

ART/NATURE. INTERVENTIONS AT THE MUSEUM FÜR NATURKUNDE BERLIN

Edited by Anita Hermannstädter

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INTERVIEW SABINE SCHO

Disrupt or Cooperate?

Justin Time spoke with Sabine Scho, artist in the literature division for the first round of interventions, about the particular challenges of creating artistic work within a natural history museum. Their conversation in March 2018 illuminated the joys and troubles caused by the encounter between the literary world and the museum as well as realisations brought about by this work.

Justin Time: You were one of the first artists to be invited to “intervene” in the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin. As an author, you were thus required to think about your work within a new context which operates differently from that to which you were accustomed. During the project, did it become clear to you what the “white cube” of the art gallery is actually good for once you had to abandon it?

Sabine Scho: Yes, most definitely. In spaces such as those found in the Museum für Naturkunde not everything is possible in the same way it would be in a “white cube” which was specifically intended for art. I always find crossover projects exciting; however, my first visit to the museum was something of a downer for me. I walked through the museum with two people. One had a very positive attitude, while the other was of the opinion, “That won’t work here. This won’t work there or there.” In the end, I thought, “There’s not much left.” I really wanted to put up posters in the Wet Collection; I was told it wouldn’t be possible – fire regulations. It makes sense; the whole thing’s full of alcohol. You initially wouldn’t worry about it coming from the outside. You’re told you have *carte blanche*. Naturally, an ideal situation would be if everything would be allowed like in the times of Anarchitecture and the heyday of conceptual art in the 1970s. Gordon Matta-Clark would come and say, “For a start, I’m going to saw the museum in half”, and everyone would respond, “Great, let’s do it!”

That’s what artists dream of, that you’ll be asked by institutions to provide that little bit of anarchy which remains and which art can still deliver. And then, you realise that today people would like everything to be so much more cooperative. If you’re accustomed to working in these “white cube” situations in which everything is focussed on you alone then the shift is unfamiliar. After the first meeting, I initially felt deflated and thought, “A *carte blanche* sounds fantastic, but I really don’t see it.”

Justin Time: Particularly since a lot had not yet been tested during the first round of the project. You also arrived as a disruptive factor since you interfered with the daily flow of work. That’s a challenge for both sides.

Sabine Scho: That’s like when zoos try to introduce New World monkeys to Old World monkeys – an attempt was made in Münster’s Allwetterzoo. They’re not always instantly friendly when they meet. And naturally, you have your own standards. I want to create something that appears meaningful for me and not just something that appears meaningful for someone else. I was afraid that it could now be expected of me from the natural science side that I would only provide another, better form of mediation for their crucial findings, rendering a kind of artistic service. At first, I withdrew because of that.

With more time and resources on both sides, I would do things differently today – also after the thoroughly positive experience and feedback. But it was, after all, my first time. It was already a challenge that there are many different levels of communication within the institution. Of course, the museum’s staff cannot be asked to stop their



work just to supervise artistic interventions; instead, they have to make time in their diaries to do this and that for the artists: record new audio guides, hang banners in the Dinosaur Hall... In a theatre, it's clear, for example, that the workshops are there for the benefit of the productions and nothing else. In a museum, however, the actual business of exhibitions keeps going, and we appear out of a completely different context with our additional requests.

It became clear to me that I had to create an artistic work and visualise it – outside of a book. And then, it was supposed to be visible in a place which is already filled to the brim. This work went far beyond what I'm accustomed to doing: that is, handing in manuscripts. I had to get budget estimates. I had to find people who could collaborate with me to think about and execute making literature visible in a museum, which I more than succeeded in doing by working with Andreas Töpfer. I had to make decisions which my publisher would usually make. First of all, I did not want to get on anyone's nerves because I sensed that this artistic intervention did not necessarily please everyone in the museum. That being said, I'm not used to having to be considerate of other people when I write. After the many decisions that I usually do not have to make, I became aware of completely different possibilities at the end of the project. That is to say, it was actually good for me to have created a magazine, which I produced entirely according to my own decisions and choices.

Justin Time: To situate art within a natural history museum means to promote new ideas, to establish new aesthetic approaches but also to irritate, scrutinise and provoke discussion in the classical sense of an “intervention”. However, that means that your art will not always be received positively. Instead, because of the resistance it provides, it may trigger conflicts.

