

Human Remains and the Limits of Artistic Re-Appropriation in Photography and Film: Interview with Artist Tal Adler and Curator Anna Szöke

Hanin Hannouch

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Hanin Hannouch: Kunsthistorisches Institut, Max-Planck-Institut (Italy)

✉ hanin.hannouch@gmail.com

Dr. Hanin Hannouch is postdoctoral researcher at “4A LAB: Art Histories, Archaeologies, Anthropologies, Aesthetics” at the Kunsthistorisches Institut, Max-Planck Institut studying color photography in the German Empire and its various uses in the sciences and in ethnography. During 2019, she was International Research Fellow at the German Maritime Museum –Leibniz Institute for Maritime History (DSM) where she examined exoticization and colonial revisionism in the interwar photography of Hanns Tschira. Throughout 2018, she was a postdoctoral fellow of the Ethnologisches Museum of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, working on Robert Lohmeyer’s color photography. In 2017, she received her PhD from IMT Lucca, Scuola Alti Studi with a doctoral thesis on Sergei Eisenstein as an art historian and was a guest researcher at Jacobs University Bremen. She also completed the International Master Program in Art History and Museology (IMKM) at the University of Heidelberg and the Ecole du Louvre (Paris) in 2014, after a first Masters degree and Bachelors in European Art history at the University of Saint-Esprit De Kaslik.

Tal Adler is an artist and researcher at the Centre for Anthropological Research on Heritage and Museums (CARMAH), the Humboldt University of Berlin. For the TRACES project (EU H2020, 2016-2019) he developed long term Creative Co-productions between artists, researchers and institutions, for creating meaningful and sustainable ways to disseminate contentious cultural heritages. For the artistic research projects 'MemScreen' and 'Conserved Memories' at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna (FWF PEEK, 2011-2016), he conducted extensive artistic research on the politics of memory and display in Austria, published and exhibited artistic work on difficult heritage at marginal and established museums, landscapes, sites of commemoration and civil society organisations. For over two decades he has been developing methods of collaborative artistic research for engaging with difficult pasts and conflicted communities in Israel/Palestine and in Europe.

Anna Szöke is currently research manager at the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage (CARMAH), Institute for European Ethnology, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. She studied Art History and Spanish studies at the University of Vienna, and has worked as a curator in Vienna's museums and as a researcher at the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna and the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Her research focuses on collections of human skeletal remains, primarily on the Viennese Natural History Museum's collection and similar collections in Europe. She explores the role of these collections in the development of scientific racism and practices of collecting from the 19th century until today.

In the introduction to this volume, we explored not only the inner contradictions of visual material but also the two levels of appropriation that frame and reframe it. The first one takes place within the institution archiving photography, films, etc. While the second one pertains to the artistic practices of it that seeks the construction of another narrative by destroying the discursive frame allowing for the initial interpretation. Yet, in the case of numerous anthropological collections, human remains are also part of the ecosystem of museums and subject to transformation by artists. People, who were once living and breathing individuals, are organized in racial taxonomies, thus entering unwillingly or without traceable consent, the institutional system of knowledge, constituting a strongly contested heritage. Hence, the contentious nature of this issue complicates the potential of re-appropriation by bringing it to its ethical limit. To examine the interplay between researching human remains, looking at anthropological photographs, and making a film about looking at that which we probably should not look at, I sit down with artist Tal Adler and curator Anna Szöke in order to discuss their investigation of the skull cabinet of the anthropological collection of the Natural History Museum (NHM) in Vienna from 2011 to 2018, with several questions in mind, least of all: How to navigate the terrain of human remains in museum collections and where is the limit of representation and exhibition?

The fruits of their research and ongoing cooperation with the staff of the NHM, with other collections and communities of interest, consist of exhibitions, conferences, educational programmes, and accompanying activities. Considered within the scope of this article is the video material¹ as well as the 30-meter-long photograph by Adler titled "Skull Cabinet Panorama", which was part of the "Dead Images"² exhibition on display at the Tieranatomisches Theater in Berlin and at the Edinburgh College of Art in 2018.

HH: How did the project regarding the skull cabinet of the anthropological collection of the Natural History Museum in Vienna start for you?

TA: In 2009, I received a private tour to the storage of the Natural History Museum in Vienna by a colleague from the museum's department of anthropology. A part of the museum's extensive collections, are the skulls of more than 40,000 people that are stored in a very long and tall cabinet with glass doors. I was utterly shocked by this 'installation' of thousands of skulls, numbered and organised neatly on shelves, as objects. I slowly approached the cabinet and looked carefully at one of the skulls. I then looked at the skull next to it and the differences between them struck me. It was the first time I actually saw a real skull in front of me and until that

1. Tal Adler made four videos in relation to this project, which are available online for free here: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCd6flgzOeTmAULAG8dbvxsQ>.

