

ART/NATURE. INTERVENTIONS AT THE MUSEUM FÜR NATURKUNDE BERLIN

Edited by Anita Hermannstädter

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 BRAUS



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“These processes should incorporate a great deal of communication.”

Anna-Lena Wenzel talked to art historian Petra Lange-Berndt about artistic interventions and her experiences as a curator during the conference *Art/Nature: Contemporary Art in Natural History Museums and Collections* in June 2017.

Anna-Lena Wenzel: You have been engaged with art exhibitions in natural history museums for a long time now.

Petra Lange-Berndt: Yes, I wrote my doctoral thesis about artists who practice taxidermy themselves and challenge the materiality of these objects. That fascinates me profoundly, and to this day, the subject as well as its institutional context are a part of my engagement with related artistic processes and strategies. In addition, I curated an exhibition in Dresden with Mark Dion: *The Academy of Things*. The show took place at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste (Academy of Fine Arts) in Dresden, the Albertinum museum and the baroque treasury, the Grünes Gewölbe.

Anna-Lena Wenzel: That means, you're also aware of the curatorial perspective on the collaboration between artists and natural history museums. What are the challenges in such a process?

Petra Lange-Berndt: First of all, these processes should incorporate a great deal of communication. During such interdisciplinary projects, the curatorial team performs an elaborate job as mediator. That responsibility shouldn't be underestimated.

Anna-Lena Wenzel: It is a classic situation within institutions that in some cases there is a routine that has persisted for decades and then something unexpected happens and ...

Petra Lange-Berndt: ... there's a skirmish over power or responsibilities. Particularly in projects that approach a single topic from different perspectives, you may find yourself at cross purposes, where people talk past each other ever so slightly. In my opinion, for instance, many examples of taxidermy are more than just cultural objects, but for some taxidermists the word “art” is extremely problematic because this group – according to their professional ethics – are showcasing “nature”. So, there are always moments in which misunderstandings arise. It can be another world ...

Anna-Lena Wenzel: ... and another language.

Petra Lange-Berndt: And also, there may be another interest about what *things* can or should achieve. Some researchers working within natural history museums have expressed an anxiety that when natural history museums open themselves to projects such as *Art/Nature* they risk becoming art museums, institutions of which there are plenty and which are linked to a very particular economy.

Anna-Lena Wenzel: We observed amidst the visitors to the exhibition *Art/Nature* in the Museum für Naturkunde that some of them had a real fear of the unknown when it came to art.

INTERVIEW
PETRA LANGE-BERNDT



Petra Lange-Berndt: But I don't understand every display either in the Museum für Naturkunde straightaway. Why should everything be accessible without a little effort? Why can't we present something slightly enigmatic, a little inscrutable, something that poses questions, something that could be the reason for coming back one more time or for reading a text?

**“We do not need still more visitors.
Instead, we need an intensive intellectual examination
of the displays within the public collection.”**

Anna-Lena Wenzel: Although, inhibitions do not necessary arise because something is not understood. Rather, it arises when something is explicitly labelled as being *art*.

Petra Lange-Berndt: That is related to the fact that the Museum für Naturkunde is a specific space with its very own dynamics. The feeling of inhibition possibly indicates that art calls for another mode of perception and precisely this discrepancy should be discussed when mediating. Incidentally, within this context, I don't believe that we need more “blockbuster objects” or “grand gestures” as Neil MacGregor stated earlier.

We do not need still more visitors. Instead, we need an intensive intellectual examination of the displays within the public collection. I sooner see the possibility for this in small or ephemeral interventions which selectively challenge something without masking the fascination of the natural history artefacts being exhibited. This should always be about a collaboration between artist, curator and museum.

Anna-Lena Wenzel: What do you think of the term, “intervention”?

Petra Lange-Berndt: I believe it is good, but it was stated correctly during today's discussion that an intervention really needs to hurt. That means, it can only intervene in something in which there has been no consensus.

Anna-Lena Wenzel: During the conference, it was also discussed that there is a danger that by inviting artists the task of examining one's own institution and critically confronting its history would be passed on or ceded to the artists. As a curator yourself, what do you think of that?

