

https://dspace.org/

Creative Curatorial Practice as a Means of Reorientating Display Tropes in Museums of Natural History

Langerman, Fritha

2022-09-16
Arts Research Africa
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/35895

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

DOI: https://doi.org/10.54223/10539/35895

CREATIVE CURATORIAL PRACTICE AS A MEANS OF REORIENTING DISPLAY TROPES IN MUSEUMS OF NATURAL HISTORY

FRITHA LANGERMAN
MICHAELIS SCHOOL OF FINE ART,
UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN
FRITHA.LANGERMAN@UCT.AC.ZA

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) licence:
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0

This paper provides a critical analysis of natural history museums and their display practices. It explores the contradictions inherent in the concept of "natural history" and the dominance over nature it implies. The paper argues that museums still promote authoritative classification and knowledge systems that reinforce hierarchical structures and colonial ideologies. The author, an artist-curator and printmaker, shares her experiences with three exhibitions that challenge traditional display methods. By disrupting linear progression, introducing complex interconnections, and emphasizing sensory experiences, the exhibitions aim to create alternative models of display that reflect the entangled and web-like nature of speciation. The goal is to move beyond colonial narratives and imagine new ways of representing and understanding the natural world within museum spaces.

Museums of natural history have become anachronisms, confounded by their very nomenclature. 'Natural history' is both a practice and a concept: the practice of labelling, collecting and naming and, implicitly, the concept of dominion over nature. There is a deep contradiction between the two: the study of nature is presented as an empirical, objective endeavour, while nature itself is historicised and absorbed into a cultural discourse. In the way that both Renaissance curiosity collections and colonial museums were a means of actualising power through object wealth and licensing the domination of the viewer over the object (Bennett 1995, 2004; Foucault 2002; Hooper-Greenhill 1992), the display of natural history cannot be separated from the ideological imperatives that drove and continue to drive the collection and organisation of nature – and the place of humans within it. Many museums of science and nature still valorise authoritative classification and forms of knowledge that promote progress and mastery over the environment (Jardine et al. 1997; Jordanova 1989), and while museums have over the past few decades begun to question their colonial inheritance and look at new ways of representing and displaying their collections, most have remained obdurate in their presentation of nature as untainted by cultural and ideological agendas.

When considering how these museums may be reframed, it is necessary to take into account not only the collections and their perhaps dubious histories of acquisition, but also the manner of their display: notably, the question of how assumptions implicit in this display work to inform or reinforce prejudices and biases. It is through display that the epistemic values of institutions are revealed, and it is the 'hidden' structures in the iconography of display that need to be exposed and reimagined if natural history museums are to move beyond colonial, imperialist understandings of the natural world.

As an artist-curator and printmaker, I have worked primarily with projects that look at the visual vocabulary of speciation, and particularly how this plays out in institutional spaces. While my research field is the history of representation in the biological and biomedical sciences, my practice is to interpret this through the making of objects and images that are presented as curated exhibitions. I am particularly interested in associative language, visual analogies and their persuasive power, and how these have fed discriminatory thinking. Central to this thinking is taxonomy. Taxonomies divide species by difference and similarity, placing them into discrete and distinct groups, ordered hierarchically. Coupled with this ordering system is the dominant icon of evolution, the 'tree of life' with its strong graphic syntax of progressive, ascendant linearity and branching divisions. Ernst Haeckel's various tree schemas produced between 1866 and 1879 are exemplars of this bias. Referring to them as *stammbäume* (genealogical trees or pedigrees), many were depicted as naturalistic botanical trees in which he positioned more complex species in the highest branches. His tree of 1876 traces a deliberate route from *monera* at the roots to *menschen* at the uppermost tips of the tree. The flawed relationship between notions of progress and understandings of evolution have been highlighted by Stephen Jay Gould (1987, 1989), who refers to an "iconography of expectation" and argues that all visualisations of evolution reinforce the notion of a "march of progress" and support a "comfortable view of inevitability and superiority" (Gould 1989, 28).[1] Natural history museums have always tended to endorse linear, hierarchical modes by presenting objects as discrete entities within temporal or spatial sequences. The visitor to these museums becomes complicit within a sequential articulation of species as they traverse a space that physically echoes a march of progress.

