Exposition.¹⁰ Taking note from these world’s fairs, the Industrial Exhibition of Berlin of 1896 also included the first *German Colonial Exhibition* (Deutsche Kolonial-Ausstellung), which was funded by the foreign ministry, and in which 106 people from the newly established German colonies in Africa were exhibited and were enlisted to perform for the fair’s visitors.¹¹ The *Cairo* exhibition, in which *the performer* probably participated, was not part of the *German Colonial Exhibition*, however.¹² Designated as a special exhibition and funded privately, *Cairo* was one of the fair’s central attractions, drawing in probably more than two million visitors, including several visits by the Prussian Kaiser himself.¹³ Representing a mixture of Cairo’s historical and contemporary sites, the exhibition included detailed reconstructions of streets, shops, restaurants, mosques, and a harem, but it also extended its offerings beyond the representation of the city, with highlights such as a peasant village and a thirty-eight-metre-high model of Giza’s great pyramid (referred to in the exhibition as ‘Cheop’s pyramid’), in which visitors could observe two mummies and climb up with an electric lift to the top of the pyramid to enjoy the view.¹⁴

[10] Because of the objection of Kaiser Wilhelm II to an international world’s fair taking place in Berlin, the Industrial Exhibition of Berlin, which was as significant and grand as other international world’s fairs of that time and included the first ‘German Colonial Exhibition’, was dubbed the ‘impeded world show’ (‘die verhinderte Weltausstellung’). See Horst Kleinert, *Mit der Tram in die Kolonien des Kaisers. Die Gewerbe- und Kolonialausstellung von 1896 in Berlin* (Lüneburg: Thurm, 2019), 19–22; Alexander C. T. Geppert, ‘Weltstadt für einen Sommer: Die Berliner Gewerbeausstellung 1896 im europäischen Kontext’, *Mitteilungen des Vereins für die Geschichte Berlins* 103, no. 1 (2007): 434–48.

[11] Anne Dreesbach, *Gezähmte Wilde. Die Zurschaustellung ‘exotischer Menschen’ in Deutschland 1870–1940* (Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus, 2005), 245–79; Gustav Meinecke, ed., *Deutschland und seine Kolonien im Jahre 1896. Amtlicher Bericht über die erste Deutsche Kolonial-Ausstellung* (Berlin: Reimer, 1897).

[12] For more on the *Cairo* exhibition and the differences and relationship between this exhibition and the neighbouring colonial exhibition, see Aischa Ahmed, *Arabische Präsenzen in Deutschland um 1900. Biografische Interventionen in die deutsche Geschichte* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2020), 160–73.

[13] Ines Roman, ‘Exotische Welten – Die Inszenierung Ägyptens in der Sonderausstellung “Kairo” der Berliner Gewerbe-Ausstellung von 1896’ (master’s thesis, Universität Münster, 2010), 43–44, 46.

[14] Geppert, ‘Weltstadt für einen Sommer’, 441.



Illustration on the cover of the *Offizieller Führer durch die Special-Abteilung Kairo der Berliner Gewerbe-Ausstellung 1896*. Zentral- und Landesbibliothek Berlin (public domain).

In her spirit narrative, *the performer* mentioned that only a few of the exhibition's participants 'were actually from Egypt'. Although I did not find biographies of *Cairo's* participants, it seems that there was an effort to represent a variety of Egypt's population by recruiting 'Bedouins, Arab merchants and craftsmen, peasants, Copts, Sudanese, Abyssinians and Nubians' for the show.¹⁵ Judging by the language and dialect she used to communicate with me, I think that *the performer* might have been an Israelite Samaritan woman. How she got to participate in *Cairo* is unclear, especially as the Israelite Samaritan community in those days was extremely small and under threat of assimilation and extinction.¹⁶ However, since the exhibition included a 'Palestinian collection', it could be that *the performer* was somehow connected to that part, offering the unique position of someone who is fluent in both Arabic and (Samaritan) Hebrew, and who is a member of a community that traces its origins to the biblical kingdom of Israel, maintaining a continuous existence on that land (mainly in Shechem/Nablus) even after the destruction of their kingdom (in 722

BCE). The official guide to the *Cairo* exhibition mentions the sale of wines from Palestine in this section of the exhibition, and although it does not mention a Jewish connection, newspaper reports from that time do refer to the sale of 'products of Jewish villages in Palestine', so it could have been that the organizers needed a local representative (such as *the performer*) who was unaffected by Islam's disapproval of wine.¹⁷

It is no surprise that *the performer* became seriously ill towards the end of the exhibition, just like many other performers in so-called human shows across Europe who might have been more susceptible to the local pathogens and not accustomed to the European weather, especially since they had to perform in supposedly traditional outfits that were often

[15] Roman, 'Exotische Welten', 43.

[16] Reinhard Pummer, *The Samaritans: A Profile* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2016), 155–70; Sean Ireton, 'The Samaritans: Strategies for Survival of an Ethno-Religious Minority in the Twenty First Century' (master's thesis, University of Kent at Canterbury, 2003).

[17] Quoted in Ines Roman, 'Exotische Welten', 58; for the original source, see *Vossische Zeitung*, no. 409, morning edition, September 1, 1896.



'Arabic Café'. Illustration from the booklet *Ansichten von Kairo in der Berliner Gewerbeausstellung 1896*. Zentral- und Landesbibliothek Berlin (public domain).

unsuitable for that climate.¹⁸ Being taken to hospital was probably the first time she was allowed to leave the area of the exhibition – all participants of *Cairo* were forbidden to leave the exhibition's grounds without supervision.¹⁹ When the show was over, they were escorted by the police directly to the trains that took them outside of Germany and to the port in Trieste on their way back home.²⁰

The performer's account of being measured and photographed by the physicians at the hospital

was common practice. European and American anthropologists took great interest in the human shows of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which provided them with an opportunity to conduct research on these shows' participants conveniently and in proximity to their research institutions, without the need for complicated, expensive, and dangerous expeditions outside Europe.²¹ Indeed, the participants of the *German Colonial Exhibition* that took place close to the *Cairo* exhibition were researched by the renowned anthropologist Felix von Luschan, who visited and measured them at the exhibition in 1896. Von Luschan published a comprehensive essay about his research, accompanied by the photographs and detailed measurements of the participants, in the official report of the colonial exhibition.²²

The performer said that after her death, she was dissected and that her 'head remained there'. This, too, is unfortunately not unusual for this period – bodies of many of the human shows' participants who died in Europe and the United States were exploited in that way, and

[18] See, for example, the story of the eight Labrador Inuit who were recruited in 1880 to be exhibited in zoos in Germany and France, where they all died of smallpox: France Rivet, *In the Footsteps of Abraham Ulrikab: The Events of 1880–1881* (Gatineau: Polar Horizons, 2014), Kindle, loc. 2052–2708 of 5271.

[19] Roman, 'Exotische Welten', 45.

[20] Quoted in Ines Roman, 'Exotische Welten', 45; for the original source, see *Berliner Morgen-Zeitung*, no. 252, General-Anzeiger, October 25, 1896, and no. 253, October 27, 1896.

[21] Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, Gilles Boëtsch, Éric Deroo, and Sandrine Lemaire, 'Human Zoos: The Greatest Exotic Shows in the West', in *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Colonial Empires*, ed. Blanchard et al., trans. Teresa Bridgeman (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 1–51.

[22] Felix von Luschan, 'Völkerkunde', in *Deutschland und seine Kolonien*, 203–69.

Waswahlil, darunter ein Junge aus Unyoro (26) und ein Mkoode (27).

Landes-Nummer	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32
Namen
Ungefähre Alter
Kopfform
Ungefähre Größe
Ungefähre Bauart
Kleider-Schmuck
Gewöhnliche A
B
Nasenbreite
Jackenbreite
Kleiderstoff
Einfach d. unternen Lagerplatz
zusammenfassend
Handbreite
Lappbreite
Ohrlänge
Ohrlänge
Körperhöhe im Sitzen
Höhe im Knien
Ganze Höhe
Höhe des oberen Brustkastens
zur Kniehöhe
Kleiderweite
Schulterbreite
Handbreite
Länge des längeren Arms
zur Vorderarm
Länge der Hand
Breite der Hand
Länge des Mittelfingers innen
innen
Handbreite Umfang des Knies
Brustumfang
Kleider Umfang d. Unterarmes
Gürtel
Gürtel Umfang d. Oberarmes
Faßlänge
Faßbreite

Waswahlil, darunter ein Mann aus Unyoro und ein Mkoode. Indices.

Gr.- zahlen	No.	Name	Sprache	Kopfform		Zweiteilung des		Körpergröße im		Kleidergröße im		Kleidergröße im				
				Beide	Höhe	2h. A.	Ch. B. C.	Beide	Höhe	2h. A.	Ch. B. C.	Beide	Höhe	2h. A.	Ch. B. C.	
Mann	16	Unyoro	216	527	130	873	552	783	827	848	109	474	209	538	248	813
	17	Waswahlil	218	626	134	793	667	842	979	999	107	453	179	458	212	848
	18	Waswahlil	120	646	139	897	576	869	1092	1011	109	467	199	486	212	819
	19	Waswahlil	218	606	139	869	576	794	774	899	109	469	172	517	210	847
	20	Waswahlil	216	649	139	869	576	863	800	104	464	208	531	248	848	
	21	Waswahlil	214	744	141	830	544	793	914	818	104	463	207	483	211	830
	22	Waswahlil	218	641	142	864	584	768	884	904	101	465	184	514	210	831
	23	Waswahlil	217	696	144	866	522	846	976	911	101	469	179	462	210	842
	24	Waswahlil	219	646	144	830	576	794	809	1011	101	465	179	474	214	844
	25	Waswahlil	219	646	144	830	576	794	809	1011	101	465	179	474	214	844
Frauen und Kinder	26	Waswahlil	219	646	144	830	576	794	809	1011	101	465	179	474	214	844
	27	Waswahlil	219	646	144	830	576	794	809	1011	101	465	179	474	214	844
	28	Waswahlil	219	646	144	830	576	794	809	1011	101	465	179	474	214	844
	29	Waswahlil	219	646	144	830	576	794	809	1011	101	465	179	474	214	844
	30	Waswahlil	219	646	144	830	576	794	809	1011	101	465	179	474	214	844
	31	Waswahlil	219	646	144	830	576	794	809	1011	101	465	179	474	214	844
	32	Waswahlil	219	646	144	830	576	794	809	1011	101	465	179	474	214	844
	33	Waswahlil	219	646	144	830	576	794	809	1011	101	465	179	474	214	844
	34	Waswahlil	219	646	144	830	576	794	809	1011	101	465	179	474	214	844
	35	Waswahlil	219	646	144	830	576	794	809	1011	101	465	179	474	214	844

some of their remains are still located in collections to this day.²³ For people like *the performer* and their relatives, this might have been especially horrific because of their faiths. Whether Samaritan Israelite, Muslim, or Jewish – according to their mortuary practices, they should have been buried, complete, immediately after death, and no part of their remains should have been kept and exhibited.²⁴

Page from the *Deutschland und seine Kolonien im Jahre 1896* publication with measurements of participants of the *German Colonial Exhibition*. Smithsonian Libraries and Archives (public domain).

[23] For example, the remains of the eight Labrador Inuit have not been returned; some of them are located in France and Germany, and some have not yet been found. See Rivet, *In the Footsteps of Abraham Ulrikab*, loc. 3251–3771 of 5271. The remains of Sarah Baartman and her body cast were on display at the Muséum d'histoire naturelle d'Angers and the Musée de l'Homme until the mid 1970s; her remains were returned to South Africa and buried in 2002, but her body cast and documentation are still in France. See Sadiya Qureshi, 'Displaying Sara Baartman, the "Hottentot Venus"', *History of Science* 42, no. 2 (June 2004): 233–57; Deborah Willis, 'Introduction: The Notion of Venus', in *Black Venus 2010: They Called Her 'Hottentot'*, ed. Deborah Willis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 10. [24] For my previous work exploring multiple perspectives on mortuary practices in the context of collections of human remains, see the video *CULTURE* that was produced as part of the *Dead Images* project: 'CULTURE', posted May 27, 2019, by Artistic Provenance Research, YouTube, 21 : 05, <https://youtu.be/eH1cFytqkJU?si=pRqcKpM-K9IQEz37X>.



The prisoner's spirit, played by Hannah Hurtzig. Film still from the *Who is ID8470?* video.
© Tal Adler

The Prisoner

A day before my execution, the guards announced a visit from a doctor – ‘a university professor’. I got excited, as I thought he could help, but when I saw him, I knew I was wrong. There was no empathy in his gaze. He asked me about my menstruation and if I was afraid of dying. His eyes cut through my flesh. It was worse than anything the guards did to me.

As much as it was disturbing to hear this spirit's – *the prisoner's* – laconic, yet poignant vignette of what might have been her last conversation before her death, it was heartbreaking and infuriating to learn more about the possible contexts of this scene. The few hints in her description refer to a gruesome chapter in the history of science, in which scientists willingly collaborated with, supported, and benefitted from corrupt and murderous power. Researching the connections between the anatomical collection of the Charité (in which the skull is kept), executed women, and the academic interest at the time in menstruation and fear of death, I came across the well-documented story of anatomist Hermann Stieve (1886–1952), who was director of the Anatomical Institute of Berlin University (precursor of today's anatomical institute at the Charité) from 1935 until his death in 1952.²⁵

[25] From the many publications on Stieve, I mainly used the following: Susanne Zimmermann, “... er lebt weiter in seinen Arbeiten, die als unverrückbare Steine in das Gebäude der Wissenschaft eingefügt sind”: Zum Umgang



Judges of the People's Court, 1944. Bundesarchiv, Bild 151-39-23 (CC BY-SA 3.0).

Alongside his work as professor of anatomy, Stieve was interested in the way external factors influence the reproductive system. After preliminary research on animals, he went on to research the human reproductive system, relying mainly on dissections of executed men and those of female victims of accidents or suicide.²⁶ However, with the establishment of the Nazi regime, Stieve had the opportunity to shift his research to

focus on the effects of extreme and chronic stress on the female reproductive system. German anatomists traditionally used the bodies of executed prisoners for teaching and research, but until the beginning of the Nazi regime, executions of female prisoners were extremely rare.²⁷ Because of the Nazi regime's use of capital punishment in civil courts for women, too, and their policies preventing family members from claiming and burying their bodies, Stieve was suddenly provided with an unprecedented surplus of bodies that were suitable for his research: healthy women of reproductive age who had suffered extreme and continuous terror and who could be delivered to his institute immediately after their deaths.²⁸ Executed at the Plötzensee Prison in Berlin, located a few minutes' ride from Stieve's institute, these women were persecuted mainly

mit den Arbeiten des Anatomen Hermann Stieve (1886–1952) in der Nachkriegszeit, in *Täterschaft-Strafverfolgung-Schuldentlastung. Ärztebiographien zwischen nationaler Gewaltherrschaft und deutscher Nachkriegsgeschichte* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2007), 29–40; Sabine Hildebrandt, 'Capital Punishment and Anatomy: History and Ethics of an Ongoing Association', *Clinical Anatomy* 21, no. 5 (2008): 5–14; Andreas Winkelmann and Udo Schagen, 'Hermann Stieve's Clinical-Anatomical Research on Executed Women During the "Third Reich"', *Clinical Anatomy* 22, no. 2 (2009): 163–71; Sabine Hildebrandt, 'The Women on Stieve's List', 3–21; Sabine Hildebrandt, 'Research on Bodies of the Executed in German Anatomy: An Accepted Method that Changed During the Third Reich. Study of Anatomical Journals from 1924 to 1951', *Clinical Anatomy* 26, no. 3 (2013): 304–26; Emily Bazelon, 'The Nazi Anatomists: How the Corpses of Hitler's Victims Are Still Haunting Modern Science – and American Abortion Politics', *Slate*, June 11, 2013; Andreas Winkelmann, 'Traces of Nazi Victims in Hermann Stieve's Histological Collection', *Annals of Anatomy – Anatomischer Anzeiger* 237 (2021): 1–12; Andreas Winkelmann, 'The "Economy of Truth": New Historical Sources Allow New Insights into Hermann Stieve's Use of Bodies of Execution Victims for Research', *Annals of Anatomy – Anatomischer Anzeiger* 241, (2022): 1–13.

[26] Hildebrandt, 'Capital Punishment', 5–14.

[27] During the Weimar Republic (1918–33), for example, no women were executed. See Hildebrandt, 'Research on Bodies of the Executed', 309.

[28] When writing here about executions under the Nazi regime, I am referring only to executions following legal proceedings in civilian and military courts, not the millions that were killed outside of the judiciary system, such as in concentration camps and under the Aktion T4 (Nazi involuntary euthanasia program).

for opposing, resisting, or not complying with the Nazi regime.²⁹ Some of them were part of resistance groups, such as Rote Kapelle, Baum-Gruppe, and Steinbrink-Gruppe, as well as the Czech, Polish, and French resistance. Others resisted outside of organized groups.³⁰ Some women were executed merely for voicing critique of and disagreement with the regime and were reported to the authorities by acquaintances, colleagues, and neighbours. Others were executed for various crimes, such as theft or arson. Among them were very young forced labourers who were abducted from German occupied territories and enslaved in German farms and businesses.³¹

The Nazi Ministry of Justice (Reichsjustizministerium) regulated the distribution of the bodies of the executed by connecting the different anatomical institutions to specific execution facilities and by preventing the families of the executed from claiming and burying their bodies.³² Stieve, for his part, maintained a beneficial relationship with the Plötzensee Prison – he was regularly notified ahead of the executions and had even managed to get the time of executions changed to better suit the schedule of his dissections.³³ In addition to the basic information that Stieve received from the prison ahead of the executions (such as a victim's name and verdict, and sometimes date of birth), he gained access to intimate information, such as these women's health condition, number of births or pregnancies, their menstruation, duration of imprisonment, and even of cases of rape.³⁴ This information was vital for his research, which focused on how the victims' terrible experiences – Gestapo interrogations and torture, prolonged imprisonment, sexual abuse and rape, constant fear of death, and the dreadful announcement about their execution – influenced their reproductive organs and their function. Although it has not been proven whether Stieve himself interviewed the victims before their executions or had others gather these intimate details for him, such data were found in his notes. He used this information for his research and teaching and published it in his academic papers.³⁵

Since it is not possible to assert that Stieve personally engaged with prisoners before their executions, I continued searching for other cases and

[29] Johannes Tuchel, *Hinrichtungen im Strafgefängnis Berlin-Plötzensee 1933 bis 1945 und der Anatom Hermann Stieve* (Berlin: Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand, 2019).

[30] Hildebrandt, 'The Women on Stieve's List', 6–7.

[31] Hildebrandt, 'The Women on Stieve's List', 7.

[32] Andreas Winkelmann, *Sezieren und Sammeln. 300 Jahre Berliner Anatomie 1713 bis heute* (Berlin: be.bra wissenschaft verlag, 2018), 42–43.

[33] Bazelon, 'The Nazi Anatomists'.

[34] Winkelmann, 'The "Economy of Truth"', 9.

[35] Winkelmann, 'The "Economy of Truth"', 9.



Harro and Libertas Schulze-Boysen from the Rote Kapelle resistance group, 1935. Both were executed in 1942; Libertas is one of Stieve's victims. Unknown photographer, from the collection of the German Resistance Memorial Centre (public domain).

found many examples of German and Austrian doctors, anatomists, and researchers who were active during the Nazi regime and, in pursuit of their research, personally engaged with victims before their deaths. These researchers designed and conducted a variety of experiments and investigations that were forced on the victims, often involving torture and death.³⁶

Unlike most of the other spirits whose stories I have captured, *the prisoner's* true identity – her real name and biography – could theoretically be identified. She was

probably a victim of the Nazi regime, and thus her story is much closer to our time than that of the other spirits I encountered, and enormous biographical research has already been carried out to commemorate many of this era's victims. This is especially true in the case of the executed women that Stieve dissected; several lists, altogether comprising the names of 226 women that were executed in Plötzensee and dissected by Stieve, have been published so far.³⁷ Some of these victims' biographies, especially of members of the now-celebrated resistance groups,

[36] Anatomists Max Clara, August Hirt, and Johann Paul Kremer are known to have engaged with execution victims before their death for the purpose of their research and experimentation. See Andreas Winkelmann and Thorsten Noack, 'The Clara Cell: a "Third Reich Eponym"?', *European Respiratory Journal* 36 (2010): 722–27; Hans-Joachim Lang, *Die Namen der Nummern. Wie Es Gelingt, Die 86 Opfer eines NS-Verbrechens zu identifizieren* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 2004); Hans-Joachim Lang, 'August Hirt and "Extraordinary Opportunities for Cadaver Delivery" to Anatomical Institutes in National Socialism: A Murderous Change in Paradigm', *Annals of Anatomy – Anatomischer Anzeiger* 195, no. 5 (2013): 373–80; Nicolas Mariot, 'Bypassing Birkenau, Autumn 1942: Re-examining the Diary of SS-Doctor Johann Paul Kremer in Auschwitz', *20 & 21. Revue d'histoire* 139, no. 3 (2018): 111–27. Other than these anatomists, there were many doctors, medical staff and researchers who have performed experiments on victims or were otherwise involved in their killing during the Nazi regime. See, for example, Gerhard Baader and Ulrich Schultz, *Medizin und Nationalsozialismus. Tabuisierte Vergangenheit – ungebrochene Tradition?* (Berlin: Verlagsgesellschaft Gesundheit, 1980); Jay Katz, 'Abuse of Human Beings for the Sake of Science', in *When Medicine Went Mad: Contemporary Issues in Biomedicine, Ethics, and Society*, ed. Arthur L. Caplan (Totowa: Humana Press, 1992), 233–70; Götz Aly, Peter Chroust, and Christian Pross, *Cleansing the Fatherland: Nazi Medicine and Racial Hygiene* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

[37] For an overview of the various lists, the differences between them, and their sources, see Winkelmann, 'The "Economy of Truth"', 8.

have been thoroughly researched.³⁸ Although my project is centred on the notion of ‘turning the numbers back into people’, and I would have loved to present *the prisoner’s* real name and biography, there are a few challenges in finding and publishing this information. First, there were 334 women executed in Plötzensee during the Nazi regime, significantly more than the 226 names that appear on the lists connected with Stieve, which might mean that these lists are not yet complete. But even if all the names were known, and even if the spirit narrative would have provided more specific information about her identity, there would still be a second challenge in publishing it.

As has been discussed by several scholars, revealing the names of executed victims of the Nazi regime poses ethical dilemmas.³⁹ On the one hand, publishing the victims’ names and stories can serve to remember and commemorate them. By naming them, we resist their perpetrators’ intention to objectify them – to turn them into numbers and objects of research and experimentation. Remembering them can counter their perpetrators’ wish to erase them. Commemorating them honours and validates their struggles and sacrifices and those of their families and loved ones. Publishing their stories can help new research and commemoration, support and hearten the victims’ descendants, and encourage a society of compassion and solidarity.

On the other hand, some information connected with their victimization can still be hurtful or pose various difficulties for their families and descendants – and indeed, some families have asked scholars not to publish the names of their loved ones.⁴⁰ There is often sensitive and intimate information about the victims that their families might want to keep private, especially in the context of Stieve and his research on the reproductive system of the victims. In the case of the victims of the Aktion T4, for example, family members might be worried about stigma and other implications of association with psychiatric and other illnesses. Although being part of the resistance against the Nazi regime is broadly celebrated nowadays, this has not always been the case, and in the past,

[38] See, for example, *Du hast mich heimgesucht bei Nacht. Abschiedsbriefe und Aufzeichnungen des Widerstandes 1939 bis 1945*, ed. Helmut Gollwitzer, Käthe Kuhn, and Reinhold Schneider (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1954); Hildebrandt, ‘The Women on Stieve’s List’; *Ehrenbuch der Opfer von Berlin-Plötzensee. Zum Gedenken der 1574 Frauen und Männer, die wegen ihrer politischen oder weltanschaulichen Einstellung und wegen ihres mutigen Widerstandes gegen das faschistische Barbarentum in der Strafanstalt Berlin-Plötzensee von 1933–1945 hingerichtet wurden*, ed. Willy Perk and Willi Desch (Berlin: Verein der Verfolgten des Naziregimes Westberlin, 1974); ‘Die Toten von Plötzensee’, website of Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand (German Resistance Memorial Center), <https://www.gedenkstaette-ploetzensee.de/totenbuch/recherche>.

[39] Winkelmann, ‘Traces of Nazi Victims’, 2; Hildebrandt, ‘The Women on Stieve’s List’, 4–5; Zimmermann, ‘er lebt weiter in seinen Arbeiten’, 18.

[40] Zimmermann, ‘er lebt weiter in seinen Arbeiten’, 18.

there were families who were reluctant to have this connection published for fear of social alienation and retribution. Similarly, stigma is also of concern for families of victims who were executed for other crimes (or what the Nazis considered crimes). Eventually, publishing about the torture, abuse, and objectification that the victims suffered before and after their death might involve the risk of resurfacing and perpetuating the victims' and their families' suffering.

Different scholars have taken different approaches to these dilemmas, with the goal of respecting the wishes of the families and the dignity of the victims, and in compliance with ethical considerations. Some have refrained from publishing names, some have published names but kept the reason for execution hidden, others have kept sensitive medical information to the necessary minimum. In the *Who is ID8470?* video, the spirits themselves have chosen how much information to provide. Since *the prisoner* did not say her name, I decided not to explore further.



The architect's spirit, played by Jonas Tinius. Film still from the *Who is ID8470?* video.
© Tal Adler

The Architect

*It was a horrible idea. It completely ruined my design!
Any amateur can see it – the dome has an opening to let the light in, you understand? Why should it be covered with a lantern and a cross?! It blocks the light!
But I couldn't tell him – the crown prince. It would have insulted him. I knew he admired me; he always wanted me to look at his unoriginal architectural sketches.
But, that last meeting in the palace, seeing his sketch with a cross on the palace's dome . . . It was my end! I lost my passion to work. I couldn't imagine serving him as the new king, covering all of Berlin with crosses.*

Although I was astonished by the implications of this spirit's narrative, I had little doubt about the identity of the narrator and the historical context of the story. All the clues were already present in this short testimony: Berlin, a crown prince's aspirational sketches, plans of a new domed chapel for the palace, and the newly crowned king's interest in topping the palace's dome with a cross. I knew immediately that I was hearing the spirit of Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781–1841), one of the greatest, most celebrated architects in German history.⁴¹

[41] There is a wealth of material celebrating Schinkel and his work – biographies, stories, films, competitions, prizes, research projects, dedicated archives and institutions, street and square names, monuments, and exhibitions. In the following footnotes, I will refer only to the sources most relevant to my exploration of this spirit's narrative, along with several interviews I conducted with living experts.



Monument to Karl Friedrich Schinkel at Schinkelplatz in front of the Humboldt Forum, 2023. A.Savin, Wikipedia (Free Art Licence).

A talented and respected architect, city planner, painter, and designer, Schinkel also educated a generation of famous architects and has an architectural style – the Schinkel School (Schinkelschule) – named after him.⁴² After a short career as an independent architect, Schinkel joined the civil service in 1810 at the Prussian Building Authority (Königlichen Technischen Oberbaudeputation), of which he became the chief director in 1830.⁴³ In his roles at the building authority, all under the reign of King of Prussia Friedrich Wilhelm III (1770–1840), Schinkel created many of Prussia’s most famous landmarks, including dozens of palaces, churches, and national monuments, many of which – including the Altes Museum, the Schauspielhaus (then a theatre and currently a concert hall), the Neue Wache in Berlin, and the Schloss Babelsberg in Potsdam – survive to this day.⁴⁴

Schinkel was admired not only for his abundant creative talent but also for his unrestricted dedication to his work. In today’s terms, he could certainly be described as a perfectionist workaholic. However, in

Schinkel, these two elements (his creative genius and his extreme diligence) were fatally combined with a third element, rarely occurring with genius artists – his managerial function at the Prussian Building Authority. As Schinkel gained more promotions, titles, and fame, he took on more building projects, supervisory tasks, and administrative duties, which slowly eroded his health. An early glimpse of Schinkel’s distress appears in a letter he sent in 1821, a decade before his ailment started



Schloss Babelsberg in Potsdam between ca. 1890 and ca. 1900. Photochrom print. Library of Congress (public domain).

[42] Eva Börsch-Supan, *Berliner Baukunst nach Schinkel 1840–1870* (München: Prestel, 1977).

[43] Peter Betthausen, 'Karl Friedrich Schinkel: A Universal Man', in *Karl Friedrich Schinkel: A Universal Man*, ed. Michael Snodin (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 3.

[44] Many of the buildings were damaged during World War II, with some, such as the Schauspielhaus, later being reconstructed.

manifesting physically, to the minister of trade and industry, Graf von Bülow, who was also responsible for the building authority. Trying to explain why he was requesting more space for artistic work, Schinkel wrote, 'In my view the artistic sphere, which alone appeals to me, is of such a limitless extent that a man's life is much too short for it. I feel, with regret, that in other circumstances I could have achieved still more in it, but that I am being inwardly torn apart by work which draws me away from my real purpose'.⁴⁵

This sincere appeal, which was declined by the Prussian minister, reveals the contradiction that Schinkel was helplessly trying to accommodate: the tension between his insatiable craving for artistic expression and his ever-growing managerial workload. Owing to his limitless diligence, on the one hand, and the Prussian authorities' crass insensitivity to his complex disposition, on the other, Schinkel, starting in the early 1830s, often needed to go on leave and visit medical retreats.⁴⁶ Running on two tracks heading for collision – his deteriorating health and his demanding career full of exponentially increasing duties – he collapsed, on September 9, 1840. After thirteen months of being in a kind of coma, Karl Friedrich Schinkel passed away.⁴⁷

Many of Schinkel's researchers and biographers attribute his progressing ailment and early death to his self-induced 'overtaxation'.⁴⁸ However, after carefully cross-checking his spirit narrative against published records, I identified a more nuanced explanation for his final collapse in September 1840 – a convergence of events and factors, some of which are individually well-documented but that have thus far not been recognized in connection with his tragic demise.

As part of Schinkel's countless projects for the royal family, he created a few preliminary sketches, in 1829, for a new ceremonial chapel inside the Berlin palace, topped by a dome that rises above the palace's west-facing entrance (Portal III).⁴⁹ In these sketches, the chapel's dome has a wide opening to the sky – an oculus (meaning 'eye' in Latin)

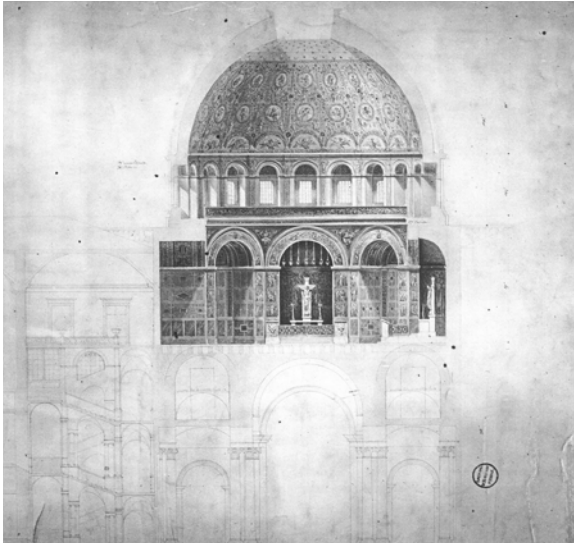
[45] Quoted in Betthausen, 'Karl Friedrich Schinkel', 3. Translation by Patricia Crampton, Anthony Vivis, and Eileen Martin.

[46] To avoid the modern recreational connotations of *spa*, I have translated the German term *Kuraufenthalt*, which Schinkel often required, as *medical retreat*. Alternatives could include *sanatorium stay* or *curative stay*, both of which retain the historical therapeutic context.

[47] Some have raised the question of whether this was truly a coma, especially considering the absence of medical interventions such as artificial ventilation, feeding tubes, or IV hydration that could sustain comatose patients for extended periods at that time. See Heinz Ohff, *Karl Friedrich Schinkel oder die Schönheit in Preußen* (Munich/Zurich: Piper, 1997), 243; August Friedrich Gottlieb Pätsch, 'Schinkels letzte Krankheit und Leichenbefund', *Wochenschrift für die gesamte Heilkunde* 49, (1841): 793–812.

[48] Betthausen, 'Karl Friedrich Schinkel', 1.

[49] The four sketches that I have found (inventory numbers: SM 41d.211 verso, SM 41d.211 recto, SM 41d.212 verso, SM 41d.212 recto, and SM 52 . 2) are part of the Kupferstichkabinett (Museum of Prints and Drawings) of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (National Museums in Berlin).



