

ART/NATURE. INTERVENTIONS AT THE MUSEUM FÜR NATURKUNDE BERLIN

Edited by Anita Hermannstädter

KULTURSTIFTUNG
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BERLIN

 BRAUS



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Beware of Interdisciplinary Ambitions!

Cord Riechelmann

The title of my paper comprises a rejection or a refusal. It is the refusal of interdisciplinarity. I participated in the *Art/Nature* interventions as curator responsible for projects involving poetry and literature. Poetry has little or nothing in common with verifiable statistical methods. Poetry does not need to navigate through technical jargon intended to facilitate exchanges between colleagues. Conversely, writing a scholarly publication in the natural sciences no longer requires a particularly pronounced feel for language. This is a dramatic change when compared to Darwin's times. Today, displaying a feeling for language could even be an obstacle; it might slow down young researchers who have to assert themselves in an ever increasing fast-paced publishing environment.

In short, if poetry and art are to be welcomed into natural history museums, it is best to renounce all aspirations of interdisciplinary approaches. In this context, an interdisciplinary approach is of help to no one. Obviously, this does not mean that artists and scientists should not engage with the same objects, whether they are snakes, stones or sperm whales. Nor does it mean that they cannot do so at the same time. Both can draw on their respective tools and resources to investigate snakes, stones and sperm whales in order to elicit new discoveries, to provoke responses we have not heard before.

Precisely because art, unlike science, is not obliged to study the functions and mechanisms of life and such processes, new and surprising results can be produced. Art does not need to seek refuge in the strict distinction between subject and object and the relations between them, with the apodictic pronouncement that subjects are not objects and, therefore, do not fall within the remit of science. As the writer Monika Rinck showed, art can raise the issue of whether objects might not be insufficiently described subjects after all. She asks whether the objects of science and of commerce, or the objects of everyday life such as knives and forks, whether all these objects are in reality subjects that have not, as yet, been recognised as such. Scholars in scientific fields of study, including Donna Haraway, Karen Barad and Bruno Latour, have long wondered about this. And they all agree that art constitutes a domain in which objects can have a go at being subjects, where objects can try out what it is like to be subjects.

Do we have to imagine stones as being thinking entities? Yes, perhaps. The mineral collection of a natural history museum would arguably not be the worst place for such speculations. It was in the mineral exhibition that Monika Rinck's office of lost property could be inspected. Her work posed seemingly simple questions. From what do objects, lost and found, derive their value? Who imbues them with value? What objects do we pick up? What objects do we leave behind? What objects do we not even consider worthy of picking up? Of course, these are very much the same questions that preoccupy people working in natural history museums when they have to decide upon acquiring minerals, fossils or stuffed elephants for inclusion in their collection. And later, there are other questions. Should these objects be put on display, should they be placed in the archive or is it time to discard them altogether? As a writer, Monika Rinck wonders whether it is possible to lose and find words. This is anything but a trite matter, as anyone desperately searching for a word that will simply not come to mind knows.

COMMENTARY



This is one of the effects that Monika Rinck's office of lost property could have on audiences, which, if they so wished, could become actors in their own right. But rather than sticking to general remarks, I would like to explore the interplay between words – i. e., language – and reality, between a species of lizard, called the checkered whiptail, and Karen Barad. I will also call upon the example of Niels Bohr, who won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1922.

Whiptail lizards live in the dry areas covering much of the southeast of Colorado and Texas as well as the north of Mexico. Vegetation in these habitats is sparse. Up to the 1960s, whiptail lizards either escaped efforts at systematic biological classification or were completely ignored by science. The reason for this was straightforward enough. This species of lizards, grouped in the genus bearing the Latin name *Aspidoscelis*, is comprised entirely of females. There are no males. In this way, the lizards spare themselves the endless hassles linked to the division of life into different sexes. They must only make sure they find enough to eat, and they need to be careful not to get devoured. That is about it. They reproduce through what is called parthenogenesis, a form of asexual reproduction that does not involve fertilisation. The lizards, thus, reproduce without impoverishing their genetic code through change, which was long suspected to be a drawback of parthenogenesis.