In contrast to the oppositional character of taxonomy, much current thinking sees speciation as relational and contingent on space and time. Lateral or horizontal gene transfer (HGT), observed particularly in microbes, suggests that species transfer genetic material between each other fairly regularly and that this is a fundamentally non-branching process, undermining the principle of vertical, hierarchical

inheritance (Zimmer 2008). As HGT[2] allows for the splicing of sections of genomes from other organisms, animals can become genotypically chimerical, and the ontology of species becomes unstable. This suggests not only that the space between species may be permeable, but that evolution is a tangled and weblike process rather than a strictly linear and chronological one. Doolittle's article "Uprooting the Tree of Life" in *Scientific American* (2000)[3] and Dagan and Martin's (2006) seminal article "Tree of One Percent," brought the debate of the analogical tree of life into the public arena. A new visual model was called for – a web of life.[4] In cladistic tree iconography, each branch or node has two finite objects, whereas in web or net evolutionary iconography, objects are more fluid and subject to reattribution and change. If biomedical visual culture is subjected to the same revisions, chains of established references are unravelled and objects and images can become ambiguous and multi-referential. My interest in curation in natural history museums has been prompted by these revisions and a search for an alternative visual model for display that mimics webness and taxonomic ambiguity. It is within these unexpected and unreliable relationships – the active place of association and the productive space of emergent ideas – that the entangled and web-like potential for museum display lies. Only when enlightenment structures are abandoned can the museum become associative and meaningful to its multiple audiences, as colonial narratives of progress are resisted and new orders imagined.[5]

This explosion of a linear form of display was tested in my three exhibitions at the Iziko South African Museum in Cape Town: *Subtle Thresholds: the visual taxonomies of disease* (2009–10), R-A-T: an associative ordering (2012–13), and *FREIGHTED: 500 years of rhinoceros collection and display* (2018–ongoing). Site of display is critical to the work. This museum, established in 1825, like many museums of natural history has a complicated display past that until recently included the hall of African Cultures. My exhibitions situated themselves self-consciously within this space as an act of insiderism that sought to critique the structures of display from within. While much Western science relies on evidentiary systems, art co-opts and inverts accepted systems for affect: the intention was to test how this act of curation could simultaneously absorb and interrupt the patterns of display and reception of information within a museum context.

Subtle Thresholds was an exhibition of prints, objects and collections, primarily concerned with the visual representation of infectious disease and specifically how the constructions of 'difference' and 'analogy' have been used to mediate the cultural understanding of pathology. It used a lattice of conceptual and visual cross-referencing to undermine an oppositional understanding of species and co-opted layering and repetition of form through visual 'hyperlinks' to expose the interconnectivity between organisms, worldviews and mythologies. Presented in a large gallery between social and natural history collections, it referred to zoonoses and the relationship between the social, cultural and scientific understanding of disease and speciation. The layout evoked a cosmology – a scattering that allowed for a sensorial apprehension of the material. The walls running on either side of the main hall were layered with objects and images, and in an attempt to undermine a linear reading of the exhibition, formats were repeated and overlayed in a complex visual filigree (Figure 1). A timeline in the form of a printed ruler circumscribed the entire exhibition area and included a biblical concordance of disease, literally running counter to a more conventional microbial history and marked in increments by lists of thousands of microbes. GPS co-ordinates enabled coded access to sites of outbreaks, paired with a world map of disease density in a proximate cabinet. Quatrefoil frames contained electron microscope images of animal excrement, thus faeces, the ultimate feared site of contamination, become wonderous, appealing landscapes for contemplation. Animal specimens were anthropomorphised, and only labelled with the zoonoses that they carry – by implication, being understood

through their disease. Comprehending the exhibition required active participation in the linking and cross-referencing of images and texts, and the contracted experience of complex reading within the exhibition was intended to influence the viewer's interpretation of consecutive exhibits (Figure 2).



Figure 1: *Subtle Thresholds: The Visual Taxonomies of Disease* (2009–10), Fritha Langerman. Iziko South African Museum in Cape Town. (detail)

