Greeting

The Humboldt Lab Dahlem was a project of the Kulturstiftung des Bundes (German Federal Cultural Foundation) in cooperation with the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation). It developed new forms of presenting artefacts of the Ethnologisches Museum (Ethnological Museum) and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst (Asian Art Museum) of the Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin (National Museums in Berlin) in Dahlem for the planned Humboldt-Forum in Berlin-Mitte. The experiment began with the question of how objects accommodated in a museum can open up new perspectives on our globalized present. In its search for solutions, the Humboldt Lab Dahlem therefore collaborated with scholars, custodians, curators, and artists. The results were regularly presented in so-called "Probebühnen" during the opening hours of the museum. In this manner, the Humboldt Lab Dahlem provided stimuli for dealing with the current challenges of presentation and mediation that are also posed to other museums in Germany and Europe.

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[Open] Secrets / Teaser

Sacred and arcane objects have always held an immense fascination for museum visitors and anthropologists; their prevalence in museum collections everywhere shows how powerfully they attract us. Many of them are hidden away deep inside museum storage rooms. In the source countries, only certain people in certain situations would ever have been permitted to see or touch them. How can a museum display such items? Who decides what should remain concealed? The "[Open] Secrets" project was an attempt to find an answer to this key question, which lies at the very heart of what ethnological museums do. A complex exhibition architecture created by studio TheGreenEyl (re)presented showing/not-showing; here, the boundary between sacred and profane was seen as political, contingent upon a specific time and space.

[Open] Secrets / Project Description

On the Possibilities (or Impossibility) of Displaying Secret Knowledge

by Indra Lopez Velasco

Within their vast collections, ethnological museums hold many sacred and secret objects. In the places from where these objects originated, only certain people in certain situations would be permitted to see or touch them and for some objects, access would be strictly regulated. The question of how contemporary ethnological museums may address sacred and secret items in their collections formed the starting point for the "[Open] Secrets" project.

The complexities of the topic of the sacred and the profane are evident in the denomination as "sacred objects." Some of them possess the status of a person, so that it may be understood as inappropriate and offensive to call them "objects." Being part of the museum praxis may also affect them in different ways; their meanings may persist, they may lose their significance, or they may change.

The early ethnological museums were aware – at least in some cases – of the complexity and sensitivity of their tasks. This is illustrated by a museum guidebook published by the Museum of Victoria in 1900 ("Guide to the Australian Ethnological Collection in the National Museum of Victoria") displayed in the "[Open] Secrets" exhibition. This awareness, however, did not, or not sufficiently, result in a practice of display that is today regarded as both respectful and appropriate.

"[Open] Secrets" ascertained whether ethnological museums are at all able to engage with the sacred. We understood the borders between the sacred and the profane as fluid, political, time dependent and situative. This constructivist approach was not intended to deny the peculiar character of the sacred. Rather, we searched for ways of exhibiting that consider a variety of perspectives.

Experimental Approaches

The exhibition was divided into two specific regional areas: Central Australia and Sepik, New Guinea. From the Sepik region, several musical instruments, the sounds of which embody the voices and songs of the ancestors, were displayed/not-displayed. These instruments were played at secret ceremonies. In the course of these ceremonies, the initiates, stage by stage, gained access to the instruments. Described in a simplified way, they were first only permitted to hear the instruments; then to see them played; then, finally, they were permitted to both produce and play the instruments themselves.

The exhibited human remains, in the form of bones, teeth and hair, were from the Sepik region as well. In their initial context, they were worn or carried in the everyday life and were at least partially visible to others. However, this does not mean that they were less significant. In contrast to these openly visible objects and human remains, the Central Australian Tjurunga – mostly flat stones or pieces of wood, bearing signs or symbols with high sacred relevance – were and are secret and sacred for people who believe in them.

