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125,660 specimens of natural history: Re-imagining the practice of collection through Alfred R. Wallace's Malay expedition

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125,660 specimens of natural history: Re-imagining the practice of collection through Alfred R. Wallace's Malay expedition

Abstract

In the era of the Anthropocene, the assumed division between nature and culture is radically destabilized. By taking a nineteenth century colonial collection of natural history as a point of departure, the international touring exhibition *125,660 Specimens of Natural History: Re-imagining the Practice of Collection Through Alfred R. Wallace's Malay Expedition* (to premier at Komunitas Salihara, Jakarta, 2015) develops transcultural artistic and curatorial methodologies as means to rethink traditional views on collecting geographies, and museological genres in light of contemporary political and environmental issues. In our presentation to the *Collecting Geographies* conference at the Stedelijk Museum, we will discuss the conceptual framework of the project, including our research on other scientists work

Keywords

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**125,660 Specimens of Natural History:
Re-imagining the Practice of Collection Through Alfred R. Wallace's Malay Expedition**

Organized and curated by Anna-Sophie Springer (co-director, K.Verlag | Berlin) & Etienne Turpin (director, anexact office | Jakarta)

In collaboration with Komunitas Salihara (Jakarta), Goethe-Institut (Jakarta) & Richard Pell (director, Center for PostNatural History | Pittsburgh)



In the era of the Anthropocene, the assumed division between nature and culture is radically destabilized. By taking a nineteenth century colonial collection of natural history as a point of departure, the international touring exhibition 125,660 Specimens of Natural History: Re-imagining the Practice of Collection Through Alfred R. Wallace's Malay Expedition (to premier at Komunitas Salihara, Jakarta, 2015) develops transcultural artistic and curatorial methodologies as means to rethink traditional views on collecting geographies, and museological genres in light of contemporary political and environmental issues. In our presentation to the Collecting Geographies conference at the Stedelijk Museum, we will discuss the conceptual framework of the project, including our research on other scientists working in the archipelago such as Franz Wilhelm Junghuhn and Ernst Haeckel, in order to provoke further reflection on how a colonial archive can be reassessed through intercultural collaboration to produce relevant, contemporary work about both the history of Euro-Asian colonial relations and their legacies in the present.

From 1854 to 1862, Alfred Russel Wallace travelled through the Malay archipelago, ardently documenting the region's geography and biodiversity while amassing a gigantic collection of specimens for museums in England. By combining archival research at the Natural History Museums of London, Tring, Oxford, Berlin, and Leiden with research and artistic fieldwork in contemporary Southeast Asia, 125,660 Specimens of Natural History retraces key episodes of the

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expedition (as published in 1869 edition of *The Malay Archipelago*) to directly confront the radically transformed, postnatural landscape that has replaced the idyllic purity of Wallace's colonial impressions. Importantly, we approach Wallace's collection not with a retrospective view, but instead propose to critically reconsider his colonial archive from a contemporary perspective that opens up challenging multidisciplinary dialogues between Europe and Asia. Essentially, the project exposes a historic, colonial archive to contemporary local knowledge and unorthodox readings and critique by both European and Southeast Asian artists and curators. While large parts of the Wallace collection are stored in traditional European Natural History Museums, 125,660 Specimens inverts the geographic itinerary and returns to the original sites of collecting with the aim of examining this cultural repository from a contemporary perspective that engages alternative epistemologies and urgent questions about ecological collapse in the Anthropocene.

Our primary goal for this exhibition is artistic, collaborative knowledge production regarding the role of colonial collections in shaping conceptions of nature and culture, categories of knowledge, and most importantly, how such historical material can be appropriated meaningfully with regards to our shared present. The secondary objective is the extensive dissemination of the results of the project through the touring exhibition and the wide distribution of the bilingual publication in Indonesia, and then in subsequent venues in Europe. We are convinced that the encounters between the postnatural and postcolonial frameworks, and the relations between scientific knowledge production and artistic practice, can only be further interrogated by intercultural research and experimental practices. We are excited to present our project at the Stedelijk Museum and engage in a formidable discourse about the political role of museum collections, art and contemporary curatorial practices in a postcolonial and postnatural world.