It would not be an exaggeration to assume that the late surge of interest in the existence and behaviour of the whiptail lizards profoundly reflects upon our preconceptions with these existential issues. Karen Barad draws some consequential conclusions as to how the history of the natural sciences should be written. It is no longer enough to make neat separations between the observing subject and the observed objects in nature. No observer, regardless of sex and gender, can rule out that the objects of nature begin to experiment at precisely the moment the observer sets up her or his experiment and calibrates the instruments and measuring devices. According to Barad, the distinction between subject and object will not get us very far here. Or, to quote the poet Alice Fulton, "Nothing will unfold for us unless we move toward what/looks to us like nothing: faith is a cascade." Moving toward what looks to us like nothing was one of the key intentions of Monika Rinck's work in the mineral gallery of the Museum für Naturkunde. More generally, this impetus is valid for all work wishing to introduce art into natural history museums. These works must fix their gaze on what seems like nothing; they must sharpen their sense of the productivity of paradoxes.

And this is where I would like to mention a few words about Niels Bohr. When a visitor once came to Bohr's home and noticed a horseshoe hanging above the entrance, he asked the Nobel Prize-winning physicist if he really believed horseshoes brought good luck. "Of course not," Bohr replied, "but they say it helps even if you don't believe in it."

Bohr, one of the greatest scientists of the 20th century, chose not to deprive the paradox of ambiguity. By doing so, he presents himself as a realist as far as human affairs are concerned. The illusion of how a horseshoe hung above a door can bring luck continues to be effective long after it has been debunked as an illusion. But there is a far-reaching implication to this insight: positivism can never fully explain the world as long as it refuses to acknowledge that indeterminacy, undecidability and paradox form part of what might be called the "world", "nature" or "the things out there".

Unambiguousness and absence of contradiction, the eternal demands of science, can only be established temporarily, within a certain space of time, in a given context and under specific conditions. This is the lesson Bohr drew from his insight into the paradoxical nature of the world. In other words, the characteristic descriptions of the natural sciences do not refer to entities that exist independently of the act of observation nor do they refer to immutable objects. Rather, they are specific and, ideally, precisely construed encounters – Barad also speaks of “entanglements” – between the phenomenon and the observer. These encounters are made possible by measuring devices. They refer to a moment and a place where matter and signification meet.

Barad argues that Bohr’s insight undermines, above all, those concepts that consider reality as something either more primordial to be a language or as something outside of language. She summarises one of the key tenets of her doctrine of entanglements as follows: “What is being described is our participation within nature”. Traditionally, philosophy has accustomed us to the idea that language is something secondary, while reality is the primary dimension. For Bohr and Barad, this is an insufficient account of the relationship between language and reality. They reject the idea that reality, not language, is the more fundamental dimension that underlies and grounds language. In this account, language would be a mere mirror, a reflection of reality. Bohr begs to differ. He wrote that “We are suspended in language in such a way that we cannot say what is up and what is down. The word ‘reality’ is also a word, a word which we must learn to use correctly”.

The correct use of words in their encounter with stones, snakes, gorillas, minerals, tissues as well as other words and gestures, this is what Monika Rinck’s lost and found was about. This is also what the earlier interventions by the poet Sabine Scho and the graphic artist Andreas Töpfer were about. I for one think that the whole point of poetic and literary interventions in natural history museums is to work on representations of the paradoxical realities of objects but also to be self-reflexive about the use of language in a scientific environment. To conclude and to illustrate this point, I would like to quote a poem by Scho entitled “snakes”.

snakes

**synaesthetic nonsense
or how they can see heat
they keep to the ditches
with their thousands of
temperature-sensitive cells**

**drive into the snake's head
what you see there
is immediately shining
projects the colouring of the seventies
onto the same area as everything
you could visit and presents
itself to the snake in space
in the shape of a lava lamp**

