

Research, Exhibitions and African History

Veranstalter: Basel Graduate School of History; Centre for African Studies Basel; Basler Afrika Bibliographien

Datum, Ort: 25.10.2014, Basel

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Experienced and young scholars, who have conceptualized, organized or curated exhibitions as part of research in African history, participated in this workshop. Conventionally historical research projects are described as following a linear process, consisting of reading, archival research, fieldwork, writing, publication and an optional exhibition as a form of „public history“. Exhibitions are often not perceived as forms of history themselves. But they narrate the past, impact upon the present and allow for communication with a broader audience that research greatly benefits from. This one-day workshop aimed at interrogating the functioning of exhibitions as a form of history and research. Given that the production of history is always intrinsically political and African history continuously needs to be reclaimed this is of particular importance.¹

After a brief introduction, TANJA HAMMEL (Basel) presented two exhibition projects. First, *Botany has always been one of my greatest pleasures* is an exhibition at the Shirley Sherwood Gallery of Botanical Art, Kew Gardens, for the bicentenary of English-born, South Africa-based naturalist Mary Elizabeth Barber's birth in 2018. The current exhibition concept addresses all senses, radically contextualizes her knowledge production and aims to challenge conventional natural history museum and botanical art exhibitions. The second is a project at the Albany Museum in Grahamstown on humans' relations with the more-than-human world² and local environmental history from the earliest sources available to this very day. The very fruitful discussion prompted her towards conceptualizing one exhibition for both locations or at least making the

individual locations speak to one another.

CHRISTIAN HUNZIKER (Zurich) talked about a recent exhibition at the Historisches Museum Thurgau in Frauenfeld. This exhibition focused on August Künzler, a Swiss who in 1929 emigrated to Tanzania where he worked in agriculture, hunted and sold game to zoos.³ Bourdieu's „biographical illusion“ inspired Hunziker to curate an exhibition that revealed the artificiality of biography.⁴ The exhibition started with the memories of Künzler and his family and ended with a memory tree where visitors recorded their opinion that became part of the museum's archive. Visitors could find their own way through the living room, rooms with big game material in the media, a small display of his collected objects, photographs on the struggle for independence, and 17 listening stations including critical comments by former co-workers. Workshop participants wondered whether a counter narrative on the struggle for independence would have been possible. They discussed the limits and challenges of a biographical approach (e.g. subjectifying people) and the mechanism by which visitors claim subjectivity and objectify the exhibitions.

ENRIQUE MARTINO (Berlin) spoke about the archive collection he curates on the website <http://www.opensourceguinea.org> which includes maps, interviews, photos, etc., displayed side by side as a continuous stream of sources. Users can scroll down eleven meters or create a PDF of 3,500 pages including the several thousand sources. According to Martino, quoting in academic texts deprives sources of their own trajectory. Providing them online and cross-referencing

¹ See Jacques Depelchin, *Reclaiming African History*, Nairobi, Cape Town, Dakar, Oxford 2011.

² The more-than-human world is a term Val Plumwood uses in preference to the non-human world. It is inclusive, while the often used term is exclusive. See Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, London 2002.

³ Historisches Museum Thurgau, Sonderausstellung: August Künzler. Thurgau-Tanzania 4. April-26. Oktober 2014, <http://www.historisches-museum.tg.ch/xml_83/internet/de/application/d14662/d16370/f14673.cfm> (15.11.2014)

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Biographical Illusion*, übersetzt von Y. Winkin, W. Leeds-Hurwitz, in: *Working Papers and Proceedings of the Centre for Psychosocial Studies* 14 (1987), S. 1-7.

in his academic publications prevents him from doing so.⁵ The project also makes sources appear in different spheres such as in a discussion group on Facebook where it is contextualized and generates inputs for his research. This approach allows him to free sources from the archive he sees as a prison. The discussion focused on legal and ethical aspects as well as examples from southern Africa where some people become more and more reluctant towards open access digitization projects.

BRYN JAMES (Manchester/London) presented on his six years of fieldwork, exhibition making and research on the materiality of West African healing and well being which he undertook as an archaeologist, ethnographer and visual anthropologist. His work merges ethnographic and archeological practices in order to explore contemporary meanings and relevance of the material past for diverse publics.⁶ He curated various exhibitions in the last two years, such as *Fieldwork Collection Exhibition on Trading Well-Being: the Materiality of Medicine & Religion at a Healer's Market, Accra, Ghana* at Manchester Museum in 2013.⁷ His approach is cyclical and exhibition making is integrated in his research process. He organized object-orientated workshops and interviews with members of Manchester's black community organizations such as the Ghanaian Union and Black Health Association who also donated African medicine to the museum that became part of the exhibition. His practices opened up the museum to new audiences.