2. Dead Images is a Creative Co-production, part of the TRACES project funded by the EU Horizon 2020. The exhibition was created and co-curated by the Dead Images team, which is: Tal Adler, Humboldt University Berlin, Linda Fibiger, University of Edinburgh, John Harries, University of Edinburgh, Joan Smith, University of Edinburgh, Anna Szöke, Humboldt University Berlin, Maria Teschler-Nicola, Natural History Museum Vienna. <http://www.traces.polimi.it/index.html?p=4095.html>.

point, my perception of a skull was more of a generic symbol, something you put on a 'pirate flag' or bottles of poisonous material. Seeing these two individuals placed within thousands more in the same cabinet in rows upon rows, dehumanized, was a cognitive dissonance and a very emotional experience. It was only two years later, in 2011, that research funding from the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) allowed me to invite the museum to collaborate on an artistic-research project.³

ASZ: I joined the project as an art historian and curator, in the second round of the funding, in 2013.⁴ I was interested in developing curatorial collaborations that elaborate on the historical consequences of such collections, and to examine the potential of artistic engagements with contentious collections.

HH: Your work "Skull Cabinet Panorama" (Fig.1) features 120 sections of a cabinet with thousands of human skulls of the anthropological collection, all stitched together. I have seen the photograph and its effect is massive. It is a contentious and problematic gesture to photograph people's skulls. How did you approach the question of the artistic re-appropriation of archived bodies and whether to display the image (or not) in the exhibition "Dead Images"?

TA: I had many doubts before photographing the skulls. It was clear that this image will be difficult and very emotive and that it has to be considered carefully. The decision to go ahead with the shooting was backed by my wish to create a travelling exhibition around it with an accompanying programme that invites the public to a discussion on the history, fate and ethics of such collections. A platform that enables multiple perspectives, especially those of communities of descendants whose ancestors are kept in collections, along with the perspectives of the researchers and curators working with these same collections. However, until closer to the exhibition's opening in 2018, the decision whether to show "Skull Cabinet Panorama" or not was always kept open and discussed at great lengths within the 'Dead Images' team, with my interviewees, and with colleagues at our research centre – CARMAH.⁵ The panorama was captured in 2012 and exhibited in 2018, so six years of reflections and discussions passed. Our 'Dead Images' team was formed 2016, in the framework of the project TRACES.⁶ As we started working together, I asked the team to reconsider the panorama and that although the project originated with this photograph, the 'cards are on the table' and we can reshuffle them; if the team decides not to exhibit the panorama, it will not be exhibited. The solution we came up with eventually was to restrict access to the panorama and allow the visitors to decide whether they want to see it or not. We placed much attention on this decision by placing the film I made, titled PHOTOGRAPH⁷ next to the entrance to the panorama's space. In this film, I discuss the dilemma around showing or not showing the panorama with my interviewees. I ask them whether the photograph should have been created in the first place and whether they would have liked to see it in an exhibition. There are different statements and positions in this film, and the visitors of the exhibition understand that their decision whether to enter the panorama's space or not, is in part what the exhibition is about. For me it is an exhibition that questions itself, an exhibition on reflexive processes, and by passing the decision to the visitors we wanted to invite them to join these processes with us.

ASZ: We wanted to understand who is held in the collection, how and under what circumstances the skulls of the people in question were collected. So, I systematically went over the collections, starting with the individual given inventory number one until individual with inventory number 5459. Because of the collection's history, different classification systems are inherent to it. It was not important for scientists from the 19th and beginning of 20th century to have the name of the individual's skull, coming from a formerly colonized place. For constructing racial differences, their focus lied on geography. Where was the individual living before his head was, under very often ethically questionable circumstances, was taken. Which "ethnic group" did he/she belong to? There is a large collection of individuals though, whose names are known. The Austrian physician

3. The project MemScreen, funded by the FWF, Programme for Arts-based Research, AR 96.

4. The project Conserved Memories, funded by the FWF, Programme for Arts-based Research, AR-2012-G21.

5. CARMAH: Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage. <http://www.carmah.berlin/> (Last accessed: 10-06-2020)

6. TRACES – Transmitting Contentious Cultural Heritages with the Arts: From Intervention to Co-Production <http://www.traces.polimi.it/> (Last accessed: 10-06-2020).