Petra Lange-Berndt: To draw back as a curator and relinquish the responsibilities of investigating complex associations and the task of finding aesthetic solutions for open discussion, completely relinquishing these responsibilities to the artists would indeed be problematic. In such a case, the necessary dialogue between the various cultures and with the institution would never arise. These interventions are precisely about making dialogue possible and sustaining those conversations. That is part of a curator's responsibilities.

Anna-Lena Wenzel: I keep asking myself, since when have there actually been artistic interventions in natural history museums? Today, the notion of the *Wunderkammer* kept arising, of the cabinet of curiosities.

These cabinets of curiosities combined an array of diverse objects, so I think this tradition must already be very old. At the same time, one always acts as if such combinations are something completely new. What does the art historian say?

Petra Lange-Berndt: In the time of the *Wunderkammer*, public museums still did not exist. In addition, these collections arose within very specific social and economical strata. Because of that, in regard to your question, I would begin after the French Revolution. Early artistic reflections regarding the objects within collections can be found among the Surrealists. These artists grappled extensively with natural science institutions and the period in which they were founded.

Nevertheless, this art did not yet find a direct way into natural history museums; the criticism was expressed conceptually from spaces dedicated to art. In 1936, for instance, a group exhibition was held in the Paris gallery of Charles Ratton. Among the displays, natural objects such as an ostrich egg, various minerals, the photograph of a preserved starfish and a stuffed anteater could be seen. In this way, there was an intense examination of the hierarchy and ordering of things in the bourgeois museum of the 18th and 19th centuries as well as in the French colonies. The collections that came before were organised in a completely different manner; despite that, artists still have a great fascination with the *Wunderkammer*.

Anna-Lena Wenzel: I think that is an important point. To be invited to this museum as people from outside means the artists come and work with the natural science institution and its staff, if they agree to do so. But it's seldom the case that the natural scientists want something in return from the artists. How would it be the other way round?

Petra Lange-Berndt: That's a good question. How do researchers, whose field of study is meteorites or zoology, actually profit from these collaborations? Is there an exchange? The principal curator of the insect collection at the Natural History Museum in London, Gavin Broad, comes to mind as a positive example. He worked closely with the artist Tessa Farmer and was recently given a research grant only because Tessa had accompanied him as an "embedded artist" during an excursion to Chile. That gives one hope that there are impulses in multiple directions.

Anna-Lena Wenzel: It is interesting to see what actually happens at the level of knowledge production. Otherwise, the picture persists that both sides are working hard on their own but nothing arises out of collaboration. During the third round of interventions for *Art/Nature*, a conversation was held between the artist Klara Hobza and biologist Esther Ullrich-Lüter. It was very beautiful because the picture of science was slightly revised and showed that both careers have a lot to do with passion and experimentation – that is to say, art and science are closer than many often think.

Petra Lange-Berndt: I couldn't agree more. And, as was said, artists have been questioning these connections for a considerably longer time than we in art history or cultural studies, in my opinion. I am interested in what the people who make art discuss in their works. Since they do not always investigate the most current developments in the natural sciences yet question the displays of public collections, this can occasionally lead to a reflection on issues that contemporary scientists might find dated.

It is often the case that contemporary art is concerned with history and not necessarily that which is currently happening. This should also be reflected in programmes such as *Art/Nature*.

“Presumably, we will soon need a university course about curating in natural history museums.”

Anna-Lena Wenzel: Do you have the feeling that there is a scientific community which is posing these questions.

Petra Lange-Berndt: Yes, most certainly. When I submitted my doctoral thesis in 2005, it seemed to me that taxidermic animals as a material for art making held an important if unique place. In the meantime, an extremely lively scene has developed and continues to grow. Presumably, we will soon need a university course about curating in natural history museums. This field requires its very own strategies and discussions – combined with extensive knowledge of art theory, history and practice.

Another important question would be about how knowledge is generated through artistic and curatorial practices, which is not necessarily set down in written language. What languages will be spoken by the various protagonists? How can we communicate with one another? The histories of science and art, curatorial debates and the relative natural science disciplines confront each other in these questions. All of these histories and disciplines would have to come together in a meaningful way. And that is difficult and cannot be achieved without conflicts.

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.

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 and 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.



COLOPHON

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