Proposal for a chapel above Portal III of the Berlin palace. Karl Friedrich Schinkel, ca. 1829. Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (public domain).

– a feature of the neoclassical style that Schinkel championed in Germany. Most likely corresponding with the open dome of the Pantheon in Rome – a city and architectural influence that shaped Schinkel’s style from the beginning of his career – the oculus was a feature he had incorporated into the design of the Altes Museum, which was being constructed at the time (1825–30) directly in front of the royal palace on the opposite side of the Lustgarten.⁵⁰ Like two open eyes imparting enlightenment – one of culture and the other of faith – these two oculi may have been envisioned by Schinkel as interconnected organs, projecting a

harmonious image of unity between monarch and citizen on both sides of the Lustgarten – the visage of Prussia’s rule.

By the time Schinkel drew the sketch for the palace’s open-domed chapel, he already knew the palace and the royal family very well. Not only was he involved in countless construction projects in and around the palace, but he also served as the private art teacher for the king’s eldest son, Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm (1795–1861), who, from an early age, exhibited a talent for drawing and an interest in architecture. After becoming king, he often seemed more interested in sketching than in official meetings; he left more than seven thousand pages of drawings and sketches – many of which are of landscapes and architecture.⁵¹ From the beginning of his relationship with Schinkel, the crown prince would develop construction ideas and prepare preliminary sketches that Schinkel would then develop further, refine, and construct, such as the crown prince’s set of apartments in the Berlin palace that Schinkel built for him between 1824 and 1826.⁵² The relationship between them in the years

[50] The rounded shape of the Altes Museum’s dome is only visible from inside the museum, under the dome; externally, it is enclosed by a square structure that still leaves the oculus uncovered.

[51] Jörg Meiner, ‘Der zeichnende König: Friedrich Wilhelm IV. von Preußen (1795–1861)’, *Zeitenblicke* 9, no. 3 (2010): 1.

[52] Albert Geyer, *Geschichte des Schlosses zu Berlin (1443–1918)* (Berlin: Nicolaische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 2010), 67–90.

leading to the crowning of Friedrich Wilhelm (as King of Prussia Friedrich Wilhelm IV) seemed ideal: a mutually respectful relationship of mentor and disciple, an admiring prince supporting the genius architect's vision for their realm, together sketching and realizing big architectural projects.

But then, something seems to have shattered their once constructive friendship, along with Schinkel's life. In June 1840, the old king, Friedrich Wilhelm III, passed away. Already in poor health, Schinkel worsened, and once again he had to leave Berlin for a medical retreat. Upon his return, he met with his former admiring student, now King Friedrich Wilhelm IV, who seemed offended by Schinkel's absence from his coronation ceremonies. It is said that during this meeting, sarcastic words were exchanged, after which Schinkel was abandoned by the king.⁵³ Shortly afterward, Schinkel collapsed, remaining bedridden and mostly unresponsive until his death.

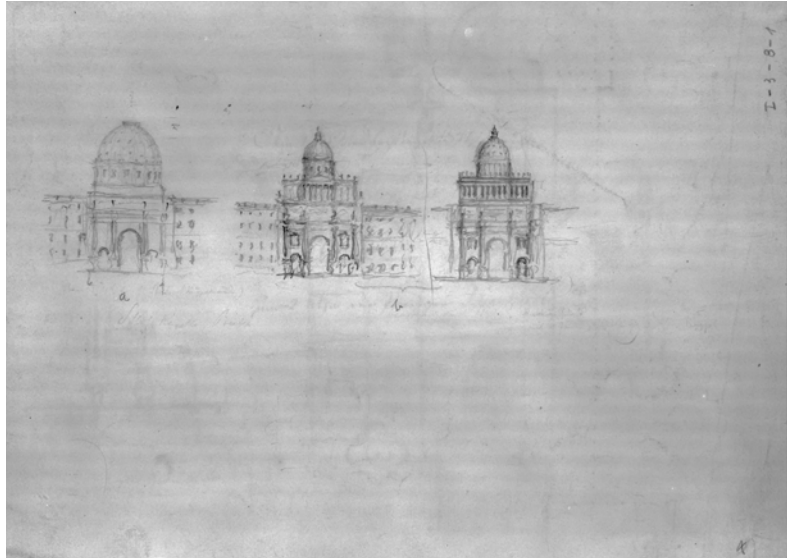
Were the sarcastic words in that meeting only connected to Schinkel's absence from the coronation? Did the king furiously turn his back on the ailing Schinkel only on account of this exchange, or did the confrontation escalate into something deeper between them, leading to Schinkel's final abandonment?

Exploring the spirit's account of that last meeting, I found a sketch made by Friedrich Wilhelm IV at around the time of their last meeting, in which he returns to Schinkel's earlier plans for the palace's domed chapel from 1829.⁵⁴ In this sketch, however, the king draws three versions on the same page: on the left, marked with *a*, is a similar design to Schinkel's, with the chapel's dome featuring an oculus at the top. Next to it, on the right, marked with *b*, are two additional versions of the dome. Though differing slightly in detail, both are topped with a lantern. A faint vertical line, possibly representing a cross, extends above the lanterns, adding more height to the entire structure.⁵⁵

[53] While Ohff only mentions 'sarcastic words', a detailed quotation appears in a lecture on Schinkel from 1864, in which the king allegedly said, 'You were apparently frightened by the cannon fire that announced my ascension to the throne to my people' (Sie haben sich wohl vor dem Kanonendonner gefürchtet, der meinem Volke meine Thronbesteigung verkündete). See Alfred Freiherrn von Wolzogen, *Schinkel als Architekt, Maler und Kunstphilosoph: ein Vortrag, gehalten im Verein für Geschichte der bildenden Künste zu Breslau* (Berlin: Ernst & Korn, 1864), 52. See Ohff, *Karl Friedrich Schinkel*, 241.

[54] The sketch, inventory number GK II (12) I-3-B-1 Rs 3, is part of the collection 'Zeichnungen König Friedrich Wilhelms IV. von Preußen' (drawings by king of Prussia Friedrich Wilhelm IV), at the *Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg* (Prussian Palaces and Gardens Foundation Berlin-Brandenburg) in Potsdam: <http://bestandskataloge.spsg.de/FWIV/92555>. In this collection, the sketch is dated 'April/Mai 1841', while Geyer dates it 'ca. 1840'. See Geyer, *Geschichte des Schlosses zu Berlin*, 127.

[55] Because of the quick and rough nature of the sketch, it is difficult to determine whether this is a cross or simply a generic vertical line that could represent a cross, sculpture, or wind vane – elements typically mounted atop dome lanterns. Because of the quick and rough nature of the sketch, it is difficult to determine whether this is a cross or simply a generic vertical line that could represent a cross, sculpture, or wind vane – elements typically mounted atop dome lanterns.



Hand drawing by Friedrich Wilhelm IV. showing three variations for the palace chapel above Portal III, 1841. © Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg

I did not find historical accounts of an argument between Schinkel and the king over such a sketch or over the king's intention to alter Schinkel's original dome design.⁵⁶ I can, however, imagine how Schinkel might have felt if he had indeed seen his purposefully planned oculus sealed with this thorny eyepatch – drawn clumsily, violently, by his majesty's dull pencil. I can also imagine how some sarcastic exchange about design and architecture – Schinkel was adamant about defending the coherence of his designs – could detonate a terminal blast to both overgrown egos and make the king turn and leave Schinkel in extreme distress.⁵⁷

[56] In addition to searching in published texts, I consulted with three experts: Adrian von Buttlar, professor of art history at the Technische Universität Berlin; Alfred Hagemann, head of the History of the Site department at the Stiftung Humboldt Forum; and Hans-Dieter Nägelke, head of the Architekturmuseum der Technischen Universität Berlin. We discussed the possibility of an argument between the king and Schinkel over the covering of the oculus with a lantern and cross. While Buttlar and Nägelke were open to these speculative possibilities, although not necessarily accepting the notion of Schinkel objecting to the alteration to his design, Hagemann attributed lesser importance to Schinkel's plans from 1829, claiming they were not necessarily meant to be implemented in any case. Alfred Hagemann, in discussion with the author, at the Humboldt Forum, August 24, 2020; Adrian von Buttlar, email exchange with the author, 6–9 October, 2020; Hans-Dieter Nägelke, in discussion with the author, online, October 27, 2020.

[57] Schinkel was adamant in defending the coherence of his designs, as evidenced by his response to a critique regarding the apparent lack of utility in parts of the Altes Museum during its planning stages in 1823: 'The design is a completed whole, the parts of which are so related that no essential feature may be changed without detriment to the whole'. Quoted in Gottfried Riemann, 'Classical Berlin', in Snodin, *Karl Friedrich Schinkel*, 131.

After Schinkel's collapse, the king commissioned architect Friedrich August Stüler (1800–1865), one of Schinkel's talented students, to process his sketch with the three-dome designs. Stüler submitted detailed plans based on the king's suggestions, and in early 1841, the king chose the winning version: a high dome with a lantern and a cross at the top.⁵⁸ Construction of the chapel took years to complete, and in October 1854, especially timed for the king's birthday, the final element – a gleaming golden cross standing seventy metres tall – was finally unveiled.⁵⁹

A hundred and sixty-six years later, after this cross had witnessed social and political transformations, imperialist expansions, world wars, and its own destruction, a replica of the same cross was unveiled in the exact same location, symbolically completing the reconstruction of the Berlin palace in its new role as the Humboldt Forum.⁶⁰ The mounting of the new cross in 2020 marked the end of a heated three-year public debate on whether the cross should be mounted atop the Humboldt Forum – a discussion that itself was part of a larger, on-going dispute over the rebuilding of the palace and the establishment of the Humboldt Forum within it.⁶¹



New cross and lantern before installation on the dome of the Humboldt Forum, Berlin, May 29, 2020. © Tal Adler

[58] See Geyer, *Geschichte des Schlosses zu Berlin*, 77.

[59] For a detailed explanation of why a higher dome and a cross were so important for Friedrich Wilhelm IV, see Alfred Hagemann, 'Symbolism Politics: Frederick William IV's Cupola for the Berlin Palace', part of the feature 'What's It All About? The Cross on Top of the Humboldt Forum's Cupola', *Humboldt Forum Magazine*, May 25, 2020, <https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/magazine/article/symbolism-politics>. Interestingly, in this text, Hagemann does not mention Schinkel and his original plan for the open dome without a cross. In the interview I held with him (see footnote 55), after his article was published, Hagemann warned me against using Schinkel's original plans from 1829 to support the idea that Schinkel was against the cross. Other texts published in the same publication do refer to Schinkel's plans. See Laura Goldenbaum, 'The Crux of the Cross', in 'What's It All About?', *Humboldt Forum Magazine*, <https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/magazine/article/die-sache-mit-dem-kreuz>.

[60] 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). To read about 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 2.1! – Dekoloniale Einwände gegen das Humboldt Forum* (Berlin: AfricAvenir International, 2017). For a discussion on the multilayered connection between the so-called Gall skull from the Charité and the Humboldt Forum, see my text 'Who is ID8470?', in this volume.

[61] The online *Humboldt Forum Magazine* published a special edition focusing on the public debate around the cross, including a chronology of the debate, a review of media articles covering the topic, and various articles, interviews, and short statements showcasing some of the positions expressed in the contentious debate (two of them were mentioned in footnote 59). See 'What's It All About? The Cross on Top of the Humboldt Forum's Cupola', *Humboldt Forum Magazine*, May 25, 2020, <https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/magazine/article/symbolism-politics>.

As I was preparing an artwork for display inside the Humboldt Forum, I was acutely aware of this contentious debate, and I was among the large crowds that gathered outside the reconstructed palace, on May 29, 2020, to witness the celebratory mounting of the lantern and cross atop the Humboldt Forum.⁶² Whether this event was connected to my reception of Schinkel's spirit narrative at around the same time is unclear. The cross remains mounted, unchallenged, atop the Humboldt Forum; the public discussion around it has long subsided. Myriad visitors flock to the Humboldt Forum every day, wandering through its various exhibitions, while Schinkel's spirit repeats its tormented narration every seventeen minutes as the *Who is ID8470?* video plays on loop, during opening hours, beneath the gleaming cross.

[62] My colleague at the time, Duane Jethro, who was there with me, later wrote an elaborate analysis of the symbolic aspects of the cross of the Humboldt Forum, its implications for both religion and heritage discourses, and the debate's relation to the palace's colonial history. See Duane Jethro, 'Crossing Heritage: Material Religion at the Humboldt Forum', in *The Routledge Handbook of Material Religion*, ed. Pooyan Tamimi Arab, Jennifer Scheper Hughes, and S. Brent Rodríguez-Plate (London: Routledge, 2023), 185–204.



The maid's spirit, played by Laura Strott. Film still from the *Who is ID8470?* video.
© Tal Adler

The Maid

Tal Adler, Clara Dröll, Ricarda Rivoir, and Laura Strott

*I always pray to God.
I want to be good in this life and go to heaven when I die.
I also pray for the Madam; she is so good to me.
Another Madam would have kicked me out for getting pregnant
unmarried.
I've been saving money for my burial – half of my salary every year.
I hope they will forgive me and bury me there.
'Unmarried mothers don't get a Christian burial'; they said.
But they also said God forgives us if we repent and pray.
I need to believe this!*

The following text, which explores *the maid's* spirit narrative and our engagement with it, was collaboratively written by Tal Adler, Clara Dröll, Ricarda Rivoir, and Laura Strott. We developed the text as an interview, or rather as a conversation – a format that is fitting with our long-term collaboration. While discussing and co-writing this text, we attempted to involve the spirit of *the maid* in its co-production by directing a few questions to and sharing our dilemmas with her. Although we did not receive direct answers, our intentions and deliberations may have symbolically brought her position forth.

Laura:

Tal, we first met you in November 2019, when the three of us were studying in the master's programme at the Institute of European Ethnology at Humboldt Universität zu Berlin. Silvy Chakkalakal, the professor leading our research seminar, 'On Rehearsal Stages and Experimental Laboratories – Ethnographic Explorations in the Humboldt Lab' invited you to present *Who is ID8470?* – the project you were developing for the Humboldt Lab at that time. During the following year, in 2020, we conducted several interviews with you as part of our ethnographic research on the Humboldt Lab.⁶³

Tal:

These were very interesting encounters that helped me share and think about the processes of research and production. During one of these meetings, at the end of 2020, I told you about the complex challenges facing the project in the few months left before the opening of the Humboldt Lab. You were very kind in offering your help. After considering your generous offer, I invited you to listen with me to the spirit of *the maid*.



Screenshot of a Zoom meeting with the authors of 'The Maid,' January 2023.

Clara:

Why did you decide to share the process of listening to *the maid's* spirit with us? And how did you first come across her story?

Tal:

I first encountered *the maid's* story in a brief passage from *Der zerstückte Körper* (The dismembered body), a book about anatomical dissection in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe.⁶⁴

[63] The Humboldt Lab is an exhibition space of the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin that was being built inside the Humboldt Forum at the time of our exchange. To read more about the process of developing the *Who is ID8470?* project for the Humboldt Lab, see the chapter 'Who is ID8470?' in this volume. To read about the ethnographic research conducted by Clara, Ricarda, and Laura on the Humboldt Lab and the *Who is ID8470?* project, see Silvy Chakkalakal, Dominik Biewer, and Laura Strott, eds., 'Kuratieren als Relation. Ethnographische Erkundungen im Humboldt Labor', *Berliner Blätter* 90 (2025): 3–18; 37–52; 97–109.

[64] I am grateful to Vanessa Zallot, another student at the Department of European Ethnology at the Humboldt Universität, who was the *Who is ID8470?* project's student-assistant for a few months in 2020 and found this reference. See Karin Stukenbrock, *Der zerstückte Körper: Zur Sozialgeschichte der anatomischen Sektionen in der frühen Neuzeit (1650–1800)* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2001), 110.

In a discussion about the legal aspects and connections between anatomical dissections and burial, there is mention of an unmarried maid (Dienstmagd) from Helmstedt, who died shortly after the birth of her child.⁶⁵ Although the woman had saved enough money for her burial, which took place on April 2, 1762, her body was exhumed five days later and transferred to the anatomy department. The book's author explains that for many individuals at the time, having their bodies handed over for dissection was perceived as a terrible fate, often regarded, and indeed used, as a form of punishment. This woman's story struck me as particularly tragic, since she likely sacrificed much to save for her burial from the presumably very small income of a maid.

In a subsequent chapter, the author emphasizes the significant disparity between the numbers of male and female bodies delivered to anatomical institutions. The considerably higher number of female bodies compared to that of males reflects broader societal inequities of that time.⁶⁶ Many of these women were unmarried mothers and/or from impoverished backgrounds, making them more susceptible to be sent to dissection compared to men, who usually enjoyed greater social agency. Especially because of this reason, I felt uncomfortable processing her story alone; the idea of her narrative being captured solely by a man, after all she had likely suffered, seemed insensitive. Your offer of support came exactly at the moment in which I was facing this dilemma, and I was relieved that you, a group of three women, agreed to listen to her story and help me process and represent it in the *Who is ID8470?* video.

Ricarda:

It is interesting how you mentioned that our position as young women was important for you in this collaboration. Yes, our position offered a different affective and experience-based access to *the maid's* story. However, when thinking about the details of her experience that were not archivally documented, we realized quickly that there is not one clear narrative to fill the void. It is rather a moment of different possibilities, which need to be carefully examined for what they imply. In fact, in an early draft of *the maid's* narrative that you wrote and shared with us, it read like a story of a woman who was raped by a superior, which is, of course, a very possible scenario. However, it made us feel uneasy telling this story, which is already so full of violence. We asked

[65] At that time, Helmstedt was part of the Duchy of Brunswick-Lüneburg, a principality of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation.

[66] While the number of female bodies transferred to anatomy exceeded that of males, the number of children's bodies exceeded both. See Stukenbrock, *Der zerstückte Körper*, 127–36.

ourselves if this part about sexual violence was really necessary. Inspired by Saidiya Hartman's concept of 'critical fabulation' – a method that combines historical and archival research with critical theory and fictional narrative – we allowed ourselves to hear the story of a woman who got pregnant through owning her sexuality and then faced the stigmatization of society.⁶⁷

Tal:

That wasn't the only part that was difficult for you in working with *the maid's* story, right? We all struggled with questions about her identity and how much we could, or should, intervene in her story.

Laura:

Well, I wouldn't say it was difficult for us to deal with the sexual violence she might have experienced, but we should rather ask ourselves how, where, and when we tell such stories. Nevertheless, it was not an easy task writing about *the maid* without knowing her (whatever that means). For example, we were worried about reproducing an objectifying gesture by calling her *the maid*. We thought about giving her a name to make our collaboration more personal.

Clara:

The name Lore came up, since it was our Laura (Strott) who eventually read *the maid's* narrative in the *Who is ID8470?* video. At the same time, we asked ourselves whether we had the right to give *the maid* a name and whether this might be an appropriation of her story and individuality.

Ricarda:

I thought that naming her might even be more violent than accepting the archival void. In Saidiya Hartman's book *Venus in Two Acts*, from which we drew inspiration and understanding of critical fabulation, she points out one of the challenges we ourselves experienced when attempting to collaborate across centuries. Did we seek to console ourselves because of the unbearable violence caused by the absence of subjectivity?

[67] See Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14. For a discussion on critical fabulation and other approaches to dealing with archival voids, see the introduction to this volume as well as Ricarda Rivoir, 'Schwieriges Erbe ausstellen – "Programmatische Leerstellen" als kritische Repräsentation im Projekt *Wer ist ID 8470?* und den Archivausstellungen', in Chakkalalal, Biewer, Strott, 'Kuratieren als Relation', 97–109.

Clara:

We tried to fill the archival voids by exploring other sources, aiming to understand the life of an eighteenth-century maid: typical salaries, the implications of pregnancy outside marriage, and burial costs.⁶⁸ Although these scattered fragments did not construct a complete identity, interweaving them through our historical research, editing her narrative, and participating in the filming deeply involved us emotionally in her story.

Tal:

Laura, I think it was especially emotional for you, right? We decided together that you would personify *the maid*, since you were particularly drawn to her story because of your family's history. Ricarda performed as one of the anonymous spirits. I remember the setting vividly. We started filming in the afternoon in the makeshift studio that I built into one of the university's seminar rooms, meanwhile outside, a snowstorm was covering the streets with deep snow. It was intense and emotional work for us, which, I think, is evident in the video.

Laura:

I did struggle in the beginning, and I was quite theatrical. But then you, Tal, suggested I should try and tap into the sadness of the story. However, the more I thought about *the maid's* story, the less sad I became. Instead, I became increasingly angry for her but also for the many women that came before and after her. Reflecting on it now, I think I became angry because her story resonated with my experience of being raised by a single mother. The stigmatization that *the maid* faced for being unmarried and pregnant reminded me of the many challenges most single parents face even today (and of course FLINTA⁶⁹ are the majority of single parents). I think that *the maid's* story is still very relevant nowadays, and many can connect to her. This is the strength of critical fabulation and of this format that you developed for this project; it helps us perceive the connection between our current times and the past.⁷⁰

[68] See Jens Flemming, "Herrenloß gesinde . . ." – Existenz am Rande des Minimums', and Susanne Schmidt, "Zu Diensten" – Gesinde und Domestiken in der Residenzstadt Kassel', in *Kassel im 18. Jahrhundert. Residenz und Stadt*, ed. Heide Wunder, Christina Vanja, and Karl-Herrmann Wegner (Kassel: Euregio Verlag, 2000), 296–307, 308–20; Stukenbrock, *Der zerstückte Körper*, 98; Norbert Fischer, 'Vom Gottesacker zum Krematorium – Eine Sozialgeschichte der Friedhöfe in Deutschland seit dem 18. Jahrhundert' (PhD diss., University of Hamburg, 1996), 26–27, 31–35.

[69] FLINTA is the German abbreviation for *Frauen, Lesben, intergeschlechtlich, nichtbinär, trans* and *agender* (women, lesbians, intersex, non-binary, trans, and agender).

[70] On the multitemporality of the *Who is ID8470?* project and relating cultural practices see also Laura Strott, 'Verflochtene Geschichten, verflochtene Erinnerungen. Ethnografische Untersuchungen von (vergangenen) Hoffnungen und ihrem Nachleben', in Chakkalal, Biewer, Strott, 'Kuratieren als Relation', 37–52.

Ricarda:

The three of us really connected with her story. It was interesting to realize that we read our personal stories in hers. So, when your first draft suggested that she might have been pregnant by her landlord, we immediately thought of the asymmetrical power balance constituted by gender and class inequities. To us, this obviously related to the #MeToo debate and patriarchal violence that the three of us experience as women in our everyday lives. In fact, we were worried that she would become a projection of our own experiences in such a way that her own story would be lost – which is just what happened when her skull became part of the anatomical collection of the Charité and was turned into an object for science and display.

Tal:

What do you think she would have thought if she knew her human remains would be turned into exhibition props?

Clara:

I assume it would have been horrible for her. We found out that she must have saved half of her yearly income for many years to be able to afford a burial. It seems like she was thinking a lot about what would happen after her death, and it must have been very important to her to be buried at the graveyard she knew.

Tal:

I also wonder what she would have thought about us, whether she would have liked to ask us something, too.

Clara:

I wonder how she would have felt about us and if she would agree to this whole research and fabulation at all.

Laura:

She might want to know whether the situation of unmarried mothers has improved.

Ricarda:

I think she would ask why she still has not received a proper funeral.

Maid:

We Are Everywhere

*There are many of us here,
parts of us, pieces,
all over the place.
Some of us you display;
others, you hide.
You put us in jars,
mount us on stands,
dry us,
cast us,
stuff us,
and slice.
You keep us behind vitrines
and in dark storages
in universities,
museums,
schools,
archives,
shops,
and private homes.
There is still very much of us here.
Everywhere.*



Main exhibition hall of the Humboldt Lab, July 2021. © Friedrich von Bose

Intervening Potentials: Artistic Research on Human Remains in University Collections

Friedrich von Bose

When a university sets off to be part of a large cultural project involving many thousands of square metres of exhibition space, competing views over what the right contribution might or should be are inevitable. When that cultural project is the most hotly debated endeavour of the past twenty years, the stakes are even higher. This was the case for the Humboldt Forum in the Berlin Palace.

When the highly controversial political decision was made in 2002 to rebuild the Berlin Palace and install the Humboldt Forum as a cultural project in it, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (HU) was set to be one of the three institutional partners. Since then, many proposals and plans have been suggested for what would, by the time of the Humboldt Forum's first (partial) opening to the public in 2021, come to be named the Humboldt Lab. Curating often involves conflicts, and it would have been surprising if curating in such a contested setting had not produced some. In addition, a university is fundamentally constituted by power relations and differing viewpoints, which can contribute to disagreements. This is especially the case for a cultural project of the scale of the Humboldt Forum, which for a university is an unusual site for public engagement. Such a project creates high expectations as well

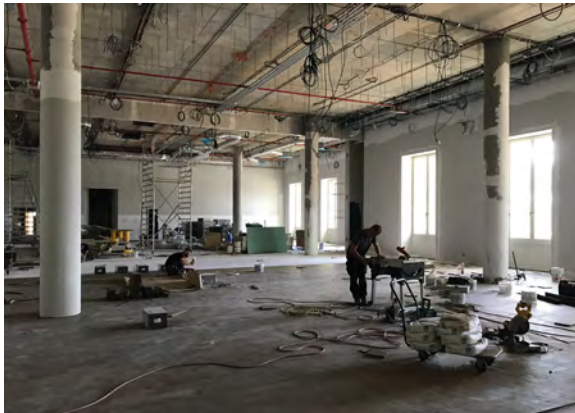
I thank Tal Adler for accepting the invitation to do an artistic research project and intervention around 'ID8470'. A special thanks goes to Sharon Macdonald for supporting this collaboration with the Humboldt Lab as director of CARMAH with funds from her Alexander von Humboldt Professorship. Considering that artistic research is still not equally rated in relation to 'proper' academic output in the university setting, I am especially thankful that she made the collaboration possible in this long-term scope.

as different and sometimes competing ideas about how to best use the opportunity it affords. We might expect, then, that curating from within the university involves a particular capacity for conflict, and that in the case of the Humboldt Lab, this was all the more so.

I was the Humboldt Lab's curator from early 2017, when the Prussian palace was still a brick shell. Coming to the post from having been an outspoken critic of the Humboldt Forum – and also as a scholar who had engaged in an ethnographic study on its planning process – I hoped that from within HU, it would be possible to contribute critical positions to the Humboldt Forum, which would, in turn, take up the criticisms that had accompanied its planning from early on. In this sense, I saw a polyphonic, collaborative approach as the working basis for the development of the exhibition formats and programmes. Many of these were designed to be further developed over the course of the exhibition or supplemented with new questions and research results – not least those that emerged for the participating researchers from their engagements with the public.

A collaborative endeavour, the Humboldt Lab involved more than one hundred scholars and students from the Berlin universities and internationally in conceptualizing its inaugural exhibition. Titled *After Nature*, the exhibition centres on planetary and social transformations in the context of the climate crisis and current contestations of democratic structures around the globe. In the context of this overarching theme, many of the projects and displays took up questions concerning the coloniality of collections and legacies of racism and antisemitism, which are sedimented in the histories of science as well as in the history of the university, in particular. The exhibition and programmes thus sought to reflexively address processes of scientific knowledge formation, both historically and in the present, and thereby to critically engage in the very processes of knowledge formation, which are manifest in university collections and practices.¹ On another level, this approach was also a means to contribute critical perspectives to one of the central aspects the Humboldt Forum had been critiqued for since its inception: the coloniality of the ethnographic collections that have constituted the

[1] Amongst the most important collaborations were those with students from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. One particularly important project was an ethnographic research project by master's degree students from European Ethnology under the supervision of Silvy Chakkalakal, titled 'Von Probebühnen und Experimentier-Laboren – Ethnographische Erkundungen im Humboldt Labor'. For over a year, the students did ethnographic fieldwork about our curatorial process. Their findings and critical perspectives on various themes within *After Nature*, as well as about the curatorial processes, are represented prominently in different sections of the exhibition. The seminar's critical reflections are published in Silvy Chakkalakal, Dominik Biewer, and Laura Strott, eds., 'Kuratieren als Relation. Ethnographische Erkundungen im Humboldt Labor', *Berliner Blätter* 90 (2025).



Shell construction stage of the exhibition spaces of the Humboldt Lab, May 2019. © Friedrich von Bose

centre of its purpose in public framings.² In light of this, it was clear that we would work in two directions: In the mode of criticality – that is, ‘from a wavering ground of actual embeddedness’, in the controversial context of the Humboldt Forum,³ but also in that of the university itself as an institutional space that is characterized by persistent structural inequalities (for example, with regard to access to education, the reproduction of racism, or discrimination through precarious employment

practices).⁴ Various inter-institutional research clusters, colleagues from university departments, the over forty university collections of HU, and partners from beyond the academic realm constituted an interdisciplinary context within which we worked out the exhibition themes. The curatorial process could very well be described as one of collaborative research; it was a process of co-production, in the way that Didier Fassin frames the relationship between the ethnographer and their interlocutors: the interactive working out of themes and issues instead of a seemingly immediate representation of facts.⁵

One part of the exhibition we as curatorial team were planning was a large grid of showcases that would hang from the ceiling in the centre of the main exhibition hall.⁶ Here, we wanted to introduce the audience to the complex history of science as it materializes in physical objects

[2] In my ethnographic study of the Humboldt Forum’s planning process, a central focus was on how the Humboldt Forum is narrated in the cultural-political field. See Friedrich von Bose, *Das Humboldt-Forum. Eine Ethnographie seiner Planung* (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2016).

[3] ‘Vom schwankenden Grund tatsächlichen Eingebettetseins’. Irit Rogoff, ‘WIR. Kollektivitäten, Mutualitäten, Partizipationen’, in *I promise it’s political. Performativität in der Kunst*, ed. Dorothea von Hantelmann/Marjorie Jongbloed (Cologne: Theater der Welt, 2002), 52–60, at 55. Translation by author.

[4] See most recently Sabine Hark and Johanna Hofbauer, *Die ungleiche Universität. Diversität, Exzellenz und Anti-Diskriminierung* (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2023).

[5] Didier Fassin, ‘The Endurance of Critique’, *Anthropological Theory* 17, no. 1 (2017): 4–29, at 22. See also Friedrich von Bose, ‘Ausstellen als Forschungspraxis. Das Humboldt Labor als Ort des kollaborativen Kuratierens’, in *Nach der Natur / After Nature. Laborbuch zur Ausstellung im Humboldt Labor*, ed. Heide Barrenechea, Bastian Herbst, and Max Illner (Berlin/Zurich: Diaphanes), 68–75.

[6] We were a team of four curators and three colleagues responsible for setting up the lab’s educational programmes. The grid had been the concept of our exhibition designers, the Amsterdam-based company Inside Outside / Petra Blaisse. The idea behind hanging showcases was that we could create different interdisciplinary constellations depending on which of the showcases were lowered towards the ground. Pulling them all up to the ceiling makes it possible for the central space to be used for public events, such as debates, concerts, or performances.

and to show how working with material objects shapes and affects scientific knowledge production. Particularly in relation to the university collections, the exhibition conception, in the co-productive sense, has sometimes resulted in re-evaluations and also shifts in the meaning of the collections and archives. While the collections, because of their involvement in research and teaching, already convey a processual and relational understanding of their objects, this character is further underlined by their interdisciplinary interrelation in the exhibition. Here, amongst our prime sources of reference were the university collections of HU, most of which we had visited repeatedly and with many of whose heads of collection we were in close contact.⁷

Over these visits, we chose objects that we found relevant to show in the Humboldt Lab for the following possible reasons: they bear witness to historical developments and debates in research; they help to reflect the multitemporal layers of scientific practice as embodied in its physical objects; they enable us to see the changing epistemic status of physical objects in their having been part of – or resulting from – research and teaching practices.⁸ Other things that also qualified for the grid included artworks, such as the plastic canister masks by the internationally acclaimed artist Romuald Hazoumè or artefacts from ongoing scientific research that would only acquire a status as ‘things’ or ‘objects’ in the very moment of their transfer to the exhibition space.⁹ Our list of objects was ever-changing. We all had our preferred objects or ‘highlights’ – to use a term that colleagues of the Foundation for the Humboldt Forum repeatedly asked us to give examples of – while we were well aware that the very nature of ‘scientific objects’, their often-changing epistemic status or the sometimes-difficult histories they represent, defeated the notion of ‘highlight’ in the conventional sense.

