



Social_
Sacred_
Stolen_

*The Lives of
Inanimate Objects*

Course and Exhibition Coordinator:

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Wintersemester 2022/2023

The course *The Lives of Inanimate Objects*

What is a thing? In what way are objects and artefacts different things? Is an instrument a tool and what is an object of art? The project tutorial *The Lives of Inanimate Objects* is concerned with the lives of things and the various research strands that are concerned with them, drawing from archaeology, anthropology, and philosophy as well as Science and Technology Studies.

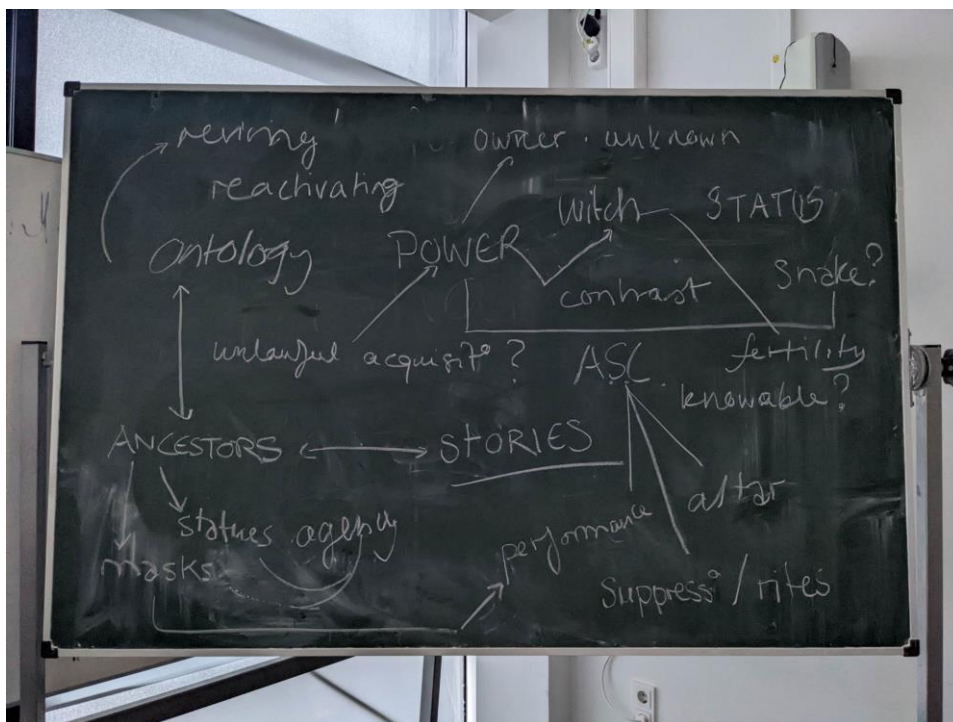


FIG. 1: CLASS NOTES for ART & MAGIC by C. CONTE

In the course of the seminar, we have explored different types of objects [e.g., artefactual, magical, ecological], object-related practices [from making to recycling and collecting] and object-places [especially museums]. The core teaching methods were object handling, museum visits, and object biographies.

Based on these practical exercises, the sometimes very complex object theories were discussed (fig. 1, above). The historical and contemporary approaches to objects we explored range from Antiquarianism to new materialism, relational ontologies to Actor Network Theory, covering terms such as agency and entanglement.

At the core of these theoretical debates lies the [deconstruction of] the nature-culture dichotomy and its related object-subject division as well as a deep criticism of anthropocentric, Eurocentric, and colonial discourses. Therewith we are asking the question: *if objects are defined anew, how do the subjects – humans – position themselves and in relation to their thing-environment?*

