

Museum Consultation Guidelines

The Museum as a Site of Unlearning: Materials and Reflections on Museum Education at the Weltkulturen Museum. Stephanie Endter, Nora Landkammer, and Karin Schneider (eds.), 2018.

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The workshop »What Is That Doing Here?« experiments with ways of working with secondary school students to address object histories, questions of ownership and restitution in relation to ethnographic collections. Developed by Julia Albrecht, Nora Landkammer and Karin Schneider as part of their research, the workshop was carried out on three occasions with different school groups, with the outcomes being documented and reflected upon (for more, see the texts by Nora Landkammer and Karin Schneider).

Here, we provide the most recent version of the worksheet used in the workshop, contextualising it with our own reflections. These reflections also document the changes in the materials used.



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Reflections on the Worksheet/Guidelines

In order to provide the students with a set of guidelines for structuring their research, we put together a worksheet and distributed it to everyone following the introductory session. The content of the worksheet was a recurring theme in many of our reflections on the project. Some of the worksheets questions were consciously formulated in an open manner. The idea behind this was to combine the classic school format of the worksheet with an open research approach; the fact that most of the questions were difficult to answer definitively or easily, or in some cases at all, was intended as a productive provocation.

It is possible that this very approach produced problematic and inherently contradictory premises: as we came to realise in our reflections, a worksheet necessarily creates a specific situation that is familiar from a school setting. On the one hand, this can be advantageous, as it gives pupils an opportunity to orient themselves and fall back on a familiar practice of knowledge acquisition that they are accustomed to; on the other hand, it may interpellate them as pupils, which in some cases means that they will begin to perform this familiar role—for instance by trying to do everything right, or by believing that there are right and wrong answers that they are supposed to find.

In our reflections, we came to suspect that the use of questions in the worksheet that consciously break with the structures of the school setting (for example that there are no right or wrong answers, and the attempt to interpellate the students as ›researchers‹) might create a confusing situation for the students that would not necessarily be productive.

The conclusion that we drew from this was to consciously and strategically convert the worksheet into a set of ›museum consultation guidelines‹, a kind of guide intended to assist in decision-making, but that also aimed to take the students and their perspectives seriously by addressing them as ›advisors‹. This version contains more general question clusters centred on whether we have information about the objects, and if so, where it comes from, whether information is missing, and whether there are requests for the objects to be returned. The idea behind this was not to simply confront the pupils with open-ended questions, but rather to address them in a different way. This open form of address is also intended to make clear to the students that it really isn't about right and wrong answers.

The new form of the worksheet is designed to convey that making a decision or providing advice about what a museum should do with a particular object requires preparation and investigation that are not always easy to ensure, and for which knowledge is necessary that is often quite difficult to obtain. In our reflections on the term ›museum consultation‹, we realised that this term also had a problematic connotation, one which we initially avoid with our approach, but which we also want to critically reflect upon with the students: the term and the idea of ›museum consultation‹ could create the impression that, following a short period of research, young people would be able and authorised to make decisions on the future of objects kept by the museum – a fantasy, one which in turn places young Europeans in an imaginary position of power (there they are again, those colonial paradigms!), a position which is ignorant of the complex task of acquiring knowledge about the objects. It was therefore very important for us to communicate to the pupils that they were not supposed to place themselves in the ›role‹ of seemingly omniscient advisor, but rather provide the museum with advice from their own perspective and level of knowledge.



MUSEUM CONSULTATION

Consultation form: What would you like to see happen with this object in future?

Object:

What do you know about the object? (For example: Where does it come from? Do we know anything about its use? Do we know anything about the people to whom it likely belonged previously? How was it removed from its original location? Why is it in the museum, and how did it get here?)

Where does your knowledge about the object come from?

(Who told you about the object or where did you read about it, and what time period did this literature come from?)

Is there information about the object that you are **lacking**? What more information would you need about the object in order to be able to form a clear opinion? From whom would you require more information?

Are there **requests for the object to be returned** to its place of origin?

What opinions do museum representatives have on this issue? Have you discovered perspectives on this issue from outside the context of the museum? Which opinions on this issue have you encountered regarding similar objects?



What would you like to happen to the object in future?

How would you justify your position?

Notes on new opinions and ideas following the discussion:

Reference

Albrecht, Julia/Landkammer, Nora/Schneider, Karin: ›Museum consultation guidelines‹. In: Endter, Stephanie; Landkammer, Nora; and Schneider, Karin (eds.): *The Museum as a Site of Unlearning: Materials and Reflections on Museum Education at the Weltkulturen Museum*, 2018, online at: <http://www.traces.polimi.it/2018/10/08/issue-06-the-museum-as-a-site-of-unlearning/>

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