[7] I want to thank Kerrin von Engelhardt, who together with Yong-Mi Rauch, was the interim head of collections at HU at the time, for her efforts to connect us with the respective responsible scholars and collection managers overseeing the collections and for the many insightful conversations we had on the epistemologies of university collections. As was known amongst HU staff, and as we increasingly learned during our visits, many of these collections carved out a rather precarious existence. This is despite the intensive commitment by the central coordinator at HU for the scientific collections, Jochen Hennig, whose position was established in 2010 at the Hermann von Helmholtz-Zentrum für Kulturtechnik (ZfK) and who left HU in early 2018 for another position. I am grateful to Jochen Hennig as well as to Felix Sattler, the curator of the Tieranatomisches Theater at the ZfK, for the fruitful exchange we have had at the ZfK, which I found highly inspirational for my work especially in the early phase of the Humboldt Lab’s conception.

[8] See Jochen Hennig, ‘Zwischen Forschung, Seminar und Depot: Spezifika von Universitätsammlungen’, *Hamburger Journal für Kulturanthropologie* 3 (2015): 117–29.

[9] For more on Hazoumè’s plaster canister masks, see <https://www.humboldt-labor.de/en/journal/persiflage-on-the-desire-for-the-exotic>. See the project ‘Adaptive Digital Twin’, a collaboration between the Image Guidance Lab at the Neurosurgical Clinic of the Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin, the Cluster of Excellence Matters of Activity, and the Humboldt Lab, <https://www.humboldt-labor.de/en/encounter-with-the-digital-twin-of-our-brain>.

A New 'Object' on the List

One day in late 2018, about half a year after we had started as a curatorial team, one of my colleagues put a human skull on this list of possible objects to include in the exhibition.¹⁰ The skull was inventoried as 'skull with inscriptions according to Gall', referring to the German physician and brain anatomist Franz Joseph Gall (1758–1828). Gall advanced the theory that distinct 'brain organs' were responsible for certain mental and character traits, such as artistry or criminality, or a propensity for wit or murder. According to his assumption, these were manifested by bulges on the surface of the skull. With his 'theory of the skull', Gall achieved great fame, but he also, already in his own time, received much criticism. The assignment of people to certain so-called types, whose character could be read from the shape of their skulls, often led to social stigmatization and to the imputation of criminal characteristics. With his theory, Gall laid the foundations for what would later come to be known as phrenology, which played an important part in the development of scientific racism.



Exhibition catalogue of *Theater der Natur und Kunst / Theatrum Naturae et Artis – Wunderkammern des Wissens*, featuring photographs and text on the 'skull with inscriptions according to Gall's teaching'. Film still from the *Who is ID8470?* video. © Tal Adler

The skull has gained some public prominence in the past two decades, since it was exhibited in various exhibitions.¹¹ Amongst them were three major science exhibitions in Berlin, which preceded the formation of the Humboldt Lab and which were all held in the Martin-Gropius-Bau: *Theater der Natur und Kunst/Theatrum Naturae et Artis – Wunderkammern des Wissens* (2000–2001); *WeltWissen. 300 Jahre Wissenschaften in Berlin* (2010); and *+ultra. Gestaltung schafft Wissen* (2016).¹² Owing

[10] About a year after I took up my position, we were finally able to assemble a team of curators, project managers, and a small educational team. The historian and former director of the Military Historical Museum in Dresden, Gorch Pieken, agreed to serve as chief curator for the conception and implementation phase until the opening of the inaugural exhibition. In this new team constellation, I served as the Humboldt Lab's deputy chief curator.

[11] See a list of exhibitions in this book.

[12] See Horst Bredekamp, Jochen Brüning, and Cornelia Weber, eds, *Theater der Natur und Kunst – Theatrum naturae et artis. Wunderkammern des Wissens*, 3 vols. (Berlin: Henschel Verlag, 2001); Jochen Hennig and Udo Andraschke, eds., *WeltWissen: 300 Jahre Wissenschaften in Berlin* (München: Hirmer Verlag, 2010); Nikola Doll, Horst Bredekamp, and Wolfgang Schäffner, *+ultra. gestaltung schafft wissen* (Leipzig: E.A. Seemann, 2016).

to this acquired fame, the skull has also been a prominent item for loan requests by other museums.¹³

I had known of the skull, and I remembered having seen it myself for the first time in the *WeltWissen* exhibition. Back then, it was exhibited under the rubric ‘Vermessen’ (measuring). While it had been part of a larger display about the problematic history of the scientific construction of physical difference, I remember well that the public display of the skull of a human struck me.¹⁴ In my view, there were two contradictions involved in doing so: First, the skull was referred to and presented as an ‘object’; this very term and presentation seemed to conceal the process of having been *made* into an object by science – of having been de-subjectified, categorized, written on. Second, a name was given in the title, but it was not the name of the person the skull belonged to, since this person is evidently not known to us. The name attached to the human remains was that of Franz Joseph Gall.¹⁵ The skull of a person we do not know anything about carries the name in the object title of the person whose popular scientific practice served as an important basis for scientific racism and who famously acquired many of the skulls for his research from prisons or psychiatric hospitals, thereby directly benefitting from systems of social marginalization for his scientific practice. This is clearly a dissonance that is both awkward and disturbing, though one that is not uncommon in anatomical collections. But how to deal with this dissonance in this particular situation?

The skull speaks to a problematic history of science – one that deserves attention in a university exhibition and that needs to be addressed with regard to the contexts of injustice, much in the sense of the work of Ciraj Rassool, who argues that ‘injustice’ should not merely refer to the practices of illegal or unethical modes of acquisition (in the case of the skull, we cannot assess who acquired it and how, who did the inscriptions, or how it entered the collection). Rather, the category of ‘injustice’ should be extended to address also those collections ‘that were inserted into discursively colonial classificatory systems and processes of knowledge production, including racial

[13] Evelyn Heuckendorf, the collections manager of the Charité Anatomical Collection of which the skull is part, told Tal Adler and me during our first collection visit, in October 2019, about the prominence the skull has gained over the years.

[14] Hennig and Andraschke, *WeltWissen*, 324–38.

[15] Yet, this lack of knowledge was also not mentioned in any of the accompanying texts. Jochen Hennig, the chief curator of the *WeltWissen* exhibition in 2010, mentions this in the film *Who is ID8470?* and retrospectively states that there should have been mention of this in the exhibition. See ‘Who is ID8470?’, posted May 13, 2021, by Artistic Provenance Research, YouTube, 17 : 51, <https://youtu.be/QBu56hd8Cy0?si=tsZ2wyTvxjku2pBP>.

research'.¹⁶ Part of this problematic history is not only the phrenological practice by Gall, as well as by his students and successors, but also the history of the public display of the skull.¹⁷

For me, this was clearly a reason not to include the skull in yet another large exhibition project of HU. And while I knew of its existence, I felt certain that we would not seriously consider 'it' on our shortlist of objects to further explore.¹⁸ Thus, when my colleague did include it on the list, we entered a curatorial dispute. While she as well as one or two other colleagues felt that displaying the skull would enable us to tell an important and complicated chapter of scientific history – one that has to be problematized today – I was convinced that we should not display the skull as an interesting or even contested so-called object of science, even if we wanted to tell a critical history of this early moment in the history of phrenology as a racist scientific practice. Displaying the skull, in my view, would perpetuate the objectification instead of dealing with the dissonance in a productive and possibly more radical way. But what could this more radical way be? What could be done, especially at the Humboldt Forum, which had already served as a catalyst for public debates about the coloniality of ethnographic collections, about the repatriation of ancestral remains and the restitution of cultural objects, and about the politics of display more generally?

Inviting the Artist

It was at this point that I approached three colleagues closely affiliated with HU: Tal Adler, Anna Szöke, and Holger Stöcker. Holger is an expert in the field of provenance research and has carried out multiple projects

[16] Ciraj Rassool, 'German Museums, Human Remains and the Challenges of Colonial Legacies', in *Human Remains in Museums and Collections. A Critical Engagement with the 'Recommendations for the Care of Human Remains in Museums and Collections' of the German Museums Association*, ed. Larissa Förster and Sarah Fründt, Historisches Forum 21 (Berlin: Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2017), 64–71, at 70.

[17] While it is not known who made the drawings on this particular skull, another skull in the Charité collection carries the drawings by Johann Spurzheim, a student of Gall's. Gall and Spurzheim worked together, and there are also plaster models on which the drawings of both can be found together. One of these is part of the collection of the Institute of Anatomy at the Universität Heidelberg. See the online entry for the skull at https://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/ausstellungen/anatomie2013/exponate/sektion2/II_05.html. This plaster model was included in the exhibition *Rassismus. Die Erfindung von Menschenrassen* at the Hygienemuseum Dresden in 2018. By exhibiting the model, the curators addressed the history of phrenology without actually displaying a human skull. It is described in Susanne Wernsing, Christian Geulen, and Klaus Vogel, eds., *Rassismus. Die Erfindung von Menschenrassen* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2018), 40–41.

[18] I use scare quotes here to highlight the complicated nature of talking or writing about an 'object' that is part of the body of a deceased person. Using the word 'it' makes the process of objectification once again evident, which lies at the heart of collections of human remains in museum or university settings.

about human remains from colonial contexts.¹⁹ Anna and Tal, at the time, were research fellows at the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage (CARMAH).²⁰ TRACES was a European Union-funded project, whose full title is ‘Transmitting Contentious Cultural Heritages with the Arts: From Intervention to Co-Production’ and which included a sub-project, *Dead Images*, which considered questions of the display of human remains. Being an associate member of CARMAH myself, I knew about Anna’s and Tal’s manifold scholarly, artistic, and curatorial involvements with the debate around human remains in museum and university collections.²¹

With Anna, Holger, and Tal being experts in the field, I expected that we would learn a great deal from discussing our curatorial dispute with them. I was convinced that this dispute could be productively resolved with the help of peers in the scholarly field who were themselves grappling with such questions. After all, we had the mandate to curate a university exhibition that aimed at showcasing scientific practice, historical and contemporary, in all its interdisciplinarity. A decision of this scope would not be one to make ourselves alone.

[19] Holger Stoecker, amongst his other positions, was research associate with the ‘Charité Human Remains Project’ (2010–13), which led to repatriations of ancestral remains from anthropological collections to Namibia, Australia, and Paraguay; he also did and continues to do provenance research for a number of other institutions, amongst them university collections. See, for example, an intensive provenance research project, undertaken with Larissa Förster, on a specimen from the teaching collection of the University of Jena: Larissa Förster and Holger Stoecker, *Haut, Haar und Knochen. Koloniale Spuren in naturkundlichen Sammlungen der Universität Jena* (Weimar: VDG, 2016). At the time of my mentioned approach, we were working together already – Holger was conducting a provenance research project for the Humboldt Lab on two human laryngeal specimens that had been discovered in the collection of the Lautarchiv (Sound Archives). The research project was funded by the Deutsches Zentrum Kulturgutverluste (German Lost Art Foundation); the report can be accessed in German and English. For the English-language version, see Holger Stoecker, ‘Provenance Report Regarding Two Human Laryngeal Specimens in the Sound Archives at Humboldt-Universität Zu Berlin’ (Berlin: Sound Archives, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2021), https://www.lautarchiv.hu-berlin.de/media/medialibrary/2022/10/Provenance_Report__Two_Human__Larynx-es_Lautarchiv_en.pdf. See also Holger Stoecker, Thomas Schnalke, Andreas Winkelmann, eds., *Sammeln, Erforschen, Zurückgeben? Menschliche Überreste aus der Kolonialzeit in akademischen und musealen Sammlungen* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2013).

[20] For the model of the Creative Co-Production (CCP), see Tal Adler, ‘The Creative Co-Production. An Experimental Model for Artistic Engagements with Contentious Cultural Heritage’, in *Contentious Cultural Heritages and Arts – A Critical Companion*, ed. Marion Hamm and Klaus Schönberger (Klagenfurt, Wieser Verlag 2021), 287–308. Sharon Macdonald provides a detailed account of the various facets of ‘contentious heritage’ that were developed over the course of the project, which also included the ethical question of displaying dead bodies, or parts or images of them. See Sharon Macdonald, ‘Contentious Collections, Contentious Heritage. Risks and Potentials of Opening Europe’s Memory Bank’, in *Contentious Cultural Heritages*, 95–127.

[21] One of their projects was the CCP (Creative Co-Production) *Dead Images*, a collaboration between the HU, the University of Edinburgh, and the Natural History Museums, Vienna, which focused on the various implications and challenges that collections of human skulls pose for an ethical practice in both the museum and university setting. See Tal Adler, Linda Fiebinger, John Harris, Maria Teschler-Nicola, Joan Smith, and Anna Szöke, ‘Dead Images. Facing the History, Ethics and Politics of European Skull Collections’, *Contentious Heritages*, 63–68. The project culminated in an exhibition of the same title at the Edinburgh College of Art, Edinburgh, 2018.

I invited Holger, Anna, and Tal to a workshop with my fellow curators of the Humboldt Lab in February 2019. This workshop resulted in the decision as a curatorial team to invite Tal for an artistic project. After our disagreement over whether to display the skull, the ultimate decision was allocated to Tal, who was given freedom in his approach to the topic in the inaugural exhibition. Regardless of his decision of whether to include the skull (which I strongly doubted he would), one thing was clear: the multi-layeredness of questions that had been opened up should also be raised in the exhibition. The question was how to do so. My further interest here was that Tal's artistic research could expand on the established notion of what questions could be raised on a structural level about human remains with regard to university collections like the Anatomical Collection – remains that are not necessarily of colonial provenance but that can nevertheless be problematic. While there was a wide-ranging debate about ancestral remains in anthropological and ethnographic collections, not least because of the Humboldt Forum, this had not been so much the case for university collections.²² My hope was that the project could be conceived as ongoing research that could engender productive feedback loops for the broader work with collections in the university context. This, at least, would be exactly what the Humboldt Lab was supposed to be about: a space of public engagement that addresses specific issues around scientific practice through the medium of exhibition-making. Could the discussions we had as a curatorial team, which centred on questions of the ethics of public display of this particular skull, be made fruitful for the wider questions about human remains in anatomical and other university collections?

Intervening Potentials

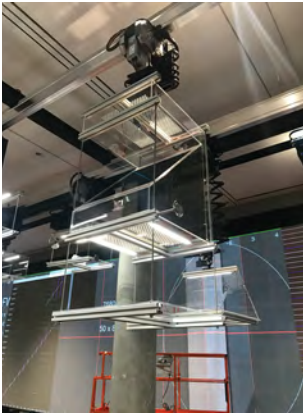
Departing from this curatorial debate, Tal Adler's intervention was, first and foremost, to not show the skull. Instead, he decided that the question about the identity of the person to whom the skull belonged should be put centre stage. Also, and significant in the specific context of the Humboldt Lab, he made the discussion about the ethics of the skull's public display a centrepiece of the installation.²³ His project, *Who is ID8470?*, is thus an important contribution to the debate around human remains in museum or university collections more widely, particularly with regard to their public display.

[22] Christian Vogel and Marie Luisa Allemeyer, 'Sensible Arbeitsobjekte – der Fall Universitäts-sammlungen', *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 2 (2019): 270–72.

[23] For the specific artistic strategy and content of the installation, and also the initially larger scope of the project, see Tal Adler's contribution in this book.



Scale model of the *Who is ID8470?* display case and Pepper's ghost by Tal Adler. © Tal Adler



Display case for *Who is ID8470?* during exhibition setup, November 2020. © Friedrich von Bose

The installation can be seen as producing a field of tension between showing and not showing by dealing with absence, precisely by *not* putting something – a human skull – on display.²⁴ In its embeddedness in the grid of objects, and vis-à-vis the twenty-five-metre-wide kinetic *Wall of Research* on which scholars and students engage with current issues of academic knowledge production, the display case can also be understood as a specific form of engagement with the politics of display in the exhibition more generally. In this sense, it is an explicit example of reflecting on the notion of visibility, which is conceived as a common thread in *After Nature* as a whole and which, for me, importantly included our own curatorial practices of making visible.²⁵

Moreover, because the conception of *Who is ID8470?* accompanied the planning of the Humboldt Lab's inaugural exhibition, it contributed a critical sub-text to the curatorial process. It underlined something that I see as central to curatorial practice: exhibition practice is always also a research practice. This involves the question of the spatial set-up, the proximities between various research projects that come together in the exhibition, and what specific narratives and questions arise from the interdisciplinary setting.

An important potential of the project, then, was to realize one of the central aims that I connected with the Humboldt Lab: that it would, in the course of its preparation as well as during its installation in the exhibition space, enable different formats of engagement with audiences as well as scholars about the ethical questions at hand. In that sense, it would

stimulate curation as a research practice and as an open process, instead of being just a *mediation* of research done elsewhere, much in

[24] This is also the opening line by Anna Degler of the Cluster of Excellence 'Temporal Communities. Doing Literature in a Global Perspective' in a conversation with Tal Adler for the audio exhibit 'Overtaxed. Literature as Intermedial Practice', which was conceived for the inaugural exhibition *After Nature*. The audio tour enters into dialogue with fifteen selected objects in the exhibition, one of them being *Who is ID8470?*. For more on the audio exhibition, see <https://www.temporal-communities.de/explore/listen-read-watch/audio-exhibition-humboldt-lab-overtaxed/index.html>.

[25] The notion of *visibility* is a structuring element for the exhibition texts: each installation is accompanied by three object texts and one illustration. The guiding principle for these were four keywords, amongst them *visibility*. By this, we wanted to highlight the importance of processes of reflection and practices of making visible in scientific practice, including in our own exhibition practice. The other three keywords were *orders*, *borders*, and *temporality*.

the way that Simon Sheikh frames it: ‘that which would otherwise be thought of as formal means of transmitting knowledge [. . .] is here an integral part of the curatorial mode of address, its content production, its proposition.’²⁶ Following this understanding, *Who is ID8470?* has the potential to question how we deal with problematic or ‘sensitive’ objects in university collections.²⁷ Here, the specific sensitivity lies not only in their unknown provenance or in their contestedness but also in their very transformation into collection objects in the first place.²⁸ In this way, the project also addresses the problem of perpetuating the process of objectification by means of exhibiting – a process that the director of the Berlin Museum of Medical History at the Charité, Thomas Schnalke, points to, in his contribution to the video of *Who is ID8470?*, as a foundational practice: the ‘making’ of an anatomical specimen involved erasing the name and memory of the person to whom it belonged in order to, ultimately, produce a ‘thing in itself’.²⁹

Opening Up Questions

Tal Adler’s artistic research project *Who is ID8470?* addresses important questions about human remains in university collections. These have so far not received as much attention with regard to their contested histories as ethnographic or anthropological collections have (especially those that more clearly originate from colonial contexts). In the context of HU’s collections, the Lautarchiv (Sound Archive) has been the most prominent with regard to being part of colonial knowledge production.³⁰ Critical research into the histories of the making of the collection and its handling in different political and institutional contexts has not only been explored through textual scholarship but has also involved the medium of film, sound, and exhibition.³¹ In the context of *After Nature*, two other archives were closely

[26] Simon Sheikh, ‘Towards the Exhibition as Research’, *Curating Research*, ed. Paul O’Neill and Mick Wilson (London: Open Editions, 2015), 32–46, at 40.

[27] For ‘sensitive objects’, see Britta Lange, ‘Sensible Sammlungen’, in Margit Berner, Anette Hoffmann, and Britta Lange, *Sensible Sammlungen. Aus dem anthropologischen Depot* (Hamburg: Philo Fine Arts, 2011), 15–40.

[28] Lange, ‘Sensible Sammlungen’, 19.

[29] ‘Who is ID8470?’, YouTube video, at 1: 32, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFFYhyrd4To>.

[30] Britta Lange, *Captured Voices. Sound Recordings of Prisoners of War from the Sound Archive 1915–1918* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2022); and Irene Hilden, *Absent Presences in the Colonial Archive. Dealing with the Berlin Sound Archive’s Acoustic Legacies* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2022).

[31] The Lautarchiv also plays an important part in the inaugural Humboldt Lab exhibition. After decades of a precarious existence in non-climate-controlled spaces at HU, it moved in its entirety to the Humboldt Forum in 2021. There, it is housed in the backspaces of the Humboldt Lab. It was during the preparation for the relocation that the two already mentioned human laryngeal specimens were discovered in the collection. The assumption was that they originate from the genocidal context of colonial rule in German Southwest Africa, today’s Namibia (see Stoecker, ‘Provenance Report Regarding Two Human Laryngeal Specimens’, 2). During preparations for the exhibitions for the Humboldt Lab, Holger Stoecker agreed to undertake a provenance research project about their origin and subsequent handling by the institution.



Exhibition view with the *Who is ID8470?* installation in the foreground, 2022. © Tal Adler

researched and curated in a special section together with the Lautarchiv: the Hahne-Niehoff-Archiv and the Janheinz Jahn-Archiv.³²

Much in line with this tradition, the *Who is ID8470?* project involved participants, sites, and events far beyond the physical installation in the Humboldt Lab. The many conversations that Tal has had, the research he (together with colleagues and students) undertook into the person's possible biography,³³ the workshops he

hosted, and the public presentations he gave in the course of preparing his installation for the Humboldt Lab and also subsequently (some of which I had the opportunity to be part of) have made this project into a collaborative endeavour that goes far beyond the installation. In this sense, the question is then, does the physical output succeed in conveying that provenance research is an unfinished process and that the situatedness of *Who is ID8470?* inside the interdisciplinary constellation of the Humboldt Lab spurs new research questions?

One of the central parts of the video installation is the 'spirit narratives' that represent possible biographies of the person to whom the skull belonged. The narratives were conceptualized as three-dimensional 'substitutes' for the skull by means of the Pepper's ghost illusion; the speculative impetus of their appearance in the video installation makes an important point, possibly the most crucial one in this display. The person associated with the skull is not Gall anymore, whose name is, at least in the object description at the collection, inextricably linked to 'ID8470'. Instead, the absence of the 'object' in question is filled with

[32] Franka Schneider was the guest curator who engaged in a critical examination of the Hahne-Niehoff photographic archive. There, she traced the connections between 'Volkskunde' and the rise of National Socialism. See Franka Schneider, 'Von an- und abwesenden Foto-Objekten. Das Hahne-Niehoff-Archiv als fragmentarische Sammlung volkskundlicher Fotografien,' in *Foto-Objekte: Forschen in archäologischen, ethnologischen und kunsthistorischen Archiven*, ed. Julia Bärmighausen, Constanza Caraffa, Stefanie Klamm, Franka Schneider, and Petra Wodtke (Berlin: Kerber 2020), 36–55. Ibou C. Diop curated the neighbouring section on the Janheinz Jahn-Archiv in the Humboldt Lab, titled 'Sichtbarkeit/visibility'. See Ibou Diop, 'Einblicke ins Humboldt Labor: Ibou Diop – das Janheinz Jahn-Archiv', posted March 9, 2021, by Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, YouTube, 3 : 11, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1dxqe1ILGbw>. Ricarda Rivoir provides a closer reading of this archive exhibition section, thereby also integrating *Who is ID8470?* in her analysis; see Ricarda Rivoir, 'Schwieriges Erbe ausstellen – "Programmatische Leerstellen" als kritische Repräsentation im Projekt *Wer ist ID 8470?* und den Archivausstellungen', in Chakkalakal, Biewer, Strott, 'Kuratieren als Relation', 97–109.

[33] See Duane Jethro's and Ricarda Rivoir's contributions in this book.

possible life stories of the person behind the skull – stories that are interwoven with the rather conventional interview accounts about the skull and the questions it poses. In combining these, the installation decentres the narrative of ‘what we know’ and emphasizes the questions about ‘what we don’t know’ and ‘what we could have known’ if there had not been an explicit institutional impetus of forgetting – and why that might be the case.³⁴

Addressing this gap in knowledge by means of possible biographies and by combining these with the interviews, the *Who is ID8470?* video opens up avenues of interrogation, much in the sense of Corrine Kratz and Ivan Karp’s understanding of the ‘interrogative museum’.³⁵ Karp and Kratz developed this perspective from one of their core principles as curators: ‘exhibit the problem, not the solution’.³⁶ This is what *Who is ID8470?* ultimately aims to do. For Karp and Kratz, exhibiting the problem means to regard ‘museum exhibits as essentially contested, debatable, and respecting the agency and knowledgeability of audiences when we develop and design exhibits’.³⁷ One arena where this contestability emerges is ‘the sphere of collaboration’. Much of our curatorial approach for the Humboldt Lab followed this spirit: the contestedness of the Humboldt Forum at large was the very precondition for our work at the Humboldt Lab; it is also in this sense that *Who is ID8470?* offers important perspectives, especially in the setting of a university exhibition.³⁸

One argument of a fellow curator in favour of exhibiting the skull was that we would be patronizing the visitors if we did not exhibit it and tell the complicated story of its history. However, following Karp and Kratz’s work, *Who is ID8470?* can be understood as taking a different stance: a collaborative project that opens up a space of possibilities exactly by means of omitting what is traditionally expected to be seen. Furthermore, the display seeks to make the visitors aware that many of the questions about a skull like this in a university collection might never be answered. It is precisely by not showing the object in question that a productive irritation can emerge, which prompts the following questions: Whom might the skull have belonged to? What was the fate

[34] In his provenance report about the two laryngeal specimens of the Sound Archive collections, Holger Stoecker makes the point about institutional forgetting; see Stoecker, ‘Provenance Report Regarding Two Human Laryngeal Specimens’, 10.

[35] Ivan Karp and Corinne A. Kratz, ‘The Interrogative Museum’, in *Museum as Process, Translating Local and Global Knowledges*, ed. Raymond A. Silverman (London: Routledge, 2015), 279–98.

[36] Karp and Kratz, ‘Interrogative Museum’, 281.

[37] Karp and Kratz, ‘Interrogative Museum’, 281.

[38] Karp and Kratz, ‘Interrogative Museum’, 281.

of that person and how did they end up in the collection? On the level of display, omitting the object also hints at the question of handling, of the institutional practices to which the skull refers. By not showing the skull, the exhibition opens more narrative space for the question of how ‘it’ became an object and why we refer to ‘it’ in the technocratic language of object IDs. Provenance research, as *Who is ID8470?* makes clear, goes beyond issues of acquisition and questions of ownership; it is also concerned with the institutional life an object has lived after entering the collection.³⁹

The relevance of this perspective becomes obvious in the context of the exhibition, in which many displays are concerned with the institutional history and the changing epistemic status of the objects shown. These displays also variously tell of complex histories of collections, of acts of accumulating as well as omitting information, of naming and renaming, of storing, and of teaching and research, all of which have been affected by the changing politics of research in the long history of university collections across several political systems.

With regard to our own exhibition practice, the institutional history also, and importantly, includes the question of how we can make sense of the skull’s rich exhibition history over the past two decades. What does the prominence of the skull tell us about the exhibitionary field, specifically within the realm of the university? And, more generally, how can we link the debates about sensitive collections in the contexts of ethnographic, anthropological, and natural history museums to debates about university collections – collections that have, at least in Germany, been for too long off the radar in the debates about the historical practices of collecting, display, and their changing epistemic status? These questions are important to address in a university exhibition in the Humboldt Forum, but they are also crucial to tackle in the broader field of university collections.⁴⁰

[39] Larissa Förster, Iris Edenheiser, and Sarah Fründt, ‘Eine Tagung zu postkolonialer Provenienzforschung – Zur Einführung’, in *Provenienzforschung zu ethnografischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit. Positionen in der aktuellen Debatte*, ed. Larissa Förster, Iris Edenheiser, Sarah Fründt, and Heike Hartmann (Berlin: Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, 2018), 13–36, <http://doi.org/10.18452/19029>. See also Larissa Förster, ‘Der Umgang mit der Kolonialzeit: Provenienz und Rückgabe’, in *Museumsethnologie. Eine Einführung. Theorien, Debatten, Praktiken*, ed. Iris Edenheiser and Larissa Förster (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 2019), 78–103.

[40] I made this assumption when we invited Tal Adler, and it was confirmed when I approached Marta C. Laurenco, who, as Chair of ICOM-UMAC (the International Council of Museums Committee of University Collections), expressed her dedication to the ethical issues of university collections. Her enthusiasm and support for the project were a strong sign of its potential for university collections, also internationally.

Who is ID8470? also addresses the issue of the public's involvement in these very questions. The challenge is always – and especially in a context like the Humboldt Forum with its diverse and international visitorship – how to consider the responses of visitors from a wide variety of contexts and backgrounds to the display.⁴¹ The quest for possible life stories of the person to whom the skull once belonged by means of the spirit narratives opens up the question of what we might call different forms of implicatedness. In a critical reassessment of the often essentialist ties between subjects and objects, as they are tendentially implied in the notion of 'source community', Erica Lehrer suggests the term 'community of implication' to 'include people who are *affected* by or can be said to be *implicated* in certain tangible or intangible cultural products, in ethical terms'.⁴² With this notion of implication, Lehrer suggests shifting the focus away from the agency of subjects to that of the objects; this helps us to 'recognis[e] the material world's ability to depict, to move, to connect, to remind, even to accuse'.⁴³

While we do not get to see the skull as physical 'specimen' in the exhibition setting, we do encounter it in various forms – including in the performed spirit narratives inhabiting the space where the skull would have otherwise been displayed. The notion of implicatedness helps address the problem that we do not know who the person was to whom the skull belonged; the multiple identities and backgrounds, which the performed tentative biographies suggest as possible ones, and the multiplicity of audiences those biographies speak to in the exhibition space enable us to take into account a range of possibilities of being implicated. This includes audiences in the exhibition who may react strongly to being confronted with a human skull. Especially in a space like the Humboldt Forum, which has always proclaimed to want to address a diverse and international public, there needs to be careful reflection on these various forms of implication.⁴⁴

[41] See Sharon Macdonald's discussion of the ethical issues around displaying contentious and difficult history, where she also touches on the potentials of exhibiting difficult history for critical reflection: Sharon Macdonald, 'Exhibiting Contentious and Difficult Histories. Ethics, Emotions and Reflexivity', in *Museums, Ethics, and Cultural Heritage*, ed. ICOM (London: Routledge, 2016), 267–77.

[42] Erica Lehrer, 'From Heritage Communities to Communities of Implication', in *Contentious Cultural Heritages*, 257–66, at 259–60.

[43] Lehrer, 'From Heritage Communities', 260.

[44] In the interview for the video *Who is ID8470?*, I made this point, asking whether we shouldn't pay more attention to whether the display of human remains – especially if we do not know anything about the provenance and therefore cannot claim that the person to whom it once belonged had agreed to its being publicly exhibited – could be disturbing for people. While I do think that disturbance and discomfort can be productive, the question has to be on what or at whose cost this discomfort is created. This means also to better consider the diversity of audiences with their various backgrounds and belief systems.

Handing over the narrative authority to Tal Adler implied for us as a curatorial team – with regard to this project more than others – subjecting our own curatorial practice to critical observation by the artist. This enabled and also challenged us to reflect on what it means to entrust curatorial decisions to someone outside the core team. As an artistic intervention, Tal's project also, at times, inhabited a somewhat precarious position within the planning process, since it reminded us of the necessary limits of curatorial authority, which did not sit easily for everyone on the team. But this was possibly the most productive aspect of *Who is ID8470?*: it shows the need for collaborative curatorial approaches. This implies the delegation of curatorial decision-making, which also and necessarily involves some conflict, and an understanding of the format of the exhibition as one of collaborative research (in the phase of planning and production as well as once the exhibition is officially opened).

Of course, this kind of collaborative endeavour requires a continuity of partners on the curators' side. This continuity was not possible, unfortunately, because most of our curatorial team (myself included) took up positions elsewhere before the exhibition was officially opened in July 2021.⁴⁵ I am thus all the more grateful that Tal – with the support of Sharon Macdonald and colleagues at the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage, as well as the authors included in this volume – has continued to pursue the question of who ID8470 might have been. With its artistic approach to provenance research, and as part of the specific interdisciplinary constellation inside the Humboldt Lab, *Who is ID8470?* has already started to produce and inform further research topics and agendas, and it will hopefully continue to do so in the future.⁴⁶

[45] The opening was delayed because of COVID-19 and also because of general delays in completing the building of the Humboldt Forum. The leaving of the curatorial team had little to do with the project itself; rather, the university's human resource strategy did not allow for a more long-term personnel planning for the Humboldt Lab, despite many calls for a more sustainable HR approach. From the curatorial team, I was actually the only member with a permanent contract. It is thanks to the commitment of a small new curatorial team that the many collaborative projects – of which *Who is ID8470?* was one – were continued successfully after the inaugural exhibition was opened. My special thanks goes to Johanna Stapelfeldt, who took up the thread with great enthusiasm and dedication, as well as to Hartmut Burggrabe, who took over responsibility for the educational programmes in the phase just before and after the Humboldt Lab's opening.

