

CONTENTIOUS COLLECTIONS. RETHINKING THE LEGACY OF ETHNOGRAPHIC SHOWS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

The project is dedicated to various types of contentious collections (art collections, museum collections, university collections, private collections, virtual collections, etc.) in Central and Eastern Europe. For the purpose of the research, ‘contentious collections’ are defined as groups of objects that include items acquired in the course of or as a result of the organisation of ethnographic shows, which were staged in the region in the latter half of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth century. The scope of our academic interest includes such diverse exhibits as human remains, plaster casts, audio recordings, cultural artefacts, anthropometric boards, photographs, postcards and even new visual objects – information-objects (in the case of digital collections). We will also study contemporary practices associated with storing, moving, displaying and consuming such objects, or even deliberately hiding them from view. The research tackles the issue of the relations between the objects and between the objects and the people that come in contact with them. We will demonstrate how (and by whom) the objects connected with ethnographic shows – a phenomenon ‘invented’ in colonial times and based around the presence of living members of non-European ethnic groups – were acquired and incorporated into collections in Central and Eastern Europe.

The material heritage of ethnographic shows remains almost completely unknown in the region, since no research on the topic has hitherto been conducted. Thus, one of the principal objectives of the project is to map and catalogue contentious collections and, consequently, to reveal the scale, status and specific nature of these collections and the items they contain. The project also aims to analyse the reasons behind the non-remembrance, neglect and marginalisation of knowledge about the phenomenon of human exhibitions and the associated material heritage in the region. Our hypothesis is that in the countries of Central-Eastern Europe, which had no colonies overseas (and, in some cases, were not even independent), the legacy of ethnographic shows was pushed into non-remembrance because it has the potential to challenge contemporary identity narratives of the societies in the region, which uphold the belief of their lack of involvement in the colonial effort in any shape or form. We wish to discover the consequences that presently ensue from such beliefs, including the possibility of reproducing colonial knowledge and imagery in the form of stereotypes, notions, and contemporary forms or practices of exoticisation. At the same time, we assume that objects removed from their context and functioning in a different time and space are still more than simply ‘traces of colonialism’. We will try to determine what they represent for contemporary inhabitants of Central-Eastern Europe.

To tackle this problem, we shall conduct a series of queries in museums, archives and other cultural institutions in Poland and abroad. We will conduct interviews with museum employees, exhibition curators and private collectors. Online queries will constitute an important aspect of the study, given that our topic of interest includes the new possibilities and challenges presented by the processes of digitalisation of collections and the associated migration of data. The methodological framework of the study is defined by: postcolonial criticism; critical methods of studying visuality, ‘contentious heritage’, consumption and materiality, with particular emphasis on approaches focused on objects.

The project’s contribution to academic discourse will involve gathering new source material and introducing it to relevant literature. Its novelty also lies in adopting the postcolonial approach. The scale and scope of the phenomenon of ethnographic shows’ legacy (as well as its regional characteristics) will be determined through comparative studies conducted in multiple countries of Central-Eastern Europe. Researching the material legacy of ethnographic shows is an important step towards understanding the iconography of contemporary popular culture, the mechanisms of constructing knowledge and otherness, the processes of exoticisation and consumption, and lastly identity-building processes in Europe.