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In conversations during the project evaluation, the demand often arose, especially among artists and people in the cultural scene, that art should be a critical, disruptive factor. But it's exhausting to sustain that in the actual situation. In my experience, creating art is a very sensitive affair. It makes you vulnerable because you want people to like and enjoy your work, while at the same time you also want them to confront it critically.

Sabine Scho: With such expectations one is bound to end up between a rock and a hard place. Everyone is dependent on money. Everyone, including the Museum für Naturkunde, wants people to acknowledge that everything “went off without a hitch”. But it's impossible for everyone to say, “Not a problem.” Because we know, that's not the case. We have to admit to ourselves what could be improved next time: for example, make it clear who at the museum even wants to participate and can set time aside for it. As a group, the expectations for the project – which may differ fundamentally – should be expressed openly. And these expectations may and should change during the course of the experiment.

Bert Neumann, the late stage designer of the Volksbühne, said it best after Frieze Art Fair commissioned him to create an intervention: “For one thing, you want it to disrupt. But if it's really disruptive, that's disruptive to you, too. Really, you only want it to appear as if it's disruptive!” But, as an artist, you also make certain that afterwards you won't be legally held responsible to pay for something.

I really wanted to wrap fan scarves printed with my poems around some of the larger stuffed specimens. And then I thought, what sort of damages could a jauntily wrapped scarf cause?! Parasite infestation is always a major fear, and just maybe I'll end up carrying something in. I have a fatalistic streak in me, but I thought, if I destroy one of the specimens, something iconic like Bobby the gorilla or Knut the polar bear, and afterwards they've been ravaged by parasites because of my fan scarves, then I'll be paying for it for the rest of my life. So, naturally, I was cooperative and not confrontational, to save my own neck.

Justin Time: During difficult moments, where did you find the drive to carry on?

Sabine Scho: You need people who will stand by you: curators, as in my case, Cord Riechelmann and people in the museum. You need people who know it's going to be difficult but who go through the process with you and who do it fearlessly. Anita, Yori and Cord were very supportive, simply because they allowed me to do my work. Perhaps, it was helpful that I abandoned my project of "disruption" early on and changed over to a project of "cooperation". As a result, we created a very beautiful exhibition together. That is already a lot, but I think we still owe ourselves a real intervention in which we let ourselves go wild. (*Laughter.*)

Justin Time: Has your manner of expressing yourself changed after your experiences in this unique public space?

Sabine Scho: I first came to poetry with an attitude which was rather dandyishly deprecating of any form of mediation. The playing field of literature is on a stage or in a book. After my experience in the museum, I started thinking of my texts on a larger scale. During discussions of the "Avenidas" text – the controversial poem by writer Eugen Gomringer on the façade of the Alice Salomon University in Berlin – I thought, well, my texts could also be printed large on a wall. Why should only large-scale advertisements for mobile phones hanging on walls catch my eyes? Why not poetry? I wouldn't have thought about that if I hadn't had my experience in the Museum für Naturkunde. Until then, for me, text was something with which you had an intimate relationship in a book. Books are lovely, but some textual forms are definitely suited for public spaces.

Justin Time: How did you deal with the museums' visitors? They were not your typical art and poetry audience.

“There were readers in front of these texts that my poems would probably have never reached.”

Sabine Scho: There were readers in front of these texts that my poems would probably have never reached. I thought that was great. The dance, opera and literary scenes are nothing but a variety of communities that usually stick to their own kind. I think that's very exciting: all kinds of audiences go to natural history museums.

Justin Time: A result of the project, therefore, is having been able to reach an audience that would otherwise not have been involved with art. To me, it seemed that you could feel that an increasing number of people from the art scene were coming to the openings at the Museum für Naturkunde. What relevance did this project have for you?

Sabine Scho: On the one hand, it is about accepting artists within this other context; on the other hand, it is about the art scene's acceptance and taking such places seriously. Both are important. Afterwards, I also exhibited in three additional institutions: the Museum of Zoology at the University of Göttingen; the museum for Westphalian literature at the Kulturgut Haus Nottbeck; and the Sylt Foundation. If my work had remained with the onetime intervention in the Museum für Naturkunde, the literary scene would probably not have shown further interest. The market value of such interventions is still not very high within the art scene. If that were to change and people would see that such museums also buy work, then perhaps the whole thing would gain more weight.

These are questions regarding sustainability. What good does it do for public perception of my work? And these scenes do not just open themselves up so easily. My books are discussed in all the major newspapers, but the magazine – which sells just as well as my books – was not picked up by any of the papers. The poetry scene to which I belong hardly showed up for the opening. It all has to do with territories and defending them, and people may be quick to think that something is being taken from them. They fight themselves into a corner, defending the wrong front, instead of realising that they're winning ground.