[46] From many of my conversations with colleagues at HU, but also at other museums, I have learned that the project has stipulated reflection on the notion of showing and not showing in different contexts. It has also led to further engagement with collections, especially amongst the involved students. For example, Ricarda Rivoir – who was a student in the two-semester ethnographic research project on the Humboldt Lab mentioned above and was also one of the collaborators for the 'spirit narratives' – brought this interest to the GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig. There, she worked with me on the multi-year exhibition program 'REINVENTING GRASSI.SKD' and also on a German Lost Art Foundation-funded provenance research project on the Togo collections at the ethnographic museums in Leipzig and Dresden. See, for further reference, Marlena Barnstorf-Brandes, Friedrich von Bose, Silvia Dolz et al., eds., *Researching Colonial Provenances. Final Report of the Project 'Provenance of Colonial-Era Collections from Togo in the Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden and the GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig (Staatliche Ethnographische Sammlungen Sachsen)*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.18452/27458>.



Drawing phrenology on an artificial skull. Film still from the *Who is ID8470?* Video. © Tal Adler

Searching for Fingerprints on ID 8470: Provenance Research on a Gall Skull from the Anatomical Collection of Berlin Charité

Marion A. Hulverscheidt

The provenance of human remains is most often examined in contexts of presumed injustice, whether these concern murder, war, and other conflicts, or the looting of burial sites. The ‘skull according to Gall’, which is the focus of consideration here, is not only a human bone that was once in the head of a human being; it is also inscribed with markings and was likely used as an object of teaching and learning. ‘Gall’ refers to Franz Joseph Gall (1758–1828), a controversial physician and anatomist, who developed ideas about how to interpret the contours of human skulls. According to these ideas, certain areas, which he called ‘organs’, can be identified. A ‘skull according to Gall’ – which for ease I will subsequently refer to as a ‘Gall skull’ – is, then, one in which these organs are delineated and named according to his scheme. These markings transform a skull into a hybrid object in more ways than one. The markings do not in fact refer to any anatomical formations as understood by medical science today – they are, instead, individual variations with no wider significance.¹ In scientific terms, such marked skulls are not anatomical visual preparations; rather, they document scientific ideas – those of Gall – that have been debunked and whose significance is not medical but historical.

[1] For example, a skull from the collection of the German Museum of Medical History in Ingolstadt serves as an anatomical teaching object. See Inv. No. 92/001, published as Johanna Hammerl, Tobias Angert, Michael Wolf, and Christian Foizig, ‘Protzsch von Zieten: Untersuchungen eines Craniums aus dem Deutschen Medizinhistorischen Museum in Ingolstadt’, in *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Medizinhistorischen Museums 8/1992–1994*, ed. Heinz Goerke, Christa Habrich, and Juliane Wilmanns (Ingolstadt: Demeter, 1995), 103–18.

As a medical historian, with knowledge of the history of the medical landscape in Berlin, I was asked if I would do provenance research relating to the Gall skull as part of the *Who is ID8470?* project, described elsewhere in this volume.² I was happy to accept.³ What follows is the result of my investigations. My method and procedure were shaped by what I learned as I followed my curiosity, drawing on both internet and documentary sources about this skull specifically and about skulls in other locations. My documentary research was primarily in Berlin, where, over a period of three months, I immersed myself in documentation concerning the era of Romantic medicine – which, on the basis of my knowledge of medical history, I determined was that in which the skull was inscribed. In this era – the first third of the nineteenth century – Berlin University was founded, and the anatomists and natural scientists Johannes Müller and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach were active in Berlin and Göttingen, respectively. I also used internet sources and surveyed, over email, anatomical and historical collections to locate other ‘phrenological skulls’– with markings according to Gall’s ideas or similar ones – in German anatomical and medical-historical collections. I followed up some of these with further searches elsewhere, including the Manuscripts and Scholarly Collections of the Göttingen State and University Library. In what follows, I describe what I learned directly about the Gall skull, before drawing on my further research into skulls elsewhere and on my wider knowledge of the period, to present what I was able to ascertain about its provenance.

The Object of Concern

The Gall skull, inventoried as ID No. 8470 in the Collection Portal of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, is about 26×13×20 cm in dimension.⁴

[2] See some of my prior work: Marion Hulverscheidt and Volker Hess, ‘Zur Etablierung der Hygiene an der Medizinischen Fakultät der Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität’, in *Geschichte der Universität Unter den Linden 1810–2010: Praxis ihrer Disziplinen*, vol. 5, *Wandel der Wissensordnung: Verwissenschaftlichung der Gesellschaft und Vergesellschaftung des Wissens*, ed. Rüdiger vom Bruch and Heinz-Elmar Tenorth (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 713–33; Gerhard Baader, Thomas Beddies, and Marion Hulverscheidt, ‘Chirurgie und naturwissenschaftliche Medizin 1850–1890’, in *Berliner Charité. Die Geschichte eines Krankenhauses*, ed. Johanna Bleker and Volker Hess (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2010), 80–111; Marion Hulverscheidt, Johanna Bleker, and Petra Lennig, *Visiten: Berliner Impulse zur Entwicklung der modernen Medizin* (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2012); Marion Hulverscheidt and Anja Laukötter, *Infektion und Institution – Zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte des Robert Koch-Instituts in Nationalsozialismus* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2009).

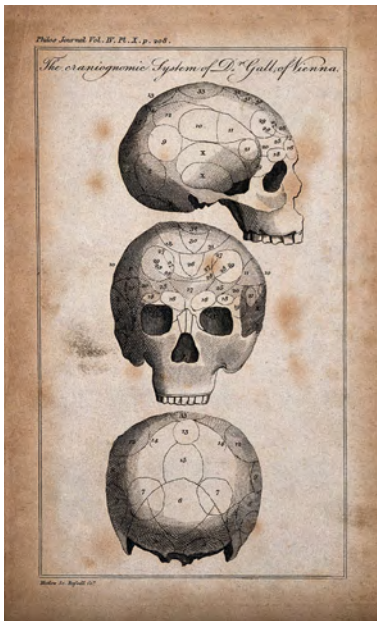
[3] From November 2021 to January 2022, I researched the provenance of the Gall skull as a guest researcher at the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. My research was funded through the AvH ‘Making Differences’ project. For information about the project, see the website, accessed June 9, 2023, <https://www.carmah.berlin/making-differences-in-berlin>.

[4] See the database entry for ‘Schädel mit Beschriftungen nach Gall’, AN 871.1, N.C. 381, Sammlung am Centrum für Anatomie, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, accessed June 9, 2023, <https://www.sammlungen.hu-berlin.de/objekte/sammlung-am-centrum-fuer-anatomie/8470>.

It is completely preserved, with the lower jaw attached to the left and right temporal bones by two spring hooks. The upper and lower incisors are missing and were probably lost post-mortem; the partially missing posterior molars and the wisdom teeth were, given the receded jawbone, likely lost during life. The colour of the bone is greyish ivory, and the bone's surface is well preserved and undamaged. Round, oval, elliptical, and heart-shaped markings have been drawn on the cranial dome and in the eye sockets, although not on the facial bones, and are arranged symmetrically on both sides of the skull.

Although, unfortunately, poorly legible, descriptions have been written within the markings, with a number noted behind them. The drawn markings are wider and darker than the writing, and it is unclear whether they were originally the same colour. Whether these inscriptions were applied with a brush, a metal quill, or a quill pen cannot be determined, nor can the composition of the pigment applied (ink). Inscribed at the *foramen ovale* are the words 'Lebens=Bedingung I' ('Life=Condition I'). Inside the *orbita* are three drawn markings, one of which can be deciphered as 'Personen-Sinn II' ('Persons-Sense II'), while the other two are illegible, other than the inscription 'Wort=sinn 19' ('Language=sense 19') and '16'. On the *glabella*, '8711' can be deciphered, while a '12' is legible in a circle above the orbital arch. 'Mordsinn 6' ('Murder-sense 6') can be read within a circle on the left above the temporal bone (*os temporale*).⁵

On phrenological skulls found in other collections, the regions are sometimes only labelled with numbers or noted in print. Some of the numberings on the Gall skull in Berlin do not correspond completely to historically published maps of phrenology or organology.⁶ On the skull bone itself, 'N. Cat. 381' is marked on the left *os temporale*, possibly as an inventory number. A label with the designation 'Z. 280' is glued on the left side of the mandible, in front of the *foramen mentale*. On the left angle of the jaw,



Three perspectives of a skull, sectioned and numbered according to Gall's system of phrenology. Etching by Mutter. Wellcome Collection, reference: 27668i (public domain).

[5] Translation of these terms by Ali Jones.

[6] Franz Heinrich Martens, *Leichtfassliche Darstellung der Theorie des Gehirn- und Schädelbaues und der daraus entspringenden physiognomischen und psychologischen Folgerungen des Dr. Gall* (Leipzig: Friedrich August Leo, 1803); and Marius Hagedorn, *Beschreibung und bildliche Darstellung der von Dr. Gall im Gehirn entdeckten Organe (. . .) Nebst einem in Gyps modellirten Schädel* (Leipzig: Johann Gottfried Graffe, 1803).

‘a Nr 8711’ is written. On an old object-label that is no longer kept with the skull, a description reads as follows:

*9/6 ‘Gall skull’ c. 1800 Berlin, Institute of Anatomy, Charité, Humboldt University Berlin. On both halves of the skull, symmetrical to the vertical axis, are inscribed various zones in which human abilities and aptitudes are located, such as ‘generosity’, ‘obscenity’, and ‘sense of colour’.*⁷

The skull can be mounted, although the original stand is missing. Because of a burglary to the collection and the theft of several items, the skull, since 2016, is not stored in the public collection rooms (the Anatomical Institute’s foyer) or in the semi-public rooms (Stern Hall), but rather in an office inaccessible to the public.

Neighbouring Skulls

At the close of the twentieth century, a so-called racial skull collection was still displayed in five-meter-high display cases in the corridor of the Berlin anatomical collection. It contained more than eight hundred skulls. The collection, which was started in the first third of the nineteenth century, reached its peak at the end of the nineteenth century, under then-director Wilhelm Waldeyer (1836–1921), and then subsequently garnered less and less interest over the course of the twentieth century. Yet, the skull collection remained, standing in glass cases in the hallway. It was viewed less and less frequently and no longer researched.⁸

In addition to the Gall skull, the anatomical collection also contains another ‘phrenological’ skull with inscriptions according to Spurzheim.⁹ This skull, allegedly inscribed by Johann Gaspar Spurzheim (1775–1832) himself, bears the inventory numbers A.Nr. 4034, and N.C. 380. The skull is complete with a mandible, although most teeth are missing. The digital

[7] Ali Jones’s translation from the German original: ‘9/6 “Gall’scher Schädel” um 1800 Berlin, Institut für Anatomie, Charité, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Auf dem Schädel sind symmetrisch zur Vertikalachse in beiden Hälften verschiedene Bereiche eingetragen, in denen Fähigkeiten und Anlagen des Menschen lokalisiert werden, wie z. B. “Freigiebigkeit”, “Zöthensinn” und “Farbensinn”’. This text comes from an old photograph of the label next to the skull. The original label is now lost.

[8] Andreas Winkelmann, ‘Die Anatomische Sammlung der Berliner Universität und ihre anthropologischen Bestände’, 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), 69–84, at 75–79; Andreas Winkelmann, *Sezieren und Sammeln – 300 Jahre Berliner Anatomie 1713 bis heute*, Hefte zur Geschichte der Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin 5 (Berlin: be.bra wissenschaft verlag, 2018), 31.

[9] The inventory numbers are found on a label numbered 221, mandible left 380, maxilla right 4034, mandible right 4034; see the database entry ‘Schädel mit Beschriftungen von Spurzheim’, AN 4034, N.C. 380, Sammlung am Centrum für Anatomie, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, accessed June 9, 2023, <https://www.sammlungen.hu-berlin.de/objekte/sammlung-am-centrum-fuer-anatomie/8511>.



Portrait of Wilhelm von Waldeyer-Hartz. Wellcome Collection (CC BY 4.0).

catalogue records its dimensions as 25×15×21cm. Markings with associated written descriptions can be found on the cranial dome and in the eye sockets, but the inscription is barely legible.

Another neighbouring object at the anatomical collection is the so-called Waldeyer skull, which is located in a glass case in the foyer of the Centre for Anatomy at the Charité. This is the skull of the former long-time director of the institute and full professor Wilhelm Waldeyer. During his lifetime, Waldeyer had mandated that his brain, skull, and hands be transferred to the Anatomy Department upon his death. His former colleague was given the task of preparing the hands. The brain no longer exists, but the skull does – along with an X-ray of the hands and a death mask. Johannes Sobotta (1869–1945) interprets Waldeyer's wish to bequeath his body parts to anatomy as a religious cult:

Thus the members of the Anatomical Society hold their honorary president in utmost memorialization, and the institute in which he worked so long and so beneficially, and which owes its present condition entirely to his outstanding organizational talent, retains as precious relics [emphasis mine] those parts of his body which he bequeathed to it.¹⁰

Also located in the foyer of the Centre for Anatomy at the Charité is an oversized wooden skull, the 'Linden Wood Skull', for which the following information is provided: '1904 Johannes Rückert (1854–1923) A. Bechtel Inv. No. 2008/60'. At



Exhibition catalogue of *Theater der Natur und Kunst / Theatrum Naturae et Artis - Wunderkammern des Wissens*. Film still from the *Who is ID8470?* Video. © Tal Adler

[10] J. Sobotta, 'Zum Andenken an Wilhelm von Waldeyer-Hartz', *Anatomischer Anzeiger* 56, no. 12 (1922): 1–43. The German original reads as follows: 'So haben die Mitglieder der Anatomischen Gesellschaft ihren Ehrenpräsidenten in bester Erinnerung, und das Institut, in dem er so lange und so segensreich wirkte, das seinen heutigen Zustand überhaupt seinem hervorragenden Organisationstalent verdankt, bewahrt als **teure Reliquien** die Teile seines Körpers auf, die er ihm vermacht hat (Hervorhebung MH):

the request of Munich anatomist Johannes Rückert, the woodcarver A. Bechtel had created two lecture models of a human skull on a fivefold scale. These can be disassembled into individual ‘bones’, and each was carved from solid blocks of linden wood. One of the two skulls was exhibited by the Munich-based Ludwig Maximilian University’s Institute of Anatomy at the 1904 World Fair in St Louis, in the ‘Medical Section of the German Teaching Exhibition’. At the end of the World Fair, the wooden skull was donated to the Berlin Anatomical Institute.

Alongside these skulls – as well as many other anatomical objects not described here – the Gall skull has lingered in the anatomical collection. Until the end of the twentieth century, little indication was provided about the provenance of such objects in anatomical collections. When such information was offered, it only stated who had prepared or previously owned the object. The objects themselves were stripped of subjectivity, as part of an unspoken culture of the anatomical collection of not naming those from whom the body parts came. A culture of written consent for the donation of bodies to anatomical institutes and collections developed only during the second half of the twentieth century.¹¹ Towards the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, bodies prepared in anatomical institutes for teaching and research purposes typically came from executed prisoners or those who had died in prison, or from people who had died in poorhouses or hospitals.¹² All of this meant that it was not possible to determine the identity of the person behind this skull. Nor was it possible to find even rudimentary information about the person who made the markings on the skull – they left no signature. Nevertheless, there was other information that could be gained and other possibilities that could be suggested by conducting historical research based on inventory numbers.

Historical Reconstruction Based on Inventory Numbers

Historical provenance research relies on examining an object’s records, and for objects in collections and museums, it typically begins with an examination of inventory list entries. The Gall skull is labelled with an A.N. number (presumably the abbreviation for *alte Nummer*, or ‘old number’), referring to an inventory book, which was probably recorded between 1810 and 1883 but was considered lost after 1910. This inventory book was instigated by the first professor of anatomy, Karl

[11] Andreas Winkelmann, ‘Schlemm, the Body Snatcher?’, *Annals of Anatomy* 190, no. 3 (2008): 223–29.

[12] Karin Stukenbrock, ‘Der zerstückte Körper’, in *Zur Sozialgeschichte der anatomischen Sektionen in der frühen Neuzeit (1650–1800)* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2001); 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.

Asmund Rudolphi (1771–1832), in 1810. It listed all the anatomical and zoological items of the anatomical collection in Berlin.¹³ The more recent catalogue included N.C. numbers (*neuer Catalog*, or ‘new catalogue’), which were often assigned parallel or supplementary to the A.N. numbers. However, this catalogue no longer exists either; it is assumed to have been destroyed during the bombing of the Anatomical Institute at the end of WWII.¹⁴ This meant that even historical provenance research was difficult and needed to consider not only what could be directly known but also possibilities based on wider information.

The first anatomical collection in Berlin was established by Johann Gottlieb Walter (1734–1816). His private collection of 2, 863 specimens was then acquired by Kaiser Friedrich Wilhelm III in 1803, for 100, 000 Reichstaler, and from 1810 on, it formed the basis of the anatomical museum housed in Berlin University’s main building, located on Unter den Linden.¹⁵ After the Kaiser’s purchase and the museum’s opening, anatomy professors were forbidden by royal decree from establishing private collections. A catalogue of Walter’s collection, dated 1796, exists and is kept in the Berlin Museum of Medical History.¹⁶ The Gall skull is not listed in it.

The ‘old catalogue’ (referring to the A.N. – old numbers) was created by Rudolphi, who had expanded the inventory of the anatomical collection to seven thousand objects by the time of his death.¹⁷ The old catalogue no longer exists. But the inventory of the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin contains a list, along with respective inventory numbers, of the objects in the anatomical museum, the animal specimens of which were given to the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin when the anatomical museum was dissolved. The list reveals that Rudolphi inventoried objects numbered 3234 to 5900, between November 1810 and June 1826, which means that this was when the Spurzheim skull (A.N. 4034) was inventoried.¹⁸ The transcripts of the inventory records also reveal that Rudolphi’s successor,

[13] Winkelmann, *Sezieren und Sammeln*, 15–16.

[14] Winkelmann, *Sezieren und Sammeln*, 15–16. The destruction of the collection directories during the WWII bombing of Berlin is also mentioned by W. Kirsche in his contribution ‘Zum 100. Band der *Zeitschrift für mikroskopisch-anatomische Forschung* und zum 100. Geburtstag ihres Begründers Hermann Stieve’, *Zeitschrift für mikroskopisch-anatomische Forschung* 100, no. 1 (1986): 1–6, at 3.

[15] Andreas Winkelmann, *Sezieren und Sammeln*, 14.

[16] Johann Gottlieb Walter and Friedrich August Walter, *Anatomisches Museum* (Berlin: Belitz und Braun, 1796).

[17] Manfred Stürzbecher, ‘Aus der Frühgeschichte der Berliner Anatomie’, *Deutsches Medizinisches Journal* 14 (1963): 803–19; Manfred Stürzbecher, ‘Beiträge zur Geschichte der Berliner Anatomie’, *Deutsches Medizinisches Journal* 9 (1958): 439–42; Winkelmann, ‘Die Anatomische Sammlung der Berliner Universität’, 84–105; Winkelmann, *Sezieren und Sammeln*, 16; and Thomas Werner, ‘Das anatomisch-zootomische Museum unter Karl Asmund Rudolphi als Lehr- und Forschungsinstitution 1810–1832’ (master’s thesis, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2012).

[18] I would like to thank Andreas Winkelmann for this important piece of advice, as well as my colleagues at the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin for scanning the relevant sections of the catalogue for my perusal, since pandemic regulations prevented me from visiting in person.

the famous anatomist and physiologist Johannes Müller (1801–58), recorded objects numbered 7198 to 10785, between May 6, 1833, and May 28, 1838. The Gall skull (A.N. 8711) was therefore inventoried by Müller during this time. It is possible that the skull had already been placed in the anatomical collection during Rudolphi's tenure but had simply not yet been recorded. Indeed, Müller explained that about three thousand objects were still being stored in the depot at that time and had not yet been prepared or processed for inclusion in the exhibition and the catalogue, and thus they had not yet been inventoried.¹⁹ On the basis of the numbers recorded on the skull and the written records in inventory lists, one can narrow down the point at which Müller inventoried the Gall skull to sometime between 1833 and 1836. It cannot be determined how long the skull had lingered in the anatomical collection beforehand, who gave it to the collection, or whether it was a gift or a purchase.

Gall's Theory of the Brain and Skull

Also important to consider is the history of Gall's theories about brains and skulls. His ideas caused a swirling controversy that peaked between 1798 and 1815, and which largely faded by the time of his death in 1828. It was only after the debate had subsided that the objects entered the museum's collection.

Born in Tiefenbronn near Pforzheim in Baden in 1758, Franz Joseph Gall began studying medicine in 1781 in Vienna, where he remained living and working as a physician after receiving his doctorate in 1785.²⁰ It was in Vienna that he developed a theory of the brain and skull, which stimulated controversial and intensive discussions in both academic and social spheres. Anatomist Samuel Thomas Sömmerring (1755–1830), who was widely known in German-speaking lands, claimed that the brain was the organ of the soul. Gall argued that not only the soul but also mental characteristics, talents, feelings, and inclinations were situated in the brain. He, therefore, shifted focus away from the cerebral



Franz Joseph Gall. Mezzotint by F. Wrenk, 1803, after Catharina Escherich. Wellcome Collection, reference: 601029i (public domain).

[19] Quoted in Werner, 'Das anatomisch-zootomische Museum', 18. The original source is Johannes Müller, 'Gedächtnisrede auf Carl Asmund Rudolphi', in *Abhandlungen der Königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Berlin: Königliche Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1837), xvii–xxxviii.

[20] See John van Wyhe, *The History of Phrenology on the Web* (website), accessed June 10, 2023, <http://www.historyofphrenology.org.uk>.

ventricles that Soemmering had identified as the soul's location and towards the cerebral cortex.

Gall revolutionized the dissection of the brain by abandoning the standard practice of proceeding inwards from the cerebral cortex; instead, he started with the spinal cord and proceeded outwards from there. Michael Hagner calls this new approach focusing on the brain an 'epistemological break'.²¹ However, accessing the brain itself was nearly impossible during Gall's lifetime, leading him to hypothesize that bulges and dents on the skull correlate with brain size and formation; this correlation would – per his theory – enable one to draw conclusions about mental faculties and qualities. He supported his theory with empirical evidence, numerous observations, and a series of systematic investigations, in order to demonstrate that his doctrine was empirically based rather than pure metaphysical speculation.

Gall had been speculating about potentially locating mental abilities in different brain regions since his anatomical-philosophical investigations at the end of the eighteenth century. The identification or locating of human characteristics was already known from the physiognomy of the Swiss priest, philosopher, and writer Johann Caspar Lavater (1741–1801). The latter believed that he could deduce a person's aptitudes from their appearance and facial expressions. This approach was critically debated. Underlying all these speculations is the desire to be able to classify and grasp a person in a simple, provable way. How, for instance, can I recognize that someone is dangerous, is deceiving me, is betraying me, or even loves me unconditionally? Such questions reveal that there was, and remains, the desire to understand and gauge other people based on simple and apparently objective characteristics, which could also be used comparatively with others.

During his time in Vienna, Gall developed a research program 'whose aim was to localize the site and sources of peoples' various mental qualities, inclinations, and talents in the various independent organs in the brain (organology)'.²² This postulated connection earned him accusations of charlatanism, but, even worse, he was accused of materialism, which resulted in Kaiser Franz II banning him from lecturing in 1801.²³ Gall saw brain structure, brain function, and human behaviour as three varied aspects of a unified, naturalistic doctrine of man, which he expected

[21] Michael Hagner, *Geniale Gehirne. Zur Geschichte der Elitegehirnforschung* (München: dtv, 2004), 55.

[22] Michael Hagner, 'Franz Joseph Gall', in *Ärztlexikon*, ed. W. U. Eckart and C. Gradmann (München: Beck Verlag, 1995), 152.

[23] Erna Lesky, *Franz Joseph Gall. Naturforscher und Anthropologe* (Bern, Stuttgart, Wien: Verlag Hans Huber, 1979), 11.

would influence psychiatry, moral science, education, and legislation. The paradigmatic shift of which Gall was representative meant that psychology was no longer organized according to philosophical categories but rather to anatomical-physiological ones.

His anatomical dissections of the brain and spinal cord stimulated lively academic discussions. However, it is the skulls he used for demonstration purposes that have remained in the cultural memory. These skulls were used to demonstrate how certain abilities or inclinations, which manifested in the cortex according to size and prominence, pushed through the brain onto the skull. The popular scientific twist was that these aptitudes could ostensibly be detected by touching the head. The location of the regions was constantly developed, and gradually more and more regions and new designations were added to the originally identified twenty-seven regions. Prints, skulls, and plaster casts were all produced as illustrative and teaching tools.²⁴ It is remarkable, although not without precedent, that Gall himself only published his major piece on his skull theory, together with his colleague Spurzheim, between 1810 and 1819 in Paris.²⁵ His teachings were thus published primarily by others, sometimes via their criticism.²⁶

After he was banned from lecturing in Vienna, Gall embarked on a lecture tour, in 1805, lasting more than two years, before he settled in Paris in 1807. This tour included a stop in Berlin, in 1805, where he gave six public lectures and conducted anatomical demonstrations for physicians.²⁷ Johann Gottlieb Walter attended a lecture and a dissection, and afterwards he wrote a harsh critique of Gall's anatomical claims, his dissection methods, and his theory of organology.²⁸ It was Gall's prosector

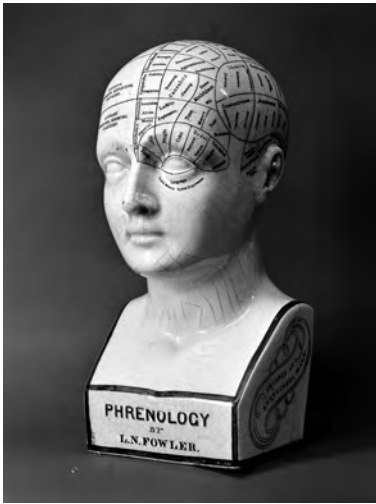
[24] See Franz Heinrich Martens, *Leichtfassliche Darstellung*; and Marius Hagedorn, *Beschreibung und bildliche Darstellung*.

[25] 'Des Herrn Dr. F. J. Gall Schreiben über seinen bereits geendigten Prodomus über die Verrichtungen des Gehirns der Menschen und Thiere an Herrn Joseph Freiherr von Retzer', *Der Neue Teutsche Merkur* 12 (December 1798): 311–82; Franz Joseph Gall and Johann Gaspar Spurzheim, *Anatomie et physiologie du système nerveux en général, et du cerveau en particulier, avec des observations sur la possibilité de reconnaître plusieurs dispositions intellectuelles et morales de l'homme et des animaux, par la configuration de leurs têtes*, 4 vols. (Paris: J.-B. Baillière, 1810–19). Volumes 1 and 2 were published jointly by Gall and Spurzheim, volumes 3 and 4 by Gall alone.

[26] Johann Gottlieb Walter, *Etwas über Herrn Doctor Gall's Gehirn-Schädel-Lehre, Dem Berliner Publikum mitgetheilt* (Berlin: Wegener, 1805); Henrik Steffens, *Drei Vorlesungen über Hn. D. Gall's Organlehre* (Halle: Neue Societäts-Buch- und Kunsthandlung, 1805); Samuel Thomas Sömmerring, 'Meine Ansicht einiger Gallschen Lehrsätze', *Göttingische Gelehrten Anzeigen* 6–7 (1829): 49–64.

[27] Lesky, *Gall*, 12.

[28] Paul Eling and Stanley Finger, 'Gall's German Enemies', *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences* (2019): <https://doi.org/10.1080/0964704X.2019.1687245>; Walter, *Etwas über Herrn Doctor Gall's Gehirn-Schädel-Lehre*; Christian Heinrich Ernst Bischoff, *Darstellung der Gall'schen Gehirn- und Schädel-Lehre; nebst Bemerkungen über diese Lehre von Christoph Wilh. Hufeland* (Berlin: Wittich, 1805); Jakob Fidelis Ackermann, *Die Gall'sche Hirn- Schedel- und Organenlehre vom Gesichtspunkte der Erfahrung aus beurtheilt und widerlegt* (Heidelberg: Mohr und Zimmer, 1806); and Garlieb Merkel, 'Dr. Gall und der Geheimrath Walter', *Die Freimüthige* 98 (1805a): 390–91; (1805a) 99: 393–95; (1805a) 100: 397–99; (1805a) 101: 401–3; (1805a) 103: 409–10.



Photograph of a ceramic head with phrenological markings. Wellcome Collection (CC BY 4.0).

and companion, Johann Gaspar Spurzheim, who advanced Gall's theory of the brain and skull in a more popular-scientific approach, which had more to do with character studies than with actual neuroanatomical science. Spurzheim and Gall fell out around 1813, and Spurzheim became Gall's successor in what he now called phrenology.²⁹ This approach was especially noted in Great Britain, and it received serious attention in the United States until the twentieth century, but only in the public realm. In medical science, Gall was esteemed for his neuroanatomical approaches, though not for his phrenology.³⁰

Tentative Biographies and the Journey to the Collection

Who held this skull in their hands and used it to learn or even teach Gall's organology? How, and through whom, did this striking object come into the Berlin anatomical collection? Such questions surrounding

past fingerprints and possession are part of provenance research, but it is often not easy to find definitive information to answer them. In such contexts, we can seek to propose 'tentative object biographies', to use a term coined by Larissa Förster and Holger Stoecker (and discussed further by Förster in this volume)³¹. Such tentative object biographies are neither proven nor disproven, but some are more plausible – or more enticing or exciting – than others. Below are four possibilities that, on the basis of my research, seem to be relatively likely.

From Gall to Walter

The skull could have possibly come from a hitherto unknown private estate of the Walter anatomists. Johann Gottlieb Walter died in 1816, and his son and successor, Friedrich August Walter (b. 1764), in 1826. By 1803, Johann Gottlieb Walter had already sold his private collection to the Prussian state, the catalogue of which still exists. This does not

[29] Roger Cooter, *The Cultural meaning of Popular Science: Phrenology and the Organization of Consent in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); and James Poskett, *Materials of the Mind. Phrenology, Race, and the Global History of Science, 1815–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

[30] John van Wyhe, *Phrenology and the Origins of Victorian Scientific Naturalism* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004); Courtney E. Thompson, *An Organ of Murder: Crime, Violence and Phrenology in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021); and Wyhe, *The History of Phrenology on the Web*.

[31] Larissa Förster and Holger Stoecker, *Haut, Haar und Knochen. Koloniale Spuren in den naturkundlichen Sammlungen der Universität Jena*, vol. 9, *Laborberichte* (Ilmtal-Weinstraße: VDG Weimar, 2016), 67–68.

list the Gall skull. However, it is possible that Walter could have ordered an inscribed skull from Gall in Vienna before 1803. Perhaps Walter received the skull as a gift from Gall, as thanks for organizing an anatomical theatre in Berlin for Gall's public lecture and demonstration. Gall spoke in Berlin in 1805, two years after Walter sold his collection, but in his position as a professor, Walter presided over both the anatomical theatre and the Royal Anatomical Museum in Berlin. Walter mentions this in 1805, when he wrote the following:

I also wish to mention one particular situation, to prove how obliging I have been to Doctor Gall in all respects, since it was not a matter of the person but of the subject itself. Only professors of anatomy are permitted to give lectures at the anatomical theatre, unless by the explicit written order of His Majesty the Kaiser, the head of the Medicinal Department, Count von der Schulenburg Excellenz, or the first director of the Collegium Medico-Chirurgicum President von Scheibler Hochwohlgeboren. But what happened here? – Doctor Gall's most ardent supporter, Mr Geheime Rath Hufeland Wohlgeboren, had his anatomy henchman simply inform me that Doctor Gall would be lecturing, and I was to prepare corpses for him. I ignored this ridiculous despotism, arranged for five heads be given to Doctor Gall, and, as I said, paid a Friedrichs-d'or on top of all that for this tidy demonstration.³²

As mentioned above, after 1810, royal decree forbade all professors at Berlin University from procuring objects for private collections. However, Walter could still have acquired a skull from Gall privately. Walter's son and successor, Friedrich August Walter, died in 1826, and the Gall skull could have come from his estate, which was only inventoried after 1833, under Müller's directorship of the anatomical collection. It can be assumed that the skull was merely considered a curiosity or relic at that point, rather than a serious anatomical specimen. This would

[32] Johann Gottlieb Walter, *Etwas über Herrn Doctor Gall's Gehirn-Schädel-Lehre, dem Berliner Publikum mitgetheilt. Zweiter Theil* (Berlin: Wegener, 1805), 24. The German original reads as follows: 'Zum Beweise, wie zuvorkommend ich dem Herrn Doktor Gall in allen Stücken gewesen, da es hier nicht auf die Person, sondern auf die Sache selbst ankam, will ich auch diesen Umstand anführen. Niemand als nur die Professores der Anatomie können, ohne Allerhöchsten schriftlichen Befehl Sr. Majestät des Königs, oder des Medicinal-Departments-Chef, Herrn Grafen von der Schulenburg Excellenz, oder stattdessen des ersten Direktors des Collegii medico-chirurgici, des Herrn Präsidenten von Scheibler Hochwohlgeboren, Vorlesungen auf dem anatomischen Theater halten. Was geschah aber hier? – der eifrigste Anhänger des Doktor Gall, Herr Geheime Rath Hufeland Wohlgeboren, ließ mir, eigenmächtiger Weise, bloß durch den Anatomieknecht sagen, der Doktor Gall würde auf dem Theater Vorlesungen halten, und ich möchte Körper für ihn bereit halten. – Ich setzte mich über diesen lächerlichen Despotismus weg, ließ dem Doktor Gall fünf Köpfe geben, und bezahlte, wie gesagt, noch obendrein einen Friedrichs-d'or für diese saubere Demonstration'.

explain the old catalogue number. Considering the harsh criticism he had published, it seems less likely that Johann Gottlieb Walter had procured a skull marked with Gall's organology for his own private use or that he acquired it directly from Gall or his collection.³³

From Gall to Hufeland

The Gall skull could also have come from the estate of Christoph Wilhelm Hufeland (1762–1836), the personal physician of the Kaiser and founder of so-called macrobiotics. In 1805, he published an account of Gall's brain and skull theory in which he differentiated and critically classified Gall's ideas.³⁴ Hufeland had also ordered the anatomist Walter to provide Gall with both the anatomical theatre for his lectures and 'five heads' for the demonstrations.³⁵ He shared his critique with professional and educational societies in Berlin. Johann Gottfried Schadow (1764–1850), the famous Prussian draftsman and sculptor, states that Hufeland encouraged him to make plaster casts of skulls, about which he lectured at the Humanity Society.³⁶ Hufeland died in Berlin in 1836. It is also possible that this Gall skull was in his possession, and that after his death, his widow delivered the skull to the anatomical collection.