**do you remember *kaa*
and your lover's climate map
booty whose jaw you dislocated
burning your own palate
do you remember, ya?**

**moulting means growth
growth means explosion
of forms overcome**

**the whole arrangements
splitting its sides
overstuffed with heat images
sycophantic for art, digging up each
signature in the fish run
cloaca spores instead of back legs
halting the prelude to coupling**

Anita Hermannstädter

Historian and exhibition curator. Since 2012, she is head of the department of cultural studies PAN – Perspectives on Nature at the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin as well as the pilot project *Art/Nature* (2014–2018). She was co-editor of the catalogue *Wissensdinge. Geschichten aus dem Naturkundemuseum* (Nicolai Verlag, Berlin 2015). Before that, she was coordinator for the theme of the year, “Evolution in Nature, Technology and Culture” at the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften and research associate at the Hermann von Helmholtz-Zentrum für Kulturtechnik at the Humboldt- Universität zu Berlin and the Ethnologisches Museum – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

Klara Hobza

studied at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste München in Munich; Columbia University, New York; and the Rogue Film School, Los Angeles. She is based in Berlin. Her works included *Die Schlickschlacht zu Schillig* (2016), *Die große Basler Gipfelbergung* (2014), *Moving with Fervour into Moments of Levity* (2012), *Diving through Europe* (2010 – presumably 2035), *Nay I'll Have a Starling* (since 2006) and *Paper Airplanes* (since 2004). Her autobiography is a conceptual self-portrait; she wrote the preliminary version in 2012 from the perspective of 2066, ten years after her death.

Brandon Kilbourne (PhD)

is an evolutionary morphologist specialising in mammals, though his previous work has also included dinosaurs and birds. His work focuses on using museum specimens to understand how skeletal and muscle anatomy, particularly of limbs, relates to the function of vertebrates in their environment. To this end, he was originally trained in biological engineering, through which he learned principles of engineering theory and physics. His doctoral studies at the University of Chicago further trained him in evolutionary biology, and for his thesis he studied how the size and shape of mammalian limbs may potentially influence the cost of locomotion. He now works at the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin.

Prof. Dr Petra Lange-Berndt

Chair for Modern and Contemporary Art, Kunstgeschichtliches Seminar, Universität Hamburg as well as a freelance curator (e. g., *Mark Dion: The Academy of Things*, Kunstakademie, Albertinum, and Grünes Gewölbe – Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, 2014–2015). In books such as *Animal Art. Präparierte Tiere in der Kunst, 1850–2000* (Verlag Silke Schreiber, Munich 2009), she researched the natural history complex in relation to contemporary art. Her writing has especially focused on the politics connected to materiality (*Materiality*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2015). Lange-Berndt's current research is investigating collectivity and communal living.

Dr Carsten Lüter

Curator of Marine Invertebrates at the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin since 2001. After reading biology and completing his doctoral thesis at the Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, he worked there and at the Universität Bielefeld as an associate researcher. A one-year postdoctoral fellowship followed at the University of Glasgow. For his research, Lüter has worked internationally, including in Sweden, Israel, Australia, New Zealand and Namibia and is a regular participant on national and international cooperative projects on ship expeditions to research deep-sea biodiversity.

Augustin Maurs

French musician and composer who combines conceptual, performative and collaborative practices, often transporting the musical experience outside the field of music. He studied at the Conservatoire de Paris, the Hochschule für Musik Detmold and the Hochschule für Musik “Hanns Eisler” in Berlin. He is the founder of the project platform written-not-written and lives in Berlin.

Dr Clara Meister

works internationally as a curator. In 2012, she headed the exhibition space MINI/Goethe-Institut Curatorial Residencies Ludlow 38, New York. Meister is co-founder and curator of the exhibition collective SOUNDFAIR. In 2014, She curated the German-wide first solo show of the French artist Camille Henrot at the Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin, and as part of the official programme of a performative project for Marrakech Biennale MB5. Her doctoral thesis about voice and language in art was published in 2018 by Edition Metzler, Munich. Since 2018, she is a curatorial collaborator at the Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin.