7. PHOTOGRAPH is One of seven videos that are part of the Dead Images exhibition. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbu7gQhmWhU> (Last accessed: 10-06-2020).

Augustin Weisbach (1837-1914) collected the skulls using, as my colleague Maria (Teschler-Nicola) would say, the “opportunity” of working in military hospitals. Maria and I had countless discussions on how to ethically approach individuals’ skulls who have passed away 100 or 1,000 of years ago. How to approach remains that were excavated during WWII by forced-labourers in Austrian archaeological sites? After going through the archival material, reading old inventory books and correspondences, our list of contacting possible related persons, nations, communities, was very long. So we started slowly.

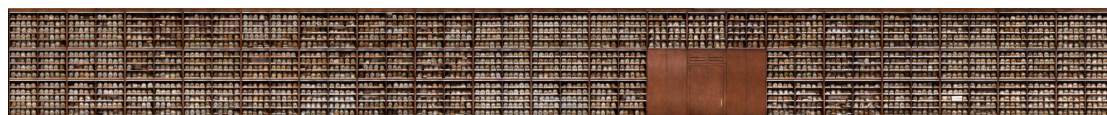


Figure 1. The Skull Cabinet Panorama, full length (30x3 meters), skulls blurred. Photograph © Tal Adler

HH: And what came out of that?

TA: In the preparation for the exhibition, I filmed a series of interviews with researchers and practitioners who are engaged with the questions that collections of human remains raise, such as the ethics of collecting, researching and displaying, provenance and repatriation, the histories of science, colonialism and fascism, private collecting, religious mortuary practices, decolonial activism, and so on. These interviews were edited into four films that became a part of the exhibition. The films highlighted the conflicts between the different positions but also the possible ways of resolving them. In one of the cases, during one of these interviews, I agreed with a community representative that I will mask the images of their ancestors that were visible in the panorama, and so we did.

ASZ: Tal once seriously considered installing the big wall for the panorama at the exhibition, but without actually mounting the print. Leaving this wall empty. Eventually we installed it in this way that the visitors had more agency. We were also interested in discussing, with those who decided to see it, their experiences of seeing it.

HH: In the panorama, we see the skull cabinet along with doors, which you told me lead to the photographic archive of the department of anthropology (Fig.2). So if we do understand the first level of appropriation of the material (the inclusion of photos in the system of knowledge and physical location of the museum next to human remains), how did you go about untangling the relationship between photography and human remains?

TA: After the panorama was composed (stitched), I came back to the museum and asked Maria (Teschler-Nicola, then head of the department) what are these wooden doors that appear in the panorama. She took me to the cabinet and opened the doors. This was my second overwhelming moment in the project. Behind the doors was a big room that used to be the department’s photography laboratory, a darkroom, that was now converted to a space housing the department’s photographic collection. This collection includes thousands of anthropometric images – photographic ‘racial research’ undertaken by researchers of this department until 1945. The subjects of these photographs included people from colonized places, war prisoners, and holocaust victims. The appearance of these doors in the panorama spoke to the entanglements of the histories of anthropology and photography in the context of scientific racism. The doors are a reminder that the project is not only about the ethics of collections of human remains but indeed about the ethics of difficult images, including this panorama itself.

One of the films in the exhibition is called DARKROOM.⁸ It refers to the room behind these doors and it is mainly a conversation between two photographers: me and Wolfgang Reichmann – the current photographer of the department of anthropology. In the film, we look at the photographic collection of the department and discuss it from our practitioners’ points of view. One of the reasons to create this film was to linger on the role of those who create difficult images, us included. So it is not only the panorama that suggests reflexivity, rather, reflexivity is the artistic strategy of the project as a whole.

HH: When googling the “Dead Images” exhibitions, I found photographs of a section of the skulls that are out of focus. Tell me more about this blur (Fig.3).

8. Ibid. DARKROOM: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6AxIznkc7o&t=43s> (Last accessed: 10-06-2020).



Figure 2. The Skull Cabinet Panorama, detail with doors of the photographic collection, skulls blurred. Photograph © Tal Adler

ASZ: In the beginning of the project, we used to send a small section of the panorama per email to researchers or the press making inquiries about the project. It was ethically challenging to select a section to send. We decided then to use a section with mainly skulls from Hallstatt (Austria) since the community already paints the skulls and has them displayed in their community's ossuary. Each individual's skull has his/her name written on it, including the date of death and usually beautifully painted flowers. Today, this is a touristic attraction. But I do not like to share the photo in any case, it makes me uncomfortable even if it is blurred.