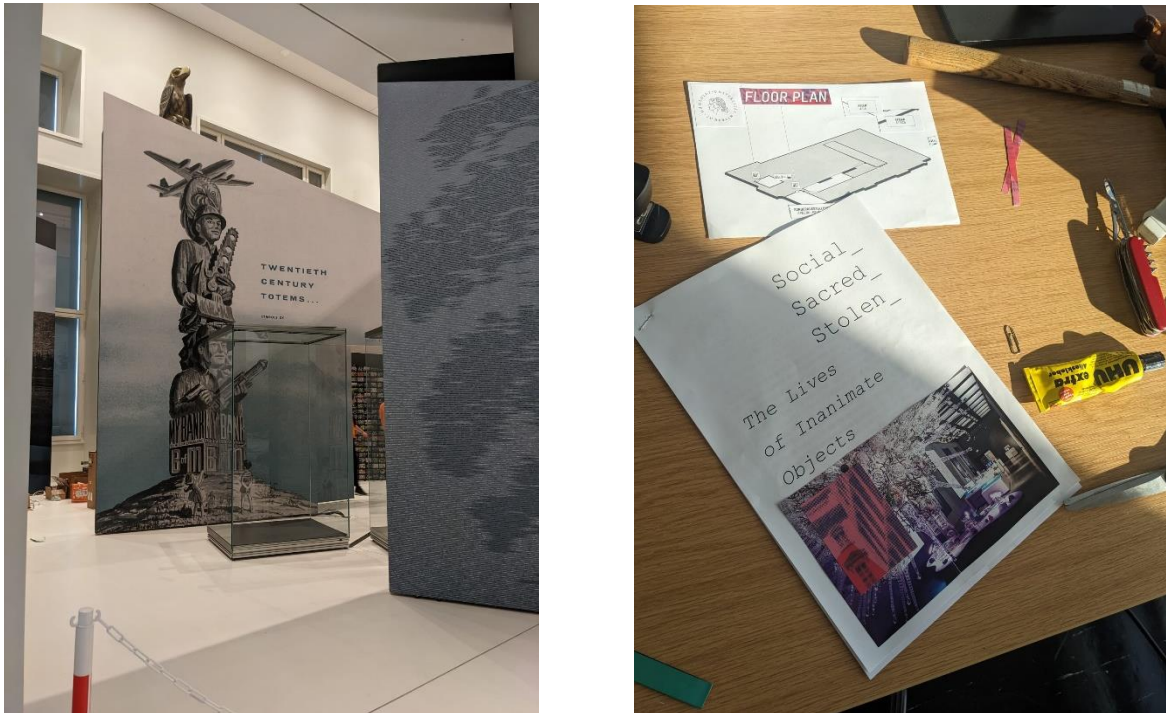


FIG. 2: AMERICAS EXHIBITION & SOCIAL_SACRED_STOLEN IN-THE-MAKING.
PHOTOS by C. CONTE

The exhibition *Social, Sacred, Stolen*

The exhibition builds up on the two assignments the course participants completed. It is simultaneously the result & the documentation of our research process.

Together, we went to explore the infamous *Humboldt Forum* (fig. 2). We formed groups which separately visited different regional sections - Africa, Americas, and Asia - with the purpose of finding an object to work on. We were

not impressed, to say the least. How can such a major institution write about unequal power relations & shared history but fail to address genocide & exhibit actual human remains (fig. 3)?