Justin Time: How has your work changed since your collaboration with the Museum für Naturkunde?

Sabine Scho: It triggered many things for me. Follow-up projects have developed out of my intervention about the senses of animals, *The Origin of Senses*. I would like to continue the *Origins* series together with Andreas Töpfer and also collaborate with other museums: *The Origin of Values* and perhaps, after that, *The Origin of Language*. The title is based on Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. My current project, *Origin of Values*, concerns the notion of value; again, it has to do with animals and their "exchange values". It can be read on multiple levels. What do people deem to have value in this world? If you think about it, Manhattan was purchased from indigenous people for some beads. Values have to do with interests. Is it about extracting as much profit as possible everywhere? And what is profit, actually?

Justin Time: What is your vision for such projects as *Art/Nature*?

Sabine Scho: I have the feeling that natural history museums have to reinvent themselves for the 21st century. What kind of place do they actually want to be? That's why artists were brought in, because an outsider's point of view was wanted, a point of view that was not scientific, *per se*. Because art approaches things with other but no-less interesting questions than science does. Art asks why the fossilised *Archaeopteryx* essentially strikes a pose that could have been imagined by Vaslav Nijinsky. Then, suddenly, you're in the subject of dance and, in the same moment, you think about the sense of equilibrium of birds because you happen to be in a natural history museum.

“The arts are a kind of bestowal of suspense to want to know more. It doesn’t always have to be right, only interesting.”

You suddenly bring your artistic experiences and associations with those from science together, and you do so far more compellingly than I did previously. Almost inevitably, you arrive at other associations and you delve with relish into scientific research because your curiosity is roused by the site and the specimens. However, there are also reservations about approaching science with an artistic perspective and, of course, your own feeling of not doing it right. Yet, this “not doing it right” can also be greatly liberating, for scientists as well. Sometimes, I also have to jump. So let’s do it right. Run up. Dive bomb. And if you hit the ground, you hit it.

That was something of a concern of mine during the collaboration, that I had to do it right, the silly artist clown. But art is also a place for mistakes in your understanding. That is why art is a link between people, who know something through and through or at least claim they do, and those who are only just becoming familiar with it. It also happens through mistakes and abstruse assumptions in the arts. Otherwise there wouldn’t be so many legends about nature which often contain a kind of truthful insight that you first have to decipher. It is said that where ferns grow, the devil does not sup. That is something of an invitation to interpret nature differently and wonder, “What is meant in this case with the devil, and how do ferns do that, keeping evil at bay?” If you begin your search there, you ultimately end up with scientific insights.

The arts are a kind of bestowal of suspense to want to know more. That is how I understand art. However, it doesn’t always have to be right, only interesting, which isn’t at all easy – being interesting. If I had known what the intervention project implied, I probably would have been disheartened. But that’s the way things often are, too many concerns in anticipation prevent what is actually interesting and imponderable, and even surprising.

Meanwhile, I can say that the intervention makes me very happy, and I thank all those who made it possible. You can’t always just be burdened with worry. The very word! But sometimes you have to throw off this burden.

Monika Rinck

lives in Berlin. Since 1989, she has published several books with a number of publishing houses. Her most recent book of poetry *HONIGPROTOKOLLE. Sieben Skizzen zu Gedichten, welche gut sind*, came out in 2012, for which she was awarded the Peter-Huchel-Preis 2013. This was followed by the collection of essays *RISIKO UND IDIOTIE. Streitschriften*, in 2015. Rinck is a member of the PEN Club, the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, and the Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung, Darmstadt. In 2015, Rinck was awarded the Kleist-Preis. She translates, most notably with Orsolva Kalász, from Hungarian, she cooperates with musicians and composers, and she teaches from time to time.

Sabine Scho

now resides in Berlin after living in São Paulo (2006–2014). Nearly all of her texts are situated on the threshold with photography and images. Her books *Album. Gedichte/Fotos und Farben. Gedichte* (both 2008), *Tiere in Architektur. Texte und Fotos* (2013) and *The Origin of Senses: An Intervention* (Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, 2015) have been published by kookbooks, Berlin. Her most recent awards include the 2012 Anke Bennholdt-Thomsen-Lyrikpreis from the Deutsche Schillerstiftung, the Crossing Borders grant of the Robert Bosch Stiftung and a travelling grant from the Kunststiftung NRW in 2018, the German Awards for Nature writing 2018, and a scholarship from the Deutsche Akademie Rom Villa Massimo for 2019–2020. Guest professorship at Deutsches Literaturinstitut Leipzig for 2018–2019.

