

## Cabinet of the Unknown

**Duration: July 28 through September 25, 2017**

An object that never revealed itself to the curator before the project began has evoked interest and many inquiries... Why would one have a key with two identical blades that mirror each other, rather than the usual single blade? Why would one use it, and what for? If this key is for a door, which parties does this door connect?

After a period of research that took place with locksmiths and long-term residents of Berlin, the answer was revealed: the Berliner Key. A prominent topic for contemporary philosopher Bruno Latour, the Berliner Key is a two-sided-key that was designed to “force people to close and lock their doors (usually a main entrance door or gate leading into a common yard or tenement block).” It was produced to replace the concierge, whose job was to open the door all through the night. Acting as a tool of power mechanism, the key granted permission for the door to be opened on both sides towards and away from two different vistas - standing for a series of binary divisions: inside and outside; tenants and owners; institutions and audiences; known and unknown.

Taking the Berliner Key as the as a ‘key’ object “Cabinet of the Unknown” exhibition project dwells with the unknown through the processes of knowing and creating acquaintance. It pursues the goal to connect the known to the unknown by linking the museum in the backyard to the street in front, making the unknown of the museum (as well as the museum itself) knowable to its environment. It takes the museum into its centre and works with a peripheral approach through three main elements: the museum, the collection and its the audience. With a ripple effect, the focus moves away from the museum and expands towards a new audience, shifting the gaze from the focus to periphery as well as shifting the attention from known objects that could be classified (in terms of museological taxonomy), to unknown objects that are not. In other words, the project gets involved with what and who is around the museum in Oranienstraße and what is around the defined collection that remains as unknown objects of the museum. Working with (and within) the neighbourhood through unknown and undefined objects in the museum offered an alternative approach to create a connection with the local community as well as to bring a new understanding to the position of the museum itself in the audience context and reevaluate the notion of institutionalisation of knowledge in the museum context.

The project used an alternative trajectory to reach its goal. The long tradition of museum practice calls for museums as institutions to provide knowledge. In traditional museology, knowledge is a commodity that a museum offers whereby the visitor entering the vicinity of the museum. The visitor has already accepted the correctness of that information. Eventually, it is the duty of power mechanisms -that the museums are part of- to act and to be perceived as the ultimate knowledge provider with an epistemological wisdom of everything.

Werkbundarchiv – Museum der Dinge  
Special Exhibition, Concept, August 14, 2017

Within this perspective, the project invites Museum der Dinge - being already an untraditional museum in terms of taxonomy, curation and knowledge production - to expose its more fragile aspect, and share this with its community. The project incorporates the entire Museum Team as the starting point of the project, asking them which object in the museum's own collection is unknown and alien to them. Acting somewhat unconventionally, the team then presents this fragility to the community. In a ripple effect, the museum team is asked to name a place, person, organisation or a business - such as unknown neighbour - that is either unknown to them or it is known to them yet due to the level of interest they believe it should be known or introduced to their peers.

For the second loop of the ripple, the project then invites these 'unknown' neighbours selected by the museum team to work with the periphery of the collection; namely the unknown objects. Do they have any idea about the museum team's selection of the unknown? What are their own unknown objects in the collection? Furthermore, how familiar is the museum to them in their own environment? And finally are there any interesting neighbours in their environment that they want to connect with so the museum can invite them for the third loop of the project?

Working both with objects of periphery and the periphery of the museum's geographical location, the project also uses a contextual connotation to "Cabinet d'Ignorance" that was at Zwinger Palace in Dresden in late 1720s. Forming part of the *Mathematische-Physikalische Salon*, the "Cabinet d'Ignorance" was created for those items that cannot be named or classified and which have an "unknown nature, petrifications, animals, monsters whose names and natures are not known" [London antiquarian, John Milles, (S. 114/217)], "for which the visitors were invited to suggest identifications" (Bedini 1965: 11).