TA: As the project developed, we decided to mount the panorama in the exhibition but to obstruct the visitor's entrance to the space where it was mounted using a physical barrier (two overlapping walls) with a notice on it (Fig.4). We also decided to ask visitors not to photograph it. I then created a version of the panorama in which the skulls are blurred, but their boxes and other parts of the cabinet are not. We use the blurred version if we are asked to provide images, for example for an article about the exhibition or research inquiries.

HH: You have mentioned the film *DARKROOM*. In it, the viewer sees Mr. Wolfgang Reichmann (the anthropology department's photographer) and yourself looking at photographs from the archives of the anthropological collection on a computer screen and discussing them. The viewer quickly understands that some of the photographs you are looking at are of war prisoners or Holocaust victims. But we do not get to watch the screen with you and see what you are beholding (Fig.5). Why did you choose to place your video camera behind the screen when filming?

TA: This cinematic device – showing me and Wolfgang looking at the photographs on the monitor but not showing what we see – speaks of course to the dilemma many other creators and curators face when dealing with contentious collections and violent images. Namely, the question of how can one exhibit something, talk about something, without showing it. Beyond concentrating on *how* Wolfgang and I interpret these images, as people who themselves create images, I wanted to visually show that there is a deliberate decision to refrain from reproducing and circulating these images that were created under very violent settings. For me, the very act of setting-up and taking these photographs were acts of violence and, explicitly in the case of the 'racial studies' of war prisoners and Jews before being deported to concentration camps, were taken without consent under extreme conditions of terror.

ASZ: Taking a photograph is in and of itself an act of power as the research of [Ariella] Azoulay tells us. So, the interaction between photographer and photographed is the first act of violence. The photographs reveal the imperial notion of the time, but the photo itself should not overshadow the complex nature of the encounter between the photographer, the photographed and a possible invisible spectator as she points out. Azoulay stresses to foreground what she calls "the infrastructure of extractions".



Figure 3. The Skull Cabinet Panorama, detail, skulls blurred. Photograph © Tal Adler.

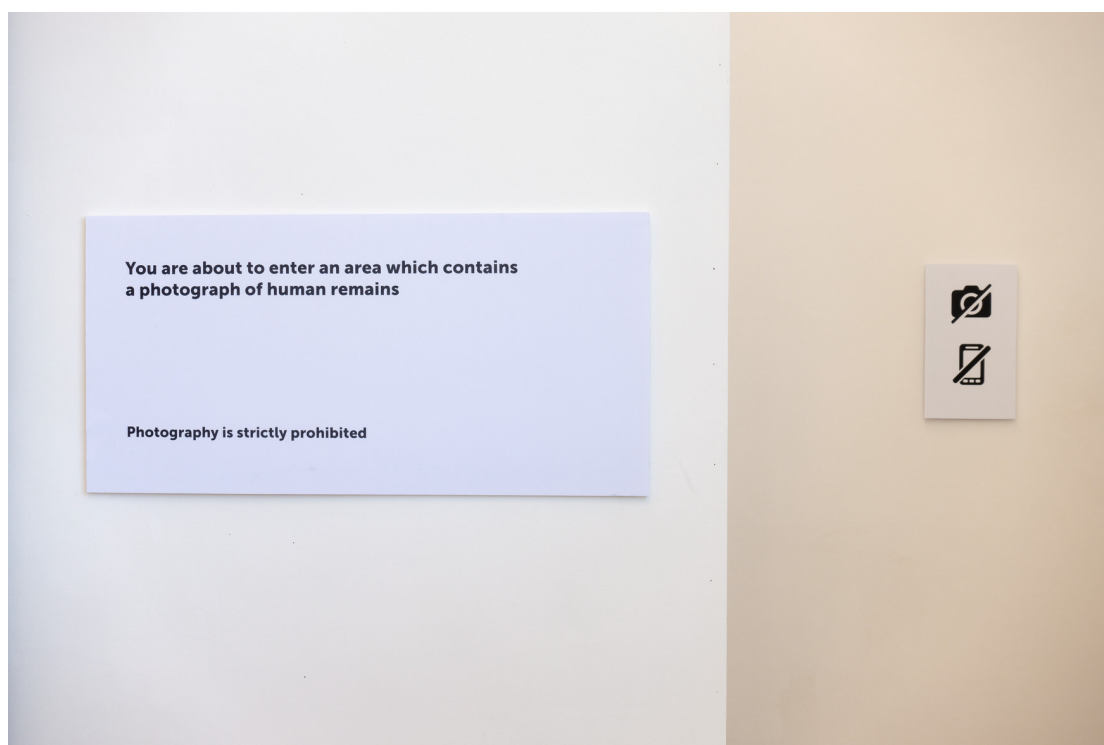


Figure 4. Entrance to the Skull Cabinet Panorama installation at the Dead Images exhibition at the Edinburgh College of Art. Photograph © Tal Adler.