PD Dr Michael Ohl

read biology, philosophy and science history at the Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel and the Georg-August-Universität Göttingen. Since 1997, he has been active in multiple roles at the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, currently as Curator of Neuropterida, Deputy Head of the science programme Collection Development and Biodiversity Discovery, and Head of the Center for Integrative Biodiversity Discovery. In his book *Die Kunst der Benennung* (Matthes & Seitz, Berlin 2015), he discusses the joys of taxonomy and the significance of labels in natural history collections.

Elizabeth Price (PhD)

was born in Bradford, England, read art history at the Ruskin School of Art at the University of Oxford as well as the Royal College of Art, London, and wrote her doctoral thesis at the University of Leeds. In 2012, she was awarded the prestigious Turner Prize and the Paul Hamlyn Award. Among her most recent works are *A RESTORATION* (2016) at the Ashmolean Museum in collaboration with the Pitt Rivers Museum, both in Oxford, and the exhibition *In a Dream You Saw a Way to Survive and You Were Full of Joy* (2016–2017). Price lives and works in London.

Mark Ravenhill

read drama and English at the University of Bristol; a freelance director, he also spent several years as the literary director of the Paines Plough theatre company in London. Following its premier, his first full-length play *Shopping and Fucking* was sold out for weeks in London's West End and went on to become a worldwide success. Besides plays, adaptations, radio dramas and scripts, he also writes for *The Guardian*.

Cord Riechelmann

Author, philosopher and biologist. He is known for his columns in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and his books *Bestiarium. Der Zoo als Welt – die Welt als Zoo* (Die Andere Bibliothek|Eichborn, Frankfurt am Main 2003) and *Wilde Tiere in der Großstadt* (Nicolai Verlag, Berlin 2004). He is also the author of the encyclopaedia *Die Stimmen der Tiere*, available on CD, which includes commentary by Hanns Zischler. In 2013, Matthes & Seitz, Berlin, published his book *Krähen. Ein Portrait* as part of its *Naturkunden* series. Riechelmann was Curator for Literature in the *Art/Nature* project.

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Susanna Schulz

A Passion for Natural History Museums

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Justin Time

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Ariane Berthoin Antal

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Clara Meister and Afif Office

Doomsday amongst Dinosaurs

A video clip of the performance is available online: <https://doi.org/10.7479/b34k-dk1k>

Among those people and artists who participated in the intervention were *The Last Ensemble* under the musical direction of Augustin Maurs with special guests Ricardo Frenzel Baudisch (tenor), Katharina Schrade (soprano), Sarah van der Kemp (soprano), Yuka Yanagihara (soprano) and Ni Fan (percussion). The members of *The Last Ensemble* are Martin Åkesson, Audrey Andrieu, Katharina Beckmann, Nina Berclaz, Cornelius von Bernstorff, Oliver Coleman, Sarah Darwin, Helga Dittmann-Pätsch, Guillaume Doerflinger, Philothée Gaymard, Cornelia Hiller, Hervé Humbert, Sam Kennedy, Cosima zu Knyphausen, Katharina Kritzler, Rüdiger Mangel, Sigrun Meyer, Alberto Piu, Antonio Piu, Cathia Ruf, Marilena Stano and Renate Wolf.

Gaby Hartel

Poetic Echo Chamber: An Intervention in the Hall of Birds

Those who participated in the sound poem were Jule Böwe, Patrick Güldeberg, Irm Hermann, Janusz Kocaj, Cristin König, Bettina Kurth, Shaun Lawton, Klaus Manchen, Friedhelm Ptok and Tatja Seibt (voices); Anna Seibt (assistant director); Hermann Leppich and Susanne Beyer (sound technicians). The piece was produced in cooperation with Deutschlandradio Kultur.

Citation, p. 62: Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time*, London 2018, p. 98.



COLOPHON

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