R-A-T used *Rattus norvegicus* as a subject to explore the representation of species. The rat has been largely excluded from presentation in museums of natural history, and as an animal that is closely related to the development of human populations, it speaks as much to a cultural and social history as to a natural one. Rather than a discrete display, *R-A-T* was dispersed throughout the museum, furtively making its way into disused corners and cabinets. The interventions were designed specifically to relate to proximate exhibits and to shift the reading of those exhibits, making connections to mythologies, psychology, literature and popular culture. This aimed to undermine the display of specimens as isolated units that stand as exemplary visible components of a greater, hidden collection, and rather draw attention to the dense layers of cultural and social history that connect human and non-human animals. One example was a large cabinet in the 'World of Water' that responded to its proximate location to underwater displays, kelp forests, seals and a giant squid. It alluded to a space of imagination and dread as well as rational ordering: the realm of fantasy and psychology. In relation to the adjacent display of comparative seal skulls, stepped in an evocation of evolutionary progress, rodent skulls were presented on a flat, non-hierarchical surface surrounded by broken ladders – the scaffolding of an ascendant iconography of evolution (Figure 3). Behind this were chalkboard texts taken from the classification of *Rattus rattus* by Linneaus in 1758 and *Rattus norvegicus* by John Berkenhout in 1789. Included was a tower of large white books of rat fiction marked with library cards of academic texts on rats, and enormous simulated rat tails labelled with 'luggage tags' from the many ships that have arrived in Cape Town harbour over the past 350 years. Interpretations of seven rodent brains and one seal brain, based on those found at the Gallery of Paleontology and Comparative Anatomy in Paris, were presented upon a light box. They were surrounded by hundreds of specimen bottles, labelled with rat experiments, alluding to the estimation that an article based on rat research is published every minute. Behind these were texts taken from Skinner's survey of operant behaviour, and Freud's 'Ratman' notes on obsessional neurosis. In this way the porosity of the interface between human behaviour and rat research was emphasised. (Figure 4)



Figure 2: *Subtle Thresholds: The Visual Taxonomies of Disease* (2009–10), Fritha Langerman. Iziko South African Museum in Cape Town. (detail)



Figure 3: *R-A-T: An Associative Ordering* (2012–13), Fritha Langerman. Iziko South African Museum in Cape Town (detail)

FREIGHTED is a mobile exhibition that has been shown in natural history museums in Cape Town, Lisbon, Madrid and Leipzig. This project was sparked by my participation in an exhibition that celebrated 500 years of the image of Durer's rhino in 2015. I found the story of Ganda, the Indian rhinoceros, compelling and saddening. That this animal was shipped as a diplomatic gift from India to King Manuel in Lisbon and was gifted again to the Pope before drowning in the Mediterranean seemed symbolic of colonial conquest and the fragile bounty of empire. The narrative would resonate for the next 500 years in the collection of animals for museums, zoos, game hunting and poaching. Ganda was the first of many rhinos sent to Europe, and is paradigmatic of the thousands of specimens that have left the East and Africa for American and European collections since. In all cases, the passage of rhinos was a demonstration of colonial power and a measure of the control that coloniser countries exercised over the colonies and their inhabitants. The legacy of imperialism and the simultaneous exploitation of the natural environment can be seen throughout the twentieth century.[6] With this in mind, I planned a project in 2018 in which

I imagined the reverse journey of a rhino making its way back from Lisbon and Europe, around the Cape of Good Hope, ultimately returning to Goa. But this would be a specimen of absence: a travelling museum exhibit in the spirit of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century peripatetic animal exhibits, but with the main attraction a surrogate. The exhibition is housed within a pine rhino-sized packing crate that makes visual reference to an ark and early conceptions of the museum, designed to fit a small shipping container and be sent around the world by sea. It is divided into two symmetrical sections that allow for intimate viewing by one visitor at a time. (Figure 5). The interiors of the crates are lined with shallow, dense cabinets that contain objects, images and videos, encyclopaedic in nature . While the exhibit is comprehensive, it presents the rhinoceros in fragments and in ways that are unfamiliar. There are no 'authentic' objects from collections – everything is reproduced and replicated, making analogical reference to the absent rhinoceros and various extinction narratives. The rationale for the replica was Durer's initial print which includes the word "abconderfet" – as taken from the Latin *imago contrafacta*, meaning an accurate copy of an absent original – a copy that bears witness. Reproduction, especially to me as a printmaker, was thus an appropriate strategy with which to approach this exhibition. Prints were remade, skins, labels and documents meticulously copied, teeth and bones manufactured.[7] (Figure 6)



Figure 4: *R-A-T: An Associative Ordering* (2012–13), Fritha Langerman. Iziko South African Museum in Cape Town (detail)



Figure 5: *FREIGHTED: 500 Years of Rhinoceros Collection and Display* (2020), Fritha Langerman. National Museum of Natural Sciences, Madrid