The Berlin studio, TheGreenEyl, translated the idea of a gradual initiation into an experimental exhibition architecture, where different kinds of glass cabinets were used to play with the idea of making objects visible or invisible. As visitors entered the exhibition, they first encountered an empty cabinet with a sign stating "Object removed"; followed by another cabinet that was black and opaque. On both, only the labels referred to the object supposedly being exhibited: the Tjurunga from Central Australia. The black cabinet referred indirectly to the existence of the objects in the museum storerooms, and hinted playfully at the fact that only the curators knew what was really behind the opaque glass. We saw this as a reference to the curator´s authority, a question that has long been a subject for discussion in the museum sector.

Visitors initially encountered the Sepik musical instruments via an open cabinet, from which only the sounds of the instruments could be heard. Corresponding to the various steps of an initiation process, the neighboring cabinet permitted the visitor to briefly see the instruments before they vanished again behind an opaque pane of glass. In the final stage, visitors were able to fully see and hear the instruments via a video projection that showed excerpts of the initiation ritual.

The "[Open] Secrets" project was accompanied by a research trip to various Australian cities. The results of this trip were to be integrated into the exhibition in two cabinets displaying changing texts, maps and other materials; in this way referring the visitors to contemporary museum discourses and attempting to place historical and current perspectives into context.

Who Decides, and Who Doesn't?

The project principally negotiated the question of who decides what is to be shown and what is hidden. By asking this, it tested various ways of exhibiting both the poles between what is to be shown and what is undemonstrable, as well as the many shades of the sacred. To discuss these and other questions in a wider context, we organized a public workshop as part of the project.

The project and workshop explored in particular the issue of who decides what should and should not be shown, and once again brought this important debate into the focus of museum discussions. Insufficiently addressed, however, were current perspectives that potentially go beyond the dichotomy between profane and sacred. Furthermore, the discussions about what might be shown did not take place between museum visitors, the people from the regions from where these objects originated and the curators. In order to enable such an exchange, which permits a both open (in terms of being transparent about what is possible and what one's aims are) as well as protected discourse (in terms of how power is distributed), long-term cooperations are necessary. Such processes require not only adequate personnel and financial resources, but must also be

institutionally anchored in a manner that permits both experimentation and failure. This attitude, which presupposes openness and sensitivity with respect to unequal power relations, is to be hoped for in many areas at the Humboldt-Forum.

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[Open] Secrets / Positions

Relational Secrets

by Anita Herle

Melanesian Techniques of Concealment and Revelation. On the Benefits of Anthropological Research for Curatorial Practice

Museum audiences and the discipline of anthropology have a long history of fascination with secrecy and sacred knowledge, as exemplified by the many studies of secret societies and initiation rituals, as well as the vast numbers of related objects in museum collections. The Humboldt Lab Dahlem project "[Open] Secrets" prompts us to consider the potential of displaying sacred objects in a museum and experiments with different mediums and processes through which secret/sacred objects might be made visible. Drawing on collaborative work with Torres Strait Islanders and other colleagues in the Pacific this article briefly explores Melanesian techniques of concealment and revelation and compares them with the processes of museum display. What are the 'secrets' that are being revealed and to whom? How can anthropological research best inform curatorial practice?

In the Torres Strait, as elsewhere in Melanesia, there is a propensity for particular forms of knowledge to be owned, restricted and selectively distributed. The process of concealing and then revealing arcane knowledge, often as part of a performance or ritual, has tremendous efficacy and dramatic presence, which imbues people and objects with power and produces a heightened emotional response. It is not just material objects that are used to contain and transmit secret knowledge, but associated stories, dances, music, bodily decorations and landscapes. These typically refer to an ancestral past and are managed through complex systems of rights and responsibilities linked to genealogical precedence, gender and personal disposition. Secret knowledge is not an intrinsic property – it is created and maintained through social relations.

Different levels of knowledge are contained within, and mobilized through, objects and performances, often simultaneously for different audiences. Knowledge is nested, and the delineation between the secular and the sacred is porous, variable and context dependent. For example, Torres Strait Islanders are well-known for their elaborate choreographed dances which incorporate hand-held 'dance machines,' articulated ornaments which refer to elements of the natural world such as stars or sea creatures. Performed for both secular and ceremonial occasions, dances are linked to particular stories, totems, places and events. Members of the audience readily recognize certain elements of the performance but relatively few understand the esoteric or 'inside' knowledge that may also be referenced. In other cases people may be privy to secret knowledge but do not have the right to speak about it.

