

October 10, 2016, 7pm

#100YrsOfNow

Dictionary of Now

# Arjun Appadurai, Tony Bennett & Sharon Macdonald: Thing

## WELCOME

Viola König, Director Ethnologisches Museum

## INTRODUCTION

Bernd Scherer, Director Haus der Kulturen der Welt

## LECTURES

Arjun Appadurai, Professor of Media, Culture,  
and Communication, New York University:  
The Migration of Objects: Circulation against  
Representation in Ethnological Collections

Tony Bennett, Professor in Social and Cultural Theory,  
University of Western Sydney:  
Mutable Immutable Mobiles

Sharon Macdonald, Alexander von Humboldt Professor,  
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin:  
Waking Sleeping Objects

## DISCUSSION / Q&A

Moderated by Bernd Scherer

The lectures and discussion will be held in English.  
The exhibitions are open from 5pm to 10.30pm, admission free.

In museums, objects are embedded in fixed classification and sign systems that situate them in narratives of specific regional and temporal origins. But museum “things” are always in a state of transition. They can be seen as active agents in processes that set time in motion. The relocation of the Ethnologisches Museum collection offers the chance to question the knowledge that has been gathered around the exhibits for more than a hundred years. Museologist Sharon Macdonald, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, and cultural sociologist Tony Bennett will explore the “thing”—its social life, its migration, and its shifting status. Shortly before the objects are being resituated to the Humboldt Forum, the three experts will debate the implications of this migration between the different institutional frames, analyze the economies of representation, as well as identify possible counter-narratives that might be told through the things themselves.

### The Migration of Objects:

#### Circulation against Representation in Ethnological Collections

Arjun Appadurai

Most Western ethnological collections use the objects in their custodianship as testaments to some other place and time, far from the moment of acquisition and even farther from the moment of contemporary viewing. These objects are used to tell stories of other cultures, civilizations, technologies, and styles of life. The strange thing is that the story of how the objects made the journey from their original contexts to the context of display in the West is usually suppressed, marginalized, or subordinated to a narrative of context-free meaning and comparison. But physical objects are also migrants, and the story of their migration, whether by sale, conquest, scientific curiosity, royal whim, or plunder is a vital part of the biography of these things. This lecture focuses on specific objects from the Ethnological Collections in Dahlem to reveal how narratives of acquisition can enrich the representational and pedagogical strategies of any ethnological collection.

ARJUN APPADURAI is the Paulette Goddard Professor of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University and is also Visiting Professor at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin for 2016–17. He is the author of numerous books and articles on materiality,

empire, globalization, and cities. Appadurai is the editor of a major collection on *The Social Life of Things* (1986) and his most recent book is *Banking on Words: The Failure of Language in the Age of Derivative Finance* (2015).

## Mutable Immutable Mobiles

Tony Bennett

Museums are sites at which both the mutability and the immutability of things are in play. They are, on the one hand, centers at which things gathered from diverse points of collection are conscripted as material actors; their immutability here is a condition of their mobility. On the other hand, as a consequence of the orderings and re-orderings of their relations to other things that they undergo during their museum careers, such things take on new properties and become the sites of changing relational effects while staying (broadly) in the same place. This lecture illustrates these points with reference to the Ethnologisches Museum's "cloak made of woven bark" collected by James Cook from Vancouver Island in 1778, and then follows a (loose) set of connections through Franz Boas's life groups at the American Museum of Natural History to contemporary indigenous practices of "re-collecting" ourselves.

TONY BENNETT is Research Professor in Social and Cultural Theory in the Institute for Culture and Society at the University of Western Sydney. He is a member of the Australian Academy of the Humanities and of the Academy of the Social Sciences in the UK. Among his most important publications are *Formalism and Marxism* (1979), *Outside Literature* (1991), *The Birth*

*of the Museum* (1995), *Culture: A Reformer's Science* (1998), *Pasts Beyond Memory: Evolution, Museums, Colonialism* (2004), and *Making Culture, Changing Society* (2013). He is also convening co-author of the forthcoming volume *Collecting, Ordering, Governing: Anthropology, Museums, and Liberal Government* (2016).

## Waking Sleeping Objects

Sharon Macdonald

As objects in the Ethnologisches Museum are being packed up and sent to storage spaces, this presentation begins from the vastness, mystery, dust, and piled-up pastness of museum storerooms. Only a small minority of that sacred category of things—namely objects—ever find their way onto display. What happens when slumbering objects are woken up? The lecture includes discussion of a project called *Object Biographies*, which was one of the experiments in the Humboldt Lab Dahlem. This took previously never-exhibited, stored Benin objects, called *bocio*, from the Museum's Africa collections, and traced their relational connections. The adventure took the researchers to international art markets, missionaries, colonial rampage, the repression and resurrection of Vodun religion, and empty spaces where the objects are now just memories. This case is used to ask how might museums deploy the idea of the *bocio*, which, according to some, means something like "a cadaver with divine breath": an inanimate object with more-than-human powers? And, more generally, what kinds of potential for re-activation and re-animation can be found sleeping in museum stores?

SHARON MACDONALD is Alexander von Humboldt Professor for Social Anthropology in the Institute of European Ethnology at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. She directs the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage and the research program *Making Differences in Berlin: Transforming Museums and Heritage in the 21st Century*. She also directs the Profusion theme of the *Heritage Futures*

project, funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council, and the *Contentious Collections* work-package of the Horizon 2020 *TRACES* (Transmitting Contentious Cultural Heritage with the Arts) project. Her recent publications include *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today* (2013) and the *International Handbooks of Museum Studies* (2015).

Over the last hundred years the sciences—and the technologies they have generated—have shaped our conception of reality, our thought, and our language. In the context of *100 Years of Now*, the *Dictionary of Now* reflects on language's capacity to both depict and create reality. The dictionary focuses on the omnipresent terms that are central to the description of the deep-rooted changes of the present—but which in their current usage are no longer able to grasp them.

What varieties and shifts of meaning lie at the root of these terms, what readings and subtexts do they harbor? What social, political, and cultural processes of transformation can be read from them? And how can they be sharpened and adjusted in order to generate scope for linguistic action? In a series of twelve discussions through 2015 to 2018, distinguished representatives from the sciences and the arts, from theory and praxis, question the established meanings of selected terms, updating them against the background of their respective expertise.

A publication to be released in 2018 will bring together the key words and participants from the individual discussions in the series, establishing connections and allowing new, dynamic constellations of knowledge production to emerge.

→ [hkw.de/dictionary](http://hkw.de/dictionary)

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**Ethnologisches Museum**  
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin



Haus der Kulturen der Welt  
John-Foster-Dulles-Allee 10  
10557 Berlin



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