My curatorial strategy within these projects has been to introduce overtly complex interconnective[8] and organisations of visual material, to liberate the display of speciation from its sequential constraints, and to present an alternative that is entangled, dense, complex and representative of contemporary web iconography. This was achieved by disrupting a linear progression through the display areas, fracturing components of displays, dislocating objects from their labels, undoing the narrative structure and textual reading, and forcing the spatial navigation of a dense matrix of connections. Although *Subtle Thresholds* was contained within a single gallery, *R-A-T* was spread throughout the museum, and *FREIGHTED* was contained within two crates, all three exhibitions relied on the disorientation and destabilisation of the viewer and the viewing experience to direct interpretation. Images and connections had to be mentally transported from one space to another in order to get any sense of a whole. Both the curatorship and experience of the exhibitions were web-like, making the viewer walk the exhibitions in either defined or dislocated spaces. None of the displays had obvious starting or termination points, thus effectively preventing any progressive, sequential experience of them. All were highly structured and complex projects, wherein small, contained units operated within internal systems of categorisation and cross-reference. A far remove from the structure of the tree, this is a model of speciation that is contingent on a random context, connected and rhizomatic.

Reading was rejected as the primary source of knowledge and the exhibitions invited the sensory as a site of meaning-making through association. In order to achieve this, the sheer volume of text had an asphyxiating and disorienting effect. The links between elements were often circular, returning viewers to a starting point and insisting that only through an investment in the visual would the exhibition be understood. In *Subtle Thresholds*, text was manifest in many forms: GPS co-ordinates on signage plates allow coded access to sites of outbreaks; Latin species names provide a veiled clue to SEM images of animal excrement; bacterial forms were hidden within steel renditions of pharmacological and demonic images; and handwritten 'chalk texts' reflected the personal, mythical and philosophical reading of the diseased body. *R-A-T* was even more reliant on the idea of the label

to be a carrier of meaning in itself. It was an exhibition of labels, referring both to a history of museum practice and to classification and naming as a potentially divisive political process. *FREIGHTED* similarly used collections of text and labels that are careful reproductions from original museum specimens, notebooks and texts.

All three exhibitions are encyclopaedic inventories – impossible and futile attempts to collect long lists. While the fragment has become an icon of contemporary art practice, set in opposition to the entirety of the Enlightenment list, in all of these exhibitions the list becomes a fragment and stands both as a reflection on museum practice and the museum experience.

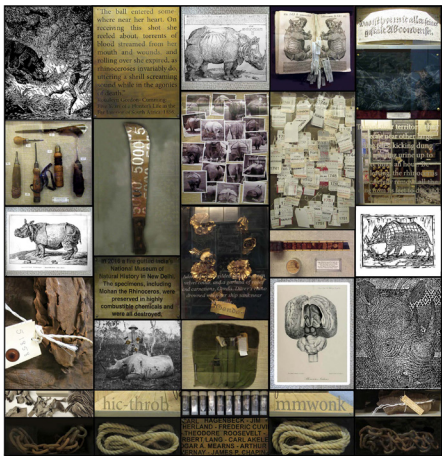

Figure 6: FREIGHTED: *500 Years of Rhinoceros Collection and Display* (2020), Fritha Langerman. National Museum of Natural Sciences, Madrid (detail)

A further strategy used was mirroring and reflection – a form of contagion and porosity, as the mirror is able to shift subject/object relations, making the viewer consciously complicit in the viewing experience. On the most obvious level, the viewer's reflection becomes part of what is viewed – a point of self-reflection – but more than that, the moving reflection introduces a temporality to the viewing experience, which can be changed by aspect and proximity. The mirror documents the journey of the walked passage through the museum.

Audience expectation within museums of natural history is, more often than not, that of a progressive narrative that has a defined starting and endpoint. Rather than meeting this expectation, if museums are to transcend their imperial origins, they will need to develop exhibits that are reflexive and responsive, presenting the natural world as contingent and entangled. Julian Spalding (2002, 22) alerts us to the important place of ignorance within museums and the need to emphasis what is not known, rather than what is. Doubt becomes a critical strategy as this uncertain space is one in which all participants can make a contribution. While museum displays have long been predicated on certainty, my practice suggests that by exploding what is known into a space of doubt, some fertile ground for dialogue will be generated. This is an alternative space of the imagination and the sensorium, where creative production is primary and understanding is not gleaned through empiricism. Artists and visual art have a role to play in interrupting expectation within these contexts and reshaping the often-passive interaction of the viewer within the museum.

References

Bennett, T. 1995. *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. London: Routledge.

Bennett, T. 2004. *Pasts beyond Memory: Evolution, Museums, Colonialism*. London: Routledge.

Dagan, T., and Martin, W. 2006. "The Tree of One Percent." *Genome Biology* 7, article 118.

