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125,660 specimens of natural history: navigating colonial collections in the Anthropocene

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125,660 specimens of natural history: navigating colonial collections in the Anthropocene

Abstract

In the age of the Anthropocene, the assumed division between nature and culture is radically destabilized. By taking a nineteenth century colonial collection of natural history as our 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 (premier at Komunitas Salihara, Jakarta, Indonesia in 2015) develops transcultural artistic and curatorial methodologies as means to rethink traditional views on scientific knowledge production, human-nature interactions, and the future of natural history collections.

Keywords

navigating, colonial, collections, 125, anthropocene, 660, specimens, natural, history

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125,660 Specimens of Natural History: Navigating Colonial Collections in the Anthropocene

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In the age of the Anthropocene, the assumed division between nature and culture is radically destabilized. By taking a nineteenth century colonial collection of natural history as our 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* (premier at Komunitas Salihara, Jakarta, Indonesia in 2015) develops transcultural artistic and curatorial methodologies as means to rethink traditional views on scientific knowledge production, human-nature interactions, and the future of natural history collections. We will discuss the conceptual apparatus of our curatorial project (including our research on other scientists and naturalists, such as Franz Junghuhn and Ernst Haeckel, whose work shaped the history of the archipelago) in order to propose how a colonial archive can be reassessed through intercultural collaboration to produce relevant work about the history of “colonial environmentalism,” the legacy of such colonial practices in the present, and the potential for appropriating these histories for contemporary conservation efforts concerned with the future of Malay rainforest ecologies. The project combines archival research at repositories such as the Natural History Museums of London, Tring, Berlin and Leyden with artist-led fieldwork in contemporary Southeast Asia in order to revisit key episodes of Wallace’s eight-year expedition and directly confront the radically transformed, postnatural landscape that has replaced the idyllic purity of Wallace’s colonial impressions. The Malay Archipelago used to rank among the world’s greatest concentrations of biodiversity, which is one reason Wallace could amass such a massive collection of specimens from the region to ship to European collectors. While his vast collection stocked museums with exotic, previously unknown materials, Wallace also carefully studied this collection in order to deduce the theory of evolution through natural selection, and the theory of biogeographical distribution, from his array of specimens. Yet, as a result of logging, bush fires, agricultural clearings, gold mining, road construction and oil palm plantations, many of the areas abundant with plant and animal life that Wallace recorded have, over the last few decades, rapidly vanished. In fact, during our research, contemporary zoologists have despairingly admitted that it is unlikely that the theory of evolution could still be discovered today because of such widespread environmental devastation. We will discuss how this colonial archive can be renegotiated not with a retrospective view, but instead as a cache for alternative epistemologies and urgent questions for artists, scientists, and theorists in the Anthropocene.

Anna-Sophie Springer is a curator, writer, editor, and codirector of K. Verlag—an independent press exploring the book as a site for exhibition making. Her publishing and curating for K. Verlag 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 engaged themes of colonialism and ethnography, geopolitics and climate change, and visual culture and the museum. <http://k-verlag.com>

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