Dr Susanna Schulz

read ethnology and American studies at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main, the University of California, Berkeley, and the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City. In 2015, Tectum Verlag, Baden-Baden, published her doctoral thesis *Von Guadalupe bis Guggenheim. Kulturmanagement in Mexiko als Identitätsstifter*. She has held positions at the Alte Oper Frankfurt, the Goethe-Institut in Mexico City, the cultural office of Guadalajara, Mexico, the Staatstheater Darmstadt, the Enjoy Jazz Festival, the Oper Köln in Cologne, Radialsystem in Berlin and for the *Art/Nature* project of the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin. In journalism, she has worked for the cultural television programme *Kulturzeit* (3sat), the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and Austria's Österreichischer Rundfunk, among others.

Serotonin

is a sound art duo made up of the writer Marie-Luise Goerke and the audio engineer and composer Matthias Pusch, who create fictional and documentary works in their own studio radiophone. They are known for the aesthetic range and originality of their numerous radio dramas and artistic features (e.g., the programme about Freeter in Japan, *Heimatlos – Tokios digitale Tagelöhner*, Norddeutscher, Westdeutscher and Süddeutscher Rundfunk with Deutschlandradio). They are also known for their performances in urban settings (e.g., *Buddenbroichs. Oder die Angst der Mittelschicht vor dem Abstieg*, Westdeutscher Rundfunk), numerous audio books and sound and spatial installations (e.g., *Audio Guide Special – Story Lines*, Humboldt Lab Dahlem, Berlin, and the Kölnischer Kunstverein in Cologne).

Justin Time

Stonemason, artist and film maker. After his apprenticeship as a mason, he embarked on a three-year tour through Europe before studying sculpture at the Weißensee Kunsthochschule Berlin and urban studies at the San Francisco Art Institute. His films and multimedia installations often stem from interviews and examine that which is seemingly “normal” within contexts of space and social dynamics. Since 2014, he is a member of Lernkultur – Institut für Bildungsforschung und Evaluation.

Andreas Töpfer

Freelance graphic designer, illustrator and drawing artist. He works for the Berlin publisher kookbooks which he founded in 2003 together with poet and editor Daniela Seel. Besides other previous positions, he worked as art director, designer and illustrator for the Canadian magazine *Adbusters* and is currently visual editor, designer and illustrator for the Norwegian literature and culture magazine *Vagant*. Currently he works at milchhof: atelier in Berlin.

Dr Mareike Vennen

read cultural studies, Romance languages and theatre studies at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, the Freien Universität zu Berlin and the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris. Her doctoral thesis, *Das Aquarium. Praktiken, Techniken und Medien der Wissensproduktion (1840–1910)* (Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen 2018), examines the history of knowledge and media history of European aquariums in the 19th century. She is currently working at the Institut für Kunstwissenschaften und Historische Urbanistik at the Technische Universität Berlin as a postdoctoral fellow. There, she is researching in the joint project “Dinosaurs in Berlin” about the museum and popular histories of these natural science objects. Her research interests cover media and intellectual histories within natural history, collection and museum histories as well as environmental history and cultural animal studies.

Dr Anna-Lena Wenzel

read cultural studies at the Leuphana Universität Lüneburg and wrote her doctoral thesis on *Grenzüberschreitungen in der Gegenwartskunst. Ästhetische und philosophische Positionen* (transcript Verlag, Bielefeld 2011). Between 2010 and 2013, she was a collaborator in the research project “Urban Interventions” at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste Hamburg, after which she has worked as a freelance writer. Since 2014, she is a member of Lernkultur – Institut für Bildungsforschung und Evaluation.

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Susanna Schulz

A Passion for Natural History Museums

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Cord Riechelmann

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Editor / Project Management

Anita Hermannstädter, Museum für Naturkunde Berlin

Text and Photographic Editors

Anita Hermannstädter / Susanna Schulz, Museum für Naturkunde Berlin

Editorial Support

Ronja Drews / Yori Schultka / Jule Stange, Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, and Patricia Newman

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Sonja Kreft, Museum für Naturkunde Berlin

Production Consultant

Thomas Schmid-Dankward

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