The "Cabinet d'Ignorance" reflects views that are both for and against the desire for taxonomy in the traditional western museology. It is a cabinet that adequately announces the fragility of the fact that some objects in the museum cannot be classified or to put it simply: be known. And yet the very act of doing this creates it itself a taxonomy of unknown objects. Considering Museum der Dinge's representation which is already more open than many other traditional institutions; and following a format of cabinets of associations in its curatorial preference; it becomes clear that the motivation behind "Cabinet d'Ignorance" can still be seen as both contemporary and relevant; and by being open to visitor identifications it creates another chance to revisit the museological contexts with participatory behaviour which support communal inclusiveness both for the museum and its audience.

From this perspective, the project does not look at the objects that are usually the focus of the collection, but beyond them to those that are at the periphery. It does not bring the museum into focus, but its periphery on Orianiestrasse. Following

Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa's statement on architecture that the "peripheral vision integrates us with space, while focused vision pushes us out of the space, making us mere spectators" (13), the project incorporates the locational and communal periphery of the museum as well as its collection. It is an act of creating closer acquaintance through participation, rather than allowing the museum to remain as another commodity for inactive spectatorship. In line with the project's direction, Pallasmaa in his book "Eyes of the Skin" continues: "The defensive and unfocused gaze of our time, burdened by sensory overload, may eventually open up new realms of vision and thought, freed of the implicit desire of the eye for control and power. The loss of focus can liberate the eye from its historical patriarchal domain."

## THE CURATOR'S UNKNOWN OBJECT

The Berlin Key is a two-sided-key that was created to impose people to close and lock the doors of the main gate opening to a common yard. Its particularity comes from the fact that it has two key blades (the part which activates the bolt), one at each end of the key, rather than the usual single blade. After unlocking the lock, the key must be pushed all the way through the lock and retrieved on the other side of the door after it has been closed, and locked again. The mechanism makes the retrieval of the key impossible when the door is unlocked. Locking an open door is also usually not possible.

Invented by the Berliner locksmith Johannes Schweiger, from 1912 on the Berlin key was produced by the Albert Kerfin & Co. Although this kind of lock and key is becoming less common, but can still occasionally be found in the tenement buildings of Berlin, Germany.

The key was produced to replace the concierge whose job was to open the door throughout the night. This interaction between the concierge and the tenants came to an end when the property owner swapped the concierge with a key with two identical bits to streamline his/her building's entry control mechanism. The key became the object that allows the tenant to his/her home only if s/he follows the rule of the key.

Bruno Latour, in his book "Berliner Schlüssel," addresses this unique 'thing,' a thing of its own that only existed in Berlin, as an object that dictates and inducts a rule. The key – even only by sitting in its owner's pocket - reflects the mentality that produced a technology that stands for the control mechanism. Berlin Key's task and what it dictates is inscribed in the very nature of it.

"The Berliner key, the door, and the concierge are engaged in a bitter struggle for control and access. Shall we say that the social relations between tenants and owners, or inhabitants and thieves, or inhabitants and delivery people, or co-owners

Werkbundarchiv – Museum der Dinge  
Special Exhibition, Concept, August 14, 2017

and concierges, are mediated by the key, the lock, and the Prussian Locksmith?" says Bruno Latour in his piece titled "The Berlin Key or How To do Words With Things" (15).

The key with its two bits opens the door two different vistas. It stands for a series of binary divisions: inside and outside; tenants and owners; institutions and audiences; the ones who live in flats and those who can afford to buy a building. Just as access and control are reflected in governmental bodies' control of other keys - visas and passports - , and permissions for 'others' reflect a stand in foreign politics; just as alarms systems in shops and malls reduce the need for on site human security and walls erected between people indicate the state of interior politics, approval stamps on documents for other related institutions, so too does the Berliner Key stand for the mechanism of power within a single contained community of neighbours.

### **WORKS CITED**

Bedini, Silvio A. The evolution of science museums. *Technology and Culture*, Vol. 6, No. 1, *Museums of Technology* (Winter, 1965), pp. 1-29

Juhani, Pallasmaa. *The eyes of the skin: architecture and the senses*. Chichester: Wiley, 2014.

Latour, Bruno. "The Berlin Key or How to Do Words with Things". Routledge. Retrieved 5 March 2013.

**Guest Curator/Project Management:** Ece Pazarbaşı

**Project Assistant:** Juliane John

---

Funded by the International Museum Fellowship Programme of the German Federal Cultural Foundation.