From the Rehmann Collection

Joseph von Rehmann (1779–1831) delivered two lectures on Gall in St Petersburg in 1805.³⁷ He advertised these with the proviso that he wanted to arouse not only 'the attention of the systematic scholar' but also the interest of 'every educated person' regarding this new theory. He would have heard Gall's lectures in Vienna on multiple occasions, had personally witnessed his demonstrations, and thus saw himself in a position to present Gall's observations and empirical research in a series of six to eight lectures. The subscription price for attending the lectures was twenty-five roubles, and for an additional ten roubles, one could purchase a plaster skull, which had been cast and labelled on the basis of one of Gall's own pieces.

[33] Eling and Finger, 'Gall's German Enemies'; and Walter, *Etwas über Herrn Doctor Gall's Gehirn-Schädel-Lehre*.

[34] See Bischoff, *Darstellung der Gall'schen Gehirn- und Schädel-Lehre*.

[35] Walter, *Zweiter Theil*, 24.

[36] Hannah Lotte Lund, "'Fleißig anatomirt!'" Berliner Anatomie zwischen Privat und Öffentlich im ausgehenden 18. Jahrhundert', in *Tiefe Einblicke. Das Anatomische Theater im Zeitalter der Aufklärung*, ed. Johanna Bleker, Petra Lennig, and Thomas Schnalke (Berlin: kadmos-Verlag, 2018), 143. Lund cites Uta Motschmann, *Schule des Geistes, des Geschmacks und der Geselligkeit. Die Berliner 'Gesellschaft der Freunde der Humanität' 1797–1861* (Hannover: Wehrhahn, 2009), 801. According to this source, Schadow delivered a lecture on June 15, 1805.

[37] See Joseph von Rehmann, *Vorlesungen über Dr. Galls Gehirn- und Schädel-Lehre*, 4 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1805), accessed June 10, 2023, <http://drw.saw-leipzig.de/30447>. The print version can be found in *Russische Karrieren. Leibärzte im 19. Jahrhundert*, Relations 4, ed. Marta Fischer (Aachen: Shaker, 2010), 200–203. On Rehmann's biography, see also Hartmut Walravens, 'Zum Werk des Arztes und Ostasienforschers Joseph Rehmann', *Sudhoff's Archiv* 67 (1983): 94–106.

It is also possible that Rehmann acquired the skull in Vienna and brought it with him to St Petersburg. He offered his lecture audiences the chance to study a plaster skull, which he had cast from a real skull. That object travelled with him across the vast expanses of Russia and China, before being sold to the Prussian State for 130 ducats, along with the rest of his collection.³⁸ Rudolphi had instigated that purchase, since he respected Rehmann as a colleague and knew he was an avid skull collector.

As Müller's Souvenir from Paris

Johannes Müller came to Berlin in 1833 as Rudolphi's successor, and by 1858 he had expanded the number of objects in the anatomical collection to 19,577. The Gall skull's inventory number suggests that it was inventoried under Müller's tenure or even procured at his request. Müller was in Paris in the summer of 1831, shortly before taking up the professorship in Berlin. He had travelled with his doctoral student Jakob Henle to conduct comparative anatomical studies in the Jardin des Plantes and to meet Alexander von Humboldt and Georges Cuvier.³⁹ Gall had lived and worked in Paris since 1807 and had amassed an extensive collection of skulls, busts, casts, and wax models of brains. In an 1830/31 publication that includes biographical references, A. A. Royer describes 354 objects from this collection on display at the Musée de l'Homme.⁴⁰ Neither Henle nor Müller mentions a visit to the collection nor the gift of a human skull in any of their letters. However, it still remains possible that Henle and Müller brought a skull marked with Gall's theory of the brain home with them as a souvenir from Paris.

These four possibilities are not the only ones, but they seem the most plausible, and they also illustrate the range of tentative object biographies concerning the Gall skull's provenance.

[38] Winkelmann, 'Die Anatomische Sammlung', 75; and Werner, 'Das anatomisch-zootomische Museum', 22–23. See also Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, GStA PK, I. HA Rep. 76 Kultusministerium, Va [Universitäten] sect. 2 Tit. X No. 11, vol. 4, tal. 129–130 (Rudolphi an das Ministerium, 14. Okt. 1828). Tot. 131–132 (Altenstein an Friedrich Wilhelm 111., 26. Nov. 1828); *Ibid.*, tot. 133 (Friedrich Wilhelm 111. an Altenstein. 3. Dez. 1828).

[39] Herrmann Hoepke, 'Der Bonner Student Jakob Henle in seinem Verhältnis zu Johannes Müller', *Sudhoffs Archiv* 53, no. 2 (1969): 193–216, at 206.

[40] 'Catalogue, Number, and Descriptive of the Heads of Men and Animals, which made up the late Dr Gall's collection'. A. A. Royer's description of the *Jardin des Plantes*, from the Manuscript by M. le Dr Danncey, a pupil and friend of Dr Gall, *Phrenological Journal* 6 (1829/30): 480–99, 583–602; and 7 (1831/32): 27–36, 181–5, 250–53. Ackerknecht and Vallois also describe 354 objects originating in Gall's collection, and which are now in the Paris Musée de l'Homme; see Erwin H. Ackerknecht and Henri V. Vallois, *François Joseph Gall et sa collection* (Paris: Mémoires du Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, 1955), 92.

Conclusion

Using the example of provenance research on a Gall skull from the Berlin collection, I have attempted to explore the possibilities and limitations of this method. As a learning tool for Gall's organology, the skull is a useful visual object, yet it would function just as well in a cabinet of curiosities, attesting to the collecting mania that raged until the middle of the nineteenth century in Europe. No longer a 'scientific' object, in the sense of being of use for natural science, the Gall skull remains part of the Charité anatomical collections, with Waldeyer's skull and the man-sized lime-wood model nearby, and close to the Spurzheim skull. While Gall's neuroanatomical findings have been lost, his popular skull doctrine has been virtually immortalized and buried in collection repositories by the long-lasting, nearly immortal teaching objects – the skulls.

The research on which this article is based has shown what could be learned from searching for the provenance of the Gall skull, but it has also revealed where the limits of provenance research become palpable and where provenance becomes unclear. As I have endeavoured to illustrate, the indeterminacy itself opens up the attractive potential for informed speculation. In my search for the possibilities of how the Gall skull was acquired, I immersed myself in the medicine of the Romantic period in Berlin. This was a time not only of natural scientists – such as those mentioned above, including Hufeland and Schadow – but also of those whose work crossed into the arts and humanities, as exemplified by Goethe. Drawing on approaches from the arts and humanities, I have sought to show how provenance research can serve as an entry point into history for discovering and awakening possible, horizon-expanding – albeit not necessarily entirely factual – stories.



Label from the teaching collection of the Phyletisches Museum Jena reading 'Scalp of a Herero'. © Michael Markert

Filling Gaps in Provenance Research: Between Plausibility and Experimentality

Larissa Förster

The emergence and the flourishing of a discourse on provenance (research) in scholarship, museum work, and cultural politics have had a tremendous effect on how, in recent years, cultural institutions in Germany have begun to question the history of their collections and exhibitions. It has kicked off a new discourse on how to decolonize spaces, structures, and narratives in museums. However, the tenacious pursuit and the ubiquitous talk of provenance have also had side effects. One of these epistemic side effects is the reinforcement of a notion of the ultimate knowability of an object's history.

Provenance as Knowledge

Provenance research is often understood as the reconstruction of a complete, uninterrupted 'chain of owners and possessors' of an object – from the creator of the object, to its sometimes-numerous subsequent users and holders, to the institution where it is kept.¹ Particularly in art historical provenance research, ideally every change of hands during an object's itinerary is listed and documented – not least because a complete chain of ownership underlines the authenticity and thus the value of an artwork by drawing a direct line from the institution back to the artist who created it.

[1] Jonathan Fine and Hilke Thode-Arora, 'Provenance Research Sources, Methods, Possibilities', in *Guidelines: Care of Collections from Colonial Contexts*, ed. German Museums Association (Berlin: Deutscher Museumsbund, 2021), 147–52; available at <https://www.museumsbund.de/publikationen/care-of-human-remains-in-museums-and-collections>

Provenance research on artworks or cultural heritage expropriated under National Socialist and colonial rule has added another dimension: it has put emphasis on the circumstances under which an object changed hands and on an ethical assessment of these circumstances from today's point of view.² The latter, too, requires detailed evidence, in part because decisions need to be taken in favour of or against further changes of ownership or possession – that is, for or against restitution or repatriation. Producing reliable knowledge is, therefore, key in the forensic work of provenance research. The latter's systematization and institutionalization have further contributed to the standards of detectability and made 'provenance knowledge' almost a field of its own.

Provenance as Ignorance

There are, however, only very few object histories that can be traced seamlessly, end to end – in particular, in ethnographic museums where objects were collected in large numbers. As a consequence, provenance researchers are often left with fragments of an object's history – and thus with a great number of question marks. Quite frequently, the producer of an artefact cannot be detected, nor can the site of its crafting; the same goes for the original user(s). Moreover, museums have difficulties in providing information on the exact date and/or site of appropriation by a non-local or European-descended actor. Usually, it is only the last holder of an artefact who has been registered in the museum's database; therefore, only accompanying information – if it is indeed still extant after two world wars – can reveal whether this previous holder (unless they removed the object themselves) was aware of the circumstances under which the object was taken from the social context for which it was produced and in which it circulated.

In the case of human remains, there are particularly painful lacunae. In most cases, the name and identity of the person behind the mortal remains cannot be retrieved or reconstructed. This is less a result of the destruction of sources or of institutional obliviousness than of a scientific practice in which individuals were only seen as examples of *types* of human beings and, therefore, remained anonymous – a prerequisite for their objectivization and dehumanization through musealization.

[2] German Lost Art Foundation, ed., *Provenance Research Manual to Identify Cultural Property Seized Due to Persecution During the National-Socialist Era* (Magdeburg: German Lost Art Foundation, 2020); available for download at <https://www.kulturgutverluste.de/Webs/EN/Research/Manual/Index.html>.

As a consequence, provenance researchers oftentimes cannot but simply wait until further pieces of evidence surface in order to complete the mosaic of hints and indicia they have begun. In a paradoxical way, provenance depends on serendipity, on the coincidental or accidental reappearance of evidence – at times of miniscule, parenthetical, or hidden hints, at times of major, spectacular finds. Therefore, it can be difficult to calculate the time that needs to be invested in provenance research. To give but one example: (oral) historians Dag Henrichsen, Holger Stoecker, Hans Axasi #Eichab, and I teamed up to research the provenance of the mortal remains of two individuals from what is nowadays Namibia, after Werner Hillebrecht, then head of the National Archives of Namibia, brought a historical publication in the German journal *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* to our attention. It took us seven years to collect and stitch together pieces of information from many different sources and come up with at least a preliminary version of who the individuals behind the remains were and how the remains had ended up in the Berlin Society of Anthropology, Ethnology, and Prehistory – a version that may be revised whenever new sources and clues turn up. We have come to call this kind of research ‘slow science’: a science that cannot be expedited by the systematization of research or by the augmentation of the quality or the quantity of research, but rather a science that proceeds, often frustratingly, only with the lapse of time and the happening upon further evidence.

To some degree, the latter is the case for any historical research. Nevertheless, I would like to argue that it is particularly constitutive for provenance research because of the forensic purpose behind this kind of research – that is, the pressure to come up with some history in a timely manner, not least in order for others to be able to reach decisions on the basis of these findings – for example, to restitute or repatriate objects or human remains. Is it maybe this very goal-directedness of provenance research that not only throws gaps into relief but actually co-produces them?

So, when faced with a plethora of lacunae, is there any point in trying to write an object biography, as is generally pleaded for? Or could gaps – be they temporary or permanent – also be made productive epistemologically? Can the many failed attempts of provenance research to create links between people and things, places and times, and to detect causalities and reconstruct chronologies be transformed into something else?

Provenance Research in Jena

In order to answer these questions, I turn to a research project that historian Holger Stoecker and I conducted for our book *Haut, Haar und Knochen. Koloniale Spuren in den naturkundlichen Sammlungen der*



Part of the teaching collection of the Phyletisches Museum Jena.
© Michael Markert

Universität Jena (Skin, hair and bones: Colonial traces in natural history collections at the University of Jena). It was the result of one and a half years of research in and around the teaching collection of the Institute of Zoology and Evolutionary Research at Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena. The collection is held in the Phyletisches Museum (Phyletic Museum), Jena, a museum founded by evolutionary anatomist Ernst Haeckel, who popularized Charles Darwin's theories in Germany and developed them further. Founded in 1907, the museum opened in 1912.

Our research began when, through an unforeseeable chain of events, the mortal remains – or, more precisely, a piece of the scalp – of an African individual, part of the teaching collection of the Institute of Zoology since the 1950s, but long forgotten, resurfaced.³ The desire to understand how and why the mortal remains of this human being ended up in the Jena zoological collection set off a range of activities on our side as well as on the side of the institution. However, as no detailed documentation existed on the teaching collection, we at first had to rely on what a label and a faded inscription on the scalp suggested: that it had been taken from the corpse of an Otjherero-speaking individual from Namibia, Germany's former colony (1884–1915), and had, at some point, been associated with a certain L. Schulze, most likely the Jena zoologist Leonhard Schultze, later Schultze-Jena (1872–1955).

The name Schultze immediately made sense to us: Schultze, a zoologist by training, travelled in what was then German South West Africa (today's Namibia), between 1903 and 1905, with the aim of assessing the potential of the colony's fishery industry.⁴ He also set out to explore and

[3] We would like to thank Gerta Puchert, at the time museum educator of Phyletisches Museum, for bringing the scalp to our and her colleagues' attention. She has inspired and supported our research by sharing not only her vast knowledge on the museum's and the discipline's history but also her empathic personal reflections on the subject(s) and objects treated here.

[4] Leonhard Schultze, *Die Fischerei an der Westküste Süd-Afrika's. Bericht über Untersuchungen an der Deutsch-Südwest-Afrikanischen Küste und am Kap der Guten Hoffnung der Kolonialabteilung des Auswärtigen Amts*, vol. 9, *Abhandlungen des deutschen Seefischerei-Vereins* (Berlin: O. Salle, 1907a).

document meticulously the landscapes of southwestern Africa as well as the economic, social, and religious practices of the cultural groups inhabiting these landscapes – work that resulted in numerous publications either by Schultze himself or by colleagues whom he provided with geological, botanical, or zoological specimens.⁵

During his travels, Schultze not only witnessed the uprising of the OvaHerero and Nama against German colonial occupation in 1904 and 1905, but he even joined the German troops in one of their campaigns against the Nama. The colonial war that German troops waged against the local population between 1904 and 1908 escalated into a genocide for two reasons: first, the relentless persecution of fleeing civilians; and second, what historian Jürgen Zimmerer has come to call ‘murder by deliberate neglect’ – that is, the malnutrition of and resulting high mortality rate amongst prisoners of war in the concentration camps.⁶ It was in at least two of these camps, Swakopmund and Lüderitzbucht/Shark Island, that German military doctors dissected the bodies of deceased inmates in order to investigate diseases and/or prepare anatomical ‘specimens’ for their colleagues at German universities.⁷ Schultze most probably tapped into these networks and exploited them for his own anatomical-anthropological ambitions when he was in Swakopmund, Lüderitzbucht, or Keetmanshoop, where a military hospital for Africans existed. In the first of a series of edited volumes that resulted from his travels in the colony, he wrote, ‘I could take advantage of the victims of war and extract parts from their fresh corpses that conveniently

[5] See Leonhard Schultze, *Aus Namaland und Kalahari. Bericht an die Kgl. Preuss. Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin über eine Forschungsreise im westlichen und zentralen Südafrika, ausgeführt in den Jahren 1903–1905* (Jena: G. Fischer, 1907b); Leonhard Schultze, ‘Einleitung’, in *Zoologische und anthropologische Ergebnisse einer Forschungsreise im westlichen und zentralen Südafrika ausgeführt in den Jahren 1903–1905 mit Unterstützung der Kgl. Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, vol. 1 (Jena: G. Fischer, 1908), v–viii; Leonhard Schultze, *Zoologische und anthropologische Ergebnisse einer Forschungsreise im westlichen und zentralen Südafrika ausgeführt in den Jahren 1903–1905 mit Unterstützung der Kgl. Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, vol. 2 (Jena: G. Fischer, 1909); Leonhard Schultze, *Zoologische und anthropologische Ergebnisse einer Forschungsreise im westlichen und zentralen Südafrika ausgeführt in den Jahren 1903–1905 mit Unterstützung der Kgl. Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, vol. 3 (Jena: G. Fischer, 1910); Leonhard Schultze, *Zoologische und anthropologische Ergebnisse einer Forschungsreise im westlichen und zentralen Südafrika ausgeführt in den Jahren 1903–1905 mit Unterstützung der Kgl. Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, vol. 4 (Jena: G. Fischer, 1912); Leonhard Schultze-Jena, ‘Zur Kenntnis des Körpers der Hottentotten und Buschmänner’, in *Zoologische und anthropologische Ergebnisse einer Forschungsreise im westlichen und zentralen Südafrika ausgeführt in den Jahren 1903–1905 mit Unterstützung der Kgl. Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, vol. 5 (Jena: G. Fischer, 1928), 145–227.

[6] Jürgen Zimmerer, ‘War, Concentration Camps and Genocide in South-West Africa’, in *Genocide in German South-West Africa: The Colonial War of 1904–1908 and Its Aftermath*, ed. Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller (Monmouth: Merlin Press, 2008), 56.

[7] Casper W. Erichsen, *The Angel of Death Has Descended Violently Among Them: Concentration Camps and Prisoners-of-War in Namibia, 1904–1908* (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2005), 139–145; Holger Stoecker and Andreas Winkelmann, ‘Skulls and Skeletons from Namibia in Berlin: Results of the Charité Human Remains Project’, *Human Remains and Violence* 4, no. 2 (2018): 12.

complemented the study of the living body (imprisoned H***** were often at my disposal)?⁸

Although Schultze earned his PhD at the University of Jena, he has been completely forgotten in the university's historiography. When we started our research, the University of Jena was perceived by nearly all our interlocutors as having no explicit links with either the history of the scientific exploitation of Africa or the broader colonial movement in Germany at the time – although they were indeed aware that Jena had been a centre of National Socialist study on human heredity.⁹ We, therefore, needed to start from scratch, by probing the history of Jena institutions and their collections. We examined the archival record at the Phyletisches Museum, at neighbouring institutions such as the Ernst-Haeckel-Haus (Ernst Haeckel House), and the university archive in search of further hints about when, how, and why this atrocious so-called acquisition could have been made. During those one and a half years, we oftentimes felt we were onto something. And indeed, we did make major discoveries: for example, we managed to unearth at least four inventory books pertinent to the collections in and around the Phyletisches Museum that had gone astray over the decades and seemed completely unknown to our interlocutors at the institution.

However, we did not succeed in retrieving either the identity or the place of abduction, nor could we determine the subsequent trajectories of the piece of a scalp through German colonial science. In fact, the short inventory list of the teaching collection, created in 1988, remained the only source where the skin was mentioned explicitly – including Schultze's own writings.¹⁰ As a result, a series of questions remained concerning not only the identity of the deceased person but also, more generally, the time span between 1904/1905, when the body of this individual must have been desecrated, and the 1950s, when the aforementioned label, typical of the time, must have been created for it.

[8] The term with asterisks in the quotation is a derogatory term for Nama. Schultze, 'Einleitung', viii. My translation from the German original: 'Andererseits konnte ich mir die Opfer des Krieges zunutze machen und frischen Leichen von Eingeborenen Teile entnehmen, die das Studium des lebenden Körpers (gefangene H***** standen mir häufig zu Gebote) willkommen ergänzten'.

[9] See, by way of comparison, Uwe Hoßfeld, *Institute, Geld, Intrigen. Rassenwahn in Thüringen, 1930–1945* (Erfurt: Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Thüringen, 2014).

[10] Larissa Förster and Holger Stoecker, *Haut, Haar und Knochen. Koloniale Spuren in den naturkundlichen Sammlungen der Universität Jena*, vol. 9, *Laborberichte* (Ilmtal-Weinstraße: VDG Weimar, 2016), 29–31.

Provenance Research as Speculation: Tentative Object Biographies

In the course of our investigation, we amassed a wealth of contextual information; traced human remains with similar histories and provenances in the collections of neighbouring disciplines and institutions in Jena; happened upon personal and place names well known for their links with practices of body-snatching, dissection, and translocation of African corpses; uncovered entirely forgotten aspects of Schultze's work and career; disproved the assumption that the University of Jena had no connection with the broader colonial movement in Germany; and eventually rediscovered that the University of Jena had had an ethnographic collection, which included yet more mortal remains of individuals from southwestern Africa. In our view, these were significant findings that needed to be told to a broader public in Jena, even though we still lacked the evidence that would enable us to reconstruct the one and only 'factual' object biography of the human remains that we had originally sought.

As a consequence, we came up with three different, speculative, but highly plausible object biographies. In these, we synthesized findings, expanded on hints and traces with the help of patterns that we knew from other case studies, and drew on parallels and similarities with other collection and institution histories. We called the trajectories we charted *tentative object biographies*. They offered a method for narrating the findings of our research, for making assumptions on the basis of typical actor constellations, motivations, and developments, with the help of the example of the piece of a scalp. Even though we crafted the tentative object biographies as separate trajectories, we made clear that points of connection between them existed – places where the skin could have 'changed track'. For on the one hand, the contexts we elaborated on seemed more or less equally convincing; on the other hand, coincidence, accidents, and idiosyncrasies that run counter to the obvious or the usual are known to play a surprisingly great role in the constitution of collections, as the historiography of museum collections has shown.

In the following, I briefly summarize the speculative plot of each of the three tentative biographies and the main arguments for it. Everything that is described is based on evidence – except for explicit references to the skin.¹¹

[11] I will point to key sources, but more detailed references are available in Förster and Stoecker, *Haut, Haar und Knochen*.

*The Theatre of War as Anatomical Theatre:
Berlin-Jena Networks in Anatomy*

Schultze's travels were financed by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation in Berlin, whose board of trustees was headed by Wilhelm Waldeyer, professor at the Institute of Anatomy at Berlin University. Funding was granted on the condition that Schultze hand over material he collected in the colony to relevant scientific institutions in Berlin. The young Schultze was eager to impress Waldeyer, who had already published on the cerebral anatomy of some individuals from eastern Africa.¹² When the opportunity arose to gain access to mortal remains of the 'enemy' in the concentration camp in Swakopmund, Schultze had them sent to Waldeyer, as is known from the two skulls that have been found in the Charité in Berlin and repatriated to Namibia in 2018.¹³ Among the body parts was a piece of a scalp.

The theatre of war in the colony turned into an anatomical theatre for the colonial metropole: Waldeyer and his colleagues started to ask the colonial administration for more deliveries. A number of articles in the journal *Zeitschrift für Morphologie und Anthropologie* testify to this.¹⁴ Waldeyer passed human remains to his colleagues at the Institute of Anatomy in Jena, where dissector Hermann von Eggeling started working on them in order to contribute to an edited volume planned by Schultze.¹⁵ None of these remains are traceable today – as is also the case for three skeletons, or parts thereof, that Schultze provided to the anatomical collection between 1912 and 1928. Only the piece of a scalp is locatable. When the Institute of Anatomy cleared out its collection of specimens that did not complement its curriculum in the 1930s, the piece was transferred to the Institute of Zoology, which was known for its interest in human evolution. Owing to the lack of documentation, the piece of scalp is not included in the exhibition, but only in the teaching collection.

[12] Wilhelm Waldeyer, 'Über einige Gehirne von Ostafrikanern', in *Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien* (Horn: F. Berger & Söhne, 1894), 24 : 141–44. Indeed, Waldeyer later also investigates the cerebral anatomy of individuals from southwestern Africa: Wilhelm Waldeyer, 'Gehirne südwestafrikanischer Völker', in *Sitzungsberichte der Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Berlin: Verlag der Königl. Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1906), 3–8.

[13] Stoecker and Winkelmann, 'Skulls and Skeletons', 20.

[14] Stoecker and Winkelmann, 'Skulls and Skeletons', 23–24.

[15] Heinrich von Eggeling, 'Anatomische Untersuchungen an den Köpfen von vier Hereros, einem Herero- und einem Hottentottenkind', in *Zoologische und anthropologische Ergebnisse einer Forschungsreise im westlichen und zentralen Südafrika ausgeführt in den Jahren 1903–1905 mit Unterstützung der Kgl. Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, ed. Leonard Schultze, vol. 3, *Anatomische Untersuchungen an Menschen und höheren Tieren* (Jena: G. Fischer, 1909), 323–48.

*The Obsession of Race Theory with Hair:
Jena Zoology under Haeckel*

When Schultze left for what was then German South West Africa, he felt indebted to his teacher Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919), who had granted him a sabbatical for his travels. Haeckel, inspired by Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, was interested in how one can recognize different 'human races' by the characteristics of their hair.¹⁶ Schultze seemed to have the ambition to deliver empirical evidence for Haeckel's theories, and thus included the analysis of hair into his anthropological investigations.¹⁷ Schultze lumped together two of the cultural groups amongst which he worked because of the seeming similarity of their hair; this is how the term *Khoisan* (a combination of *Khoe* and *San*) was created – a term used in linguistics and genetics as well as in political discourses on indigeneity in southern Africa to this day.¹⁸

When Schultze got access to dead bodies, he secured at least one hair and skin sample for his teacher. Haeckel incorporated the latter into the zoological collection he had built over the previous forty years – that is, since he became a professor in Jena. Back in Jena, Schultze was designated director of the Phyletisches Museum – a project that Haeckel had been working towards for many years. When the museum eventually opened, in 1912 – Schultze had left the Institute of Zoology in the meantime – a great part of the collection of the institute went on display, including hair samples. They became part of a display in which men of different 'races' and primates were compared in terms of their anatomy. Over the subsequent decades, the collection of the museum grew bigger, and its displays became overstuffed; the vitrines were finally reorganized and culled in the 1950s. The piece of a scalp of an individual born in south-western Africa was relegated to the teaching collection; it is, therefore, not present in a photograph of the display taken in the 1950s.

*Producing Knowledge for Colonial Expansion:
Jena Geography*

Schultze's well-received publication on German South West Africa earned him a professorship in geography – which is why he left the Institute of Zoology, including the Phyletisches Museum, and became head of the Institute of Geography in Jena and its ethnographic collection, in 1908.¹⁹

[16] Ernst Haeckel, *Systematische Phylogenie der Wirbelthiere (Vertebrata)* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1895), 636.

[17] Leonhard Schultze-Jena, 'Zur Kenntnis des Körpers der Hottentotten und Buschmänner', 166.

[18] Susanne Berzborn, *Ziegen und Diamanten. Sicherung des Lebensunterhalts im ländlichen Südafrika* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2006), 232–33.

[19] This publication is Leonhard Schultze, *Die Fischerei an der Westküste Süd-Afrikas*.

The ethnographic collection had a strong focus on German South West Africa, thanks to Schultze's predecessors, Eduard Pechuel-Lösche and Karl Dove, two proponents of the geography of German South West Africa who both donated their private collections to the institute. Dove also co-organized Jena's colonial exhibition of 1900; moreover, he used his networks to acquire objects and even human remains from a number of colleagues.

Thus, Schultze may have had good reason to follow suit and add the piece of a scalp (and maybe more objects) he had originally held back for himself. In the 1920s, when geography and ethnography became separate disciplines, the ethnographic collection held by the Institute of Geography fell out of use and was dispersed across public institutions in Jena. Interestingly, more than a decade later, another discipline took an interest in the collection: the anthropologist Bernhard Struck, head of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Jena, tried to reassemble it. Struck also started building an anthropological collection, which included '49 hair samples, taken from Bushmen, H***** and Hereros', to which the piece of the scalp from the reconstructed ethnographic collection was added.²⁰ Because the disciplines of ethnology or African studies did not get institutionalized at the University of Jena, the ethnographic collection faded into oblivion and was eventually dispersed for good. Only the skin was saved by zoologists for their teaching collection.

Potential and Limitations of Tentative Object Biographies

Without additional evidence, it is not possible to determine which of the three ways, sketched above, the skin might have reached the zoological teaching collection by the 1950s. Each of the three tentative object biographies appears plausible in its own way: the first, because of the well-documented and notorious networks along which human remains were traded by anatomists in colonial Germany; the second, because of its particular focus on the specific interest that Jena's scientific circles could have taken in it; the third, because of the prominent role that the territory of German South West Africa played in the discipline of geography already before the abduction of the piece of the scalp. It is possible that in some months, years, or decades, a piece of writing will turn up that validates or invalidates our tentative object biographies – or at least gives them a different twist and turn.

[20] The word with asterisks in the quotation is a derogatory term for Nama. Johannes Bescherer, 'Zur Geschichte des Instituts für Anthropologie und Völkerkunde der Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena in den Jahren 1936–1953', *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena. Mathematisch-naturwissenschaftliche Reihe* 3 (1954): 3–12.

Nevertheless, we argue, the tentative object biographies will remain heuristically valuable, because they are carefully constructed from a wealth of contextual knowledge and an abundance of related and similar cases that we have come across in our work. They condense circumstantial evidence into compelling examples. Taken together, they detail many of the motivations, mechanisms, and ramifications of what sociologist Wulf D. Hund has called the ‘political economy of desecration of dead bodies’ of African subjects under colonial rule, and they provide evidence for the inextricable complicity of (Jena) science with colonialism around 1900.²¹ They also point to the lack of institutional self-reflection at the time of our research and plead for a critical, postcolonial institutional memory that fundamentally builds on such findings.

What all three biographies cannot achieve, unfortunately, is a reconstruction of the identity of the individual whose mortal remains were abducted, meaning that a dignified return to their family of origin is not yet possible. Had we better and more detailed sources, however, our assumptions and speculations could perhaps have also allowed us to begin to address the identity of the deceased person.

On Speculating and Writing Experimental Histories

Our notion of tentative object biographies was inspired by a number of discussions that we felt were related to our problem of the absence of conclusive evidence. In the humanities, historian Carlo Ginzburg’s essay on “clues” has been influential.²² Ginzburg reflects on drawing conclusions from marginal observations and from reading and interpreting the (material) traces of individual actions in forensic contexts. Often characterized as the ‘circumstantial paradigm’, this method informed our approach. Philosopher Sybille Krämer, considering the epistemic role of traces and citing psychologist Albert Spitznagel, speaks of the ‘art of intelligent conjecture’ based on experience as well as creativity, a ‘knowing-how [. . .], a capability, that, under certain circumstances, leads to new knowledge, even though, at the same time, it makes us perceive the limitations of that knowledge’.²³ Taken together, the three narratives also re-enact our ‘scrutinising movement’ (*Suchbewegung*)

[21] Wulf D. Hund, ed., *Entfremdete Körper. Rassismus als Leichenschändung* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009).