Sacred objects in themselves are not necessarily secret and the same object may be deemed sacred and/or secret in one context and not in another. In many areas of Melanesia, powerful objects are sacrificed, destroyed, discarded or sold to outsiders once they have fulfilled their ritual purpose. New Ireland Malagan are a salient example of objects whose potency and value is limited to the religious circumstances for which they were produced. Alternatively, objects such as commissioned models may be deemed sacred. Among the most important Torres Strait objects in the extensive collections at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) in Cambridge are a pair of Malo Bomai masks, commissioned by anthropologist Alfred Haddon on the island of Mer in 1898. Malo was the predominant cult hero and *agad* (god) associated with a powerful religious fraternity. The masks, originally composed of turtle-shell, were secretly made by Wano and Enoch away from the disapproving eyes of missionaries and non-initiates, using cardboard from Haddon's packing cases. The production of the masks encouraged a re-enactment of the Malo Bomai ceremonies in which numerous Meriam men actively participated, selectively making visible aspects of a secret initiation ritual that had allegedly been forgotten. The masked dancers were photographed and filmed and the sacred

Malo Bomai songs recorded on wax cylinders. As this example demonstrates, it is important to acknowledge the agency of local people in determining which aspects of elements of secret knowledge may be revealed and to whom.

In the absence of earlier extant examples, these cardboard masks are sacred objects for many Islanders today. When MAA organized an exhibition to mark the centenary of the 1898 Cambridge Anthropological Exhibition to the Torres Strait, produced in consultation with Islander representatives, we sought advice about their presentation. Here, the concern was not the public display of masks, but the associated stories outlining the arrival and movements of Malo Bomai on the island of Mer, which have continuing socio-political implications. Thanks to the island's chairman Ron Day, the exhibition text describing Malo Bomai was written with the assistance of Meriam elders. The consultative approach that was developed during the creation of the exhibition has been extremely productive, providing opportunities for cross-cultural exchange and leading to numerous ongoing collaborative projects.

Many anthropological analyses of secrecy and sacred knowledge attend to political power and the maintenance of control by initiates over non-initiates, men over women and elders over youth. Anthropologists thus recognize the mutually constitutive relations of power and knowledge in the communities in which they work. Likewise we need to acknowledge the asymmetrical relations of power and knowledge between museums and the communities that are represented by museum collections and displays. Open secrets thus involve associated political and ethical concerns. While there has been much debate over issues of curatorial authority and the complexities of collaborative research, recent work has demonstrated the potential of developing mutually productive relations with our colleagues and assistants in the Pacific and elsewhere.

So what kind of secrets might be revealed through museum display? The Humboldt Lab theatrically experiments with techniques of concealment and revelation. Screened areas restrict the viewer's perspective and frosted glass momentarily clears to show sacred flutes from the Sepik. Tjurunga, secret objects of great significant to Aboriginal people from Central Australia, are shown in the form of plaster replicas, anthropological drawings and publications. The displays are intriguing, and highlight the experiential aspects of both ritual processes and museum display. "[Open] Secrets" demonstrates processes through which esoteric knowledge is revealed, but although visitors may glimpse restricted objects, the content or substance of associated secret knowledge remains unknown.

Given the ontological basis of different knowledge systems, museums can never fully decode the multiple meanings of objects such as sacred flutes and tjurungas. Nor, in keeping with various anthropological codes of ethics, would it be appropriate to try to do so. Yet the objects in museum collections continue to act as mediators between source communities, museum staff and broad public audiences. Fieldwork and consultation with colleagues in the Pacific and elsewhere, combined with an informed but less proprietorial form of curatorship, provide the opportunity to cultivate interest, respect and understanding for diverse knowledge systems, beliefs and practices as well as developing insights into our own subjective positions and perspectives.

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[Open] Secrets / Credits

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