The viewer of the mentioned video – DARKROOM – is confronted with this, the ever-present violence. In the film, we see Wolfgang's working space. There are skulls behind and around him. Unfortunately, we could not blur these in the video, so visitors to the Dead Images exhibitions were advised about human remains visible in the video, before entering the room in which it was screened.

HH: You choose to block the viewer's gaze as Mr. Reichmann and yourself look at the photographs during the video, but you reveal only two photographs to the viewer, upon which you linger. Can you tell us more about these exceptions?

TA: In DARKROOM, I used four cameras in different positions in Wolfgang's working area. One of the cameras is positioned behind Wolfgang and I, capturing the monitor that we look at, over our shoulders. It was actually Wolfgang's private camera and you can see him operating it in the first few seconds of the film. I included this camera's footage in the film to reveal only two of the photographs that we look at and discuss that the viewer can actually see. Both photographs refer to the setup that was used to photograph the prisoners of war: The first photograph is of the setup itself. In it, you can see a person handling the equipment, probably the photographer, and another person seated, upper body naked, but his face is rendered unidentifiable as it fades into total highlight. In the film, Wolfgang talks about this photograph as a meta-layer of the process itself; a photograph of the photographic method (Fig.6).

The second photograph is of Josef Wastl (1892-1968), the head of the museum's department of anthropology who took charge as soon as the Nazis came into power in Austria. Wastl was obsessed with Jewish remains and used his position to excavate Jewish graves in Austria and to commission skulls of murdered Jews from the anatomy institute of the Reich University of Posen / Poznań. He was also extremely excited about photography as an anthropological research tool and used it extensively in POW camps and to photograph hundreds of Jews that were gathered in the Stadium in Vienna in 1939 for the purpose of Dr. Wastl's 'racial studies.'⁹

9. Margit Berner, The Nazi Period Collections of Physical Anthropology in the Museum of Natural History, Vienna. http://coltempo.hu/catalog/margit_berner.html (Last accessed: 10-06-2020).



Figure 5. Video-still from the film DARKROOM. Photograph © Tal Adler.

This portrait of Wastl that I show in the film was taken in the same studio setup that we saw in the previous photograph. I can imagine the situation, the proud photographer approaches the chief scientist, his boss: “Herr Wastl, it’s ready, please have a seat, we will photograph you first!”.

In the film, I talk with Wolfgang about my decision to show Wastl’s photograph and why I do not want to show the others. Wastl’s photographic ‘research’ enacted violence on those he photographed. Although he was photographed very proudly in his set-up with a suit and a swastika on his armband, showing this photograph in my film portrays him as the perpetrator.

HH: In your videos, you use montage to go back and forth between opposing discourses about questions of repatriation of human remains, can and should scientists use human remains for research? Can curators use dead people’s photographs without asking their descendants for consent, etc.? Tell us more about this thesis/antithesis approach and where did it come from?

TA: I wanted the conflicts to come to the surface. I did not want to avoid them. I did not invent anything that was not there. I asked people questions that I was trying to think through myself. There is conflict, for example, between communities wanting repatriation and neocolonial attitudes in institutes, and I think it is very important to show that. So, I did let these dialogues emerge in the films, hoping to involve the public in these conflicts and in trying to think together about possible solutions.

HH: What comes after narrative and counter-narrative, then?

TA: Well, a discussion of course. Negotiation, listening to the other positions and trying to understand them, then trying to collaborate on fair and just solutions. This, for us, was the goal of the project, to aim for significant and sustainable solutions. The main methodology of the project is multi-perspectivity and some of the films’ interviewees were invited to the conference that opened the exhibition (Fig.7). Different, sometimes opposing positions were presented very respectfully and a true process of understanding, of empathy happened there. Some museum practitioners approached us after the conference and told us that they will change some practices. Some have made changes to the way they work with collections, talk about them, and relate to descendant communities after watching the films or participating in the conference of the activities around the exhibition.



Figure 6. Video-still from the film DARKROOM. Photograph © Tal Adler.



Figure 7. The Dead Images exhibition at the Edinburgh College of Art. Photograph © Tal Adler.