IMMERSION, David Weber-Krebs

Clémentine Deliss:

I think anyone can go through a research process without knowing exactly what the final result will be, just feeling their way and moving closer or listening, then gradually forming an idea of something. That must happen in a similar way for researchers on their travels and for someone who comes here to our museum. Before you came, what were your ideas about research in a museum of world cultures?

David Weber-Krebs:

I don't know what ideas I had, but I didn't imagine that the objects would play the leading role. I began my work with a certain notion or ambition of immersion: that as a viewer, you enter a museum and thus other worlds that are more about cartographies, histories and ethnographies than about material objects.

The first things I saw here were the inventory books. They interested me greatly, because I had already worked on the archives of Teylers Museum in Haarlem, or rather with its library catalogue. Teylers Museum, the first museum in the Netherlands, was founded in 1784 on the initiative of the banker and merchant Pieter Teyler. One hundred years later, its collection was brought to a stop. As a result, the museum is a kind of time capsule, a testimony to a specific era: the Age of Enlightenment. The scientific books written and published in that era all had totalising ambitions. They tried to comprehend a topic in its entirety, to portray the whole world within themselves. With titles like The Natural History of the Herbs, Trees, Four-Footed Beasts, Birds, Fish, Insects and Reptiles of the Islands of Madeira, Saint Christopher's and Jamaica, they represent the idea that everything about these islands can be said in one book. That's an idea I took up for my own work. I wanted to see if something similar could be done here in Frankfurt.From the very start, I wanted to work with the entirety of the collection. But the important difference between Teylers Museum and the Weltkulturen Museum is that here it's all about objects. It's about material culture. It's about what can be found in these stores. That is clearly a completely different matter. I have tried to visualise the museum, or the museum's collection, by naming the objects. It is an attempt to create an image – an image of the whole world, if I view the museum as a world.

At the beginning of my residency, I asked the curators of the collections for three things: series, spheres, and representations of the world. I wanted to search in a very intuitive way. The curators showed me a large number of objects that were related to cosmogonies or cosmologies. When the selection of objects arrived in the lab, I saw for the first time that my intuitive request for round things, or spheres, had been right.
Surrounded by these spheres, something really happened for me. It made sense. The individuality of each particular object emerges most strongly when it is shown alongside other objects with which it has no intrinsic connection except

for sharing the same form. The function is different, the origin is different, the material is different. Everything is different, but they have the same form. Function, origin, materiality or even age, only become relevant when the objects are brought together. At the beginning, the form was the sole criterion. A round shape can be found in raw materials, toys, containers …. The connections between the items are infinite, I would say.

As well as the spheres, I also chose other series: headrests from the Sepik and from Zimbabwe, and heddle pulleys from the Ivory Coast. In fact, without the spheres the theme of seriality probably would no longer have interested me. Now, though, I think that through these serialities, I can somehow portray a world.

I tried to produce a series of my own, an assemblage of my own, with the spheres. In a second step, I included the seriality of the database so as to create an image of the collection as a whole – a collection that is so enormous, almost sublimely enormous, that you simply never know where to enter the collection and where to leave it again. You need a system for that. My assistant Marie Urban and I spent a week and a half looking for one, until we realised that every system would create a particular picture, which would be incomplete and in that sense arbitrary. It is almost impossible to represent the museum and the world in its totality. The representation will be limited by the form of language, by the reduction and arbitrary naming of an object.

Even so, this work is a new form of inventory, an attempt to encapsulate the world. I developed my own form of language: my research language, my story. This reflects the processes by which the collection was originally systematised, so it simultaneously deconstructs the museum inventory system. At stake, here, it is the relationship between text and object. What form of text do we use to describe objects, what codes are applied, what tone of voice is chosen, who speaks, who has the power over all these codes?

Within our taxonomy, Marie and I had to find our own way into the collection database. There are endless different possible ways in – through shapes, through materiality, through a geographical limitation or an ethnicity- for example. In the end, I decided to work chronologically, starting at zero and registering the whole collection right to the end. You simply follow the inventory numbers: the first inventory number in the database is 000510 and the last is 55274. We made that journey. We travelled through the whole collection. I became a kind of archaeologist of the collection, as I named all these objects. And Marie wrote them down.

With every object, I made a selection and took decisions. Sometimes I said "Basket", "A basket", "A basket" and another time I added "All from the Sepik". Then I went further and said "A basket that was collected before 1904". After that: "A dance mask made of red wood that was collected by…". Of course it went very fast, because I really did it intuitively. For example, I saw fourteen arrows that were all collected by the same collector and all come from the same region. So I said that. I experienced the chronology of the collection. And I documented it. This practice is quite extreme, and the principle is that no one object has a

higher status than another – so the accumulation of these 55,000 objects also generated a radical levelling. This is how the text became image.

It is an image of the opulence of the world, of the diversity of the world. When I see this text-image on the wall, and imagine it enlarged and viewed from a distance, then at the beginning I wouldn't see that it is individual elements or words – almost ontological elements – which make up a whole. Only when I come physically closer to this picture, I see it. And that interests me. Part of the reason I'm so concerned to make a picture is that, of course, I know nobody will ever read all this. The letters and words are material, they are paint. But the practice of dictating the object designations is also a performative act, and in this sense what arose was not only a text-picture, but also a vocal sculpture, a vocal object. It is as if these objects were actually being invoked in the "here and now" purely by naming them. This audio sculpture expresses the obsession that underlies all collecting. The mania of endless accumulation.

The whole piece of work is a story that I have written. The story of the impossibility of representing the totality of the museum. I suppose I knew more or less from the beginning what I wanted to do. I don't think I would have reached this point, though, without the assemblage of those nine spheres, because they are a mixture of discursive concept and material artefact that intertwine and crystallise out an interesting set of problems. It has something to do with proximity and distance, from picture to text. Almost from "sphere" to "being in the sphere". That's immersion.