

Faculty Spotlight: Dr. Carey Newman

AUDAIN PROFESSOR OF CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICE | IMPACT CHAIR IN INDIGENOUS ART PRACTICES

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Screenshot of Newman detailing the experience of meeting Nulis in Germany.



Screenshot of Newman discussing two iterations of the Nulis mask during the webinar.

Unmasking Meaning: Culture, Collection and Family

With Kim Dhillon, Carey Newman and Monika Zessnik

On Wednesday, January 26, 2022, art theorist and writer Dr. Kim Dhillon moderated a conversation between multidisciplinary artist and educator Carey Newman (Impact Chair in Indigenous Art Practices at UVic) and curator Monika Zessnik (North American Collections, Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin). Newman and Zessnik had explored the history and understandings of the Nulis mask.

Newman detailed his first encounter with the Nulis mask at the Museum of Ethnology Dahlem in 2012 (now housed at the Humboldt-Forum building). The experience was one of joy from meeting an ancestor accompanied with the deep sadness of disconnection as a result of seeing them behind glass. Within Western institutions, masks have been conserved out of care for their aesthetics, rather than their spiritual and cultural meanings. In Newman's community they are animated; they are active, they engage in dance, and can rest after being sung to sleep. However, in the setting of museums, they are rendered static and contained, unable to participate with their community.

While the Museum of Ethnology Dahlem may have had the intent of showcasing a myriad of anthropological material, the reality is that best practices have not been applied to the objects in institutional care. For example, had Nulis stayed within its community, it would have participated in potlatches, been recognized and cherished by their family, and have the opportunity to return to the earth. Instead, Nulis is deprived of rest and has been conserved out of care of its aesthetic. As a result of conservation efforts, Nulis cannot be handled or make facial contact.

Through this conversation, we are reminded that decolonization is an ongoing project and not something that can be instantly rectified with people being appointed to institutional positions. Nulis' journey explores how museums regard objects as possessions, collecting cultures without taking into consideration the community from which they have been extracted. Further, the conversation pushes us to consider our responsibilities moving forward. How can we be respectful and maintain acts of care?

View the conversation here: <https://gatewaytoart.uvic.ca/2022/01/27/unmasking-meaning-culture-collection-and-family/>