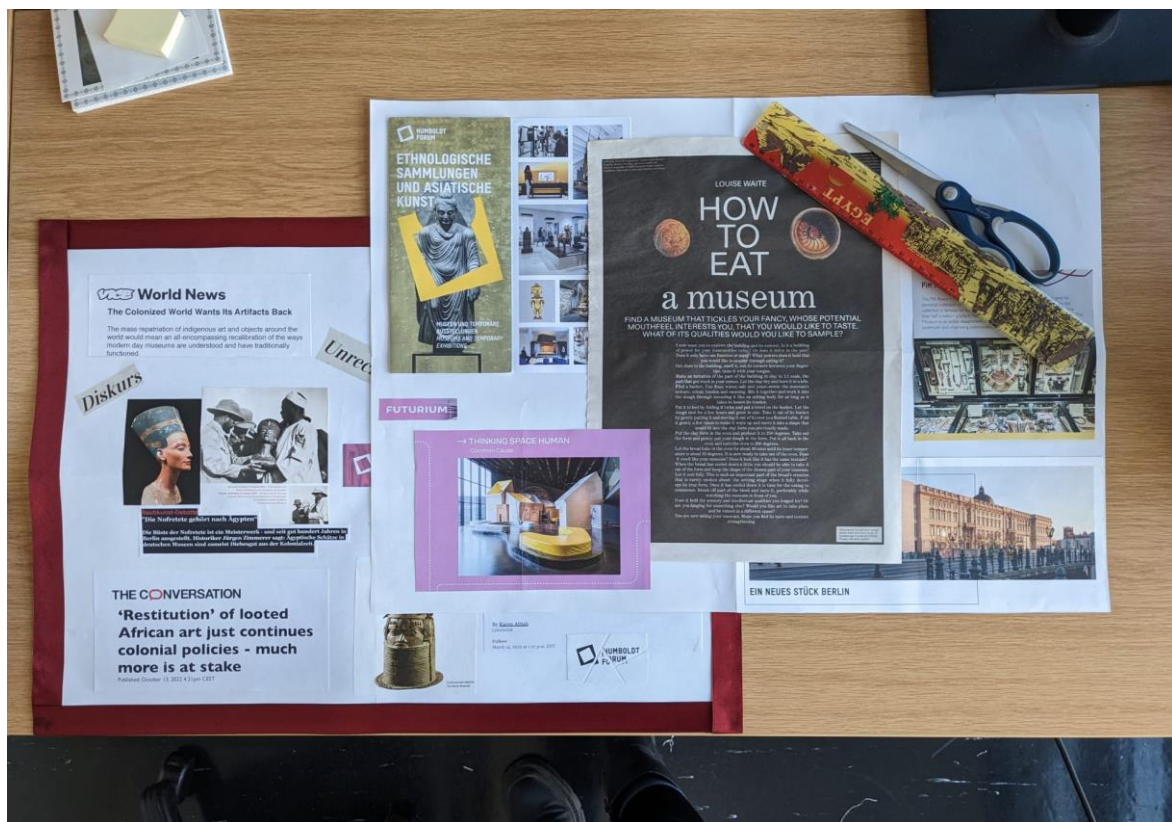


FIG. 3: POSTERS on RESTITUTION (N. WOLTER & S. LIMANT) & MUSEUMS (C. CONTE)

The participants crafted a biography for their chosen object: to track the object from its origin to today, finding out how it was made, whom it belonged to, how it changed owners and meanings. Despite there not being a great amount of time and resources, every biography yielded impressive results.

The objects, including a Chinese teapot, a Qur'an board & an umbilical cord vessel, were very diverse & prompted us to discuss multiple concepts. What is the difference between an altar, a shrine, & a temple (fig. 4)? Which academic, military, or religious institutions were responsible for “bringing” these objects to Europe? *How to deal with social, sacred, or stolen objects in a museum or academic context?*

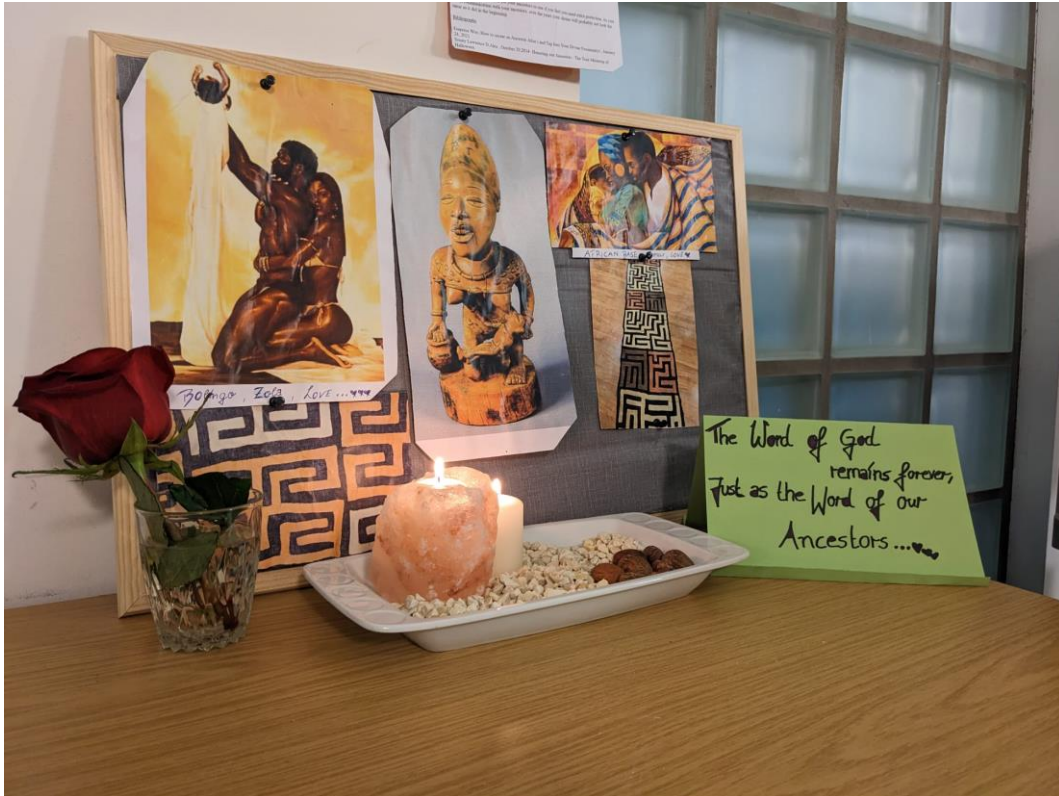


FIG. 4: AFRICAN ANCESTOR SHRINE by MUTUMBU-MAKINENE CAREIRA

The second assignment in preparation of the exhibition was a theoretical essay, where the participants had to pick and research a specific term. The most popular ones were artefact, material turn, authenticity, and restitution. Some exhibition pieces are based on the essay and now give a more visual explanation.