[22] Carlo Ginzburg, ‘Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method’, introduction and trans. Anna Davin, *History Workshop Journal*, no. 9 (1980): 5–34.

[23] Sybille Krämer, ‘Was also ist eine Spur? Und worin besteht ihre epistemologische Rolle? Eine Bestandsaufnahme’, in *Spur. Spurenlesen als Orientierungstechnik und Wissenskunst*, ed. Sybille Krämer, Werner Kogge, and Gernot Grube (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007), 21. My translation from the German original: ‘Spurenlesen ist ein knowing-how, [. . .] ein Können also, das unter bestimmten Umständen zu neuem Wissen führt – uns aber auch dessen Grenzen spüren lässt’.

between traces, our constant weighing of plausibilities against one another without making a final judgement. The approach teases out the question: How much can or must we know in the first place to tell the story of colonial desecration of dead bodies of African individuals and to be able to repatriate their human remains?

Expounding the potential trajectories of the skin also elicited another aspect – that of fiction as an element in historians' writings. Referring to the historiography of Australian settler-Indigenous relations, historian Klaus Neumann has spoken of 'experimental histories'.²⁴ Experimental histories often address unequal relations, which is why they programmatically go beyond the scope of the colonial archive, with its lack of the voices of the oppressed and marginalized and its inherent bias. They bring in ethical, emotive, and subjective layers motivated by a critique of the colonial archive and a plea for alternative ways of knowing the past. Neumann goes as far as to also reference genres and media such as novels, theatre plays, and films when he writes, 'Experimental histories are departures from conventional academic histories in that they do not privilege a single perspective on the past, are not couched within the realist paradigm, do not have a linear narrative structure whose logic is determined by chronology and a series of cause and effect relationships, are not written in the third person, and are not unambiguously non-fiction'.²⁵

In contrast to some of the writings Neumann refers to, our tentative object biographies do not abandon chronology or causality – quite the opposite. Nevertheless, opening up towards and making assumptions about the hitherto unknown in critical-creative ways may be what provenance research can learn from *Spurenlesen* – the reading of tracks – as well as from experimental history: it may prevent provenance research from getting bogged down in an endless search for conclusive evidence.

Conclusion

Even though the final proof remained lacking, in our book (and in the accompanying case report) Holger Stoecker and I argued for a strong likelihood that the piece of a scalp had been appropriated in one of the prisoner-of-war camps in Shark Island/Lüderitzbucht, or Keetmanshoop during the genocidal war. This meant it had been abducted in a 'context of injustice', to borrow the terminology used by the German Museums Association's guidelines on the 'Care of Human Remains in Museums and

[24] Klaus Neumann, 'But Is It History?', *Cultural Studies Review* 14, no. 1 (2008): 19–32.

[25] Neumann, 'But Is It History?', 21–22.



Handover ceremony during the repatriation of ancestral remains from German institutions to Namibia, Berlin, 2018. © Joachim Zeller

Collections'.²⁶ As a consequence, the Phyletisches Museum eventually decided to repatriate the object. The case was reported to the Namibian Embassy in Berlin, and in 2018 a joint return of ancestral remains from several institutions across Germany (Berlin, Greifswald, Hamburg, Hannover, Jena, Witzhenhausen), as well as from one private household, was organized. All ancestral remains returned in the years of 2011, 2014, and 2018 are now kept in a storage space at the National Museum of Namibia that is dedi-

cated specifically to repatriated human remains.

The previous illegitimate transfer of these body parts to Germany – that is, their object biographies – were in most cases better documented than in Jena. Nevertheless, for not more than two of them did names resurface.²⁷ For none of them could a subject biography of family of origin be established. This remains the most scandalous obliteration we are confronted with in the field of provenance research on human remains abducted in colonial contexts.

[26] German Museums Association, *Guidelines: Care of Collections from Colonial Contexts* (Berlin: Deutscher Museumsbund, 2021), 17–19; available at <https://www.museumsbund.de/publikationen/care-of-human-remains-in-museums-and-collections>.

[27] Quite frequently, chains of custody can be reconstructed only fragmentarily. The concept of 'tentative object biographies' has been employed in some other cases in order to productively address the lack of evidence. See Bettina Brockmeyer, Frank Edward, and Holger Stoecker, 'The Mkwawa Complex: A Tanzanian-European History about Provenance, Restitution, and Politics', *Journal of Modern European History* 18, no. 2 (2020): 117–39; Martin Nadarzinski, 'Namibia in Witzhenhausen. Die ethnographische Sammlung des Deutschen Instituts für Tropische und Sub-tropische Landwirtschaft' (master's thesis, Goethe-Universität zu Frankfurt, 2020); see also the following report, produced in the context of the exhibition 'Nach der Natur' at the Humboldt Forum, Holger Stoecker, *Provenienzbericht über zwei menschliche Kehlkopfpräparate im Lautarchiv der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin* (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin, 2021), https://www.lautarchiv.hu-berlin.de/media/medialibrary/2022/10/Provenienzbericht_Kehlkoepe_Lautarchiv.pdf.



The hanging tree in Old Moshi with an advertisement for the *Marejesho* exhibition, 2022. © Konradin Kunze

From Performing Provenance Research to Community-Centred Engagement: Flinn Works and the Ancestors in Boxes

Konradin Kunze

As a child, I occasionally visited my father at his office at the University of Freiburg, where he worked as a professor. I enjoyed strolling through the building. I favoured the rooftop terrace, which offered a good view of my picturesque hometown with the medieval cathedral tower and the adjacent mountains of the Black Forest. I also liked the libraries, especially the old books and archives. I never went to the cellar of the building (I likely would have been denied access); had I done so, I would have encountered hundreds of ancestors in boxes. Like many universities and museums in Europe and North America, the University of Freiburg holds a so-called skull collection: remains of ancestors from many parts of the world, largely appropriated during the German colonial period. Had I seen them, I possibly would have asked questions like, Who are these people? Why are they here? Why are they stored in boxes? Where did they come from? Who took them and for what reason? Maybe I would have even thought of their friends and families, wondering if they miss them.

Many years later, once I learned of the existence of these ancestors, I was led back to libraries and archives in a quest to find answers to these questions. By then, however, I had chosen a profession that is not usually practiced in academic venues but instead in other bourgeois temples. In Freiburg, the city's theatre is situated just opposite the university. Here, first as a child, I began my career as an actor.

In order to ask these questions without having met the ancestors in the cellar, I had to learn about the racist colonial practice of trafficking ancestral remains in other ways. I could have learned it in school, but all I remember about German colonialism in history class was a world

map with a few brown spots indicating German colonies. We were not told what happened there. We believed that Germany had colonies ‘only for a few years’ and that the British and French had many more spots on the map. This assumption was not an exception in my history classes; to this day, many Germans still think this way. I did not learn anything about the genocide against the Herero and Nama communities in so-called German Southwest Africa (today’s Namibia), 1904–8, nor did I hear anything about the biggest anti-colonial movement on the African continent and its violent suppression, the Maji Maji War that took place in parts of so-called German East Africa (today’s Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi) between 1905 and 1907. My ignorance about German colonial history led to a shock when I travelled to Tanzania and, for the first time, heard stories about the brutal colonial regime and the atrocities committed by Germans more than a hundred years ago. Although those who told me this history never blamed me as a descendent of the colonizers, I felt deeply ashamed. I felt ashamed of the violence of the past but even more of my ignorance in the present. How come every schoolchild in Tanzania knew more about this history than I did?

Maji Maji Flava

Shame and shock can lead to a state of paralysis and defensiveness. In my case, it led to the beginning of a confrontation with the past and a long-term collaboration with the Tanzanian performer, musician, dancer, and choreographer Isack Peter Abeneko. My partner and artistic director of Flinn Works, Sophia Stepf, and I met Isack during a theatre workshop on our first trip to Tanzania, in 2009. Our conversations about colonial history and the different levels of knowledge and awareness in our respective countries led to a common project by Flinn Works and Asedeva (Isack’s Dar es Salaam-based company): a dance, theatre, and music performance called *Maji Maji Flava* about the Maji Maji War, highlighting the different perspectives on our shared history. It was first staged in 2016 at the Staatstheater Kassel, in 2016 and 2019 at the Sophiensæle Berlin, and in 2017 in various spaces in Dar es Salaam and Bagamoyo, Tanzania.

During research for *Maji Maji Flava*, I eventually encountered the ancestors in the boxes in the basements of German institutions – not in person but through media reports and the work of NGOs like Berlin Postkolonial or alliances like *Völkermord verjährt nicht!* (No Amnesty on Genocide!). We were determined to include the issue of the so-called skull collections in our performance but soon realized that it was far too complex to be touched upon as a marginal note in the performance. So, we decided to create the lecture performance *Schädel X* (Skull



Jan Beyer, Isack Abeneko, and Konradin Kunze in the *Maji Maji Flava* performance at Staatstheater Kassel, 2016. © Nils Klingner

X) as an accompanying project of *Maji Maji Flava*. Nevertheless, we included a dance scene in *Maji Maji Flava* in which we tried to portray the brutal act of cutting off heads after executions. In the performance, which was first staged 110 years after the Maji Maji War, we referred to the hangings of more than sixty leaders in Songea on February 27, 1906, at the end of the war. We had visited the mass grave of the Ngoni leaders in the Majimaji Memorial Museum.¹ Yann LeGall described this scene as a re-enactment of ‘the bloody quest for morbid war trophies’, but with a twist, since it wants to ‘challenge the objectifications of the formerly colonized’. He concludes, ‘After centuries of ellipses and concealment in the archives and reports, of gaps between the journals written by colonial officers and the museum receipts acknowledging delivery of human remains from German East Africa, headhunting finally stands in the spotlights’.²

Audience reactions to our performance varied. In Germany, the shock and shame of being confronted (often for the first time) with one’s own colonial history was the major theme in, often emotional, talks and statements by audience members after the performance. Some elderly audience members were clearly irritated and left the performance as soon as we opened the floor for discussion. Others blamed the school system and the German government for neglecting this history. During our research in

[1] The grave for Songea Mbandu on the premises of the Majimaji Memorial Museum is separated from the mass grave. The tomb is divided into two parts; the upper, narrower part reminds us that the body is buried here, but the head is still missing today.

[2] Yann LeGall, ‘Remembering the Dismembered: African Human Remains and Memory Cultures in and after Repatriation’ (PhD diss., University of Potsdam, 2020), 220–21.

Tanzania, we never encountered any upfront anger or accusations. On the contrary, interview partners sometimes even highlighted positive aspects of the German colonial legacy, such as railroad tracks or still-solid colonial buildings. However, after the performance of *Maji Maji Flava* in Dar es Salaam and Bagamoyo, most audience members expressed the need for an apology and further action by the German government. *Maji Maji Flava* even made it to the Tanzanian Parliament, where, just one week after he had seen the performance in the National Museum and House of Culture in Dar es Salaam, a member of parliament (MP) asked the Tanzanian government to demand reparations from Germany.³

During research for *Maji Maji Flava*, we met Nkosi (chief) Zulu Gama V, a descendant of one of the hanged leaders, who also leads the yearly Maji Maji commemoration in Songea. His words were included in the performance, narrated by one of the performers, and in an interview excerpt that was screened after the show. The team of *Maji Maji Flava* fervently wished to help him with his demand to repatriate the head of Songea Mbano, but to this day, we have not been able to find any trace locating him in any Western institution. Nevertheless, we were able to arrange a trip of Zulu Gama V to Berlin to speak on a panel with Mnyaka Sururu Mboro at the conference ‘Prussian Colonial Heritage. Sacred Objects and Human Remains in Berlin Museums’.⁴ The voice of a descendant of the hanged leaders of the Maji Maji War was, thus, heard for the first time in the former colonial metropole.

Schädel X (Skull X)

The common definition of scientific provenance research does not even try to answer all the questions that I, or likely any child, would have asked when encountering the ancestors in boxes. It is often narrowed down to the best possible answer to the question of how and from where ‘the object’ came into the collection.⁵ In this sense, Flinn Works’ *Schädel X* (Skull X) could be regarded as portraying provenance research on ancestral remains, highlighting its complexity and obstacles. But more than that, the performance triggered a search for a missing ancestor, a

[3] Konradin Kunze and Timo Grampes, ‘Scham und Vergessen gegenüber Tansania’, *Deutschlandfunk Kultur*, February 24, 2017, <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/deutsche-kolonialgeschichte-scham-und-vergessen-gegenueber-100.html>.

[4] The conference was organized by Berlin Postkolonial. See ‘Panel V – Tanzania Headhunting: Mnyaka Sururu Mboro (TZ/DE) and Zulu Gama V (TZ, tbc)’, posted May 15, 2018, YouTube, 57 : 13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=080r2yfUoAo>.

[5] Often, in scientific practice, ancestral remains are still framed and treated as objects, while in most communities of origin they are regarded as subjects – that is, individuals. In my opinion, insisting on objectifying language and practices is a continuation of colonial violence.

reversed provenance research, that went much deeper than the research necessary to devise the performance. Provenance research usually starts from an existing subject of investigation. Our search began from a void, from a place where someone is missing.

Although *Schädel X* evolved as a side project of *Maji Maji Flava*, it premiered before it, in 2016, at Sophiensæle Berlin, followed by a series of presentations at various festivals and venues in Germany, Austria, the United Kingdom, and Tanzania. It was realized with a relatively small budget, funded mainly by the Berlin Senate. The funds limited the number of performers to just one – me. We chose the format of a lecture performance with a mobile technical set-up, which meant it could be performed in venues such as universities, museums, and auditoriums, especially those with a historical or present connection to ‘skull collections’. Our hope was to extend the discourse on the ancestors in boxes and their repatriation to a wide audience – beyond academic conferences, diplomatic backroom talks, and activist interventions.

Lecture performances mimic the techniques and gestures of a scientific lecture while often presenting made-up content. It is part of the genre to leave the audience in the dark about what is fact and what is fiction. Using this genre for such a sensitive issue as ancestral remains might seem inappropriate, but it offered the opportunity to question the methods and techniques of scientific knowledge production (including provenance research) by artistically re-enacting them. Almost the entire narration presented in *Schädel X* was based on facts; the only false pretence was that I myself had inherited a skull. A skull formed the centre of the performance. This was not a real skull, although some audience members assumed it must be the inherited one. Two biographical stories

revolved around the skull, augmented by archival material, sound recordings, and recent or historical

images that were projected onto it. The first story was that of Gerhard Ziegenfuß, a retired teacher living in Ennigerloh, Germany. Ziegenfuß inherited a skull from his great-uncle, a Catholic missionary in what was called German Southwest Africa, today’s Namibia. He suspected this skull to be a Herero ancestor and feared that it was taken during the genocide at the beginning of the twentieth century. His



Konradin Kunze in Flinn Works’ lecture performance *Schädel X* (Skull X), 2016. © Flinn Works / Julia Gechter

attempts to repatriate the anonymous ancestor turned into a long odyssey involving physical anthropologists, historians, ambassadors, and Herero activists. It was shaped by many unexpected twists and turns, which serve as an – at times entertaining – example of the difficulties and limitations of provenance research and repatriations. Owing to the fact-fiction character of a lecture performance and the absurdity of the story, some audience members assumed that it was made up, despite the use of original audio recordings of Ziegenfuß's meetings with scientists, experts, and the Namibian ambassador.⁶ The fictive element in this part of the lecture resulted from the mingling of Ziegenfuß's story and that of the performer – that is, my own biography. For the duration of the performance, with Ziegenfuß's joyful approval, I pretended to be his son, calling myself Konradin Ziegenfuß. We invented the passing of the skull to me on the occasion of my audition (for *Hamlet*) at the drama department at the University of Hannover, and from then on, it stayed with me. Gerhard Ziegenfuß featured in the performance as himself in recorded phone calls with me as his 'son'.

I told the real story of Gerhard Ziegenfuß's quest as if it happened to me – for dramatic reasons but also to let the audience project their feelings onto the performer. This opened the possibility for the audience to reflect on their own reactions and relationships to the person onstage, his actions, and his relationship to the skull. After the first few performances of *Schädel X*, we added a scene in which the alleged skull itself used a supposed technical glitch to protest its use as a prop and projection surface for the white man's performance. This was possible because, for most of the performance, the audience wore headphones. They heard everything from the acoustic perspective of the skull itself (we attached microphones inside the skull): When, in a re-enactment of racist anthropological practices, brain capacity was measured using dried beans, the audience heard the beans inside their own heads. When a bone sample was taken for a DNA analysis, the sound of a drill resonated in their own skull bone. And in the above-mentioned scene, voices in their heads asked the audience to protest and leave the performance. Some did so and thus missed the performance's end, although most came back for the after-show talk. The performance's ending varied, especially to reflect developments concerning the ancestor in Ziegenfuß's custody. Eventually, in 2018, this ancestor was repatriated, together with other

[6] We could use the uncut material of the radio feature by Bernhard Pflutschinger, 'Warum Herr Ziegenfuß nach Afrika muss', *Hörspiel und Feature*, November 19, 2016, <https://www.hoerspielundfeature.de/kolonialis-mus-warum-herr-ziegenfuss-nach-afrika-muss-100.html>.

ancestors, to Namibia. Ziegenfuß and I attended the repatriation ceremony in the Französische Friedrichstadtkirche in Berlin.

The other story that was told in *Schädel X* neither blended with the performer's biography nor contained any fictive elements. It concerned the missing head of the Chagga leader, Mangi Meli, of Moshi, in today's Tanzania. In the search for a story that would illuminate the quest for ancestors through descendants, I came across a newspaper article posted on a Facebook page about the village Old Moshi, situated in the foothills of Kilimanjaro and just a few kilometres from Moshi, the centre of the region and a hotspot of the safari and mountain-climbing tourism industry. An article from *Arusha Times* cited Isaria Anael Meli, grandson of Mangi Meli: 'the Old Moshi community has been making several attempts to follow up their historical Chief's skull since 1968 for the sake of restoring it back for essential traditional ritual procedures but their efforts have ended in vain.'⁷

In 2016, Sophia Stepf and I visited Isaria Anael Meli at his home. We were warmly welcomed, and after we explained the reasons for our visit, he led us to the graves of German officers of the so-called Schutztruppe, the German colonial army. Despite his advanced age, he knelt to wipe of the red earth from the tombstones with his handkerchief. Then he showed us the place close to his own house where the Germans built their military station on the ruins of Mangi Meli's former *Boma* (homestead). Only then did Isaria lead us to the hanging tree, an acacia on the roadside. There, he told us, on March 2, 1900, his grandfather Mangi Meli, son of Mangi Rindi Mandara, together with other leaders, was hanged by German colonizers. With the villagers of Old Moshi, Isaria's grandmother, Masinde, one of Meli's wives, had to watch while he was fighting death on the rope for several hours. According to Isaria's grandmother and other testimonies, Meli's head was cut off and then carried to the sea, where it was supposedly shipped to Germany. Unlike for the German soldiers, there was no grave or memorial for the executed Mangi of Moshi at the time of our visit. 'I tried to build a grave here, but now it is gone. I want to build another one', Isaria told us and added with a smile, 'Now we are no longer enemies, we are friends. Thank you for that. When you go to Germany, send my greetings.'⁸

The video recordings of Isaria Meli telling the story about his grandfather featured prominently in *Schädel X*. So did the testimonies of

[7] Valentine Marc Nkwame, 'Chagga Want Chief Meli's Skull Back from Germany', *Arusha Times*, November 5-11, 2005.

[8] Isaria Anael Meli, interview by Konradin Kunze, February 2016, Old Moshi, Tanzania.

different stakeholders who described their numerous attempts to find the missing head of Mangi Meli. These included Mnyaka Sururu Mboro from Berlin Postkolonial, who was born in a neighbouring village near Kilimanjaro, before he came to Germany in the 1970s on a scholarship. Mboro's grandmother, although not related to Meli, gave her departing grandson the task of bringing back Meli's head. This laid the foundation for his ongoing, relentless fight for the repatriation of ancestors and for a culture of remembrance for the victims of colonialism and racism. Another more spontaneous attempt to find the head of the Chagga chief was made by a niece of Isaria in the United Kingdom, who flew to Bremen, where, according to an incorrect newspaper report, all skulls from Tanzania were sent. She believed she could 'just grab the skull and take it home'. But obviously, it turned out to be not that easy. In *Schädel X*, the search for the head of Mangi Meli has no happy ending; the need to find and repatriate him lingers in the room after each performance. After the 'thrilling investigation', according to one review, 'we still don't know where the skull comes from. At least, its deathlike aesthetic has now become familiar, human'.⁹

As previously mentioned, the main goal of *Schädel X* was to expand the discourse on ancestral remains and to raise awareness of the 'skull collections' in German museums and universities. Thus, the target audience was everyone who was not yet aware of this issue. Technically, the audience number was restricted to sixty people, which mostly consisted of passionate theatre-goers without prior knowledge of the subject, as well as activists, students, and scientists and experts in the field of ancestral remains. Sometimes audience members who themselves, or their institution, held ancestral remains came to me after the performance, seeking advice on how to deal with them. *Schädel X* also served as an occasion for experts to exchange knowledge.¹⁰

In addition to these outcomes of the lecture performance, we received praise and also criticism from audience members. The criticism centred on the non-distinction between the performer and the real events. This was despite hints in the performance, such as the different last names of character and performer, and the fact that we always

[9] Yann LeGall, 'Schädel X: The Echoes of German Colonial History in a Skull', website of Postcolonial Potsdam, March 3, 2020, <https://postcolonialpotsdam.org/en/2020/03/03/skull-x>.

[10] For example, after one performance Mnyaka Sururu Mboro and his co-founder of Berlin Postkolonial, Christian Kopp, told me about Herero initiatives in the United States. This led to a visit of a Herero delegation to the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) to see the Herero ancestors in the boxes. Later, in a US federal lawsuit, in which Herero groups sought to hold Germany legally and financially responsible for the genocide, those ancestors in the AMNH were to serve as evidence. Daniel A. Gross, 'The Troubling Origins of the Skeletons in a New York Museum', *New Yorker*, January 24, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-troubling-origins-of-the-skeletons-in-a-new-york-museum>.

revealed the fictional parts and the artificial nature of the skull during the post-show talks. A further criticism was the issue of the white male narrator, presenting the white man's story live onstage, while Black voices and the opinions of descendants were only heard and seen as recordings. We tried to address this by inserting a scene in which the ancestral skull itself claims agency, but that did not solve the problem of unequal representation. The biggest risk of the performance, however, was that it might retraumatize audience members, especially BIPOC. We did not want to hide the violence of historical and racist supposedly scientific practices, and we intended to shed light on the ethical concerns about today's scientific practices of provenance research (e.g., invasive methods). The scenes in *Schädel X* could nevertheless be shocking. A trigger warning was issued, but that could, of course, only serve to exclude.

Schädel X was designed to have an impact on German audiences, and to some extent it did. But what about people in Namibia and Tanzania? We were not involved in any efforts to repatriate the ancestors in Ziegenfuß's custody. He was eventually able to return the head, albeit not to the community of origin (to our knowledge, it is still kept in a box in the cellar of the National Museum in Namibia). Regarding Tanzania, we could not leave Isaria Meli without promising him to try to find his grandfather's head. His various attempts to trace it and have it returned ended at the local authorities or at the German embassy. In 2000, the ambassador replied that he had asked German museums, but they could not trace Mangi Meli's head. Our promise was the start of an ongoing search, which would result in further Flinn Works projects and shape no small part of my working time in the years to come. I was not the first one to promise. Isaria had dreamed about the decapitated Mangi in the 1950s and since then saw it as his task to find the missing head. Mnyaka Sururu Mboro promised the same to his grandmother. In 2004, the German mathematician Christina Helbig met Isaria by chance, after she climbed Kilimanjaro, and she promised him to search. Together with Mike Nelson, a Tanzanian tour guide, she contacted several museums in Germany, often without any, or only negative, responses. They found a skull at the Charité Berlin with an inscription containing 'Mandara', Meli's family name; however, it turned out to have entered the collection a decade before Meli's death, and the inscription pointed to a subordinate of Mandara, not a direct family member. Christina Helbig handed over their findings to me. In the following years, we found traces of Mangi Meli in reports of the colonial officers, in the diaries of the missionaries, and in songs and stories. We also found historical pictures and later even objects that belonged to Meli. But we still did not find his head.

Mangi Meli Remains

When we showed *Schädel X* at the Goethe-Institute in Dar es Salaam, we invited Isaria Meli to be our guest of honour. He came with Gabriel Mzei Orio, a tour guide who had just established his company Old Moshi Cultural Tourism Enterprise. After the performance, they asked me, ‘How can we make your research accessible to the Old Moshi community?’ Given their ephemeral nature, one or two performances of *Schädel X* in Old Moshi would not be sustainable. Thus, a new project was envisioned, this time on the initiative of the descendants: *Mangi Meli Remains*. The idea was to depict the biography of Mangi Meli, to highlight the need for the return of his head, and to create a place of remembrance in Old Moshi. First, we thought of an animated film, then of an exhibition. Eventually we combined them in an exhibition with historical photographs and a video sculpture with an animated film. *Mangi Meli Remains* consists of three chapters: ‘Life’, ‘Death’, and ‘Thereafter’. It explains how Mangi Meli was fought by the German colonial forces, because in contrast to his father, he did not welcome the colonizers in his territory; how he was able to defend their attack in 1892, and how he was defeated a year later; how the Germans forced his people to build a military station on the place of his destroyed *Boma*, and how, in return, he was allowed to maintain his position as Mangi under the control of their guns and cannons; how he was finally betrayed (or slandered) by his long-time enemy, accused of conspiring against the Germans; how on March 2, 1900, he was hanged, together with eighteen other Chagga, Arusha, and Meru leaders; how his head was chopped off and likely sent to Germany at the request of scientists such as Felix von Luschan for their racist research; and how the head is still missed by his descendants in Old Moshi.

Unlike for *Schädel X*, for *Mangi Meli Remains* Flinn Works was able

to team up with artists, curators, and consultants from Tanzania or those with Tanzanian family ties. The film script aimed at including both oral history and (colonial) archival sources to reconstruct the story. Often, they complemented or confirmed each other; in case of doubt, unanswered questions were left open in the narrative. The first drafts of the script were written by me, on the basis of my research, and then revised by Sarita Lydia Mamseri. Inspiration for the main



Isaria Meli, grandson of Mangi Meli, with young visitors in the *Mangi Meli Remains* exhibition in Old Moshi, 2019. © Sarita Mamseri

character and storyteller of *Mangi Meli Remains* was Isaria Meli's grandson, who approved the script. Historical photographs by colonizers such as Hans Meyer or German missionaries served as models for the visual artwork by Amani Abeid and Cloud Chatanda, which was again redrawn by the animators when transformed into moving images.¹¹ Thus, the film had multiple authors, and each image was redrawn several times, as in a palimpsest.

In the exhibition, the animated film is projected on an empty, broken clay pot – a reference to the traditional Chagga burial rites and a placeholder for the missing head of Mangi Meli. In pre-Christian times, Chagga communities would place the skulls of their ancestors in the banana groves, protected by such a pot. There, descendants would give offerings and remember the deceased. The video sculpture forms the centre of the exhibition. Visitors can choose between three languages: Kiswahili, English, and German. Re-examined historical photographs and documents complement the exhibition.

Mangi Meli Remains was first shown in 2018 as part of the exhibition *The dead, as far as [] can remember* at the Tieranatomisches Theater (TA T) at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. *Deutschlandfunk* reported,

*The exhibition is above all about changing perspectives. This is shown particularly impressively in a room that deals with a personal search, the search of a grandson for his grandfather's skull. [. . .] The actor and director Konradin Kunze, together with Tanzanian artists, has processed the story of this search into an [. . .] animated film projected onto the half-broken shell of a clay pot. [. . .] An empty space that hurts. But who has the interpretive authority at the end of the story? In the exhibition, Mangi Meli himself seems to provide the answer to this question. His almost life-size portrait hangs on the wall: powerful, youthful, he stands there, looking condescendingly into the face of his photographer. This is not the look of a subjugated person.*¹²

After the exhibition in Berlin, which was well received by the (professional) public, the press, and Black and Afro-diasporic visitors, *Mangi Meli Remains* was shown in the historical old Boma, at the Dar es Salaam Centre for Architectural Heritage (DARCH), before being inaugurated

[11] See Schayan Riaz, 'As a German, I Can't Describe Things from an African Perspective', website of the Goethe Institut, May 2018, <https://www.goethe.de/en/uun/pub/akt/g18/21289669.html>.

[12] Christiane Habermatz, 'Ausstellung der Humboldt-Universität Berlin: Koloniale Gewalt und menschliche Überreste', *Deutschlandfunk*, November 8, 2018, <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/ausstellung-der-humboldt-uni-versitaet-berlin-koloniale-100.html>. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations by Konradin Kunze.



Inauguration of the Mangi Meli Memorial below the hanging tree in Old Moshi, 2019. © Konradin Kunze

as a permanent exhibition in Old Moshi on the anniversary of Meli's death. The exhibition room is set in the old court building in Tsuduni village, Old Moshi, next to the hanging tree. On the occasion of the opening, a crowd-funded memorial of Mangi Meli was opened to commemorate the hanged leaders.¹³ The Old Moshi community now holds a yearly Mangi Meli commemoration. The exhibition, managed by Old Moshi Cultural Tourism Enterprise, is open and free for all.

The *Citizen on Sunday*, a Tanzanian newspaper, saw the exhibition as a call to have Mangi Meli's head returned:

The return of the stolen human remains is a moral obligation to heal spiritual wounds in the Tanzanian society. The exhibition 'Mangi Meli Remains' is a mediation service in this sense. It tells the story of one of the most important leaders in the resistance against the German

[13] 'Spendenaufwurf für das Denkmal Mangi Melis in Moshi', website of Tanzania-Network, accessed May 25, 2023, <https://tanzania-network.de/node/35>.

*colonial power and makes it accessible to German and Tanzanian society. In the inaugurated exhibition [...] the legacy and search of chief Meli's remains have been keenly reflected on through the critical mining of photographs and documents in colonial archives.*¹⁴

The exhibition, Isaria Meli's statements, and Mnyaka Sururu Mboro's activities with Berlin Postkolonial all contributed to growing media attention. International newspapers, magazines, radio, and TV channels reported on Mangi Meli and the search for his head and/or the exhibition, including the *East African*, the BBC, *ZDF heute journal*, *Die Zeit*, and *Der Spiegel*.¹⁵ In addition to the exhibition, a film version of the installation was shown globally at several international film festivals.¹⁶ Gabby Orio and I also created a virtual tour on Mangi Meli for the website of Dekoloniale, a project that aims to reappraise Berlin's colonial history.¹⁷ *Mangi Meli Remains* thus helped to raise awareness at home and abroad of Meli's story and the need for the return of his head. But what about the search for the head?

Since my first encounter with Isaria Meli, I continuously searched for traces of Mangi Meli and his remains in numerous archives. The results of the research are partly reflected in Flinn Works' projects but are more extensive than can be represented in these. The most promising trace was that of a German colonial officer, Lt. Moritz Merker. Merker was involved in the fight against Meli and became deputy chief of the German military station in Moshi (today's Old Moshi). With the chief of the station, Capt. Kurt Johannes, he conducted several so-called punitive expeditions against the communities in the Kilimanjaro and

[14] Elisha Mayallah, 'In Moshi, Anti-colonial Hero Mangi Meli Is Reawakened', *Citizen on Sunday*, March 17, 2019.

[15] Caroline Uliwa, 'Exhibit Brings Mangi Meli of Old Moshi Back to Life', *East African*, January 25, 2019, <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/magazine/exhibit-brings-mangi-meli-of-old-moshi-back-to-life-1411106>; 'Executed Tanzanian Hero's Grandson Takes DNA Test to Find Lost Skull', *BBC*, November 20, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-46277158>; 'The Search in Germany for the Lost Skull of Tanzania's Mangi Meli', *BBC*, November 13, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-45916150>; Timm Kröger, 'Koloniales Schicksal in Tansania', *ZDF heute journal*, July 4, 2019, video, 3:00, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190704203951/https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/heute-journal/koloniales-schicksal-in-tansania-100.html>; Xaver von Cranach, 'Wo ist Mangi Meli?', *Die Zeit*, February 8, 2020, <https://www.zeit.de/2020/07/kolonialismus-mangi-meli-schaedel-tansania-stammeshaeuptling-afrika>; Katja Iken, 'Wo steckt der Kopf des Mangi Meli?', *Der Spiegel*, March 28, 2021, <https://www.spiegel.de/geschichte/deutscher-kolonialismus-in-afrika-wo-steckt-der-kopf-des-mangi-meli-a-1e5ab093-222a-4453-93d3-597e8aea417c>; Oliver Noffke, 'Museen und ihr koloniales Erbe: Das Verbrechen', *rbb*, February 2, 2020, <https://www.rbb24.de/kultur/beitrag/2020/02/kolonialzeit-stiftung-preussischer-kulturbesitz-mangi-meli.html>.

