

Material Authenticity of the Ephemeral

Veranstalter: Leibniz Research Alliance „Historical Authenticity; Deutsches Museum München

Datum, Ort: 16.10.2017–18.10.2017, München

Bericht von: Stephanie Probst, Harvard University

Coming from different disciplinary backgrounds – conservation science and musicology respectively – the two organizers Marisa Pamplona-Bartsch (München) and Rebecca Wolf (München) put forward a topic arising at the intersection of many current discourses in material culture studies, conservation science, and museum studies: „Material Authenticity of the Ephemeral.“ Acknowledging that this complex question is best addressed through interdisciplinary collaboration, the conference brought together a breadth of approaches and professional expertise represented by curators, conservators, and researchers. The case studies that they shared of their work only affirmed the topicality and political stakes of interrogating notions of authenticity and the ephemerality of material objects.

These concerns pertain in particular to practices across museums, as chair of research at the Deutsches Museum HELMUTH TRISCHLER (München) intimated in his opening remarks. But the conference made clear that they also extend well beyond these institutional boundaries. Indeed, as STEFAN SIMON (New Haven, CT) emphasized from the perspective of cultural heritage research, the claim to authenticity can establish or confirm the identity of diverse groups and attach historical, social, aesthetic, and monetary value to cultural monuments. Simon’s examples included such current issues of debate as the confederate monuments in the United States, the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock, and war destruction in Syria.

Also ACHIM SAUPE (Potsdam) highlighted the ethical and political responsibilities that processes of authentication entail. As the head of the Leibniz Research Alliance „Historical Authenticity“ (founded in 2013), Saupé offered a helpful overview over the challenges posed by the „fictitious“ concept of au-

thenticity and the research questions it raises. Of the six distinct concerns that he listed, all were addressed over the course of the conference, such as the authority and power associated with authentication practices, the distinction between subject-related and object-related forms of authenticity, or the possibilities and demands with regards to authentication and preservation methods that new media introduce.

The concern with the construction of authenticity was addressed in particular by JOHANNES MÜSKE (Zurich). He proposed that the creation of tangible records in ethnographic research „precedes the construction of heritage.“ Indeed, these material documents are commonly understood to authenticate fleeting cultural phenomena, not least by the use of „authentic“ technologies – as the phonograph and photography were conceived in the early twentieth century. Müske enlivened his argument by drawing on the example of the Dür Collection of „Swiss Music,“ a sound archive of the Swiss radio, which was used to represent a Swiss cultural identity to international broadcasting audiences. Encompassing a variety of musical styles – including utility music – the collection inscribed, valorized, and commodified a distinct musical heritage.

The three days of the conference were arranged around the broad topics of „Conservation Science,“ „Theory and Measurement,“ and „Performance and Communication.“ While thus facilitating lively discussions at the end of each day, many cross-references and themes crystallized across the entire duration of the conference.

Artist Nam June Paik, for instance, made repeated appearances; first in HANNA B. HÖLLING’s (London) talk on the preservation and reconstruction of a video art installation in a case of unintentional destruction, and then in the contribution of KATJA MÜLLER-HELLE (Berlin) on Fluxus art works of the 1960s that centered around the willful, planned destruction of musical instruments. Building on the scholarship of Monika Wagner, Müller-Helle raised intriguing questions about the relationship between destruction and construction in such art works, and between material and form as defining features (and targets of preservation efforts)

in art works more generally. Moreover, the performance component of Fluxus art inspired a discussion following the talk about the historical specificity of notions of authenticity, as a value that had to be reevaluated across reception histories of art, and that might provoke different perceptions whether examined from inside or outside such traditions. While opposing notions of authenticity in general cultural-anthropological terms, LARS-CHRISTIAN KOCH (Berlin) inadvertently addressed some of the same issues in his talk on processes of remodeling in the manufacturing of North Indian musical instruments.

The difficulty of cataloguing music and sound, let alone of displaying it in a museum context was cogently illustrated by SILKE BERDUX (Munich), curator for musical instruments at the Deutsches Museum. Berdux guided the conference participants through the museum's complete Nachlass of pioneer of electronic music Oskar Sala. She recounted how Sala himself had struggled with keeping track of his tape recordings and shared her visions for making accessible Sala's studio, oeuvre, and working process in a museum exhibit. Further guided tours of the carefully planned conference included a visit to the exhibit on „Maritime Navigation“ and to the conversation laboratories of the museum.

A common theme that arose from multiple talks was a call to differentiate between functional and material authenticity. This differentiation acknowledges the necessity of selecting between these two options in cases of conservation science. The presentation of JÖRN BOHLMANN (Munich), curator for maritime exhibitions at the Deutsches Museum, was particularly enlightening in this regard. Through the example of restoration projects of historical wooden boats, Bohlmann discussed the chain of decision-making involved, which had to be oriented by a specific desired purpose. He explained that the materials, utensils, and techniques used depend vastly on the aspired demand on the vessel – whether the purpose was to present it within a museum exhibition, or to make it useable at sea. These decisions necessarily prioritize certain qualities of the artifact while obscuring – if not destroying – others. Apart

from using historically accurate utensils and materials, Bohlmann furthermore pointed to the importance of acquiring historical craftsmanship skills.