CHRISTIAN ERNSTEN (Amsterdam/Cape Town) presented a photographic essay in connection with his PhD on an archaeology of the future of Cape Town. It is the product of a four-day walk in District One and District Six with photographer Sara de Gouveia entitled *Ruins of the Alternative Future of Cape Town*⁸ that visualizes a counter-archive. Focusing on the colonial city, Ernten explores urban discourses and the inscriptions of the history of slavery and forced removals into the landscape of the city. The photographic essay points to the functioning and disruptions of official discourse and presents a starting point for researching the

past. To go beyond the colonial archive (that includes archives, architecture, archaeological sites and everyday life) Ernten suggests speculating about an alternate history.

MELANIE BOEHI's (Basel) talk was on the project *Cape Town Floriography* that she curates together with Chrischene Julius (Cape Town). It is an intervention that will take place at the flower market in Adderley Street and Trafalgar Place in Cape Town in early 2015. The work consists of a temporary display of historical images, the overgrowing of a memorial, a floriography storytelling workshop and the making of maps that document past and present sites and routes related to the activities in Trafalgar Place. It is a presentation of research that Boehi has been involved with since 2009 as well as an attempt to gain more data and open up authorship towards a collective approach to history writing by using display techniques that enable participants to rearrange and inscribe the displayed material. The discussion focused on the challenges of curating outdoor exhibitions.

SUSANNE HUBLER BAIER and ANNA VOEGELI LITELU (both Basel) gave a paper on three sound exhibitions that the archive of the Basler Afrika Bibliographien has organized based on its collection of audio recordings by journalist Ruth Weiss.⁹ The first two took place in Basel, the third one in Cape Town. The Basel exhibitions consisted of listening stations, a composition and minimal visual displays. Visitors' reactions to this design were mixed. Sometimes the experi-

⁵ Enrique Martino, Open Sourcing the Colonial Archive – A Digital Montage of the History of Fernando Pó and the Bight of Biafra, *History in Africa: A Journal of Method*, 41 (2014), S. 387-415.

⁶ Yannis Hamilaakis, Aris Anagnostopoulos, What is Archaeological Ethnography? in: *Public Archaeology: Archaeological Ethnographies*, 8:2-3 (2009), S. 65-87.

⁷ See e.g. Bryn Trevelyan James, *The Healer's Tools. A Study of Material Assemblages amongst Indigenous Practitioners in Ghana and their Archaeological Implications* <<http://bryntrevelyanjames.wordpress.com/tag/medicine/>> (15.11.2014)

⁸ Inspired by Mike Davis, *City of Quartz. Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, photographs by Robert Morrow, London, New York 1990 [2006].

⁹ Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 'My very first question to you' *Memoriav: Audiovisuelle Kulturgüter erhalten*, <<http://de.memoriav.ch/eventdetails.aspx?id=6f728a5b-b4de-4420-b68b-7d2da1fb4e16>> (15.11.2014).

ence of being „thrown into sound“ was perceived as uncomfortable. The most productive moments were experienced when curators accompanied visitors and were available for introductions and discussions. The resistance against audio-based exhibitions became also obvious when the „acoustic portrait“ of Ruth Weiss was transferred to the Jewish Museum in Cape Town, which transformed it into a classical visual exhibition with the sound composition turned down to background music. The discussion focused on how sound poses particular challenges to historians and curators.

ROSARIO MAZUELA and JÜRIG SCHNEIDER (both Basel) presented their project *Cameroon Photo Press Archives. Protection, conservation, access*. This project includes the digitization of a part of the Press Photo Archives of Buea, Cameroon. It also aims to raise awareness of Swiss and Cameroonian archivists and young researchers to challenges and opportunities working with this material. Besides a field seminar with students from the University of Basel and the University of Buea, the results will be displayed in photo exhibitions in Switzerland and Cameroon.¹⁰ Students are participating in the exhibition project and a publication. In addition, an international conference will take place in Cameroon, which focuses on sub-Saharan African archives. Schneider and Mazuela emphasized that exhibitions are more than what occurs in controlled spaces such as museums and that historical work obtains multilayered and circular aspects. Exhibitions take on a life of their own which cannot be fully controlled by researchers or organizers.