Anna-Sophie Springer (b. 1980, West-Berlin) is a curator, writer, editor and co-director of K. Verlag, an independent press exploring the book as a site for exhibitions. Holding an MA in Contemporary Art Theory from Goldsmiths College, University of London, and an MA in Curatorial Studies from the Academy of Visual Arts, Leipzig, her practice merges curatorial, editorial and artistic interests. She is Associate Editor for the forthcoming 8th Berlin Biennale publications, and in the past worked at the pioneering German theory publisher Merve Verlag, where she is editing a forthcoming collection of texts on art by Hélène Cixous. Anna-Sophie is a member of the SYNAPSE: International Curators' Network of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, and previous exhibitions include *Ha Ha Road* (Mostyn, Llandudno + Quad, Derby, UK, 2011/12), *The Subjective Object* (Grassi Ethnographic Museum, Leipzig, 2012), and the series *EX LIBRIS* (Galerie Wien Lukatsch, Berlin and others, 2013). With essays in *C Magazine*, *Rheinsprung11* and latest pieces such as "The Museum as Archipelago" in *Scapegoat #5* and "Colonizing the Exhibition Space: A Conversation with Willem de Rooij" in *Fillip #18*, she actively contributes to an international curatorial discourse. Anna-Sophie co-founded K. Verlag in 2011 together with the Canadian artist Charles Stankiech. K.'s publishing and curating produces new geographical and physical encounters, develops intercultural approaches to historical archives, and advances hybrid methodologies to explore contemporary issues. Previous projects by K. Verlag have critically engaged themes of colonialism and ethnography, geopolitics and climate change, and visual culture and the museum.

Etienne Turpin (b. Canada, 1980) is director of an exact office, a design research practice committed to multidisciplinary urban activism, artistic and curatorial experimentation, and applied philosophical inquiry. Etienne is also currently director of the Urban Livability, Sustainability, and Resilience Research Group, and Vice Chancellor's Postdoctoral Research Fellow, at the SMART Infrastructure Facility of the Faculty of Engineering & Information Sciences, and an Associate Research Fellow with the Institute for Social Transformation Research of the Faculty of Law, Humanities, and The Arts, at the University of Wollongong, Australia. With the support of this appointment, Etienne lives and works in Jakarta, Indonesia, where his research helps produce

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strategies for political resistance and community resilience among informal settlements of the urban poor facing the combined violence of climate change and rapid development. He is the editor of *Architecture in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Design, Deep Time, Science and Philosophy* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing/Open Humanities Press, 2013), and co-editor of *Jakarta: Architecture + Adaptation* [English and Bahasa Indonesian bilingual publication] (Depok: Universitas Indonesia Press, 2013). From 2009-2013, he was an editor of the journal *Scapegoat: Architecture | Landscape | Political Economy*, where he co-edited issues on "Property" (00–Winter/Spring 2010) and "Service" (01– Summer/Fall 2010), and edited the issue on "Excess" (05–Summer/Fall 2013). Etienne is a member of the Synapse—International Curators' Network of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, Germany, and his curatorial and artistic work has been exhibited in Southeast Asia, Europe, and North America. Etienne's academic background is in applied philosophy and visual culture; he completed his Ph.D. (Philosophy) in the Department of Theory and Policy Studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto.

Recent Work

As part of the 15th Jakarta Biennale—Siasat—we curated the performance/installation work *For a Minor Ornithology* at the Pasar Burung Pramuka bird market in Jakarta, Indonesia, in November 2013. Accompanying the performances are a series of diagrams (designed with Jono Sturt of HTCHBCK) and the co-authored essay, "Some Notes For a Minor Ornithology." This essay considers the remarkable role of avifauna in the history of European scientific experiments, public museum displays, and taxidermy practices (to access the text visit <http://anexact.org/For-a-Minor-Ornithology>). An additional co-authored essay, which continues this research and develops our argument regarding the Anthropocene, is scheduled to appear in the upcoming issue of *Cabinet* magazine under the title, "Reverse Hallucinations in the Archipelago: Javanese Cartography, Colonial Collections, and the Will to Knowledge."

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