Similar issues were raised in the talk of CHARLOTTE HOLZER (Munich), who shared insights from her work in the research and conservation efforts of a dress made of glass fiber, once in the possession of Infanta Eulalia. Holzer's examinations uncovered multiple material and historical layers in this rare object, not all of which, however, can be equally accounted for in the conservation and exhibition of the dress. Presenting the case of another wearable artifact from the turn of the twentieth century, ELENA GÓMEZ-SÁNCHEZ (Bochum) discussed how she could reconstruct historical manufacturing techniques and their technological context through diverse material examinations of a diving suit made of caoutchouc.

The awareness of inevitable negotiations involved in conservation science counterbalanced the unsurprising call for standards of conduct for preservation and documentation. The challenges around the establishment of such unified standards and their enforcement within contexts that are driven by commercial interests, were stressed in particular by NADJA WALLASZKOVITS (Vienna), speaking about the restoration and digital archiving of sound recordings. Wallaszkovits defined the agenda of sound archiving as clearly oriented towards the preservation of the stored information, if necessary at the expense of the material object. PATRICIA FALCÃO (London) suggested a similar hierarchy between material and function in much more recent art works. As conservator of software-based art installations, Falcão outlined her interaction with the artists and programmers to discuss what changes to the art works they consider acceptable. This collaboration and the attendant arrangements made to secure preservation speak to the inherent ephemerality of time-based media art works.

In response to the challenges introduced by digital media with regards to their preservation, FABIAN OFFERT (Santa Barbara, CA) proposed as a concrete approach to harness Field Programmable Gate Arrays (FPGAs) to „clone“ digital artifacts. Promising „circuit-

level authenticity," this strategy – which involves detailed archeological research as the basis for complex programming operations – has yet to be comprehensively explored by museums, though Offert could already present two cases of his own curatorial experience.

In a „thought experiment,“ FRANK BÄR (Nuremberg) inquired general concerns with regard to reproductions and visual representations of artifacts, by conjuring up Walther Benjamin's famous ascription of „aura“ to the original. Examining from this perspective different technologies for the documentation, modeling, and preservation of human-made artifacts, Bär's talk paired nicely with the contribution of PETER BARTSCH (Berlin), who shared insights from the particular challenges encountered in natural history collections. A general observation, which resonated with comments made by other conference participants, pertained to the experience that archival collections – particularly of natural objects – often elicit entirely unforeseeable use-value.

„Material Authenticity of the Ephemeral“ addressed concerns that pertain across all practices in museums, archives, and collections, from acquisition, conservation, and research, to exhibition and communication. Shedding light on how discourses on authenticity can create and affirm power relations and re-inscribe social hierarchies in these institutional repositories of our heritage, the discussions of the conference challenge us to reflect on how we engage with natural and cultural artifacts—which quickly prove equally ephemeral.

Conference Overview:

Conservation Science

Stefan Simon (Yale University, New Haven): Exploring Context and Values: The Role of Heritage Science in Cultural Heritage Research

Elena Gómez-Sánchez (Deutsches Bergbau-Museum Bochum): Following the Natural Degradation of Caoutchouc: Material Analysis of a Diving Suit from the Turn of the 20th Century

Charlotte Holzer (Deutsches Museum, Mu-

nich): How to Preserve the Story of a 19th Century Glass Fibre Dress

Hanna Hölling (University College London): Trace, Memory, Time: Perpetuating Media Art

Summary & Perspectives: Stefan Simon

Theory & Measurement

Patrícia Falcão (Tate, London): Software-based Art Installations as an Object of Conservation

Nadja Wallaszkovits (Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna): Digitisation and Restoration of Historical Audio Recordings: A Balancing Act between Authenticity and Manipulation

Silke Berdux (Deutsches Museum, Munich): Oskar Sala and the Digitization of Audio Tapes

Johannes Müske (University of Zurich): Constructing Authenticity: Ethnographic Archives and the Material Traces to Intangible Cultural Heritage

Fabian Offert (University of California, Santa Barbara): Preservation as Translation: The Case for Programmable Logic Devices as a Strategy for Circuit-Level Authenticity

Katja Müller-Helle (Freie Universität Berlin): Orchestrated Destruction: The Dissolution of Form and the Production of Sound since 1950

Summary & Perspectives: Frank Bär

Performance & Communication

Jörn Bohlmann (Deutsches Museum, Munich): Just Doing It Right: Craftsmanship and Historical Authenticity in the Case of Restoring Historical Boats and Ships

Peter Bartsch (Museum für Naturkunde Berlin): On the Minor Differences between Natural Objects and Man-made Constructs

Lars-Christian Koch (Ethnologisches Museum der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin): Materializing Sounds: Sonic Concepts and the Ephemeral in North Indian Musical Instrument-Manufacturing

Frank Bär (Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg): Aura versus Information? Artifacts and Their Virtual Representation

Tagungsbericht *Material Authenticity of the Ephemeral*. 16.10.2017–18.10.2017, München,
in: H-Soz-Kult 16.11.2017.