GIORGIO MIESCHER (Basel) and LORENA RIZZO (Bielefeld/London) presented their research and exhibition project entitled *Photographs beyond ruins – the old location albums of Usakos, 1920s-1960s* that they organize with Tina Smith and Paul Grendon (both Cape Town). While conducting oral history interviews in the Usakos area in Namibia, Miescher and Rizzo encountered four women who owned outstanding photographic collections of the old location. These collections are of outstanding relevance as no photographs of Usakos' old location are

stored in archives and African photographers have not gained much attention in scholarly work. They plan a permanent exhibition in a local museum and a travelling exhibition that will be displayed in southern Africa, Europe and the United States. The latter is expected to encourage engagement with similar private photographic collections elsewhere and initialize a dialogue between old and new photographs of Usakos' old location. Miescher and Rizzo emphasized the circular nature of their research processes and the understanding of research as a journey.

RETO ULRICH (Basel) presented insights into the nature of exhibition making with students as a different form of teaching and learning.¹¹ He elaborated upon how influential the participation in courses that resulted in exhibitions was for him as a student and how he now as a lecturer teaches courses in which the students make exhibitions. According to Ulrich, exhibition courses enable more in depth encounters with the studied material. Students also acquire skills in a variety of fields (e.g. project management, fundraising, design) that are otherwise not taught at universities but are useful for students' further career development.

The workshop was a rare opportunity for historians using similar approaches to reflect on the impact exhibition-making has on the research and writing processes. Additional data in terms of sources or potential exhibits have been gained through such projects (Bryn James, Enrique Martino, Lorena Rizzo/ Giorgio Miescher, Melanie Boehi). Bryn James demonstrated how promising positions such as the researcher in residence at the Manchester Museum are. More of these would allow researchers to apply a similar approach to the workshop participants' in their different projects.¹² Enrique Martino showed

¹⁰Jürg Schneider, Cameroon Photo Press Archives. Protection, conservation, access, Centre for African Studies Basel: <<https://zasb.unibas.ch/research/research-projects/endangered-archives/>> (15.11.2014).

¹¹See e.g. Posters in Action. Swiss-Namibian Cooperation Project on the History of Posters in Namibia, Science & Policy Platform of the Swiss Academy of Sciences: <<http://www.kfpe.ch/projects/echangesuniv/henrichsen.php>> (15.11.2014).

¹²See <<https://researchersinresidence.wordpress.com/category/manchester-museum/>> (17.11.2014).

how academic research can profit from cross-referencing to entire source collections.¹³ The visual sense's dominance in historiography can be challenged by conceptualizing exhibitions addressing different senses allowing to think differently about the past (Tanja Hammel). The Basler Afrika Bibliographien's exhibitions based on journalist Ruth Weiss' sound archives successfully challenged the visual sense's dominance in exhibitions and invited the visitors to reflect on the presentation, use of and research on audio sources (Susanne Hubler Baier/ Anna Voegeli Litelu). In terms of teaching at history departments, it has been shown how exhibition making allows students to acquire skills not usually addressed in courses (Reto Ulrich, Rosario Mazuela/ Jürg Schneider). This workshop did not focus on museum studies, but on how exhibition making on an early stage of a research project in African history enriches research in terms of data, methods, conveyance and interpretation.

Conference Overview:

Session 1

Tanja Hammel (Basel), Bicentenary exhibition(s) on naturalist Mary Elizabeth Barber's (1818-1899) life, work & time

Christian Hunziker (Zurich), August Künzler. Thurgau-Tanzania. A (non-)biographical exhibition

Session 2

Enrique Martino (Berlin), Bits of the Colonial Archive of the Bight of Biafra Online: A Digital Montage of Hyperlinks, Spectres and a Thousand Open Sources

Bryn James (Manchester/London), Exploring African Medicine: Memories, Stories, Materials

Session 3

Christian Ernsten (Amsterdam/Cape Town), Ruins of the alternative futures of Cape Town. Visualizing a counter archive

Melanie Boehi (Basel), Cape Town in the language of flowers

Session 4

Susanne Hubler Baier / Anna Voegeli Litelu (Basel), 'My very first question to you' – Exhibiting the Sound Archives of Journalist Ruth Weiss

Rosario Mazuela / Jürg Schneider (Basel), Was Pandora the guardian? Appropriated visuals from the Press Photo Archives Buea/Cameroon

Session 5

Giorgio Miescher (Basel) / Lorena Rizzo (Bielefeld/London), Photographs beyond ruins – the old location albums of Usakos, 1920s-1960s

Reto Ulrich (Basel), Exhibition projects with student participation: a different form of teaching/learning

„Africa in Basel“ Guided City Tour

Tagungsbericht *Research, Exhibitions and African History*. 25.10.2014, Basel, in: H-Soz-Kult 21.11.2014.

¹³ See footnote 5.