

# 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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,<sup>3</sup> 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).<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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 Universitäts-sammlungen’, *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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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).<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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'.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup> 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](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.<sup>19</sup> Anna and Tal, at the time, were research fellows at the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage (CARMAH).<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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](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.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>

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.’<sup>26</sup> Following this understanding, *Who is ID8470?* has the potential to question how we deal with problematic or ‘sensitive’ objects in university collections.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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’.<sup>29</sup>

### 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.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup>

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,<sup>33</sup> 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=1dxqe1lLgBw>. 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.<sup>34</sup>

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’.<sup>35</sup> Karp and Kratz developed this perspective from one of their core principles as curators: ‘exhibit the problem, not the solution’.<sup>36</sup> 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’.<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup>

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.<sup>39</sup>

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.<sup>40</sup>

[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.<sup>41</sup> 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'.<sup>42</sup> 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'.<sup>43</sup>

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.<sup>44</sup>

[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.<sup>45</sup> 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.<sup>46</sup>

[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