Final note, future thoughts?

We asked ourselves: how can we turn the frustration and anger vis-à-vis the Humboldt Forum into something more positive?

Through this exhibition we attempt to show that there are multiple, more appropriate ways of working with objects.

Rather than just speaking *about* things, we tried to *make* things which show the intersection of academic research and art.

STOLEN_ Some pieces are a direct reaction to the Humboldt Forum and its failing discourse of colonial conciliation and art restitution.

SOCIAL_ Some pieces share a personal story and show how objects and humans intermingle, sometimes creating emotional links.

SACRED_ Some pieces work with or around the inherent agency of objects, transcending ontological boundaries of human and non-human (fig. 5).

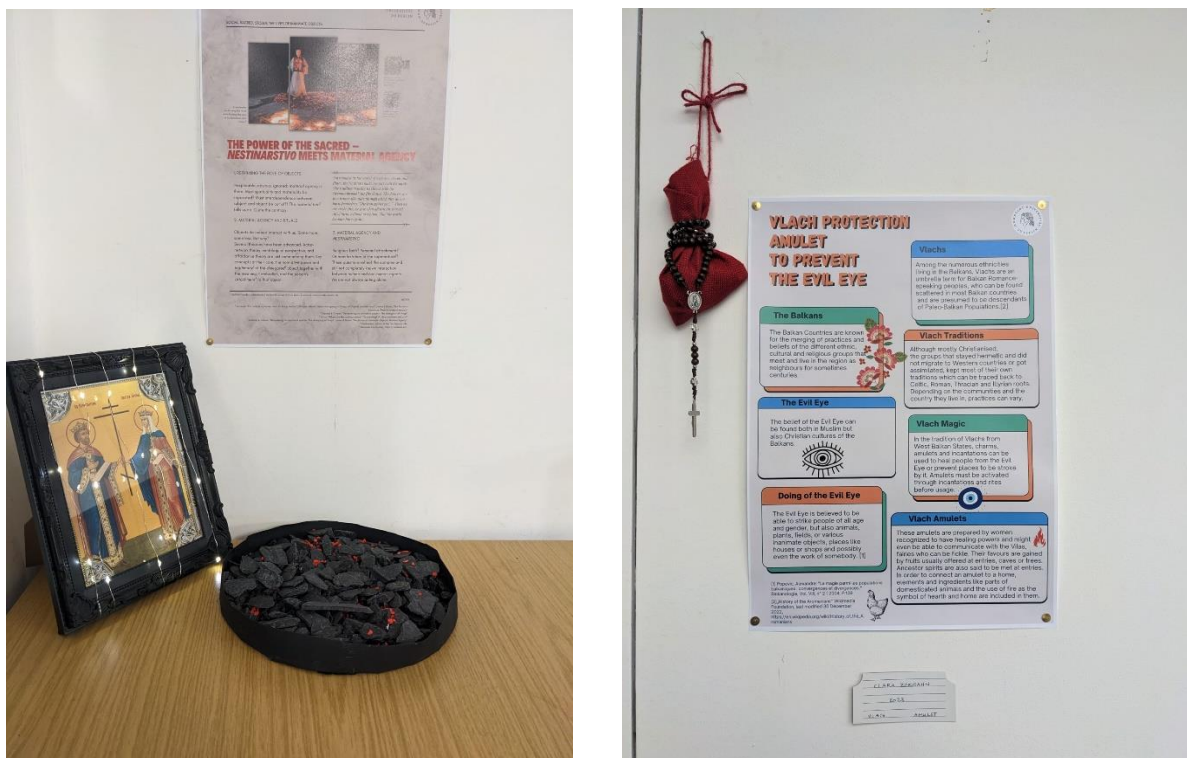


FIG. V: EXPLORING the SACRED by T. ATANASOVA (LEFT) & C. ZERRAHN (RIGHT)

PARTICIPANTS :

- Teodora Atanasova_ Lea Baumgarten_ Mutumbu-Makinene Careira
- Nursena Erdem_ Meike Heinz_ Gregor Holfert_ Semyon Limant
- Julia Meierbeck_ Abror Mirzaev_ Ngabgou Mouafo_ Mara Powilleit
- Paulina Savignano_ Yannik Schoechle_ Jakob Supper_ Phila Weber
- Simon Weiss_ Nathalie Wolter_ Gulshoda Yusupova_ Clara Zerrahn