Deleuze, G., and Guattari, F. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Doolittle, W.F. 2000. "Uprooting the Tree of Life." *Scientific American* (February): 72–77.

Doolittle, W.F. 2004. "If the Tree of Life Fell, Would It Make a Sound?" In *Microbial Phylogeny and Evolution: Concepts and Controversies*, edited by J. Sapp, 119–33. New York: Oxford University Press.

Foucault, M. 2002. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London: Routledge.

Gould, S.J. 1987. *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle: Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Geological Time*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Gould, S.J. 1989. *Wonderful Life*. New York: Norton.

Haeckel, E. 1876. The History of Creation: Or the Development of the Earth and Its Inhabitants by the Action of Natural Causes. http://archive.org/details/historyofcreatio76hist. Accessed October 10, 2022.

Haraway, D. 2008. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press.

Hooper-Greenhill, E. 1992. *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*. London: Routledge.

Howell, F. C. 1965. *Early Man*. Life Nature Library. New York: Time.

Jardine, N., J. A. Secord, and E. C. Spary. 1997. *Cultures of Natural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jordanova, L. 1989. "Objects of Knowledge: A Historical Perspective on Museums." In *The New Museology*, edited by P. Vergo, 22–40. London: Reaktion Books.

Marcus, J. 2000. "Towards the Erotics of the Museum." In *Cultural Encounters: Representing Otherness*, edited by E. Hallam and B. Street, 229–44. London: Routledge.

Spalding, J. 2002. *The Poetic Museum: Reviving Historic Collections*. Munich: Prestel.

Zimmer, C. 2008. "What Is a Species?" *Scientific American*, June: 48–55.

Notes

1. One of the most damaging images contributing to the public misconception of evolution has been Rudolf Zallinger's illustration for F. Clark Howell's 1965 book, Early Man. Here the linear movement from left to right, from crouching ape to ascendant white male is exemplary. It has arguably informed the public understanding of evolution ever since.
2. This process is genetically identifiable, although not evident in the phenotype. The chimerical aspect of mammals also relates to the idea, as expressed by Donna Haraway (2008, 4), that by virtue of hosting micro-organisms within the body, humans are a multispecies assemblage.
3. He argued that micro-organisms, which were the main inhabitants for at least two thirds of the planet's history, provide little information for defining relationships between species and constructing a clear family tree. In addition, lateral or horizontal gene transfer allows for the exchange of significant genes or suites of genes between micro-organisms; and this fundamentally shifts our understanding of linear, vertical inheritance. Doolittle also argued that two fundamental evolutionary processes, HGT and endosymbiotic gene transfer, must be taken into account when visualising the form of evolution (Doolittle 2000).
4. This finds similar footing in Deleuze and Guattari's writings of arborescence and rhizomatics. They identify the dominance of the tap and dichotomous root in most Western thinking – a lateral system that foregrounds progression (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).
5. Julia Marcus argues that the danger is that these exhibitions become increasingly opaque. In response to the Museum of Sydney (1995) with "its collage of quotations, its erasure of distinctions and the absence of evaluation" she argues that the erotics of the museum – that based on desire and looking – are lost when comprehension and evaluation are removed (Marcus 2000, 231). She calls this "reactionary nihilism" in that the absence of texts and primary reliance on aesthetics within display produces an "unreadable visual text" (Marcus 2000, 240). She argues that while this is an effective means of breaking up colonial narrative, it also denies access to to their past for those who most need it, instead presenting a fragmented equivalence that is ultimately conservative.
6. The 1909 Smithsonian–Roosevelt African Expedition alone collected 11 500 specimens, including 11 black and 9 white rhinos. Throughout the 20th century, elephants and rhinos were the currency that supported civil wars, significantly in the DRC and Angola, where the stockpiling of elephant tusks and rhino horns used to support the Angolan war decimated the wildlife in the area. Poaching too, is never a simple binary, but a complex set of global machinations that facilitate the trade in horns.
7. See the exhibition website: https://www.freightedexhibition.co.za/.
8. The links between themes in the cases, are for example: CJ RHODES, implicated in South Africa's brutal colonial past, and his commission to hunt some of the last northern white rhinos north of the Zambezi, donated to the SA Museum in 1895; the April 2008 theft of the horn of Rhodes' rhino from the South African museum; the so called "Dead zoo gang," the fourteen men convicted in 2016 of plotting to steal rhino horn and Chinese artefacts worth up to £57 million – documented in stool sample vials; and a collection of rhinoceros excrement in sample vials.