[16] 'Mangi Meli Remains', Flinn Works Production in co-production with the Ethnological Museum Berlin and Tieranatomisches Theater at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, posted November 7, 2019, Flinn Works, Vimeo, 12:00, <https://vimeo.com/flinnworks/mangimeliremains>.

[17] Konradin Kunze and Gabriel Mzei Orio, 'Mangi Meli (1866–1900) – Tanzania | Germany', website of Dekoloniale Memory Culture in the City, 2020, accessed May 25, 2023, <https://dekoloniale.de/en/map?kind=stories&categories=biographies#Mangi%20Meli%20%5B1866-1900%5D>.

Arusha regions. When in 1900, Meli and other Chagga, Meru, and Arusha leaders were arrested, Merker led the interrogations, which resulted in their hanging the next day. While Chagga ancestral remains were verifiably stolen by several German colonizers before (among them Hans Meyer, August Widenmann, and Otto Ehlers), the first Chagga remains mentioned in the archival sources after the executions of 1900 were sent by Merker to Berlin, at the request of Felix von Luschan, in 1901. Merker was head of the military station by then, since Johannes had been ordered to Dar es Salaam. In the following few years – until he, too, was transferred to Dar es Salaam – Merker sent dozens of ancestral remains from Moshi to Berlin. He continued exchanging letters with Luschan and published ‘ethnological’ books about the Wachagga and Wamaasai, before he died in 1908, in Mwanza. In his letters, he often gave details about the individual remains, sometimes with name and age. Since most of them were young and middle-aged men, and Merker had access to this personal information, it can be assumed that some of them were executed or died as prisoners. For the first shipment of skulls (two boxes of skulls labelled as ‘Chagga’ and ‘Maasai’), in 1901, neither a letter with names nor any further information could be found in the archives. The shipment reached the Royal Museum of Ethnology in Berlin and Luschan, where they were even given S-numbers, as was common practise in the museum. But the remains can no longer be found in any of the collections.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the connection between Merker and Luschan proved to be the most promising lead.

Already in 2016, I contacted the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz, SPK) on behalf of Isaria Meli. The SPK with its Museum of Prehistory and Early History was responsible for the so-called S-Sammlung (S-collection), which it took over from the Charité in 2011. Isaria’s request was the first they received, and they were initially reluctant to do provenance research. Despite this, growing pressure from Berlin Postkolonial and other NGOs, as well as media reports, led to the establishing of a provenance research project on ancestral remains from East Africa. On our initiative, Isaria Meli and Gabby Orio were invited to Berlin to attend the study day of the NGO Tanzania-Network. Thus, at the age of almost ninety, Isaria boarded a plane to leave his country for the first time. In a meeting with the president of the SPK, Hermann Parzinger, a DNA sample from Isaria

[18] Bernhard Heeb, Charles Kabwete Mulinda, and Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, *Human Remains from the Former German Colony of East Africa: Recontextualization and Approaches for Restitution* (Paderborn: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022), 246.

was taken to be compared with that of six skulls in the collections, to see if there was any match. Later, two more samples were taken from descendants of executed leaders of 1900. The results of the tests were all negative. This led to the SPK's statement that Mangi Meli's head 'is not in the collections of Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz', although it cannot be ruled out that he is among the hundreds of still-unidentified ancestors in SPK's boxes.¹⁹

During the research project, I was in regular exchange with the scientists involved, and we shared documents and interim research. Meanwhile, we reached out to other institutions, and a few approached Mboro proactively. In some cases, our requests and research resulted in research projects, such as at the University of Göttingen: in addition to the well-known 'Blumenbach Sammlung' (Blumenbach collection), the university holds the former collection of ancestral remains from what was then the Museum für Völkerkunde Hamburg (now the Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt, MARKK), as I learned from the latter's director when I performed *Schädel X* there. When I searched for Mangi Meli's remains in Göttingen, I found indications of several ancestors from Tanzania but not from the Kilimanjaro region. Since several ancestors clearly had a colonial context, I urged the custodian to inform the respective communities and begin to research the provenance. Eventually, the university started a provenance research project on both collections.²⁰

Marejesho

Mangi Meli Remains triggered further enquiries to us from descendants. We also gained knowledge through our research and had access to information that went beyond the individual case of Mangi Meli. This led, in 2022, to Flinn Works, Berlin Postkolonial, and Old Moshi Cultural Tourism Enterprise joining forces to create the mobile research exhibition *Marejesho asili mila utamaduni wetu* – or *Marejesho* for short – funded by the German Federal Cultural Foundation. The title indicates the overarching goal of the project: the return of cultural heritage – that is, the ancestral remains and objects from the Kilimanjaro and Meru regions that are held in European and US institutions. In the absence of communication between these institutions and the communities in

[19] 'Chief Mangi Meli's Skull not in Collections of Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz', website of Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, September 20, 2019, https://www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/en/news-detail/article/2019/09/20/schaedel-des-mangi-meli-nicht-in-spk-sammlung0.html?sword_list%5B0%5D=meli&no_cache=1.

[20] 'Press release: Sensible Provenienzen', website of Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, September 27, 2022, <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/3240.html?id=6818>.

the Kilimanjaro and Meru regions, the project aimed at a knowledge exchange initiated by civil society and the arts. We collaborated with three museums in Germany: the Ethnological Museum Berlin, the GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig, and the Linden Museum Stuttgart. During the first phase in Germany, the core team engaged in provenance research, searched the archives, and visited the respective museum depots to see and eventually select the objects. The Tanzanian members also requested to see the ancestors in the SPK and the GRASSI Museum. For the first time, a Tanzanian delegation was able to encounter the ancestors in these institutions. However, the respective institutions handled the encounters very differently. In the SPK, the encounter was a rather irritating experience, since our team strongly felt that the ancestors were treated and presented in an inappropriate manner, without due respect for their dignity. In contrast, at GRASSI Museum, our Tanzanian team members were the first ones to use a newly established, specific room for such visits, which enabled a dignified encounter.



Visitor of the *Marejesho* exhibition in Kibosho holding a colonial photograph of his ancestor Laigwanani Saroni of Arusha, 2022.
© Konradin Kunze

Before travelling with the exhibition, Mboro, Gabby, and I went on a preparation trip to the villages to inform the traditional leaders and the descendants of the Mangis about our findings and ask them for permission to display the historical photographs of their ancestors and pictures of their objects. In sometimes larger, sometimes more intimate meetings, we showed historical photographs of the respective Mangis that we had found in archives. We also informed them about the objects and the outcome of our provenance research. In most cases, those items that could be traced back to individuals were those of the Mangis. Among them were an earring and a bust of Mangi Mareale of Marangu, in the Ethnological Museum Berlin; several personal items of Mangi Meli of Moshi appropriated by German officers on the day of his

defeat (but ironically declared as ‘gifts’ in the archive), in the GRASSI Museum; and a headdress and blanket of the Mangi of Kibosho (likely Mangi Molelia or his father Mangi Sina), in the Linden Museum. Many of the objects could also clearly be identified as war booty – for instance, shields with bullet holes, jewellery, or garments of killed Chagga soldiers. Almost all of these objects are inscribed with a violent appropriation; they can tell of the cruelty of German colonial rule but also of resistance against it.

The mobile, temporary architecture of *Marejesho* for the Kilimanjaro and Meru tour was conceptualized as an easily accessible *Baraza* (an open terrace for meetings) by Dar es Salaam-based APC Architectural Pioneering Consultants.²¹ During six weeks in August and September 2022, *Marejesho* travelled to five villages in the Kilimanjaro region and one in the Meru region, stopping on open lawns at or near historical sites of the respective chiefdoms. It consisted of the video sculpture from *Mangi Meli Remains* to address the issue of ancestral remains, historical photographs of Mangis or leaders, and banners with pictures of selected objects from the region. An audio station with 120-year-old recordings of Chagga songs and a display with a video of our visit in a German museum depot were set up. Filmmakers from the Bagamoyo film collective (Bafico) conducted video interviews with members of the communities and edited them on the spot to display them within the exhibition. The visual artists Amani Abeid, Cloud Chatanda, and Masana joined *Marejesho*, creating live drawings and paintings. The artwork served as a bridge between the past and the present, artistically connecting today’s villagers with the ancestors and their objects. The accompanying programme of *Marejesho* consisted of public discussions, film evenings, dance performances, and the obligatory traditional sharing of banana beer (*Mbege*).

Certainly, the format of such an exhibition was new to most of the villagers, and some raised doubts about our intentions, wondering whether there was a possible ‘hidden agenda’. Although the vast majority of our team was Tanzanian and some of them identify as Chagga, some people regarded the project as a foreign initiative. We also realized that the widespread Christian belief system sometimes harboured strong reservations about engaging with (pre)colonial history and practices. All these aspects prevented some people from even entering the exhibition or engaging in talks. Some descendants of certain Mangis may

[21] See ‘Marejesho Travelling Exhibition’, Kilimanjaro Region, Tanzania, 2022, on the website of APC Architectural Pioneering Consultants, accessed May 25, 2023, <https://www.apc-tz.com/work#/marejesho-travelling-exhibition>.

also have shied away from visiting *Marejesho* because their ancestors had collaborated with the German colonizers. Despite those obstacles, *Marejesho* attracted many interested and curious visitors.

Mboro formed the heart of the project, with his profound knowledge of colonial history and his understanding of both Chagga and German societies. Often surrounded by crowds of all ages, he guided visitors through the exhibition, explaining, discussing, commenting, and asking questions from morning until nightfall. We learned that the absence of the remains of the hanged Mangis was well known, at least among the families of the descendants; however, the trafficking of the remains of members of the Chagga community, other than those of the leaders, did not seem to have been part of the oral tradition. The reason for the massive appropriation of the ancestral remains – that is, the demand of European anthropologists to use them as objects for racist ‘scientific’ research – was also not known and is still hardly believed. As for the objects, no one we met knew about them being stolen and stored in European museum depots, which came as a surprise, especially to the descendants of the Mangis. This was partly true for the historical photographs as well. The special moments when descendants discovered pictures of their ancestors in the exhibition or, for instance, heard their grandfather’s voice in an old audio recording linger in the memory. Of course, we shared copies of the pictures with them. In each locality, we presented special banners depicting items that originated from that village. These banners were then left for display at the village offices after our exhibition moved to the next place.

The majority of visitors stressed the need for all ancestors to be repatriated to Kilimanjaro, in accordance with the still-existing practice of being buried in the homeland. Despite the efforts of Christian missionaries in colonial times to establish cemeteries, the Wachagga, to this day, bury their deceased on their own homesteads. This holds true even for Wachagga in the diaspora, with descendants sometimes raising funds within the communities to finance the repatriation. Visitors mostly supported the return of the objects, to educate the younger generations about the past (and present) Chagga traditions. However, we encountered different views on how and where the ancestors and their objects should be buried, kept, and remembered. Our project could only mark the beginning of a necessary debate within the communities.

During the six weeks of *Marejesho*’s presence in the Kilimanjaro and Meru regions, the team was temporarily accompanied by external film teams. Also, the ethnologist Isabelle Reimann joined us for provenance research on the ancestral remains, and the lawyer Sarah Imani from the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR)

held several initial talks with descendants of hanged leaders to explore potential legal interventions.

Also important in the *Marejesho* project were political activities and the establishment of a network within the Chagga and Meru societies, within which the Umoja wa Machifu (chiefs union), as the representative body of the traditional leaders in Tanzania, played a significant role. Several meetings were held during our project phase, resulting in a letter urging the Tanzanian government to take action to officially demand the repatriation of the Tanzanian ancestors from Germany and other countries holding them. In addition, Mboro and I, together with the Kilimanjaro secretary of the Umoja wa Machifu, travelled to Dodoma for a visit to the parliament, where we talked with MPs as well as the minister of culture about this issue. The minister asked us to write a report summarizing all the available information about ancestral remains and objects in European and US collections. The report was handed over to the ministry in November 2022. As of July 2023, the Tanzanian government has initiated talks with the German government about repatriation, restitution, and, to a certain extent, also reparations.

Apart from these political effects of *Marejesho*, our provenance research yielded new information about the whereabouts of some individuals. We were able to trace the head of Mangi Nkunde of Kibognoto and thirty anonymous individuals from Old Moshi to the University of Strasbourg, France (during the era of German colonialism, Strasbourg was German). We could also trace the remains of the historically significant trader Hassan bin Omari (aka Makunganya), who was executed in November 1895 in Kilwa. Today, his remains are kept in the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York, while some objects attributed to him are held by the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. In consultation with the SPK and at the wish of the descendants, we took DNA samples of several family members from the Meli, Molelia, and Ngalami families to be compared to eight skulls in Berlin – all of the forefathers had been hanged in 1900. In some cases, individuals were named differently by the German colonizers and the Chagga or Meru communities, as in the case of Mangi Lobulu. At an early phase of our research in the archive of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, I came across a letter by Lt. Moritz Merker to Felix von Luschan containing a list of individuals from Kilimanjaro whose remains had been sent from (Old) Moshi to Berlin, among them ‘Meru-Häuptling Kiwosso, c. 25 Jahre alt’ (Meru chief Kiwosso, about 25 years old). In the Meru community, nobody could relate to Kiwosso as a name of a person, but reports by German Lutheran missionaries mention a ‘Kiwoso’ as

the son of Matunda and Mangi of Meru, who was hanged as one of the main suspects of the ‘conspiracy from 1899’ together with Mangi Meli. I learned from the descendants and written sources that until then, there was only one Mangi of Meru at a time, always belonging to the same line, the Kaaya family. All this information taken together strongly suggests that Kiwos(s)o and Lobulu are the same person. During our *Marejesho* preparation trip, I shared my findings with the Kaaya family. Shortly after the trip, the AMNH confirmed that they hold a skull and skeleton catalogued as ‘Kiwosso’. An examination of the remains also revealed a label with the inscription ‘Kiwosso, Merker’. The family asked me to negotiate the conditions of repatriation with the AMNH and the Tanzanian authorities.

A year after we collected DNA samples from descendants during *Marejesho* at Kilimanjaro, we received the results: to our surprise, the DNA of four of the eight tested ancestors matched with the DNA of living persons and could be assigned with a very high probability to two families. Thanks to the combination of knowledge within the families and archival material, the ancestors can likely be identified as an *Akida* (minister) of Mangi Meli of Moshi, namely Sindato Kiutesha Kiwelu, as well as Mangi Molelia of Kibosho and his brother, all of whom were hanged together with Mangi Meli in 1900.²² The fourth ancestor is not in a direct paternal line to Molelia family members but instead turned out to be a more distant relative, potentially the *Akida* Mrekereke, who is said to have been hanged together with his Mangi Molelia. The SPK celebrated this match as scientific news even before the descendants had been informed.²³ But without the DNA request by the descendants and *Marejesho*, the ancestors would have remained unidentified. The *Marejesho* team informed the descendants about the results via video call in September 2023. On the same day, the latter demanded the fastest possible repatriation of both identified and unidentified ancestors to the families and communities respectively. They demanded an apology from the German government and the involved institutions for the colonial crimes and the trafficking of their ancestors. And they asked for all the *Mangi*’s belongings to be restituted and for talks about reparations

[22] Katja Iken, ‘Der Schädel meines Großvaters muss zurück nach Tansania. So schnell wie möglich’, *Der Spiegel*, September 9, 2023, <https://www.spiegel.de/geschichte/kolonialzeit-der-schaedel-meines-grossvaters-muss-zu-rueck-nach-tansania-a-eb47098a-af82-4ff8-939a-aae87e02db4f>.

[23] Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, ‘Menschliche Überreste aus Tansania: Erstmals Bestätigung von Verwandtschaftsverhältnissen zu lebenden Personen’, press release, September 5, 2023, <https://www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/pressemitteilung/artikel/2023/09/05/menschliche-ueberreste-aus-tansania-erstmals-bestaetigung-von-verwandtschaftsverhaeltnissen-zu-lebenden-personen.html>.

to be initiated.²⁴ These demands and the voices of the communities feature in the Berlin iteration of our exhibition, *Marejesho: The Call for Restitution from the Peoples of Kilimanjaro and Meru*, at TA T (Tieranatomisches Theater) at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, which opened in October 2023.²⁵

I am curious to witness the return of Mangi Lobulu, Mangi Molelia, and his brother, Akida Sindato Kiwelu, and eventually all ancestral remains to Tanzania. I am not sure whether this will be an act of healing or repair. For me, it is difficult to imagine what it would mean for the descendants. Is it of significance to a young child when finally their great-great-grandfather is freed from the boxes and the depots and travels back to rest in peace in the soil of his homeland? How will Isaria Meli feel when hundreds of ancestors return to Tanzania, but Mangi Meli is not among them? What I know is that Emanuel Kaaya, at over a hundred years old, was moved to tears when he received the message that Mangi Lobulu was found.

[24] European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, 'After DNA-matching: Relatives at Kilimanjaro Demand Early Return of Their Identified Ancestors and Apology from Germany', press release, September 11, 2023, <https://www.ecchr.eu/en/press-release/nach-dna-abgleich-angehoerige-am-kilimanjaro-fordern-baldige-rueckkehr-ihrer-identifizierten-ahnen-und-entschuldigung-von-deutschland>.

[25] For more information about the exhibition, *Marejesho: The Call for Restitution from the Peoples of Kilimanjaro and Meru*, see https://tieranatomisches-theater.de/project/ausstellung-marejesho_2023_de.



Dithugula tša Malefokana, installation view at the 10th Bamako Encounters, *MaBareBare: Telling Time*, Bamako, 2015. © George Mahashe

Unsettling Spirits: An Unfinished Conversation Towards Provenance and Artistic Work

Duane Jethro and George Mahashe in conversation

In this conversation, we present bytes of a longer conversation around the artistic approaches taken by Dr George Mahashe in his work, which flow from his consideration of khilovedu (khelobedu) and the archival context around the Vhalovedu (Balobedu) nation of southern Africa.¹ As he explains, ‘Khelobedu is, amongst other things, the language, culture and religion of Balobedu from the north-eastern part of the Limpopo province in South Africa. I use it here without capitalization ‘khelobedu’ as a conceptual tool to deal with the complex and entangled imaginings of Balobedu by themselves, and by their neighbours; by successive waves of colonial agents over the last two centuries; and by myself, a contemporary Molobedu working as an artist and academic (anthropologist).² This approach draws on the idea that to engage khilovedu as an archival context demands a transdisciplinary practice that takes seriously the limits of contemporary disciplines, their interactions, or

[1] Within this text, I render the established Khelobedu language text using Kgotatso Seshayi’s experimental Khilovedu orthography currently being tested by the Bible Society of South Africa in their translation of the Hebrew Bible into contemporary Khilovedu. Where I am quoting a text that is already published or a place name, I retain the old popular orthography to minimize confusion. *Khi-* is a prefix denoting culture; *Va/Vha-* is a prefix denoting the people; *Mo-* is a prefix denoting a person; and *Bo-* is a prefix denoting place. Thus, *Bolobedu* refers to the place where *Vhalovedu* have their stronghold and where the seat of Mudjadji is located, where *Khilovedu* is spoken and one of the places where the practice of *khilovedu* is dominant. Similarly, I use brackets to indicate a popular orthography of the same word used in line with the new Khilovedu language orthography. I spell the word *khilovedu* in lower case when it denotes an idea and concept and with a capital letter when it refers to the language or religion.

[2] See George Tebogo Mahashe, ‘Walking towards a Camera Obscura’, *Critical African Studies* 12, no. 2 (2020): 218–36.

reforms'. In this southern African paradigm, the ancestors (vadimu) can be seen as vivacious entities actively operating in the material world as contemporaneous subjectivities, including in museum and heritage settings. It takes seriously a holistic metaphysical perspective that sees cultural work as an expression of an ever-unfolding ancestral vision. This conversation makes the case for an appreciation of more diverse spiritual ontologies that may be operating in heritage and museum settings and reflects on their manifold affordances for rethinking provenance and art practice today.

Spirits, spectres, apparitions, and ghosts are frequently cited in debates in heritage and museum studies, particularly in reference to provenance. Hauntings are invoked as a metaphoric and conceptual indicator of illegitimate ownership and as-yet unestablished traceability. The spectres of museum objects – such as collections of African objects gathered under questionable circumstances during colonial times – can signal unresolved questions of provenance.³ In these literatures, spectres are often grounded in a conceptual genealogy that starts with Jacques Derrida's notion of haunting and hauntology.⁴ For Derrida, a spectre is the persistence into the present of the afterlife of ideas from a socially and culturally different past. It disrupts linear, conventional notions of time and being. This formulation of the spectre has been widely and productively taken up in literatures that attempt to deal with epistemic and structural issues of power around institutions holding problematic collections.

Despite the productive work in this area, this notion of the spectre and the general notion of provenance are decidedly Eurocentric and culturally limiting. Provenance, for example, depends on widely accepted evidentiary forms, such as documents and images, and ownership is framed as a matter of property. This neglects conceptions of custody that may be much broader than legal definitions of ownership. Moreover, the Derridean understanding of spectres is informed by a Christian religious worldview about the nature of being and the afterlife that does not accord with cosmologies from which African collections may originate. There is, thus, a need to rethink the homogenous notion of provenance and its relationship with notions of spectres, spirits, and ghosts. In this conversation, we surface different frames of reference for provenance

[3] The striking through of words indicates that the author disputes a word that is currently in popular use. It indicates that the word is inaccurate while signalling that it is not the author's current intention to go into the politics of finding and explaining a preference for a new appropriate term. The strategy is used throughout this text.

[4] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994).

and art practice that are informed by a southern African cosmology in which beings referred to as ancestors play an active role.

Duane:

George, could you tell me a bit about how you first came to think about provenance?

George:

My first encounter with provenance in the art world was with a debate around some unsigned photographic prints by a famous photographer that were released on the auction market by the photographer's master printer. The photographer was long dead, but their work continued to turn up at art auctions. This raised the question of what the difference is between work sanctioned by the photographer and work produced through the same means but without the express – documented – consent of the photographer. This led to the development of provenance research protocols to authenticate authorship in reproducible media like photography.

What was fascinating for me in this particular case was that provenance became a way of narrowing down possibilities for what could be considered authentic – in other words, a limiting exercise and not a process of accepting and grappling with the complexity brought by photography as a democratizing practice.

Duane:

And so, then, what does provenance mean to you?

George:

Ultimately, the question of provenance [as a technical and discursive practice] is connected to European understandings of collections that do not belong to them enacted, in the process of trying to do best practice in matters of repatriation and restitution in a museum settings. I also appreciate it as an exercise in how to avoid the process' difficult implications for European institutions.

It also has to do with certain things that I have been shown by those – the *vadimu* – I walk with that are hard to mediate in the format of a book chapter in a focused publication. These are things that are caught up in the custody of museums, and ethnographic museums specifically. But I have to emphasize that in my artistic and scholarly journey, provenance has not been about finding those things per se, but about finding out why those things are important. The point here, which is driven by *vadimu* themselves, is that I should pay attention and ask

the question “why are artefacts important?” rather than answering it or taking them as self-evidently important.

So, for me, provenance is really about comprehending complexity rather than finding something concrete.

Another way of answering this question is: if you ask me about provenance, I will meander – I will tell a tall tale with many irrelevant tangents. That is to say, we have to discuss many other things that are unruly before we can get to the question of provenance itself. That is because if one restricts a discussion on provenance to being straight-forward, then it is not a conversation I can participate in, as the format buys into a set of shaping assumptions that provenance rests on – that is, linearity, traceability, evidentiary certainty, and so on.

For me, provenance is meandering, following the leads, not consolidating them. That means, it is not an argument that has an outcome. It is a process of practicing the act of finding out. Paying attention to what do you learn along the journey that changes the assumptions about how transactions and exchanges play out. To a degree, this is also the thing that makes me uncomfortable about the current emphasis on provenance research by European museums, which in my view has an effect of amassing a new archive on the provenance context being investigated, leading to new objects in the form of contextual data whose access will have to be negotiated and resituated later – so, effectively trapping those demanding restitution in a conversation that has not changed from colonial/imperial days.

In my context, of South Africa, and as directed by my conception of *khilovedu* – about which I say more later – we traffic in responsibility and ‘custodianship’. We are not in the business of finding out who owns something but, rather, who does the responsibility for things fall to? ‘We’ in this case is like the royal ‘we’ – aka *vadimu* and I.

Duane:

Using an example, can you explain what role provenance plays in your work?

George:

In my artistic work, I have explored ideas related to provenance and evidence through the media and practice of photography. In my second body of work around the *Vhalovedu* – in the work *Dithugula tsa Malefokana* – I followed some breadcrumbs in the form of the photographic work done by early nineteenth-century anthropologists. But I was not trying to understand anthropology per se. I considered why it was important to consider the anthropologist as a particular archivist deemed viable by *Vhalovedu* in the 1930s.

The resulting work, which I will discuss in more detail later, was in principle my engagement with a series of ethnographic photographs taken between 1930 and 1945 in Bolobedu, my hometown, taken by Eileen and J. D. Krige, both South African anthropologists in the Malinowskian tradition. The photographs drew me from within the old anthropology wing of the South African Museum – or rather, from the storeroom of the Iziko Museums of South Africa.

Duane:

Is photography, then, an entry point into provenance for you, since it connects your professional life as a practicing artist and your personal life in this sense?

George:

Yes, in a way. My journey to the photographs come from my time as a photographer commissioned by a fashion house, which used nineteenth-century photographs, like those of [Alfred Martin] Duggan-Cronin, as references for a fashion photo shoot. The fashion label Sun Goddess was trying to recapture or reimagine ‘precolonial’ Africa from what they found to be consistent with a persistent aesthetic sensibility that spoke to autonomy and self-love.

This encounter with the ethnographic image as fashion reference plunged me into research around colonial photography, canonized through Duggan-Cronin’s series *Bantu Tribes of Southern Africa* (1928, 1937, 1956, 1966) and the work of anthropologists like the Kriges, whom I just mentioned.

From there, I became interested in producing what I now understand to be a ‘halfie’ ethnography of sorts of Balobedu, which was missing from Duggan-Cronin’s collection.⁵ I was later able to find these references in the archives of the Kriges and in the archive of the missionary Fritz Reuter. The question there was, Were the photographs anthropological objects, or were they traces, technologies – spiritual or otherwise – left by my ancestors in order for me to comprehend what they did in the 1940s and earlier?

[5] The idea of a ‘halfie anthropologist’, and by extension ‘halfie ethnography’, refers to a situation in social anthropology where the subject and researcher are the same person at the same time, subjecting them to accountability to multiple constituencies (1991: 466–470). L. Abu-Lughod, ‘Writing against Culture’, in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, ed. R. Fox (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1991), 137–62. See also Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin, *The Bantu Tribes of South Africa: Reproductions of Photographic Studies* (Cambridge: Deighton Bell, 1928).



Dithugula tša Malefokana, installation view at Gae Lebowa Fieldworks, Bolobedu, South Africa, 2015. © George Mahashe

Within the context of the fashion label Sun Goddess's appreciation and referencing of Duggan-Cronin's photography, I could say that his images are gold in terms of their postcolonial capacity for negating their initial context. Despite the accepted reality of their problematics, such as the unethical conditions of their production, they still hold great appeal for me and my generation because of their capacity to image a moment filled with a confidence unimaginable to us. This goes to show that

the author's intentions are not absolute, that despite the conditions of their production, the photographic event and the audience's agency are still rich and generative. This is what is interesting about photography in the decolonial moment and the role that provenance research played in my foray into photography as a contemporary art practice. In other words, the provenance process of following the initial fashion-shoot reference image into the wider colonial archive led to a process of multiplying my understanding of the complexity of photography's promiscuity, its capacity to infiltrate all disciplines and fields, its democratizing effect, and its capacity to overturn the photographer's initial intention.

Duane:

This is fascinating. Could you say a little more about what you actually did in the exhibition?

George:

The exhibition, *Dithugula tsa Malefokana*, was an interactive installation that aimed to actively resist the finished photograph. The audience was invited to enter a specially built darkroom in a gallery space, where they were handed a random undeveloped photographic print from the Krige collection. They then had to develop the image themselves using chemicals placed before them inside the darkroom and continue to handle the fragile, wet image and hang it up on a wall in another brightly lit room. The image developed really quickly, ultimately getting overexposed in a matter of minutes, as they moved the unfixed photograph from the photographic darkroom to the display space.

Through this process, I had hoped that the audience would not have enough time to dissect the image presented on the unfixed print. They could not consume the image, so to say, but they were burdened by the technicalities of the photographic process itself, before the image faded from being unfixed as a developed photograph.

The development process is very quick. It lasts only a minute and a half, to be exact, during which time the image appears clearly for a brief moment, before blackening and becoming obscure. Essentially, visitors were burdened with the cumbersome nature of analogue photography, having to process an image that they were not able to see long enough to appreciate its evidentiary qualities. One could say, they could not refer to what they had briefly seen with any sense of certainty.

Duane:

What were the evidentiary properties of the image itself and its relationship to provenance? And what had you hoped to achieve through this process?

George:

A proper, clear fixed, fully developed image is available for provenance research. You can use it to trace things. But I had hoped to interrupt that process through burdening participants with the process of making a photograph that they ultimately would not be able to fully see and read as the anthropologist intended.

Through this process, you end up with an overdeveloped photograph that is not available for easy reading. It is only there for you to see a very brief glimpse but not for you to dissect – so, hopefully, making it unavailable for certain types of analysis and scrutiny.

Duane:

You also travelled to Berlin for your research. What were you doing research on?

George:

I was searching for photographs taken of my home town in the 1880s. Missionary Fritz Reuter facilitated photographic opportunities for the Berlin Missionary Society's marketing and fundraising activities. I had travelled to see the resulting archive, which was a desire on my part to see those that came before me, those who were imaged in these photographs.

Duane:

To then circle back for a moment, your artistic work is strongly influenced

by your cultural background and the metaphysics of the Vhalovedu. I am interested in the ancestor as a being and figure, and what it is and how it influences your work. Could you share a bit about this?

George:

I would not call it metaphysics, just simply the reality of what *khilovedu* as a contemporary practice demands of one's critical thinking skills. For me, how I've understood the concept of the ancestor through my research over the last twelve years has always been around that very idea that one is an ancestor – what we refer to in the *Khilovedu* language as *vadimu* (*badimo*) or *mudinwana* – when one understands that one is outside of time as we know it. Most people reach this after death; some reach it while still alive; others are simply born as *vadimu*.

Vadimu refers to those people that recognize their capacity to devise means. So, when they say 'mudinwana' or 'thoho tshweu', referring to the natural greying of one's hair associated with old age, they are generally pointing to an advanced ability to devise means based on lived experience. And I think that is what's at stake; for me, the implications of the designation *vadimu* is the capacity to make means, to secure a future for your children, and to facilitate the dead through their difficult aspect of their experience of having lived. This is important because by some accounts, death does not make you an ancestor, and much must be done by the gifted (healers or those walking with the old ones) to recover you, should you pass on without attaining the designation of *vadimu*.

Vadimu are those that acknowledge their capacity to devise a way to persist, despite the limits imposed by the experience of living. They are not ghosts or spectres.

For me, a ghost would be someone that, despite *vadimu*'s concessions, refuses to acknowledge and survive the reality that they comprehend upon death, the reality that you are not bound to the body, that one is not bound to time in the way that our physical bodies make us bound to time and, by extension, space.

Duane:

One other interesting observation for me in provenance discussions is that in all of these definitions of provenance, there are notions of property in play – that is, artworks, objects, and human remains are considered to be someone's possession. But in the South African context, I'm thinking about the importance of land and provenance around claims to ownership of land.

George:

That is the main question, ultimately, because for me, the work that we, as artists and people, do starts from that point of view. The issue really starts with the question of land and, you know, whom the land ‘belongs’ to, right? Did the land belong to us? Or does the land belong to vadimu? To say that the land belongs to vadimu is also to recognize that in some cultures, you really do literally ‘own’ the piece of land you are buried on, and it is your home, and your body become the land you are buried on. So, in most cases, we are living on top of graves – we are living on what remains – in time and space – of our ancestors.

Duane:

It makes a lot of sense to me. We started our conversation earlier thinking about artistic objects as property and provenance as means for securing value in those objects. Now we are at the point of thinking about land and custodianship and its relationship to being.

George:

The question of land is central. It all boils down to land. If we are talking about coloniality, for me the fight is not about being treated as human; I don’t care about being treated as human. I care about having the land so that I can see to my own humanity. All my practice is ultimately interested in how do I go back to that moment when I am not under the custody of someone, when I can direct the flow of life as directed and inspired by vadimu. So, land is central.

But when it comes to land and the apartheid regime, the paradox that is there for me – and especially if one is thinking about conceptions of past, present, and future – the Afrikaners ‘conquered’ (if you believed the battles to be over) the people they found here in the 1860s up to the 1950s. They did not conquer vadimu, the ones that provide us – the ‘conquered’ – with the land. Therefore, their claim and provenance protocols to the land under that regime, and their contribution through their dead, don’t count. And this is where, for me, the ‘dead’ become more important, as the ancestors *are* the land and its ‘custodians’.

Duane:

This is a complex notion of the land. But on a point of clarification, do the ancestors reside *in* the land, or are they connected *to* the land? Can you explain that relationship between the ancestors and the land?

George:

I think the ancestors as an expanded complex of ideas *are* the land.

Literally. The ancestors are the land; they are tethered to it. One should not attempt to separate them from the land. Sometimes when they say they are the providers of the land, it is that literal, because they are the land by virtue of having died and been buried there. That is one response.

The ancestors are the land, but I also like to subscribe to the idea that they are beyond the land and everything we can imagine. Some people like to say the vadimu reside in the future, not in the past.

Duane:

What I hear you saying is that there is a different cosmology and notion of time in operation in the realms in which the ancestors operate – but also in the different temporal-scapes that they shape. It follows that if we adopt an ancestral view of the ways in which objects circulate, then the restitution of objects matches the ultimate preconceived vision of these ancestors.

George:

And there we get into the terrain of prophecies. Because the story of the prophecy is exactly the agency: the fact that vadimu imagined and saw the future in the way that they have seen it, and that they prepared our way to resist the type of death that we are imagining ourselves in, is the reiteration of their efficacy in the present.

Duane:

Can you give me an example of a prophecy, and perhaps maybe even from your practice, of how you work with prophecies?

George:

I follow mythologies, which I appreciate as prophecies subjected to time, as well-crafted formulations that resist the constant fluctuation of power. I have been chasing one prophecy that I no longer understand. There is a prophecy that is mostly attributed to the isiXhosa-speaking geography – you never know who a person is these days; they might have been in an area where most people speak isiXhosa. And the prophecy says that they will come – ‘they’ being the Europeans – and that they will land and make inroads into the land. So, first, it’s acknowledging that they have been coming for a very long time, but this prophecy speaks about when they come to stay. They will bring with them a button – or something that people refer to as a button, and what others have interpreted as a coin – and a book. The book is interpreted as the Bible – not as the contents but rather as the skill of inscribing into something decodable, a traceable reference: in the 1860s, for a lot of the Black communities,

the Bible symbolized a written account – it doesn't matter what account. You see it more and more in research when you discover that a lot of nineteenth-century southern African elders used to produce written notebooks on a variety of topics, because they understood that the book relies heavily on other books. So, for us Balobedu to take the book and reject the coin was a way of being in control of contemporary power play based on the written word and its many archives. Automatically, this prophecy tells us how we are going to survive. I'm not going to say win, but to outlast this documentary – or, in our current context, provenance – age. For me, this is quite impressive.

But at the same time, there's another prophecy that comes from Mokoto, who is acknowledged as the last male ruler of Vhalovedu, which basically says, 'I am tired. I am going to sleep. I do not like to sleep in public, but before I go, here is a song'. In the song, he laments, 'They will come, the black ants. And the black ants you will overcome. The red ants will come. You will not overcome them'. Of course, there are debates around who the red ants are. Some say they are Europeans; some say ... actually, let me not get into that one. But generally, the song points out that outsiders will come and the only way to survive them is not to be drawn into an open fight with them but – as I understand it – to let them run their course. I've been really trying to grapple with these two prophecies. On the one hand, the prophecy says 'embrace' the documentary, 'embrace' the fixed record. The other one says be permeable. And they're all referring to surviving the same onslaught: nineteenth-century colonialism. So for me, the work [*Dithugula tša Malefokana* (2012–15)], and others that follow from it, tries to grapple with the tension of fixed–unfixed things and their roles in navigating and persisting beyond the current onslaught, which is Western colonialism and its many afterlives. My work at the moment tries to grapple with these propositions.

The darkroom of this installation (*Dithugula tša Malefokana*), where I had photographic images that would appear and fade into blackness, was also about that idea that one should not be able to fix the moment, in time. Or at least the fixed moment should be of such opaque quality that it is not easily drawn into the regimes of provenance. That's sort of the work.

Duane:

As we wrap up, perhaps you could reflect on the importance of provenance for society and the future?



Dithugula tša Malefokana, installation view at Gae Lebowa Fieldworks, Bolobedu, South Africa, 2015. © George Mahashe

George:

I think the work of provenance research is important for the current moment, when dispossessed communities assert their demands for restitution and repatriation. But this idea of provenance should be directed by the cultural context of our respective cultures. It should not be dictated by global northern expediency and rationality – to flog a dead horse, so to speak. The ideas coalescing around the practices associated with decoloniality are not for dialogue and negotiation, or for

Western sensibilities asserting their realities, but rather for a process where ‘others’ are left to address their own context and should be free to create and solve their own problems. So, let’s stop wasting time reinventing colonial disciplines and instead pay attention to what ‘others’ have imagined to solve problems that we all face.



Edmund de Waal. © Tom Jamieson

Provenance is Many Journeys: it's Plural, it's Complicated, it's Contingent

Edmund de Waal in conversation with Tal Adler and Sharon Macdonald

Tal:

Artistic provenance research is the topic of the book that we are working on. What do you make of that term? Does it have resonance for you?

Edmund:

It's a very immediate question for me, and it's always been a question for me. I work from the principle that objecthood is – that the things in the world are – profoundly unstable. The way in which they are made – and their intentionality, the kinds of investment that you have in them as a maker – is one element of their being. But that's endlessly fissile. It's provocative. As soon as you've made something, and it's out in the world, your ownership of it, your sense of control of where it will be, in whose hands it might travel, its uses, and its productivity in terms of its creation of new possibilities and new meanings are extraordinary.

For me as a maker and as a writer, I'm dealing with things and their meanings the whole time: one, as a creator of objects out into the world, knowing that briefly my naming of them, my placing of them, and my pausing of them – I use the word pause an awful lot, taking it from Paul Celan, as a moment of possibility – are temporary. I have a very small window to control anything that I make as it goes out into the world. So that's me as a maker, making things and putting them out to the world.

But, of course, my life is threaded with thinking about provenance: thinking about the objects and things that I have in my life and the ways in which they've come into my life all the way back, to the different places, people, generations, and cultures in which things have happened.

That is both in my family stories, which I might navigate through the books – *The Hare with Amber Eyes* and *Letters to Camondo* – but also simply in terms of my life as a potter and the ceramics that I trace back in the *The White Road* and in other books. These are all failed attempts to try and navigate what provenance might mean.

There's a line at the end of *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, where I say objects have always been bought, sold, bartered, lost, looted, recovered. And I go on and say that inheritance is part of that. But you know, you get given things, but that's not a safe transaction. So, in the same way, provenance as a process of looking for antecedents, looking for beginnings, is a necessary search for meaning, search for identity, search for a place. It's also iterative – it's not one journey, it's many journeys. You can go back again, and again, and again. Each time you go back, it's a different journey; it's a different beginning.

So, that's a very long answer to begin with, to say it's plural, it's complicated, it's contingent. It doesn't get any easier the older you get. And it is absolutely vital. It's a necessary political, personal act.



Uncle Iggy holding the netsuke.
© De Waal family archive

Sharon:

The subtitle of *The Hare with Amber Eyes* is *A Hidden Inheritance*. There seems to be in your writing a strong sense – even a compulsion or obligation – that those hidden things need engagement. Where does that come from?

Edmund:

The hidden is really important, because there are so many reasons why things are hidden. And increasingly as I get older, I realize that the hiddenness and silences in family stories often indicate places of trauma – places where a particular generation in a family has decided not to hand something on, not to hand on a particular history, not to hand on a story, not to hand on something they've experienced. Of course, that's a very loving and protective act. It's also a way of making a very provocative silence within a family, within a person's life.

Over the years, many people have talked to me about being on a similar journey – journeys in order to understand their own histories. So many of them have said, 'I can't find anything. There's nothing there. All I've got is, you know . . . things run out'; 'I can go back one generation'; or 'I can go back to my grandmother. But she died before I thought of

asking her questions'; or 'I have a silver teaspoon that may have come from Latvia. But I don't know . . .' There's a profound need and possibly an obligation to try and discover, to look deep into the past, to discover your present condition, and to see what you want to hand on to your children in terms of storytelling.

So, hiddenness is really important. And as soon as you use the word *hidden*, it's got so many different levels of meaning, because there's the personal hiddenness of someone deciding not to tell you something or being in an emotional place when they can't tell you something. And then, of course, there are all the extraordinarily painful ways in which people's histories are taken away from them and are deliberately hidden. And that can be through the Shoah, and it can be through the African American experience of trying to reconstruct family stories, where, of course, there is a massive lacuna. And it can be more recently in terms of refugee stories where things have been deliberately taken away in order that people can't return to their countries.

Sharon:

You sometimes use the word *commemoration* in relation to what you are doing.

Edmund:

Commemoration is naming at its heart. So, what any of this is, is an attempt to name the people who are lost. That's why it matters. And that's why it is often, in lots of different communities, incredibly painful and intrinsically difficult, because names have been removed, erased, defaced.

Tal:

In our book, we look at different examples of artistic provenance research, and we also ask: What change, if any, did it produce? Did it make any change to the field of provenance or the field that the work was relating to, to the subject, or to the people around the work, and also to the makers themselves? So, in that sense, how did your books influence, first of all, you, maybe your family, and the field?

Edmund:

How can you not be changed by the process? I mean, it's the first thing to say. If you do this kind of research on a very immediate and personal level, it does completely change you. It changes your sense of where you stand in the world, and actually, in my experience, it makes you more unstable – not safer, not more secure about identity, but much more aware of the instability. I've gone on record saying that the first book



Eine Stadt ein Buch edition, Vienna, 2021. © Paul Zsolnay Verlag

[*The Hare with Amber Eyes*] was an attempt to try and deliberately get my father to talk about things he wouldn't talk about. It was an attempt, while he was getting older and my children were getting older, to actually make a connection, generationally. It has been extraordinary for us as a family. It took us back to Vienna and made the connection with this diasporic family: four siblings had gone to Japan, to England, Mexico, and to America. It couldn't be more Jewish in that sense. It was an extraordinary experience, in Vienna, of the family coming together for the exhibition around the book. But it was also difficult – it was a new reality.

But what it has done is that it has allowed access between generations. It's something that happened, something that I don't own. The book has opened a conduit. It doesn't map what then happened. And that's terrific – very, very extraordinary.

And then, of course, it's influenced everything else: how I make things, and my sense of sort of where I want to be in the world, what I want to do, the projects I want to do. It's done lots of different things.

On another level, it's actually had, surprisingly, quite a substantive impact on things in Austria. I had a very moving encounter with the president of Austria who said that the book has helped change the kind of awareness in Austria of Jewish families. It's done a lot in terms of moving some of the ground about where and how people thought about Jewish families – so, not just as victims. As I said in my speech when I presented the book in Vienna, it is about actually bringing a family back to Vienna. It's a powerful act of restitution. It's not just about looking for the lost art that sits in a box – a complicated box – of 'them'. Instead, it brings a family back into an 'us'. And they've changed the law so that Holocaust-era families can reclaim citizenship. About bloody time too! So, my father has reclaimed his citizenship and so have my brothers. I haven't yet, but I will, at some point.

Two years ago, there was an initiative in Austria called 'Eine Stadt, ein Buch', in which the government distributed one hundred thousand free copies of *The Hare with Amber Eyes*. I mean, that's pretty cool for

a book about provenance.¹

Tal:

Yes, it is, and it brings so many things to mind regarding what we are writing about, especially the evolution of provenance research from being a market tool of the rich and the powerful to, in recent decades, being transformed into a tool of social and historical justice.

This has to do with our next question, which I would like to pose by quoting a paragraph from your book *Letters to Camondo*: ‘I’ve got to ask you about selling everything that you inherited. It is quite startling to read that you sent off to auction all the paintings of mosques and courtyards and houris that your father loved’.

But this question is not only about your giving up the netsuke collection. When you published the book, you already created, in a way, another provenance entry in the netsuke collection. And then there were the exhibitions, then the loans, and then the auction and the donation. And all these things actually added provenance entries. In *Letters to Camondo*, you reflect back on your speech in Vienna and quote Jean Amery: ‘Nothing is resolved, no conflict is settled’.

Edmund:

That Jean Amery quote is really important. It’s at the heart of this question, which deals with the contingency of memory and its connection to objects. You might feel that you want to nail things down: ‘so this is where it is’, ‘this is what it means’, ‘this is where its value lies’. But that’s not truthful. You can’t hold things forever in one place; they don’t have one meaning. And so, the decision, which was taken with my family, to sell an element of the netsuke collection, was during the first Syrian refugee crisis, in order to directly fund an element of the Refugee Council.²

It was saying that the inheritance was an inheritance of objects, but it was also an inheritance of the idea of migration. It was the idea of exile, the idea of crossing a border. It was the idea of some of the family being able to escape. That’s what I’ve inherited. That’s in the story. And actually, being truthful to the heart of the story suggests that you don’t just keep the collection locked away in a vitrine, but you see that it has

[1] For more on this initiative, see the website of ‘Eine Stadt. Ein Buch’, accessed June 21, 2025, <https://echoevent.at/eseb>. See also the German-language edition of the book: Edmund de Waal, *Der Hase mit den Bernsteinaugen*, trans. Brigitte Hilzensauer (Vienna: Zsolnay, 2012).

[2] See Ben Luke, “‘A Moment of Total Crisis in Europe’ Prompted Edmund de Waal to Sell His Prized Netsuke Collection”, *The Art Newspaper*, December 6, 2018, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2018/12/06/a-moment-of-total-crisis-in-europe-prompted-edmund-de-waal-to-sell-his-prized-netsuke-collection>.

continuing agencies in the world. Therefore, two things were simultaneous: One was the loan of the collection to the Jewish Museum in Vienna, to say that it can work harder in Vienna in the museum than it can work at home. My children were at that point almost twenty. And the second thing was to do something emphatic and real in the present moment to help refugees. When we published my grandmother's novel, called *Exiles Return*, which was her unpublished novel about her return to Vienna, all the proceeds from that also go forever to the Refugee Council. We haven't taken any of the proceeds from that book.

So, it's basically, trying to locate the agency that you have. Provenance research, as you cunningly suggested, is often thought of as a tool of auction houses – of people who want to make that great list in their sale-room catalogue in order to commodify objects. All my practice is about breaking that up and going: 'You know what, you want complexity? Bring the word provenance in. You want complexity? Bring the word restitution in'. It's using the lens of Amery as justice being a continuous act. Not something in the past tense – it's an enacting of something rather than a coding of something.

Tal:

You also write about there being some things that you 'don't want to pass on': 'I don't want to live with it anymore'.

Edmund:

This has two elements: One was discovering from my grandmother that she burned hundreds of letters from her grandmother in the 1950s. She kept them, and then actually let them go. She just burned them; she didn't want to pass them on. So, there was that act. And, of course, burning things is a very symbolic and powerful act that I return to in the *library of exile* project.³ And the second element was the sense in which, for me, writing these books was an attempt of not passing on to my children. It sounds perverse because it's a long-winded way of not passing things on, but it was an attempt to not pass on silences. And then we made a decision that the archive should go to the Jewish Museum in Vienna. You don't have to have it yourselves; you just need to know where it is.

A footnote to that is that the Jewish Museum in Vienna discovered a vast, monumental history painting from 1840 of cavalry officers. This had been looted in '38 from the family house, and it ended up in the Museum

[3] Edmund de Waal, *library of exile*, the British Museum, London, August 27, 2020 – January 12, 2021; see the website for the exhibition at <https://www.britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/edmund-de-waal-library-exile>.

of Military History in Vienna, which is not too far from the house. It had been hanging there since 1938, and in the records from 1950, they noted that 'this belonged to the Ephrussi family'. But . . . anyhow, it was restituted to us, and there was a family discussion about what happens with it, because there was no point selling it. So, what do you do with it? In fact, the title is going to be passed to the Jewish Museum in Vienna.⁴ So, it will have moved. But I was arguing for something slightly different, which was to say that it should stay in the Military Museum with a great text about provenance, which would have been very provocative, a kind of beautiful way of doing it and in itself a kind of artistic intervention.

Sharon:

I love that idea – why didn't it happen?

Edmund:

Because I'm one of several. All of this is complicated because you hold a bit of the story, or you think you hold the shape of the story. And of course, it's everyone's story. Other people can write other histories or feel other histories. So, you have to be very aware and sensitive to just how complicated this is. There's no straight line.

Sharon:

Yes, it's important to reflect on that, and in your writing you reflect a lot on these very processes. One thing that you mentioned that changed through your doing this provenance research was your own artistic practice. Could you say more about that? And about the relationship between your pottery and your writing, especially in relation to these questions of provenance?

Edmund:

I think what doing that work has done is that the background has become the foreground. *The Hare with Amber Eyes* wasn't the first book I wrote. I've written about ceramics for years. But it allowed me a space to reflect more straightforwardly on these things. What has happened is that I've developed a kind of language of the vitrine. That's not arbitrary. And in fact, when I was finishing *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, I was doing my first ever large-scale, site-specific installation at the same time. It was up

[4] Jewish Museum Vienna, 'The Jewish Museum Vienna and the Austrian Ministry of Defense Make Restitution to the Ephrussi Family Possible', news release, September 1, 2021, https://www.jmw.at/en/news/the_jewish_museum_vienna_and_the_austrian_ministry_of_defense_make_restitution_to_the_ephrussi_family_possible.

in the dome of the V&A Museum, a huge red ring of objects.⁵ Its opening was in the same month that I had the proof of *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, and I realized that I was getting up ladders and putting objects out of harm's way – I was making objects which were non-diasporic, because unless you got a scaffold and got seventy feet up in the air, you can't get these objects down. And, simultaneously, I was writing about lost things.

Those parallel journeys have inflected each other ever since. And so much of my work is also in dialogue with particular people – with Paul Celan, for instance, where there are strong connections between the brokenness of language and new language, and an attempt to say something, and a compulsion to say something, alongside the need to stay silent. All those sorts of themes are also present in the ways in which I hold my work back or let it come out into the world, as in my use of shards, my use of brokenness.

This is also about the places where I have worked. My intervention at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna is a very difficult example of that. What do you do if you're invited by the Kunsthistorisches Museum to do something? You say no, you say no, again you say no, and finally you say yes. That project is called *During the Night*, after a Dürer watercolour of a nightmare.⁶ There was a whole discovery of broken objects within the museum. So that's part of my practice – making something, making an exhibition. And, more recently with *Letters to Camondo*, that's both the book and an exhibition.⁷ Well, I can't call it an exhibition, because it's not: it was a presence within the house, both seen and unseen.

So, how are my writing and pottery linked? You know, I'm one person. Some things get written, some things get made. I'm never totally sure what's going to go where. If you were in the studio at the moment – which I wish you were – there are books everywhere, and there's clay everywhere. It doesn't feel to me like two practices at all.

Tal:

I want to follow up on something that you mentioned and to talk about vitrines. I am also thinking a lot about vitrines, in general, and about how you use vitrines, and also how you write about vitrines. I think there

[5] Edmund de Waal, *Signs & Wonders*, permanent installation, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 2009; for an installation view, see <https://www.edmunddeaal.com/making/signs-wonders>.

[6] *Edmund de Waal meets Albrecht Dürer. During the Night*, Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, October 11, 2016 – January 29, 2017.

[7] The exhibition, or what de Waal calls 'a presence', is Edmund de Waal, *Lettres à Camondo*, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, October 7, 2021 – May 15, 2022; see the website for the exhibition at <https://www.edmunddeaal.com/writing/books/letters-to-camondo/about>. The book is Edmund de Waal, *Letters to Camondo* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2021).

are different levels of how you write about them and how you use them in your artistic practice. You write about vitrines as thresholds, and also about them as defining a space. But I was also captivated by how you wrote about the ceremony around the vitrines. When talking with provenance researchers who might do 'straightforward' research, we sometimes say that artistic provenance research is also about the things that are around the objects themselves. So, maybe your writing itself, or the book, is a kind of a vitrine for the stories in a certain way? We also thought that there are two kinds of vitrines: The vitrines that you write about, which can be opened, and where it's this kind of social game of taking things out, etc. But then the vitrines that you use in the installations are closed.

Edmund:

You're spot on, absolutely spot on. Because there is an actual threshold experience of opening a vitrine, which I talk about, as you say. And then there's this liminality of opening something up and handing it around, – that activation of something.

As you say, my vitrines are closed, and you can't open them. But for me, they are absolutely thresholds, still thresholds, liminal, because you read them. For me, the objects are also sounds and words. It's a kind of choreography. It's a sort of notational system as well. It's got that kind of feeling to me. It's much more like a kind of John Cage score of possibilities. You don't have to open the vitrine up and move the pots around for it still to be active. And, of course, you're right that it's just like how you don't expect a book to open up, and the words to start falling around, and

the chapters to start mingling; but you also know that opening a book is essentially a liminal thing. You open it up, and you move within the text. The relationship between the page and a vitrine is very, very close to me.

So, the answer is yes – absolutely yes.

Sharon:

The other term from artistic provenance research that we haven't particularly touched on directly is the *research* aspect.

Putting *artistic* and *research*



just (for RMR), Edmund de Waal (Waddesdon Manor installation view), 2022. © Chris Lacey

together doesn't always make sense to people doing more conventional provenance research, where there's such an emphasis on 'this has to be the case' to carry a particular weight. You often use the term *stories* in relation to what you write as well as *journeys*, and that means you show us the process, which is fabulously compelling. Could you say a bit more about your thoughts on research?

Edmund:

I have an academic background, as well as a profession of being a potter. And so, I have a sort of academic training. When I left my university, I could have gone two ways: pottery or PhD. Happily, pottery it was.

I'm very clear that there is a real discipline in research, in one kind of research: a discipline of being in the archives and cross-checking and noting everything down. There's a cupboard of research behind me, old-style research materials; it's all pre-Google; it's all from going to places. Which brings me to the second point, which is the somatic research. The reason I use the words *stories* and *journeys* so much is that, for me, the research isn't purely the experience of tracking down texts and materials in libraries and archives. It's about actually being present in the places where things happened. Now, how do you notate that? How do you put that into a different kind of provenance? A methodology? But you should! Walking up and down, and counting the steps, and finding the distance between one place and another, or trying to trace a morning walk in Vienna for my grandmother – these are as important to me as those hours in the Bibliothèque Nationale.

If you think about objecthood as being objects in the round, then you have to deal with the body. You have to deal with the physical presence of something, and the places that it's been, and all those other things.

So, for me, that is an absolutely compelling part of research. You can call it artistic research, research-research, I don't care. But it's real research.

Sharon:

Research raises the question of degrees of faithfulness to what has been encountered. How much poetic licence do you allow yourself?

Edmund:

Well, 'not much' is the answer. I think I indicate where I'm present in a story and conjecturing, and where I know what happened. So, with *Letters to Camondo*, obviously there are huge archival resources that I could use. But I'm also clear about when I'm talking to him and say 'I don't know what it was like', 'I wish I was next to you on this particular

dinner table', or 'what was it like to hear the sounds from one room to another?' And, you know, I got some things wrong. And people are very, very keen on pointing out when you get things wrong. So, I know exactly what I got wrong, because, apart from some really moving letters, I've had letters where they go 'you idiot, if you come out of Schottengasse and turn left, and then left', 'any fool knows that you should', or 'the entrance to your great-grandfather's café moved in 1910'. What you don't get are letters saying 'actually, we know where the Rafael copy that was looted in 1938 now is'.

So, it's interesting that people are very prepared to tell you what you've got wrong. But actually, you know what? It'd be quite helpful if people wrote in and went 'actually, we know where all that went', or 'we've got it'.

Tal:

For me at least, it's also about the aesthetics of research – about the way that you're writing, the aesthetics of writing. When I was reading *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, I was also thinking about Stefan Zweig's book on Marie Antoinette. I was always thinking, 'How the hell did this guy do that, what kind of research did he do, how many archives?' But it's not only the facts. It's really about wanting to understand. And both of you managed to write in such a way as to create this identification and affect. I think of it as the aesthetics of doing the research.

Edmund:

Thank you very much for any sentence with reference to Stefan Zweig!

There's something about having done enough research. The fullness of research. To be able to try and bring someone to life. To have enough sense of milieu, of tone, of the weather . . . in order to make it happen. And bluntly, I felt responsibility.

You talk about aesthetics of it, and this is the ethics of it, which is 'don't screw it up'. If you have one shot at trying to say anything about the Shoah, anything at all – be careful. And somewhere towards the end of the book I say, 'Be careful, walk it again, walk it again, make sure you get it right'. And of course, I did get some things wrong. But I got it right enough for the people I care about for it to work. That triangle of father, me, children – for that kind of triangle to happen.

Tal:

You mentioned the funny letters by the readers, and I was wondering – because it is also connected to the impact of your work – did you also encounter Antisemitic readings of your work?

Edmund:

Absolutely, yes. There were people who were offended on different levels. One was just saying ‘another book about rich Jews’. And then other people . . . there was a particular review – actually, a couple of reviews in America – which went ‘most of the family got away, so what’s the story?’ So, there was a sort of hierarchy of suffering. You know, I haven’t reached the threshold of appropriate suffering in order to write a book, according to them.

Of course, there are those readings. But I have to say, what it has done is to connect, very powerfully, which has been hugely meaningful for me, not only to parallel families in the Jewish community but to many other non-Jewish families who have other experiences of exile. And that’s been absolutely extraordinary.

I’ve written about this: Some beautiful Meissen plates, looted from the von Klemperer family in Dresden in 1938 were destroyed into fragments during the firebombing in 1945. I bought them, and then had them repaired using the Japanese art of kintsugi and showed them back in Dresden.⁸ In terms of your beautiful circles that you’re drawing in the air about belonging and objecthood, and in some ways about inscription – about how much you need to inscribe on something in order to indicate provenance – they were kind of like a beautiful footnote.

Sharon:

That sounds like a lovely place to end this interview. Thank you very much!

[8] *library of exile*, Japanisches Palais, Dresden, November 30, 2019 – February 16, 2020; see also the website for the exhibition at <https://japanisches-palais.skd.museum/en/exhibitions/library-of-exile-edmund-de-waal>.

List of Exhibitions of the so-called Gall Skull

List of exhibitions in which the ‘Skull with inscriptions according to Gall’ from the anatomical collection of the Centre for Anatomy at the Charité was exhibited since the year 2000 (compiled by Marion Hulverscheidt and Tal Adler, January 2024):

December 10, 2000–March 4, 2001: ‘Theater der Natur und Kunst. Theatrum Naturae et Artis. Wunderkammern des Wissens’, Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin

September 15, 2001–May 15, 2002: ‘Computer.Gehirn’, Heinz Nixdorf MuseumsForum, Paderborn

February 8, 2006–May 20, 2006: ‘Melancholie – Genie und Wahnsinn in der Kunst’, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin

August 18, 2006–March 15, 2007: ‘Kino im Kopf. Psychologie und Film seit Sigmund Freud’, Deutsche Kinemathek – Museum für Film und Fernsehen, Berlin

July 10, 2009–March 28, 2010: ‘Murder and Manslaughter: An Exhibition about Life’, Luxembourg City History Museum

August 23, 2010–January 31, 2011: ‘Weltwissen. 300 Jahre Wissenschaft in Berlin’, Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin

July 23, 2011–October 30, 2011: ‘Images of the Mind: Bildwelten des Geistes aus Kunst und Wissenschaft’, Deutsches Hygiene-Museum, Dresden

December 8, 2011–March 18, 2012: ‘Images of the Mind’, the Moravian Gallery in Brno

April 23, 2012–August 9, 2012: ‘Von mehr als einer Welt. Die Künste der Aufklärung’, Kunstbibliothek, Kulturforum Berlin

September 29, 2016–January 8, 2017: ‘+Ultra. gestaltung schafft wissen’, Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin

~~July 20, 2021–June 30, 2025: ‘After Nature’, Humboldt Lab at the Humboldt Forum, Berlin. (The skull was eventually not included in the exhibition as part of an artistic intervention by Tal Adler)~~

June 16, 2023–January 28, 2024: ‘The Brain in Science and Art’, Berlin Museum of Medical History at the Charité

This book's authors

Tal Adler

Conceptual artist and researcher developing long-term artistic engagements with difficult histories, conflicted communities, and contested heritages through collaboration, participation, and multiperspectivity. He has worked at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna and at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin's Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage and Centre for Advanced Study *inherit. heritage in transformation*, leading artistic research on memory, commemoration, and the ethics and politics of collecting and displaying human remains.

Friedrich von Bose

Director of the Museum der Kulturen Basel, he is trained in European Ethnology and has previously held posts including Deputy Chief Curator of the Humboldt Lab at the Humboldt Forum, Berlin, and Head of Research and Exhibitions at the three ethnological museums in Leipzig, Dresden and Herrnhut. His research and curatorial practice focus on contemporary museum transformations, politics of display, and the social life of collections. He has published widely on ethnographic museums and on the intersections of anthropology and museology.

Clara Dröll

Studied European Ethnology at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, where she worked as a student assistant at the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage. Her research focuses on decolonization and curatorial practices, particularly on how to deal with human remains in collections. She is also interested in critical knowledge transfer in museums, artistic research, and migration studies.

Larissa Förster

Director of the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt, she is trained in Anthropology and was the first Head of the Department for Cultural Goods and Collections from Colonial Contexts at the German Lost Art Foundation, Berlin. Her research and practice address colonial collections, provenance, restitution, and postcolonial memory politics. She has written widely on colonial legacies in museums and heritage institutions.

Marion Hulverscheidt

Trained medical doctor and researcher in the history of science and medicine, her work focuses on nineteenth- and twentieth-century medicine with ethical trajectories into contemporary medicine and society. For the past 25 years she has examined colonial, racist, and patriarchal ideas and practices in medicine.

Duane Jethro

Senior Lecturer in the Department of African Studies and Linguistics at the University of Cape Town (UCT). His work examines heritage formation, contested public cultures and material religion. He was a Junior Research Fellow at the Centre for Curating the Archive (UCT), and a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. His publications include *Heritage Formation and the Senses in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (2020).

Konradin Kunze

Theatre-maker, exhibition curator, and researcher working at the intersection of art, memory, and public history. He has developed participatory and site-specific projects that address commemoration, heritage, and contested public space. With a particular focus on German colonial history in Tanzania, his work has contributed to debates and practices of restitution.

Sharon Macdonald

Alexander von Humboldt Professor of Social Anthropology at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, she directs the Centre for Cultural Techniques and co-directs the Centre for Advanced Study *inherit. heritage in transformation*, and was founding director of the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage. In all of these, she has been concerned to foster innovative research and practice, including artistic research. Her wide-ranging writing, especially on difficult heritage, memory politics and museum transformations is internationally known.

George Mahashe

Senior Lecturer in Fine Art at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, and a practicing artist. He convenes the research platform –*defunct context*, which centres the curatorial as artistic practice. His work combines photography, anthropology, archives, and storytelling, foregrounding transdisciplinarity as an apt response to the complexity of indigenous knowledge systems, engaging both its historic and emerging practices.

Ricarda Rivoir

Studied Anthropology, Political Science, and European Ethnology in Leipzig and Berlin. Her research focuses on postcolonial provenance studies, especially the colonial legacies of museums and restitution discourses. She has been working at the GRASSI Museum of Ethnology in Leipzig from 2021 and, from 2024 until 2025, at the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum in Cologne in the Africa collections department.

Laura Strott

Studied Social and Cultural Anthropology, Political Science, and European Ethnology at the Freie Universität Berlin and the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Her research focuses on post- and decolonial perspectives, with particular interest in processes of negotiation, dynamics of entanglement, and moments of failure. She is co-editor of a recent issue of *Berliner Blätter* on curating as relational and ethnographic explorations in the Humboldt Lab.

Edmund de Waal

Internationally renowned artist and writer, he is celebrated for his installations of porcelain vessels, which explore themes of memory, materiality, and narrative, often in relation to particular collections or archives. These themes are also explored in his writing, including the prize-winning *The Hare with Amber Eyes* (2010) and his most recent book, *an Archive* (2025).

